



# APALACHICOLA THE TIMES

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THE APALACHICOLA TIMES

## A most rare piano



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The piano was treated gingerly as its was brought into the Raney House.



Posted Thursday, October 15, 2020 2:12 pm

## **by Pam Richardson Special to the Times, The Apalachicola Times**

A few weeks ago, on a perfect fall afternoon, Bill Gladwin drove from Tallahassee to Apalachicola hauling precious cargo: a 180-year old square grand piano that had been in his possession for half a century.

His destination was the antebellum Raney House which, by prior arrangement with Caty Greene, president of the Apalachicola Area Historical Society, was to be the antique piano's new owner.

Excitement filled the air and a small crew of men gathered on the steps as Bill pulled up in front of the house. After a brief discussion, the six men muscled the main body of the piano out of the trailer onto the sidewalk, up the front stairs, and through the door into the parlor - without mishap. Additional parts were brought in and Bill set to work attaching legs, pedals and music rack. As he worked, he recounted the piano's story.

As a child in Tallahassee, Bill had often accompanied his mother on visits to her longtime friend, Kitty Chaires Mays, who lived next door to Belle-Vue plantation, once the home of Princess Catherine Murat and later acquired by Kitty Mays' family. The piano sat inside the house for many years, but when the house was needed for storage, the piano was moved to the front porch and covered with canvas drop cloths. Bill, a student of piano, was fascinated by the instrument and Mrs. Mays often told him that it had belonged to Prince and Princess Murat. Years later, a woman from an old, well-connected Tallahassee family immediately recognized it as the piano from the Murat house.

Prince Murat's full name was Charles Louis Napoleon Achille Murat. He was born in Paris in 1801 to Caroline Bonaparte, Napoleon's sister, and spent his childhood in the Elysée palace. With the fall of Napoleon in 1815, Achille's father - appointed a Marshal and King of Naples by Napoleon - was deposed and executed, and his wife and children were sent to Austria.

When Achille reached adulthood, he immigrated to the US, giving up his inheritance of the throne in Naples. He settled in St. Augustine in 1822 and, four years later, married Catherine Daingerfield Willis Gray, a great-grandniece of George Washington, in Tallahassee.

Murat was a planter, an attorney, a political and cultural writer, and a colorful eccentric. He owned several plantations and counted among his friends Ralph Waldo Emerson (who came to Florida to treat his tuberculosis) and Florida Territory governors William Duval and Richard Keith Call. Due to an overindulgence in food and drink, Murat died, too young, in 1847. Some years later, his widow purchased Belle-Vue where the piano survived long after her death in 1867.

In 1972, when Princess Murat's house was to be moved to Tallahassee's Junior Museum (now the Tallahassee Museum), Kitty Mays gave the old piano to Bill. It accompanied him through various moves and even traveled to Tennessee to be restored.

Paperwork accompanying the restoration identifies the builder of the piano as William Disbrow of New York. A brief search for more particulars on this man reveals only that he began his career as a cabinet-maker in 1831 and started making pianos around 1845. He is found on the 1850 census in Williamsburg, New York, listed as a piano forte maker, age 48, living with his wife and two grown children.

The piano is 72 inches long, and its interior is made of rock maple while its exterior is a combination of mahogany and walnut. Its style is Empire, a neoclassical design of American furniture prevalent in mid-19th century Southern plantations. The magnificent old piano is in perfect working condition. It needs only to be tuned, as all pianos do after they are moved.

While neither Bill nor the piano has any direct relationship to the Raney House, there are a couple of associations. The first is the long-ago presence in Apalachicola of one Antoine Jean Murat, who was born in Greece in 1836, immigrated to Florida, and served as mayor of Apalachicola in 1871.

An 1897 issue of an Edgefield, South Carolina newspaper printed a brief bio of this man which it found in the Atlanta Constitution:

*There is a man living in Florida who can rightfully boast of royal blood coursing through his veins. A. J. Murat of Apalachicola, Fla, is the aristocrat, and he has some very high family connections. He is a great-great-grandson of Marshal Murat, Napoleon's famous general, who afterward became King of Naples. He is the great-great-nephew of four kings - Napoleon, Louis of Holland, Joseph, King of Spain, and Jerome of Westphalia. He is a third cousin of Louis Napoleon and great-great-grandson of Napoleon's mother, who died in 1836, the year he was born. Mr. Murat is a man of about 60, and one of the quietest, most unassuming men imaginable.*

This account has some problems. Among them, (1) only three, not four, kings are cited; (2) the man in question is referred to as the great-great-grandson of Napoleon's mother instead of the great-grandson of Napoleon; and (3) A.J. Murat would have been the great-grandson not of

Napoleon, but of his Marshal. Over and above these objections, all attempts to genealogically link A. J. Murat with Achille Murat have, so far, failed.

The second association pertains to Bill's great-grandfather, John Knott Whaley. When he represented Wakulla County in the Florida legislature in the years 1899-1902, he became great friends with George Pettus Raney, a Florida Supreme Court justice, Leon County legislator and son of the original owner of the Raney House. Their friendship was so strong that Mr. Whaley named his son – Bill's great uncle - Raney Whaley.

As for Bill Gladwin, he spent 30 years in the US Navy (both active and reserve), has degrees in history, anthropology/archeology, international affairs and law and has taught at Florida State University's College of Business for almost three decades. He is passionate about history, the piano and, most recently, his law school flame, Nancy Kaiser, with whom he is once again in relationship.

The Apalachicola Area Historical Society is grateful for his gift and hoping to welcome him as an adjunct member of its board. Once the piano can be tuned and gatherings can be larger, the AAHS and the Raney House Museum look forward to recitals or small gatherings around this lovely piano. Come by and see it when the house is open, Tuesday through Saturday 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

*Local historian Pam Richardson is a member of the Apalachicola Area Historical Society's board of directors.*

*This article originally appeared on The Apalachicola Times: A most rare piano (<https://www.apalachtimes.com/story/news/2020/10/15/most-rare-piano/3646518001/>)*

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