

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Facts, Not Factoids

The neologism "factoid" was originally coined by Norman Mailer in his 1973 biography of Marilyn Monroe. He said factoids were "facts which have no existence before appearing in a magazine or newspaper," in other words, invented bits of information mistakenly accepted as facts even though they're not actually true, repeated so often in print they are believed to be true. Factoids were the "fake news" of the 1970s.

Twenty years later, William Safire addressed the topic in his *New York Times* column *On Language; Only the Factoids*:

"What on earth is a factoid?" demanded a reader. "I have seen this word on CNN as a heading for a few lines of quasi-truthful information."

Safire explained its original construct, "The Greek suffix -oid, long used in mathematics and astronomy (rhomboid, asteroid), usually means 'similar but not the same' when applied to a noun; an android, as Mr. Spock's fans know, is very like a human being but is an automaton."

Sadly, by 1993 the word became its own self-fulfilling prophesy and was understood by many to mean "a little-known but interesting piece of information". But, in fact, as defined by *The Washington Times*, a factoid is "something that looks like a fact, could be a fact, but in fact is not a fact".

A great example of a factoid is the statement that the Great Wall of China is visible from the moon. However, one's eyesight would need to be thousands of times stronger than 20/20 for one to see it. Nor did George Washington have wooden false teeth. Still we have heard these assertions so many times that we believe them to be gospel.

At first, I was going to use the term "factlets" in the title of this article, defined as interesting and perhaps trivial bits of information, yet nonetheless quite true. Safire called factlets a "little bit of arcana".

Still the word "fact" is always clear in its meaning. It's always true, period! And fact is, after all, often stranger than fiction.

Not to sugarcoat the first "fact," I'll refer to it as the Molasses Flood of 1911, which occurred when a storage tank containing 600,000 gallons of blackstrap molasses flooded the streets two to three feet deep in the vicinity of Market and St. Thomas streets. The Sugar Planters' Storage and Distributing Company had taken over the city's pre-Civil War water supply tank, a reservoir 100 feet square and eight feet deep. Its rupture cost the company \$40-50,000, and they were uninsured. The kids in the neighborhood had quite an experience. Mostly boys, both black and white, gathered enough molasses (in "buckets, tubs, barrels, tin cans, wash bowls" reported the *Picayune*) for their families to last a month. Housewives, however, worked strenuously for some time to clean up their sidewalks and front steps of the sticky ooze.

**HALF-MILLION GALLONS OF MOLASSES
SPREAD OVER RIVER FRONT SECTION.**

Old Water Works Reservoir, Purchased by Sugar Planters' Storage Company, Gives Way, Despite the Opinion of Engineers.

Headline in the Picayune, September 12, 1911

Things go wrong all the time, not just in the Crescent City, but all around the world. I particularly love this quote by Sid Noel Rideau, quoting on his alter ego, Morgus the Magnificent:



Morgus, with *E. R. I. C.* and Chopsley

"Yes, he's a fable with touches of satire and pathos. That hand on the back of his coat. That's the world holding him down."

We all remember that handprint on the back of Morgus' lab coat, a great reminder that things don't always go our way. And, what is more, we all don't have Chopsley to blame things on.

Some indomitable souls don't let anything get in the way of their goals. One such person was journalist and explorer Henry Morton Stanley. Born in Wales in 1841 as John Rowlands, he arrived in New Orleans where he was adopted by a wealthy cotton merchant and benefactor named Stanley. Most remember him for this quote:

"Dr. Livingstone, I presume?"

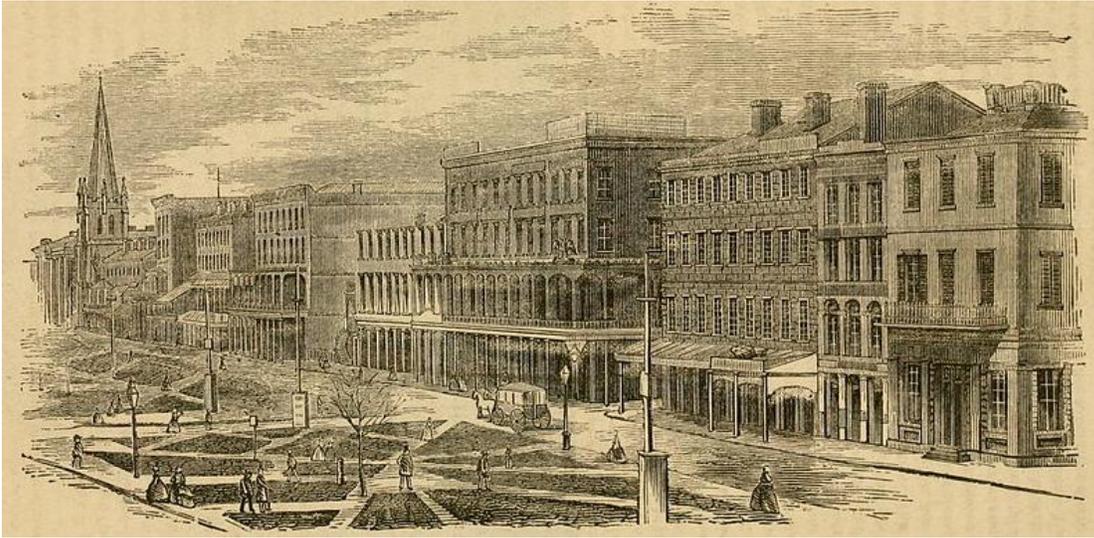
But did you know what he had to say about his first encounter with New Orleans in 1859? He entered the city by "hastening across the levee ... at a point not far from St. Thomas Street," he wrote, very close to where the great Molasses Flood would later take place.

What follows is from his autobiography:

"Though about thirty-five years have elapsed since I first stood upon the levee of the Crescent City, scarcely one of all my tumultuous sensations of pleasure, wonder, and curiosity, has been forgotten by me ... The soft, balmy air, with its strange scents of fermenting molasses, semi-baked sugar, green coffee, pitch, Stockholm tar, brine of mess-beef, rum and whiskey drippings, contributed a great deal towards imparting the charm of romance to everything I saw. The people I passed appeared to me to be nobler than any I had seen ... We reached the top of Tchaptoulas Street [*sic*], the main commercial artery of the city. The people were thronging home from the business quarters, to the more residential part ... In the vicinity of Poydras Sreet, we halted before a boarding house where we sat down to okra soup, grits, sweet potatoes, brinjalls, corn pones, mush-pudding, and 'fixings' - every article but the bread was strange and toothsome."

What great tastes and smells! And the city apparently had a strong aroma of molasses even then, in 1859, long before the great Molasses Flood of 1911.

Brinjal, by the way, is another name for eggplant, or aubergine, and is the Indian name for this edible fruit of the nightshade family. Brinjal is the term colloquially used in the Indian sub-continent, South Asia and South Africa.



New Orleans in 1859, Canal Street, from "The River Mississippi, from St. Paul to New Orleans", by Harthill, Ross, Tousey, Bushnell, et al

Mentioning all of those "toothsome" delights should remind us of the importance of good dental hygiene. Remember, be true to your teeth, or they shall be false to you.

But did you know that one of the nation's greatest dentists had a practice in Nineteenth Century New Orleans at No. 49 Canal Street?

Born in Vermont, a New Orleans dentist named Dr. Levi Spear Parmly is credited with inventing the earliest iteration of modern dental floss, introduced in 1815. Dr. Parmly encouraged his patients to floss with a waxed silken thread after each visit. In 1819, Dr. Parmly wrote a book on dentistry entitled *A Practical Guide to the Management of Teeth*, which encouraged people to brush twice daily, and floss once every day.

Although he never got to fit George Washington for false teeth, Dr. Parmly so enamored President James Monroe with his skills as a dentist, testimonials were printed during his service as President of the United States in the *Courier de la Louisiane*, February 20, 1822.

TEETH INSURED FOR LIFE BY

L S. PARMLY, DENTIST.—Terms: Annual
 subscriptions, for families collectively, each
 person.....\$ 5
 Singly,10
 Non subscribers, for each operation,.....1
 Children, half price.
 These terms include all operations, except the inser-
 tion of new Teeth.
 A front Tooth.....\$9 | A back Tooth.....\$5
 N. B A practical Discourse on the management of
 the Mouth and Teeth, every Thursday evening at
 his residence, No 49 Canal street. dec 22

Advertisement for Doctor Levi S. Parmly, the Louisiana Advertiser, August 18, 1826

**Copy of a certificate received by Mr. Parmly
 from James Monroe, President.**

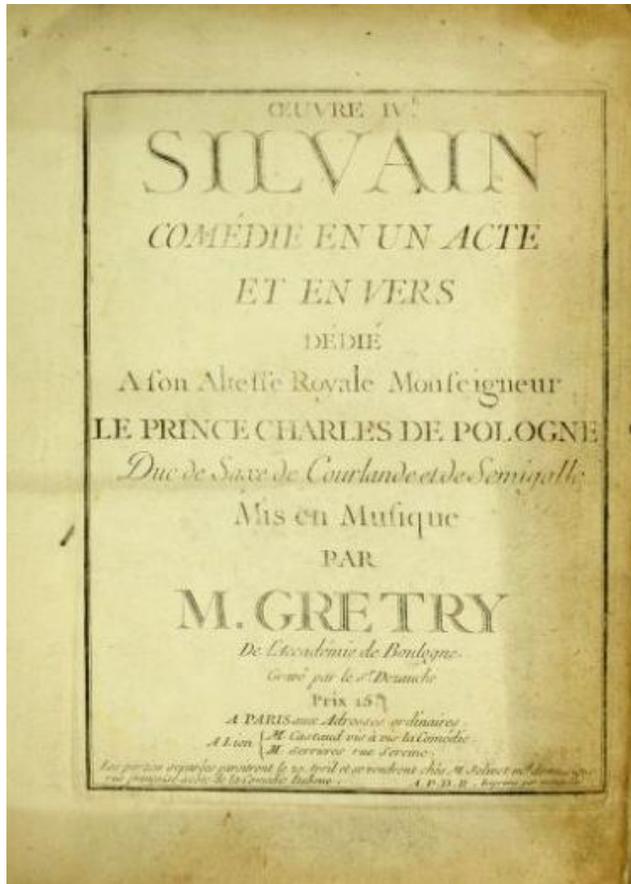
**The testimonials presented to me by
 Mr. Parmly, of his great talents as a Den-
 tist, are of high character; in addition to
 which, I state with great pleasure, that
 his operations in my family have afforded
 a practical and very satisfactory evidence
 of his merit.**

JAMES MONROE.
Washington, December 9, 1820.

A glowing endorsement from the President, Courier de la Louisiane, published February 20, 1822

Doctor Parmly died in Paris, France, in 1859, the same year John Rowlands, aka Henry Morton Stanley, arrived in New Orleans. Dr. Parmly was the first American dentist to practice, with distinction, in England. He hobnobbed with some of the most distinguished dentists, such as Thomas Bell, Alexander Nasmyth, Sir John Tomes and Samuel Cartwright. In addition, he was recommended highly by two of the best surgeons in England, Sir Astley Cooper and Sir Anthony Carlisle. Carlisle considered "his discovery of the causes which produce decay in teeth, to be a valuable accession to surgical knowledge; while his liberality and candour, in making his experience public, do him honour

as a Man.”



Sylvain, first opera performed in the United States

New Orleans, to be sure, has quite a number of firsts. In fact, the performance of the very first opera in America, Ernest Grétry's *Sylvain*, took place in New Orleans on May 22, 1796, while George Washington was still President of the United States. Of course, the Crescent City was still under Spanish rule at the time. Since that first performance, operas have been staged in New Orleans almost continuously for the past two centuries, most notably at the city's historic French Opera House, or *Théâtre de l'Opéra*, on *Rue Bourbon* in the French Quarter, which was destroyed by fire in 1919.

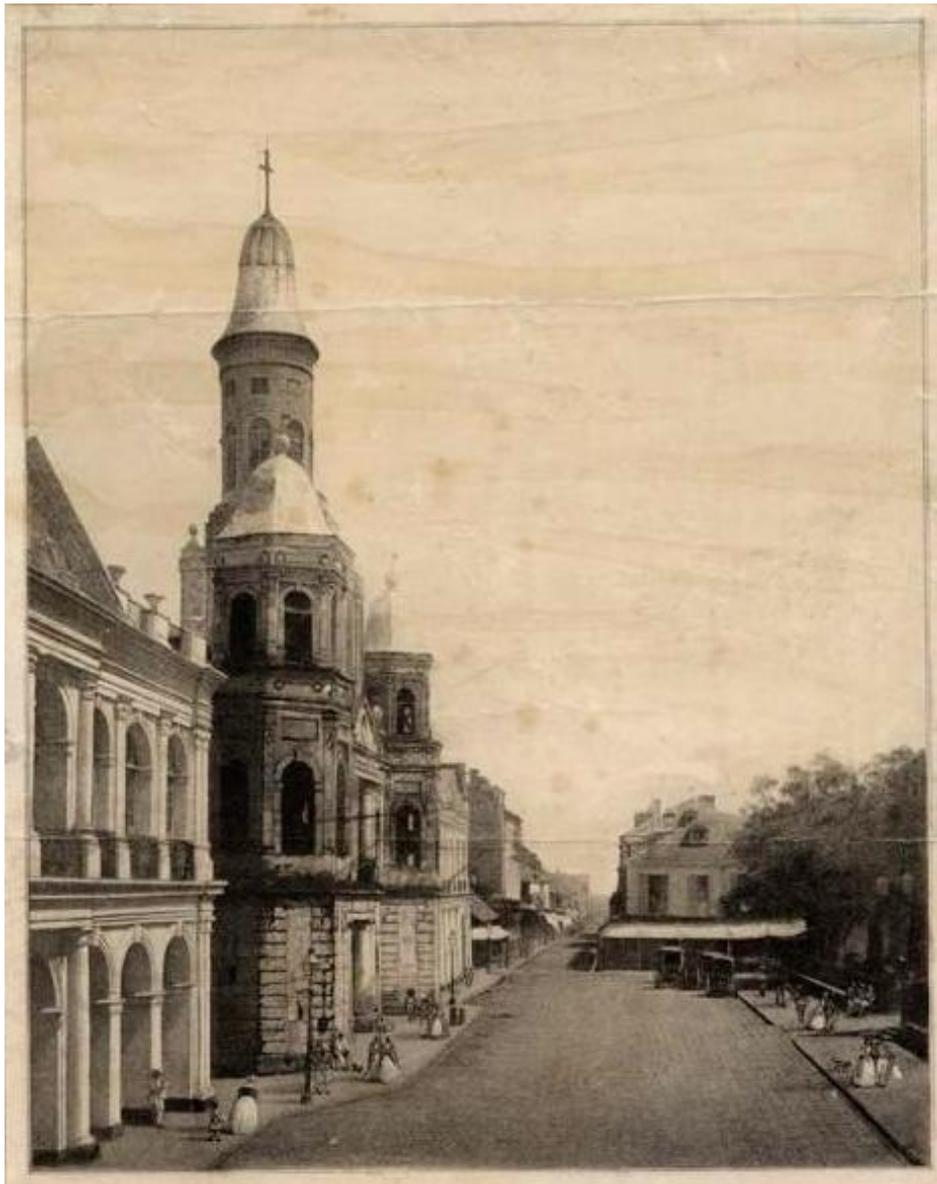
Another "first" fact is that New Orleans is home to America's first licensed pharmacist, Louis Joseph Dufilho, Jr. in 1816. His circa 1823 apothecary shop at 514 Chartres Street in the French Quarter is still standing and is home to the New Orleans Pharmacy Museum, housing excellent exhibits of early medicines, superstitious cures, containers and equipment. The *Pharmacie Dufilho* opened for business on the ground floor while Dufilho's family was domiciled in the apartments above.



New Orleans Pharmacy Museum, co-founded by Dr. Edward J. Ireland, once a pharmacologist in the School of Dentistry at Loyola University

In 1804, the State of Louisiana, under the leadership of Governor Claiborne, passed a law that required a licensing exam for pharmacists wishing to practice their profession. The popular druggist, Louis J. Dufilho, Jr. was the first to pass the test, making his pharmacy the first United States apothecary shop to be operated under the criteria of proven adequacy.

Governor Claiborne may never have enacted that law if a hero of the American Revolutionary War had decided differently. President Thomas Jefferson, before giving the job to William Charles Cole Claiborne, informally offered the first American governorship of Louisiana to Marie-Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette. He politely declined the offer. Claiborne, instead, became the first American governor of Louisiana in December 1803.



1842 lithograph of St. Louis Cathedral based on a daguerreotype by Jules Lion (c. 1809-1866), Cabildo is immediately to the left

On December 20, 1803, Claiborne, along with James Wilkinson, Commanding General of the United States Army, met with French representative Pierre Laussat in the *Sala Capitular* (capitol room) of the Cabildo to sign the documents transferring sovereignty over French Louisiana to the United States of America. The raising of the American flag took place in the *Place d'Armes*, today's Jackson Square.

Although the Marquis turned down the governorship and did not sign the documents that day, he did later reside at the Cabildo as a guest of the State on his visit to New Orleans in 1825.

In 1869, Jefferson Davis became president of something other than the Confederate States of America. As president of the Carolina Life Insurance Company in Memphis, Tennessee, he took up residence at

the Peabody Hotel. That was, of course, before the ducks found a home there in the 1930s.



Judah Touro

I'll end with a few curious facts about Judah Touro (1775–1854), one of the city's greatest philanthropists. According to an article in the *Times-Picayune*, dated January 25, 1937, the generous Touro "would never ride in a carriage." Born in Rhode Island and of Jewish descent, "he made no distinction between Jewish and Christian charities. He built a synagogue and almshouse for his people, established a library, founded Touro Infirmary and gave money to build a Christian church." Oddly, after first arriving in New Orleans in 1801, "the only time he left the city limits was when he went to the field of Chalmette to fight under General Andrew Jackson in the Battle of New Orleans."

Like Henry Morton Stanley, Touro began modestly but worked hard. Upon his arrival in New Orleans, he opened a small store near the levee, selling soap, codfish, candles and other New England exports, eventually working his way up the financial ladder. He became a successful and prominent merchant and ship-owner, especially after the Louisiana Purchase propelled the city and region's commercial growth.

Some may erroneously call the facts presented above as factoids. Others may call them factlets. Regardless, they are all true and, in their own way, important parts of the history and culture of New Orleans.

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