

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Prince of the Two Sicilies ... and New Orleans Attorney

New Orleans author John Chase described Bernadotte and Murat not only as Mid-City street names, but also as Napoleon's best field marshals, "the tip-top echelon of *Le Grand Armee* — only the crowned heads!" Bernadotte became King of Sweden, while Murat's domain was the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies.

Why two Sicilies? It all started with the Normans, who were the Viking conquerors of the territory in northern France known as Normandy. In the early decades of the 11th century, Norman adventurers came to southern Italy, at first to fight against the Saracens. The Normans left their mark on the many castles and cathedrals (such as Roger II's at Cefalù), which dot the Sicilian landscape. Norman King Roger II formed the Kingdom of Sicily by merging the County of Sicily with the southern part of the Italian Peninsula (then known as the Duchy of Aoulia and Calabria) as well as the Maltese Islands. The capital of this kingdom was Palermo — on the actual island of Sicily.

The Hohenstaufens gained Sicily through marriage in 1194, and Charles of Anjou (younger brother of St. Louis, King of France) became King of Sicily by conquest in 1266. Charles' kingdom, however, was split by the War of the Sicilian Vespers. Charles lost a good part of Sicily to the House of Barcelona, with support from the natives. Charles continued to reign as king over the peninsular part of the realm, thereafter informally known as the Kingdom of Naples. Officially he never gave up the "Kingdom of Sicily" name and thus there were two kingdoms calling themselves "Sicily".

The Kingdom of the Two Sicilies resulted from the unification of the Kingdom of Sicily with the Kingdom of Naples (peninsular Sicily), by King Alfonso V of Aragon in 1442. Apart from an interruption under Napoleon Bonaparte, the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies remained under the Bourbon line continually until 1860.

Napoleon's interruption came in January of 1799, when he captured Naples in the name of the French Republic and declared the Parthenopaeian Republic. In 1806, Bonaparte, by then Emperor, again dethroned King Ferdinand and appointed his brother Joseph King of Naples. Two years later, Napoleon removed Joseph to Spain and bestowed upon his sister Caroline's husband, Joachim Murat, the title of King of the Two Sicilies, though *de facto* he never actually held the island of Sicily where Ferdinand was, so he's usually referred to as just the King of Naples. Throughout this time, King Ferdinand remained in Sicily with the British Royal Navy to protect him.

Joachim Murat, not yet Napoleon's brother-in-law, in late 1795 had been in the right place at the right time. Napoleon was named commander of the French National Convention's defending forces, and he assigned Captain Murat the difficult task of gathering artillery from a remote suburb. These cannons, acquired barely in time, allowed Napoleon to save the National Convention members targeted by the armed mob. For this success Joachim Murat was made *chef de brigade* (colonel) and continued to be one of Napoleon's best officers and later Marshal of France. He would reign as King of Naples from 1808 until 1815, when King Ferdinand I was restored by the Congress of Vienna. From 1816 the two kingdoms reunited as one and lasted until 1860 with the annexation by the Kingdom of Sardinia. The Two Sicilies extended over the *Mezzogiorno* (the southern part of mainland Italy) and the island of Sicily.

Charles Louis Napoleon Achille Murat (January 21, 1801 — April 12, 1847) was born the son of Joachim Murat and Caroline Bonaparte in the *Hôtel de Brienne* in Paris, France. Young Prince Achille Murat grew up in Paris and Naples as heir presumptive to his father's titles. Achille was pronounced Prince of the Two Sicilies, Prince Royal of the Kingdom of Naples and Duke of Cleves. In physical appearance, he closely resembled his uncle, Napoleon Bonaparte.

After Napoleon was exiled for a second time, Achille Murat fled with his mother, brother Lucien, and sisters Letizia and Louise to Frohsdorf Castle in Lower Austria. Upon reaching majority, Achille traveled to America and arrived in New York where he made immediate application for naturalization. After a few months in that city, he made an extensive tour through the United States.

Murat settled in a cottage in eastern Florida but in 1823 purchased an extensive property of 2,800 acres in St. Augustine. This land was converted to a plantation and named *Parthenope* after the Siren of Greek mythology that failed to beguile Odysseus. *Parthenope* was the daughter of *Ancaeus*, king of Samos, and Samia, daughter of *Meander*, the river-god. *Parthenope* was also a Greek settlement now part of the Italian city of Naples, and the source for Napoleon's Parthenopaeian Republic.

Prince Murat was a member of the local enrolled militia and resided in Tallahassee, Florida, during Florida's territorial and early statehood days. During the early phase of the Seminole Wars, he was a lieutenant colonel of Florida's militia. Achille Murat would retain the rank of colonel the rest of his life.

Between 1824 and 1826, Murat bought Lipona Plantation fifteen miles east of Tallahassee. The name Lipona may have been an anagram of Napoli (Naples), the kingdom over which he might have ruled. He quickly became woven into the social fabric of the community. He joined the Masonic lodge, became a bondsman of the city treasurer and dabbled in local politics. He was elected alderman of the city in 1824, mayor in the following year, and in 1826 appointed postmaster, which office he held till 1838.

It is said, although there is no evidence for this, that George Washington turned down the title of king to become president of the United States. George's great-grandniece, however, Catherine Daingerfield Willis Gray, had no problem in 1826 meeting and marrying the Prince of the Two Sicilies, Achille Murat. She was born near Fredericksburg, Virginia, in 1803. Murat and his wife moved to New Orleans for several years, where the Prince set up a law office in Exchange Alley in partnership with a Mr. Garnier. While so engaged in the Crescent City, Prince Murat purchased a house at 919 Esplanade Avenue and a sugar plantation on the Mississippi (Magnolia Mound) near Baton Rouge. While living in New Orleans and Tallahassee, Murat studied and wrote about the law and government, publishing *A Moral and Political Sketch of the United States of North America* in 1832 and other works.

An event occurred at Prince Murat's sugar plantation, according to Matilda L. McConnell, where Achille accidentally slipped into one of the sugar-boiling vats. The syrup did not scald him, but he was perturbed that his wife "Kate will make me wash." "He had a decided aversion to water," she wrote, and "He never drank it without adding whisky to it." Murat believed that water was "intended only for the beasts of the field," McConnell related.

While in Louisiana, Murat was named president of the Texas Land Company. He and his wife entertained frequently, experimenting with dishes like alligator tail soup, roasted crows, turkey buzzard stew, boiled owls and stewed cows ears. If that wasn't odd enough, he slept on a moss mattress and spoke seven languages. Following the 1830 revolution in France, Achille returned to Europe to become a colonel in the Foreign Legion of the new Kingdom of Belgium, hoping for a "call from Italy" which never came. While in Belgium and France, he had tried unsuccessfully to regain some part of the family fortune that he

believed to be his. He also lost the Louisiana house and plantation, as well as property in Florida. Fortunately for him he had used OPM (other people's money) for these properties, and in 1834 the Murats returned to the Tallahassee area. There, he died April 15, 1847, at the age of 46. His death occurred one year before his maternal first cousin Louis Napoleon (Napoleon III) rose to power in France, a move that would have given Murat the status he had always desired.

But Napoleon III did come through in 1866 by providing Prince Murat's widow, Catherine, with a cash sum of \$40,000 and a comfortable annuity. She had inherited the 2,000-acre Lipona Plantation in Jefferson County, Florida, upon Prince Murat's death. In 1854, she bought Bellevue, in Leon County, which became her main residence. During her years there, Catherine became involved in the nation's first successful preservation effort, the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association's work to preserve George Washington's home. She was appointed Vice Regent for Florida, the state that raised the largest per capita amount toward the restoration of Mount Vernon. Catherine died in 1867 and is buried with her husband at the St. John's Episcopal Church cemetery in Tallahassee.

The St. Augustine house where Prince Murat lived briefly still stands at the corner of St. George and Bridge Street and is called the "Murat House". In Tallahassee, there's a motel named for Prince Murat at the corner of Monroe Street and Thomasville Road. In New Orleans, there's a street named for the Prince's father, Joachim Murat, born an innkeeper's son in 1767, Grand Duke of Cleves and Berg, Grand Admiral, Marshal of France, King of Naples (and almost Two Sicilies). Napoleon also granted Murat, his cavalry commander of the French Egyptian Expedition of 1798, the title of "First Horseman of Europe".

Joachim Murat fled to Corsica after Napoleon's fall. During an attempt to regain Naples through an insurrection, he was arrested and was executed by firing squad in 1815. He kissed a cornelian on which the head of his wife, Caroline Bonaparte, was engraved, and gave the command — "Save my face — aim for the chest — fire!"

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