

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

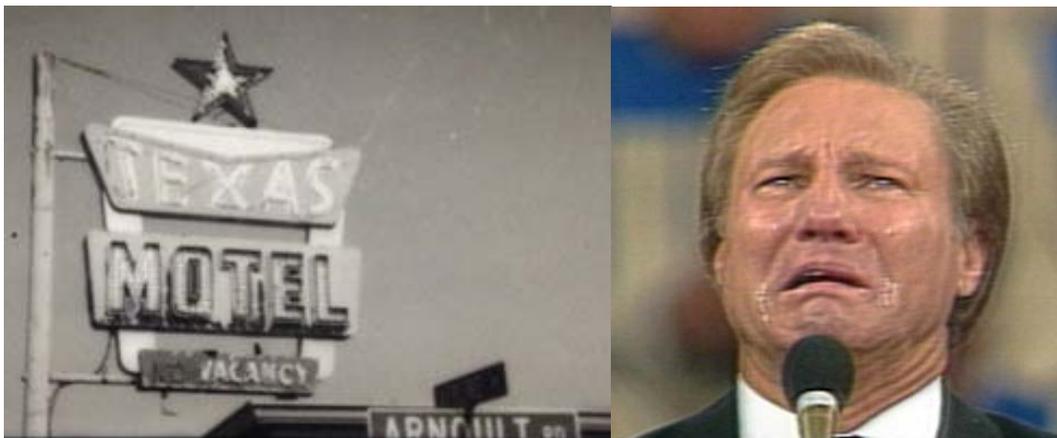
Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Flight Paths

Some New Orleans natives remember their airport on Airline Highway as Moisant Field. On July 11, 2001, it was renamed for Louis Armstrong in honor of the famous jazz musician's centennial birthday (actually August 4, 1901). For years, everyone (including Louis, it seems) believed he was born on July 4, 1900. His baptismal certificate was finally located at Sacred Heart of Jesus Church on Canal Street after his death (revealing the correct date).

Things are not always what they seem. For example, if you were to presume that Airline Highway was named because of the airport or airplanes, you would be wrong. It was built in the 1930s and 1940s to provide a direct route between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. Airline was once a synonym for a beeline, or a straight direct route. Governor Huey Long was said to have pushed for this route so he would have a shorter trip as he shuttled between the capital and New Orleans. Rather than running along the bending Mississippi River, Airline Highway runs in a relatively straight path. A portion of it has been renamed Airline Drive in an effort to clean up its history of no-tell motels (to which some in times past have made a beeline ... including televangelist Jimmy "I have sinned!" Swaggart).



"I have sinned!"

A February 23, 1988, article in the *Times-Picayune* reported that a witness told interrogators that Swaggart "on several occasions visited the Texas Motel at 3520 Airline and the Travel Inn at 1131 Airline, where he could park his plush Lincoln Town Car in the rear."

Running roughly parallel to Airline Drive is the Earhart Expressway, an extension of Earhart Boulevard. On a beautifully illustrated "Guidemap to New Orleans" from the 1990s, the artist erroneously labeled the thoroughfare the "Amelia Earhart Expressway". Both the boulevard and expressway were in fact named for Fred A. Earhart, Commissioner of Public Utilities, who served as mayor of New Orleans for just one day in the summer of 1936. Reprints of the map have been corrected.

Most think of Amelia Earhart as the nation's greatest aviatrix, but there were others that were equally, if not more, interesting. Harriet Quimby was the first woman to obtain a pilot's license in the United States (Earhart was 16th). She became interested in flying in 1910 after attending a tournament on Long Island, New York, where she met Matilde Moisant and her brother John. It is John for whom Moisant Field was named, and his sister Matilde was the second U.S. licensed female flier.



Harriet Quimby



Matilde Moisant (with swastika)

Both Matilde and Harriet were attractive ladies of the air. The 1912 photo of Matilde (above) displays her hourglass-shaped flight suit with

buttons down each side and a familiar medal suspended from her pocket. It is a swastika, but in those pre-Nazi days this abhorrent symbol was thought of as a good luck charm. One was painted on the inside of the propeller spinner of Lindy's "Spirit of St. Louis". These early fliers were totally unaware of the symbol's future ... or their own.

Harriet Quimby cut a very striking figure in her plum colored satin flying costume. Before taking an interest in aviation, she had penned several romantic film screenplays for Biograph Studios directed by D. W. Griffith. She was also a theatre critic for *Leslie's Illustrated Weekly*, which published over 250 of her articles. Harriet wowed local spectators with her flying skills in an air meet in New Orleans in 1911, the year before conquering the English Channel. The first woman to pilot a plane across the Channel, Harriet flew from Dover to Calais on April 16, 1912. Any media attention, however, was completely overshadowed by the sinking of the *Titanic* the day before.



John B. Moisant in his Blériot monoplane

Also in April 1912, Harriet became the spokesperson for a new grape soda developed by a division of Armour Meat Packing Plant of Chicago. Harriet, with her natural savvy for sales, knew how to market the product by showing off her distinctive purple aviatrix costume.

Ironically, Matilde Moisant crashed her plane at Wichita Falls, Texas, the same day the *Titanic* struck the iceberg. Having broken the

women's world altitude record the year before, Matilde recovered from her 1912 crash injuries and gave up flying. She died in 1964. Harriet was not so lucky. She crashed to her death in her Blériot monoplane during a Massachusetts aviation meet on July 1, 1912, and into the mists of history (and later on to a 50-cent U.S. postage stamp).



Harriet Quimby, as portrayed on a U.S. postage stamp

Matilde's brother, daring aviator John Bevens Moisant, was equally unfortunate. He had represented the United States in an air race around the Statue of Liberty for a \$10,000 prize. After defeating the competition, this Kankakee, Illinois-born aviation pioneer became a national hero. Two months later, he was in New Orleans to race and prepare for the Michelin Cup. Taking off from City Park racetrack with a kitten named "Paris-London" as passenger, he circled his Harahan field destination twice and then began his descent from an altitude of 200 feet. He dipped sharply, and when his machine was twenty-five feet from the ground it became vertical and Moisant was pitched forward and (according to the *Picayune*) "shot through the air as though hurled from a catapult." He met his death that day on December 31, 1910, near the site of what was later to become Moisant Field. *The New York Times* wrote that Moisant was "caught in a gust of wind" and "thrown bodily from his Blériot monoplane and landed on his head". It was cold that day, and Moisant stuffed his flying suit with newspaper for insulation. His sister Matilde believed that, because of the cold, Moisant's crash "was due to a cramp in his leg which caused the removal of his foot from the foot control" – as was the case in a previous fall that her brother had experienced.

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JOHN B. MOISANT.

*January 1, 1911, Picayune headline (with morbid graphic) read:
"Moisant, King of Aviators, Killed"*

Moisant Field opened in 1946 and, by May of that year, six major airlines were flying there. But this was not the city's first airport. Lakefront Airport came before, built upon a man-made peninsula projecting out into Lake Pontchartrain. Originally named for Abraham Shushan, Shushan Airport was constructed from 1929 to 1934 and was to be "The Air Hub of the Americas." Shushan, President of the Levee Board, was convicted of various kickback schemes during the 1939 "Louisiana Scandals" but was pardoned by President Truman in 1947. Although the airport's name was changed, it was virtually impossible to remove the multitude of letters "S" for Shushan from the beautiful art deco terminal building.

In the early 60s, architects T. Sellers Meric and Benedict Cimini redesigned the Lakefront Airport terminal to protect it from nuclear disaster by ensconcing it in concrete two inches thick. Hurricanes

Katrina and Isaac later took their toll on Lakefront Airport, which years earlier saw the arrival of the Beatles for their 1964 concert. It also witnessed Ronald Reagan delivering a campaign speech after the Blue Jay Band played a rousing chorus of the Jesuit Fight Song. And it is said that Lee Harvey Oswald met David Ferrie there while a member of the Civil Air Patrol. Also, Enrique Alférez's 1930s sculpture in front of the terminal, entitled "Fountain of the Winds," is a local landmark. Today, after a beautiful renovation (removing the 1960s concrete) by architect Alton Ochsner Davis, the airport has returned to its 1930s art deco glory. One can dine at Messina's Runway Café, have some airplane propeller shaped French fries, watch the planes take off or visit the Walnut Room.

In the 1940s it was decided that the city needed a bigger airport than the Lakefront Airport, and Mayor Maestri announced that the new facility would be named for John B. Moisant. Moisant, having died in New Orleans over three decades before, was still well remembered. Besides his previously mentioned accomplishments, he was also the first aviator to have flown over the city of Paris with a passenger and the first to have made a trip from Paris to London with a passenger. Since cattle were raised at the location for the new airport, its identifying letters were to be MSY for Moisant Stock Yards.

In 1949 Moisant was the third busiest airport in the nation after New York and Miami. In 1961, on a recommendation by then councilman (later lieutenant governor) James E. "Jimmy" Fitzmorris, Jr., the New Orleans city council unanimously changed the name of Moisant International Airport to New Orleans International Airport. The MSY airport code remained (and does to this day, even after another name change).

Now named the Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport, it is the second lowest international airport in the world at an average four feet below sea level. The Netherlands' Schiphol International Airport has the distinction of being first at fourteen feet below, but then the Dutch benefited from New Orleans engineering.

Renowned New Orleans engineer and the inventor of the Wood Screw Pump, Albert Baldwin Wood (December 1, 1879 – May 10, 1956), it may be remembered, was especially helpful in helping the Dutch in the reclamation of the Zuyder Zee, a territory as large as Rhode Island and capable of supporting 300,000 people. The Dutch government had learned about the remarkable Wood Screw Pump, as well as its brilliant inventor, and sent a representative to obtain the blueprints and rights from Wood in person.

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