New Orleans—"The City That Care Forgot" and Other Nicknames

A Preliminary Investigation

People have been calling New Orleans “The City that Care Forgot” since at least 1938, when the sobriquet appeared in the New Orleans City Guide produced by the Federal Writers’ Project. That volume suggests that New Orleans is “traditionally the city that care forgot,” id. at xx, but does not say who coined the term, or when. A search of guide books and other works describing New Orleans published from 1879 through 1936 did not reveal an earlier use of the term. But, the search did show that writers have used lots of other terms for New Orleans.

In one writer’s estimation, New Orleans was the “Queen City of the Inland Sea.” Many authors noted “her famous sobriquet—that of ‘The Crescent City,’” or her “appellation of the ‘Crescent City.’” Another called her “among cities, the most feminine of women . . . .” Somewhat prosaically, one group called New Orleans “The Gateway to the Mississippi Valley.”

Some early authors might have avoided the “City that Care Forgot” formulation even if they knew of it in light of their purposes, usually advertising New Orleans as a good place for business and industry. Good burghers might have felt uncomfortable with such a louche image. Nonetheless, things had loosened up a bit by the turn of the century, at least for journalists. In 1902, The Picayune published its New Orleans, Louisiana, The Crescent City, a volume intended inter alia “to acquaint the world with the city’s attractions as a place of residence . . . .” The authors were not shy about mentioning the city’s “Latin gayety and hey-dey” and its lack of “sumptuary restrictions.” Still, in the end they could come up with nothing more catchy than: “New Orleans is the liveliest and freest city in the Land.” The Picayune also averred, again in quotes, that “There Is But One New Orleans.” Doubtless true, then as now, but what about forgetting care? The omission of the term from this volume suggests that it had not found wide use by 1902.

Other terms continued to crop up in guide books. New Orleans had already become “America’s Most Interesting City” by the 1920’s. Someone else at that time thought of calling New Orleans “The Paris of America.” This same person called the city “The Winter Capital of America.” Another author thought New Orleans “Debonair.” The editors of The New Orleanian referred to “the city where cookery is king.” And of course there’s “The Big Easy,” a term that according to one local historian derived from an early jazz music hall, but did not come into wide use until the 1970s.

Still, no printed mention of the city that care forgot. Even a leading history of Mardi Gras from the 1930s omits the term, noting that “New Orleans had a gay name, and had earned it,” and adds that the city was for a time “[a]ccounted the most wicked city of its day,” but makes no reference to the city that care forgot.
As noted above, the Federal Writers’ Project authors also of the 1930s thought New Orleans was “traditionally” known as the City that Care Forgot, but they didn’t say when the tradition started. Similarly, in 1953, another leading chronicler noted that New Orleans “earned the title of ‘The City that care forgot,’”[15] but he didn’t say when she earned it. At this writing, the derivation of the term remains obscure.

Even so, the City that Care Forgot is inspiring yet other newer and more colorful sobriquets. To pick but one: as t-shirts that began appearing during a still sweltering summer in the late 1990s will attest, New Orleans also qualifies as The City that Air Forgot.

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[1] Most of the works consulted have introductions setting out the purposes of the publication and giving some background information about the city. The author of this essay perused them with an eye toward discovering use of the term.

[2] In addition to works otherwise mentioned, the following works were consulted.

Visitors’ Guide to New Orleans, New Orleans, Waldo, ca. 1879


The Picayune’s Guide to New Orleans, New Orleans, 1908, 1910, 1924


The Double Dealer, v.1 no. 1, January 1921; v.1, no. 7, July 1921

Guy Manners, Atmosphere, New Orleans, Rob’t H. True Co., 1922


Stephen Curtis West, French Quarter Guide, New Orleans, 1929

City Guide and Commercial Directory, New Orleans, S.E. Surgi, 1927?

W.G. MacFarlane, The Charm of New Orleans, Chicago, American Autochrome Co., 1928

New Orleans To-Day, New Orleans, Wetzel, 1938


[10] id. at 5; the Gulf Coast was the “Riviera of America.” id.


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