

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

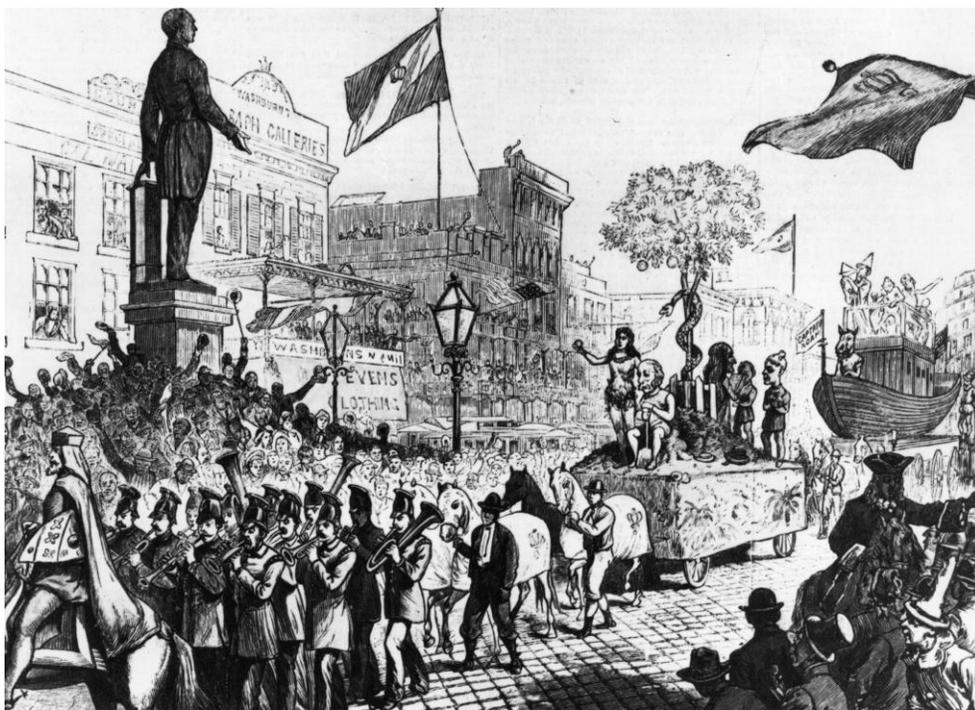
*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **Mardi Gras Miscellany, Part Deux**

The royal colors of Rex, and Mardi Gras as a whole, were established the very first time Rex made his appearance on the streets of New Orleans, February 13, 1872, as reported by the Washington, D.C., *Daily National Republican*:

“The buildings and club-houses on Canal, St. Charles, Esplanade, Rampart, and Royal Streets were profusely decked out with myriads of flags, festooned. Chinese lanterns and flowers, in which the royal colors of the king – green, purple, and gold – showed prominent, and, with the gaily dressed people crowding the balconies, presented a charming spectacle.”



*The Rex parade in 1879. The Rex flag on the left is designed correctly, while the one on the right is not. To learn more, read on.*

In fact, a proper heraldic description of the King of Carnival's colors was well-publicized before the royal procession by the *Daily Picayune*:

### "THE ROYAL COLORS

In answer to the many inquiries from ladies who wish to bear the colors of the King of Carnival to-day, we give the following description of the royal standard: It is a parallelogram. A bar of gold extends from the upper left hand or pole corner, diagonally across to the lower right hand corner. The triangle at the lower pole corner is of purple silk, and the triangle at the upper right end of green silk, making a beautiful design and dispersing the colors in delightful contrast."

One can easily observe that the rules of heraldry were very much on the minds of the Rex organizers when choosing the colors. The fact that the diagonal "bar" goes from "the upper left" to "the lower right" is important in that (at least in literature) Rex is not of bastard birth. What's that you say?

In heraldry, a "bar" is actually a horizontal line. A "bend" is the proper term for a diagonal line (or *barre* in French heraldry). A bar sinister is supposed to signify illegitimate birth, with "sinister" coming from the Latin, meaning "on the left". But popular historical novelist Sir Walter Scott created the trope and was one of the culprits responsible for this (completely bogus in terms of heraldry) misinterpretation. Scott's writings popularized both the idea of the "bar sinister" as a sign of illegitimacy and the misspelling of "*barre*".



*Postcard view of "Carnival Flag" with "bar sinister" – Oops!  
Printed in Germany for F.F. Hansell & Bro., Ltd., Canal Street*

The reader will notice also that gold is the metallic element in this heraldic "field", and is always placed in the middle of a tricolor. The

heraldic metals are either silver, which can be represented by white, or gold. According to the rules of heraldry, a metal should never touch a metal and a color should never touch a color. Repeating the colors in different order (which we've so often seen in print), such as "purple, green and gold" or "green, purple and gold", was the result of ordering the colors so they rolled off the tongue more easily. And for those of my dear readers who are a bit geometrically challenged, you may recall that a parallelogram is a four-sided plane rectilinear figure with opposite sides being parallel. In the 1872 explanation, it would have been much simpler to describe the royal standard as "a rectangle".

Also, for readers who watched cartoons in the 1960s, the principal villain in the *Underdog* series was the wicked, "wanting to rule the world" Dr. Simon Bar Sinister, shown below:



*Dr. Simon Bar Sinister*



*Correctly designed Rex flag*

Presumably, kids were not supposed to know what "bar sinister" meant. As for villainy, according to Mark Twain in his *Life on the Mississippi*, it was Sir Walter Scott who was responsible for the Civil War. Here's just part of what Twain wrote on the subject:

"It was Sir Walter that made every gentleman in the South a Major or a Colonel, or a General or a Judge, before the war; and it was he, also, that made these gentlemen value these bogus decorations. For it was he that created rank and caste down there, and also reverence for rank and caste, and pride and pleasure in them . . . Sir Walter had so large a hand in making Southern character, as it existed before the war, that he is in great measure responsible for the war."

Meanwhile, back to the colors. Most people are curious as to what the colors signify and why. On February 12, 1950, the city's beloved journalist, historian and humorist Charles L. "Pie" Dufour (1903 - 1996) offered *Times-Picayune* readers an answer - at least in part.

PIE DUFOUR'S *A La Mode*  
**Where'd Rex  
Get Colors?**

*1950 "Pie" Dufour's A La Mode Column, Times-Picayune*

"Pie" explained how the colors did indeed date back to 1872 when Rex provided the public with "12 days of royal edicts, orders and proclamations all printed exclusively in the Republican." The Washington, D.C., *Daily National Republican*, from which I quoted in the beginning of this article, was described by "Pie" as "an ably edited paper, which modestly called itself the official organ of the United States, the state of Louisiana and the city of New Orleans. The general populace of New Orleans, however, regarded it as a carpetbag sheet."



*Rex standard correctly executed*

"Pie" continued by mentioning that it was Rex's Edict XII that gave instructions regarding the colors:

"All persons residing along the route of the royal pageant are ordered to provide extra supports for their galleries, to festoon and decorate the same with the royal colors (green, gold and purple) ... under penalty in default thereof of perpetual exile to the Balize."

You'll notice that in this proclamation the royal colors are mentioned in proper heraldic order. Rex also had a sense of humor since the old French settlement built near the mouth of the Mississippi, the Balize, was not the most hospitable place and was often vulnerable to

hurricanes.

Back in 1950, "Pie" wrote that Rex "didn't give any reason for picking" the colors. "So unless somebody comes up with a good reason, backed by documentary proof, you can believe any explanation you want," he concluded.

Of course, the theme of the Rex parade in 1892, twenty years after its founding, was "The Symbolism of Colors", as interpreted in the March 1, 1892, issue of the New Orleans *Daily City Item*. Floats numbered VII and VIII were "PURPLE-JUSTICE" and "GOLD-POWER", one after the other, followed not long after by No. XII, "GREEN", signifying faith. Curiously, Float No. I was "THE ROYAL COAT OF ARMS" displaying the "shield with the royal colors, green, yellow and purple, and the golden crown in the centre." The heraldic order of the colors is correct again, but notice the paper mentioned yellow instead of gold. The shield, by the way, was supported "by two characters one on either side with leopard skin breech cloths and bludgeons in their hands."

Obviously, the thinking behind the meaning of the colors came twenty years after the original Rex parade. The original Rex and his officers didn't write down any meaning for the colors in 1872, but it's clear that the rules of heraldry played a big part. In writing Rex's centennial book *If Ever I Cease to Love: One Hundred Years of Rex 1872-1971*, co-authors "Pie" Dufour and Leonard Huber further elaborated how justice, faith and power as the colors' meaning in 1892 had to be an afterthought by stating, "This of course is an ex post facto explanation, and one may be certain that the colors were selected in 1872 because they were gay and colorful and not because of any symbolism as explained by Rex two decades later."

Another possibility of the selection of green, gold and purple is that Lewis Salomon, the first Rex, had borrowed a magnificent purple Richard III King's costume from actor Lawrence Barrett. The *Republican* in its February 21st issue that year described his royal raiment: "The king was gorgeously attired in a royal robe of purple silk velvet, sparkling with gems. At his side hung his sword, while on his kingly head rested a jeweled crown, from beneath which flowed long white hair." Perhaps, the early Rex organizers (or Rex himself) chose his royal colors based on choosing two additional colors which were an ideal accompaniment to his costume. Without a more fuller description of Rex's regalia that year, we may never know.

Just what did the Grand Duke Alexis think of his visit? This question was asked by a Havana correspondent of the *New York Times*: "Would you object to telling me how you liked your trip and sojourn in the United States?"

Alexis replied promptly and without objection:

"If I had anything unpleasant to say I should remain silent and not answer your question; but my stay was so pleasant, and the people were so kind, that I can only regret that I could not remain longer; and if I did not have my path in life laid out for me, I should like to live in America altogether – dividing my time from May to January between New York and the prairies and spending the remainder in New Orleans. I may go back there if I can." Who'd want to winter in Russia anyway?

And did the Grand Duke eat pancakes? Why do you ask?



*Headline in the New York World, February 14, 1872*

In Great Britain and other countries around the world, the Tuesday immediately before Ash Wednesday, is called Pancake Day. The pancakes are symbolic of the four pillars of the Christian faith: eggs for creation, flour as the mainstay of the human diet, salt for wholesomeness and milk for purity. On Shrove Tuesday (another name for Mardi Gras), Anglo-Saxon Christians would go to confession and were "shriven" or "absolved" from their sins. A bell was rung calling people to confession, which came to be known as the "Pancake Bell".

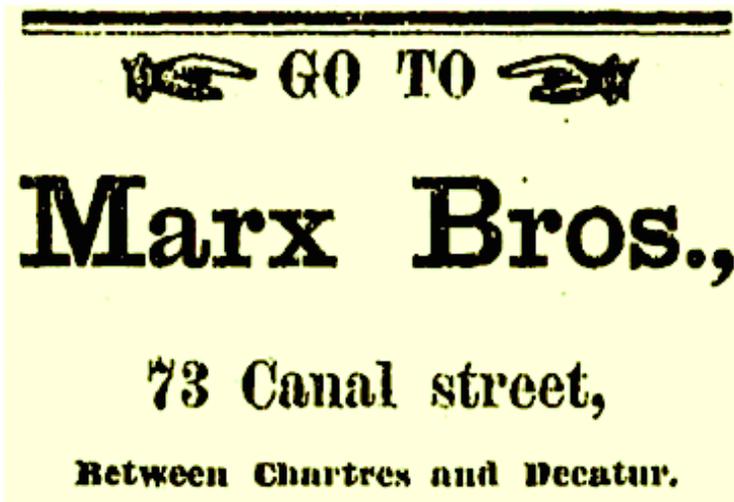
As for the Grand Duke Alexis, the headline read "Alexis Eating Pancakes". What we don't know is whether he ate them literally or metaphorically. We do know everyone had a grand time.

The Grand Duke, of course was of royal blood, a Romanov and son of Czar Alexander II and brother to future Czar Alexander III. And the Romanov colors are NOT in any stretch of the imagination green, gold and purple. But what about Rex, King of Carnival – what is his ancestry? According to *Times-Picayune* writer Meigs O. Frost, writing in the 1930s, Rex is "the son of Old King Cole, that merry old soul, who disguised himself as an Irish bull and wooed Terpsichore, Greek goddess of the dance." He left Europe for "the Land of the Free and Home of the Brave" and "retired to Louisiana's swamps" only "to emerge once a year in New Orleans on Mardi Gras." According to Mr. Frost, this official ancestry was made public in 1874, but I have been unable to find the appropriate genealogical records.



*Carnival Day in the 1880s on Canal Street, or  
The Marx Bros. Meet Mardi Gras in New Orleans*

But I did come across this interesting photograph, shown above. It is believed to have been taken on Mardi Gras Day sometime in the 1880s. It could not have been in the 1870s because the Marx Bros. Store, Furnishers and Hatters, 73 Canal Street between Chartres and Decatur, did not open for business until mid-September, 1879. It is the large store shown immediately behind the mule-driven float.



*Marx Bros. ad from 1880*

To end this selection of "Mardi Gras Miscellany," I must comment on two figures of speech. One is the "Irish bull," as mentioned by Meigs Frost in his ancestry of the King of Carnival. An "Irish bull" is said to

be a ludicrous, paradoxical statement that first appears to make sense. Its incongruence is usually unrecognized as such by its author. Ireland never claimed Yogi Berra or Samuel Goldwyn, but they were masters of the Irish bull. As for me, I had an Irish great aunt, who would produce great ones on a regular basis, such as: "If you went and got yourself killed, then what would you tell your father?"

The other figure of speech is "macaronic," which refers to using a mixture of words from different languages to create an idea or verse, especially that which mixes the vernacular with Latin. This is not the same as a hybrid word, such as automobile, which is one single word combination: *auto* from the Greek for self and *mobilis*, the Latin for moveable.

The word "macaronic" is believed to have its origins in 15th century Padua, apparently from the Italian *maccarone*, a kind of coarse dumpling or pasta eaten by peasant folk at that time. It is also the presumed origin of "macaroni".

"Bar Sinister" is an example of a macaronic reference to a heraldic term made famous by Sir Walter Scott, and the other macaronic usage in this piece is "Part *Deux*" to which we must now say, "Adieu, y'all."

And a Happy Mardi Gras.



Another F.F. Hansell & Bro., Ltd., postcard: flag is correct as viewed, but incorrect as mounted on flagpole. The "bend" of gold should extend from the upper pole corner diagonally down to the lower outside corner.



## **NED HÉMARD**

New Orleans Nostalgia  
"Mardi Gras Miscellany, Part Deux"  
Ned Hémard  
Copyright 2017