

Offbeat Backstories

Perhaps you were unaware that the marble counters and mirrored walls we've grown so accustomed to over the years at the Morning Call Coffee Stand may have had their origins in Paris at the Café Procope. Located in *rue de l'Ancienne Comédie*, 6th arrondissement, it is known as the oldest café of Paris in continuous operation. First opened in 1686, the original café actually closed in 1872 and did not reopen as a café until the 1920s. So the claim of "oldest café" is not precisely correct. Nonetheless, it is a fascinating story.



Café Procope, Paris



Mirrors and marble at Morning Call

The original proprietor of the café was a Sicilian chef named Procopio Cutò (also known as Procopio dei Coltelli or François Procope), whose place of business was referred to as an "*antre*" (cavern, or cave) because it was so dark within, even when it was quite sunny outside. To brighten up his 17th century coffehouse's dark interior, Cutò installed crystal chandeliers, wall mirrors and marble tables, fixtures now standard in modern European cafés.

It must have helped since the café became a meeting place for the intellectual establishment and attracted countless writers, actors, musicians, philosophers, poets, revolutionaries, statesmen, scientists and dramatists, including Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Voltaire and John Paul Jones.

So when you see mirrored walls in a coffee shop or restaurant, such as the ones in New Orleans' historic Galatoire's Restaurant, you'll know where that concept originated.

Napoleon, Josephine of 'Night in Old New Orleans'



"Vic" Schiro shaved his moustache to play Napoleon Bonaparte.

Did you know that, years before Victor H. "Vic" Schiro became Mayor of New Orleans, he worked as a movie extra, co-managed a gold mine in Nevada, became a radio announcer and briefly worked as an assistant cameraman for movie director Frank Capra?

Eventually he founded his own insurance company and became an active civic leader. But in 1953 he couldn't pass up the chance to play

the part of the Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte as a climax to the Spring Fiesta's annual "Night in Old New Orleans". Serving at the time as the City's Commissioner of Public Parks and Buildings, "Vic" went all out and even shaved off his familiar moustache to play the role. The *Times-Picayune* praised Schiro, stating, "APPARENTLY NO SACRIFICE WAS TOO GREAT." His elegantly gowned Josephine for the evening was Miss Dawn Hebert, daughter of Representative and Mrs. F. Edward Hebert.

You may find it surprising that the Pontalba "apartments" in Jackson Square were not the first apartment buildings erected in the present-day United States, as commonly promoted. The matching red-brick, one-block-long, four-story buildings were originally constructed in the 1840s by New Orleans-born Micaela Almonester, Baroness de Pontalba, not as rental apartments but as Parisian-style row houses. They didn't become apartments until the 1930s renovations (during the Great Depression).

Baroness Pontalba later commissioned a beautiful mansion to be built in Paris, which was completed in 1855. It was what the French called an *hôtel particulier*, which is a townhouse of the grand variety, usually free-standing with no other *maisons* sharing any of its outer walls. Occupied by the baroness until her death in 1874, this magnificent mansion is today (since 1971) the official residence of the United States Ambassador to France.



The Hôtel de Pontalba, not your ordinary townhouse

But did you know that the property was purchased from her heirs by the Baron Edmond James de Rothschild, and during World War II

was requisitioned by Nazi Germany as an officers' club for the Luftwaffe (very much like the posh setup in *The Dirty Dozen*)? After the war, it was rented out to the British Royal Air Force Club and later to the United States government, who purchased it in 1948, primarily to house the United States Information Service.

You might be interested to learn that three different types of alcoholic beverage were used in toasting the finalization of the Louisiana Purchase? Robert Livingston, James Monroe and France's Barbé Marbois had already signed the treaty in Paris in April of 1803. Following ratification by the U.S. Senate later that year, the three nations celebrated the peaceful transfer of the territory in New Orleans with a series of toasts:

The first with Champagne to honor France;

Malaga (a fortified Spanish wine) to honor Spain;

and Madeira (a fortified wine produced on the Portuguese island of Madeira) to honor America.

Madeira was an American favorite and in 1776 was used to toast the Declaration of Independence, as well. Madeira was also George Washington's drink of choice.

A few readers may have discovered that there is a "stubby gray granite marker erected by the United States Coast and Geodetic Survey" in New Orleans' Lafayette Square. At least that was the way the unusual marker was described by writer Meigs O. Frost in his August 16, 1936, article in the *Times-Picayune*. It was placed there in February 1880. Frost further explained, "A line drawn from it, parallel to the equator, runs straight through the heart of the Great Pyramid of Cheops, in Egypt."

What he was actually describing was a line of latitude, which does indeed run parallel to the equator and east-west around the globe. Lines of latitude are used to measure distances North and South of the equator. Lines of longitude, on the other hand, run from the top of the Earth to the bottom. They are *not* parallel as lines of latitude are. Instead they meet at a point at the North and South poles and are called meridians.

The latitude and longitude of the Lafayette Square marker's location are carved into the granite: Latitude 29° 56' 59" North and Longitude 90° 04' 09" West. So how does that compare with the latitude of the Great Pyramid of Cheops (also known as the Pyramid of Giza or the Pyramid of Khufu)? The latitude of the Great Pyramid is 29° 58' 44.3830" (according to the GPS coordinates of a brass disk on the top of the Pyramid of Khufu on the Giza Plateau), which is a pretty close match.



Longitude and latitude marker in Lafayette Square

Louisiana historian and columnist Charles "Pie" Dufour, in 1968, explained that the marker was placed in Lafayette Square because it was the site of an astronomical station for the Coast and Geodetic Survey, but perhaps its near perfect alignment with the Great Pyramid had at least something to do with it.

So where is the latitude and longitude precisely 30 degrees North and

90 degrees West?

The "Geodetic Survey", established in 1807, now administered by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, places the exact location of 30 degrees North and 90 degrees West in New Orleans East, at a point near Terminal Road a short distance off the Inner Harbor Navigation Canal. It must also be remembered that in 1880 that would not have been a convenient spot for a marker.



The Great Pyramid lines up almost precisely with Lafayette Square.

An article in the publication of the *Louisiana Historical Society, Volume II, Part III*, February 1900, page 68, tells much the same story: "a line drawn from the U.S. Geodetic Survey stone in Lafayette Square will pass through the centre of the Great Pyramid of Cheops in Egypt."

The same article tells informs us that in New Orleans, according to the *Louisiana Historical Society* article, "although near the tropics, the climate is not extremely hot or unhealthy, and old settlers never used ice to cool the water. A tradition exists that ice was considered so unhealthy in the early part of this century that the mayor caused the first cargo of ice to be dumped into the river. However, ice cream and soda water were introduced in the 30's by Anthony Rasch, the jeweler,

at his store near the corner of Chartres and Bienville streets, and soon became popular refreshments."

The article, of course, is referring to the 19th century and the 1830s. Anthony Rasch, it should be noted, the son of a Bavarian count, was a skilled craftsman and excellent gold and silversmith. In 1957, his workshop at 315 Chartres Street was part of the Spring Fiesta's Candelight Patio Tour. "The vault of this home," the *Times-Picayune* stated, "built in 1830, is most unusual."

So the next time you enjoy a nectar soda in New Orleans, you now know that the beverage's fundamentals all began in a French Quarter jewelry store pretty much on the same latitude as the Great Pyramid in Egypt. Picture, too, a great leader nearby, in 1798, vaguely resembling Victor H. Schiro (minus the moustache), who commanded a successful French force that virtually wiped out the entire Egyptian Army at the Battle of the Pyramids. That victory, after an orchestrated coup in 1799, propelled Napoleon to First Consul and later Emperor of France.



Napoleon's tomb in the Hôtel des Invalides, Paris

Of course, he would eventually meet his Waterloo and die May 5, 1821, on the island of Saint Helena, where he had lived in exile since 1815. In 1840, his remains were exhumed and brought to Paris after

Louis-Philippe demanded that the English return the emperor to French soil. After a state funeral, his remains were laid to rest in the chapel of Saint-Jérôme until 1861 when his tomb was completed. Napoleon's magnificent resting place, designed in 1842 by Italian-born French architect and designer Louis Visconti, is located directly beneath the middle of the dome in the *Hôtel des Invalides*.



Architect Louis Tullius Joachim Visconti (1791 - 1853)

Carved from red porphyry, it sits atop a green granite base circled by a crown of laurels. Notably, the architect Visconti also designed that splendid Parisian townhouse for the Baroness Pontalba.

Silver Manufactory.

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He proposes to execute in the most superb manner, and conformably to either French or English taste,

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SERVICES of SILVER WARE,**

CONSISTING OF

Tea and coffee Pots, Cream Pots
Sugar Basins and Slop Bowls
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Warranting his silver pure. He also manufactures all kinds of JEWELRY, such as Pearl Breast Pins, Finger Rings
Ear Rings, Bracelets, Chains
Seals, Keys, Jet Rings, Breast Pins

And will repair all kinds of Pearl Work. Jewelry, Plated Ware, &c. And also Engraving on silver, and gold, and metal. All kinds of Fire Guildings, &c.

The continuance of the liberal patronage already bestowed upon him by his friends and a generous public he hopes to secure, by the strictest attention to their orders, as well as by his skill as a workman & conduct as a citizen.

ANTHONY RASCH,

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REFERENCES—Morgan, Dorsey & Co. or Wm. Kenner & Co.

All kinds of gold and silver bought or exchanged—likewise all kinds of pearls and precious stones.

Dec. 19

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*Early ad for Anthony Rasch's Silver Manufactory,
Louisiana Advertiser, Dec. 25, 1820*

Marble and mirrors, missing moustaches, Micaela's majestic maison, Malaga, Madeira, a memorable marker and so much more. Although these tales are a bit unusual, their backstories add rich layers to the varied history and culture of New Orleans.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"Offbeat Backstories"
Ned Hémard
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