

A NOBLE EFFORT

CEMETERY GROUP TO HONOR FAMOUS DRUMMER WHO HERALDED THE BATTLE OF NEW ORLEANS 02/09/01

By Elizabeth Mullener

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It was just before sunrise on Jan. 8, 1815, and the air was chilled and damp. As thousands of British soldiers came marching across the flat Chalmette plain, the Americans led by Andrew Jackson prepared to fight. That's when a drummer boy named Jordan Bankston Noble sounded the call to arms. And the Battle of New Orleans was on.

Noble was only 14 at the time, newly arrived in New Orleans and a volunteer with the 7th Regiment. For the rest of his long and celebrated life, Noble kept a drum by his side. He served in four U.S. wars, he led a prominent local band, he played at hundreds of dances and balls, he participated in every kind of municipal parade. And most of all, he cultivated a personage for himself, known to everyone in town, beloved by most and a darling of the media.

"He must have been a charmer," said Freddi Evans, an independent researcher who has written a children's book on Noble.

On Saturday, the Friends of New Orleans Cemeteries will remember Noble's life with a tribute to him at St. Augustine Catholic Church at 1210 Gov. Nicholls St. in Treme at 1 p.m., followed by a percussion second line featuring local drummers to St. Louis Cemetery No. 2, Square 3, where a bronze plaque memorializing Noble will be unveiled.

BORN A SLAVE

"I would respectfully beg leave to say that I was born in the state of Georgia, October 14, 1800," begins a letter Noble wrote to Edward Wharton, a longtime friend, patron and editor at The Daily Picayune. The autobiographical account was not published at the time, but it appeared in the newspaper several decades later, when Wharton's daughter found it among her father's valuable papers after his death.

Beyond his letter, the details of Noble's life are sketchy. He was born a slave, but the timing and circumstances of his emancipation are not known.

"I cannot find a single place where he refers to his period in slavery," said Mary White, another independent researcher who has studied Noble extensively. "He didn't want to discuss who his parents were, his brothers and sisters.

"Many people of the period didn't want to acknowledge their slavery. It was considered degrading."

What is certain is that Noble had a black father and a white mother, that he was well-educated, literate from an early age, and fluent in French and English. Although he lived for a short time in the French Quarter, he spent most of his adult life in Central City, much of it in a house on Clio Street. He married twice and had three children. For a time, Noble was well-fixed, but it didn't last long and he spent most of his life scrambling to make a living.

"His life is interesting from the point of view of the struggles of newly emancipated black people to survive,"

White said. "It reflects the whole process of moving through emancipation. How did these people live? What was their quality of life? It's one thing to say you're free. It's another thing entirely to have to live it.

"But he was ingenious. His survival techniques were interesting."

'SWEET MUSIC'

For the most part, Noble made his living as a musician and a man about town.

At social occasions, he played quadrilles and reels, and all the popular dance tunes of the day — "sweet music," White calls it. He played for innumerable charitable benefits. And on the side, he gave music lessons.

With his fife and drum band, he performed as well at all sorts of public and civic occasions. And no parade was complete without him, usually marching at its head. He played for the Continental Guards' moonlight drill and rendered "a number of interesting evolutions," as one newspaper account had it. And every New Year's Day for decades, he called on a select group of the movers and shakers around town and performed for their entertainment, frequently reprising the reveille he played to rouse the American soldiers at Chalmette.

"It was a tradition he started," Evans said. "He would march in with his band and salute the mayor, the city officials, the newspapers. He would go to their places of business and play a little tune."

As Noble's stature in the city grew, his gigs grew more and more illustrious.

He was a member of the funeral procession for President James A. Garfield. He was present at the dedication of Andrew Jackson's memorial. He was on the platform at the city's Emancipation Celebration held in Congo Square. And he sat with his wife at the entrance to the 1884 world's fair, welcoming visitors, doling out autographs and sometimes collecting contributions.

"He was sort of a mascot of the city," White said. "He was always given a position of honor, and he usually made a speech. Everybody in town knew who he was.

"To me, he's a survivor. He lived in adverse circumstances, he had no family here, and he had only his own wits to help him.

"I'm sure he must have been an appealing man. If he didn't have a pleasant manner and a warm way, why would all these people have responded to him as they did?"

CRUCIAL ROLE IN BATTLE

As for Noble's military career, it comprised 9 years and 9 months, as he calculated in his autobiographical letter, and it ranged from the War of 1812 to the Civil War.

By the time of the Battle of New Orleans, the 14-year-old was already a veteran, having served in the several clashes in the months that led up to it.

The role of a drummer at the time was a crucial one, not merely ornamental. Drumming was the primary method of communication during a battle. So the drummer would position himself near the company captain and relay the captain's orders as they were given.

"They would sound calls for commencing fire, ceasing fire, advancing, retiring. You could hear the drum and fife above the noise of the battle," said Tom Czekanski, a former curator at the Louisiana State Museum, where Noble's drum is on exhibit. "There were calls to regulate all the activities of a soldier, maybe 30 different calls, and a soldier was expected to recognize them. There were signals for everything from reveille to roll call to mess call to drill."

For Noble, drumming was his identity. On his calling card, he introduced himself as "Jordan B. Noble, the veteran drummer who had the pride and satisfaction of beating to arms the Americans... on the 8th of January, 1815."

A few years later, Noble went to the Florida Everglades for a skirmish. In 1847, he was recruited for the Washington Artillery, an elite private militia group that fought in the Mexican-American war. And during the Civil War, although he was in his 60s by then, he organized a black command under Union Gen. Benjamin Butler. He also was used in his role as a celebrity to recruit other black soldiers to the Union cause.

Noble gave up his military career against his will. At the age of 72, living on a small Army pension and whatever he could scrounge up as a musician, Noble appeared at a military station and asked to be assigned to duty.

"He seemed disappointed," Evans said, "that there was no immediate use for his services."

In 1890, Noble died. The Daily Picayune, which so often had reported his comings and goings, marked his death with a poignant obituary.

"The famous drummer boy of New Orleans," it ended, "has gone to join his comrades of many campaigns. Peace to him and honor to the brave man who served his country so often and so well."

Friends of New Orleans Cemeteries holds its annual tribute named in memory of New Orleans historian Joe Logsdon on Saturday at 1 p.m. at St. Augustine Catholic Church, 1210 Gov. Nicholls St.

The organization honors a different New Orleanian every year.

After the memorial, about 1:30 p.m., a percussion second line, with Bob French as grand marshal, will proceed to St. Louis Cemetery No. 2, Square 3, where Noble's grave will be blessed and a bronze plaque will be unveiled about 2 p.m.

Any drummers interested in joining the second line, which will be led by the Treme Brass Band, should assemble at St. Augustine at 1 p.m.

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