



A Princess in Tallahassee

Catherine Murat (1803-1867) as a conduit of culture on the Florida Frontier

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Abstract

In its infancy, Tallahassee was home to many colorful characters and personalities. Among these individuals was Catherine Willis Gray, great-grandniece of George Washington, whose marriage to deposed Napoleonic Prince Achille Murat became one of the most celebrated and mythologized events of the early city. Through her marriage to Achille, Catherine would come to be integrated into French aristocracy and would henceforth carry two distinct elite identities. This research aims to examine Catherine's dual identities as a slave-owning Tallahassee aristocrat and a princess of France, and the ways in which those dual identities were perceived by those around her. From this, insight can be gained as to how Catherine's fusion of these two identities produced something truly unique to herself. The goal is to demonstrate how the creation of this identity was influenced by the frontier context of early Tallahassee.



Painted portrait of a young Catherine Murat, date unknown.

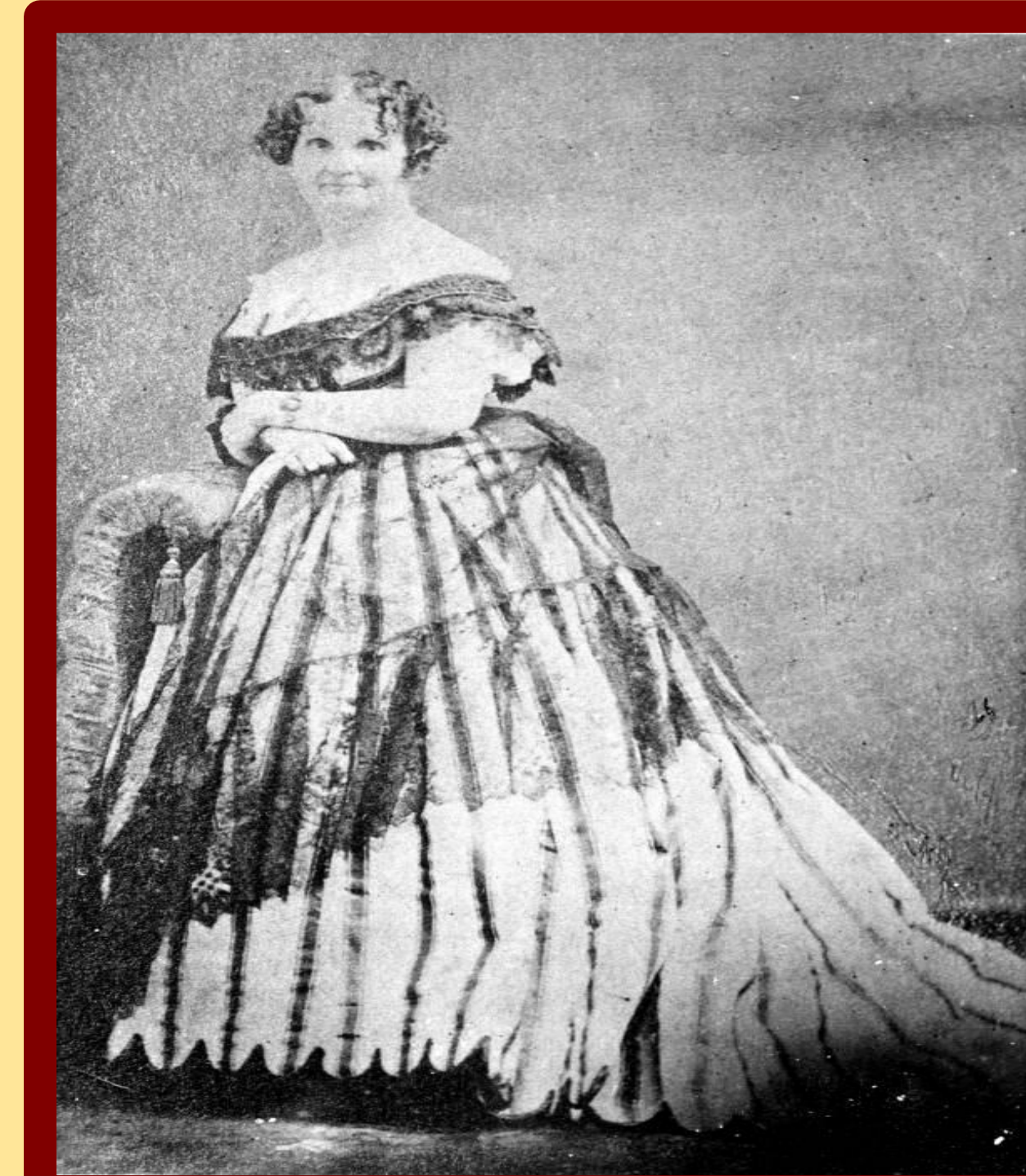


Photo of Catherine Murat in her older years.

Background

Originally from Fredericksburg, Virginia, Catherine Willis Gray was born into Virginian plantation aristocracy in 1803. She moved to the recently founded Tallahassee with her family in 1825 and married the exiled French prince Achille Murat in 1826. A nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821), the prince would introduce Catherine to the French court culture he had been born into. For their honeymoon in 1827, the couple went to visit Achille's family at Point Breeze, New Jersey, home to Napoleon's brother Joseph. This royal estate, lavishly decorated with European fine art, required her to stand in the presence of the former King Joseph. Then, in 1830, she accompanied Achille to Europe as he sought to reclaim his family's wealth. As a result of these experiences, Catherine was exposed to and subsequently adopted aspects of French elite culture. At their plantation named Lipona (an anagram of Naples, the kingdom Achille was once to inherit), the couple hosted the elite of Tallahassee. The house was filled with French decorations, silverware, and furniture that contrasted with the interior's otherwise rustic aesthetic. After Achille's death in 1847, Catherine moved to a new plantation which she named Bellevue, after a hotel in Belgium where she and Achille stayed during their 1830 excursion. Like Lipona, Bellevue ("beautiful view" in French) demonstrated a fusion of elite cultures. Furniture brought from Paris, as well as a bust of Achille's mother Caroline Bonaparte, were among the decorations of this otherwise typical plantation home. She was also invited to Paris by Emperor Napoleon III, Achille's cousin, on multiple occasions. It was Napoleon III who officially made Catherine a princess of France, offering her a home there. Catherine declined this offer; instead, the Emperor decided to send Catherine yearly stipends to support her life as widow. The two would keep close correspondence until Catherine's death in 1867.

Perspectives and Conclusions

The following perspectives on Catherine Murat explicitly detail the fluidity of her elite identities:

- Achille Murat, her husband, accepted her enthusiastic adoption of his culture but nevertheless thought of her and her accent as being "thoroughly Virginian."
- Ellen Call Long, daughter of territorial governor Richard Keith Call, enthusiastically referred to the French aspects of Catherine's identity. Her usage of French words to describe events held by Catherine ("recherche déjeuners, fêtes champêtre...") points to an adoption of said language among the local elite, either by Catherine herself or those around her enamored with her alternate identity.
- Joseph Bonaparte, upon meeting Catherine in 1827, described her as "pretty, sweet, and gay". While the Bonapartes of Point Breeze already held her in high esteem on account of her American lineage, she is said to have won them over through her charm even though she could not speak French at the time.
- Napoleon III was quite fond of Catherine, having met her in 1831 while exiled in London with his mother. After becoming Emperor of France, Napoleon III invited Catherine to Paris on multiple occasions. Affectionally referring to her as "Cousin Kate," Napoleon III officially made Catherine a princess and provided stipends for her until her death. After this, he provided a pension of 6,000 francs a year for her sister Ellen Attaway Booker, expressing "ease" in learning his prior stipends had "sweetened the last moments."

Through the differences seen in these perspectives, one can get a grasp of the unique identity Catherine created. By incorporating aspects of French elite culture, she created an elite identity unique to herself, which as time went on, greatly influenced those around her. Understanding her experience not only shows how Tallahassee was impacted by contemporary historical events, but also provides evidence of the frontier context creating new identities in territorial Florida.

Methodology

- Orientation and Specialization: The first step was studying background literature on the history of Tallahassee, to build an understanding of the area during its early days. Afterwards, a special interest was chosen, and the search for primary sources that would provide further information began. A. J. Hanna's descriptive biography *A Prince in their Midst* was essential for gaining an understanding of the lives of the Murats.
- Gathering Evidence: Primary sources were obtained at the State Archives of Florida, the Special Collections of Florida State University, the archives at Rollins College (which houses Hanna's papers), and internet-based sources. Notable research findings came from the writings of Ellen Call Long in both *Florida Breezes* and *Princesse Achille Murat: A Biographical Sketch*, as well as two letters from Napoleon III concerning Catherine's death. These pieces of evidence provided a picture of Catherine, her identity, and her impact on those closest to her. Additionally, Catherine's Bellevue plantation house, which currently stands on the grounds of the Tallahassee Museum, was visited.



The Bellevue plantation house as it stands today, featuring a restored interior. Catherine purchased the property in 1854, living there until her death in 1867.

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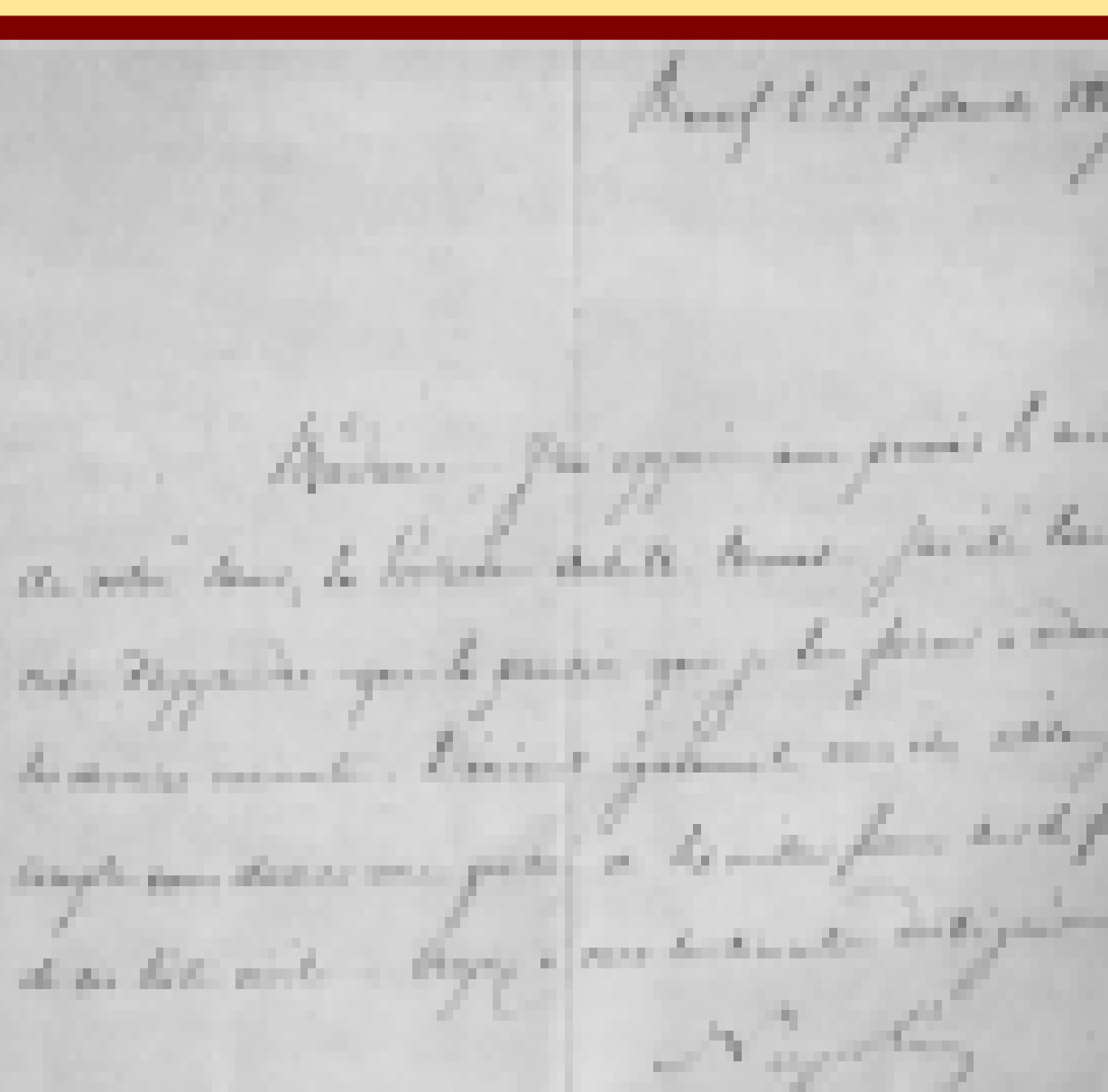
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Correspondence from Louis Napoleon to Ellen Attaway Booker, September 13, 1867, N2017- 15, Booker family letters and petition, 1867, 1893, State Archives of Florida, Tallahassee, Florida.



Letter from French Emperor Napoleon III to Ellen Attaway Booker, Catherine's sister, regarding her death.