

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

The Original Nine Muses of New Orleans

Everyone loves the Krewe of Muses with its fiber optic shoe sculptures, imaginative throws and (since 2014) the “Glambeaux”, a female flambeaux troupe lighting up the evening sky. And most of the city’s residents are familiar with (and mispronounce) the streets of the Lower Garden District named for the nine Muses of classical mythology.

For this we must thank Barthélémy Lafon, New Orleans Deputy City surveyor, who subdivided four plantations in the Second Municipality between 1806 and 1810. Lafon, it seemed, was inspired by all things classical and had a thing for Nymphs, Nayades, Dryades and Muses. He named streets for them as he unified the *Faubourgs Delord, Saulet, LaCourse* and *Annunciation*.

He named streets for the gods Apollo, Bacchus and Hercules (today Carondelet, Baronne and Rampart), as well as for the nine Muses. The Muses were said to be the personification of science, literature and the arts, especially history, dance and music. In Greek mythology, they are the nine daughters of Zeus (king of the gods) and Mnemosyne (memory itself personified). One really must have a good memory to spell Mnemosyne correctly.



The Muses, second century AD Roman sarcophagus, the Louvre

So who are these goddesses that have long been considered the "Sweet Inspirations" for the knowledge (related orally for centuries) contained in poetic lyrics and myths? In case you may have forgotten, here is a list of these inspirational ladies:

Calliope, the Muse of epic poetry, shown with a writing tablet

Clio, the Muse of history, shown with scrolls

Erato, the Muse of lyric poetry, especially love and erotic poetry, shown with a lyre-like instrument with a sounding box known as a *kithara* (source of the word *guitar*)

Thalia, the Muse of comedy, shown with a comic mask

Melpomene, the Muse of tragedy, shown with a tragic mask

Terpsichore, the Muse of dance, shown with a lyre

Euterpe, the Muse of music, song and elegiac poetry, shown with a Greek wind instrument known as an *aulos*

Polyymnia, or Polyhymnia, the Muse of sacred poetry or music (hymns), shown with a veil

Urania, the Muse of astronomy, shown with a globe and compass

The listing above is in the order that the Muses' streets are located, going from Downtown to Uptown.

But a number of years before these nine Muses graced the streets of the Crescent City, the first of “the original nine Muses of New Orleans” arrived – and her name was decidedly French.

Eulalie de la Ronde, named for her mother, was the first of nine sisters born to Pierre Denis de la Ronde II and his wife, Eulalie Guerbois. Born in New Orleans April 20, 1762, Pierre Denis was a lieutenant in the second company, first battalion, of the Louisiana troops serving the King of Spain. He was also a civil and military commandant for St. Bernard Parish, and (from 1798 to 1803) he was a member of the Cabildo, succeeding his brother-in-law, Don Andreas Almonester y Roxas, entrepreneur and benefactor of the City of New Orleans.

Almonester is remembered for his funding of the construction of the Ursuline Nuns’ chapel at Ursulines and Condé (Chartres) streets, the building of the first St. Louis Cathedral and erecting the *Presbytère* (intended for but never used as a residence for priests). He and Louise de la Ronde (Pierre Denis II’s sister) were the parents of Micaëla Leonarda Antonia Almonester, later the Baroness de Pontalba (who also accomplished a great deal in completing the stunning Pontalba Apartments that flank Jackson Square).

Muse No. 1, Eulalie de la Ronde, born February 25, 1789, married René Philippe Gabriel Villeré, son of the first Creole governor of Louisiana, and together they had twelve children. Many of their descendants are today proud citizens of New Orleans.

Muse No. 2 was Céleste de la Ronde (born June 15, 1791), who married the Irish-born Maunsel White, cotton factor and sugar cane planter, whose “decoction” of the “celebrated tobasco [*sic*] red pepper” was described in an 1850 issue of the *Daily Delta* (and reprinted in numerous periodicals at that time). He and Céleste had one daughter, Eliza, who became the wife of Cuthbert Bullitt of Louisville, Kentucky. White fought at the Battle of New Orleans and married again after Céleste died. His next wife was:

Muse No. 3, Héloïse de la Ronde, born December 11, 1792, who bore Colonel White three children.



Colonel Maunsel White

Muse No. 4, born June 21, 1796, was Joséphine Pépita de la Ronde, who married first Thomas S. Cunningham of the U. S. Navy. They had two sons who died young. Her second husband was General Casimir Lacoste, who also distinguished himself at the Battle of New Orleans. General Lacoste was first married to Pépita's sister, Manette, the fifth Muse.

Muse No. 5, Marie Manette de la Ronde, was born February 1, 1795, and died February 9, 1857. After Manette's death, her husband, General Lacoste, married Joséphine Pépita de la Ronde, Muse No. 4. Neither of the General's marriages resulted in children.

Pepper.

One of the most useful vegetables in the hygiene, is red pepper. Especially in warm countries has it been considered invaluable as a stimulant and auxiliary in digestion. Among the Spanish and French races it is used in the largest quantities, and they invariably enjoy most excellent health. Of late, principally since the cholera visited our State, our planters have begun to discover the virtues of this vegetable, and mingle large quantities of it with the food of their negroes. Considerable attention has been drawn to the selection and cultivation of the best kinds of pepper. Among those who have appreciated the importance of this vegetable, is that admirable planter, and exceedingly practical gentleman, Colonel Maunsel White, the proprietor of "Deer Range," commonly known as the Model Sugar Plantation. Col. White has introduced the celebrated tobacco red pepper—the very strongest of all peppers—of which he has cultivated a large quantity, with a view of supplying his neighbors and diffusing it through the State. The tobacco pepper yields a small red pod, less than an inch in length, and longitudinal in shape. It is exceedingly hot, and but a small quantity of it is sufficient to pepper a large dish of any food. Owing to its oleaginous character, Col. White found it impossible to preserve it by drying; but by pouring strong vinegar on it after boiling he has made a sauce or pepper decoction of it, which possesses in a most concentrated and intense form, all the qualities of the vegetable. A single drop of this sauce will flavor a whole plate of soup or other food. The use of a decoction like this, particularly in preparing the food for laboring persons, would be found exceedingly beneficial in a relaxing climate like this. Col. White has not had a single case of cholera among his large gang of negroes since that disease appeared in the South.—
N. O. Delta.

September 1850 article from the New Orleans Delta

Child No. 6 was not a Muse at all, but the only son born to Pierre Denis II and his wife, Eulalie. Since the nine daughters were known as "The Nine Muses", the son (Pierre Denis de la Ronde III) was humorously known as "Apollo". In classical mythology, Apollo was the leader of the Muses and their choir director, thereby functioning as the patron god of music and poetry. As the one male out of nine daughters, it was an apt nickname.

Child No. 7 and Muse No. 6, Adélaïde Adèle de la Ronde, born December 24, 1803, became the wife of Pierre Adolphe Ducros in 1820. Their union produced a son and a daughter. Daughter Elizabeth Adèle Ducros married Gabriel Ernéville Villeré and son Pierre Adolphe Ducros, Jr., married Coralie Fernet and had seven children. The seventh, also named Coralie, married Henri Jules Stouse and had eight children. One can see already how many descendants these nine Muses have produced.

Muse No. 7 was Marie Félicie de la Ronde, born September 28, 1805, married Pierre Jayme F. Jorda, and they had nine children.

The eighth Muse was named Isabelle Emilie de la Ronde, born August 6, 1807, and she became the wife of Pierre de Hôa. Of Pierre and Emilie's three daughters, one married a Forestier, the second wed Belgarde Lacoste and the third, Eulalie de Hôa, married Charles Emile LeBlanc and had seven LeBlanc children. The LeBlanc progeny, in turn, had many more of their own.

Magdalena Azélie, Muse No. 9, born May 21, 1809, married Pierre Urbain Forestier and had two sons (one of whom married Amélie de Hôa and the other Félicie Jorda). It is interesting how the same family names come back into the picture.

More must be said about the father of these nine muses, Pierre Denis de la Ronde II. His father, Pierre Denis, *écuyer*, Sieur de la Ronde, was born in 1726 in Québec, and died in Louisiana in 1772. His mother was Magdelaine Marguerite Broutin, daughter of the colony's royal engineer under Bienville, Ignace François Broutin, who was connected by marriage with the historic families of Marigny and Pontalba. Royal Engineer Broutin was great-grandfather to second cousins Xavier Célestin Delfau de Pontalba (known as Tin Tin), as well his wife, the Baroness Pontalba. Magdelaine Broutin was also the widow (and second wife) of Louis Xavier Martin de Lino de Chalmette. Chalmette, Louisiana, was named for their son, plantation owner Ignace Martin de Lino de Chalmette (born 1755), whose French surname refers to pasture or fallow land (especially in a mountainous area). Mountainous?

The de la Ronde family in Louisiana, whose ancestors originally made their way to Québec from Tours, in Touraine, France, had one of the most beautiful plantation homes in Louisiana at that time, and it was called *Versailles*. One of its main attractions was its magnificent *allée chêne* (or oak alley), planted on Pierre Denis II's twenty-first birthday. When the British invasion of Louisiana was taking place and New Orleans was threatened with conquest, Pierre Denis de la Ronde II was serving as a Colonel of the Louisiana Militia, and his home was one of five plantations that lay in the path of the British advance on the city. Neighbor Gabriel Villeré, some may recall, made a daring escape from his British guards and scurried away to the next plantation, that of the de la Ronde's. Colonel de la Ronde was there to receive the news, and the two men sped to New Orleans to inform Andrew Jackson of the enemy's approach. Grace King wrote that there was a family tradition that it was de la Ronde who overheard British officers speaking the password phrase for the night, "Beauty and Booty". When conveyed to the American Army, it "furnished them with the deadliest motive that fired their fury against the invaders."

New Orleans historian Stanley Clisby Arthur wrote, "*Versailles*, to continue the application to mythology, was termed 'Parnassus,' where a lavish hospitality was dispensed." Parnassus, of course, is the name of a limestone mountain in Greece, sacred to Apollo and (of course) home to the Muses. St. Bernard Parish is far from mountainous, but the name "Parnassus", in a literary sense, refers to its distinction as the home of poetry, literature, and learning. The hilly *Montparnasse* area on the Left Bank of Paris, France, as I've written before, is so named for the many students who went there to recite poetry.

But *Versailles*, aka Parnassus, has another connection to Paris. It is part of a long forgotten real estate promotion of that period. With other landowners of that area, Colonel de la Ronde had plans to establish a thriving metropolis there, one to rival and eventually surpass nearby New Orleans (the schemers promised). The new city was to be called (like de la Ronde's plantation) *Versailles*, and a second sister city on the shores of Lake Borgne was to be named *Paris*.

So much happened in Chalmette those many years ago. It was there that New Orleans was spared from conquest. How does one reach these historic sites? "St. Claude," John Churchill Chase tells us, " ... used to be Good Children street, crosses the city limits into the lower parish to become the St. Bernard Highway. After a few minutes' ride, the Rodrigues canal is reached, the actual battlefield crossed, and the highway forks to pass on both sides of the ruins of the plantation house of Peter de la Ronde." That's the Anglicized version of Pierre Denis de la Ronde II's name.

What's left of the double row of majestic oaks became known as the Pakenham Oaks, where the story was spread that it was beneath these trees that the British general was mortally wounded (though all historians deny this).

As for de la Ronde's dream of twin cities, a road and a barge canal would connect these two metropolises, but (as Chase said) "unlike his oak trees, De La Ronde's cities never took root." What remains of de la Ronde's grandiose plans is the road connecting St. Bernard Highway with New Orleans, known today as Paris Road. It's another way of accessing Chalmette and the historic events that took place there two centuries ago and to imagine the loveliness of "the nine original Muses of New Orleans".

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"The Original Nine Muses of New Orleans"
Ned Hémard
Copyright 2014