

The Real Madame Lalaurie & Other Legends From American Horror Story: Coven



Kathy Bates has played her to horrifying perfection on television, but what’s the real story behind New Orleans’ most famous murderess?

by Erin Z. Bass & Anne Wheeler

Demon in the shape of a woman. The widow Blanque. Savage mistress. She goes by many names, but Madame Lalaurie remains a fixture in New Orleans history and lore even 165 years after her death. Her story is also interconnected with some of the most recognizable names in history, including the pirate Jean Lafitte, writer George Washington Cable, poet William Cullen Bryant and, more recently, actor Nicolas Cage.

She’s portrayed on “[American Horror Story: Coven](#)” by Kathy Bates as a sadistic mother and slave owner who shows no remorse for her sins. She slathers the blood of her slaves on her face to maintain a youthful complexion and takes pleasure in the deplorable conditions they endure chained up in her attic. How close is this depiction to the actual truth? In some ways, it’s highly accurate but in others, it’s a sensationalistic account of a woman who was much more complicated.

Fact Vs. Fiction

Two books on Madame Lalaurie — Carolyn Morrow Long’s *Mistress of the Haunted House* and Victoria Cosner Love and Lorelei Shannon’s *Mad Madame Lalaurie: New Orleans’ Most Famous Murderess* — shed light on what is fact and what is purely fiction in a tale that’s still told nightly on the streets of New Orleans. Along with a

few other sources, it's primarily these works we use to tell Madame's story.

Born Marie Delphine Macarty in 1775, Madame Lalaurie's upbringing does little to explain how she became known as a murderess. She was brought up in a tradition of slavery during a time when it was acceptable to use force to discipline them, but attempts to provide motive through her parents and family members have failed to hold up. Some stories say her mother or father was murdered by a slave and so what she did was an act of revenge. In reality, there is a link to her family and the 1811 slave revolt and one of her uncles was murdered by his own slaves in 1771, but it's not known how strongly these events would have affected Delphine.



Her first marriage at age 14 to Spaniard Lopez Y Angula left her a young widow with a child named Marie Delphine Francisca Borja, known as Borquita. At age 20, she married again to Jean Paul Blanque, a Frenchman and a slave trader who associated with pirate Jean Lafitte. The couple lived in a two-story brick townhouse on Royal Street near Conti (now [Ida Manheim Antiques](#)) and also had a plantation on the banks of the Mississippi River with 26 slaves. Delphine had three daughters and a son with Blanque.

He died in 1815, and three years later, following his late wishes, she emancipated their slave Jean Louis. This act, along with future emancipations, has been used as proof that Madame Lalaurie had a heart and could not have tortured her slaves the way she would eventually be accused of doing.

Meeting Louis Lalaurie

Delphine seems to have been a typical wife and mother up to the point of her marriage to Louis Lalaurie. She was very wealthy, due to inheritances from her parents and her late husbands, and tasked with raising five children alone. Lalaurie studied medicine at the Sorbonne in Paris and traveled to New Orleans at the age of 22 to seek his fortune. He arrived in 1825 and sent a letter to the editor of the *Courier* asking him to announce that "a French Physician has just arrived in this city, who is acquainted with the means, lately discovered in France, of destroying hunches."

It is this specialty (along with the more sensational rumor that he was testing Haitian-style zombie drugs to increase obedience in slaves) that serves as the main defense of Madame Lalaurie. Could Louis have been using painful techniques to treat or experiment on the slaves and their cries mistaken for torture? It's not known how Dr. Lalaurie and Delphine met, but one theory is that she consulted him about her daughter's crooked back. By 1826, the two were a couple and Delphine found herself pregnant at age 38. She gave birth to their son, Jean Louis, the following year, and five months later the two were married. Lalaurie brought \$2,000 to the marriage, while Delphine was worth more than \$66,000.

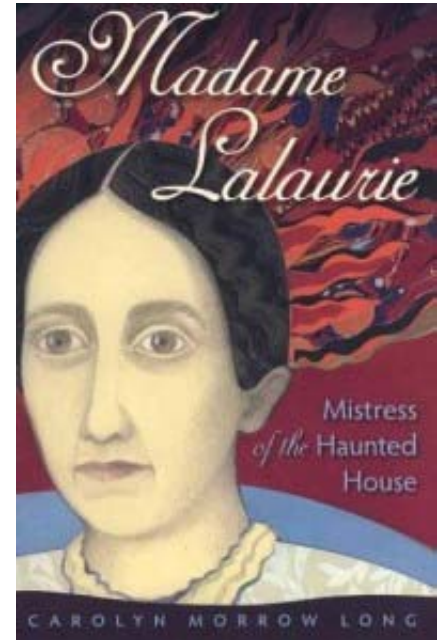
Did the marriage begin with an imbalance of power that continued as Madame Lalaurie took out her frustrations on her slaves while her new husband stood by and watched? There is no clear answer to this, but the marriage seems to have deteriorated quickly, with Madame falling deeper and deeper into madness. She purchased the lots that would become the Lalaurie Mansion in 1831. The family lived there with Delphine's four Blanque children, but the following year she petitioned the court for a separation from her husband, claiming he had beaten her.

It's impossible to know whether Madame's claims were true or whether Dr. Lalaurie granted her wishes as a way of distancing himself from her behavior that would soon be made public. Gossipy letters written by neighbor Jean Boze to his friend in France stated, "They do not have a happy household; they fight, often separate, and then return to each other, which would make one believe that someday they will abandon each other completely."

Up in Flames

Delphine owned at least 54 slaves between 1816 and 1834, when she fled New Orleans. She wasn't accused of mistreating any of them until her marriage to Dr. Lalaurie. In 1828, rumors were flying in the neighborhood, and Boze mentioned her abuses in another letter to his friend, describing her "barbarous treatment of her slaves" and that "she had them incarcerated, letting them be given only the bare necessities." He also wrote that her case had come before the criminal court but that she had been absolved. Other sources cite that complaints from her relatives and neighbors caused her to be investigated at least three times, but there is no hard evidence to support this.

In her book, Morrow Long calls this part of the story and an 1829 receipt for legal services "for defending the prosecution of the State against her in the Criminal Court" the "smoking gun" in the saga of Madame Lalaurie. Other writers heard similar stories from neighbors that corroborate Boze's claims, and English author Harriet Martineau wrote in her memoir *Retrospect of Western Travel* "that it had long been observed that Madame Lalaurie's slaves looked singularly haggard and wretched" and that she would beat her daughters for giving them food.



All of this serves to set the stage for the events that unfolded on April 10, 1834. Fire broke out at the Lalaurie house on Royal Street that morning. The fire was reported to have started in the kitchen, which had the slave quarters above it. Since neighbors were aware of the slaves chained there, they expressed their concern to Judge Canonge, who was present on the scene and lived across the street. Chronicled in his deposition, the story goes that the judge politely asked Dr. Lalaurie to have the slaves removed to a safer place but was rudely told to mind his own business.

The judge gave orders to break down the doors of the slave quarters and that's when the chained, starved and beaten slaves were discovered. The condition of these slaves has been embellished and exaggerated through storytelling over the years, but it's important to note that newspaper accounts following the incident contain eyewitness accounts of their exact condition. The *Courier* described it as an "appalling sight ... "their bodies covered with scars and loaded with chains."

The *Bee* reported that the rescuers found "seven slaves, more or less horribly mutilated ... suspended by the neck with their limbs stretched and torn from one extremity to the other." The editors of both papers had gone to the Cabildo, where the slaves were brought, to see for themselves, and the *Courier* also described a man with a hole in his head filled with worms.

These horrific accounts, along with the duration of Madame's alleged abuse, help to explain why neighbors and citizens were upset enough to ransack her house and destroy everything they could. Madame herself is believed to have skipped town with the help of her coachmen, Bastien, that afternoon before the mob arrived and fled first to Mobile, then New York and Paris. A sighting by the poet William Cullen Bryant puts her on a ship

named the Poland, sailing from New York to Le Havre in June of 1834.

Keeping the Legend Alive

While some believe that Madame did eventually secretly return to New Orleans, it's more likely that she lived out the rest of her life in Paris. Letters from her children express that she never fully realized the implications of what had taken place and she seemed to struggle with what would probably be diagnosed as some form of bipolar disorder or other mental illness today. Morrow Long concludes that Madame Lalaurie's madness, or a type of insanity, caused her to treat her slaves the way she did. Marie Points, writing for the *Daily Picayune* in 1892, described Madame's "well-known eccentricity, and her high, ungovernable temper, which at times ... almost bordered upon insanity."

Paris records show that she died at her home there on December 7, 1849. Her son-in-law signed her death record as a witness, and she was interred at the Cimetiere de Montmartre and then exhumed on January 7, 1851, and brought to New Orleans. Madame Lalaurie is believed to be buried in St. Louis Cemetery No. 1, but there is no record of this.

A mysterious epitaph plate discovered in the cemetery in 1941 and thought to be a hoax stoked the legend that she had returned to New Orleans before her death, and other rumors, newspaper articles and books have continued to keep Madame's story alive over the years. Jeanne deLavigne's 1946 book *Ghost Stories of Old New Orleans* has the most sensational version of the story, listing among the slaves rescued a woman who had her skin peeled in a spiral around her body so she resembled a caterpillar and another with all her bones broken and reset at different angles so she resembled a crab.



Madame's wax rendition at the [Musee Conti Historical Wax Museum](#) (pictured above) has been called "obscene" and depicts a slave shown whipping two other slaves who are starved and chained in the attic. The

slave doing the whipping is thought to be Bastien, the driver who helped her escape the mob. The display has not been changed since the museum opened in the 1970s.

But her most successful legacy is her house on Royal Street, believed to be haunted to this day and a stop on every New Orleans ghost tour.

The Haunted House on Royal Street

The house at 1140 Royal Street wasn't known as a haunted house (let alone so thoroughly coupled to the Lalaurie name) until sometime after the fire and subsequent looting in 1834. But by 1897, it was listed as a tourist attraction in *The Picayune's* "Guide to New Orleans" and had secured its place in the city's spooky history.

The building's exterior is fairly unremarkable by French Quarter standards. It is a gray, hulking and "large, solid rectangular pile," mostly unchanged from George Washington Cable's description in his story "The Haunted House In Royal Street." Written in 1889, originally for *Century Magazine*, Cable's description of the building and legend are spot-on even by today's light. Cable's description of the mansion and the legend may be the best out there.



He sets forth the Lalaurie legend in epistolary fashion, first acquainting the reader with the building's architecture through "plain fact and history." And because Cable wrote this over a century before Instagram or Tumblr or the iPhone camera created the image-heavy writing commonly seen today, he relied on beautiful word use to create the building in the reader's mind. And he did a bang-up job.

As described by Cable, the house is encircled by "an uncovered balcony, as wide as the sidewalk," and the entrance, "a deep white portal, the walls and ceilings, of which are covered with ornamentations, two or three steps, shut off from the sidewalk by a pair of great gates of open, ornamental iron-work, with gilded tops rise to the white door." Cable describes the door as: "loaded with a raised work of urns and flowers, birds and fonts, and Phoebus and his chariot." He also notes that upon his visiting the building, the "shutters [were] closed [and] by the very intensity of their rusty silence spoke of a hostile, impenetrability."



To those who have seen the house recently, very little has changed in the 125 years since Cable's writing. The gorgeous iron balconies — which are actually galleries as they're supported by columns to the ground, rather than cantilevered metal beams from the building — are still intact, ornate pattern and all. The entryway is exactly as described, save the gilded gate tops, which are now the same black as the rest of the gate. The white door with ornamental urns, flowers, birds and fonts is as if Cable were standing directly in front of it. The shutters aren't quite as described, and seem to be lighter, giving the impression of the building having its eyes now open in contrast to the hostile, impenetrability of Cable's description.

Cable wrote his description 55 years after the fire, and the description almost completely holds today. However, Cable's house and the current-day house are unrecognizable from the house as [Madame Lalaurie would have known it](#).

Delphine purchased the property from Edmond Soniat Dufossat in 1831 for \$33,750 at 8 percent interest, payable over two years. The house on the property was under construction when purchased, to be finished within 30 days. When finished, the house stood only two stories, with an attic, and looked much more like the Soniat House (1133-1135 Chartres; pictured below) or the Hermann-Grima House (820 Saint Louis; interior photo below) still do today, than the three story affair currently occupying 1140 Royal St. (Interestingly, the Hermann-Grima house was used as the [filming location](#) for the Lalaurie Mansion interiors in "American Horror Story: Coven.")



After the 1834 fire and mobbing, the main house remained vacant until 1837 when it was purchased and rebuilt by Charles Caffin, in the style familiar to us today.

Since 1837, the house has passed through several owners and housed a panoply of things — Union headquarters during the Civil War; an early, integrated school for young women; a home for delinquents; a tenement; a music conservatory; saloon; furniture store and the private residence of several owners, including Nicolas Cage. Cage owned the home from 2007 until 2009, when it was sold at bank auction for \$2.3 million.

The house is currently a private residence owned by Texas energy trader Michael Whalen and not open to the public.

A Peek Inside & Ghost Tours Available

Although interior tours are not available for the Lalaurie Mansion, NOLA.com has a fantastic [slideshow](#) showcasing the house's most recent makeover, which plays up its spooky side. The mansion is also the highlight of most every French Quarter tour — ghost themed or otherwise — particularly with the popularity of “AHS: Coven.” The house sits at the corner of Royal and Governor Nicholls, the public sidewalk butting up against the building's walls, providing fairly intimate access to one of the city's most storied buildings, all from the city sidewalk.

Tour-goers and guides have reported experiencing everything from fainting spells to capturing orbs in their photos when going by the house, so keep the camera ready.

French Quarter tours essentially come in two styles — tour guide-led and self-guided, and can focus on nearly anything —architecture, food, ghosts, history, cemetery, voodoo. Each tour style has its advantages, but if you're visiting New Orleans for the first time, it's well worth the money (some run as low as \$20) to take a guided tour, especially a ghost tour, if only to experience the over-the-top theatrics of the tour guides. (See tour links below.)

All tour guides within the city of New Orleans must be licensed. To become licensed, guides must pass a fairly intense test focusing on the city's history, geography, legends and culture. This ensures that all tour guides know the same information. That being said, there are dozens of tour companies and self-guided tours to choose from in the city. The information below may help you make the most of your tour — Lalaurie Mansion-centric or otherwise.

Other Legends of New Orleans

Along with Madame Lalaurie, “AHS:Coven” has introduced several other local legends throughout this season's episodes. The Axeman of New Orleans first appeared in episode 6 and is based on a serial killer who was active in the city from 1918-1919. In a March 13, 1919, letter to *The Times Picayune*, he mentioned his fondness for jazz music. “I swear by all the devils in the nether regions that every person shall be spared in whose home a jazz band is in full swing at the time I have just mentioned,” he wrote. “If everyone has a jazz band going, well, then, so much the better for you people. One thing is certain and that is that some of your people who do not jazz it on Tuesday night (if there be any) will get the axe.” He was never caught.



Haitian voodoo character Papa [Legba](#) was featured in episode 10. Usually appearing as an old man with a crutch or a cane, he acts as the gatekeeper between the worlds of the living and the spirit world. In voodoo ceremonies, he is the first and last spirit invoked, because his permission is needed for communication.

We have to wonder if the Devil Baby of Bourbon Street, discussed in *Mad Madame Lalaurie*, will get a mention before the season ends. Said to be both deformed and cursed, this baby could provide the real-life link between Madame Lalaurie and Marie Laveau. The myth is that Marie Laveau brought Madame Lalaurie what is now known as the “Devil Baby of Bourbon Street” to raise. The child allegedly lived five years before being buried in St. Louis Cemetery No. 1. The book’s authors believe this could have been a child with severe birth defects or what is commonly called a Harlequin baby, which would have had extreme thickening of the skin and huge diamond-shaped scales on its body.

Tour & Resource Links

[American Horror Story: Coven Location Guide](#)
[New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau](#)
[New Orleans Online](#)
[Frommers self-guided walking tours](#)
[GO NOLA App](#)
[Official Paranormal Guide – New Orleans App](#)

Further Reading

[Madame Lalaurie: Mistress of the Haunted House](#) by Carolyn Morrow Long
[Mad Madame Lalaurie: New Orleans’ Most Famous Murderess](#) by Victoria Cosner Love and Lorelei Shannon
[The Haunted House In Royal Street](#) by George Washington Cable
[Ghost Stories of Old New Orleans](#) by Jeanne deLavigne
[Fever Season](#) by Barbara Hambly
[The Historic New Orleans Collection](#)
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