

The Mexican Connection

The population of Southern Louisiana, and especially of New Orleans, has many deep and long-lasting connections with Mexico. These include not only family ties but cultural influences, such as cuisine, art, furniture and music, which have made their way back and forth across the Mexican-American border for centuries. Historical, as well as cultural connections, abound.



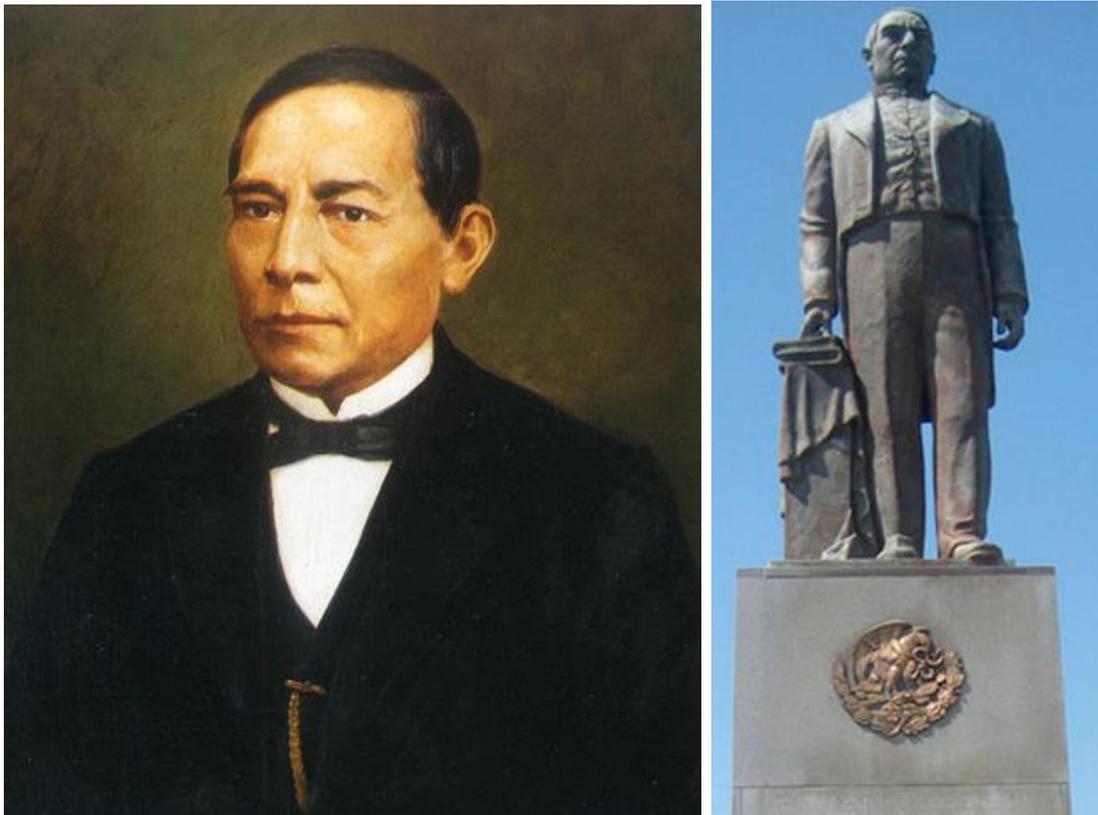
Gálvez defeats the British at the Siege of Pensacola, 1781.

Bernardo de Gálvez (1746 – 1786) was the fourth Spanish colonial governor of Louisiana, from 1777 to 1785, and remembered for his successes against the British during the American Revolution. He also endeared himself to the French Creole population of New Orleans by marrying in November 1777 Marie Félicité de Saint-Maxent d'Estrehan, the daughter of Gilbert Antoine de Saint-Maxent and recent widow of Jean-Baptiste d'Estréhan's son. For his many achievements, Gálvez (for whom a major thoroughfare in New Orleans

is named) was made a count in 1783 and soon after Viceroy of New Spain. This took him to Mexico, where he arrived in Vera Cruz on May 21, 1785, and made his formal entry into Mexico City that June.

In Mexico City, Gálvez did many great things, such as ordering the installation of street lights and the paving of streets, as well as the construction of the cathedral towers. He also initiated the construction of Chapultepec Castle in 1785. When a famine and typhus epidemic struck the following year killing 300,000 people, Gálvez donated 12,000 pesos of his own inheritance and raised an additional 100,000 pesos to buy beans and maize for the populace. He himself died of typhus at Tacubaya, a part of Mexico City where many of the city's wealthy, including viceroys, built homes to enjoy the area's beautiful scenery. Only 40 years old at his death, Gálvez is one of only eight people to have been awarded honorary United States citizenship.

New Orleans is home to an equestrian statue of Governor Gálvez, as well as a monument to Mexican independence leader and president Benito Juárez.



Benito Juárez and his statue on Basin Street in New Orleans

Born in Oaxaca, Mexico, a Zapotec Indian of humble origins, orphaned at 3, lawyer and politician Benito Juárez (March 21 1806 – July 18, 1872) is revered as a national hero in Mexico and served as its 26th president from 1858 until his death in 1872.

Known as “*Benemérito de las Americas*” and the “George Washington of Mexico”, Juárez set in motion *La Reforma*, which began with a call in 1854 for the removal of the dictator Antonio López de Santa Anna, who we all remember from the Battle of the Alamo. Santa Anna fell the following year, and Juárez and the liberals enacted the *Ley Juárez*, abolishing the *fueros* (special privileges of the clergy and the military). Juárez is remembered for establishing the foundation for the Mexican Republic, thereby preserving the independence of Mexico.

But did you know that Juárez lived and worked in New Orleans, eking out a meager existence in the 1850s?



Benito Juárez of Mexico once lived in the New Orleans French Quarter.

He lived in a dismal boarding house garret in the French Quarter, just making do by rolling cigarettes and cigars at a tobacco factory on the Street of Great Men (now Dauphine Street). Only a year before he had been the governor of the state of Oaxaca, but in 1853 was forced to flee after having been imprisoned for several months over his objections to Santa Anna’s corrupt military dictatorship. The deprivation and loneliness while in exile in New Orleans strengthened his resolve and passionate love of his country. In 1854, while still in

New Orleans, he was busy drafting the Plan of Ayutla as the basis for a liberal revolution in Mexico. He returned to his country in 1855 to help foster a revolution that forced Santa Anna to resign. He later became the republic's supreme court chief justice, its vice president and provisional president of its liberal faction.

After a three-year civil conflict broke out in 1858, Juárez was again forced to spend time in New Orleans. The details about that stay are lacking, but once again he returned to Mexico to defeat his rivals, claimed the presidency in 1861 and set in motion his plans for modernizing the republic.

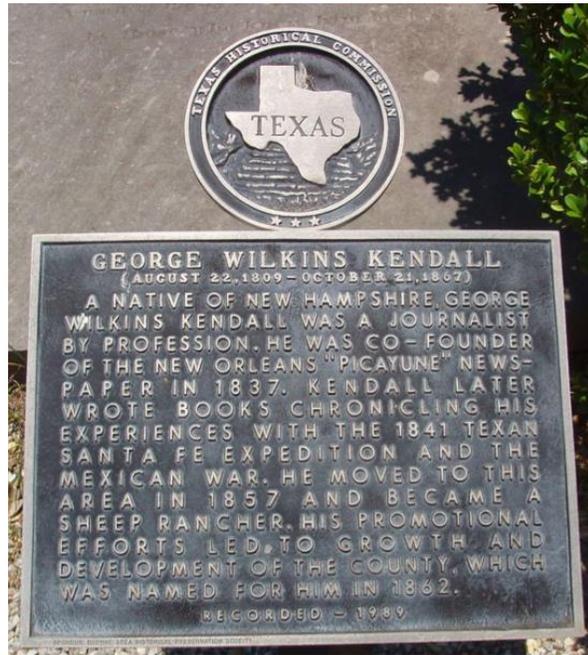
During the administration of Mayor Victor H. Schiro, the Juárez Monument on Basin Street was officially presented on April 24, 1965, commemorating Mexican president Benito Juárez. Sculpted by Juan Fernando Olaguibel, the bronze statue's unveiling was celebrated with a colorful parade of seven Blaine Kern designed floats, one of which carried a Mariachi band sent here by the Mexican government.

The Mexican Ambassador to the United States, Hugo B. Margain, in presenting this gift to the city from Mexico, remarked, "We may be sure that Juárez never imagined that his statue would be some day offered by his country to a city where he once experienced so much hardship with perfect poise and unwavering faith in the triumph of his cause."

Juárez was not the only person to spend time in New Orleans to also be imprisoned by Santa Anna. George Wilkins Kendall, co-founder of the *New Orleans Picayune* in 1837 and the nation's first documented war correspondent, was another. He was taken prisoner by the Mexican military in New Mexico and marched 2,000 miles to Mexico City and confined in a leper colony where he contracted smallpox. While in captivity in Mexico, Kendall posted detailed letters, twenty-three of which were subsequently published in the *Picayune* over a period of one year. Kendall was released in 1842.

"When the Mexican war broke out," according to a *Boston Herald* article dated February 18, 1926, "Kendall resolved to get to the front, for his paper. He rowed across the river in a skiff. By horse and mule he traveled overland for 11 days, reaching Gen. Taylor's forces on the Rio Grande. He wrote his dispatches on the battlefield – the first time this had been done." Long before the founding of the Pony Express in 1860, Kendall and the *Picayune's* other co-founder Francis Lumsden began their own pony express, with riders handing off dispatches to

the next rider in the chain, to link Kendall's reports to other newspapers in the East.



George Wilkins Kendall, co-founder of the New Orleans Picayune

Kendall, born in Mont Vernon, New Hampshire, August 22, 1809, learned the art of printing at a young age, working for Horace Greeley, and in Alabama in 1832 for the *Mobile Register*. The *Picayune's* initial price (and the source of its name) was one picayune, a Spanish coin equivalent to 6¼¢ (half a bit, representing one-sixteenth of a dollar). Noted for its "witty, cheerful tone, its political independence, spirit of good will, and emphasis on local news," the *Picayune* was described as a "saucy little sheet" that urged, like Greeley, westward expansion, the annexation of Texas and war with Mexico.



If that wasn't enough for his resumé, Kendall is considered a pioneer of Texas sheep ranching, and is regarded him as the father of that industry in Texas. Kendall County, Texas, part of the San Antonio-New Braunfels Metropolitan Statistical Area, is named in his honor.

PROSPECTUS
OF
THE PICAYUNE.

TO THE PUBLIC:—In selecting the above title for our contemplated Journal, we intend the word to have a double application, as to its limited dimensions and demands.

“Man wants but little here below,
Nor wants that little long.”

Some may object to our Anglo-Spanish spelling of the title, and call for the derivation; but when we exchange our picayune for your picayune, and we derive a profit, it will be time enough to touch the Spanish.

Editors are often tempted by the Devil to do strange things, and our *diabolus ad typo*, puffed up with technicality and temerity, suggested the title of the *small pi-ca-yune* as a *demon-stration*. But the Devil was cast out; and what is most extraordinary, the office was too hot to hold him.

Printed in the Picayune, January 29, 1837

Throughout early 1846, Kendall and other New Orleans editors vigorously advocated for war with Mexico and it finally came that April. With New Orleans being the closest American port to Mexico, it became the staging area for many soldiers leaving for the Mexican front. A young Ulysses S. Grant sailed from New Orleans, bound for Texas and a promotion to full second lieutenant. During the war, for the first time, he and Robert E. Lee met and served together

Less than two score years later, amity between Mexico and the United States was being promoted. The World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition, which opened in New Orleans on December 16, 1884, was the setting for a most important Mexico-New Orleans connection. Mexico went all out for the Cotton Centennial Exposition and was its largest exhibitor. Mexican president Porfirio Díaz saw the expo as a great marketing opportunity to showcase his country and to encourage American investment. One way to win the crowds was with music.

The Eighth Cavalry Mexican Band thrilled the crowds at the fair and was a tremendous influence upon local musicians. Jazz was still about 30 years in the future. It didn't even exist yet, but it was truly influenced by this phenomenal band. Upon the close of the fair, band

members discarded their surplus instruments at bargain prices. Some of the Mexican musicians stayed behind in the Crescent City, sought jobs and taught local musicians their techniques. One such method was a plucking style on the string bass that became the predominant mode of playing as jazz emerged. Mexican saxophonist, clarinetist and flautist, Florencio Ramos remained in New Orleans and is credited with introducing the saxophone to the city. He lived at 4505 Dryades Street from 1929 until 1931.

In addition to the success of the Mexican Band, the Mexican Pavilion was a thing of architectural beauty. This impressive kiosk was called the Mexican Alhambra Palace because its architecture so closely resembled the style of the *Alhambra* in Spain. It was also called the "Octagonal Building" because of its eight-sided design. After the Fair was over, the kiosk was dismantled and sent to Mexico City and reassembled on the south side of the *Parque Alameda Central*. There the *Kiosco Morisco* remained until it was moved to make way for a semicircular neoclassical monument dedicated to Benito Juárez. Construction began in 1906 to mark the centennial of Juárez's birth, and the memorial was dedicated in 1910. The beautiful *Kiosco Morisco* was then moved to the *Alameda de Santa María la Ribera* in Mexico City where it stands today.



Mexican Alhambra Palace at the 1884 Cotton Exposition



The Alhambra Palace, or Kiosco Morisco, in Mexico City today

There are so many ways in which New Orleans shares a connection with Mexico. Whenever we enjoy Mexican cuisine or perhaps spice up our bowl of gumbo with Tabasco sauce, there is a Mexican connection. Tabasco peppers (*capsicum frutescens*) originated in the Mexican state of Tabasco. When we celebrate Cinco de Mayo (5th of May), we are celebrating the Mexican victory at the Battle of Puebla, (May 5, 1862), fought between the army of the liberal government headed by Benito Juárez and the French forces sent by Napoleon III to advance French imperial expansion in Mexico. A young officer (and future president), Brigadier General Porfirio Díaz contributed to the victory by turning back a flank of the invading French army. Declared a national holiday by President Juárez, it is a common misconception in the United States that Cinco de Mayo is Mexico's Independence Day. It is not.

In Mexico in the early part of the 20th century, Porfirio Díaz was still president and didn't feel like stepping down. He "ran" again in 1910 and declared himself the winner of an eighth term. The failure of his 31-year-long regime was a catalyst in bringing about the Mexican Revolution, which lasted roughly from 1910 to 1920.

Born in a rural village in northern Mexico in 1901, Enrique Alférez ran away from home at the age of 12 and rode with Pancho Villa's army during the Mexican Revolution. Introduced to sculpture at a young age by his father Longinus, a European-trained artist who carved religious statues for the church, Enrique fled to the United States and found work as a photographer's assistant in El Paso, Texas. Sculptor and art teacher Lorado Taft saw potential in the young man and

encouraged him to come study under him at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, which he did. While in Chicago, Alférez created twenty-four wood reliefs at the city's Palmolive Building skyscraper. After completing his education in 1929, he moved to New Orleans, where he lived for much of the rest of his life.



Enrique Alférez, prolific Mexican-born New Orleans art deco sculptor

Best known for his sculpture in the art deco style, Alférez's striking creations, influenced by the realism of his native Mexico, are an important contribution to public art in New Orleans, where he specialized in sculpting architectural reliefs and the human form. One can find his works all around town, many of which were commissioned by the Works Progress Administration during the 1930s, especially in City Park. There he did bas-relief work on bridges, figures on gates, and sculpture, which can be seen today at The Helis Foundation Enrique Alférez Sculpture Garden in the New Orleans Botanical Garden. His other sculptures and reliefs include the well-known façade of Charity Hospital, the "Molly Marine" statue at Canal Street and Elk Place (the first statue of a woman in military uniform in the U.S.) and the bronze "Lute Player" and "David" standing before the entrance of 909 Poydras Street.



*Fridamania in Bay St. Louis with Fridas everywhere, pre COVID-19
Photo by Ellis Anderson, The Shoofly Magazine*

One of the city's most enduring and delectable symbols of Mexican culture is Manuel's Hot Tamales, even years after it has been closed for business. Manuel Hernandez, born in Mexico City, came to New Orleans in the early part of the Twentieth Century, and began selling his tamales from a cart at the corner of Canal Street and Carrollton Avenue for only 15 cents a dozen in 1933. Countless New Orleans residents have fond memories of purchasing a dozen or more truly "hot" tamales, packaged in newspaper alongside a kerosene lantern. In 1960 Manuel acquired a storefront for his business at 4709 South Carrollton. The beloved tamale purveyor died in 1968, and the business passed to his son-in-law, William Schneider. The business thrived for over 70 years, until floodwaters arrived right after Katrina and put an end to a New Orleans favorite.

It's not unusual to see street corner vendors, as well as local restaurants, groceries and stores, selling "Manuel's style" hot tamales to this very day. Whether "Manuel's style" or "New Orleans style", the important difference is that Manuel's meaty tamales, unlike traditional Mexican tamales, were only lightly rolled in dry cornmeal before being wrapped, rather than being encased in a thicker corn-based dough. We all loved them and still do.



MANUEL HERNANDEZ

Manuel, the King of New Orleans Tamales – we miss you.

So the next time you order tacos from Juan's Flying Burrito, which bills itself as a "Creole Taqueria", or a "*numero uno y medio*" from Taqueria Corona, remember that there are so many other rich connections between Mexico and "America's Most Interesting City".

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"The Mexican Connection"
Ned Hémard
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