The Napoleon House plot: The colorful history behind the New Orleans landmark

By **Contributing writer**
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The Times-Picayune is marking the tricentennial of New Orleans with its ongoing 300 for 300 project, running through 2018 and highlighting the moments and people that connect and inspire us. Today, the series continues with the 1821 plan to spirit the then-exiled Napoleon Bonaparte to New Orleans.

THEN: In 1821 New Orleans, where sentiment for all things French remained strong, a plot was afoot to rescue Napoleon Bonaparte from his exile on St. Helena and bring him to the Crescent City. The plan: Dominique You, a pirating colleague of Jean Lafitte, would lead a band of Baratarians to spirit the Little Corporal off the south Atlantic island in a yacht called the Seraphine. Nicholas Girod, a wealthy businessman and former mayor, not only helped underwrite this scheme but also offered to put Napoleon up in his house at 500 Chartres St. Despite their planning,

none of this came to pass: Word of Napoleon's death reached New Orleans before the plot could be set in motion.

NOW: Napoleon didn't get to New Orleans, but his name graces The Napoleon House. One of the city's most legendary restaurant-bars, it now occupies the building at 500 Chartres. Pimm's cups are served in tall glasses and classical music pours forth from the speakers.

TRI-via:

- The Napoleon House isn't the only local reminder of Napoleon. Dr. Francois Carlo Antonmarchi, who had been Napoleon's doctor in exile, gave the city a copy of Napoleon's death mask, which is on display in the Louisiana State Museum.

- One of Uptown's main thoroughfares bears Napoleon's name, and it is flanked by streets bearing names of his battles. The exception to this array is Gen. Pershing Street, which got that name during World War I, when anti-German sentiment led the city to change the name of Berlin Street.

- According to accounts of the time, excitement was rampant about the possibility of rescuing Napoleon in what was supposed to be a daring nighttime move. No definitive word exists on whether Napoleon knew of this scheme and, if so, what he thought of it.

- Girod, who was New Orleans' mayor from 1812 to 1815, was born in 1747 in France, and his family moved to New Orleans while the city was under Spanish rule.

- Girod and three brothers were so successful as merchants that he bought property at Chartres and St. Louis streets, where he built his house. He also invested in land beyond the French Quarter, including property along what is now Girod Street.

- According to the Napoleon House website, this is why you always hear classical music and opera in the bar: After Joseph Impastato bought the building in 1920 for $14,000 -- the equivalent of nearly $170,000 today -- he decided the place needed some atmosphere, so he brought down his Victrola and some opera records to play for the customers. A tradition was born.

- The Napoleon House's signature drink is the Pimm's Cup. Here's the recipe, from the Napoleon House website: Fill a tall 12 oz glass with ice and add 1 1/4 oz. Pimm's #1 and 3 oz lemonade. Top off with 7up and garnish with a cucumber slice.

N.O. DNA:

Where else but New Orleans would you find a landmark commemorating something that didn't happen? The fact that it involves one of history's most charismatic personalities -- the man who crowned himself emperor of France -- only enhances the tale. The Napoleon House, where mottled walls are hung with fading pictures, doesn't look as though it has changed much since the city's earliest days. Habitues feared change when the restaurateur Ralph Brennan bought the bar in 2015, but Chris Montero, whom he installed as the executive chef and general manager, allayed that concern when he said, "Why would we come into this amazing place and change anything?"

John Pope, contributing writer   *Sources: Staff research, "New Orleans City Guide," gonola.com, www.napoleonhouse.com*