

WHAT
HAPPENED

Baroness Pontalba returned to New Orleans in 1848 and spent the next three years on her namesake apartment buildings.

Baroness de Pontalba lived in New Orleans as an adult for fewer than four years, but her mark on the city is indelible.

Micaela Leonarda Antonia Almonester y Rojas was born in New Orleans in 1795 to wealthy and influential Andres Almonester y Rojas, a Spanish city official who came to own the property around the city's Place d'Armes. She was wed at age 15 in a prearranged marriage to French cousin Xavier Célestin Delfau de Pontalba and moved to France. She quickly discovered Celestin's father, Baron de Pontalba, wanted her wealth. "He opened a sustained campaign of psychological, and sometimes physical abuse aimed at breaking her will and forcing her to sign over her fortune," which she refused to do, according to New Orleans historian and tour guide Bruce Nolan.

In 1834, the Baron was so enraged that he shot Micaela four times in the chest. She somehow survived. Her father-in-law committed suicide that same day, making Celestin a baron, and Micaela the Baroness Pontalba. The two, who had three sons, were later legally separated and Micaela kept her vast fortune.

She returned to New Orleans at the outbreak of the French revolution in 1848, and ordered the construction of two red-brick townhouses flanking the Place d'Armes. She personally oversaw construction of the first building. She had them decorated with cast iron, including her initials "AP" on the balconies. One of the buildings is today owned by the state; the other by the city. Before returning to France in 1852, she renovated the empty town square into the garden that was soon renamed Jackson Square, Nolan said.

Her home on the outskirts of Paris, the Hotel d'Pontalba is the official residence of the U.S. Ambassador to France.



Baroness Pontalba, here in a daguerreotype, was known for her wit and intelligence.

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The Pontalba buildings, which had fallen into disrepair, were renovated by the Works Progress Administration between 1935 and 1937.



The Baroness Pontalba made cast iron popular in the French Quarter with the decorations, including her initials 'AP' on the balconies of her row houses.



The building fronting Rue St. Peter, upriver from Jackson Square, is the upper Pontalba. The building on the other side, fronting Rue St. Ann, is the lower Pontalba Building.