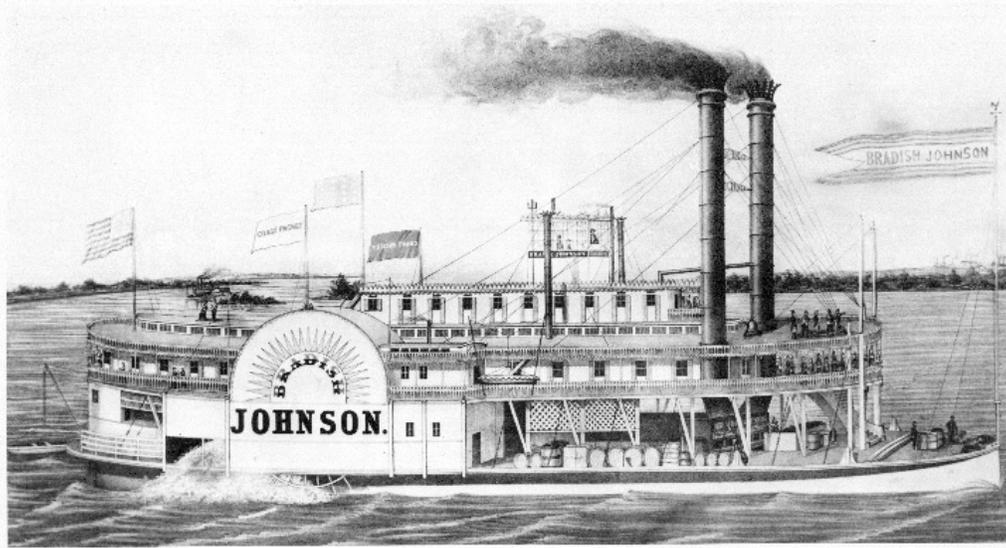


# BRADISH JOHNSON



1811 – 1892

Stephen Whitney Lindsay

2008

2.0

# BRADISH JOHNSON

I recently researched a number of my ancestors, using the World Wide Web to wander through archived newspaper stories, genealogical sites, and old digitized books to learn their stories and unravel some mysteries. One branch of the family tree seemed unpromising — it contained names that were not part of the family lore, so I didn't bother with it.

At some point, when I thought that I had found about all I was going to find about my ancestors, I realized that this branch — my great grandmother's maternal line — might be of interest, so I did a search using the name I had found for her grandfather: Bradish Johnson. Unusual names such as his work well in a web search, since most of the results will be relevant. With a common name like "James Johnson", the millions of useless links that turn up can be overwhelming.

The first thing that my Google search revealed was a beautiful photograph of a mansion in the Garden District of New Orleans — called the "Bradish Johnson House". The next thing was a bed and breakfast south of New Orleans — an old plantation house that had belonged to Bradish Johnson. Then I found a reference for the Bradish Johnson Building, at Fifth Avenue and Twenty-first Street in Manhattan. Apparently, there was a story here. With a little online sleuthing, I was able to piece some of that story together.

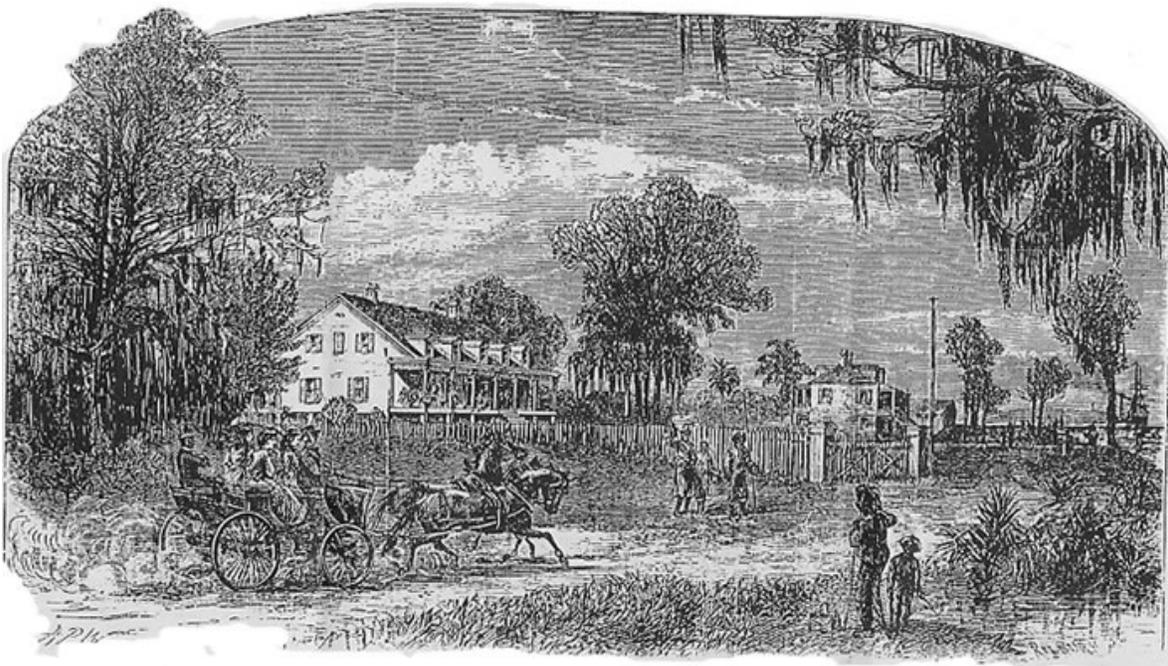
In 1795, two sea captains from Nova Scotia, Captain William M. Johnson and Captain George Bradish, purchased a large plot of land on the Mississippi Delta forty miles south of New Orleans. On it they founded a plantation that they called "Magnolia". They proceeded to grow sugarcane there, refining it in one of the first sugar refineries built in Louisiana. Captain Johnson also purportedly went into partnership with the famous pirate Jean Lafitte, who would capture slaves at sea and deliver them to Johnson, who would then sell them up and down the river<sup>1</sup>.

Captain Johnson, as he liked to be called, had four sons: the third of these, born in 1811, was named for his father's partner, George Bradish. That is my great-great-great grandfather, Bradish Johnson.

Although being a pirate, a slave trader, a river pilot, a captain, and a planter sounds like enough to keep one man busy, it was apparently not enough for Captain Johnson. In the

early 1820's, he went to New York City and opened a refinery and a distillery there, presumably using cane from his plantations in Louisiana as the raw material. Foreseeing the rapid growth of the city, he began accumulating as much property as he could, mostly on the Hudson waterfront around his distillery. The distillery (or at least one of them— there seems to have been more than one) occupied two crosstown blocks, from 15<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> Streets between Ninth and Eleventh Avenues.

In the late 1830's, Captain Johnson sold his half of "Magnolia", retaining land four miles up the river at Pointe à la Hache where he started a new plantation, called "Woodland". The manor house of this new plantation was a relatively simple Creole farmhouse. After the father's death, presumably in the 1840's, his ambitious third son Bradish took over his businesses in Louisiana and New York.



**Woodland Plantation in 1871**

Bradish Johnson seems to have been as much a Northerner as a Southerner. He was born in Louisiana, but he attended Columbia College in New York, graduating in 1831. During his father's lifetime, the businesses in New York operated under the name William M. Johnson & Sons. After his father's death, Bradish went into partnership with Moses Lazarus

under the name Johnson & Lazarus. When Lazarus retired, the business became Bradish Johnson & Sons (the name of a firm was apparently supposed to be an accurate representation of who was in it at that time). The New York Times reported that two different Johnson distilleries burned to the ground in a period of six months in 1854: Johnson & Lazarus at 244 Washington Street, about a block north of the future site of the World Trade Center, and Johnson & Sons at 16<sup>th</sup> Street. The Johnsons became known as innovators in the industry. For example, the Johnson & Lazarus refinery was reported to be the first firm to successfully make use of centrifugal machines in refining sugar.<sup>ii</sup>



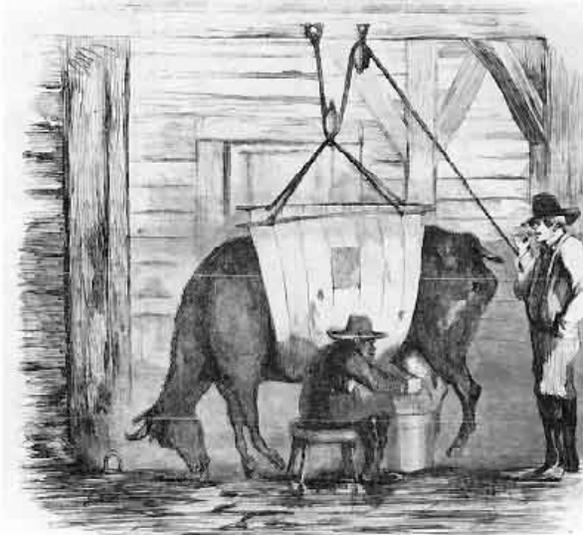
**The Bradish Johnson Mansion at Broadway and 21<sup>st</sup> Street**

I was surprised to find, during one of my Google searches, that Bradish Johnson's name appears in a biography of the poet Emma Lazarus, whose poem *The New Colossus* ("...give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free...") is inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty. Emma Lazarus was the daughter of Bradish Johnson's business

partner, Moses Lazarus. The biographer speculates that Emma Lazarus might have visited the Johnson plantations in Louisiana, since some of her poems include empathetic descriptions of black slaves.<sup>iii</sup>

In the same West Side neighborhood as Johnson's distilleries there were other industries, including several chemical companies. These companies banded together at some point to form the Chemical Bank of New York, which was incorporated in 1844. Bradish Johnson was a founder of the bank and served on its original board. The name Chemical Bank has disappeared, but the bank went on to be very successful: in the 1990's, it acquired Manufacturers Hanover Trust, then Chase Manhattan, and eventually J.P. Morgan, to become the behemoth J.P. Morgan Chase & Co.

The huge Johnson distillery at 16<sup>th</sup> Street was the subject of a famous muckraking expose by *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* in 1858. The distilleries in 19<sup>th</sup> century New York



**Milking a sick cow at the Johnson & Lazarus Distillery, from Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, 1858**

over the city, advertised as farm-fresh milk from New Jersey. In an editorial published at the height of the scandal, the *New York Times* described swill milk as a “bluish, white compound of true milk, pus and dirty water, which, on standing, deposits a yellowish, brown sediment that is manufactured in the stables attached to large distilleries by running the refuse distillery slops through the udders of dying cows and over the unwashed hands of milkers...” [sic].

The Johnsons were sponsors of the Tammany Hall politician Alderman “Butcher Mike” Tuomey, who “became nationally known for blocking sanitary laws and regulations, most notably in the area of clean milk for children”<sup>iv</sup>. Tuomey defended the distillers vigorously throughout the scandal — in

had to get rid of the tons of organic waste they generated, and their solution was to feed the still hot mash to hundreds of sick old cows and then sell the milk. The cows were crowded into filthy stables, and were so sick that some of them were reportedly held up by slings. They were cared for by old drunks, referred to sardonically as “milkmaids”. The milk, called “swill milk”, was sometimes cut with chalk or flour mixed with water. “Swill milk” was accused of being a major cause of infant mortality — it was sold from pushcarts all



**The swill milk trade, by Thomas Nast**

fact, he just happened to be put in charge of the Board of Health investigation. *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* staked out Bradish Johnson's mansion at 21<sup>st</sup> and Broadway, and reported that in the midst of the investigation, Tuomey was observed making late night visits.<sup>v</sup>

Not surprisingly, the Tuomey committee's investigation concluded that there was nothing deleterious about swill milk, but that the stables should nonetheless be cleaned up a little. "Butcher Mike" was thenceforth known as "Swill Milk" Tuomey.

Although Johnson & Lazarus was the subject of the expose that led to the swill milk scandal, the distillery was hardly unique: all the distilleries in New York and Brooklyn produced swill milk. The horror of swill milk led to the first food safety laws, and the growing realization that government had a role to play in protecting the public from unbridled capitalism. The first food safety laws—and the beginning of the idea of consumer protection—came out of the swill milk scandal of 1858.

In a laudatory biographical sketch of Bradish Johnson that appeared in an 1862 book called *Merchants of Old New York*, the author makes a light-hearted reference to the recent swill milk affair. He also credulously reports that Bradish had offered his 250 slaves at Woodland Plantation the chance to go to Liberia at his own expense, but that they had voted to stay on the plantation they loved. This claim seems a little suspect, given the timing (during the Civil War) and the circumstances (Bradish being a plantation owner who was also part of New York's merchant elite).

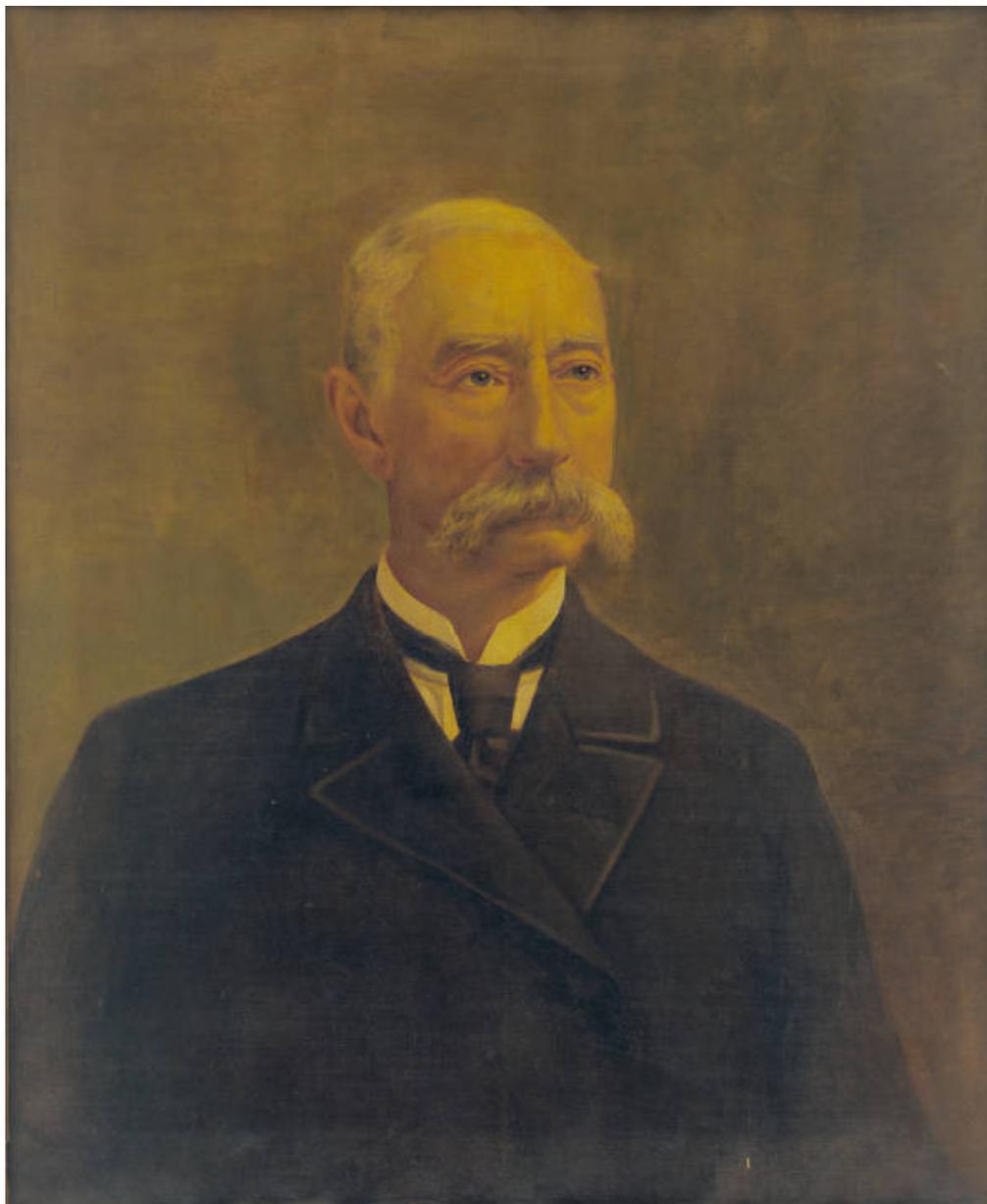
During the Civil War, Johnson was involved in several notable events — none of which make him look very good. In 1863, he and two other Northerners who owned plantations in Louisiana wrote to Abraham Lincoln to request that Louisiana, then conquered and under military rule, be forgiven and let back into the Union with its constitution intact—that is, with slavery preserved. They argued that the state had never been dissolved, so the constitution had remained in effect. Lincoln politely replied by saying that he had heard that "a respectable portion of the Louisiana people desire to amend their State constitution", and that to let Louisiana back into the Union with slavery intact would probably not help the Union cause.

Earlier in 1863, Johnson had sued a brigadier general of the Union Army in Louisiana. The suit claimed that in 1862 the occupying Union Army, under the command of General Dow of the 13<sup>th</sup> Maine Regiment, "took from Johnson's plantation twenty-five hogsheads of sugar, plundered the dwelling-house hereon and took one silver pitcher, one-half dozen silver

knives, one-half dozen silver spoons, one fish knife, one-half dozen silver teaspoons and other articles.” Johnson presented himself as a loyal citizen of the Union, residing in New York, who had simply been robbed by the Union Army. He was awarded \$1750 in damages by the court. When General Dow failed to pay him, he sued Dow in Dow’s home state of Maine after the war. The case went all the way to the Supreme Court, which handed down a decision in 1876 against Johnson, pointing out that his holdings were in conquered territory during a time of war, and that it would be very hard to engage in warfare if the enemy could sue for damages. The case of “Johnson v. Dow” became a hot topic of debate during the heated Tilden-Hayes Presidential election of 1876, as the country tried to figure out the confusing nature of the status of the defeated Confederate states.<sup>vi</sup>

The war also produced an account of life at Woodland, admittedly at a confusing and difficult time. In 1863 the Union Army’s “Office of Negro Labor” was sent to investigate conditions there. They found that on the plantation, which was run by an overseer named Decker, “great ill feeling and discontent” existed, with much of the animosity directed towards Decker. The slaves (now called “laborers” by the Union Army) said that they would “accept even the Devil for an overseer, if you will only remove this man!” They begged to be given permission to enlist in the Union Army. They complained that their rations were “unfairly curtailed” by Decker and that he was “lecherous toward their women.” After the inspectors had left, Decker is said to have “harangued the Negroes, boasted of his unlimited power over them,” and “used seditious and insulting language” towards the Union.<sup>vii</sup> This report presents a very different picture from the one that appeared in *Merchants of Old New York*, which claimed that the happy slaves had refused passage to Liberia and were able to earn enough money to buy their own freedom, but chose not to.

A very different view of Woodland was published in a post-war travelogue called *The Great South*. According to this account, the Negroes are now making money “rapidly” with the help of their old masters. “Each plantation has its group of white buildings, gleaming in the sun; each its long vistas of avenues, bordered with orange trees; for the orange and the sugar-cane are friendly neighbors. When the steamer swings around at the wharf of such a lordly plantation as that of the ‘Woodlands’ of Bradish Johnson, . . . the negroes come trooping out, men and women dancing, somersaulting and shouting; and if perchance there is music on the steamer, no power can restrain the merry antics of the African.”<sup>viii</sup>

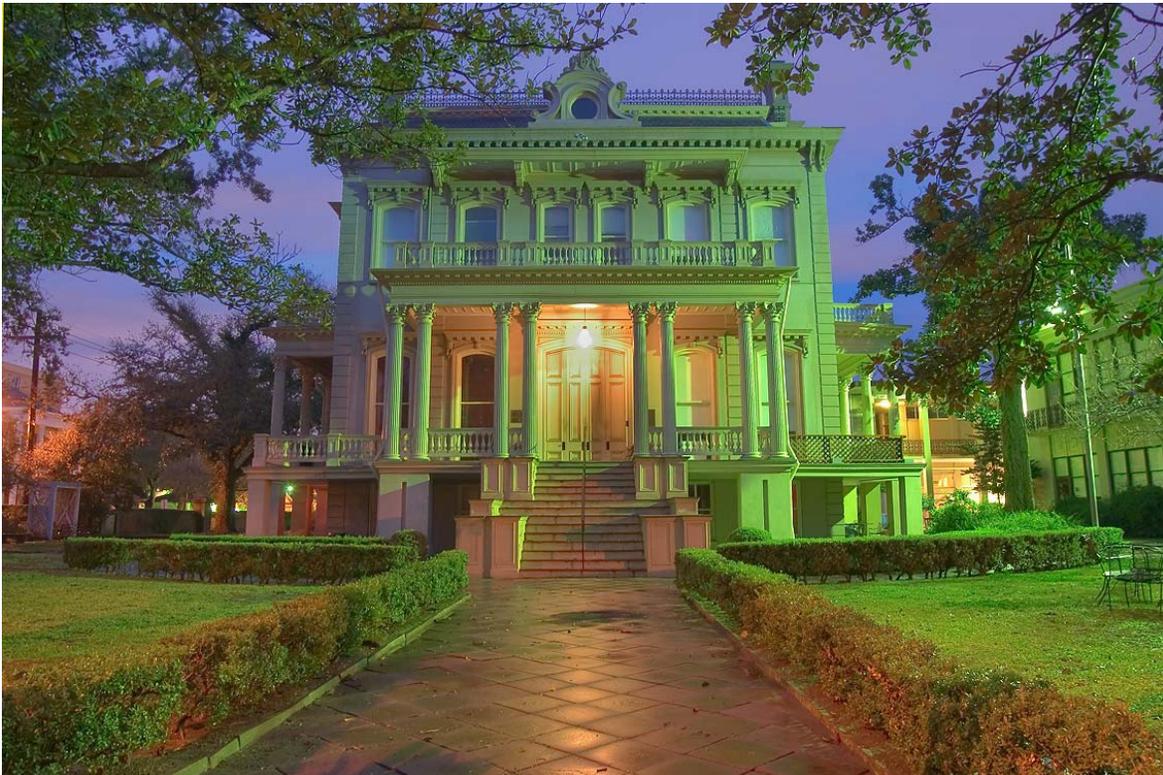


**Bradish Johnson, from the Louisiana State Museum**

Around 1840, Bradish Johnson had married Louisa Anna Lawrence, who was descended from some of New York's prominent merchant families – she was a Lawrence on both her mother's and father's sides, and her mother was an Ireland . Bradish and Louisa had ten children. One of their daughters, Margaret Lawrence Johnson, married the New Haven and New York socialite Stephen Whitney, grandson of the millionaire New York merchant of the same name. Their first child was Louise Lawrence Whitney, my great grandmother, born

in 1867, whom I knew as “Ga” (she died in 1962, when I was nine). I wonder what the aristocratic Whitneys thought of their in-law Bradish Johnson— a slave owner and liquor merchant in partnership with a Jew, accused of poisoning babies, who had sued a Union general?

In my family, stories have long circulated about my great grandmother Ga’s connection to New Orleans, but no one could explain exactly what that connection was— all our relatives seemed to be from New York or New Haven. Now I understand that the connection was through Ga’s grandfather, Bradish Johnson. In 1872, around the time he retired from business and just after the death of his wife, Johnson moved from New York to a new Italianate mansion he had built on Prytania Street in the Garden District of New Orleans.



**The Bradish Johnson House, New Orleans**

Ga must have gone to that house when she was young and, as a young woman, participated in New Orleans High Society. A short biography of her father Stephen Whitney published in 1877 says that “he resided on the homestead, Whitney Avenue, New Haven.... spending the Winter months on Woodlawn [sic] plantation, Parish of Plaquemine, La.”<sup>ix</sup> Ga’s father, who was a gentleman farmer in Connecticut, was apparently helping his father-in-law run the

plantations in Louisiana in the post-war years. The family ties were strong: when Stephen Whitney's wife Margaret died, he married his sister-in-law, another one of Bradish Johnson's daughters, Louisa.

Bradish Johnson died at his vast summer estate in Bay Shore (East Islip), on the south shore of Long Island, in 1892, at the age of 81. His obituary in the *New York Times* repeated the story from *Old Merchants of New York* about what an enlightened slave owner he was. His mansion in New York stood on the small block on 21<sup>st</sup> Street between Broadway and Fifth Avenue. In 1877, after he had moved to New Orleans, it had become the home of the Lotos Club, although he still owned the building. In 1900, his heirs tore down the mansion and, after a delay of seventeen years, built a "modern" office building—the Bradish Johnson Building—on the site. I believe it still stands, just south of the Flatiron Building.

Woodland Plantation was sold and fell into disrepair. In the 1990's a couple bought the house, completely restored it, and turned it into a bed and breakfast. They point out on their web site that the house is in fact well-known as the old plantation portrayed on the label of Southern Comfort.<sup>x</sup>



The plantation house of the original Johnson plantation, "Magnolia", rotted away a long time ago.

Bradish owned other plantations, including "Pointe Celeste" and "Belleview", which were in Plaquemines Parish along with "Woodland". Another one, according to numerous web sites, he gave to his grandson, "Harry Payne Whitney"[sic] (Great Uncle Harry Whitney, Ga's younger brother, is often confused with his much wealthier and better known contemporary Harry Payne Whitney, who

was no relation). This is now called the Whitney Plantation, in what is called the Whitney Historic District northwest of New Orleans.<sup>xi</sup> The ruin was purchased in 1997 by a lawyer named John Cummings, who is in the process of renovating it. It is unique in having untouched slave quarters and other original features. Cummings is planning to turn the site

into a Museum of Slavery.<sup>xiii</sup> Biographies of Harry Whitney do not mention any time spent in Louisiana, so this plantation may have actually been associated with Harry's father Stephen Whitney.

The Bradish Johnson House in New Orleans is now the home of a private school for girls, the Louise S. McGehee School, and is a New Orleans landmark.

Johnson's Manhattan real estate was auctioned off in 1900 to settle his estate (he also owned a lot of land in the Bronx). The lots were all purchased by a corporation formed by his 60 heirs. Most of the land was between Eighth Avenue and the Hudson River, from 12<sup>th</sup> Street to 49<sup>th</sup> Street, with a strong concentration around 16<sup>th</sup> Street. In all, 78 acres of Manhattan real estate were sold for a total of \$4,796,100.<sup>xiii</sup> The two blocks between 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> Avenues and 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> Street, where the Johnson & Son distillery, stables, and sugar refinery once stood, became the home of the rapidly expanding National Biscuit Company.



**Chelsea Market**

Over the next twenty years, Nabisco built a complex of bakeries on the site, connected by pedestrian bridges in some places. But by 1958, all of its production had moved to more modern facilities in New Jersey, and the property was sold and left to decay.

In the early 1990's, it found a new lease on life when a developer named Irwin B. Cohen turned the ground floor of the eastern block into the fashionable Chelsea Market, a collection of trendy shops and food providers set among the preserved ruins of the old factory. In 2009, the old elevated railroad tracks, which used to deliver tons of flour to the National Biscuit Company bakery, were turned into an urban park called "The High Line". One of the access points to the High Line is located between the two Johnson blocks, at 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 16<sup>th</sup> Street.<sup>xiv</sup>



**The High Line at 10th Ave. and 16th Street**

Bradish Johnson's son Bradish Johnson Jr., usually identified as a "financier", built a new mansion in East Islip—and called it "Woodland", after his family's old plantation. It is now the main building of a small private school called the Hewlett School. During World War II, the Johnson's loaned it to the exiled King and Queen of Norway. President Roosevelt visited them there.



**The Hewlett School, East Islip, Long Island**

There are intriguing online references to a famous treasure hunter and salvager operating in the Florida Keys in the 1890's by the name of Bradish Johnson. He is said to have learned to sail by racing yachts on Long Island, so he is certainly related to the original Bradish Johnson, although I can't figure out how.<sup>xv</sup>

A 26 year old Newsweek photographer named Bradish Johnson IV was killed in 1937 while covering the Spanish Civil War.<sup>xvi</sup>

There is a current business listing for a law firm in New Orleans named Bradish Johnson Co. Ltd. They specialize in oil and gas leasing, I believe. There does not appear to be a Bradish Johnson in New Orleans, but there are a number of Bradish Johnson's, from Pennsylvania to Hawaii, who appear in a Peoplefind search.

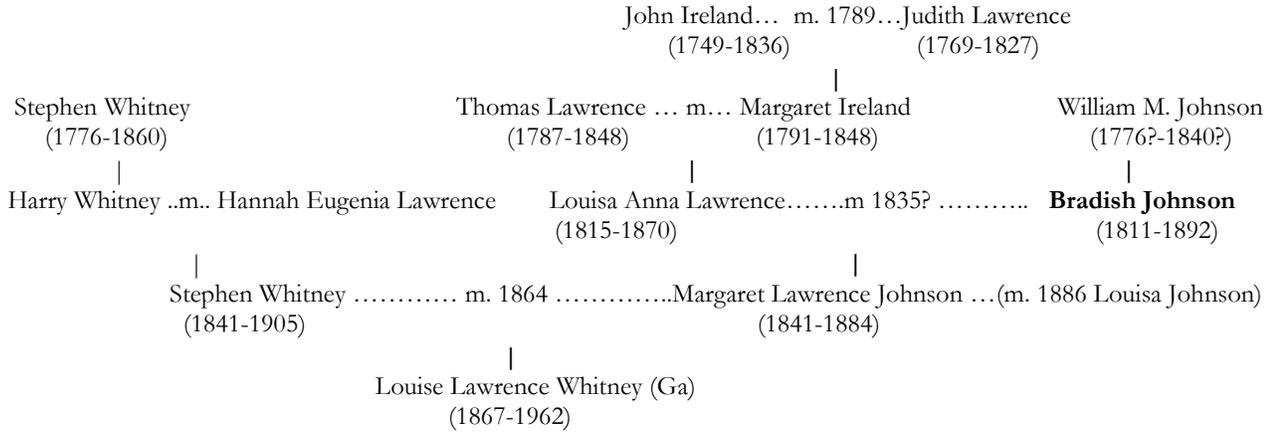
Although I know that people have always moved around a lot—mobility is not a 20th century invention—I still find it amazing to think of having a family business in both New York and Louisiana in the decades before the Civil War. Whatever else they were (not saints), the Johnsons must have been strong willed and energetic men. They were part of the wild growth and development of the United States in the nineteenth century, and Bradish was a second string player in the age of the Robber Barons.

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Detail of an 1852 map of Chelsea, showing the notorious William M. Johnson and Sons cow stables to the west of 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue. The Distillery fills the block to the east of 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue, the current site of Chelsea Market.

## Whitney – Johnson Family Tree



\* Stephen Whitney’s mother was Hannah Eugenia Lawrence, so both of Ga’s grandmothers were Lawrences—and one of those (Bradish’s wife) was also a Lawrence on her maternal side.

\* Stephen Whitney married Louisa Johnson, his late wife’s sister, in 1886

## End Notes

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- <sup>i</sup> History of Woodland Plantation Bed and Breakfast <http://www.woodlandplantation.com/history.htm>
- <sup>ii</sup> NYT November 5, 1892 obituary of Bradish Johnson
- <sup>iii</sup> “Emma Lazarus and Her World: Life and Letters” Bette Roth-Young 1997 p. 49 (on Google Books)
- <sup>iv</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael\\_Tuomey](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Tuomey)
- <sup>v</sup> cited in NYT October 29 1878 p. 8
- <sup>vi</sup> “Nathan Clifford Democrat 1803-1881”, Phillip Greeley Clifford, G.P.Putnams and Sons 1922 p. 295 (on Google Books)
- <sup>vii</sup> “Emma Lazarus and Her World: Life and Letters” Bette Roth-Young 1997 p. 49 (on Google Books)
- <sup>viii</sup> “The Great South” by Edward King , 1875 p. 81 UNC Library online electronic edition <http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/king/king.html>
- <sup>ix</sup> “The Whitney Family of Connecticut”, Stephen Whitney Phoenix, 1878, p. 911 <http://www.whitneygen.org/archives/extracts/phoenix/p0911-0915.html>
- <sup>x</sup> Woodland Plantation Bed and Breakfast <http://www.woodlandplantation.com/history.htm>
- <sup>xi</sup> Whitney Plantation Historic District web site <http://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/louisiana/whi.htm>
- <sup>xii</sup> Country Roads Online, February 2007 <http://www.countryroadsmagazine.com/ViewArticle.php?articleid=74>
- <sup>xiii</sup> “Bradish Johnson Holdings Bring \$4,796,100”, New York Times, October 12 1900
- <sup>xiv</sup> Chelsea Market History <http://chelseamarket.com/history/>
- <sup>xv</sup> “Bradish Johnson, Master Wrecker 1846-1914 , Gilpin, 1941 [http://digitalcollections.fiu.edu/tequesta/files/1941/41\\_1\\_03.pdf](http://digitalcollections.fiu.edu/tequesta/files/1941/41_1_03.pdf)
- <sup>xvi</sup> The Freedom Forum Journalists Memorial <http://www.newseum.org/scripts/Journalist/Detail.asp?PhotoID=598>