

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### Duel Personality

In days of yore when a court of law did not seem the appropriate solution to libel or slander, the duel (especially in New Orleans) was considered an excellent resource for recovery of reputation. More duels were fought during the 1830s in the Crescent City than in any other city in the world. Louisiana Historian Alcée Fortier wrote that on a single Sunday in 1839 ten duels were fought in New Orleans.

The word duel from the Latin *duellum*, an archaic form of *bellum*, originally signified a legal method of solving a private matter. By the time it came to New Orleans it was an extrajudicial avenue for settling a private affront. It was conducted according to twenty-six points of the *Code Duello*, adopted in 1777 in Ireland, of all places. It seems as if the gentlemen of Tipperary, Galway, Mayo, Sligo and Roscommon needed some ground rules so as to avoid a donnybrook. And it was only for gentlemen since they would only duel those of their own social standing, even though the insults would indicate otherwise.



## *Dueling in City Park in 1841*

In 1722, only four years after the founding New Orleans, Bienville outlawed dueling. Both the French and Spanish administrations had tough laws against dueling, but they were not enforced. In 1812, when Louisiana became a state, dueling was illegal. An "Association Against Dueling" was formed in New Orleans in 1834, but Creole tempers still flared. In 1855 the New Orleans police began to enforce the laws on the books against dueling, and a number of arrests and prosecutions were made. But, despite these efforts, duels continued for many years. The local newspapers also campaigned against this time-honored tradition, but even they became involved in the practice:

July 1, 1873, Colonel R. B. Rhett, editor of the New Orleans *Daily Picayune*, fatally shot former Judge William Cooley at Bay St. Louis; and on June 7, 1882, Harrison Parker, also editor of the New Orleans *Daily Picayune*, seriously wounded Louisiana State Treasurer Edward A. Burke in a duel with pistols.

Finally the anti-dueling law began to have an impact, and public opinion began to change. Refusing to accept a challenge to defend one's honor no longer carried the same stigma in the community. The last reported duel under the oaks in City Park was June 22, 1889. By 1890 dueling in the Crescent City was a thing of the past. But fifty years earlier, duels were numerous.



"In 1840," wrote James M. Augustin in a 1908 *Picayune* article, "there were fought a series of duels between fencing masters, impelled by professional jealousies. They combated with broadswords and several of the contestants were killed." He mentioned some of the famous

duels, such as "those between Marcel Dauphin and Bonneval, in which the former was killed; Reynard, a redoubtable duelist with the sword put to rest a number of antagonists; L'Alouette thrust Shubra through and through." *L'Alouette, gentille L'Alouette!*

In addition, wrote Augustin, "Pepe Llulla, of renowned memory, a duelist who met any man with any weapon, scored innumerable victories." He was referring to Don José (Pepe) Llulla, Pepe being the diminutive of José (Joseph). When the legendary master L'Alouette from Alsace died, Pepe succeeded him as teacher in the fencing hall.

Creole honor was a matter of great delicacy and the Dueling Oaks (*Les Chênes d'Allard*) in City Park (once Allard's plantation) were a preferred setting for *les affaires d'honneur*. Young Creole gentlemen were ably skilled in swordsmanship and the *colichemarde* (a long sword balanced especially for dueling) was a frequent choice. Duelers had seconds, those who had the responsibility of attempting to resolve the dispute in order to avoid the duel altogether.

Bernard de Marigny is said to have fought nineteen duels beneath the Allard Oaks. Representative of most duels, his were often over a lady. Many were fought over Anna Mathilda Morales, whom he later married. In 1817 he challenged James Humble (six feet ten inches tall) to the field of honor. Humble, never having wielded a sword or fired a gun, selected "blacksmith hammers in six feet of water in Lake Pontchartrain". Marigny had a sense of humor and took Humble to dinner instead.

Emile La Sère, a U.S. Congressman from New Orleans, fought eighteen duels. Governor Claiborne fought a duel, and his brother-in-law, Micajah Green Lewis, died in one. José (Pepe) Llulla, however, was the undisputed *maître d'armes* of the dueling ground. His expertise saw him through over forty duels with swords (from épées to sabers) and firearms (from handguns to shotguns). He ran a dueling academy on Exchange Alley in the French Quarter. Augustin wrote, "Llulla, was a Spaniard, and in his day the insurrection in Cuba against Spain was very active. Many Cubans had sought refuge in New Orleans, and it was such men that Llulla delighted to pick a quarrel. He provoked them under the slightest pretext and succeeded in killing several." None of his serious duels lasted more than a few minutes, and Llulla even purchased and maintained the Louisa Street Cemetery for the burial of those that died at his hand.

Swordsman Pepe Llulla (born 1815) was equally adept with a pistol. His friends and *confrères* would volunteer as targets, holding a silver dollar between their fingers or a pipe in their teeth as a target. Master Pepe would not miss. He even balanced an egg on the head of his young son and cracked it with a single pistol shot at thirty paces. With

a rifle he would unfailingly hit any cork or coin tossed into the air. And he was amazingly proficient with a bowie knife.

Llulla's defense of his homeland did not go unnoticed back in Spain. A special missive from Madrid sealed with the royal seal, bestowed upon him knighthood and enclosed the golden cross of the Order of Charles III. Lafcadio Hearn wrote of Llulla, "while comparatively few are intimate with him, for he is a reserved man, there is scarcely a citizen who does not know him by name, and hardly a New Orleans urchin who could not tell you 'Pepe Llulla is a great duelist.'" He died a natural death at age seventy-three and is buried in St. Vincent de Paul Cemetery.

## "Pepe" Llulla, Dead.

*Don José Llulla, native of Port Mahón, Menorca, "peacefully passed away" March 6, 1888, "after an eventful and stormy life". - Picayune*

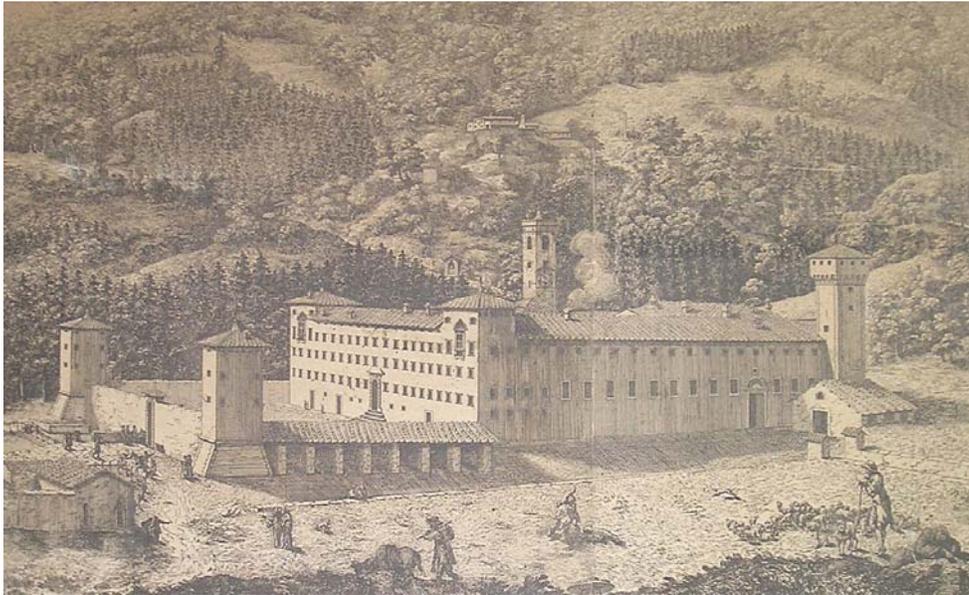
Other *salles d'armes*, such as the academy run by Llulla, did a thriving business. One fiery-tempered bayou barrister named Gilbert (Titi) Rosière, who must not have found enough action in the courtroom, taught young gentlemen the dueling arts. He also sent several adversaries to an early grave.

Philippe Toca and Judge Gilbert Leonard, both of Plaquemines Parish, faced each other with double-barreled fowling pieces (shotguns used for shooting birds or small animals) in a duel that took place in March of 1845. Each weapon was loaded with a single ball. Leonard died as a result of the second round of fire. In the first round, neither hit each other. The John Hueston-Alcée Labranche duel two years before employed the same choice of weapons but went into the fourth round before Hueston was killed.

A haughty French academician, the Chevalier Tomasi, visiting New Orleans (also in 1845) made the grave error of calling the Mississippi River "a mere rill, figuratively speaking" in comparison to the great rivers of Europe. Speaking disparagingly of the "Father of Waters" in the Crescent City was a near fatal *faux pas*. Creole pride brought about an immediate challenge, and the offending Frenchman acquired a slash across his cheek. A couple of days later the Chevalier blamed his wound on the inferiority of his American-made sword. Fortunately for him, Creole honor had already been sufficiently satisfied.

The DeBuys-Alpuente duel was also fought with double-barreled shotguns with single balls. DeBuys was saved by a Hollywood ending

in which the ball hit a twenty-dollar gold piece in his waistcoat. Feeling lucky, he crossed swords with Aristide Gerard later that afternoon and received fourteen wounds. A born duelist, DeBuys is known to have fought twenty-four duels.



*Vallombrosa Abbey in Tuscany, where leaves are as plentiful as duels fought in the name of love in New Orleans*

"Duels having for cause '*cherchez la femme*' were as plentiful as leaves in Vallambrosa [*sic*]," concluded Augustin (a reference to a line from Milton's *Paradise Lost*). "Hot-headed youths would leave the Planter's Ball or the Opera Ball at an early hour in the morning and proceed to the City Park and fight to the death just because some lady showed preference for one cavalier over another either in a dance or at supper." At one such dance in 1830, a Monsieur Le Tellier refused to relinquish the first half of his dance with a beautiful Creole belle. His indignant challenger (the gent who wanted to dance with his belle) called Le Tellier "*mal élevé*" (impolite), and the following morning they found themselves beneath the oaks of Allard's plantation ready to kill each other "in a perfectly gentlemanly and correct manner."

One of the famous dueling oaks in City Park was brought down by a hurricane in 1949. The remaining one still stands at the intersection of Dueling Oaks Drive and Dreyfous Drive.

William McKendree Gwin, who was appointed to superintend the construction of the New Orleans Custom House, did not stick around to see its completion. He left instead for California, where he fought a duel with rifles at thirty yards with Congressman Joseph McCorkle over Gwin's alleged mismanagement of federal patronage. Both men fired shots, but the only victim was an unfortunate donkey standing some distance away. The innocent beast of burden was shot dead.



*The Dickinson-Jackson Duel of 1806*

Perhaps the most significant duel (apart from the tragic meeting of Burr and Hamilton in 1804) was Andrew Jackson's encounter with a young lawyer, Charles H. Dickinson, over two hundred years on May 30, 1806. Years before the Battle of New Orleans, Jackson and Dickinson fought over a horse race. As the dispute intensified Jackson's wife Rachel was slandered by Dickinson, who later called Jackson a "poltroon and a coward." Dickinson was redundant, as the word "poltroon" (the slur of choice in those days to instigate a duel) is defined as a base or utter coward.

A duel indeed ensued, with Dickinson perhaps the best shot in the country. But Old Hickory cleverly wore a loose overcoat in which he turned his body sideways so as to mask his body's orientation. The bullet came in two inches from his heart and broke two ribs. Standing as if he were not hit, Jackson took deliberate aim as Dickinson stood in disbelief awaiting his fate. Dickinson bled to death hours later, and Jackson suffered with his wound the rest of his life.

Dickinson's father-in-law, Captain Joseph Erwin, moved his family to Iberville Parish, Louisiana, the year after the famous duel and became a prosperous planter. Young Charles H. Dickinson (born March 9, 1806, the same year Jackson mortally wounded his father) came down to Louisiana in 1828 and built Live Oaks Plantation on *Bayou Grosse Tête*. Together they and their descendants became prominent citizens and leaders of the state.

And Andrew Jackson lived to fight another day, especially on January 8, 1815, as the hero of the Battle of New Orleans. The British, intent on gaining control of the vast Louisiana Purchase, were thwarted in the last armed engagement between the United States and Britain. Jackson's overwhelming victory elevated national pride, secured the nation's sovereignty, propelled him along the path to the Presidency and established once and for all that Louisiana had earned and would retain its status as an American state.

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