

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

When General Pershing Took Berlin

One hundred years ago, June 28, 1914, marked the beginning of World War I with the assassination in Sarajevo of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir presumptive to the Austro-Hungarian throne. The dominoes began to fall, mostly in August, as Barbara Tuchman explained the earliest stages of the war in her excellent narrative, *The Guns of August*. It was not until April 6, 1917, that the United States declared war on Germany. And in November 1918, Kaiser Wilhelm II abdicated and the armistice was signed. As for the results, the map of Europe was dramatically altered. Four empires (German, Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman and Russian) disappeared, and there was untold carnage: 16 million dead and 21 million wounded (many from disease, especially the devastating influenza pandemic of 1918-1919).

Back in New Orleans, a letter to the Editor of the *Times-Picayune* dated February 16, 1918, started the process of doing away with that "unpatriotically named" Germanic street, situated in Uptown New Orleans: Berlin Street.

Would Rename Berlin Street.

New Orleans, Feb. 16, 1918.

To the Editor of The Times-Picayune:

As everybody is patriotic, why not have the name of Berlin street changed to an American name and do away with the German one?

Why not call it Columbia street.

THRIFT.

Emotions were running high to remove "Berlin" as a street (and, in the above suggestion, to change it to Columbia Street) even though the original street name represented an event symbolic of Napoleon being

victorious over the German forces. Following Napoleon's defeat of the Prussian army in the twin battles of Jena and Auerstedt October 14, 1806, the French Emperor entered Berlin through the Brandenburg Gate later that month. According to a contemporary account, Napoleon "reviewed his guard in front of the palace and stood by some fine linden-trees, near the statue of Frederick the Great."

Can you imagine the pronunciation challenges an Auerstedt Street would have provided the citizens in New Orleans?



Napoleon entering Berlin through the Brandenburg Gate

By April 1918, Mayor Martin Behrman (New Orleans' mayor with a distinctly German name) personally introduced the ordinance in the the city commission council providing for the re-naming of the street. After May 7, 1918, Berlin Street would forevermore be named General Pershing Street.

As for "the name of Berlin, the former designation of said street," the ordinance read, "is hereby forever abolished and eliminated and shall never hereafter be used or employed in referring to said street."

Section 2 of the ordinance ordained that the Commissioner of Public Property go out and "is hereby directed to erase and eliminate from the several intersections ... the name 'Berlin street' and replace it with the name" of the general who led the American Expeditionary Forces in World War I: "General Pershing".



*John Joseph "Black Jack" Pershing
(September 13, 1860 – July 15, 1948)*

Berlin Street Wins Fight To Be Named Pershing

There will be no more Berlin street in New Orleans after May 7. Folks residing on the beautiful uptown thoroughfare thereafter can hold up their heads proudly and tell the world they live on General Pershing street.

Article in the New Orleans Item, April 30, 1918

The ordinance took effect in May, but by June there were already complaints that the "Berlin" letters "embedded in the sidewalks" were not being "effaced" fast enough.

The Mayor's ordinance which changed the named of the street to General Pershing ordered the name "Berlin" to be effaced, but it still is embedded in the sidewalks at the intersections. Have Johnny Mangan to chisel it out, Mr. Mayor.

Article in the New Orleans States, June 12, 1918

And although there were entreaties to "chisel it out, Mr. Mayor," it is fortunate for history that they weren't totally successful. The photograph below shows what is left of some "Berlin" street tiles.



Remnants of pre 1918 Berlin Street tiles

The ruins of "Berlin" remain as an historical reminder of the fervent anti-German sentiment in 1918, even though the Crescent City had a very large and loyal American German ethnic population.

Soon after the armistice was signed, there was a proposal in the *New Orleans States* on November 18, 1918, that the name of Canal Street, the city's great wide way, be changed to Foch Avenue. It didn't happen, but Marshall Ferdinand Foch, the World War I Allied *Généralissime*, did get a street named for him in Lakeview, as well as an exquisite oyster dish at Antoine's.

WOULD CHANGE NAME OF CANAL TO FOCH AVENUE

That the name of Canal street be changed to Foch avenue, "in honor of the greatest general of the day," was the proposal made by Emile Durlieu, in a letter to Mayor Behrman, Monday morning.

Oysters Foch, Oui! Foch Avenue, Non!

On February 16, 1920, the celebrated General Pershing visited New Orleans – at Mardi Gras, of course. He is shown below riding with Frank B. Hayne, former Rex, in front of the Union Station. A jubilant populace cheered as the General was "driven down St. Charles street from Lafayette Square to the Pickwick Club, where luncheon was served to him and his staff," reported the *New Orleans States*.



Franklin Brevard Hayne, for whom Hayne Boulevard in New Orleans East is named, was an active participant in the cotton trade, as well as serving as President of the Poitevent & Favre Lumber Co.

School children "cheered" and Boy Scouts stood at "rigid attention" and "saluted as their hero marched through their open ranks," the general "who directed the American advance that drove Kaiser Bill out

of Germany."

At 11:30 AM on Tuesday, Mardi Gras Day, February 17, 1920, on the steps of City Hall, overlooking Lafayette Square, a decoration was conferred upon General Pershing, the title of "Duke of Victory" in recognition of his services to his country. Postmaster Charles Janvier, representing His Royal Highness Rex, conferred the insignia to the General.

PERSHING IS DAY'S HERO; IS MADE A DUKE

**Great Masses of Humanity
Acclaim Him on Every
Public Appearance**

The tall and handsome, square-jawed leader "was much amused by the numberless maskers," wrote the *States*. "Smiles perpetually wreathed his face, and at times he laughed outright." Women threw kisses, and boys hung from tree branches to catch a glimpse of this broad-shouldered figure. Comparisons were made to the city's welcome of General Andrew Jackson after the Battle of New Orleans. The throngs were large and enthusiastic.

General Pershing was soon introduced to Rex, King of the Carnival, and his Queen. To observe the parade, the General was invited to view the festivities "from the balcony of the Boston Club." John F. Clark, another prominent cotton man, was Rex that year, with Miss Elinor Bright (daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Edgar H. Bright) reigning as his queen.

The Jefferson City Buzzards paraded "and presented patriotic subjects.

They were led by Uncle Sam, and a roast of the High Cost of Living" ended their procession. The banner read, "Hi Cost may soar to the skies. We'll wear our sacks till Hi Cost dies." Another masker's placard proclaimed, "Got the Kaiser's Goat." And Carnival back then even had "hairy-armed ... female impersonators."

Cold and rain could not totally dampen the spirits of the citizenry, although there was surely some disappointment. After all, the people of New Orleans had been deprived a Carnival since 1917 due to the reign of Ares, God of War. Prohibition, however, became effective the month before and the *Times-Picayune* lamented, "The alcoholic stimulants, those drinks which 'made New Orleans famous' and which warmed many past cold carnivals, were absent."

MARDI GRAS CARNIVAL ENLIVENS NEW ORLEANS

**Pershing Guest of All Functions in
Thronged City; First Cele-
bration Since 1917.**

**NEW ORLEANS, February 17. —
With maskers thronging the streets,
business suspended and the city
thronged with visitors, New Orleans
today gave itself completely over to
Mardi Gras celebrations.**

General Pershing is the only United States Army officer to be promoted in his own lifetime to the highest rank ever held in the United States Army — General of the Armies. A retroactive Congressional edict in 1976 promoted George Washington to the same rank, but with higher seniority. In his earlier days, Pershing commanded the all-black "Buffalo Soldiers," fought in the Spanish American War and chased down wily revolutionary Francisco "Pancho" Villa. Then Brigadier General Pershing was selected to lead a punitive expedition into Mexico to capture Villa, a mission that failed. This was soon overshadowed by America's entry into World War I, and Pershing's significant legacy.



"Berlin" is "Gen. Pershing" today and has been since 1918

The famous words "*Lafayette, nous voilà*" (Lafayette, we are here), have been popularly, but incorrectly, attributed to General John J. Pershing. The line was delivered during World War I at the tomb of the Marquis de Lafayette during a speech honoring his heroic service in the cause of the American Revolution. Pershing stated that the quote was spoken by Colonel Charles E. Stanton, and "to him must go the credit for coining so happy and felicitous a phrase."

In 1920, when Pershing approached Lafayette Square in New Orleans, he had his chance to say something meaningful. Not all of his words were captured for posterity, but wouldn't it be great if he said:

"Lafayette, I'm here. But where are you?"

You see, of all the statues in Lafayette Square, none are of Lafayette.

NED HÉMARD

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