



GEORGE PARISH II AND HIS MISTRESS, AMERICA VESPUCCI

Story Of The Fabulous America Vespucci Appears In The St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Editor's note: The author of this carefully researched, excitingly written story of America Vespucci, Paul J. Reale, was a reporter for the Ogdensburg Journal and Sunday Advance-News in the early 1950's. Since then, he has worked on newspapers in Ohio, Maryland and Massachusetts, as editor in several instances. He has long been intrigued by the romance between Vespucci and David Parish and has had stories on the subject published on a number of occasions. He has also sold articles on various subjects to national special interest magazines. His wife is the former Rosemary MacDougall of Ogdensburg. The couple and their children now live in Marshfield, Mass.

By PAUL J. REALE
THE LADY VISITING ST. Louis was America Vespucci, a descendant of the Florentine explorer Amerigo, for whom America was named.

The time: early spring, 1839. She had youth, intelligence and great beauty, in addition to an illustrious name.

James Silk Buckingham, British lecturer and writer, had met the girl just prior to her arrival, and he thought her dazzling.

He wrote that the woman with the dark eyes and flowing jet-black hair "seemed to realize the idea I had often formed of Cleopatra." "She had," he said, "the style of beauty one sees in the finest statues of the antique — a noble head, a fine expanded chest, white and delicate hands, small feet, and an exquisitely graceful figure."

Also in America's favor was the story she told:

She was an exile, banished from Italy because she had espoused liberty for her countrymen.

She had been in La Jeune Italie, a secret society agitating to rid Italy of foreign domination and to unite the whole land under a single sovereign. Disguised as a man, she had battled on the banks of the Rimini and suffered a severe stroke on the back of the head from an Austrian dragon.

St. Louisans, always for freedom, worshiped the lady.

As to her business here, everybody knew about that already — it had been in all the newspapers for months. America was in St. Louis because Congress had advised her that the people — "this patriotic, enlightened and generous people" — would give her her heart's desire if only she would go to them.

WHAT THE LADY DESIRED, and what the Federal Government had said it could not grant her for constitutional reasons, was a piece of land on which she and perhaps other exiled revolutionaries might settle. The whole country was therefore being urged to contribute money to help America purchase a tract. Nicholas Biddle, Philadelphia banker, had agreed to serve the cause as national fund treasurer.

America was in Washington, D.C., in the winter of 1838, soon after her arrival from Europe. Her guardian in the city was French Minister De-Pontois because she had come under the auspices of King Louis Philippe and his queen, who had granted her asylum from Italy. The French monarchs had armed the girl with a packet of highly complimentary letters for her journey to the New World, and a French ship had been placed at her disposal.

The giants of government were captivated by America. She was, in the words of one observer, "a decided sensation." Daniel Webster as well as Levi Woodbury of New Hampshire, the Secretary of the Treasury, threw parties in her honor. Henry Clay squired the lady to a lavish ball at the Georgetown mansion of the Russian Minister, Count Alexander de Bodisco. The venerable ex-President, Representative John Quincy Adams of Massachusetts, was seen "gurgling half-English, half-French blandishments in her ear."

President Martin Van Buren, too, was enchanted by America. It was widely reported that he, a widower, "seemed much struck by the splendid girl and was turning his attention to the study of the Italian language." Gossips noted that she was seated at the head table, between Van Buren and Webster, at a dinner in the White House for the Supreme Court justices.

America's petition for land was presented Jan. 29, 1839, and her champion was Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri. "The big, muscular senator could hardly have been more eloquent than he was that day, with America herself looking down at him from the gallery. "She is without a country,



THIS WAS THE HOUSE THAT DAVID PARISH BUILT — and this was the house in which his nephew, George, and George's exquisite mistress, America Vespucci, did NOT live happily ever after. However, they did live to-

gether there for 18 years. It was later bought by George Hall and underwent extensive changes. Since July, 1923, it has been the Remington Art Memorial.

without fortune and without protection," Benton told his colleagues in the course of a long, passionate address. "She asks," he said, "that we grant her a corner of the land which bears the name of her glorious forebear."

THE PUBLIC LANDS COMMITTEE deliberated for a full month and then ruled against the petition. "With every feeling of respect and tenderness," said Robert J. Walker of Mississippi, chairman, "the majority of the committee deems it impossible for this Government to make a grant of land. It thinks such a grant without precedent, and it would violate the spirit of those compacts by which the public domain was ceded to the Government."

Unhappy news, indeed, but as Walker was immediately to assure her, America really had no cause to rue.

"This patriotic, enlightened and generous people," he pledged, "will take into their hands the case of America Vespucci and do all that Congress is forbidden to do, and more. They will demonstrate to the world that the name of America — our country's name — is dear to us all. They will procure for her that home which she desires among us."

The words had hardly been uttered than when the senators arose, almost in unison, and started contributing sums of money for the start of the national subscription in America's behalf.

"Senators from every quarter of the Union subscribed," says one account. "The money was received by Mr. Haight, sergeant-at-arms of the Senate, and presented to her. Many others gave money, among them judges of the Supreme Court, members of the House of Representatives and some citizens."

Bolstered both in spirits and in finances, America set off to see and to be seen. She traveled about the country for 14 months, and she created a stir no matter where she went. "Her path," it is said, "was strewn with roses, open hands and confiding hearts."

The day of Miss Vespucci's arrival in St. Louis — May 27, 1839 — found the city in something of a holiday mood. A delegation of citizens representing St. Louis society and wealth was on hand to greet her as her boat, the steamer St. Louis, pulled into port. Even Gov. Thomas Reynolds and Mayor Joshua Pitcher were there, clambering aboard to pay tribute.

The city's newspapers treated America kindly in their columns, with the exception of the Missouri Republican. The editor was annoyed by the whole business and said as much. "We have looked upon this matter, since its first introduction into Congress, up to the present time, as rather ridiculous for men of grave and sober sense," he grumbled. Further, he could not see what claim America had "on our national sympathies beyond those which any other foreigner could accomplish, handsome and virtuous female may demand."

ST. LOUISANS GENERAL-ly disagreed for America was feted everywhere especially by the city's elite. Several times she was the guest of honor at elegant parties at the John F. A. Sanford home, and Sanford

was pleased to inform his father-in-law, Pierre Chouteau Jr., the "Prince of Fur Traders," that he had entertained the Florentine. "She has won all hearts," he said.

The city fathers were as attentive to America as anybody. They called a public hearing at the Courthouse and duly checked her credentials to pronounce her worthy of American aid and protection.

Thereupon the city threw its efforts behind the national subscription. U.S. District Judge Luke E. Lawless headed the local drive. His committee included such prominent figures as Mayor Pilcher, Col. John O'Fallon, banker John Smith; Marie Philippe Leduc, the Probate Court judge; Gen. William Milburn, Victor Monroe, Louis A. Benoist, Montgomery Blair and Judge J.B. Bowlin.

The St. Louis campaign under way, America who had been here for about a month, sailed on to other cities... Louisville, Cincinnati and Philadelphia.

Then came the shocker. The time: early spring, 1840.

America advised the press that the money raised for her was not "an official gift of the government" and she was consequently rejecting it. With this announcement, she boarded a ship for Europe, leaving in her wake a bewildered citizenry.

The New York Evening Star seemed best able to explain the curious development, perhaps because it had done some digging into the Florentine's past.

THE PAPER CHARGED that America, while indeed a descendant of Amerigo, had been the key figure in a palace scandal. She had been involved romantically with King Louis Philippe's son, Ferdinand, Duke of Orleans, and when the monarch insisted that he marry some continental princess, America had been "an obstacle to that desirable alliance and her absence therefore became necessary."

The publication went on:

"America was somewhat remote, and a capital excuse for a visit to the New World might be found in a claim for a corner of land, given to the descendant of one of the first discoverers of that aforesaid land."

"Miss Vespucci arrives in this country, assigned to the polite attention of the French Minister, and through him is introduced to the First Society."

"Well, in the course of time the prince marries, and De-Pontois, gentleman of moderate political influence, is suddenly promoted to be Ambassador of Constantinople, a high diplomatic station with great outfit and noble title. Miss Vespucci makes her curtsy to the American people, declines receiving their money because it is not the gift of the nation, and embarks for Europe."

There was much more to the story, but, unfortunately, the public was to remain ignorant of it until publication of "Life and Times of Amerigo Vespucci" by Baker & Scribner, New York, in 1846.

C. Edwards Lester, the author, had interviewed the Vespucci — America's parents, Capt. Amerigo Vincenzo and Leopolda Cappelli Vespucci — at their home in Florence in the early 1840s and, as he was to report in his book, they were much embarrassed by America's escapades.

The girl, born Nov. 29, 1804, raised his last gold piece to had always been "indole and Parish's eyes. "You want the unmanageable." Prior to her woman, then you shall have New World adventures, she had her — providing your luck been "the mistress of some holds. I shall play you the lady dozen men" (Bad behavior ra- against my losses. Mr. Parish, ther than an association with on the cross of this coin."

La Jeune Italie would seem Legend says that the coin reason for expelling the girl, if was flipped and that Parish indeed she was expelled by It-

aly. She had not come directly Some months ago, America again delighted Washington, Her first stop off was Rio de this time as the heroine of a Janeiro. When Brazil rejected musical comedy. "The Day the Senate Fell in Love" The book her bid for a pension as a des- and lyrics are by Bruce Har- rison, a young playwright and cendant of Amerigo, she looked hobby historian from Arlington, for a change of luck in Wash- Va. John Franceshina of Chicopee, Mass., wrote the music. The show ran for a week under the auspices of the Depart-

ment of Drama at Catholic University. FINALLY, ELENA, NOT America was her given name. En route to the United States, she had appropriated the name of her youngest sister, Ameriga, and discarded the "g" for a "c."

On Nov. 18, 1841, the steamer Caledonia, 14 days out of Liverpool, docked in Boston and the Florentine stepped ashore. How different she seemed now! Gone were the plain black gowns she had worn as an exile. She was attired in chic and costly costumes, and she announced herself grandly as "Contessa Helene America." But few persons ever had opportunity to address her as such because shortly after her arrival she vanished from public view. Not for two years was there any mention of her in the newspapers.

Then, in 1843, St. Louisans found in the Missouri Republican an article that must have given them a start. The item, reproduced from a New York paper, stated that America was now living "in a state of immoral intimacy" with George Parish, a merchant-landowner in Ogdensburg, N.Y., on the St. Lawrence River.

George was the scion of a fiercely rich family of German bankers. His uncle, David Parish, is well known to serious students of American history. He helped float the \$16,000,000 loan with John Jacob Astor and Stephen Girard to bolster the United States in the War of 1812.)

The paper said that the Parish-Vespucci liaison had started before her first visit to this country. "After she had left the United States on the defeat of her scheme of begging land," said the article, "Parish sent to Paris for her and conveyed her from Plattsburgh, N.Y., to his home in Ogdensburg in a splendid coach and six, he himself riding behind the establishment."

While this may be so, the story that persists in New York is that Parish won her after a poker game played with John Van Buren, rakish, hard-drinking lawyer son of Martin Van Buren. John is supposed to have taken up with America on her return to the United States.

TRADITION HAS IT THAT the game took place one stormy night in the winter of 1841-42 in a hotel at Evans Mills, N.Y. Van Buren, dulled by much drinking and playing recklessly, lost all his money to Parish and then an additional \$5000 belonging to a client. The loss disturbed him deeply, and so, too, did the warm glances being exchanged between his woman friend and his opponent at cards, the handsome and clear-headed Parish.

"You fancy the lady?" John finally asked. "I make a proposal then," he continued, and



Advance News., March 10, 1968, Page 9, Image 9

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