

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Mardi Gras Miscellany

This article is brought to you by the Krewe of Miscellaneous, named for the demi-god also known as Eclectica, appearing on the "Sundry" before Mardi Gras as the motley monarch of all things diverse and heterogeneous. The Krewe's motto is "*Variis aromata vitae est,*" or "Variety is the spice of life."



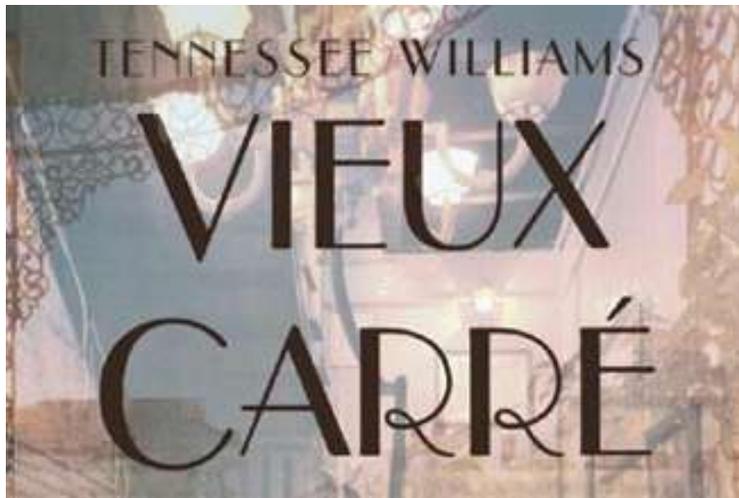
The Technicolor visual feast that is Mardi Gras

Speaking of miscellany (a collection of assorted items), or heterogeneity (the quality or state of being diverse in character or content), I must comment on the latter word in French, *hétérogénéité*.

In the case of the diacritical mark known as the *accent aigu*, this word has a total of five! The acute accent in French is used only on *é* and is known as *accent aigu*, in contrast to the *accent grave*, which is the accent sloped the other way, or *è*. Only three French vowels can take the *grave* accent: *à*, *è*, and *ù*. An example:

Le vieux carré est très intéressant à visiter et à vivre.

In English: The old square (French Quarter) is very interesting to visit and to live.



The French *Mardi Gras*, meaning “Fat Tuesday,” has certainly put Louisiana on the map, but long before that ever occurred Mardi Gras became the very first place name of non-Native American origin on a Louisiana map — in fact, in the entire Mississippi River valley.

Mardi Gras, also known as Shrove Tuesday, was first celebrated in Louisiana after Pierre Le Moyne, Sieur d’Iberville, accompanied by his brother Bienville, rediscovered the Mississippi River over three hundred years ago. Sent by Louis XIV to secure the territory for France, Iberville and his party set out in two *biscayennes* or *traversiers* (small coastal sailing vessels) and entered the great river on March 2, 1699. According to Iberville’s journal, the following day, which was Mardi Gras, they proceeded upstream and camped for the night on a point of land “two leagues from the mouth on a point to the right of the river,” formed by a bayou entering the river. In honor of the festive occasion being celebrated that day back in France, Iberville named the spot *Pointe du Mardi Gras* and the connecting rivulet *Bayou du Mardi Gras*. Both located in present-day Plaquemines Parish, they are the oldest place names of European origin in Louisiana.



The brothers, d'Iberville and Bienville

Three years later in 1702, Bienville founded the city of Mobile, Alabama, as the first capital of colonial French Louisiana. He founded New Orleans sixteen years later in 1718.

The name *Bayou du Mardi Gras* had disappeared from maps over time but was restored by the Plaquemines Parish Commission Council in early 1971. Parish officials also dedicated a plaque mounted on a granite pedestal in 1972 commemorating the event; and on March 3, 1999, on the 300-year anniversary of its naming, Rex officials and a few selected guests traveled by bus and by boat to the spot where it is believed Iberville and crew landed.

Rex unveiled a plaque in tribute to the occasion, but it has since been damaged and lies flat on a platform next to Fort Jackson.

So what is the origin of the name Carnival, the name for the festive season just before the liturgical season of Lent? Like most New Orleanians, I had always been told that the origins of Carnival can be traced to Medieval Europe, where the Catholic Church adopted age-old pagan customs from the *Lupercalia*, a Roman festival taking place each year in mid-February. I was also told that the word originated from the Latin *carne vale*, meaning "farewell to meat", signifying the approaching fast, or, "farewell to flesh" as an expanded interpretation of what was being given up for Lent.

According to the late, great Charles L. "Pie" Dufour in his PIE'S A LA MODE column dated February 25, 1962, there is another explanation:

Pie wrote, "Whereas 'Carnival' comes to us from Latin, 'Mardi Gras' is out-and-out French which suggests that the celebration reached its peak on Gallic soil in the early middle ages."



Carnival in Rome, circa 1650

"A frequent error," stated Pie, "holds that 'Carnival' comes from 'Carnis' (flesh or flesh meat) and 'Vale' (farewell), hence Carnival is a 'farewell to meat' or farewell to things of the flesh.'" In other words, carnal knowledge doesn't mean knowing the difference between sirloin or porterhouse, but *carnivore* and *carnal* do indeed share the same root word.

Pie continued, "Actually, 'Carnival' derives from 'Carnis' and 'Levamen' meaning 'consolation of the flesh.' By a series of contractions – 'Carnelavemen,' 'Carnelevel,' 'Carnevale' – the Italian 'Carnevale' resulted. It is the word which gives us our 'Carnival.' Whereas the 'vale' is only a termination and not the Latin word 'farewell, the idea is more or less the same, for Carnival represents a final fling before the austerities of Lent."

So there's an explanation, if ever you cease to doubt.

If there was ever any doubt as to the Carnival significance of English stage musical personality Lydia Thompson (February 19, 1838 – November 17, 1908), whose spirited rendition of "If Ever I Cease to Love" became Rex's popular anthem, read on. In fact, it was a time when Carnival's theme song was once threatened by another.

In an advertisement printed in the *Picayune*, dated January 18, 1874, Lydia was sent a ROYAL EDICT from Rex, in which he stated that he had "ordered a change in his national melody; at least, not exactly a

change, for 'If Ever I Cease to Love' still remains his Majesty's special air, but Rex has also ordered that 'The Soldier's Song' shall be especially dedicated to his army, and declared a national anthem. In order that the air shall become public and well known to the community, he has commissioned his harper and Blondin to make known and sing the same to the public on Wednesday, January 21st, as may be seen by the following regal communication and order:

ROYAL EDICT
Department Lord High Chamberlain
BY ORDER OF THE KING OF CARNIVAL
NEW ORLEANS, Jan.16, 1874

To Miss Lydia Thompson, greeting:

It has pleased his Most Gracious Majesty to order that his 'Soldiers' Song,' the echoes of which are now borne upon every breeze which sweeps the blue waters of the Mediterranean, be first produced by yourself in this the Royal Capitol [*sic*]. In conformity with said order, I now transmit the same.

Congratulating you upon this flattering mark of sovereign condescension, I have the honor to subscribe myself,

By order of the King,
BATHURST,
Lord High Chamberlain."

Miss Thompson graciously responded:

"ACADEMY OF MUSIC
New Orleans, Jan. 16, 1874

To His Most Gracious Majesty King of the Carnival:

Miss Lydia Thompson, your loyal subject, feels royally honored by your Majesty's condescension in selecting her as the unworthy instrument of producing His Majesty's 'Soldiers' Song," the receipt of which is acknowledged.

The song has been placed in rehearsal and will be sung at the Academy of Music, on Wednesday evening, Jan. 21, 1874, and your servants ever pray for the long life and happy reign of your Majesty.

SAML. COLVILLE,
Business Manager
Lydia Thompson Troupe."

The contents of both communications were advertised in the Picayune by order of:

"BATHHURST, Lord High Chamberlain."



Lydia Thompson

Lydia Thompson did sing "The Soldier's Song" that Wednesday long ago, backed by her male quartet, and was "vociferously received" by the audience. The song was composed by "Xariffa", the pen name of poet and author Mrs. Mary Ashley Townsend of 125 Carondelet Street. Mrs. Townsend penned a series of humorous papers known as "Quillotypes", which appeared in the *New Orleans Delta* and were widely copied by other newspapers.



XARIFFA'S
POEMS

Mrs. Mary Ashley Townsend

Lydia Thompson was born in Brydges Street, Covent Garden, England, and her burlesque theatrical troupe, the "British Blondes", dazzled audiences on several continents. Lydia captivated New Orleans with her singing and dancing and once caught the eye of a Russian Grand Duke named Alexis. Lydia sang "If Ever I Cease to Love" while appearing in *Bluebeard* at the Academy of Music on St. Charles Avenue, between Perdido and Poydras streets, just before the 1872 Mardi Gras. But by that time, when the first Rex appeared on the streets of New Orleans, the Grand Duke's interest had shifted to another actress, Lotta Crabtree. He did not view Lydia's appearance on stage during his visit to New Orleans. The bands that Mardi Gras day did not play for him "If Ever I Cease To Love," but the Russian national anthem instead. They did play it, however, along with other music, for Lewis Salomon, the first Rex, after he dismounted on Canal Street. And, with all appropriate fanfare, it is played every year for each new Rex, King of Carnival, to this day.

A few words must be said about Bathurst, Lord High Chamberlain, of the Rex organization, also known as The School of Design. It is said that a chamberlain is the officer in charge of managing a sovereign's household. In the Rex organization Bathurst is the formal name for the captain of Rex, whose real name is never revealed to the public. In his role as captain, he carries out the vision and purpose of the founders: "*Pro Bono Publico*" ("For the public good"). He also ensures that the annual Rex parade is the highlight of Carnival in New Orleans, a tradition of entertaining crowds since 1872. He also sees to it that Rex and his Queen preside over a splendid ball, which the organization calls "Carnival's glittering conclusion."



The original Bathurst was a British politician, Allen Bathurst, 1st Earl Bathurst PC (1684 – 1775), known for his wit and learning who, apart from his career in politics, had a close friendship with numerous scholars and literary greats of his age, such as satirist Jonathan Swift, playwright and poet William Congreve, poet and diplomat Matthew Prior, novelist Laurence Sterne and master of the heroic couplet, Alexander Pope.

For those a little rusty on their Senior English, in English poetry, the heroic couplet is a commonly used form in epic and narrative poetry consisting of a rhyming pair of lines in iambic pentameter. You may recall that an iambic "foot" is an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. A "pentameter" is a line that has five of these "feet". The Bard of Avon, Will Shakespeare, used iambic pentameter in his plays and sonnets.

Another Rex official whose title has an English pedigree is Earl Marshal Warwick, also mentioned as Warwick, Earl Marshal of the Empire, as in the Rex proclamation issued in an advertisement in the *New Orleans Item* shown below, dated February 17, 1881.

Show Your Colors !

PROCLAMATION

— BY —

WARWICK,
Earl Marshal of the Empire.

To all Loyal Subjects of His Majesty, the King
of the Carnival—Greeting :

Whereas, the annual fete day of our most gra-
cious Sovereign REX is near at hand, and in
honor of his near approach, all loyal subjects are
requested to display the royal standard from
their houses and places of business on WEDNES-
DAY, January 26, 1881, and in testimony of their
joy at his return to continue to display the colors
of the realm until after Mardi Gras.

God save the King ! **WARWICK,**
Earl Marshal of the Empire.

Official: ESPY, Seventh Secretary.
Carnival Palace, New Orleans, January 24,
1881, and the 1009th of H. M.'s reign. ja25 cod1m

And, as you can see, ESPY, Seventh Secretary, is an additional Rex officer.

Rex himself made a proclamation later that year in anticipation of the 1882 Mardi Gras:

“The fame of these our festivities has spread throughout many lands, creating a desire among their people to witness the magnificent pageants in our honor and participate in the joys of our reign, and we do therefore extend to all who dwell beyond the realm protected by our royal standard of purple, green and gold, a cordial invitation to visit our chosen Capital at Mardi Gras, promising them a hearty welcome and that generous hospitality for which our loving subjects of the Crescent City are world-wide famous.”

Those words could have been written yesterday. Hope you, too, show your Mardi Gras colors early.

NED HÉMARD

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