

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **Turning on Dufossat**

The people of New Orleans have numerous jokes about their street names, like the so-called mispronunciation of the Muses (especially CL-10 for Clio). Then there's the old anecdote about the police officer finding a dead horse at the corner of Common and Tchoupitoulas streets. He was so perplexed as to how to spell Tchoupitoulas on his report that he dragged the poor animal a block down to Magazine.

And many have probably heard this humorous riddle (or some version thereof):

"Why can't the lawns be watered at the Latter Library?"

Because you can't 'turn on Dufossat' there."

For those not familiar with the street nomenclature of the Crescent City, the Latter Library sits on St. Charles Avenue between Soniat and Dufossat streets. Dufossat Street is "One Way" away from the river, so there is a "Do Not Enter" sign preventing one from turning right toward the river. Now one could turn *left* on Dufossat, or go around the block to Atlanta Street by using either Soniat or Valmont. Then it would be possible to "turn on Dufossat" past the library.

None of this could have been possible had not one gentleman liked his son-in-law so much that he named three streets after him – plus another for lagniappe.

Francois Robert Avart owned a plantation above Faubourg Bouligny measuring eight arpents fronting on the River (an arpent in Louisiana being 0.84628 acres). Avart had acquired the property from his mother, Julie Allain Avart, in 1815. He subdivided his land in 1841 and called it Faubourg Avart. Its boundaries were Upperline Street on the lower side and Valmont Street on the upper.

Upperline Street is the upper boundary of Faubourg Bouligny. This

designation accounts for the strange situation where Lowerline Street is actually above (or upriver from) Upperline Street. This is because Lowerline is actually the lower boundary of the City of Carrollton.

Faubourg Avart's upper boundary, Valmont Street (along with Soniat and Dufossat streets) were all named for the same person, Martin Valmont Soniat DuFossat (1811-1877). Valmont wed Robert Avart's daughter, Louise Almais, and her father named the three streets after her husband (Valmont, Soniat and Dufossat). His daughter did not merit a street name, although her *père* did manage to name one street for himself (Robert) and another for Valmont's family (a short street named Bellecastle).

Belcastel Castle is a medieval citadel in Belcastel, France, in the region *Midi-Pyrénées*, on the north shore of the river Aveyron, downstream from Rodez. For centuries it has been the ancestral home of the family Saunhac, one of the largest families of Rouergue. Some Saunhacs held the title, *Seigneur de Belcastel*; and the inhabitants of Belcastel are called *Belcastélois*.

The Saunhacs (or Soniats, as the name has become in Louisiana) had their origin in ancient times. They served as bishops, army and naval officers, pages and gentlemen in waiting to the King. Guillaume de Saunhac was first Rector of the Commandery Auzon and Preceptor of the Commandery of Saint-Eulalie-de-Cernon and Preceptor of Aquitaine in 1236. He later became Grand Master of the Knights Templar. During the seventh crusade, he was off to Damietta (200 kilometers northeast of Cairo) with St. Louis, King of France. De Saunhac was blinded and then killed at the Battle of Mansourah in 1250. His descendant, Guillaume, II, de Saunhac (born circa 1350) was the Baron de Belcastel.

Descendant Jean de Saunhac (born 1452) was married to Anne de Toulouse-Lautrec (the painter's family), but he and his first wife Antoinette (Marguerite) de Caussade were the parents of Francois de Saunhac, Baron du Fossat. One of du Fossat's descendants (born in 1726), the Chevalier Gui de Saunhac, Baron du Fossat (of the regiment de Béarn), received his first battlefield wounds as an officer during the siege of Maestricht.

This dashing young officer from Gascony had come to Louisiana circa 1751. Even though he brought with him a contingent of troops, de Saunhac (in the words of Stanley Clisby Arthur) "had surrendered unconditionally to the charms of one of Louisiana's fair daughters". She was Francoise Claudine Dreux, descended from the "once sovereign *ducs de Bretagne*".

The Spanish (when they supplanted the French in New Orleans) also appreciated the talents of the Chevalier Gui. He became captain of the

Battalion of Louisiana and later an *alcalde* in the Spanish Cabildo. Gui and Claudine would produce nine children (a noble effort for the Soniats), but seventh son Gui Joseph fathered (by his two wives) no less than fourteen *enfants*. One of these, Charles Théodore had ten children. Another son (and grandson of the Chevalier) was none other than Valmont Soniat du Fossat.

Charles Théodore *fils* (lawyer and notary, born 1847) had in his possession a number of relics of the Saunhac family, including a helmet worn by uncle Gui Joseph Soniat du Fossat (member of Louis XVIII's bodyguard 1824-1830). Someone had taken this artifact from an old storeroom in the *Château de Saunhac* and given to him. It took him some twenty years to trace the helmet to his uncle, who had left New Orleans in 1814 to serve in the King's army in France.

After World War II, General Charles de Gaulle decided he would need an *aide-de-camp* (or *officier-d'ordonnance*) who'd fought in the Resistance. He chose Gaston de Bonneval, a regular army soldier who'd been captured by the Germans and sent to the concentration camp. Bonneval stood very close to De Gaulle at formal functions, giving necessary information about guests as they were announced. Bonneval married Yvonne de Saunhac, the daughter of Jean de Saunhac and Madeleine Bérail. The Countess Gaston de Bonneval died January 12, 2004, in her 88th year.

In New Orleans the Saunhac name became Soniat and du Fossat became Dufossat (or the combined Soniat-Dufossat). Today, there is a small (yet charming) luxury hotel in the French Quarter known as the Soniat House. Composed of three historic townhouses, it is located at 1133 Chartres Street.

Soniat is a small community in Iberville Parish. White Castle (home of historic Nottoway Plantation) lies immediately to the east.

There are numerous Soniats currently living in the New Orleans area, and some descendants still use DeSaunhac as a middle name. Remember them and their history the next time you "turn on Dufossat".

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