

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Charles and His Avenue

Two years before the founding of New Orleans, Elisabeth Farnese (the second wife of French-born Philip V of Spain) gave birth to the *Infante* Carlos (Charles of Spain) on January 20, 1716. He was a long shot to ever become king, being fourth in line to the Spanish throne after three elder half-brothers: the *Infante* Luis, Prince of Asturias (who did actually rule briefly as Louis I of Spain), the *Infante* Felipe (who died in 1719), and Ferdinand.

In 1734, three years after Charles became the Duke of Parma, the royal teenager conquered the kingdoms of Naples and of Sicily, and was crowned as the King of Naples and Sicily on July 3, 1735, reigning as Charles VII of Naples and Charles V of Sicily. In 1738 he married the cultured and educated Princess Maria Amalia of Saxony, who gave birth to thirteen children, eight of whom survived to adulthood.

Charles' half-brother Felipe's death in 1719 put Charles third in line to the throne after Louis and Ferdinand. Eventually, these two both died and Charles succeeded to the Spanish throne on August 10, 1759, as Charles III of Spain. Later the same year, he abdicated the Neapolitan and Sicilian thrones in favor of his third surviving son, Ferdinand, who became Ferdinand of the Two Sicilies (a kingdom Charles III's descendants ruled until 1861).

Although Charles was a long shot to ever reign as the king of Spain, you might say he won by a nose. It seems that the most significant characteristic of his facial appearance was his prominent proboscis. Having inherited his dominant Bourbon nose from his father's side of the family, Charles was described as "a brown boy" with "a lean face with a bulging nose".

Charles had a wide range of interests, including painting and especially hunting, and he was educated in printmaking. He remained an enthusiastic etcher throughout his life. He attempted to better his empire through numerous far-reaching reforms such as weakening the power of the Church, modernizing agriculture, promoting science and

the work of universities, facilitating commerce and keeping Spain out of war.



Charles III of Spain and his Bourbon nose

This was not always easy. Along came the Seven Years War, described by some scholars as the world's first truly global conflict. It had two major fronts. The first, in Europe, was the hostility between Prussia and Austria, still simmering after the War of the Austrian Succession. This expanded to include alliances among all of the European powers. The second front was the colonial rivalries between Britain, France and Spain, known in America as the French and Indian War, which began over which power would control the Ohio valley.

The Seven Years' War was a disaster for France and the government of Louis XV. Charles had become deeply worried that Britain's success in these conflicts would destroy the balance of power, and the Brits would soon set their eyes on conquering the Spanish Empire as they

had done the French. So in early 1762, Spain entered the war by attempting to invade Portugal and capture Jamaica - both dismal failures. Britain and Portugal not only warded off the Spanish attack on Portugal, but also captured the Spanish cities of Manila in the Philippines and Havana, Cuba.

To get these two cities back, Spain had to cede Florida to the British in exchange for their return. This was partly compensated by France's ceding Louisiana "as well as New Orleans, and the island in which that town is situated" to Charles as a compensation for Spain's war losses. This was the result of a secret treaty signed in 1762. New Orleans would have a new king, Spanish not French, but not without a fight. General Alejandro O'Reilly was sent to New Orleans to crush the rebels and take formal possession of the colony for Spain. Charles was the new king, and his name lives on in New Orleans.



The St. Charles streetcar line on the street named for a king

When Bertrand Gravier and his wife, Doña Maria Josefa Deslondes (widow of André Renard) began to divide their land holdings in 1788, they created the Faubourg Ste. Marie (named for Gravier's wife). It was to become New Orleans' Central Business District (the CBD), and would also come to be known as the American Sector. To honor King Charles III of Spain, they named a street in honor of the king's patron saint, St. Charles Borromeo (a leading figure during the Counter-

Reformation and responsible for significant reforms in the Catholic Church). Like King Charles III, he also had a prominent nose. Back then, St. Charles Street extended from Canal Street as far as St. Joseph Street.

Alas, the Spanish king known for his happy and exuberant character (who also supported the American revolutionaries in their War of Independence), died at the end of the year his street was named. Soon new leaders entered the world stage. Ruinously high taxes and a number of other events brought about the French Revolution, and a military officer named Napoléon Bonaparte later rose to the position of Emperor. He, too, suffered setbacks. Severe troop losses in Saint Domingue helped convince Napoléon to sell France's North American possessions. Louisiana (taken back from Spain) was conveyed to the United States in the Louisiana Purchase of 1803.

Between that time and 1810, visionary architect and city planner Barthélémy Lafon subdivided the area just upriver from the Faubourg Ste. Marie along classical lines. Greek mythology was his inspiration. From a beautiful circular park (originally Tivoli Circle, today Lee Circle) a new wide avenue would angle off following the curve in the river. There would be fountains and parks, classic schools and theatres, all within a grid carefully fitted within that crescent.

Lafon named his main thoroughfare *Cours des Naiades* (later Nayades) for the Greek nymphs who ruled over fountains, springs, wells, brooks and streams (as well as waters of ponds, marshes and lagoon-lakes). The *Naiades* presided over all the fresh water wetlands, since the *Oceanids* were saltwater nymphs and the *Nereids* were specifically associated with the Mediterranean. Nonetheless, the ancient Greeks thought of the world's waters as a single system.

Eventually Lafon's avenue was called Route of the Nayades, but in 1852 many street names changed. City ordinance No. 395 washed away forever the nymphs and changed the *Cours des Naiades* to St. Charles Avenue, extending the street first begun in the Graviers' Faubourg Ste. Marie.

As new and newer faubourgs were annexed by the City of New Orleans, St. Charles Avenue extended further Uptown. Growth was greatly enhanced by the New Orleans and Carrollton Railroad Company, which began running the city's famous streetcars in 1835 along the same route in use today.

While much of Lafon's master plan was never fully realized, his Greek-inspired Route of the Nayades endured for 45 years. Today, Charles III reigns supreme over this beautiful avenue named in his honor.

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