

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### Tain't It The Truth?

With proper homage to the late Ernie K-Doe (who recorded such stellar tunes as "Te-Ta-Te-Ta-Ta" and "Tain't It The Truth"), this is the story of just a few things that are true - and a few that are not true - in New Orleans.



Some misinformation about the city comes from a small number of well-meaning carriage drivers who misguide tourists with near truths, such as: "The St. Louis Cathedral is named for Louis XVI, King of France." Louisiana was in fact named for Louis XIV, whose patron

saint was his earlier ancestor, Louis IX. Louis XVI lost his head in 1793 to the guillotine. Each King Louis mentioned was a king of France. The cathedral bears the name of St. Louis (Louis IX), but was actually named in honor of Louis XIV (who was no saint). To make things even more confusing, everyone in New Orleans calls the church the St. Louis Cathedral when it is more correctly a minor basilica (so designated by Pope Paul VI in 1964). St. Louis, Missouri, has their Cathedral Basilica of St. Louis, constructed in the early 20th century, which obtained that name when it was designated a minor basilica by Pope John Paul II in 1997.

In New Orleans, basilicas are to cathedrals what attorneys are to notaries. A cathedral may be a basilica (or not), and a basilica may be a cathedral (or not). And so it is with attorneys and notaries. It is possible for each to be one or the other (or both).

Next door to the St. Louis Cathedral is a building readily referred to as the Cabildo. All New Orleanians call it that. But it is not really the Cabildo at all. Its correct designation is the "*Casa Capitular*" meaning "Capitol House". The "Very Illustrious Cabildo" is the name of the governing body that occupied this building during Spanish colonial rule.



*Old postcard view of the "Casa Capitular"*

Down the street from the "Cabildo" and the "Cathedral" is the Napoleon House, named for France's "Little Corporal". Most people think of Bonaparte as being quite short. First of all, the name "*Petit*

*Caporal*" was an appellation given to him by his troops in 1796 for defeating four armies larger than his own. It had nothing to do with how tall he was. Napoleon actually stood 5 feet 6 ½ inches, a respectable height for that time. Confusion resulted when using the old French feet (*pieds du roi*), making him a mere 5 feet 2. When in the Quarter, stop by the Napoleon House for a short one.



*Napoleon Bonaparte, not all that short*

The French Quarter is full of contradictions. It is called the *Vieux Carré* (meaning "Old Square"), but it is rectangular in shape. And the Quarter's architecture is more Spanish than French (with its lacy balconies and interior courtyards), due to the fact that Spain was governing Louisiana in the late 1700s when two historic fires destroyed

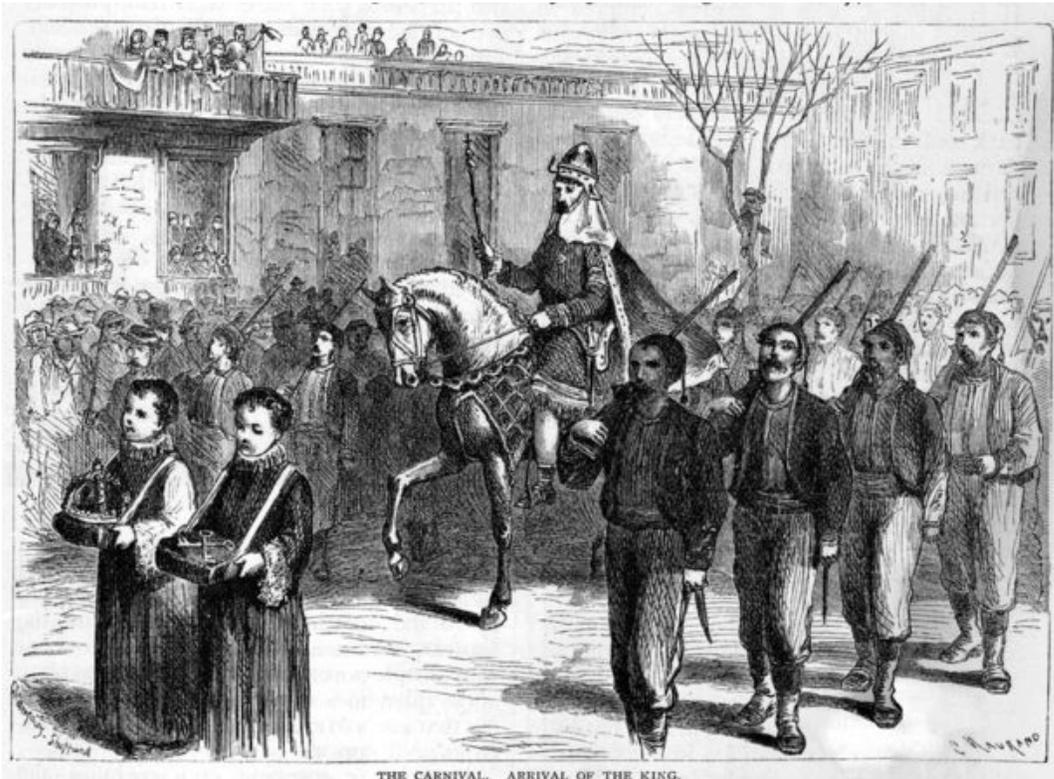
much of the early city.

In a city where the West Bank is west of the Mississippi (but not usually in a westward direction), things are not always as they seem. Due to the city's colossal crescent, compass readings are deceptive. And Upperline and Lowerline Streets have no immediate relation to each other. Upperline is the upper boundary of the former Faubourg Bouligny, whereas Lowerline is the lower boundary of the former City of Carrollton. Metairie's Northline was once Carrollton's northern boundary.

Another line of local popularity is the "second line", one in which participants often carry beautifully decorated parasols. "Parasol's" has an alternate meaning to natives of New Orleans. It is the name of a popular bar and restaurant on the corner of Third and Constance Streets in the Irish Channel. There they have overstuffed po-boys and an overflowing annual St. Patrick's block party. But the name has nothing to do with umbrellas or anything Irish. The name is a corruption of the previous owners' quite Germanic name, *Passauer*.



St. Patrick's Day is that holiday that attempts to put Lent on hold. After a short period of rest and religious observance after Mardi Gras, some locals are ready to see March go out like a lion. Then again, Mardi Gras itself is a plethora of paradoxes. A newspaper article in 1872 announced the upcoming arrival of "the mysterious personage, Rex," and proclaimed: "If it is a fair day, New Orleans will be a gay city." The very first Rex was Jewish (Lewis J. Salomon), and the theme of the parade was "The Arabs". "If Ever I Cease To Love," Carnival's beguiling theme song, was composed by a British dancehall performer, and the guest of honor for that first Rex parade was a Russian Grand Duke (who happened to hang out with General George Armstrong Custer for part of that auspicious Mardi Gras Day).



*The first Rex had neither floats nor a queen that first year.*

The Grand Duke Alexis viewed the parade from City Hall, now named Gallier Hall after its architect, James Gallier (who was not French, but an Irishman named Gallagher who Gallicized his name). In July 2001 Ernie K-Doe, "Emperor of the Universe" and New Orleans singer extraordinaire, lay in state in Gallier Hall before a spectacular jazz funeral. Now he's gone ... we feel so bad ... he was the best thing we ever had.

Now that's the truth! "Tain't it the truth!"

## **NED HÉMARD**

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