

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

The Strange Case of William Ratcliffe Irby

William Ratcliffe Irby (January 4, 1860 – November 20, 1926), tobacco company executive, banker and philanthropist, came to the Crescent City as a young boy and later became instrumental in the acquisition and preservation of many historic properties in the New Orleans French Quarter.

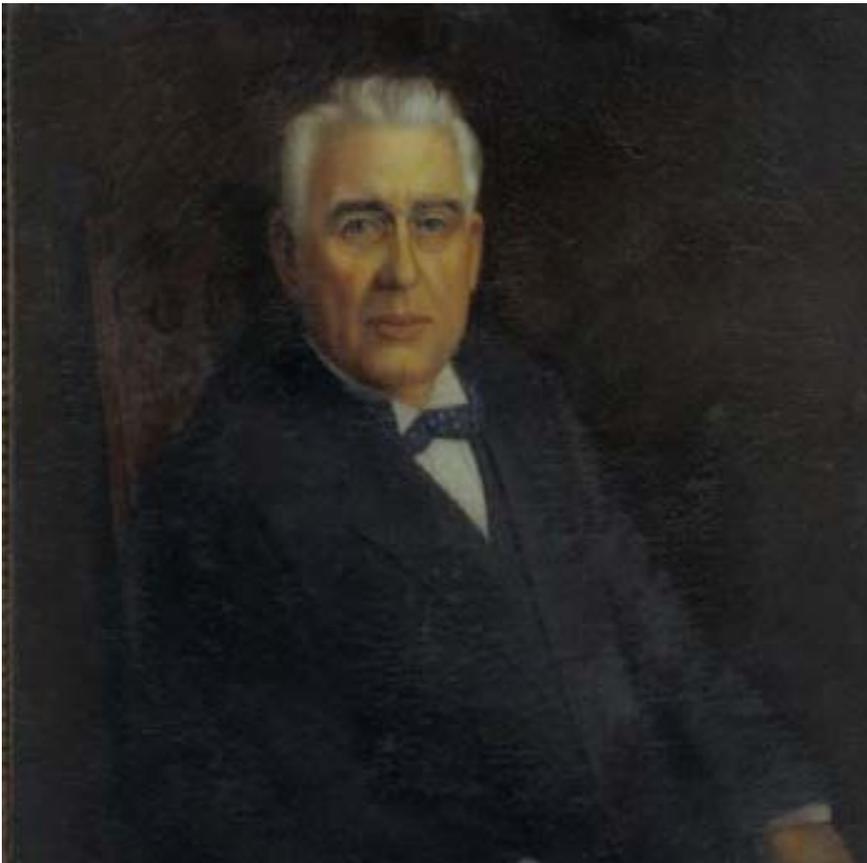
Washington Duke was the owner of a tobacco company, which his two sons took over in the 1880s. In 1885, son James Buchanan Duke acquired a license to use the first automated cigarette making machine and, within five years, supplied 40% of the American cigarette market. In 1890, he consolidated control of his four major competitors under one monopoly, the American Tobacco Company, making it the largest tobacco company in the world.

Anti-trust violations and a ruling by the Supreme Court of the United States resulted in American Tobacco being broken up into several separate companies, of which only the British-American Tobacco Company remained in Duke's control. Of the various companies that emerged, there were four major players: Liggett & Myers Tobacco Company, P. Lorillard Company, R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company and a reduced-in-size American Tobacco Company.

In a *New York Times* article, Feb. 15, 1912, it was reported that of the original 27-member board of American Tobacco, seven resigned to go with P. Lorillard and Liggett & Myers. Four of the seven, C.C. Dula, R.B. Dula, R.D. Lewis, and William Ratcliffe Irby (born January 4, 1860) became directors of Liggett & Myers. The W. R. Irby branch of American Tobacco in New Orleans had manufactured cigarettes and smoking tobacco, its main brands being "King Bee" and "Home Run". The New Orleans factory became one of many Liggett & Myers operations, St. Louis being the largest.

William Ratcliffe Irby had come from Lynchburg, Virginia, to the Crescent City as a young boy (1866) with his parents. James Jackson Irby, his father, was also in the tobacco business. William Ratcliffe Irby oversaw local operations of the company (today called the Liggett Group, fourth largest U.S. tobacco company). Chesterfield came out right after American Tobacco was broken up (1912) as a Turkish-Virginia blended cigarette. L & M was another brand. Liggett & Myers manufactured Chesterfields until 1999 (when the brand was sold to Philip Morris), and through the years were promoted by spokesmen Ronald Reagan, Bob Hope, Bing Crosby, Arthur Godfrey, Rod Serling and Jack Webb. The 1984 New Orleans World Fair held live performances in the 5,500-seat capacity Liggett & Myers Quality Seal Amphitheatre, designed by the famous architect Frank Gehry.

William Ratcliffe Irby, besides serving as director of Liggett & Meyers Tobacco Company, was also a successful banker, Chairman of the Canal Bank & Trust Co. of New Orleans. Irby, also President of Tulane University's Board of Administrators, was instrumental in setting up the university's central purchasing system. Esmond Phelps succeeded Irby as President of the Board in 1926. Both gentlemen have dorm buildings on Tulane's campus named for them, Irby and Phelps Halls. But these are not the only reasons Tulane and the City of New Orleans are indebted to this generous benefactor, William Ratcliffe Irby.



*Tobacco Executive, Banker and Philanthropist,
William Ratcliffe Irby*

On September 29, 1915, a Category 4 hurricane inflicted major damage to the New Orleans area, uprooting stately oaks, flooding some areas of the city and destroying or damaging several historic structures. Many of these landmarks were in the French Quarter, or what constituted the original boundaries of the city at its founding. As an example, the exterior structure of the Presbytere's cupola was demolished in that storm and was not restored until 2005, immediately before another major hurricane named Katrina. Architect Ames Yeates chose to restore the building to the way it was when the State Museum acquired it in 1911.

The 1915 hurricane, as well as years of neglect, had left much of the French Quarter very much in a state of disrepair. Mr. Irby, who was described in Time Magazine as "a representative old-school Southerner of great power and dignity," began taking notice of this situation and decided to do something about it.

The St. Louis Cathedral had been another victim of the hurricane of 1915. Major deterioration of its foundation was one of the problems. A gift of \$125,000 was donated to help correct the storm's damages with the stipulation that his generosity would remain anonymous. Irby's unselfish gift was not revealed until after his death.

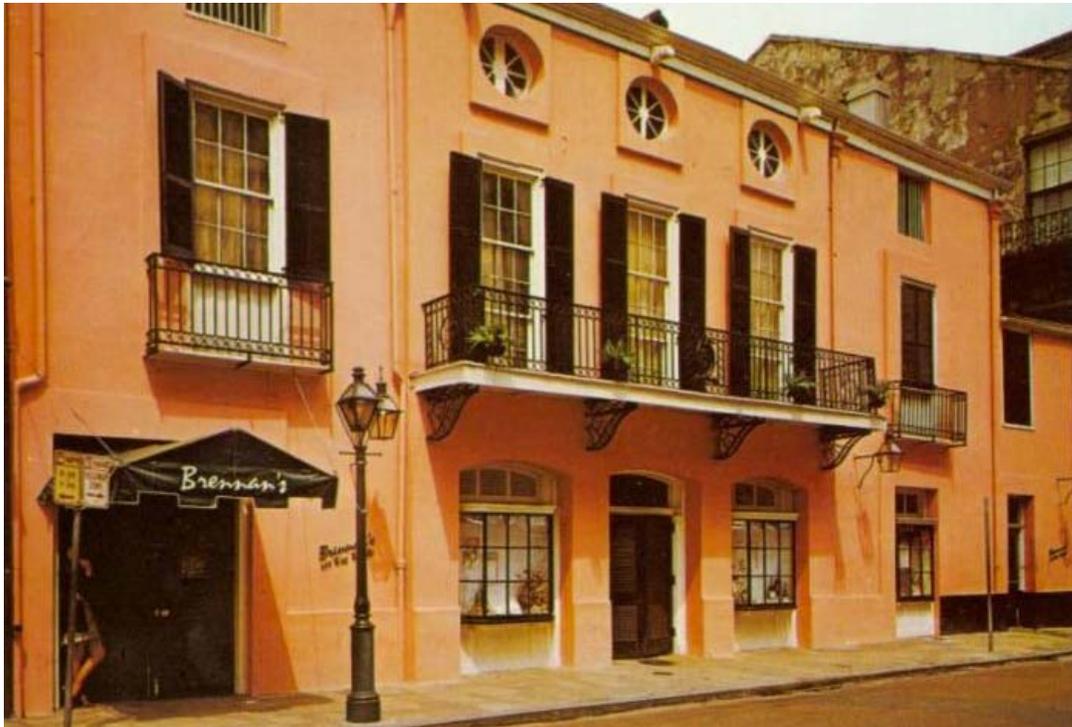
The French Opera House was another famous building he rescued.



The French Opera House before it was destroyed by fire in 1919
Designed by architect James Gallier, Jr., the magnificent hall was commissioned by the opera company director Charles Boudousquie. It stood at the uptown lake corner of Bourbon and Toulouse streets since 1859, host to operas, carnival balls, concerts, debuts and receptions.

But by 1913 the grand old house had fallen on hard times and was forced into receivership. Once again, an anonymous donor (that's right, William Ratcliffe Irby) purchased the building and donated it to Tulane University, along with the backing to operate it under the new leadership of the French tenor Agustarello Affré. The Opera House reopened, and things looked promising, but sadly the building was consumed by flames on the night of December 4, 1919.

Another familiar landmark saved by Mr. Irby was the building located at 417 Royal Street between Conti and St. Louis streets. Most of us recognize the site below as Brennan's Restaurant.



The historic marker states much more of the building's history:

"Banque de la Louisiane, built in 1795 by Vincent Rillieux (great grandfather of the artist Edgar Degas) who purchased the site a month after the great fire of Dec. 8, 1794 had destroyed earlier buildings here and more than 200 houses and stores. It was bought in 1805 to house the Banque de la Louisiane, the first bank established after the Louisiana Purchase. Residence of the Alonzo Morphy family from 1841 to 1891. A son, Paul Morphy, (born 1837) who became the world's chess champion died here on July 10, 1884. Building given to Tulane University in 1920 by William Ratcliffe Irby. Brennan's restaurant since 1955."

Owen Brennan rented the property from Tulane in 1954, renovating and restoring the historic structure while establishing his innovative and hugely popular restaurant. In 1984, Tulane sold the property to Owen's three sons, Pip, Jimmy and Ted.

In 1918, the Brulatour Residence at 520 Royal Street was purchased and restored by William Ratcliffe Irby.



The beautiful Brulatour Courtyard

Also known as the Seignouret House, it was erected in 1816 by Francois Seignouret, a native of Bourdeaux, France, a fine furniture and wine merchant. Seignouret leased part of his ground floor footage to Antoine Michoud, merchant. Pierre Brulatour (also a wine importer) bought the house in 1870, the same year Jules Brulatour was born in New Orleans, one of the co-founders of Universal Pictures. When William Ratcliffe Irby bought the property in 1918 (after three decades of neglect), he set out to restore it as his own residence.

Back when the French Opera House blazed out of control, writer and journalist Lyle Saxon looked on in horror. Like Irby, he wanted to make sure the Vieux Carré did not lose any other significant landmarks. At the time, the Quarter was not the bohemian artistic

magnet it was to become. It was a low-income run-down diamond in the rough. Most did not see the historic significance nor its potential, but Saxon and Irby did. Saxon wrote, "The old New Orleans is a city of intense personality. Time and decay have not killed its pristinine charm. The old houses today are as full of beauty as they were in their prime. Architecturally they are tremendously interesting."

Saxon believed the Quarter could be revitalized by attracting artists and writers to the city and creating an artist colony of like-minded creative individuals who shared his vision. Through their works they would celebrate the charm and allure of the Vieux Carré. Soon William Faulkner, Sherwood Anderson, William Spratling and others came to New Orleans and before long formed the Arts and Crafts Club of New Orleans, which Irby soon invited to have its galleries and classrooms housed at his Brulatour residence. The Club moved into 520 Royal in December of 1921 and officially incorporated the following year. The group's *Bal Masqué des Artistes* also helped to capture the mystique of the French Quarter.

Irby's home at 520 Royal is today owned by the Historic New Orleans Collection, but from 1950 to 1996 it was home to the studios and offices of the city's first local television affiliate WDSU-TV.

In 1921, Mr. Irby bought the block-long building known as the Lower Pontalba Apartments for \$68,000 from Michel Joseph Gaston Delfau de Pontalba, grandson of the Baroness Pontalba (who oversaw the construction of the famous Pontalba Buildings). Irby bequeathed the historic apartment building to the Louisiana State Museum in his will, and it maintains control today.



The Lower Pontalba Apartments

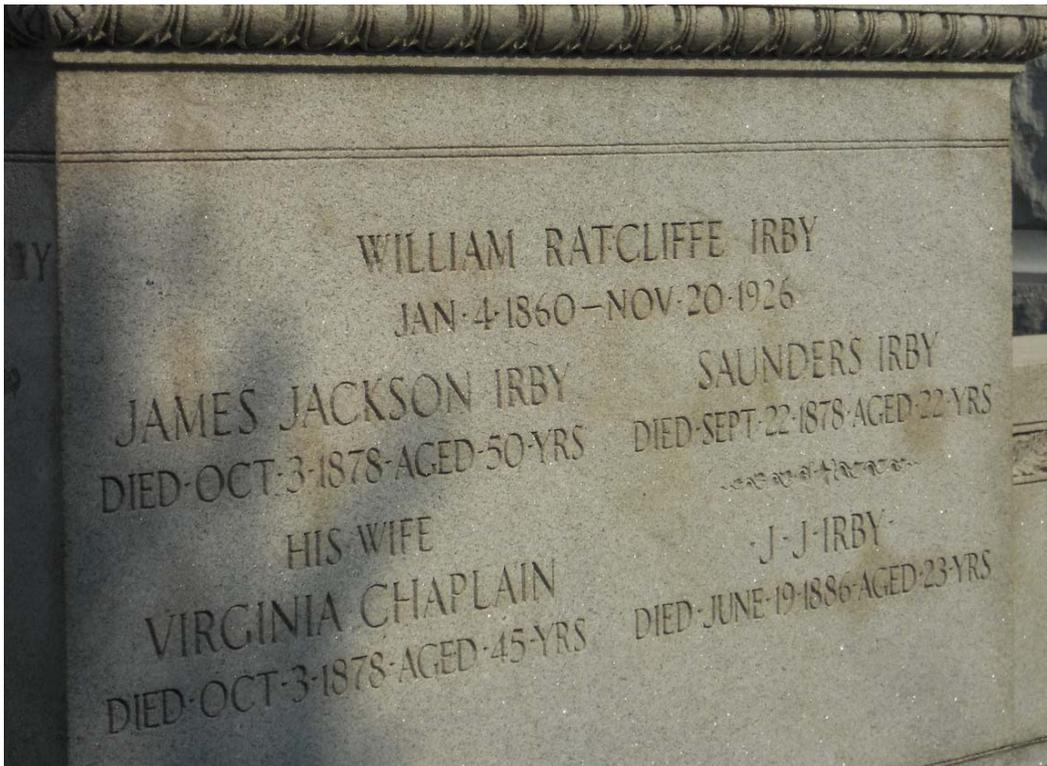
The St. Louis Cathedral, the Seignouret-Brulatour Building, the French

Opera House, the Lower Pontalba Apartments, the 1795 building that today houses Brennan's Restaurant (so many once dilapidated properties in a forgotten part of town) William Ratcliffe Irby helped to restore. He created a resurgence in the city's French Quarter, often anonymously. He breathed new life into so many historic structures once given up for dead.

It is strange to consider how much good was done to revitalize the French Quarter with money from the sale of countless cigarettes. And it is equally strange that this special philanthropist, this giver of life to dying buildings, ended his own life in such a bizarre manner.

On Saturday morning, November 20, 1926, Irby went about his day in his normal manner. He visited the bank, performed a few routine duties and had a mid-morning cup of coffee. He next took a cab to the Tharp-Sontheimer-Tharp undertaking parlors at Carondelet and Toledano streets. The *Times-Picayune* reported that he "greeted the attendants affably" and told them he had "come to make arrangements for a funeral." He looked at coffins on the second floor and then "asked for a morning paper". At 10:15 AM (after Mr. A. S. Tharp went downstairs for the paper) Irby, sitting on a sofa, fired a revolver into his right temple. A note was left "requesting simplicity in his funeral". Another listed an "incurable heart disease" as the reason for taking his own life.

In addition to the Pontalba Apartments, which he donated to the Louisiana State Museum upon his death, William Ratcliffe Irby left over two million dollars to Tulane University. At the time of his suicide, a New Orleans newspaper reported that "out of pure sentiment alone, Mr. Irby is known to have purchased property in the Vieux Carré to preserve many of its famous old landmarks." His "pure sentiment" was a love of his city's neglected Old Quarter, its charm, its art, its literature and especially its architecture.



Tomb of William Ratcliffe Irby in Metairie Cemetery

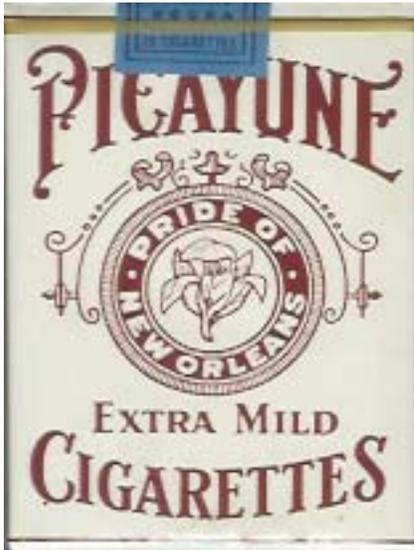
Irby had a granddaughter, Jane Wheeler Irby, who married a Russian prince. Time Magazine in its December 25, 1939, issue announced:

"Born. To Prince Alexis Obolensky II, 25, Manhattan cafe socialite, Russian nobleman once removed, and Princess Obolensky (Jane Wheeler Irby), 23, New Orleans socialite: their first child, a daughter; in West Palm Beach, Fla. Name: Ann (sic). Weight: 7 lb. 2 oz."

Anne (her spelling) wrote that her great-grandmother "Althea Garland Irby ... was from Baltimore" and "she was estranged from" her great-grandfather, William Ratcliffe Irby.

Anne's mother Jane, who married Russian Prince Alexis Obolensky II (backgammon enthusiast) in Virginia in 1939, died in 1981 and is buried in Metairie Cemetery alongside her philanthropist grandfather. William Ratcliffe Irby's estranged wife, Althea, and their son Robert (Jane's father) are buried elsewhere.

It is curious to note that Liggett & Myers previously marketed Picayune cigarettes, now a defunct brand. The packs read "Pride of New Orleans" and "Picayune Extra Mild Cigarettes", but they were said to be one of the strongest-tasting cigarettes ever.



Also, in 1996-1997 the Liggett Group became the first tobacco company to settle smoking related litigation brought by the Attorneys General of several states. This came about because of the class action lawsuit known as the Castano case. Named for New Orleans attorney Peter Castano, who died of cancer, the case was backed by an alliance of sixty of the nation's top plaintiff attorneys. The group of lawyers agreed to pay \$100,000 each to set up a central office with support staff, a strategy that had never been implemented against the tobacco industry. And, up till then, "Big Tobacco" had never paid out anything in damages in forty years of defending litigation. The plaintiffs (who included his widow, Dianne A. Castano) charged that the tobacco companies knowingly and fraudulently concealed the facts about nicotine being addictive. It all happened in New Orleans.

NED HÉMARD

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Suggested Reading

Death notice for William Ratcliffe Irby, *TIME Magazine* – Monday, November 29, 1926

Tallant, Robert: *The Romantic New Orleanians – 1950* – E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., New York

Reed, John Shelton: *Dixie Bohemia: A French Quarter Circle in the 1920s* – September 17, 2012 – Walter Lynwood Fleming Lectures in Southern History

Heimann, Robert K.: *Tobacco & Americans – 1960* – McGraw-Hill, New York