

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Royal Gumbo

“What is New Orleans?” asked Kermit Ruffins, New Orleans jazz trumpeter and vocalist. His answer is the very essence of the Crescent City:

“New Orleans is Creole gumbo, filé gumbo, cowan gumbo, chicken gumbo, smoked sausage gumbo, hot sausage gumbo, onion gumbo.”



Cowan, or snapping turtle, for sale in New Orleans' Ninth Ward

For a remarkable description of a mouth-watering Louisiana gumbo, there is none better than that offered by food historian, writer and documentary filmmaker, Lolis Eric Elie, in an article appearing in the *Smithsonian* (2012). And of course, as we all might do, he said his

mom's was by far the best:

"My mother's gumbo is made with okra, shrimp, crabs and several kinds of sausage (the onions, garlic, bell pepper, celery, parsley, green onions and bay leaf go without saying). My mother's gumbo is a pleasing brown shade, roughly the color of my skin. It is slightly thickened with a roux, that mixture of flour and fat (be it vegetable, animal or dairy) that is French in origin and emblematic of Louisiana cooking. When served over rice, my mother's gumbo is roughly the consistency of chicken and rice soup."



Chef John Besh's idea of his "Mamma's Seafood Gumbo"

Gumbo, called a soup by some, a stew by others, is categorized by which of the the three thickeners is used: okra, filé or roux. It is understandable that there is much controversy surrounding the origins and etymology of this popular South Louisiana dish. Does its name derive from *ki ngombo*, the word for okra in many Bantu languages in West Africa, or from the Choctaw word *kombo*, or *gombo*, meaning ground sassafras leaves, which we call filé? And who actually made the first gumbo in the Louisiana colony? Was it an Indian-influenced filé gumbo complemented by a French roux or was it perhaps an African or West Indies okra-based Creole seafood gumbo? We may never know, but thank heaven for all these wonderful influences!

The Cajun cooks of South Louisiana, too, have their own special ingredients, such as chicken and sausage, for their gumbos.

There is a fascinating newspaper clipping dated September 11, 1817, which appeared in the *American Star*, Petersburg, Virginia. It describes the many benefits of an edible green plant common in the West Indies,

known as *Hibiscus esculentus*, or in Jamaica as the "OKRO" plant. We are more likely to call this nutritious green used in "their soups and pepper pots" as okra. "At St. Domingo they are called *gumbo*; and from their mucilaginous quality are esteemed very wholesome," stated the article. The stewed "*Tomators with Okro*" is quite the Creole dish, and would seem to make the case for an African (via West Indies) origin for gumbo.

OKRO.

Hibiscus esculentus, or eatable Hibiscus, is common in the W. Indies, where it is cultivated for the capsulis (or pods) which they gather green to put in their soups and pepper pots. They are generally boiled separately, and added just before these messes are taken off the fire, but the seeds may be boiled in broth, like barley rice, or any other ingredient; for they are not so mucilaginous as the pods. The pods, boiled and buttered, make a rich plate: but they are used only in private families in this form.— They are full of a nutritious mucilage. It is known in Jamaica by the name of the Okro plant. It is also cultivated, in the gardens, in China and Cochin-China.

MANZIN'S EDITION OF MILLAR'S BOTANICAL DICTIONARY.

To cook Tomators with Okro.—Take an equal quantity of each, put them into a stew pan without water, with an onion chopped fine, with pepper and salt to your taste, and a lump of butter, stew them for one hour.

To dress Okro—Put them into a stew pan with a little water and salt, with some butter, stew them until tender, then serve them up with drawn butter. At St. Domingo they are called *gumbo*; and from their mucilaginous quality are esteemed very wholesome, (especially to those who have delicate stomachs;) they are excellent in all bowel complaints, either to prevent or cure, being easy of digestion and are very nutritious.

1817 article on OKRO

But the very first printed mention of gumbo (according to Lolis Eric Elie) was in a 1764 court document uncovered by Gwendolyn Midlo Hall:

"Comba and Louison, both Mandingo women in their 50's, were vendors selling cakes and other goods along the streets of New Orleans. They maintained an active social life, organized feasts where they ate and drank very well, cooked gumbo filé and rice, roasted turkeys and chickens, barbecued pigs and fish, smoked tobacco and drank rum."

The reference above is made to food prepared and eaten by African maroons who had escaped slavery in Louisiana, but the gumbo mentioned was made with filé, or sassafras leaves – indicating more of a Native American influence.

In an advertisement in *L'Abeille de la Nouvelle-Orléans*, or the *New Orleans Bee*, dated October 27, 1831, the proprietor of the *Café de Paris*, corner of Orleans and Bourbon streets, announced, "Beef and oyster soup, gomme, &c., may be had every day at his establishment." By the 1830s, gumbo wasn't just being served in home kitchens. It was truly a dish fit for a king.

But did you know that in 1838, it would be presented as a special gift to one of history's most famous queens – Britain's Queen Victoria?

There were two presenters of "The Bowl of Gumbo," the first being the Honourable Andrew Stevens, U.S. Ambassador to the United Kingdom (known formally as Ambassador to the Court of St. James). The second was the Ambassador's personal slave, named Pompey, who had lived many years in Louisiana.

**Great News from London—The Bowl of
Gumbo—Andrew Stevenson's Speech—
Pompey's Elucidation, &c. &c.**

Headline in the Picayune, dated August 19, 1838

The coronation of the young Queen Victoria had taken place on June 28, 1838, just over a year after her succeeding to the throne at the age of 18. The presentation of the "Bowl of Gumbo," forwarded to England by the editors of New Orleans' fledgling newspaper, the *Picayune*, established only the year before, was "marked by the greatest pageant that has graced the British Metropolis" since the Queen's accession. The gift, "a fine, large China bowl of a *soup-iferous* decoction called *gumbo*," was "delivered to Her Majesty with all appropriate ceremonies."



Justly famous coronation portrait of Queen Victoria by Thomas Sully

Andrew Stevenson (January 21, 1784 – January 25, 1857), born in Culpeper County, Virginia, was elected in 1820 to the U.S. House of Representatives. From 1827 to 1834 he served as Speaker of the House. In 1816, he married his second wife, Sarah Coles, a cousin of Dolley Madison; and it was she who accompanied her husband to London upon his becoming U.S. Ambassador to the Court of St. James. Nominated by President Andrew Jackson as Minister to Great Britain, he served from 1836 to 1841. The ambassadorship has always been an important posting and has been held by various notable politicians, including five who would later serve as U.S. presidents: John Adams, James Monroe, John Quincy Adams, Martin Van Buren and James Buchanan. President Kennedy's father, Joseph P. Kennedy, held the post in World War II from 1938 through most of 1940. And New Orleans-born Anne Legendre Armstrong was Ambassador to Great Britain 1976-1977.



Ambassador Andrew Stevens and his wife, Sallie Coles Stevenson

On June 8, 1836, Ambassador Stevens and his wife, Sallie embarked at New York for London aboard the packet ship, *Montreal*. Three weeks later, the couple docked at Portsmouth, England. Reaching London on June 30, the Stevensons were about to witness some memorable moments in history.

William IV, third son of George III, sat upon the British throne, but would die the following June. At the time of his death William had no legitimate children, but was survived by eight of his ten illegitimate children by the Irish actress, Dorothea Bland, better known by her stage name, Mrs. Jordan, with whom he cohabited for twenty years. Heir presumptive to the crown was a slender, rosy-cheeked teenager, Alexandrina Victoria, and the Victorian Era was about to begin.

Sallie Coles Stevenson, from an old Virginia family, and her husband soon had hosts of friends, and it was not long before the diplomatic couple was very much a part of English social circles. Mrs. Stevenson was described as "tall and almost gypsylike in her style." As wife of the "Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary," she achieved an unrivaled social success. Having received a barrel of apples from Richmond, Virginia, Sallie and her husband shared two dozen of these perfect Albemarle pippins with the Queen, beginning a tradition. In

fact, it was Ambassador Stevenson who arranged for Thomas Sully, the famous portraitist whose grand nephew designed many of the beautiful homes along St. Charles Avenue, to paint the large, yet striking, coronation portrait of Queen Victoria (shown earlier).

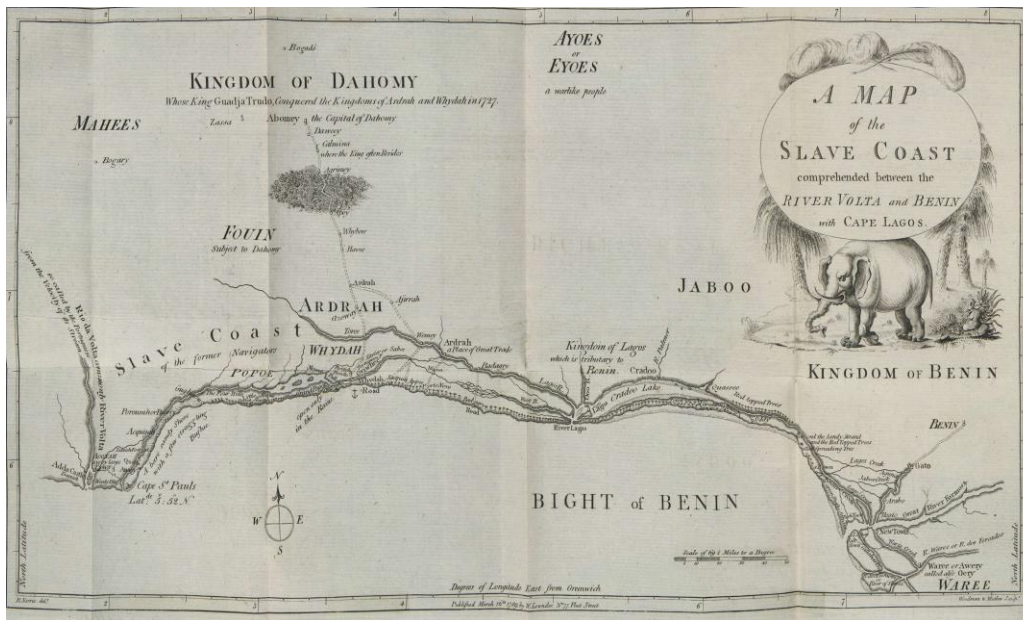
Then came that day in July, 1838, when the presentation of the "Bowl of Gumbo" was to be made. The American Minister wanted to deliver the gift at the lunch room of Buckingham Palace "in a quiet unostentatious manner," but Queen Victoria would not listen for a moment. Her respect for the donors was of such a nature that she wanted to be seated on the throne in the House of Peers so "that the Lords and Commons should all be present to witness the ceremony."

A great crowd did indeed arrive, as well as Her Majesty's chief cook, assistant cooks, other servants of the Royal Palace, including porters, butlers, washerwomen and Lord Stewart of the Household. Then came Pompey conveying the "Bowl of Gumbo" followed by his "master," the Ambassador. Next came Victoria in her State Carriage followed by all her ministers, foreign ambassadors, the Corporation of London, Westminster, etc. It was a big to-do!

Addressing the Queen, Ambassador Stevenson humbly apologized for being a "green horn" and for the *Picayune's* blunder in not "attending to sundry little formalities for which court etiquette requires." After more of these remarks, the Queen graciously interrupted and said, "I admire the go-ahead-itive disposition of the Yankees, and I want, if possible, to stir up my sleepy subjects to imitate their example." She continued, "As to the editors of the *Picayune*, who have conferred upon me so distinguished a mark of their regard, I feel almost angry at you, sir, for intimating that I *could* be offended with them. They have invariably manifested the utmost generosity and gallantry in mentioning my name, as I see by their paper, for I take four copies of the *Weekly*, besides one copy of their *Daily* publication."

The Ambassador indicated that his part, "which was to apologize," was over and it was now up to Pompey to "elucidate." Only "with your gracious permission," he asked the Queen. Pompey immediately, upon being given the signal, mounted the rostrum near the throne, and holding up the "Bowl of Gumbo" began his presentation.

He explained to Queen Victoria that he was "quite oberjoicified" by the special honor of being there, and that he, too, was of Royal Blood. His father's great grandfather was a Prince from the area around the Bight of Benin, a 400-mile stretch of western African coastline that is part of the Gulf of Guinea. The Bight of Benin has a long history of association with the slave trade.



The Slave Coast along the the Bight of Benin, home to Pompey's ancestors

Pompey then went on to tell the Queen that everybody in Louisiana, old and young, male and female, black and white, eats gumbo. Even young ladies at a ball.

He then remarked on the mucilaginous nature of the gumbo's ingredients, which Pompey saw as the true beauty of the present. Although the mixture was "sticky and stringy," to him it resembled the two countries, England and the United States, "stickin togedder like bredren."

Pompey also observed that the gumbo's various ingredients were symbolic of the world's numerous ethnic shades, as in a rainbow.

As for Queen Victoria, she was "greatly pleased" with her Louisiana-style "soup-iferous decoction" and Pompey's "elucidation." The *Picayune* article covering these events stated, "Our Abolition friends in America will be pleased to learn that the Queen smiled benignantly upon Pompey." She also liked "the flavor" of the gumbo, but thought it was "a little too ropy." Still, I bet you never knew that Queen Victoria dined on gumbo or read the *Picayune*.

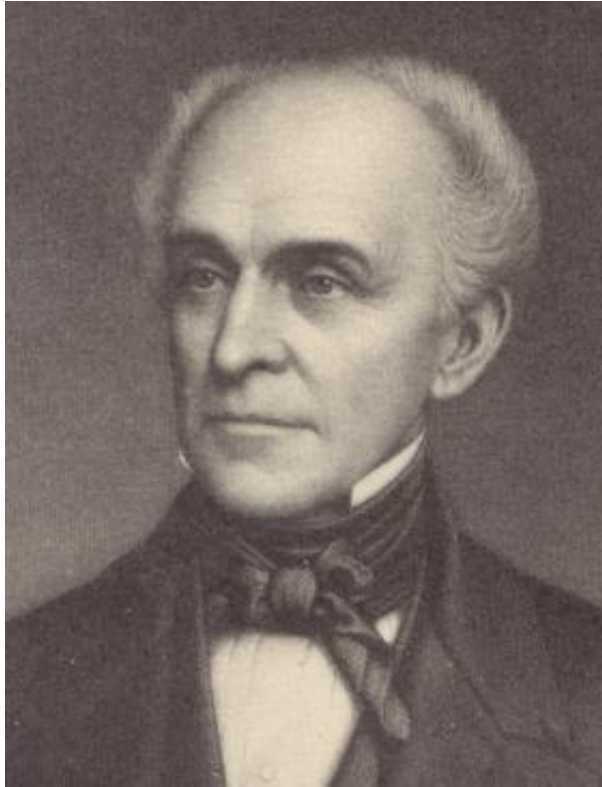


A youthful Queen Victoria

P. S. The British Parliament passed the Slavery Abolition Act five years before Queen Victoria's coronation (1833), abolishing slavery throughout the British Empire, but with some exceptions: "the Territories in the Possession of the East India Company"; the "Island of St. Helena"; and the "Island of Ceylon" (Sri Lanka). The exceptions were eliminated in 1843. As for the United States, it would take the American Civil War to eliminate the institution of slavery.

Ambassador Stevenson's term as Minister to the United Kingdom was at times controversial due to the growing abolitionist movement in Great Britain. Since Stevenson was a slaveowner, he became subject to being denounced in public for this role. On one occasion, it almost resulted in a duel, but the Irish statesman whom he challenged refused and said he had been misquoted. After his service in England, Stevenson presided over the 1848 Democratic National Convention.

Mrs. Stevenson's brother, Edward Coles, on the other hand, was a sincere abolitionist who freed his slaves. He served as second Governor of Illinois from 1822 to 1826. As a young man he was a neighbor and associate of presidents Thomas Jefferson and James Monroe, as well as serving as secretary to President James Madison for five years. Although inheriting a plantation and slaves, Coles was an anti-slavery advocate throughout his adult life. When he was in a position to leave Virginia, he moved to the Illinois Territory in order to set his slaves free. In 1819, he manumitted some 300 slaves and acquired land for them.



Edward Coles (December 15, 1786 – July 7, 1868)

As for Queen Victoria keeping up to date with news reports from New Orleans, it must be remembered that 350 million pounds of American cotton were spun in the mills of the United Kingdom in 1838, much of which was shipped out of the Port of New Orleans. By 1840, New Orleans, by one measure, ranked as the fourth busiest commercial port in the Western world, surpassed only by London, Liverpool, and New York.

As for me, from now on, whenever I am presented with a delicious "Bowl of Gumbo," I will think of Pompey's splendid adjective:

"oberjoicified"!

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"Royal Gumbo"
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