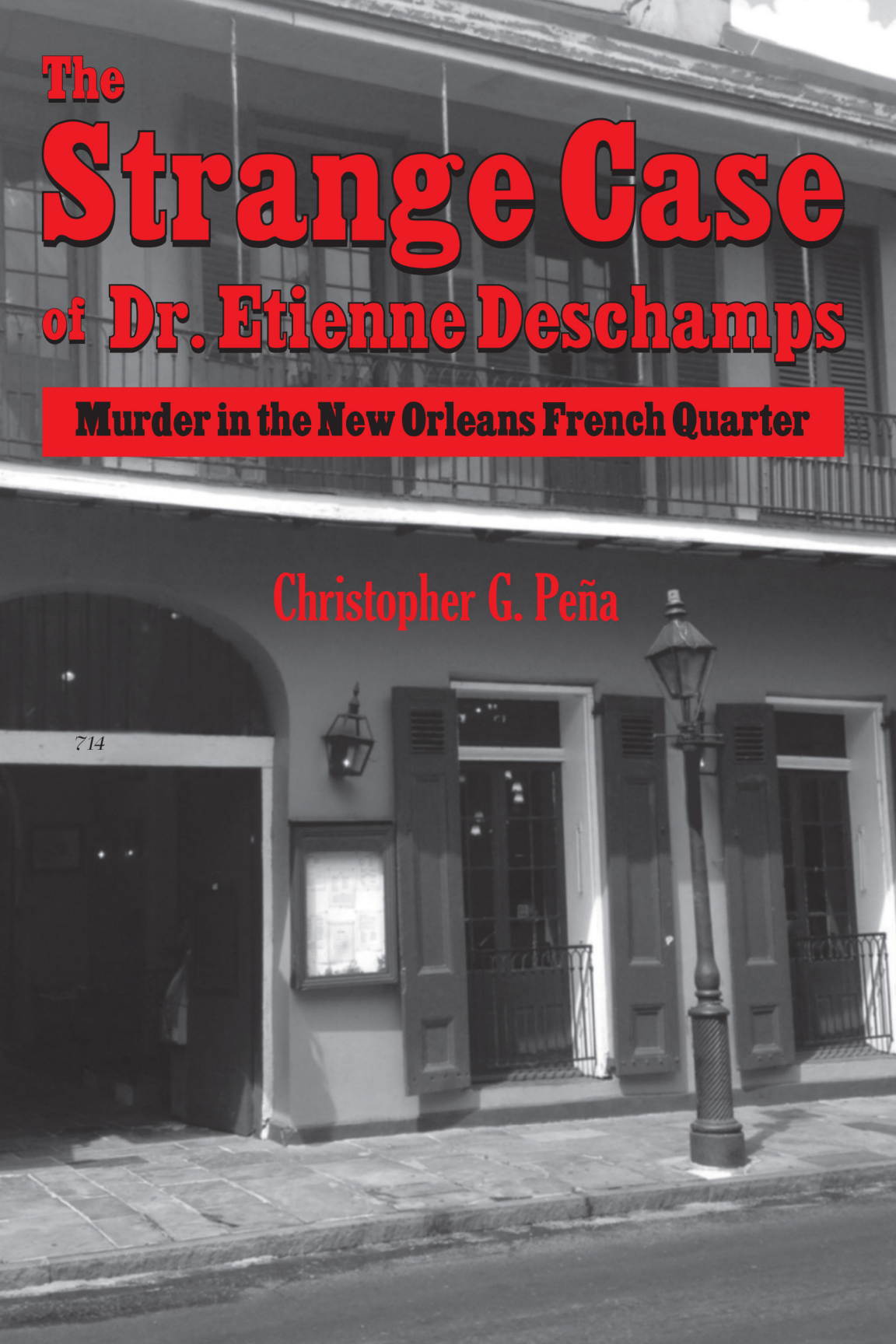
The Strange Case of Dr. Etienne Deschamps

Murder in the New Orleans French Quarter

Christopher G. Peña



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Was Dr. Etienne Deschamps a vicious murderer, or insane? The French dentist made his home in the French Quarter of New Orleans, but he employed more than just traditional dental procedures. Deschamps treated patients by using his supposed magnetic and hypnotic powers. Obsessed with the lost treasure of Jean Lafitte, he began a search for the perfect spirit medium to guide him to its hiding place.

Twelve-year-old Juliette Dietsh's family came to rely on the charitable dentist, but Deschamps had more than generosity on his mind: he had found his medium. Deschamps repeatedly hypnotized, sexually molested, and finally anesthetized the girl with chloroform. Inevitably he made a mistake: too much chloroform, and Dietsh died.

This engrossing story explores Deschamps's crime and his defense team's effort to spare his life. The dilemma of whether he was guilty of capital murder or innocent by reason of insanity still haunts our justice system today.

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For
DeeDee

Contents

Acknowledgments

I won't say that I have a macabre fascination with homicide, but for some odd reason I've always wanted to chronicle a famous murder case. One day I stumbled upon the Web site Murderpedia: The Encyclopedia of Murderers. As I scrolled through its alphabetized listings, I came across Etienne Deschamps. What particularly interested me about this case was that the murder occurred in New Orleans. Though I currently live in the Volunteer State, I was born in Louisiana. For many years I lived and worked in Thibodaux, a small college town approximately sixty miles southwest of New Orleans. Over time, I also became very familiar with the Crescent City. With my love of history, and the fact that the murder occurred more than 125 years ago, I was hooked. This was a story I was destined to write, for better or worse.

The first person I contacted about my book project was DeeDee Denise DiBenedetto, a dear friend and a private investigator who lives in St. Amant, Louisiana. I deeply appreciated her unique abilities to access research materials online and her willingness to go the "extra mile," which included visits to Louisiana State University's Hill-Memorial Library, and they are the reason why I dedicated this book to her. She never said no and always sought to do more. I could never have accomplished what I did without her assistance. Thank you so much, DeeDee.

I would be remiss if I did not mention the following people whose assistance is greatly appreciated. Thanks to family members Gerard and Patricia "Trisha" Peña, of Slidell, Louisiana; Michael Peña, of Irvine, California; and my daughter, Pamela P. Smith, of Knoxville, Tennessee. Many thanks to Gloria Borum, of Knoxville, Tennessee, for proofreading my first draft and your words of encouragement. Special thanks to Beth Davis, Vital Records Section, Louisiana State Archives, Baton Rouge; Judy Bolton, former Head of Public Services for L.S.U. Special Collections, Jennifer Mitchell, Head of Manuscripts Processing, Hans Rasmussen, Coordinator of Special

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Author's Notes

Going over various accounts of the murder and its aftermath, I often found that people's version of the truth became modified or remembered differently from one year to the next, or even one day to the next. This, in and of itself, is not unusual. Days, months, and years after the fact, people often see and remember things differently. Even two people who shared an experience may recall different versions of what they saw or heard. As a result, their recollections, as true as they believe them to be, often contradict other eyewitness accounts. With that said, I attempted to take everything into consideration as I chronicled the history of this murder, especially the dates when comments or testimonies were recorded. I hope that I have presented the storyline with a clear focus so as not to confuse the reader, while pointing out discrepancies whenever appropriate.

The victim's last name was often spelled *Dietsch* or *Deitsch* in various newspaper articles and *Deitsh* in the defendant's first legal brief filed with the Louisiana Supreme Court in late 1889. I prefer to use *Dietsh,* which was the spelling that appeared in some personal letters; the victim's burial record; the January 31, 1889, Orleans Parish coroner's report; the first trial in late March 1889 (the summation of which was printed in the *New Orleans Daily Picayune*); the defendant's second legal brief filed with the Louisiana Supreme Court during the second quarter of 1890; and *Soards'* New Orleans city directories from 1891 through 1898 (except for 1897, when it was spelled *Deitsh*).

I have one final note. In 1893-94, the New Orleans street-numbering system underwent a major overhaul. There was no standardization to the numbering process prior to that. Thus, for all pre-1893-94 street addresses, I have included the current block number or address to orient the reader to its approximate or exact present-day location.

Prologue

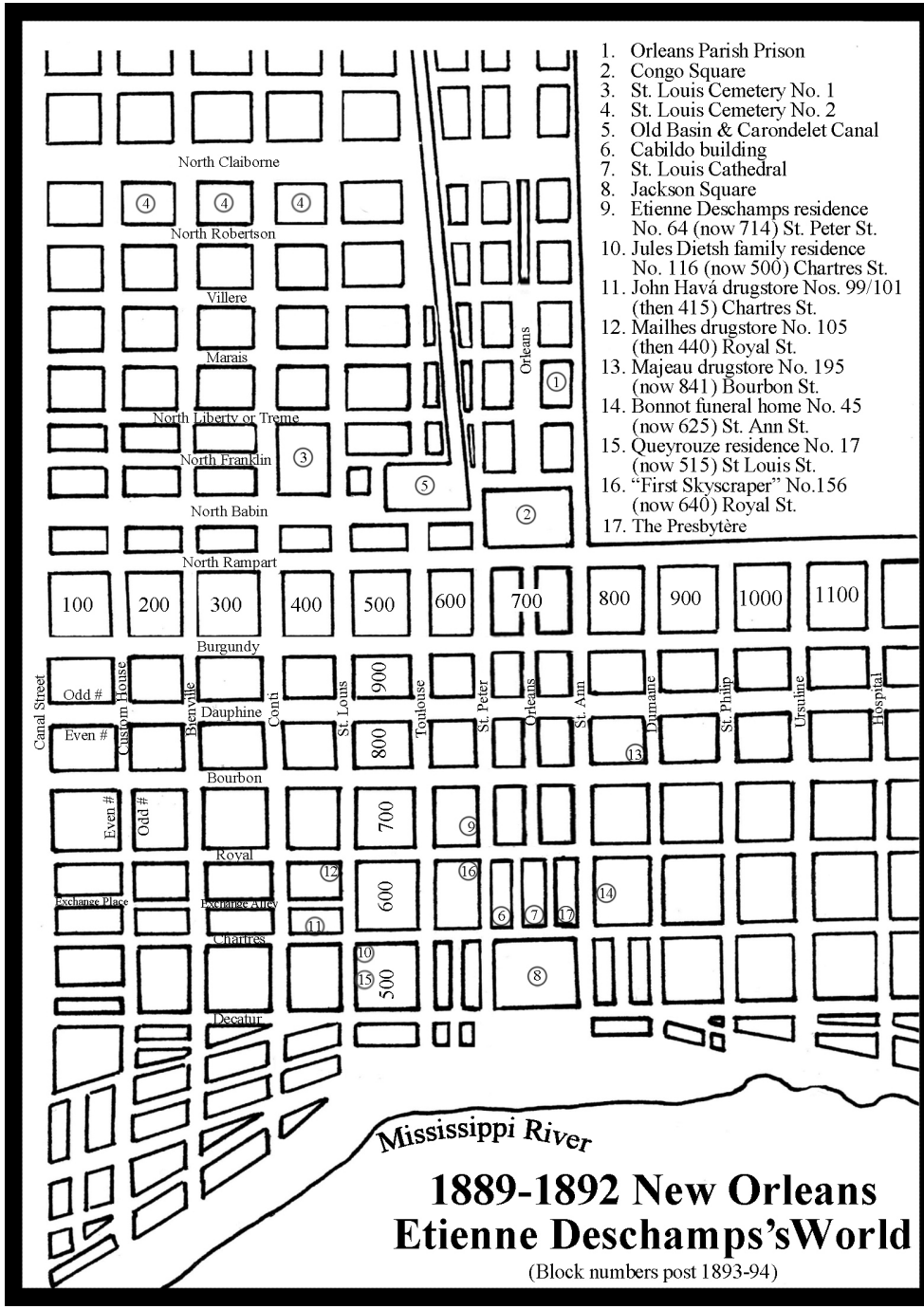
In New Orleans during the latter years of the nineteenth century, a hideous crime was perpetrated upon an innocent twelve-year-old girl. It sparked outrage in the city and attracted an unprecedented amount of local, state, and national press coverage. For many people across the country, but especially for the folks living in the Crescent City, the guilty verdict and the sentence of death that followed were not only justifiable; they were righteous judgments. The perpetrator had not only murdered a child. He had stolen her innocence while betraying her trust and the trust of her father.

But not everyone during that time desired the death penalty as adjudicated by the court. Was the murder a premeditated act as the State successfully argued, or was it a horrible experiment gone awry, given the strange set of circumstances under which the young girl met her death? Also, was the condemned man sane or insane at the time of this appalling deed? These were perplexing questions that were raised during that time.

Complicating the matter for the defendant was the physical evidence and the words he uttered outside the courtroom that portrayed him as a sexual predator, though that did not directly contribute to the young girl's death. The man was never charged with rape, a capital offense. Nevertheless, that fact alone did not aid in his defense, nor did it create a swell of sympathetic supporters once he was convicted of his crime.

In essence, the condemned man was clearly guilty of something, but did his crime—premeditated murder by chloroform poisoning—rise to the level of a capital offense? At that time, the answer was a resounding yes, though it was far from a universal sentiment. Even now, the question of guilty as charged, or guilty of manslaughter, or innocent by reason of insanity begs a renewed look, a new perspective, and a reexamination of the facts. Only then can the mysteries surrounding this bizarre murder be brought to light and the persistent misconceptions about this case be properly addressed.

The Strange Case of Dr. Etienne Deschamps


1. Orleans Parish Prison
2. Congo Square
3. St. Louis Cemetery No. 1
4. St. Louis Cemetery No. 2
5. Old Basin & Carondelet Canal
6. Cabildo building
7. St. Louis Cathedral
8. Jackson Square
9. Etienne Deschamps residence No. 64 (now 714) St. Peter St.
10. Jules Dietsh family residence No. 116 (now 500) Chartres St.
11. John Havá drugstore Nos. 99/101 (then 415) Chartres St.
12. Mailhes drugstore No. 105 (then 440) Royal St.
13. Majeau drugstore No. 195 (now 841) Bourbon St.
14. Bonnot funeral home No. 45 (now 625) St. Ann St.
15. Queyrouze residence No. 17 (now 515) St Louis St.
16. "First Skyscraper" No.156 (now 640) Royal St.
17. The Presbytère
North Claiborne
North Robertson
Villere
Marais
North Liberty or Treme
North Franklin
North Babin
North Rampart
Orleans
100
200
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Burgundy
Canal Street
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Custom House
Bienville
Dauphine
Conti
St. Louis
900
800
Toulouse
St. Peter
Orleans
St. Ann
Dumaine
St. Philip
Ursuline
Hospital
Bourbon
Even #
Odd #
700
Royal
Exchange Place
Exchange Alley
600
Chartres
500
Decatur
Mississippi River
1889-1892 New Orleans
Etienne Deschamps'sWorld
(Block numbers post 1893-94)

Chapter One

Execution Day

The head jerked to the right, the feet swung forward, and then the figure straightened and swayed a bit from the strain of the rope.
New Orleans Daily Picayune, May 14, 1892

When dawn broke on Friday morning, May 13, 1892, a heavy fog hung over the Crescent City. This was not an unusual spring occurrence in New Orleans, which was often plagued with high humidity and progressive heat, though the city would be spared record warmth that day. It wasn't until twenty or thirty minutes later that the first burst of sunlight pierced the eastern horizon, slowly dissipating the mist. By all accounts it would be a gorgeous, cloudless day, with the temperature rising no higher than eighty-three degrees. As the sun rose higher in the sky, commercial carts rumbled on the brick-lined streets of New Orleans, and foot traffic slowly began to clog the downtown area as people went about their business. There seemed to be "an easy and sweet contentment" that morning, according to the *New Orleans Daily City Item*, as delightful floral fragrances inundated the air.

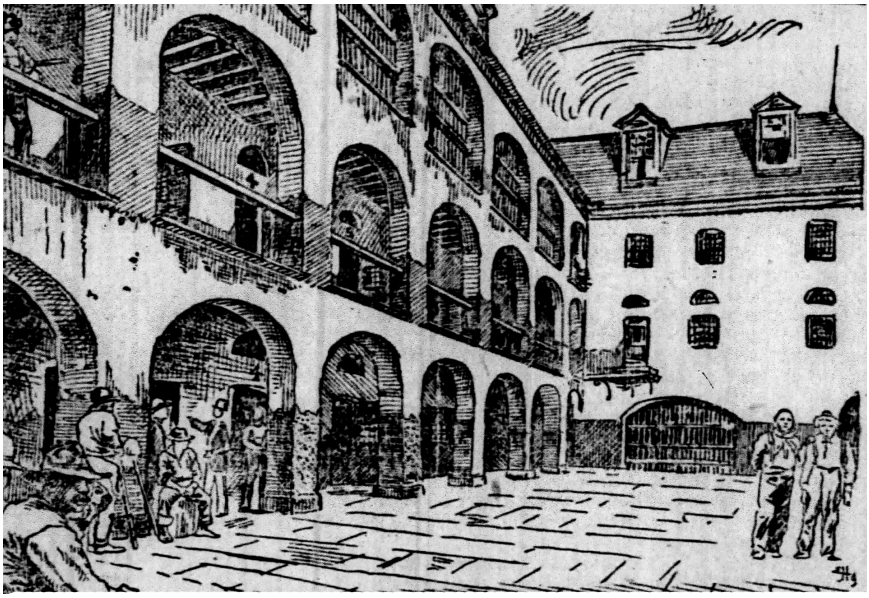
But not every quarter in the city shared in that pleasant moment. Fronting Orleans Street and bordering Marais, North Liberty (or Treme), and St. Ann streets, a block behind Congo Square in what is now Louis Armstrong Park, stood a massive and foreboding three-story, gray, stucco building—Orleans Parish Prison. The main prison complex, which housed male inmates, ran along North Liberty Street. It was accessible only through an iron gate. The portion of the prison along Marais Street was used as the New Orleans Police Department Fourth Precinct. The women's prison was located to its rear. In essence, the massive structure, built in 1834 of brick and iron, was divided in half by an enclosed walkway, with male prisoners on one side and females on the other. White and African-American inmates of both genders were segregated.

Orleans Parish Prison (1834-95). (Courtesy NOLA.com/The *Times-Picayune*)

Inside the main entrance of the men's prison on the right was a visitor's room—visiting hours were from 9:00 A.M. to 3:30 P.M., Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Next was the clerk's office, followed by a private apartment for the criminal sheriff. Situated on the left were the sleeping quarters for the captain, deputy sheriffs, prison keepers, and watchmen.

A second iron gate led to a long corridor, which served as a dining room for prison officials. The kitchen was located at one end of the passageway. To the right of the kitchen, a third iron gate led directly to the interior prison yard and to cells occupied by African-American inmates. To the left of the kitchen were the cells and yard for white prisoners. A stairway at the end of the corridor led to the second-floor infirmary and "rooms for prisoners able to pay board and enjoy all the comforts of life, except liberty," according to a *Daily Picayune* story about the prison.

Beyond that, in the middle of the hallway through another iron gate, ran a gallery that skirted a double tier of cells allocated for condemned criminals only. Any inmate who received a sentence of death, regardless of whether that sentence was under appeal, was immediately transferred to this isolated section of the prison. There were eight cells, grouped in pairs. Condemned Box No. 1 and 2 ran along the third-floor gallery and No. 3 and 4 along the second floor. All of the cells, isolated from one another, overlooked the prison yard below. During the day, occupied cells were left open, giving the prisoner access to



Orleans Parish Prison interior. (Courtesy NOLA.com/The *Times-Picayune*)

his individual gallery in front. He could exercise there, if desired, or converse with the general population in the yard below. No visitors were allowed in the condemned person's cell, except in the presence of a prison official.

Once the governor had signed and transmitted the death sentence, the condemned prisoner was placed under constant watch and frequently searched for any contraband that might be used for self-destruction. Prisoners were locked in their cells at sundown and placed under constant surveillance by a jail keeper or watchman. This ritual constituted the "death watch." Prisoners slept on a mattress placed on the floor and were provided with a pillow, bed linen, and mosquito netting. No other furniture was allowed, though there was some means for toileting. When the prisoners ate, only a spoon was furnished, no knife or fork. All meat was cut into small pieces by an attendant prior to serving.

On this particular Friday in May 1892, Etienne Deschamps was the only condemned prisoner at the facility. He was scheduled to be executed that day for his crime. His cell, identical to the adjoining one in Condemned Box No. 1, was a gloomy ten-by-twelve-foot space. It rarely saw direct sunlight, and graffiti from past occupants covered its walls. Deschamps referred to his cell as no more than a stall.

Originally housed on the second-floor condemned area, Deschamps had been transferred to the third floor sometime after mid-March 1891. There he remained isolated, except for an eleven-month period starting in mid-May 1891 when a fellow condemned prisoner, Philip Baker, occupied the adjacent cell. He went to the gallows on April 22, 1892.

In early May 1889, Deschamps was found guilty of the January 1889 murder of a twelve-year-old girl and sentenced to die. The Louisiana Supreme Court later overturned his conviction. When he was tried again in March 1890, Louisiana's highest court upheld the guilty verdict and death sentence. The governor issued a temporary reprieve in April 1892 until the Board of Pardons could act upon the findings of a self-appointed medical commission. There were some supporters of Deschamps who believed him to be insane, but in the end it made no difference.

At 5:00 A.M., Deputy Sheriff Edgar White, the death watchman, entered Deschamps's cell and found him stretched out and asleep on his mattress, with his head resting on his right arm. The condemned prisoner had woken briefly at midnight and requested a glass of lemonade for his parched throat. An hour later he woke again, staring nervously about before falling back to sleep a few minutes later.

"Deschamps," White said as he bent down and touched his shoulder. "Come, it's five o'clock," he stated in French. "Time to be up and about, Deschamps."

When Deschamps woke from his last earthly sleep, his face was "pale and wan," according to the *Daily City Item*. He spoke not a word at first. His eyes were "feverishly bright and he seemed to realize that his case was hopeless." His silvery, curly locks were unkempt, though he had received a haircut two weeks before. He bounced to his feet and used the toilet.

After emptying his bladder, Deschamps, who spoke very little English, glanced about the room before resting his head on the jail-cell bars as if meditating. Whatever thought he had at that exact moment he took to his grave, but based on his facial expression, White assumed it was about his impending doom.

If there was a set timetable that White wished to follow that morning, Deschamps wanted no part of it. As quickly as he had risen to his feet to relieve himself, he returned to the floor with his legs crossed and his face buried in his hands. White knew it was best not to disturb Deschamps at that particular moment. He had a history of verbal outbursts and tantrums while jailed, and on three occasions he had attempted suicide. On Deschamps's last day on earth, White wisely allowed him to reign over his limited dominion, if only for

a little while. After some time had elapsed, he rose to his feet and breathed a heavy sigh. "It's a sad day for me," Deschamps finally uttered in French.

He then proceeded to pace around his gallery space, occasionally pausing to look down into the prison yard through the bars that ran along the third-story banister. About three feet from the end of the gallery was the gallows, a wooden scaffold with a trapdoor held in place by a series of ropes. A gangway bridged the chasm between the gallery and scaffold. Deschamps knew he would walk across it to the gallows sometime that day. Only a miracle could prevent it.

At 7:30 that morning, Rev. Louis LeBlanc, a Jesuit priest, visited the condemned man. Fluent in French, he was a natural choice as a spiritual advisor to the French-born Deschamps. On several occasions the previous day, Father LeBlanc had asked him to go to confession, but Deschamps refused. He had convinced himself, and said as much to Father LeBlanc, that God had instructed him to confess only to Him.

Etienne Deschamps (1890). (Courtesy NOLA.com/The *Times-Picayune*)

"I will not make any confessions to a man," the Frenchman defiantly remarked. But he added, "If you wish to, you may pray for me."

He admitted to Father LeBlanc that he had no time to waste in prayer himself, though he promised him that he would attend Mass and receive the sacraments later that morning, something that he had refused to do in the past.

When breakfast was announced at eight o'clock, Deschamps spoke not a word, but by his actions it was clear that he was hungry. As he continued to pace around the gallery, a number of newspaper reporters shouted questions at him. The criminal sheriff of Orleans Parish, Gabriel Villeré, had given them unfettered access to the prisoner off and on during the past three years but especially the day before, allowing them to enter his cell at will. Prior to sundown, he had conversed with some members of the press. It would have been easier for everyone, especially Deschamps, had Villeré simply banished them until just before the execution, but Deschamps's crime begged their presence. The public demanded it. Therefore, reporters literally camped out in the prison, hoping to converse with him one last time.

But by Friday morning, Deschamps held nothing but contempt for the reporters, who he believed were directly responsible for his sentence of death. A flood of negative newspaper articles written over the past thirty-nine months proved to Deschamps their bias against him, before, during, and after his various court appearances, including the various appeals by his lawyers. Unlike the evening before, when he was cordial toward the press, by morning his attitude toward them had turned 180 degrees. He wanted nothing to do with them.

When at last his breakfast was served, his appetite had waned. Nervousness had taken hold of his psyche. When he was provided with a plate of eggs, potatoes, rice, meat, and a cup of tea, he only consumed the eggs.

At 9:00 A.M., Sheriff Villeré arrived with a new set of clothes for Deschamps. He had wanted to wear his old tattered garb to the execution, but as a favor to Villeré, he acquiesced. The new clothing consisted of a grosgrain coat, white shirt, striped trousers, and slippers. A reporter from the *Daily City Item* commented after the execution that, with his long hair and whiskers freshly trimmed, "he looked like the Etienne Deschamps of three years ago, when he committed the horrible crime."

While Deschamps dressed and groomed himself, a crowd of the curious slowly gathered in the grassy neutral ground along Orleans Street. During the early years of the prison, executions were public spectacles. The gallows was situated over the first-story covered walkway that united the two halves of the prison. Standing on Orleans Street at the building's divide or atop the

roofs of neighboring buildings, people could easily witness the grand event. But the state legislature put an end to that in 1858 after a public uproar over a botched execution that was observed by hundreds of spectators during a violent thunderstorm. Thereafter, all executions were performed indoors. As reported in the *Daily City Item*, the law required that "not less than four nor shall more than fifteen people, one of whom had to be a physician, shall be present" to officially witness the execution. However, scores of other spectators received passes from the prison captain or one of his custodians to enter the yard. The gallows was erected against the rear building in the whites-only section of the prison yard. It loomed high, flush with the second- or third-story gallery of the condemned prisoner's cell.

In spite of their inability to witness Deschamps hanged, throngs of onlookers gathered along Orleans Street anyway. If they could not directly witness the execution, they would not be deprived of the opportunity to hear firsthand of his demise. Surprisingly—or maybe not, given that a young girl had been murdered—the crowds that gathered in front of the prison were comprised of a disproportionate number of females, the majority of whom were African Americans. The crime committed more than three years before had undoubtedly touched the lives of many ethnic and racial groups living in the New Orleans metropolitan area. Nearly everyone who gathered in front of the prison was eager to see justice carried out for the murder of an innocent child. By 10:00 A.M., the crowds had swelled to such a degree that one or two policemen were assigned to the area to preserve the peace. Meanwhile, inside the prison, all inmates were locked up and preparations for the hanging commenced.

After donning his gallows attire, Deschamps walked the short distance to the third-floor chapel for Mass as he had promised and received the Sacraments of Communion and of the Dead. Chief Deputy Sheriff Raoul Arnoult accompanied him and sat next to him during the service. True to an earlier promise from Sheriff Villeré, no reporters intruded upon Deschamps's time in the chapel. Afterward, he returned to his cell.

Though apprehensive, Deschamps still entertained some glimmer of hope that day. On his way back to his cell, he asked a fellow prisoner if the telegraph service between Baton Rouge and the prison was defective. It was not. But even if it had been, it would have made no difference. The possibility that Deschamps would receive another gubernatorial reprieve, or for that matter a commutation of his sentence, was as remote as him flying to the moon. His legal options had finally run their course.

At 12:20 P.M., the coroner for Orleans Parish, Dr. Yves René LeMonnier,

Jr., swore in the coroner's jury. These were the gentlemen who would officially witness the execution and later attest to and certify the death by hanging of Etienne Deschamps. They included six physicians and nine newspapermen, each reporter representing one of the city's prominent tabloids of the day. Besides Dr. LeMonnier, other city or Orleans Parish officials included Sheriff Villeré; his chief deputy sheriff, Raoul Arnoult; his former chief deputy sheriff, Alcée LeBlanc, currently a bond clerk for the Second Recorder's Court; and Assistant Coroner Dr. Paul Emile Archinard.

Of all the eyewitnesses that day, Dr. LeMonnier was the most outspoken opponent to any notion that Etienne Deschamps was insane at the time of the murder and therefore not responsible for his actions. On this day he would witness justice served. Later he would comment about the autopsy findings, which involved a close examination of Etienne Deschamps's brain. For Dr. LeMonnier, the findings would definitively prove that the murderer was sane and accountable for his unspeakable crime.

Five minutes after the coroner's jury was sworn in, Deschamps was given one last opportunity to visit the chapel before walking across the gangway to the gallows. According to one source, he was not particularly interested in doing so but did it as a favor to Sheriff Villeré. Another witness disputed that notion, however, claiming Deschamps did anything and everything to delay his execution. Deschamps and Father LeBlanc entered the chapel at 12:28. A group of nuns, members of the Sisters of Mercy who had accompanied Father LeBlanc, knelt quietly on the gallery, praying earnestly for the repose of Deschamps's soul.

Nine minutes later, Father LeBlanc opened the chapel door and requested that three chairs be brought inside, along with some writing material. Deschamps wanted to dictate something—another delay, perhaps. A minute later, the chairs and materials arrived, accompanied by Sheriff Villeré and Chief Deputy Arnoult. Arnoult served as the scribe.

The foursome spoke in low voices inside the chapel. No one on the outside heard their conversation. Then at precisely 12:43, Deschamps began his dictation, "looking around indifferently," while Arnoult passed sheet after sheet of the completed manuscript to Sheriff Villeré. At 12:50, Deschamps stopped, and Arnoult and Villeré signed the document. The pair then departed, leaving Father LeBlanc and Deschamps alone in the chapel once again.

At 1:05, the chapel doors opened. Father LeBlanc called upon the nuns to say one last prayer for the condemned prisoner as Deschamps walked

out into the gallery "cool and collected, followed by the others," as the *Daily Picayune* reported.

The witnesses gathered along the gallery connected to Condemned Box No. 1, awaiting the arrival of Deschamps. Once he arrived, Arnoult began to read the death warrant in English. Knowing what it was, Deschamps "interrupted in his excitable French manner," one witness recalled.

"It is only a formality. Let us dispense with it," he requested.

But Arnoult continued reading as prescribed by law while Deschamps looked upon the witnesses, paying no attention to Arnoult. When Arnoult began to recite the death warrant in French, Deschamps interrupted him again on the same grounds. But it made no difference to Arnoult, who continued.

Deschamps pointed directly at Dr. LeMonnier.

"I am innocent! LeMonnier is a murderer! Assassin! LeMonnier!" Deschamps cried out, his eyes blazing.

Alcée LeBlanc, who stood nearby, tried to calm Deschamps as his march to the gallows began. The party had scarcely walked a few yards when Deschamps cried out again. "I am innocent who am to be hung. LeMonnier is a criminal. Assassin! LeMonnier! Assassin! LeMonnier!"

They reached the gangway. The executioner placed a noose around Deschamps's neck. His hands were pinioned.

The executioner's name was not immediately known to the newspaper reporters who were present. Quietly spirited into the prison and isolated in an unidentified cell the previous night, the man had been given all the comforts of home before performing his grisly task the following day. One reporter implied that the executioner was "no other than the redoubtable Taylor," a well-known figure in the city dubbed "Hangman Taylor" by the press. Years later he was described as a tall, bearded man, "calm and most provokingly cool."

It turned out that the reporter's inclination was correct. The executioner was Hangman Taylor; one of the newspapers identified him by name the following day. Disguised "under the folds of a black domino [mask]" and undoubtedly wearing a grotesque black robe with hood and white gloves, which was his trademark costume, Hangman Taylor went about his task nameless and faceless to all but a few select prison officials.

The use of a professional hangman was still a relatively new development. In years past, the sheriff solicited help from minor criminals under his charge with the promise of a pardon if they undertook the job. But that created

more problems than not for the Sheriff's Department when the hanging went badly. By the 1890s, a professional hangman was hired.

Hangman Taylor was such a person, and he was known around the country as most proficient in his trade. How Taylor—his first name was never published—acquired his skill is unknown. The circumstances surrounding his first execution are also unknown. By May 1892, he had already executed more than twenty of Louisiana's condemned prisoners. His profession would eventually cost him his marriage and alienate his son, John, who never knew his father other than by what he did for a living. Ostracized by his peers because of his father's occupation, John turned to a life of crime as a petty thief by 1904 at the age of eighteen.

By the time the old Orleans Parish Prison closed its doors in January 1895 and moved to its new location on Gravier Street, Hangman Taylor had officiated at two additional hangings there. He performed several more in the new building, before his reported death sometime during the early 1900s.

"Have you anything to say?" Sheriff Villeré asked Deschamps in French.

"Nothing. I have said all I had to say to Father LeBlanc," he replied. "He advises me to say nothing."

Father LeBlanc, standing inches from Deschamps, raised the crucifix, affording Deschamps one last opportunity to kiss the cross before being placed upon the drop door where a stool had been positioned. Taylor tied his feet, and Deschamps was then seated, "glancing about with interested unconcern," according to one reporter.

"Adieu," Deschamps muttered, looking at one of the men he recognized.

It turned out to be his last utterance—appropriate but pathetic as it was. Hangman Taylor placed a black cap firmly over his head and then retreated to a neighboring cell to await Sheriff Villeré's signal to cut the rope that held the trapdoor. The trap had been weighted from beneath to expedite its opening and to prevent it from rebounding and striking the condemned prisoner as he dangled. The time was 1:10 P.M., and Etienne Deschamps had ninety seconds left of conscious life.

At precisely 1:11 1/2 P.M., Sheriff Villeré gave the signal to Taylor, whose raised ax swung down and severed the rope with a single blow. The attached weight and Etienne's mass caused the hinged trap to swing down, making a clanging sound as the door struck the weathered prison wall. A second later, the stool hit the ground with a clatter. Deschamps's body plunged eight feet, "the upper portion leaning forward in the fall," before the rope snapped his neck, terminating his descent. "The head jerked to the right, the feet swung

forward, and then the figure straightened and swayed a bit from the strain of the rope," according to one eyewitness.

A minute after Deschamps's plunge into eternity, observers noted convulsive twitches of the abdominal muscles. Lack of oxygen had triggered the beginnings of lactic acidosis, which caused widespread spasms until death. Thirty seconds later, his body hung motionless, though his "powerful lungs were yet to assert themselves," as noted by an eyewitness. A second set of strong muscular twitches then continued in regular intervals for several minutes.

At 1:16, his pulse was checked and recorded at eighty-four beats per minute. By then his breathing was much slower. Two minutes later, all muscular activity relaxed. Etienne Deschamps hanged for ten more minutes before being declared dead at precisely 1:28 P.M. From beginning to end, not a single sign of struggle had been observed by the witnesses. Hangman Taylor had done his job well.

Taylor cut down the condemned man at 1:43, and two stalwart African Americans placed the body on a wooden stretcher that had been deposited beneath the gallows. There, newspapermen and other witnesses quickly gathered. "No one [rejoiced] at Deschamps' death. The feeling [was] only one of grim satisfaction, absolutely passionless," a reporter later wrote.

A cursory examination of the body by Dr. LeMonnier showed that Etienne Deschamps had died by "a slow, but unconscious and painless strangulation." His inspection revealed that Etienne's face was badly cyanotic, and the rope had left a deep impression in his neck. "The lips were barely parted." His right eye was closed, and "the left partially open, with the eye ball in normal position." The *Daily Picayune* printed graphic details of the execution and the autopsy that followed.

A post-mortem examination of Deschamps's brain, done "in the interest of science," revealed that it was "well developed and perfectly normal," according to Dr. Archinard, who performed the autopsy at the prison thirty minutes after his death. Coroner LeMonnier was present during the operation. Archinard noted that the brain was "a little soft," but that was to be expected in a warm body. Dr. LeMonnier had previously indicated that he believed Deschamps lacked any physical or psychological signs of abnormality and therefore was not insane at the time of the murder. Of course, by today's standards, not finding any abnormalities of the brain doesn't rule out mental illness as a causative factor for the crime of murder. But in the world of 1892, in Dr. LeMonnier's mind, it had.

Deschamps's corpse remained at the prison until 4:00 P.M., when it was placed in a simple pine coffin and transported for burial to Potter's Field or Holt Cemetery, established in 1879 for the indigent. No one had claimed the body. The mostly in-ground cemetery, a rare phenomenon in New Orleans, is situated approximately three miles northwest of what was then the prison's location, along Metairie Road (now City Park Avenue) on Rosedale Drive, adjacent to present-day Delgado Community College.

The press later questioned Father LeBlanc, Sheriff Villeré, and Chief Deputy Arnoult about the content of Deschamps's dictation in the prison chapel.

"It is in no [way] relative to the crime, and is not a confession or statement," Villeré and Arnoult jointly announced. "Its nature we are bound by an oath to Father LeBlanc to keep secret." Father LeBlanc would not discuss the content of his conversations with Deschamps and also asserted that the document was not a confession or statement. As far as he was concerned, Deschamps had kissed the cross and died a Roman Catholic in good standing.

Prior to the execution, rumors had spread across the city that Deschamps was a Mason and therefore would never hang. Dr. LeMonnier was a Mason, and a Mason would never allow another Mason to hang. We do not know if Deschamps himself fueled such rumors. His membership is possible, but there's no evidence. For at least 150 years prior to the hanging, the Roman Catholic Church had been openly critical of Freemasonry, forbidding Catholic men from joining the organization. With Deschamps severing his alleged ties with "an alien Masonic body," as the *Daily Picayune* reported, all was right in the eyes of the Lord, as far as Father LeBlanc was concerned.

Etienne Deschamps now belonged to the ages and to God, his infamy forever a stain upon his family's name. For the murder of a twelve-year-old girl, there would be no forgiveness. His offense would become one of the most sensational in the crime annals of New Orleans.