

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **New Orleans in 1810**

As the Crescent City begins a new decade, it is worthwhile exploring what this glittering gem on the Mississippi was like 200 years ago.

1810 marked seven years after the Louisiana Purchase but two years before Louisiana achieved statehood. The city of Memphis, Tennessee, was not yet founded until nearly a decade later. In fact, that summer was the first public celebration of the Fourth of July in Louisiana at the St. Philip Theatre (*Théâtre St. Philippe*). Built in 1807 on St. Phillip Street, between Royal and Bourbon streets, the theatre could accommodate 700 people. With a parquette and two rows of boxes, the *Théâtre St. Philippe* was the rendezvous of all the fashionable people of New Orleans. The gala performance held that July 4, 1810, was in honor of the Declaration of Independence and the proceeds were devoted to the relief of victims of a giant fire on July 1 that had destroyed twenty-five houses.

The revolution in Saint Domingue brought about the second republic in the Western Hemisphere. Not all were happy or safe with the new leadership, and many Haitian refugees would make their way to New Orleans. The 1809 migration brought 2,731 whites (*affranchis*), 3,102 free persons of African descent (*gens de couleur libres*) and 3,226 slaves to the city (doubling its French-speaking population). While Governor Claiborne and other American officials wanted to prevent the arrival of free black *émigrés*, French Creoles wanted to increase the French-speaking population. As more refugees were allowed into the Territory of Orleans, those that had first gone to Cuba also decided to come to Louisiana.

This huge influx of refugees put New Orleans in the top ten of largest cities in 1810 and the most populous outside the thirteen original colonies. By 1840, the city rapidly grew to the wealthiest and third most populous city in the nation. Dwarfing many other cities in the antebellum South, it would remain in the top twelve until 1910, a century later.

New Orleans' growth beginning in 1810 was the result of its unique geographic location, the increasing industrialization of the American Northeast and Great Britain and the westward movement of the young United States. Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin proclaimed a GNP of \$120 million in 1810. The fledgling republic was largely agricultural, undercapitalized and underpopulated. Before the advent of the railroad, the country's only major transportation network was the Ohio-Missouri-Mississippi river system. And New Orleans, at the mouth of this system, could only benefit from the Louisiana Purchase (which removed the political barriers to the development of the city's natural economic and situational advantages), the expanding West, and the Industrial Revolution (that demanded western foodstuffs and southern cotton). The increased output of cotton was borne by a more efficient means of water transportation and the star of that river system, the steamboat.

Nicholas Roosevelt left New Orleans for New York by sea, arriving on January 15, 1810. He had just completed an exploratory Mississippi expedition by flatboat, covering the intended route for the steamboat to come. During this test voyage, he recorded depths and measured currents for later reference. Partnering with Robert Fulton and Robert Livingston, Roosevelt would then build the first Mississippi steamboat named "New Orleans" and steer it successfully down the Mississippi to its namesake city in January of 1812. The age of the steamboat had begun. In 1821, 287 steamboats arrived in the city, and by 1826, there were 700. In 1845, 2,500 steamboats were recorded, and during the 1850s an average of 3,000 steamboats a year called in New Orleans.

Nicholas Roosevelt made the famous river voyage with young wife Lydia Latrobe, daughter of his business partner Benjamin Henry Latrobe, architect of the U.S. Capitol and 403 Royal Street in the French Quarter (known today as Latrobe's). Designed as the Louisiana State Bank, Latrobe's architectural plans were completed on August 10, 1820. The building's wrought-iron balconies feature the bank's cartouche, and the stuccoed brick exterior form a familiar sight along *Rue Royale*.

In 1810 Thomas Bolling Robertson, descendant of Pocahontas and John Rolfe, took office as Secretary of the Territory of Orleans. He would later serve as Governor of Louisiana.

James Pitot purchased a Creole country house on Bayou St. John in 1810 known as the Pitot House. Pitot had prospered in sugar in Saint Domingue until the rebellion. Returning to France, he immigrated to the United States and became an American citizen. Pitot built one of the first cotton presses in the city and served as Mayor of New Orleans from 1804 to 1805 and later as parish court judge. The home is an

historic landmark and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Other notable owners of the house include Edgar Degas' great-grandmother, Madame Marie Rillieux, and Mother Frances Cabrini, America's first saint.

Elsewhere around the world, Sir Walter Scott, Francisco Goya, Goethe and Ludwig van Beethoven were writing literature and music. And Napoleon got hitched to Marie Louise, Archduchess of Austria, on April 2, 1810. *Au revoir, Joséphine.*

Closer to home, the independent republic of West Florida was annexed by proclamation by President Madison after a brief rebellion against Spanish rule by American and British settlers. On September 23, rebels overcame the Spanish garrison at Baton Rouge and raised the flag of their new republic: a single white star on a blue field. Known as the "Bonnie Blue Flag", it would be the inspiration for both the flags of Texas and Cuba. In literature, it would give Rhett and Scarlet Butler a name for their daughter.

The republic lasted 90 days, and its boundaries included all territory south of the 31st parallel, west of the Perdido River, and east of the Mississippi, but north of Lake Pontchartrain. It included the Louisiana parishes of East Baton Rouge, East and West Feliciana, Livingston, St. Helena, Tangipahoa, Washington and St. Tammany (known today as the Florida parishes). It included some Alabama and Mississippi counties, yet (despite the name) no part of the present state of Florida lay within its borders. Its capital was St. Francisville. Oakley Plantation house was completed near there around 1810. John James Audubon arrived at the house in 1821 to tutor Miss Eliza Pirrie and produce many of his *Birds of America*.

Meanwhile back in New Orleans, the city was growing to meet its expanding population. All of the forts around the original city were demolished except Fort St. Charles as Jacques Tanesse prepared to divide into lots part of the city commons area. Changes brought some complaints. On August 20 a protest was lodged by Messrs. James Johnston, Sam B. Davis and William Lidle concerning a lot of ground situated opposite the rope-yard and the city's ramparts.

The city purchased in 1810 the plantation of Claude Tremé, along the road to Bayou St. John, for \$40,000. Jacques Tanesse also did this subdivision along with a similar area in back of the upper *Vieux Carré*. A September 6th plan of lots below Barracks Street (also by Tanesse) shows a public promenade, which would become Esplanade Avenue.

In 1810 in *Adelle v. Beauregard*, a woman sued her master and claimed her freedom under the ancient Spanish law that put the burden of proof upon the slave owner. Adelle actually won her freedom because the court held that "while Blacks are presumed

slaves, Coloured persons are presumed free". The presumption that mulattoes were free unless proven otherwise had been established, and the constant carrying of manumission papers was no longer necessary.

One such person born in 1810 would become a real estate investor, successful businessman and philanthropist. This free man of color known as Thomy LaFon, would go on to leave more than \$600,000 to medical, educational and other charitable organizations upon his death in 1893. A school and nursing home would later bear his name.

More newspapers came out in 1810. The *Louisiana Planter* began publication; and a second Spanish language semiweekly, *El Mensajero*, also first appeared in 1810.

From the city's founding in 1718 until 1810, New Orleans was essentially French and Spanish colonial in its physical layout and design and in its human orientation. 1810 saw a departure from the city's European roots and its emergence as an American city on the move. Perhaps 2010 will begin a new century of growth and prosperity for the City of New Orleans.

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