

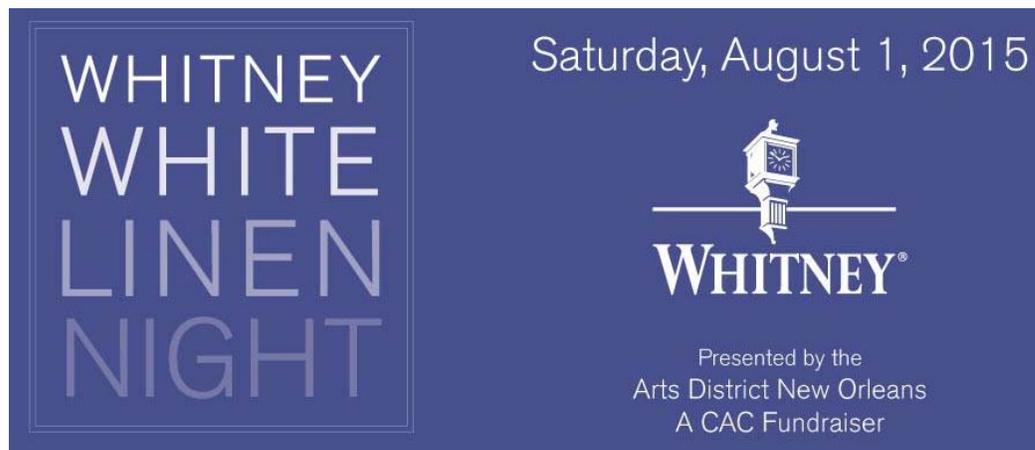
## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### Nights in White Linen

Thousands took to the street this past Saturday evening, August 1, to enjoy the New Orleans Arts District's annual mega gala, otherwise known as "Whitney White Linen Night 2015." Doug MacCash of the *Times-Picayune* described the summer white wearing partygoers as the "world's largest flock of snowy egrets." The event coincides with "Satchmo SummerFest" in the Quarter, held this year from July 30 – August 2, 2015, which is presented annually by French Quarter Festivals, Inc. (FQFI).



The Crescent City's revitalized and renamed Arts District is what we used to call the city's Warehouse District. Today, this historic neighborhood, also known as the American Sector, is home to excellent restaurants, hip cafés, top-notch art galleries and world-class museums, such as the National WWII Museum and the Ogden Museum of Southern Art.

The transformation of this stylish area from an area of urban shabbiness to what many have called "the SoHo of the South" began in the fall of 1976 with the opening of the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC). The CAC (with 10,000 square feet of gallery space) is located at 900 Camp Street, between Andrew Higgins Drive and St. Joseph Street, one block from Lee Circle and the Saint Charles streetcar line.

It began, according to the Center's history, "as an artist-run, artist-driven community organization in the nearly empty arts district of New Orleans." It is still engaging and enlightening visitors with *avant-garde* artwork, as well as an eclectic mix of music, theatre and dance.



*Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans*

Once a 19th century industrial area with warehouses to store grain, coffee and produce shipped through the Port of New Orleans, the Warehouse (now Arts) District is today rejuvenated. The city's World's Fair, known as the 1984 Louisiana World Exposition, was a tremendous catalyst in this urban renewal process. The Riverwalk Marketplace and the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center are perhaps the Fair's most obvious legacies, but the whole district since the '84 Fair has become home to chic hotels, restaurants, condominiums, museums and shops.

Some of the sophisticates that sashayed along Julia this past Saturday evening in August may recall the event's beginnings. The first Saturday in August was decided as the date in New Orleans for "White Linen Night." It was the CAC that conceived this grand idea back in the mid 1990s to showcase the art scene of the New Orleans Warehouse/Arts District with an elegant evening block party. The block turned out to be several blocks long, up and down roughly the 300 to 700 blocks of Julia Street, with various artistic tributaries flowing into the festive celebration. Presented by the New Orleans Arts District Association, this annual artistic soirée has become the summer "place to be" to experience diverse art, outstanding local cuisine, music and liquid refreshments. To keep things cool in more ways than one, linen has always been the attire of the evening.

And to make things cooler yet, this year the CAC came up with a truly cool concept: the "Cool Down Lounge" at the Lighthouse at 743 Camp Street (just off Julia), sponsored by Cox Cable. For only \$40 per

person, linen-donned revelers were entitled to extremely cool air-conditioning, private restrooms, tables and seating plus a cool deck to chat and chill out. Also included were two complimentary adult drinks and delicious food. Particularly flavorful was the Indian butter chicken.



*The "Cool Down Lounge" on "White Linen Night" 2015*

Other culinary delights for both the *haute* and the *hoi polloi* were available at the food booths up and down Julia. One booth offered ceviche and tuna, tastefully prepared. One could also choose a "ghetto burger," pizza, roasted suckling pig or a cantaloupe and tequila soup served with mint *crème fraiche* and prosciutto. The food choices were definitely "cool."

In fact, the entire shindig has become so cool that the French Quarter, as a spoof of the original, has its own "Dirty Linen Night" later on in the month to showcase its artists and craftsmen (and women, too). What better place is there to air one's dirty linen in public?

After the 6-9 pm "White Linen Night" street festivities come to a close each year, the CAC hosts an after-party. This year, from 9–11 pm, immediately after the "Cool Down Lounge," Mod Dance Party's DJ Matty provided soulful and funky entertainment for all back at the CAC.



*The Moon above the "Cool Down" deck*

But how did linen get to be such the *de rigeur* raiment of the Crescent City? It all started over 3,000 year ago. Most of the textiles that have come down to us from dynastic Egypt and earlier are made of linen. The harvest of flax is depicted in the Book of the Dead on a linen mummy bandage from the Ptolemaic Period (305-30 BC). And flax is the source of linen, a natural cellulose fiber produced from the plant's stem.

Linen fibers have a natural luster and in their natural state range between ivory, grey and tan. The phrase flaxen-haired denotes a light, bright blonde color (a hue of the raw flax fiber). Remember the words of "Hair" sung by the Cowsills in 1969: "Gimme a head with hair, long beautiful hair, shining, gleaming, streaming, flaxen, waxen".

Pure white linen is created by heavy bleaching, which is not good for the fabric; but linen fibers are stronger, stiffer and more lustrous than

cotton. Linen is cool and absorbent and wrinkles easily. All of these attributes are part of its charm (as well as its utility) in the South. With its crisp and textured feel, its appearance can seem either rough or soft and smooth. The white linen suit continues to be an integral part of New Orleans culture, especially when dressing up for spring and summer evenings (or possibly a wedding). Mayor Arthur J. O'Keefe (1926-1929) always looked sharp in his. White linen looks equally stunning on the ladies, accentuated perhaps by Estée Lauder's fragrance of the same name.



*Mayor Arthur J. O'Keefe posing in white linen on the porch of his home at 1018 St. Mary Street in 1928*

Linen comes from the Latin word for the flax plant, *linum*. So do so many other words. A straight *line* was first measured with a linen thread. *Linseed* oil comes from flax and is used as a drying oil in paints. It is also an ingredient in *linoleum* flooring. The French came up with the word *lingerie* for linen items worn in the bedchamber, which would surely make one *linger* (alright, *linger* came from somewhere else). Because of linen's widespread use in the home in tablecloths, napkins and towels, even sheets are called *linens* (even when made of another material). And the *lining* for garments was often made from linen. The fabric has been around so long it has permeated our vocabulary.

Today flax oil and flax seeds are being rediscovered as health foods. This is nothing new, for flax was one of the original "medicines" used by Hippocrates. A better remedy would be to don one's white linen and enjoy all that New Orleans has to offer.

**NED HÉMARD**

New Orleans Nostalgia  
"Nights In White Linen"  
Ned Hémard  
Copyright 2006 and 2015