

## History that nearly was

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The building at Chartres and St. Louis streets in the French Quarter that houses one of the oldest and most fashionably decadent bars in the city ? the Napoleon House ? has a storied, colorful and improbable past that includes its namesake, the French emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, and a past mayor of the city.



Historical accuracy can sometimes take a backseat to lively storytelling. (Illustration by Mark Andresen)

Pull up a barstool, imagine you are sitting in front of the bar's famously refreshing Pimm's Cup drink and allow me, a newly minted tour guide, to spin this yarn from days of yore.

The short version is that after the Great Fire of 1788 destroyed the site's original building?as well as 850 of the 1,100 or so buildings in the Vieux Carre ? a Frenchman named Nicholas Girod acquired the property from his late brother. In 1812, Girod became the fifth elected mayor of New Orleans and two years later he built the architectural gem that stands there today. Built as a private residence, the structure would not accommodate a tavern for nearly a century.

In 1820, Girod and a number of other prominent citizens hatched a bizarre plot to rescue the exiled French emperor from the island of St. Helena where he had been sent after losing the Battle of Waterloo to the British in 1815 (the same year as the

Battle of New Orleans; I'll get to that in a minute). Trust me, St. Helena in the South Atlantic off the coast of Africa was not exactly a top-10 tourist attraction.

The New Orleanians' game plan called for some of the pirate Jean Lafitte's band of outlaw Baratarians ? including Dominique You, Lafitte's famed cannoneer ? to sail a fast-moving sloop to the island, abscond with Napoleon in the dead of night and return to the city by outrunning the slower British frigates surrounding the island. The emperor would have refuge in Girod's house. However, only days before the band of marauders was to depart in 1821, word came that Napoleon had died.

To read more, click [here](#).