

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Eighteenth-Century Etiquette

Manners are defined as the prevailing customs, ways of living, and habits of a people, class or interval of time. Etiquette, on the other hand, is the customary code of polite and ethical behavior in society or among members of a particular profession or group. Social arbiter Judith Martin, better known by her pen name Miss Manners, explained the difference:

“I make a distinction between manners and etiquette - manners as the principles, which are eternal and universal, etiquette as the particular rules which are arbitrary and different in different times, different situations, different cultures.”

New Orleans' own Dorothy Dix (1861 – 1951), who began writing for the *Picayune* in 1896 and was America's most widely read and highest paid journalist at the time of her death, defined Etiquette in 1916 as “nothing more nor less than the Golden Rule dressed up in party clothes and with a flower in its buttonhole.”

She also wrote:

“As for etiquette being the mother of insincerity, that is nonsense. There is more to praise than to blame, more to admire than to criticize, more to like than to hate in the world. Why is it not as honest to speak of a person's good qualities as his bad qualities?”

“At its worst,” she concluded, “etiquette is merely assuming the virtue of consideration of others by those who have it not,, and that is better than the brutality of the savage, who goes his own way unmindful of the rights of others.

When we all get to be angels, altruistically intent on promoting each other's happiness, we can do without etiquette; but until that time arrives, blessed be good manners that make it bad form for us to step on each other's toes and do and say things we are prompted to do.”

The French word *étiquette* was not used in a modern sense in English

until around the mid-1700s. It was a word that literally signified a tag or label. Still, codes of conduct and moral precepts had been around for centuries. Ptahhotep, an ancient Egyptian vizier, offered some words of wisdom designed to instruct young men in appropriate behavior way back in the 3rd Millennium BC. The Chinese teacher and philosopher Confucius (551 – 479 BC) also had some excellent maxims.

As a sixteen-year-old student in Virginia, George Washington took his first steps toward greatness by copying out by hand *110 Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation*, based on a French etiquette manual composed for young gentlemen by French Jesuits in 1595. The English translation first appeared in 1640.

And who could forget Polonius' advice to his son, Laertes, in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (written about 1599 – 1601):

"Neither a borrower nor a lender be;
For loan oft loses both itself and friend,
And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry."

That was just a portion of a caring father's sage counsel.

It was another concerned father, Philip Stanhope, 4th Earl of Chesterfield, who is credited with first using the word "Etiquette" in its modern sense, in his *Letters to His Son on the Art of Becoming a Man of the World and a Gentleman*. First published by his son's widow in 1774, this work is composed of over 400 mostly instructive letters written from 1737 or 1738 and continuing until his son's death in 1768. These missives to his son were filled with elegant wisdom, keen deductions and perceptive observations.

Lord Chesterfield advanced the following pearls of wisdom:

"A man's own good breeding is the best security against other people's ill manners."

"Manners must adorn knowledge, and smooth its way through the world. Like a great rough diamond, it may do very well in a closet by way of curiosity, and also for its intrinsic value; but it will never be worn, nor shine, if it is not polished."

Chesterfield, too, saw a difference between Manners and Etiquette and strived to disjoin the issue of manners from conventional morality, making the argument that mastery of etiquette was a vital weapon in the arsenal of social advancement.

Chesterfield was no slouch. Educated at Trinity Hall, Cambridge, he later embarked on the traditional Grand Tour of Europe, an essential

educational rite of passage for the upper crust. It was there that British noblemen and the wealthy landed gentry gained exposure to the cultural legacies of Classical Antiquity and the Renaissance, and became acquainted with their aristocratic continental counterparts.



Philip Stanhope, 4th Earl of Chesterfield

Louisiana, too, had an eighteenth-century Polonius, or Chesterfield. His name was Pierre-Joseph Favrot, who was born in Louisiana in 1749 and died in 1824. When he wrote his "*Education Manual*" for his sons in 1798, he was serving as commandant of the swamp-surrounded, hurricane and fever prone Fort St. Philip in Plaquemines Parish in the service of colonial Spain. He had begun his military career earlier in 1761 upon receiving a commission as infantry ensign in the French colonial troops in Louisiana. He later served under Spanish Governor Bernardo de Gálvez and participated in the capture of Baton Rouge from the British in 1779.

Gálvez made him commandant of the fort and district of Baton Rouge, where he served until 1781. The command of Mobile followed in 1783, Natchez in 1792 and (with an appointment by Governor Carondelet) Plaquemines Parish in 1796.

Unlike the Earl of Chesterfield, Favrot was not a learned man or teacher. But he was able to acquire a suitable personal library and was well aware of eighteenth-century trends in mathematics, natural science, philosophy and education. Given the austerity of his posting and the lack of instructional facilities, he and his wife, Marie-Françoise Gérard of Pointe Coupée, took the duty of educating their four children (two sons and two daughters) upon themselves. Four other children had died in infancy.

Favrot's *"Manual"* is indeed an historical and cultural gem and a significant Louisiana snapshot in time. It included lessons in "Fencing", not to mention "History" and "Geography". His section on "Physics" was broken down into "Optics", "Mechanics", "Statics" and "Astronomy".



Pierre-Joseph Favrot, the Polonius of Plaquemines

What is "Statics", you might ask? According to Favrot:

"Statics is that part of mechanics that concerns the laws of the equilibrium of bodies, the knowledge of weights and the center of gravity. It is divided into Statics and Hydrostatics. One deals with the equilibrium of solid bodies and the other with the laws of fluids."

He also had a whole section on "The Arts", which included "Engraving", "Music" and "Dance". "Dance" was important back then and involved, according to Favrot, "leaping gracefully". Since it was used in "sacred ceremonies" in the Bible, it must be considered "innocent", he explained.

Dance, he wrote, "is good in that it imparts to all movements of the body a certain pleasure and joy. It produces a relaxed and free air, which is evident in the gait and in the position of the chin, and which is most pleasing in young people."

He explored "Grammar", "The Languages" and "Mathematics", in which he covered both "Arithmetic" and "Geometry", as well as how to

"Calculate Well", "Arabic and Roman Numerals" and the "Ages" of Man. Do you remember what a "Diphthong" is? He explained it in detail.

He also discussed monetary conversions. Do you know how many *deniers* make one *sol*? The answer is "Twelve". And there are two hundred and forty *deniers* in one *livre* (French pound), and five *livres* in one *piastre*. The *denier* (from the Latin *denarius*) was a French penny first issued in the late seventh century. It is interesting to note that before the decimalization of British coinage in 1971, two hundred and forty pence equaled one-pound sterling. Similarly, twelve pence were equal to a shilling, just as there were twelve *deniers* to a *sol*.

Not only that, the word for money in Spanish is *dinero*, also derived from the Latin *denarius*. In Italian it's *denaro*, in Portuguese *dinheiro*, and in Slovene *denar*, all meaning money.

Favrot's "*Education Manual*", originally written in French, was first made available to the public in 1988 with a translation by Martha Scott Gruning. Edited by Guillermo Nájuez Falcón, it was published by Tulane University's Howard-Tilton Memorial Library.

Below are Favrot's rules of conduct for "A Wise Man".

An excerpt from:

**PIERRE-JOSEPH FAVROT'S
EDUCATION MANUAL FOR HIS SONS**

A Précis of Knowledge For An Eighteenth-Century Louisiana Gentleman

(written in 1798, when he was lieutenant colonel serving in the Spanish colonial troops of Louisiana and commandant at Fort Fort Saint Philip in Plaquemines Parish)

THE CONDUCT OF A WISE MAN

My Son, love always without selfishness: forgive without weakness.

If you must submit, do so with servility.

Cultivate with care the friendship of every man.

Do not institute proceedings.

Always be sympathetic to the misfortunes of others. Be tolerant of the faults of your peers, and always be a loyal friend.



"Do not institute proceedings," but learn "Fencing"

My Son, speak little, think nobly, and cheat no one.

Be appreciative always of what you are given.

Do not be oppressive with poor debtors or with anyone else. In short, do not be scornful and do not be proud.

Do not be curious about the affairs of others and, without affectation, always keep your own hidden.

Never grudge your good deeds and consider them part of your secret affairs.

Be mindful of the needs of an unfortunate friend.

Be generous without being wasteful.

Try as often as possible to do as others wish; demand as seldom as possible that they do as you wish.

My Son, never betray a confidence.

Do not be envious of the good fortune of your neighbor.

Be boastful of nothing.

Keep silent and do not stoop to idle gossip.

Rise above the troubles that discourage the spirit, and in no way let them affect another.

Value each person for what he does best.

Do not criticize through ostentation.

My Son, always be fair and always consider the profession of flatterer as a vile and evil one.

My Son, give to the Creator, that which you owe Him.

Think carefully before undertaking any project.

Associate only with people of integrity.

Do not become puffed up over your fortunate talents.

Pay attention to what you are told.
Do not try to appear more intelligent than you are.
Do not commit yourself indiscriminately and honor your word invariably.

My Son, Religion defines our duties toward God. Civil Law defines our duties toward the State and the Sovereign. Natural Law defines our duties towards individuals and society.

The duties of children towards their fathers and mothers are obedience, submission, respect, love and gratitude.

The duties of fathers and mothers are instruction, education, and love for their children.

The duties of friendship are trust, solicitude, and good advice.

My Son, remember that flattery is the art of seduction by false praise and that it is the tool of knaves. Such unworthy fools are despised throughout the world and would be beaten were it not for the fear inspired by those figures of authority who listen to such rogues, but who finish by despising them.

Slander is a secret inclination to think badly of people. It manifests itself through words.

Generosity is the sacrifice of personal interest for the good of others. It is born of consideration. Generosity is praiseworthy only when it is not marked by ostentation.

As for the success of Pierre-Joseph Favrot's wise words, his sons Louis and Philogène Favrot became successful adults, holding positions of trust in the community. Like their father and grandfathers before them, they served in the military as officers. They also held public office as judges in West Baton Rouge Parish. It is no surprise that family, duty and personal honor were of utmost importance in their lives. Their descendants, too, have been and are prominent citizens in New Orleans and Baton Rouge, as well as other parts of the state.

It is in no small part due to the fact that Pierre-Joseph Favrot believed passionately that the "duties of fathers and mothers are instruction, education, and love for their children."

It's not always easy, as Oscar Wilde once confessed:

"The world is my oyster but I used the wrong fork."

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