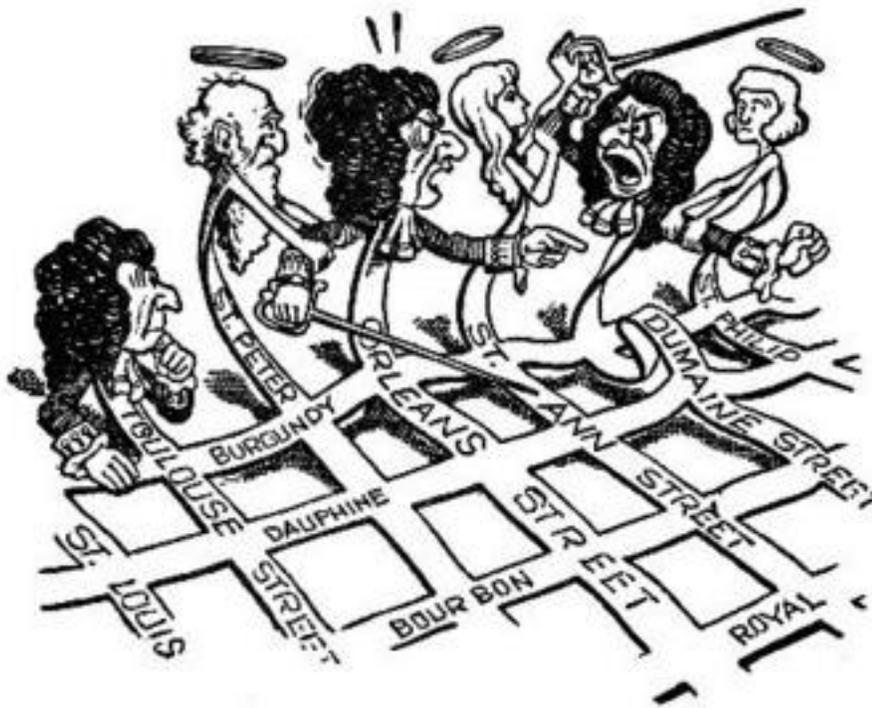


Street Names of New Orleans

A street map of New Orleans not only serves as an impressive Louisiana history book, but it also provides an excellent education in classical mythology. Historian and cartoonist John Churchill Chase demonstrated this splendidly in his *Frenchmen, Desire Good Children...and Other Streets of New Orleans!*, first published in 1949. He wrote with humor and provided wonderful cartoons to tell the story, but he was not the first to make these observations - not by any means.



Royal bastards on either side of the Duc d'Orléans, separated by Saints, as drawn by John Chase

The following is from a travelogue printed almost a century before Chase, written by A. Oakey Hall in 1851:

"The original city fathers of New Orleans (original they certainly were) must have been born poets and have afterwards deeply studied the classics. They named the streets in the mood in which their subjects erected dwellings; consulting everything and everybody. At the christenings, mythology and history, conceit and whimsicality stood

sponsors; French Dukes and Princes were given up to immortality upon corner signs; and 'Chartres,' 'Conti,' 'Burgundy,' and Condé' will never be forgotten in New Orleans so long as black paint and iron spikes exist. In the same manner the various saints came in for their share of fame. So did many sinners. The early governors were not forgotten, as Carondelet, Villeré, and Claiborne-streets attest. The Muses and the Graces contributed their refinement to the swamp infested districts of the Faubourg St. Marie."



Rue de Condé became Calle de Conde and later Chartres Street

When the above was written, the *Rue de Condé* was that part of Chartres Street that ran from the St. Louis Cathedral to Esplanade. Today it is all Chartres Street. Abraham Oakey Hall provided the above description of Crescent City streets in *The Manhattaner in New Orleans, or, Phases of "Crescent City" Life*. Oakey would later become Mayor of New York in 1869, so it was only natural that he would admonish his fellow New Yorkers on their skills concerning street nomenclature:

"Oh ye Gotham cavillers," he wrote, "at the utilitarianism that has numbered and lettered your streets and avenues, what would you say to Nayades and Dryades and Bacchus-street (in the latter a Temperance Hall) which run into Felicity-road and are intersected by Calliope and Clio and Erato and Thalia-streets, begging pardon for the omission of Melpomene, who has a 'raging canawl' in her midst, a standing theme for 'Picayune' jokes,) or Terpsichore, whose very curb-stones quadrille it as the oozing mud beneath wells up and down on

thawing wintry mornings. When I add that the Indians, and the sires of the Revolution, and the living statesmen, were also remembered, I have said enough to convince the most skeptical that the original fathers of New Orleans were born poets.”

Bacchus Street is now Baronne, and stretches of Dryades and Melpomene streets are today named for Oretha Castle Haley and Martin Luther King, Jr. And, fittingly, a segment of Calliope Street in the Warehouse District was renamed John Churchill Chase Street. Cavillers is not a misspelling of cavaliers. A caviller is a disputant who quibbles; someone who raises annoying petty objections, in other words, a quibbler, or pettifogger. As for the condition of the streets and “canawls” in those days as compared to today, it may prove difficult to distinguish much difference. In mythology, Dryades were tree nymphs and Nayades (St. Charles Avenue today) were river nymphs.

Mr. Hall finished his thoughts on New Orleans streets by commenting on what a tough time outsiders might have in pronouncing the street names correctly. Phonography, mentioned below, is spelling based on pronunciation (or trying to spell by the way words sound).

“And any one who has merely loafed about the city will readily grant my assertion, that Phonography has before it a wonderful task to translate unto Hoosier comprehension, at a first sight, the mystical names that spectre-fy beholders at every street-corner.”

A number of years after these relevant words were written, and thirteen years before John Chase penned his iconic book on the city’s history contained in its street names, Meigs O. Frost wrote an extensive history of New Orleans streets in a four-part series for the *Times-Picayune* that ran for four successive Sundays in August and September 1936. The four-part series was entitled *Strange Stories Behind New Orleans Street Names*.

In Part 1, August 16, 1936, Frost wrote of New Orleans streets:

“The pageant of two centuries and more has passed along them in a literature in itself. No city in the nation has a galaxy of street names that quite compares with them.”

He explained how “French royalty got a heavy play in those first street names. Bourbon street for the royal house of France,” was but one example.



*Strange
Stories*
By Meigs O. Frost
Behind **NEW ORLEANS STREET Names**

In Part 2, August 23, 1936, Frost explained how New Orleanians pronounce things a little differently:

In the case of "Terpsichore street, named after the Greek muse of dancing," Frost wrote, "But by the true New Orleanian it is pronounced 'Terp-si-kor,' with the accent on the 'Terp,' instead of the Greek 'Terp-si-ko-ree,' with the accent on the 'si.'"

He also elucidated a bit more about Nayades becoming St. Charles Avenue:

"Not so many in New Orleans today know that St. Charles avenue, named for the patron saint of King Carlos III of Spain, who once ruled Louisiana was Naiads street, named for the river nymphs of ancient Greece, and was spelled and pronounced as the Spanish spelled and pronounced it, Nayades street."

He added that Baronne Street once was "Bacchus street, named for the god of wine" and Carondelet "once was Apollo street."

Moreover, he explained how "Engine street" was a misspelling of the *duc d'Enghien*, "last of the Condés of France," who "was shot ruthlessly by order of Consul Napoleon Bonaparte". It survived as "Engine street" on "the popular tongue in New Orleans, until they renamed it Lafayette." Today it's Almonaster avenue, which is humorous since it was "designed to honor a gentleman whose signature survives to show us he spelled his own name 'Almonester.'"

He was the father of the Baroness Pontalba, and we continue to be confused by the two spellings of his name. "You say Almonaster. I say Almonester. Let's call the whole thing off."

Frost opined, "Popular pronunciation, like popular spelling, has a way of laughing at the authorities."

Frost no doubt gleaned quite a bit of his street information from Sidney Paul Lafaye (1873 – 1965), who in 1912, wrote a monograph entitled *Old Street Names of New Orleans*. It is not a history so much as it is an extensive list of New Orleans streets and their previous names. Most usefully, the street names of the Crescent City are arranged in alphabetical order by the old street names in one section and by the new street names in a second section.

Part 3 of Frost's series appeared, August 30, 1936, and centered on Bernard de Marigny. "No one man in New Orleans history," wrote Frost, "ever left behind him a more colorful pattern of street names than Bernard Xavier Philippe de Marigny de Mandeville."



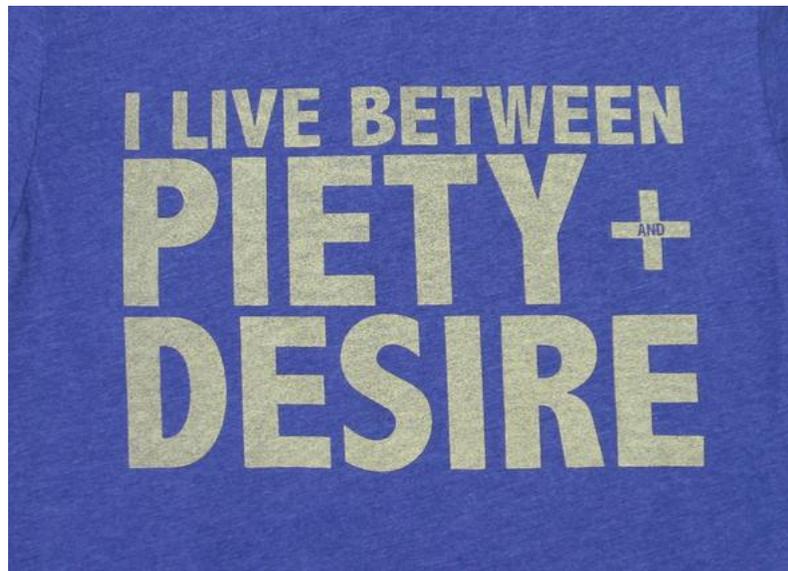
The *bon vivant* Marigny was the driving force behind the title of Chase's book, and Frost provided explanations for the naming of the *Rue des Bons Enfants*, or Good Children street (now St. Claude). "He was a humorist!" said Frost, "placing it one block back of Love street". And he told the story of "Craps" street and how it was named for the dice game of "Johnny Crapaud," or "Johnny Frog", a derisive name for a Frenchman. It was rechristened Burgundy as a continuation of that street. He wrote how "the Rue des Grand Hommes, the street of the Great Men street survived for years" until it became a "part of Dauphine street below Esplanade avenue." Frenchmen street, it must be remembered, was named for the six French leaders who were executed in public by Spanish Governor Alejandro O'Reilly after these men led a revolution against Spanish rule after Louisiana was ceded to Spain.



Craps

"The pastime universally known as crap-shooting, craps, African golf, galloping dominoes," wrote Frost, was called "hazard" in Paris. "It spread to England," and Marigny introduced it to New Orleans.

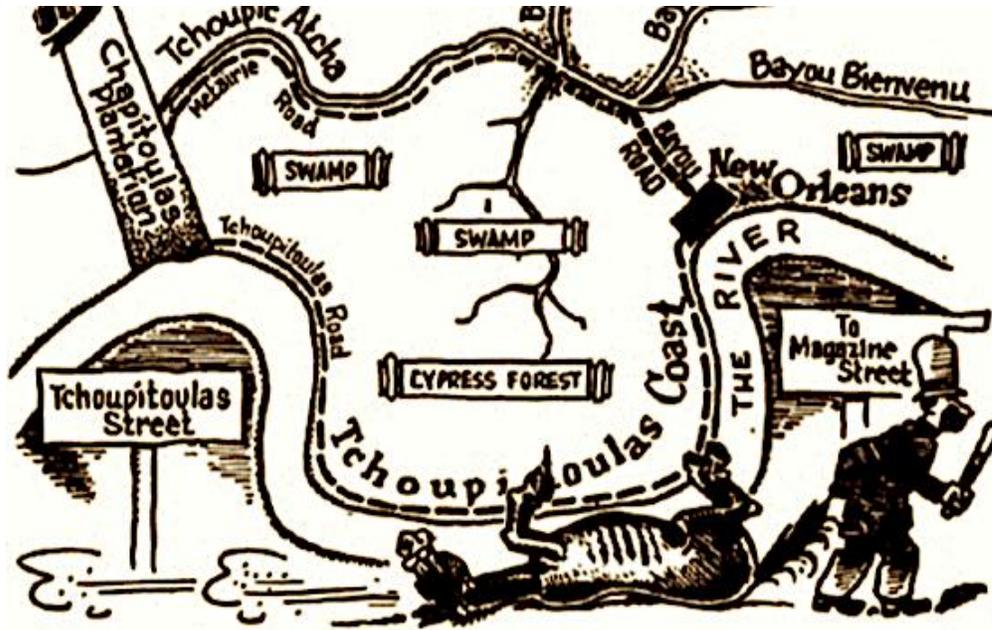
We also learn that Piety street "began as Piete street, named for a family and not for religious devotion." And Desire, "pronounced like the word that means the fervid yearning of human love," was instead "named for a girl, it being her first name" originally "pronounced, 'Day-zi-ray,' with the accent on the last syllable." Desirée's parents were Robert Gautier de Montreuil and Marie Marthe de Macarty. Her husband was Francois Pascalis de LaBarre, for whom Labarre Road in Metairie is named.



*Local T-shirt message, quite true of a number of Bywater residents
Tee design by NolaBonVivant, nolabonvivant.com*

In Part 4, on September 6, 1936, Meigs Frost related the familiar tale also repeated by Chase:

“The feeble little tribe of Tchoupitoulas Indians, now extinct, left in that street, once a trail leading to their village, a name pronounced ‘Chop-i-too-las’ and the imperishable story of the policeman who dragged the dead horse to Camp street before he wrote his report, so he could spell the name of the spot.” In Chase, however, the officer dragged the horse to “Common and Magazine.”



Chase cartoon of policeman dragging a dead horse to Magazine Street

Prior to Meigs Frost’s in-depth history of New Orleans street names, the *Times-Picayune* featured a very interesting article on the subject on February 12, 1922, entitled *Many Old Romances Are Buried Under Names of City’s Streets* by Lois K. Pelton. The following is a small excerpt:

“Other streets that have had different names from those by which we know them are Calliope, formerly Duplantier, Melpomene, formerly Edward, Lafayette which was Enghien, Thalia, once Estelle, South Rampart, which was Hercules, Kerlerrec, which had the most historical of all names, History, and Constance, which was originally called Live Oak. Coliseum once knew the name Plaquemines, and General Pershing a few years ago, was Berlin.”

Needless to say, whole books can be written on the subject of New Orleans street names, and indeed they have.



4th District Police Station on Rousseau Street in 1897, still there today



Marigny Introduces Craps to New Orleans, by George Schmidt

Since Chase, I recommend Sally Asher's thoroughly researched *Hope and New Orleans, A History of Crescent City Street Names* (2014).

Metairie, Ames, High: The Streets of Jefferson Parish (2011), by Earl Higgins, adequately covers the streets of our neighboring parish.

An earlier *The Stories Behind New Orleans Street Names* (1992) by Donald A. Gill was completed on a tight publishing deadline and contains numerous errors.

And, of course, keep reading my articles on the subject.

Meigs Frost elaborated in 1936 how New Orleans street names answer our many needs, "Dreams that came true? Dreams that faded? Clamor of rough and hardy pioneers? Deadly quiet of languid aristocrats gone effete? Adventure dauntlessly sought? Romance of honest love? Sordid tinsel of loves illicit? Robust revelry boisterously roaring?" All of these and more are answered. They encompass discovery, war and peace, love and lust, defeat and rebirth, tribes and who we are as a people through countless decades. More than mere names, New Orleans streets have fulfilled the dreams of untold generations.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"Street Names of New Orleans"
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