

Washington's Carriage in New Orleans

George Washington's inauguration as the first President of the United States took place on April 30, 1789, in New York, at that time the nation's capitol. On his way there, the President-to-be received a triumphal reception in almost every town his carriage passed through along the way, including Alexandria, Philadelphia and Trenton.



George Washington leaves Mount Vernon for his inauguration in 1789.

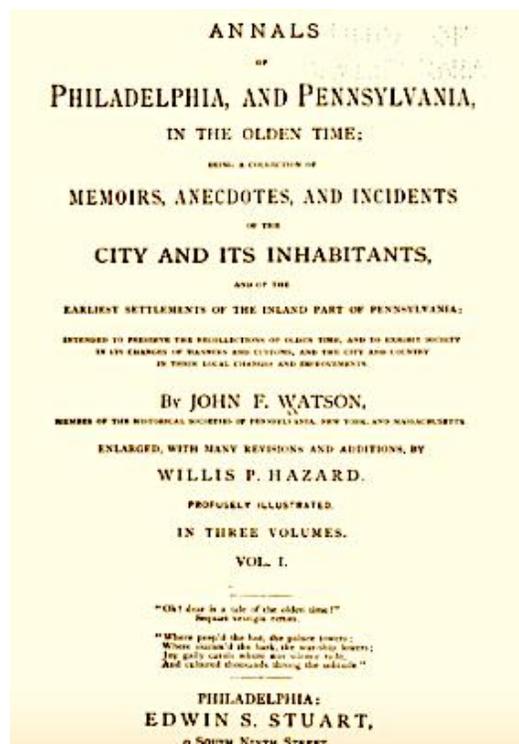
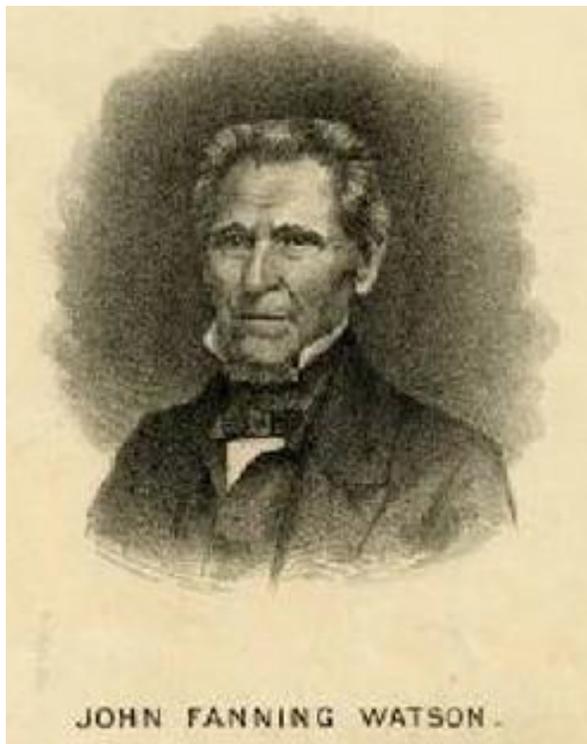
Chancellor Robert Livingston, the highest ranking judicial officer in the state of New York, administered the oath of office on the second floor balcony of Federal Hall, in view of an admiring throng of people gathered on the streets below. Our nation now had its first president.

In an age before the advent of rapid transportation, television, computers, the internet and social media, it is remarkable how news travelled and Americans thronged to see their first President. How exciting it must have been to hear the hoofbeats, as the President's carriage approached. New Orleans (and the whole of Louisiana) was not yet part of the United States during George Washington's two terms as President. Esteban Miró was Spanish Colonial Governor of Louisiana at the time of Washington's first inauguration, but Francisco Luis Héctor, Baron de Carondelet, was governor of the Spanish

colonies of Louisiana and West Florida from 1791 to 1797, the greater part of President Washington's eight years as President.

Yet in 1804-1805, soon after the Louisiana Purchase (signed on April 30, 1803, exactly 14 years after Washington's first inauguration), a treasured relic of Washington's tenure as President made its way down to New Orleans (now a part of the United States).

John Fanning Watson (1779 -1860) was a Philadelphia antiquarian and amateur historian who spent some time in New Orleans. One of his interesting topics was the "splendid looking" Presidential carriage of George Washington, which he had seen while a resident of Philadelphia – and again in New Orleans!



Writing in his *Annals of Philadelphia, and Pennsylvania, in The Olden Time; Being A Collection of Memoirs, Anecdotes, and Incidents of The City and Its Inhabitants* (first published in 1830), Watson recounted his recollections of this impressive coach, "There was in it, at least to my young mind, a greater air of stately grandeur than I have ever seen. It was very large, so much so, as to make four horses an indispensable appendage."

He described the carriage "of a cream colour [*sic*], with much more of gilded carvings in the frame than is since used. It's strongest attractions were the relief ornaments on the pannels [*sic*], they being painted medallion pictures of playing cupids or naked children."



An article in the *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, September 15, 1848, had a similar description of the Presidential carriage:

"Washington's carriage was very large and splendid, requiring four horses to propel it, and occasionally six Virginia boys were attached to it. It was cream-colored, globular in its shape, ornamented with cupids supporting festoons and wreaths of flowers, emblematically arranged along the pannel-work (there's that archaic spelling of panel once again); the whole neatly covered with the best coach-glass. It was of English construction."

It must be noted that President Washington owned at least three carriages, one a post-chaise (a fast carriage with a closed body on four wheels, seating two to four persons, and drawn by two or four horses), which he used for travelling and in the country; the second a family coach used for attending church; and the third a "chariot for state purposes". All three were cream-colored, with three figures on the panels, pulled by matched horses, all brilliantly caparisoned. His coachmen and footmen wore white liveries trimmed in brilliant red-orange, a color that Washington had selected much earlier for his racing silks. Watson claimed that the "splendid" carriage he had seen

in Philadelphia was one “previously imported for Governor Richard Penn”, or it may have been presented to Washington by Louis XVI, King of France, as a mark of his personal esteem and regard.



Washington's neighbors greet him on his way to his inauguration.



Washington's second inauguration in Philadelphia, March 4, 1793

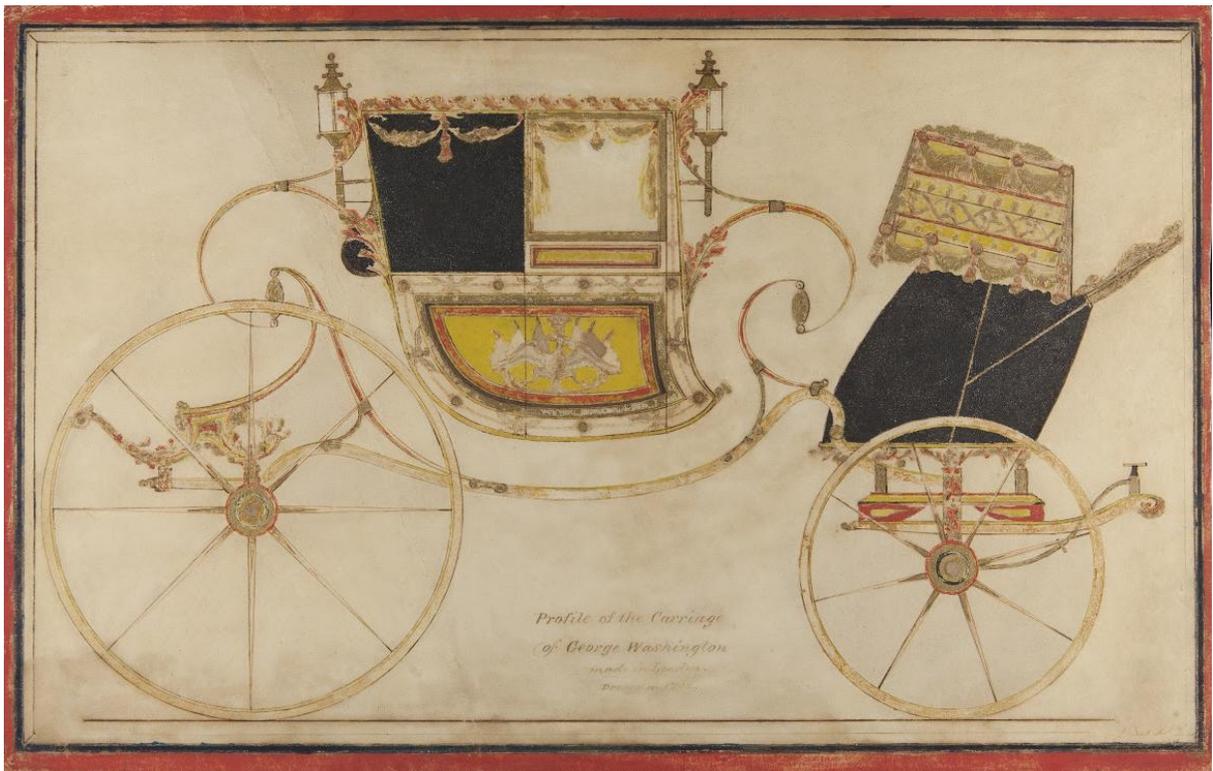
Watson continued his narrative on Washington's carriage, reporting a most unusual turn of events:

“That carriage I afterward saw in 1804-5, in my store yard at New Orleans where it lay an outcast in the weather! – the result of a bad

speculation in a certain Doctor Young, who had bought it at public sale, took it out to Orleans for sale, and could find none to buy it, where all were content with plain volantes! A far better speculation would have been to have taken it to the Marquis of Lansdown, or other admirers of Washington in England."

The "volantes" mentioned by Watson were indeed popular in New Orleans. A *volante* was a Spanish one- or two-passenger carriage, having only two wheels and an open, hooded body. It was usually pulled by a single horse, which was ridden by the coachman, although sometimes two or three horses were employed. *Volantes* were popular in Spain, Mexico, Cuba and Louisiana in the early to mid 1800s.

By now the reader is surely wondering what happened to the Presidential carriage after it reached the Crescent City and no one seemed interested in its purchase. Watson explained, "It became in time a kind of outhouse, in which fowls roosted; and in the great battle of New Orleans it stood between the combatants, and was greatly shot-ridden! Its gooseneck crane, has been laid aside for me." Some additional ironwork was used as a border around a gravesite.



Profile of another carriage of George Washington, made in London

What an inglorious end to such a splendid Presidential carriage! And how did it end up in the line of fire at the Battle of New Orleans? How on earth, you must be asking yourself, did it make its way to Chalmette, if that is where it met its fate? Watson does not explain all the details of the custom chariot's demise. But Willis P. Hazard, who in 1879 completed an expanded third volume to John Fanning Watson's *Annals*, provided "the rest of the story" – if you believe it.

Hazard wrote that he had seen that very carriage:

"I have seen this Carriage. It was brought from New Orleans and exhibited on Chestnut Street (in Philadelphia) as a curiosity. Every one who was desirous of sitting where Washington had sat, paid twenty-five cents for the privilege. It was then stored away in a *coach-factory* and was again exhibited in 1876, at the Centennial Exhibition. It is now at the Permanent Exhibition."

A prominent author on George Washington, Mary Stevens Beall (1855 – 1917), questioned how this could be true. She asked, "Could any one who saw the alleged 'Washington Coach' exhibited at the Centennial Exhibition, believe for a moment that it had been used as a hen-house, had stood out-of doors in all kinds of weather, been riddled with bullets, completely destroyed, deprived of its goose-neck crane, and the rest of its iron work used to fence a grave?" And, I would add, "magically restored for exhibit in Philadelphia?" No, it must've been a different coach. And, if so, what about the carriage down in New Orleans? Did it just crumble to nothingness out on the battlefield?



Mrs. Mary Stevens Beall

Perhaps we'll never know the answers to these questions, and that is one of the mysterious yet fascinating ironies of history. And New Orleans, once again, has revealed itself as an integral part to so much of our nation's rich and varied narrative.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"Washington's Carriage in New Orleans"
Ned Hémard
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