

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Games of Chance

Games of both skill and chance have always played an important role in the history and culture of New Orleans. From a Persian game called *As Nas* to modern video poker, it has been a long and interesting journey.

It is generally accepted that Persian sailors taught the game of *As Nas* to New Orleans sailors early in the 1820s and this evolved into the game of *Poker*. This game shares a common ancestry with the Renaissance game of *Primero*, the French *Brelan* and the English game of *Brag*. It is assumed that the name came from either the French *poque* (in turn from the German word meaning *to knock*) or from the slang word *poke*, which is used by pickpockets to describe the act of stealing from an unsuspecting mark. The game's name is most likely from the French pronunciation of *po-que*, which is spoken almost in two syllables. English actor Joseph Crowell reported that the game was played in New Orleans on the steamboat *Helen M'Gregor* in 1829, with a deck of 20 cards and four players betting on which player's hand was supreme. Jonathan H. Green in 1834 wrote a book about the spread of the game from the Crescent City to the rest of the country by Mississippi riverboats. As it spread up the Mississippi with gamblers such as George H. Devol, it also went west via saloons on the way to the California Gold Rush and became a part of our national culture. Green called it the "cheating game".

The French dice game of *Hazards* was introduced to New Orleans by Bernard de Marigny. It would be forever changed by the Americans and their derogatory term for Frenchmen: *Crapauds*, or toad-frogs. Since the Frenchmen of New Orleans were seen playing this game of chance, the shortened name *Craps* would prevail. Marigny named a street for the game at which he is said to have lost as much as \$1,000,000, an amount he may have considered a mere *bagatelle* (also a street he named, called Pauger Street today). *Bagatelle* was also the name of a form of billiards with nine holes at one end of the table, obviously Marigny's intention. Craps Street has been Burgundy

Street since 1850. Such is part of the charming history of the Faubourg Marigny.

A game similar to *Craps* was *Rattle and Snap* where players would “rattle” beans and throw them out with a quick “snap” of the wrist. In one fortuitous snap, Lt. Colonel William Polk, father of Leonidas Polk, won 5,648 acres in Tennessee from his brother-in-law, the Governor of North Carolina. The stately plantation home erected there was appropriately named “Rattle and Snap”.

The Boston Club of New Orleans which first met on May 15, 1841, also has a game in its past. It is named not for the City of Boston but an obsolete card game called *Boston*, involving bidding and tricks, which was very similar to *Whist*. New Orleans was also home to the Chess, Checkers and Whist Club. A charter member, Armand Edward Blackmar (1826-1888), wrote of a novelty chess opening later championed by Emil Joseph Deimer, commonly known today as the Blackmar-Diemer gambit. In 1890, the Chess, Checkers and Whist Club burned down and later rebuilt on the corner of Canal Street and Baronne. In 1938 it became the location of the Art Deco Walgreen’s Pharmacy.

But no chess player could surpass New Orleans-born Paul Morphy (1837-1884). By the time he was thirteen, this child prodigy had defeated Hungarian chess master, A. J. Lowenthal, a visitor to New Orleans. He later defeated Europe’s chess elite and by twenty-one was declared world champion after defeating Adolf Andersen in Paris. Morphy returned to overwhelming accolades in the United States. Back in New Orleans with no more chess dragons to slay, he decided to practice law. He died in his bathtub after having suffered a stroke.

The 1970s brings to mind Louisiana’s gambling governor, Edwin Edwards. But it was also during this decade that the game of backgammon caught on nationwide with the general public. This was due to efforts of Prince Alexis Obolensky (1914-1986). Of a distinguished Russian family (Prince Sergei Platonovich Obolensky married Alice Astor, daughter of millionaire John Jacob Astor, IV, who went down with the Titanic), “Oby”, organized the first backgammon World Championships in the Bahamas and published the first backgammon bestseller: “Backgammon, The Action Game”. He was married to New Orleans native, Jane Wheeler Irby (1914-1981).

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