

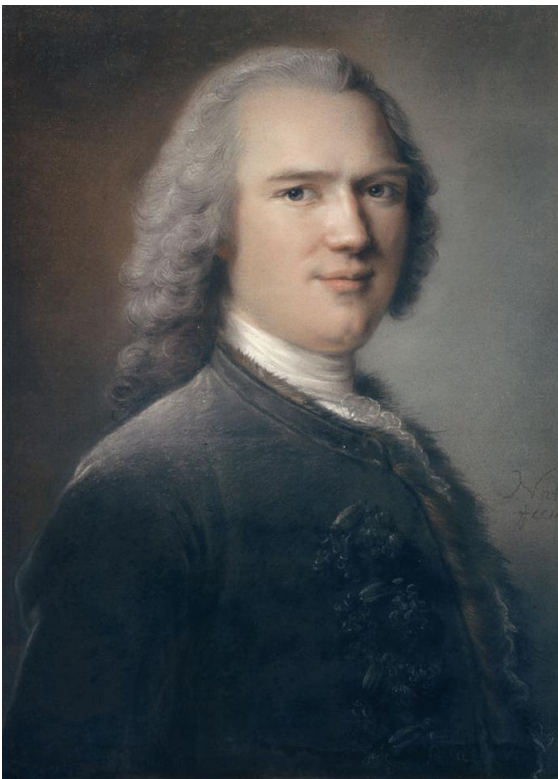
NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions**By Ned Hémard***Madame Langlois, Fact or Fiction?**

*Artwork for Times-Picayune article by Meigs O. Frost, August 2, 1936,
tinted by Lauren Hémard*

An historical event of 1706, a feminine rebellion known as the "petticoat insurrection," really did take place. Mention is made of it in the journal of French explorer Bénard de la Harpe (February 4, 1683 – September 26, 1765), who arrived at Dauphin Island in the spring of 1718 and visited (among other places) the newly founded "city" of New Orleans. The so-called origin of Creole cuisine, however, had its start fourteen years earlier on the 24th of April, 1704, when the fifty-gun ship *Pélican* arrived in Mobile Bay. In addition to troops and provisions for the colony, there were also on board two grey nuns and twenty-three young women to be married off to colonists, poor but of good character, the first women who had come to Louisiana. It must be noted that New Orleans had not yet been founded, and the Louisiana colony included the "city" of Mobile, Alabama, founded in 1702.

Historian Charles Gayarré also referred to the "petticoat insurrection" in his *Histoire de la Louisiane*, asking: "What can be more harrowing than the massacre of the French settlement on the Wabash in 1705; and in 1706, what more comical than the threatened insurrection of the French girls, who had come to settle in the country, under allurements which proved deceptive, and who were particularly indignant at being fed on corn? This fact is mentioned in these terms in one of Bienville's dispatches: 'The males in the colony begin, through habit, to be reconciled to corn, as an article of nourishment; but the females, who are mostly Parisians, have for this kind of food a dogged aversion, which has not yet been subdued. Hence, they inveigh bitterly against his grace, the Bishop of Québec, who, they say, has enticed them away from home, under the pretext of sending them to enjoy the milk and honey of the land of promise.' Enraged at having thus been deceived, they swore that they would force their way out of the colony, on the first opportunity. This was called the *petticoat insurrection*."



Bénard de la Harpe



Replica of Le Pélican

Known historically as casket girls or casquette girls, *les filles à la cassette* (girls with a cassette) were the marriageable women brought over from France to the Louisiana colony as wives for the male colonists. The name derives from the small chests, known as *casquettes*, in which they carried their clothes and belongings. These young women of admirable character were recruited from church charitable institutions, usually orphanages and convents, and,

although poor, were virtually guaranteed to be virtuous. They should not be confused with the women brought over later, many of whom had been imprisoned in the *Salpêtrière*, once a Parisian gunpowder factory, for minor crimes, such as begging, prostitution and homelessness.

The first consignment of casquette girls reached Mobile, Alabama, in 1704 (as mentioned above); Biloxi, Mississippi, in 1719; and New Orleans, Louisiana, in 1728. They inspired composer Victor Herbert to write the operetta *Naughty Marietta*, while the shipments of women to Louisiana of more questionable character formed the basis of the short novel *Manon Lescaut* by Abbé Prévost. The maidens who arrived in 1704 were all well married within a month, except one unusually "coy and hard to please," who would take no man in the colony.



Les filles à la cassette (The casquette girls)

So it was that these early women of good virtue, who arrived in Mobile to swiftly be taken as colonial brides, grew upset with the colony's limited diet and lack of proper French food, particularly French bread. Staging a "culinary *coup d'état*," they marched in protest, as the story has become embellished, clanging pots and pans, and demanding improved cuisine choices – a demonstration historians were to call the "Petticoat Rebellion."

The solution to this insurrection, according to a story that first

appeared in the 1930s, Sieur de Bienville, the governor of French Louisiana at the time, instructed his cook and relative, Madame Langlois, to teach the young women how to cook meals with local ingredients as prepared by the Indians. These indigenous cooking techniques she had mastered by spending time among the local tribes. Madame Langlois, in turn, trained the mutinous young French cooks how to make cornbread from cornmeal and to create other local Native American recipes. She also showed them how to prepare familiar French dishes, only adapting local ingredients to achieve that goal.



Cookbook author and chef Amy Sins created “Langlois Culinary Crossroads” in the New Orleans’ Faubourg Marigny, a business described as “a next-generation, interactive, restaurant dining and cooking experience” that offers “participatory cooking classes and unique dining experiences focusing on authentic Cajun and Creole food.” Here’s how she explained the inspiration for the name:

“I was struck by the story of Madame Langlois [lang-WAH], the “mother of Creole cuisine.” Langlois ... is credited with teaching the first recorded cooking class in North America. Her students? French women who were shipped to Louisiana to marry and who marched on the governor’s house to protest the poor state of food (particularly bread) in the new colony. Clanging pots and pans with wooden spoons, the women demanded better food in a protest that historians later called the Petticoat Rebellion. Bienville responded by offering the services of Langlois, who introduced the women to flavorful native ingredients like hominy and ground sassafras leaves and taught them how to adapt their cooking using these unusual local foods.”

The first recorded cooking class in North America generally heralded as the origin of Creole cuisine? Question is, was this moment in history actually recorded? Indeed, a culinary insurrection did take place, but was Madame Langlois the mediatrix? Or was she merely a popular historical construct?

The story of Madame Langlois has been a popular one. After all, the “insurrection” was real and the young women did learn to cook locally, such as using sassafras (*gumbo filé*) as a thickener. But is Madame Langlois herself fact or myth? Not mentioning Madame Langlois by name, *The Bridgeport Herald* of Bridgeport, Connecticut, on January

26, 1902, even described the "petticoat insurrection" as "perhaps the first 'women's rights' movement in America." But before we can accept the existence and role of Madame Langlois as fact we must first look at a phenomenon I call:

The All Too Remarkable Langlois Family

The Sunday Magazine Section of the *Times-Picayune New Orleans States* featured a full-page illustrated story of Madame Langlois and her "cooking school" on August 2, 1936. The author of the piece was Meigs O. Frost, who in 1934 received an honorable mention from the Pulitzer Prize Committee of Columbia University.



Meigs O. Frost



Francois Ludgere Diard

Frost wrote an extremely entertaining article on Madame Langlois, the highlights of which have been mentioned above, a tale that has for years captured the hearts and minds of the people of New Orleans. The fact that it all happened in Mobile (instead of New Orleans) has been forgotten over time. People get the casket girls confused since they arrived at different times. The grey nuns are confused with the Ursulines, who did not arrive until 1727 – in New Orleans. But the biggest problem with the story is that Frost got his information from Francois Ludgere Diard, who served as supervisor of the WPA writers project for the Sixth Alabama District, which includes Mobile. Diard claimed that his great-great grandmother was the first cousin of Madame Langlois, who was said to be cousin of Bienville's mother. Madame Langlois, he determined, was "Catherine Tierry Primot Langlois," wife of Nicolas Langlois, commissioned an army lieutenant serving under Iberville and Bienville. Trouble is, "Catherine Tierry Primot" was the name of the wife of Charles LeMoyne, and the mother

of Iberville and Bienville. Seems like Diard got his facts confused.



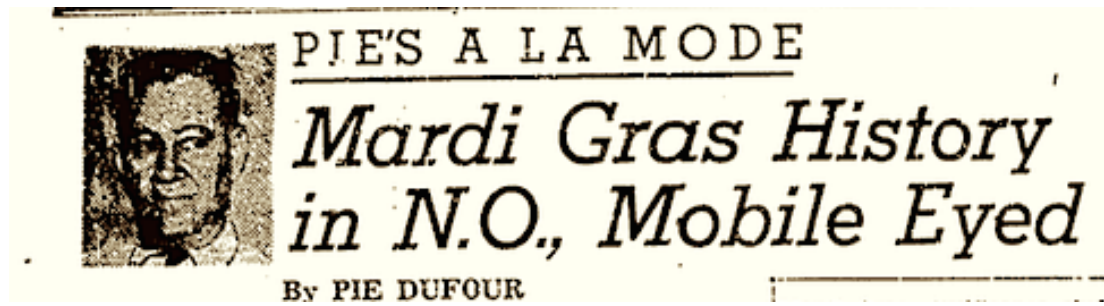
Profusion of Azaleas in Mobile's Bellingrath Gardens

In addition, Diard claimed Nicolas Langlois and his wife had a son, Fifise Langlois, who was responsible for all the azaleas in the Mobile area. A famous horticulturist, Fifise visited Europe in 1754, and returned with azaleas from his grandmother's garden in France. Today they have spread to "beautify floral trails in Mobile, New Orleans and other Gulf states cities." His fascinating "story" was featured in newspapers throughout the United States beginning in the early 1930s. So convincing was the tale, that many identified Diard himself as the man who brought the azaleas to Mobile. In a 1935 film titled *Down Mobile Way*, the narrator stated: "Almost 200 years ago, Francois Ludgere Diard brought azaleas – pink, purplish-red, and white – from Toulouse to Mobile, Alabama."

And what marvelous things did the patriarch of the family, Nicolas Langlois, do? In 1704, according to Diard, he established the *Société de Saint-Louis* on August 25, 1704 (Feast Day of St. Louis) at the original Mobile settlement on 27-Mile Bluff, creating the first mystic society in North America, and held the first ever masked ball of Carnival season ever held in the Americas. If that were not enough, he founded the "Boeuf Gras Society" in 1711. Author Julian Lee Rayford of Theodore, Alabama, repeated a number of Diard's claims in a book titled *Chasing the Devil Round a Stump*, subtitled *The History of Mardi Gras in Mobile in 1704*.

In 1962, historian and columnist "Pie" Dufour commented on Rayford's book and on Nicolas Langlois "of whom little is known," and that the "Masque de la Mobile" organized by Langlois was held on the Feast of

St. Louis – so what’s the Mardi Gras connection? Pie wrote, “the Mardi Gras significance eludes me.” Diard’s ancestors seemed to be there for everything, even if it didn’t really happen that way.



Kevin Lee, writing in Mobile’s *Lagniappe Weekly*, November 11, 2015, said that Diard was “an early 20th century Mobilian committed to elevating the status of his hometown without adherence to a historian’s ethics.” Due to Diard’s many years with the *Mobile Register*, “Diard’s claims were never subjected to due scrutiny.”

In Peter J. Hamilton’s extensive history, *Colonial Mobile* (1897, revised 1910), Madame Langlois does not appear in over 600 pages. Nor do other members of her family.

According to Mobile author Ann J. Pond, Diard “came to consider himself ‘Mobile’s Historian’ and firmly believed that “he alone understood Mobile’s history as no one else did.” Pond continued, “Diard’s public statements seemed at times abrasive. In one undated *Letter to the Editor* for example, Diard wrote a detailed explanation of Mobile’s long carnival tradition. His letter ended with this statement, a sentiment he expressed frequently.

My progenitors came to the first Mobile in 1702 with the first settlers, were among the originators of carnival and Mardi Gras both here in Mobile and at New Orleans and I think speaking as Mobile’s historian, that if anyone should know, it is I.

Francois Ludgere Diard”

Pond further explained, “Although he wrote about researching French records, he consistently misinterpreted the French terms ‘Mardi Gras’ and ‘Boeuf Gras,’ adding to public confusion over their meaning which lingered into the twenty-first century. Still, Mobilians in general never questioned his accuracy or the bottomless fountain of information that flowed from his ‘family records.’ There seemed to be no question about Mobile’s history that Diard could not answer. There was nothing about which he was unsure.”

“Both Diard and Rayford,” she wrote, “were confident and determined to persuade others. Their histories were bold and insistent, filled with

dramatic generalizations and creatively embellished detail, written as though they had been there themselves. Even when not accurate, they caught the attention of a believing public.

For Diard particularly, it was important to establish Mobile's rightful place in the history of the Gulf Coast. If the French had first established a colony in Mobile before moving their capital to New Orleans he argued, then all aspects of French culture surviving on the Gulf Coast would have been found 'first' in Mobile and it became very important to him to establish Mobile's 'firsts.' He wrote stories that credited Mobile (and his own family), with the first azalea, the first gumbo, the first garden, but especially, the first Mardi Gras."

"Little information exists," wrote Pond, "to explain where Diard's ideas" for all his claims originated. "In some cases, journals from the early settlement do mention minor events that seem to have been taken out of context and greatly exaggerated to support Diard's vision."

"Diard harped on the Langlois family name, using it any time he referenced eighteenth century Mobile at all, confusing it at times with the name LeMoyne and claiming ancestral ties to both. He stated frequently that Nicholas Langlois, who, according to Diard, also originated the Spanish Mystic Society, was married to 'Madame Langlois,' described as Iberville's cousin and cook, who oversaw the education of the Pelican Girls *and* created the 'first' gumbo."

"Diard gave the Langlois family credit for much of what happened in the early colony but the records do not agree." The only person named Langlois who resided in Mobile after 1711 was Pierre Langlois, of Tours, France, whose name does appear in church records. The population records from eighteenth century Mobile are very comprehensive. Yet no other person with the Langlois name is mentioned in any regard throughout the rest of the century - no births, deaths, baptisms nor marriages.

Diard's Langlois lineage was either fabricated, misconstrued or misunderstood. There is certainly no proof that it ever existed.

There were, however, members of the Langlois family in New Orleans. Étienne (Stephen) Langlois was one of the earliest landed proprietors along Bayou St. John, and on June 6, 1726, a tailor named Langlois filed a petition of recovery to the Superior Council in New Orleans for 26 francs owed him by Monsieur Cadot. Part of the final settlement involved Madame Langlois (surely not *the* Madame Langlois of culinary fame) "to desist from her daily invectives at Cadot." There is also a large concentration of the Langlois family in Pointe Coupée Parish, Louisiana.

So, here are the facts as we know them:

- 1) Mobile had parades before New Orleans, but they were held on New Year's Eve. There is no evidence that Nicolas Langlois introduced masked Mardi Gras balls in 1704.
- 2) New Orleans' Mystick Krewe of Comus (1857) was an outgrowth of Mobile's *Cowbellion de Rakin Society*, a group of Mobile revelers first celebrating New Year's Eve a quarter of a century earlier and whose leader was Michael Krafft.
- 3) As "Pie" Dufour wrote, "New Orleans had a Mardi Gras parade, in more or less its present format, in 1857 and this antedates Mobile's first parade on Mardi Gras."
- 4) The numerous "firsts" credited to members of the Langlois family of Mobile are highly suspect: the first azalea, the first gumbo, the first garden and the first Mardi Gras.
- 5) Madame Langlois, at least the one who is credited with teaching culinary skills to a group of women protestors in petticoats, may not have existed. The evidence is not there. But Bienville's "petticoat insurrection" surely did take place, and somebody had to mediate a resolution. The young women of the colony did indeed learn about alternative food sources from the Indians.

We'd all like to believe that someone as resourceful as Madame Langlois was around to make all this happen.

As for the very first casket girls that arrived on *Le Pélican* and comprised the "petticoat rebellion," here is a list of their names:

Francoise de Boisrenard, Jeanne Catherine Berenchard, Elizabeth le Penteau, Marianne Decoudreaux, Marie Noel, Du Mesnil, Gabrielle Sanart, Marie Thérèse Brouchou, Angélique Fayard, Marguerite Fayard, Marguerite Tavenier, Elizabeth Deshays, Marie Philippe, Louise Housseau, Madeline Douane, Marie Dufesne, Margurite Geuchard, Reine Gilbert, Francoise La Fontaine and Gabrielle Binét.

The descendants of these intrepid young women, who taxed Bienville's patience and ingenuity, still inhabit the shores of Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana.

NED HÉMARD

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