

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### From Chalmette to the Charts

In January 2015, New Orleans celebrated the bicentennial of the Battle of New Orleans, which was actually a series of military encounters fought beginning in December 1814, with the major battle fought January 8, 1815, in Chalmette, Louisiana.



*General Andrew Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans*

The British historian, Paul Johnson, in his chronicle of world society from 1815-1830, *The Birth of the Modern*, chose the Battle of New Orleans as the pivotal starting point of his tome. That event demonstrated to him “how this friendship between the two great English-speaking nations sprang, phoenix-like, from the ashes of the tragic and bitterly fought War of 1812.” Both sides were at the time unaware that the Treaty of Ghent had already been signed, but (had the British won) the treaty would not have mattered. The conquerors

would have had other plans. Uncovered British war records reveal that Pakenham was given secret orders: "If you hear of a peace treaty, pay no attention, continue to fight." In Addition, the treaty failed to mention the vast lands of the Louisiana Purchase. It only required the combatants to return those lands that had been seized from the other during the war. But after the American victory at New Orleans, "the strong and abiding community of interests between the two peoples did its healing work and the elements of a mighty, civilizing friendship began to come together." This special relationship between Britain and the United States after Jackson's victory on January 8, 1815, along with the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo that same year, was for historian Johnson the beginning of an exciting modern age.

Jean Lafitte, played by both Fredric March and Yul Brynner, in two versions (1938 and 1958) of Cecil B. DeMille's *The Buccaneer*, has been a greatly romanticized figure.



According to eyewitnesses, Jean Lafitte was almost definitely not on the battlefield that day, nor did the Lafittes ever fly the skull and crossbones flag so immortalized in pirate fiction. That is not to undermine the Baratarians' contribution. Although originally called "hellish banditti" by Jackson, they provided his forces with flints and powder, knowledge of the bayous and swamps leading into the city and an able cannoneer known as Dominique You.

Besides Lafitte and his men, Jackson had amassed an army of militiamen (from Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi and Louisiana), Choctaw Indians and locals. Slaves and citizens alike helped widen canals and build up defenses along them. And two battalions of soldiers were free men of color, over 600 strong, a volunteer contingent much larger than that of the privateers of *Grand Terre*. One free person of color, fourteen-year-old Jordan Noble, became famous for beating the long roll on his snare drum during the battle.

The night before the battle, Ursuline nuns (along with New Orleans wives and daughters) gathered to pray to *Notre Dame de Bon Secours*, Our Lady of Prompt Succor, for victory the next day. The Ursuline Convent had been spared from a fire in 1812 after prayers to Our Lady. The wind changed direction and turned the fire away. This time, Mother Ste. Marie Olivière de Vézin, made a solemn vow to have a Mass of Thanksgiving sung annually should the American forces be victorious.

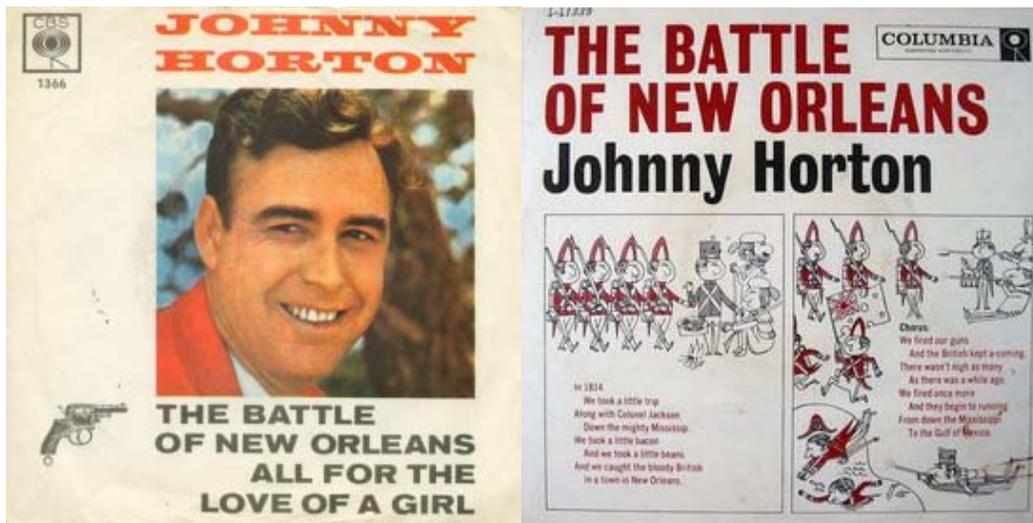
Major General Edward "Ned" Pakenham, the Duke of Wellington's brother-in-law, was impatient and had a poorly executed plan of attack for the British side. A small British force routed an American contingent on the west bank of the Mississippi, but was of little consequence to what was occurring on the east bank. One significant failure was that Colonel Thomas Mullins, the British commander of the 44th (East Essex) Regiment of Foot, failed to bring forward the fascines and ladders needed to scale the earthworks along the Rodriguez Canal. And Old Hickory had flooded the battlefield by breaching the levees (this time on purpose). The British siege cannons could not get a solid footing and sank into the soggy terrain. Trajectories could not be calculated. The Americans, although facing twice their number, were on high firm ground and had great success in shooting down the enemy.

As the fog lifted, the 93rd (Sutherland Highlanders) Regiment of Foot sustained the largest number of casualties. When Lieutenant Colonel Dale was killed, there were no orders to either advance or withdraw so that the men of the 93rd steadfastly remained in place and were mown down with grapeshot from Line Jackson. Both Pakenham and his second-in-command, General Samuel Gibbs, were mortally wounded as they approached the earthworks. British General John

Keane was wounded, but survived. After about twenty more minutes of surmounting casualties, and with most of their senior officers dead or wounded, Major General John Lambert assumed command and eventually decided to order a withdrawal. It was over very quickly.

The Americans reported 13 killed, 39 wounded and 19 missing, while the British casualties (killed and wounded) were over 2,000. As astounding as these numbers are to us, most Brits simply are unaware of this particular bit of history. They remember many more significant battles fought by England like the Battle of the Somme in 1916 with over 58,000 British troops lost (one third of them killed) in a little over ten hours. Some English however have heard of the Battle of New Orleans from a most unlikely source – a song!

Believe it or not, the song, "The Battle of New Orleans," was a big hit on the UK charts in 1959, reaching Number 2 and staying there for several weeks. It was the most popular recording in the States for 1959, second only to "Mack the Knife" by Bobby Darin. Johnny Horton had the U. S. hit while Lonnie Donegan had the hit record in the UK. It was a song written by Jimmy (James Morris) Driftwood to the music of an old fiddle tune known as "The Eighth of January." Driftwood was a teacher who used music to teach his students history.



*Johnny Horton and his recording of "The Battle of New Orleans"*

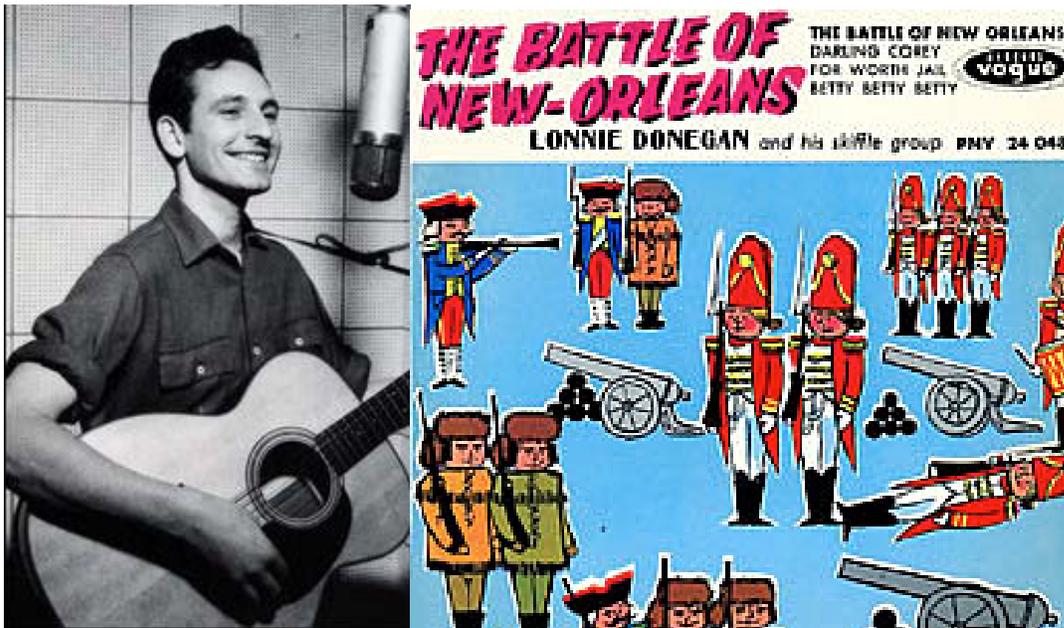
Lonnie Donegan was a skiffle musician who was very popular in England. "Skiffle bands" were first known as "spasm bands" and began, coincidentally, in New Orleans in the early 1900s. Street performers used simple improvised instruments like kazoos and cigar-box fiddles. The earliest known band to perform in the Crescent City under the name "spasm band" was formed in 1895, known alternately as "Stale Bread's Spasm Band" and the "Razzy Dazzy Spasm Band". Their informal musical style was influential in the development of instrumental New Orleans jazz.



*"Stale Bread's Spasm Band" with  
Stale Bread in the front row, the second from the right*

Donegan found great inspiration in the blues and New Orleans Jazz. He started playing traditional Jazz, called *trad* in the UK. He then performed skiffle for audiences with washboard, tea-chest bass and a cheap Spanish guitar. As a result, Skiffle became extremely popular in England in the 50s and 60s. Donegan played a lot of folk songs in the skiffle style and had a huge hit with "Rock Island Line," a song by (Louisiana-born) Leadbelly. Donegan inspired so many British bands because he made playing music look so simple. One "skiffle band" in England known as the Quarrymen evolved into the Beatles. In 1964, that group that had its start as a "skiffle band" came to New Orleans to play before a capacity crowd of 12,000 at City Park Stadium. The Beatles' visit will be fondly remembered.

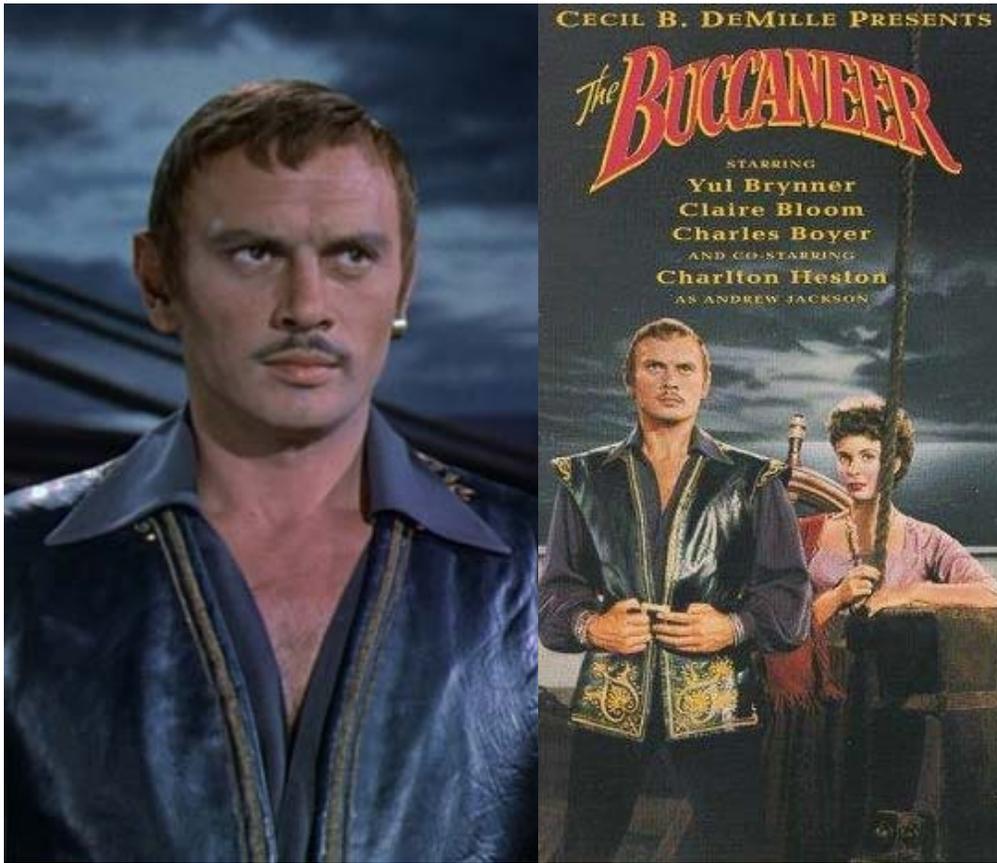
Paul McCartney said of Donegan, "We studied his records avidly. We all bought guitars to be in a skiffle group. He was the man."



*Lonnie Donegan and his jacket cover of "The Battle of New Orleans"*

The British have always loved New Orleans music. The Beatles covered several songs by Larry Williams, such as "Slow Down" and "Dizzy Miss Lizzy". The Stones did "Time Is On My Side" (recorded earlier the same year by Irma Thomas) and Benny Spellman's "Fortune Teller." Herman's Hermits even did "Mother-In-Law," but they could never compare with the late Ernie K-Doe, Emperor of the Universe. It was Allen Toussaint, of course, who wrote "Fortune Teller" and "Mother-in-Law".

If a song has a good beat and you find yourself captivated by the melody, do you subconsciously decide to just *not* pay attention to the lyrics? Seems that's what the British did in 1959. It is indeed a peculiar footnote to history that a song glorifying the decisive British defeat at New Orleans was so popular over there.



*Russian-born Jean Lafitte, Yul Brenner, in The Buccaneer (1958)*

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