

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **The Montparnasse of New Orleans**

Everyone's heard of Mount Olympus in connection with the Greek gods and goddesses of mythology, but Mount Parnassus is another pinnacle particularly prominent in the classical past. From its summit one can look down upon Delphi, north of the Gulf of Corinth, and view the spectacular view of olive groves and beautiful countryside. Sacred to Apollo (god of music and poetry and patron of Delphi) and the three Corycian Nymphs (or Naiades), and home to the nine Muses, Mount Parnassus was the inspiration for a famous area of Paris on *Le Rive Gauche*.

This hilly neighborhood on the Left Bank was given the name *Montparnasse* in the seventeenth century by students who went there to recite poetry (and thereby receive inspiration from their Muse) until the following century when the hill was leveled to construct *Le Boulevard Montparnasse*. "Climbing Parnassus" is an expression used to mean seeking a career as a poet, composer, writer or artist. The can-can made its first appearance in the area's working-class ballrooms around 1830, and (from 1910 to the beginning of World War II) artists, poets and writers migrated there as an alternative to the *Montmartre* district. New Orleans' own famous actress, artist and poet, Adah Isaacs Menken (1835-1868), is buried in the Montparnasse Cemetery, amidst other notables as Jean-Paul Sartre and Guy de Maupassant.



*Adah Isaacs Menken*

Although New Orleans did not have much in the way of hills, it would provide a fitting home for *Les Muses de Montparnasse*. It was all due to a mythology minded architect who was a bit of a Nymphomaniac. Actually, men are not subject to Nymphomania (which owes its name to those feminine nature spirits of Ancient Greece). The male version of this affliction is known as Satyriasis (after those half men-half goats, the Satyrs). But Barthélemy Lafon had a thing for Nymphs, Nayades, Dryades and Muses.

In 1806 Lafon became Deputy Surveyor of Orleans County (yes, it was a county before it was a parish), and this architect's classical vision took shape the following year when he designed a plan for the area just upriver from the Faubourg Ste. Marie (roughly in the area that would become the Lower Garden District). From a beautiful circular park (now Lee Circle) a new wide avenue would angle off following the curve in the river. Today it is St. Charles Avenue, but back then he named it *Cours des Naiades* (later Nayades) after Greek mythology's River Nymphs.



*Painting of the Naiads' abduction of Hylas by English artist John William Waterhouse (1896). The Cours des Naiades, before it was called St. Charles Avenue, took its name from these water nymphs.*

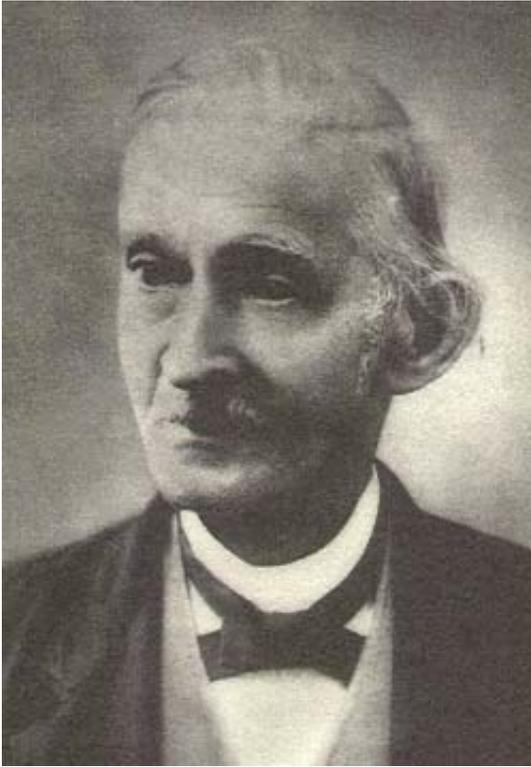
A few streets over toward the cypress forest, Dryades Street was named for the Wood Sprites (but the Dryades were associated with oaks and not cypress trees). In between ran Apollo (leader of the Muses and their choir director), Bacchus and Hercules Streets – now Carondelet, Baronne and Rampart. The cross streets were the nine Muses: Calliope (epic poetry), Clio (history), Erato (love poetry), Euterpe (music), Thalia (comedy), Melpomene (tragedy), Terpsichore (dance), Polymnia (sacred music) and Urania (astronomy).



*Dancing Muse*

St. Charles Avenue is famous for its streetcars, and during carnival season the Krewe of Muses rolls along this historic route. The Krewe of Nereus (1896) utilized streetcars for floats in a grand electrical display on February 21, 1900. Nereus, the all-wise old man of the sea, was father to fifty Sea-Nymphs known as Nereids.

Barthélémy Lafon was a busy city planner who also worked on areas of the Bywater and Bayou St. John neighborhoods. Additionally, he made recommendations for the fortification of New Orleans during the War of 1812. After the Battle of New Orleans, he left architecture for a career of piracy and smuggling as an associate of Jean Lafitte and company. He had a relationship with a *femme de couleur libre* named Modeste Foucher and acknowledged several of their children in his will.



*Thomy Lafon, Philanthropist*

It is believed that one of these children was Thomy Lafon (1810-1893), although some sources list his father as Pierre Laralde. Thomy Lafon became an extremely successful real estate investor and one of the city's foremost philanthropists. Thomy Lafon's fortune in 1870 was estimated at \$250,000, making him at the time the nation's wealthiest African American. During his lifetime, he amassed nearly half a million dollars yet lived in a rather unpretentious house at 242 Ursulines Street. He used his wealth to make significant contributions to the *Institution Catholique des Orphelins Indigents* (for poor African American children); the American Anti-Slavery Society; the Underground Railroad; the Louisiana Asylum; Charity Hospital (for the benefit of the ambulance service); the Eye, Ear, Nose and Throat Hospital; Southern University; Straight University; New Orleans University; the Society of the Holy Family; the Shakespeare Alms Home; the *Société des Jeunes Amis*; the Little Sisters of the Poor; the Lafon Old Folks Home and the Lafon Orphan Boy's Asylum.

Just as the Muses of mythology provided inspiration to mankind in the area of the arts, Thomy Lafon gave generously both to the arts and to charitable causes benefiting the poor of all races in New Orleans. Immediately after his death, the Louisiana State Legislature voted to pay tribute to this generous man in memoriam - the first African American to be so honored by any state in the Union.

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