

Abel Dreyfous 1815-1891

Since Napoleon had emancipated the Jews, Abel Dreyfous, like other French boys, could attend a Jesuit school. Early on, he displayed the intelligence, independence and industriousness later so predominant in Felix. By the age of ten, he was working as a *petit clerc* for a notary as well as going to school. In 1834, at the age of nineteen, he was ready to leave France and embarked on a ship headed for New York. He spent about a year in the city working in a dry goods store, but he found that the job and the environment were, in his words, "not to his liking." He then moved to Long Island to work on his English language skills so that he might prepare himself to become an attorney. There he learned about the Crescent City where French was spoken and French culture thrived, and he moved South to pursue a career among those who would respect and appreciate the world from which he came.

Arriving in New Orleans in 1836, Abel pursued two careers. Already familiar with the soap-making process, he and another young French immigrant became partners as very small-scale soap manufacturers to provide them with the wherewithal for room and board. The other venture, as a clerk in the notarial firm of Joseph Cuvillier, proved a more fruitful direction. Abel found that his early training in Belfort was useful in his new home since Louisiana was under the same Civil Code with which he was already familiar in Alsace. At the end of his first decade in New Orleans, Abel had already won a notarial commission from the governor, Alexander Mouton. After receiving his commission, Abel became a partner of the man who had been, until then, his employer. The firm of Cuvillier and Dreyfous was large and well-respected.

Abel had to wait five years before becoming a naturalized citizen of the United States. To receive his certificate of citizenship, he returned to New York because that was where he originally entered the country. On the twenty-fifth of September, 1839, he formally gave up the allegiance for France and officially became an American.

Now that he had secured citizenship and a solid financial footing, Abel could begin to consider marriage. In 1846, three years after his commission was in place, he married Alice Brunswig. The couple had two children, Cécile R. and Alice, and, although they were strong enough to survive during an era when yellow fever was running rampant, Alice *mere* was not. She died while her daughters were still quite young.

In the meantime Caroline Kaufman, a lovely young woman, had arrived in New Orleans in 1848, having immigrated from Bavaria with her family. Two years later when she was sixteen, Caroline and Abel married. Already a mother to Abel's two daughters, this remarkably mature young woman and her new husband began to raise a family of their own. Caroline gave birth to nine children, but only the first seven survived to adulthood. Born in 1851, the year after Caroline and Abel married, Emile was the oldest, and the family increased methodically every other year. Two daughters preceded Felix; Amélie was born in 1853, and she was followed by Anna. Felix was the middle child of this union. His brother, Jules, was next, while two sisters, Rose and Blanche, completed the household. Caroline's younger children gave her an early brush with the tragedies that many mid-nineteenth century New Orleanian families had to endure. As she was giving birth to her ninth child, Martha, the youngest brother, Charles, lay dying of yellow fever in the adjoining bedroom. Martha, too, did not survive past childhood.

These losses shaped Caroline's life, and thereafter her empathy for those in need sparked her activism. During the Civil War she aided the wounded, and after the war she found a new use for her medically-related volunteerism as a founding member of the Ladies Aid and Sewing Society of Touro Infirmary. As a child, Ruth remembers that the women of the Ladies Aid and Sewing Society met every Thursday. Ruth enjoyed going downtown on the streetcar with her grandmother to Fellman's store (now Krauss

Company) on Canal Street to purchase the linen and cotton that Caroline then took to the hospital where the ladies met to make sheets and pillowcases for the patients. Caroline Kaufman Dreyfous' good deeds on behalf of the sick and needy earned her the unofficial appellation of *Charity Queen of New Orleans*, a title with a reputation to match that Felix claimed helped elect him to the state legislature when he ran for office. On September 9, 1892, the New Orleans correspondent for the AMERICAN ISRAELITE discussed the work of elite Jewish women on behalf of Touro Infirmary and the Jewish Home for Widows and Orphans. At this time, Caroline was the second vice-president of the Ladies Aid and Sewing Society. The correspondent singled out Caroline as one of three women deserving special mention. "Mmes. [I.L.] Leucht, [Charles] Newman and [Abel] Dreyfous are ladies well known for unselfish zeal in all matters of Jewish Charity, and perform the functions of their office in a manner to make all feel their nobleness of heart and kindness of purpose."

By 1859 Abel had moved the soap factory to "Barracks Street between Dauphine and Bourbon Streets" while Abel and Caroline returned "to their home at the corner of Esplanade Avenue" where, Abel continued to reside until his death in October 1891. Abel died while his son Felix and daughter-in-law, Julia Seeman Dreyfous, were on their honeymoon. When the couple returned to the city, they lived with Felix's mother on Esplanade Avenue until they built their own home on the uptown river corner of Jackson Avenue and Camp Street in the Garden District. The Dreyfous family was not the only family that moved from Esplanade Avenue to the Garden District; many of their friends were making a similar transition. After his parents' home had been sold, Felix insisted that Caroline come to live with the newlyweds in their new home.

More of this story is available on this site under Felix Jonathan Dreyfous Biography