

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Terry and Carol Sue

The year is 1960, and the names “Terry and Carol Sue” sound like the perfect date choices to escort to the sock hop. Picture before you their initials boldly stitched on poodle skirts, as you envision one of these All-American girls as your dream date.

Well, the year *was* 1960 (Sunday, March 6, 1960, to be exact), and the fledgling unincorporated West Bank subdivision named Terrytown was first opened to the public. It is the oldest planned community in Jefferson Parish, laid out in an area that was once swampland known as Oakdale Subdivision. Paul Kapelow was the developer, and he named the two main intersecting thoroughfares for his daughters: Terry Parkway, running north and south (for his oldest daughter), and Carol Sue Avenue (named for his second daughter), running east and west. He also named what was to become the 6,000-home West Jefferson community of Terrytown after daughter Terry, as well.

400 homes constituted phase one of Kapelow’s subdivision. Fifteen model houses were on display that day in March to attract young families, especially New Orleans residents - many from the Irish Channel. The affordability of two innovations after World II, the automobile and consumer air conditioning, made the shotgun house and other older homes obsolete to this new wave of homebuyers. The shotgun had very little appeal to those building or buying new houses, as car-oriented modern suburbs like Terrytown were built *en masse*.

A new home with modern conveniences such as central air could be had from \$12,900 to \$19,000. Many of the original homeowners were veterans, all part of this later stage of the postwar residential building explosion, availing themselves of the GI Bill. The 1958 Mississippi River Bridge was a powerful catalyst, too. Kapelow situated Terrytown right off the bridge between Algiers and Gretna, bounded on the east by Orleans Parish and the west by the City of Gretna. Its southern boundary is Belle Chasse Highway (Louisiana Highway 23).

In French, *belle chasse* literally means "beautiful hunting", wildlife no doubt being abundant in the area. Others opine that Belle Chasse, the largest town in Plaquemines Parish, was named after Colonel Joseph D. Bellechasse, who lived in New Orleans around the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Judah P. Benjamin, "The Brains of the Confederacy", had a plantation in Belle Chasse. Before the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, Benjamin was a U.S. senator from Louisiana who had helped frame the Louisiana state constitution. Benjamin was the first Jewish appointee to a U.S. Cabinet position, and the first Jewish American seriously considered for nomination to the U.S. Supreme Court (he twice declined to be nominated). Jeff Davis appointed Benjamin the first Attorney General of the Confederacy in 1861, for "the lucidity of his intellect, his systematic habits, and capacity for labor." Later that year, he was confirmed as Secretary of War. After the collapse of the Confederacy, Benjamin escaped to England, where he began his life anew as a respected Barrister and member of the Queen's Counsel. Responding to an anti-Semitic remark he is said to have replied, "It is true that I am a Jew. And when my ancestors were receiving their Ten Commandments from the immediate hand of the Deity amidst thundering and lightning's of Mount Sinai, the ancestors of the distinguished gentleman who is opposing me were herding swine in the forests of Great Britain." *Touché!*

Many of the New Orleans transplants who gravitated to Terrytown did so because they couldn't afford to buy a comparable residence in the city. And large parcels in Terrytown were mapped out and planned for schools, parks, fire stations and libraries in order to service the area's anticipated growth. Homes were prefabricated, which meant lower construction cost and speedier construction time. Paul Kapelow had his eye on the future.

Born in Memphis, Mr. Kapelow graduated from the University of Tennessee. He arrived in the Crescent City after World War II to begin his career as a developer, working at first on postwar federal housing programs. All residential construction had been halted during the war so that resources could be directed toward the war effort. This created a huge pent-up demand for housing when the soldiers came home. Kapelow's first major project was in 1947, when his company (Shelby Construction Company) built the 1,114-unit Parkchester Apartment complex in Gentilly. Kapelow also erected the 1,000-unit, 17-story Claiborne Towers (1950-1951) as the city's largest apartment complex. It was later converted to a hotel. Located at South Claiborne and Canal, it has fallen into disrepair over the years under numerous owners.

Another one of Kapelow's visionary ideas was Lakeside Shopping Center, a "shopper's dream come true!" It also opened for business in March 1960, and featured department stores D.H. Holmes, J.C. Penney and Godchaux's. Construction commenced on the single-level, 431,700-square-foot complex in 1958 when today's Veterans Memorial Boulevard was just a shell road and the site was surrounded by cow pastures. A 1961 ad touted "36 fabulous stores under one roof" (including a T G & Y and Kresge's), but the center court was still open to the elements. There was plenty of parking, and huge fluorescent-lighted pylons could be seen for miles. It became an air-conditioned and enclosed mall in 1968.

Over several decades in some 30 cities and in many states (including Florida, Texas, Tennessee, Mississippi and Virginia), Kapelow's companies developed more than 30,000 housing units, numerous office buildings and shopping centers, hotels and nursing homes. He also did the Carol Apartments building on St. Charles Avenue. Throughout this wide swath, Paul Kapelow always thought of New Orleans as home.

Paul Kapelow died in Hollywood, Florida, in June 2007, at age 93, not quite three years before Terrytown's golden anniversary in March 2010. Survivors included his wife, Hester Kapelow; his two daughters of West Bank fame, Carol Brown of Miami Beach, Florida (husband Ray Brown) and Terry Ray of Boulder, Colorado; six grandchildren; and six great-grandchildren. Lakeside Shopping Center also had a 50-year anniversary in March 2011. Stores have come and gone. The food court, P. F. Chang's, the Apple Store, Macy's and Sucré were never dreamed of in the shopping center's original incarnation. But Paul Kapelow would not be surprised. He knew his developments would be tremendously successful.

Except for when it comes to history. Observer of Jefferson Parish Streets Earl J. Higgins revels in the absurdity of a street in Terrytown named for one of France's illustrious kings, Rue St. Louis XIV. Of course Louis XIV, the king from whom Louisiana gets its name, should be honored with a street. But making Louis XIV a saint, wrote Higgins, is "either a joke or a mistake." He continued, "That King Louis was no saint. He lived lavishly and extravagantly, suppressed the peasants, and kept mistresses, not exactly exemplary behavior that is usually considered to be holy and sacramental."

Louis XVI was no saint, either, according to Mel Brooks:

Count de Monet – "Sir, the peasants are revolting!"

Louis XVI – "You said it. They stink on ice. PULL!"

Louis IX, of course, was the saint - St. Louis, King of France, who led a life dedicated to fasting, prayer and penance. Soon after New Orleans' founding, its new parish church (today the cathedral) was dedicated in his memory. But the memory of whoever named that street in Terrytown was severely lacking. "Maybe," wrote Higgins, "someone forgot how to count in Roman numerals."

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