

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

“Uncle Sam” in New Orleans

Dan Rice (1823 – 1900), who has been called “The Most Famous Man You’ve Never Heard Of”, was the first truly great clown of the American circus. He was also an animal trainer, strong man, dancer, composer, commentator, homespun political humorist, actor, director, producer and politician. He transformed the circus into its modern-day model by mixing animals, acrobats and clowns. Before the Civil War (during the height of his career), Rice was more of a household name than Abraham Lincoln or Mark Twain.

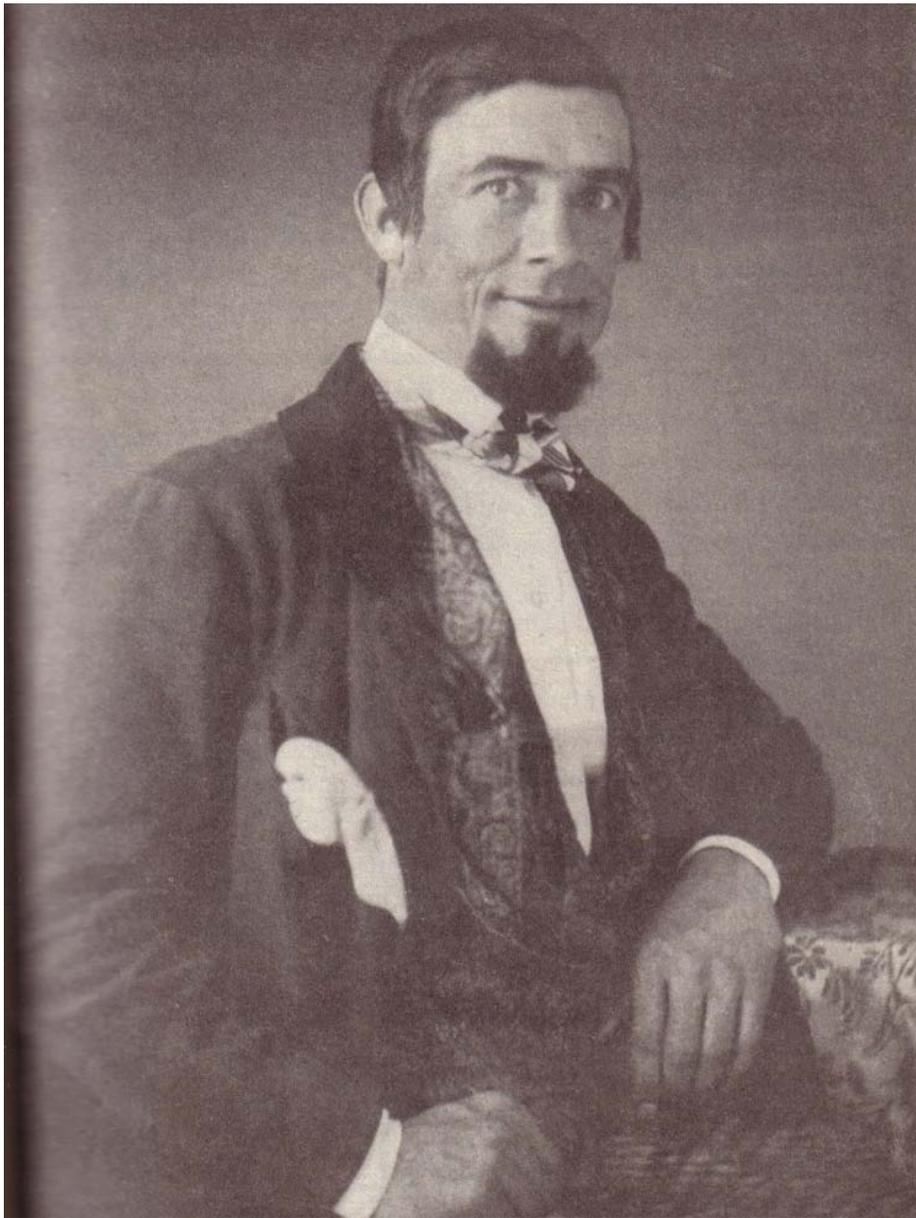


“The Greatest Show on Earth” on Carondelet Street, 2012

Making popular the terms “Greatest Show” and “One Horse Show”, he was a dynamic force in America’s new “pop culture”. Decades before

other circuses (especially the "Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus") used the phrase, an Arkansas newspaper praised Rice's as "The Greatest Show on Earth". Early in his career with only a single horse, he was mocked by rival circuses who said he had a "One Horse Show". Rice turned the derogatory expression into a plus by putting on a terrific show, and the phrase became attached to him thereafter.

Rice was known as "The American Grimaldi", after the inventive superstar of the Georgian pantomime, Joseph Grimaldi (1778 – 1837). Grimaldi was an innovator, acrobat and comic genius who pioneered the clown's slap, wig, white face paint, red nose, flouncy trousers and huge shoes – for which he was nicknamed Joe Frankenstein (for Mary Shelley's creation).



"Uncle Sam" Dan Rice, nee Daniel McLaren in New York City

Sporting a unique costume of red, white and blue-striped tights, a star-spangled cloak, a top hat and chin whiskers, Rice's patriotic regalia led political cartoonist Thomas Nast to use him as the model for "Uncle Sam". Rice was so well-known, he ran for Senate, Congress and even President of the United States in 1868. He lived and performed in New Orleans for a brief period, as well. With the passage of time, this legendary performer and his many talents have gradually faded into almost total historical obscurity. It is interesting how "Uncle Sam" came into being and how Dan Rice became his "real life" persona. The story begins with the origin of the term "Uncle Sam" as the national personification of the United States of America (or sometimes more specifically the U.S. government itself).



1837 New Orleans bank failures give "Uncle Sam" the "Grippe" (flu)

The above cartoon shows "Uncle Sam" seated and holding a document labeled "Failures New Orleans ...". He is wearing a Liberty cap, vest, breeches, moccasins and a robe composed of the American Flag. An eagle sits on the right and on the extreme left side is a busted bust of George Washington labeled "*Pater Patriae*". "Dr. Hickory" (Andrew Jackson as Ben Franklin), Thomas Hart Benton (holding a serious-looking enema device) and "Aunt Matty" (Martin Van Buren) are all depicted with captions.

The satirical work attributes the nation's dire fiscal straits to Andrew Jackson's banking policies, specifically to recent bank failures in New Orleans, New York and Philadelphia. On March 17, 1837, New Orleans'

biggest cotton houses went under with staggering losses due to a combination of extended credit and cutbacks in demand for U.S. cotton (several important mercantile houses in England had gone bankrupt the year before). Financial chaos engulfed the United States. The cartoonist blamed the 1837 panic on Jackson's and later Van Buren's efforts to limit currency and emphasize specie (or coinage) as the circulating medium in the American economy. The American economy survived. But this was not the first reference to "Uncle Sam".

Some historians have written that the term "Uncle Sam" had its origins on the wharfs of New Orleans before Louisiana became a U.S. territory. Even then, the Crescent City was an important port, and the goods that came through the city's docks labeled U.S. were referred to as those of "Uncle Sam".

But most scholars date the term's beginnings to the War of 1812. The term "Uncle Sam" first appeared in print in a broadsheet from the spring of 1813, stating: "If Uncle Sam needs, I'll be glad to assist him." Later that year, it appeared in an editorial in the *Troy Post* (of Troy, New York) on September 7, 1813, claiming: "Loss upon loss, and no ill luck stirring but what lights upon Uncle Sam's shoulders". The book *The Greatest Stories Never Told* states that the term "Uncle Sam" was first used in a cartoon with Napoleon Bonaparte mouthing that expression.

The Troy, New York, connection seems to back up the widely held belief, reported as fact in many reliable reference books that the original "Uncle Sam" was one Sam Wilson, a meat packer in that town who supplied rations to the U.S. military during the War of 1812. Wilson at the time was a subcontractor to one Elbert Anderson, and the letters "E.A. - U.S." were stamped on all the pair's army-bound packing crates or barrels of meat. Asked what the letters stood for, one of Wilson's workers joked that it stood for "Elbert Anderson and Uncle Sam", meaning his employer, Mr. Wilson. Many of Wilson's workers served in the army during the war, and the story spread from there. This narrative appears to have first found its way into print in 1842, but is it true?

Yes, researchers have established that Anderson and Wilson did supply meat to the government during the War of 1812. And there is that reference in the 1813 *Troy Post*. But the Sam Wilson story didn't appear in print until thirty years after the event. Also, the notion that someone in 1812 wasn't aware what "U.S." stood for is hard to fathom. The term was in widespread use by then.

In addition, there's more strange evidence. Sam Wilson was a prominent citizen of Troy, New York, but none of his hometown newspapers come up with the story until all those years later. The

1813 article in the Troy Post makes no mention of Sam Wilson. Even the Post reprinted a story in 1816 from Philadelphia claiming that Uncle Sam originated in the initials "USLD", meaning United States Light Dragoons, a regiment formed in 1807. The soldiers in that regiment told people that the "USLD" on their caps stood for "Uncle Sam's Lazy Dogs". A year later the Post took up the matter again, this time reverting to the explanation that "Uncle Sam" was simply a humorous expansion of the letters U.S. (with no mention of Sam Wilson).

Whether or not the term was first heard on the docks of New Orleans, by "Lazy" Dragoons or that Sam Wilson was the inspiration for the term "Uncle Sam" will continue to remain a matter of controversy.

"Uncle Sam" wasn't always the personification of the nation. In editorial cartoons and patriotic posters, "Brother Jonathan" was depicted as a tri-cornered hat-wearing American revolutionary. This character was in widespread use, mostly from 1783 to 1815. "Brother Jonathan" was replaced by the female personification "Columbia" and the increasingly popular "Uncle Sam". And the man who came to personify the increasingly popular "Uncle Sam" was none other than the famous clown and circus impresario, Dan Rice.

His first circus break came in 1841 with his presentation of a pig named Sybil who could tell time and do other tricks. From there he moved on to singing and dancing in various minstrel performances. His first circus appearance as a clown was in Galena, Illinois, in 1844 at \$15 a week. Little by little, he transformed himself into a man with something worthwhile to say. His renown as a wisecracking, cracker-barrel philosopher became so far-reaching that he was able to buy his own shows, both wagon and riverboat. An accomplished animal trainer, his specialty was pigs and mules, which he trained and sold to other clowns. He also performed in an act with a trained rhinoceros and is the only person in circus history to present an elephant walking a tightrope.

In 1848, he was in New Orleans – when a fight ensued. A member of Rice's troupe was attacked by a local mob and yelled to his friend Reuben for help. Ever since that day, a "Hey, Rube!" in circus parlance is a call for assistance meaning "come help in this fight".

Also that year, Rice campaigned for Zachary Taylor for President. He'd invite "Old Rough and Ready" to climb aboard the circus bandwagon in the circus parades. Not just Taylor but also other local politicians would join the ride, too, hoping Taylor's popularity would benefit them. People would comment, "Look who's on Taylor's bandwagon", inspiring the phrase in widespread use today: "jump on the bandwagon".

In 1852, Dan, his wife Maggie and two daughters (Libbie and Kate),

settled in New Orleans where Dan managed the popular, lucrative circus company known as "Dan Rice's Great Hippodrome and Menagerie". Business was booming and with a profit of nearly \$1000 a week, Dan was one of the highest paid performers in the nation.

That January in New Orleans, two spectacular things happened. First of all, eight inches of beautiful white snow fell on the Crescent City. What could surpass that? On January 13, 1852, born promoter Dan Rice drove over the snow on St. Charles Street in a makeshift horse-drawn sleigh (made from a large dry-goods box), bells a-ringing. Two-inch planks served as runners. Improvisational Dan opened "Rice's Circus and Great Hippodrome" for a four-month engagement on St. Charles. A third momentous event was the initial publication of the *Picayune* on January 25th.

The New Orleans *Crescent* poetically reported on Rice's "Museum": "All day the Museum doth send forth its strains; While Dan Rice's band all the live-long night reins."

Rice's circus thrived in the midst of competition, and was always there for the city of New Orleans in a philanthropic way. A priest at St. Anne's thanked him for \$90,000 in contributions. The *Picayune* praised him for "his manifold donations to charitable institutions".

One of Rice's competitors, "Spaulding and Rogers' Floating Circus Palace", came down from Cincinnati. They brought with them the leading circus clown from England, walrus-mustached William F. Walleth (who'd done a command performance at Windsor Castle for Queen Victoria). He was a "Shakespearean" clown who could respond to comments from the spectators with appropriate quotes from the Bard of Avon. His talent could rival Rice's, and the *Picayune* hailed his credentials as "*prima facie* evidence of his extraordinary genius".

Although they tried to get Walleth to enter the competitive feud against Rice, the clever clown declined. Instead, one night he visited in clown dress "the ring where Rice was performing," said Walleth. Rice fraternized with Walleth and introduced him to the patrons. The crowds loved it. But Walleth's employers were not amused.

After that, Rice and Walleth worked together, each dressed in the "garb of their respective nationalities": Walleth in a costume like the British flag and Rice in stars and stripes (an image that cartoonist Nast would eventually transform into the modern image of "Uncle Sam"). Dan Rice played so long and was so well-loved in New Orleans that he had a racehorse named for him. He was also "regarded as a fixture".

Rice's fame and popularity did not stop him from changing routines and keeping his acts fresh. Perhaps influenced by Walleth, he parodied

the works of Shakespeare (performing these humorous versions with songs and dialects demonstrating his versatility). He was well-known for his quick quips and biting tongue. He was a truly different entertainer, combining jokes, reflective observations and songs. He won the affection of many newspapers and writers, including those of Walt Whitman and Mark Twain. Twain, who probably saw Rice perform in Hannibal, Missouri, paid him homage in his description of a circus in *Huckleberry Finn*.

By 1862 Rice was earning twice as much as President Lincoln, with whom he was good friends (as he was with Jefferson Davis). Always the philanthropist, he donated generously to many charities and erected the first monument to soldiers killed during the Civil War. Dan Rice was the embodiment of "Uncle Sam" in more ways than one. He was even a great influence on the patriotic George M. Cohan, the nation's "Yankee Doodle Dandy".

Before Dan Rice's interpretation of "Uncle Sam" was firmly etched in the culture of the nation, the goateed gent was portrayed in every outfit (from pajamas to eveningwear). He was thin and fat, old and young (even a tantrum-throwing toddler). Thomas Nast's portrayal of a Dan Rice inspired "Uncle Sam" went on to influence later images of the nation's foremost persona. Nast also gave us the Democratic Party's donkey in 1870 and the Republican Party's elephant in 1874, not to mention images of a jolly Santa Claus. Vincent Van Gogh collected newspaper illustrations, and had twenty-one cartoons by Thomas Nast in his collection.

The later defining portraits of "Uncle Sam" (featuring the iconic finger-pointing, bewhiskered gentleman of the "I Want You" World War I recruitment posters) were painted by *LIFE Magazine* illustrator James Montgomery Flagg. First appearing on the July 6, 1916 cover of *Leslie's Weekly*, his posters became part of a powerful national ad campaign.

Historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., wrote, "Every generation of American life re-creates Uncle Sam in its own image." It's comforting to know that this image may have been greatly nurtured here in New Orleans, and very likely even born on the docks of this fascinating city.

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"Uncle Sam in New Orleans"
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