

Jean Étienne Miltiade de Bresse Préfontaine

Founder of the Musée de Noyers



The story of an honourable man

To this day, there is a street in Noyers whose name has always intrigued me: *La Rue de Bresse*. This name that echoes from a distant land led me to the museum, and at the same time, to this curious story.



As one approaches Noyers, the Notre Dame church and the former school establish the city's medieval character. The symbolism is striking: faith and knowledge.



We can thank the 15th and 17th century villagers for these buildings. The school was built in 1633 by the municipality, led by mayor Francois de Selle, Lord of Moutot. The school was to be under the guidance of the religious catholic congregation, the *Doctrinaires*.



The faculty of the school, which was made up of priests and catechism teachers, varied over the centuries. During that period education was open to all and was free from primary school until the 3 years preceding graduation.

This system remained stable until the 18th century, when the introduction of taxes disrupted the financial balance, requiring farms to be sold. This disequilibrium led to a lawsuit against a municipality reluctant to pay its part.



Commenté [Clarice M1]: We start the sentence in the exact same way and mention the same word 3 times

The revolution meant the confiscation of the clergy's assets, thus ceasing operations at the school. The municipality had to fight hard to keep ownership of the school building, coveted by the Auxerre and Tonnerre districts, and for the salaries of the religious teachers to ensure that the children could continue to be educated. The sale of the school's assets meant the dispersion of its furniture, but most importantly its library. It would take the next three governments (the First French Republic, the First French Empire, and the Bourbon Restoration) for teaching in the school to resume.

THEN CAME THE DE BRESSES



Étienne de Bresse de Préfontaine, of lower nobility, was born in Saumur on the 3rd of October 1769 and studied in Maison Alfort. Inspired by the ideas of the Enlightenment, he enlisted in the anti-royalist *Compagnie des volontaires de Bourgogne* on the 15th of August 1791 instead of fleeing the turmoil of the revolution.

Subsequently, he participated in wars for the Revolution and the Napoleonic wars against the German army, then against the Italian army under the command of marshal Davout. He climbed the ranks of the cavalry to achieve the title of Captain of the 3rd Armored Cavalry. He was injured in Essling and Leipzig, and in Waterloo on the 18th of June 1815.

This last injury brought to a close his exemplary military career. He had been awarded the first degree (*Chevalier*), then the second degree (*Officier*) of the *Légion d'honneur* in 1813, and then the *Ordre des Lys* in 1814 by Louis XVIII.

Aged 47, he married Caroline Simmonet (30) in 1818. The daughter and granddaughter of lawyers in Noyers, she was a respected member of the French senate (*Conseil des anciens*). After the coup of 18 Brumaire she became a member of Napoleon's governing body, the *Corps législatif* (equivalent to today's *Assemblée Nationale*). Together the couple forged a relationship with Josephine Bonaparte.

Although they didn't show it, the Simmonet family had wealth. Étienne and Caroline settled in Noyers, where she gave birth to a boy on the 7th of January 1820. They named their son Jean Étienne Miltiade, after the victor of the Battle of Marathon.

In 1830 Miltiade started his education at the school of Noyers, then from 1835 to 1840 he studied at the school of Tonnerre. Considered a treasured child and overprotected by his mother, his family moved to the same city to keep a close eye on him due to his sickly disposition. Miltiade finished his studies in Sens, and after graduating in November 1841 he moved to Paris to obtain a law degree which he finished in February 1845. Because of his fragile health Miltiade was excused conscription, much to the chagrin of his father, and instead pursued becoming a judge.

The de Bresses seemed to worry about their son being appointed in Tonnerre, where the high society of the Bourbon Restoration would not welcome the son of a former soldier of Napoleon Bonaparte – especially one from Noyers!

With this in mind, Miltiade's parents wrote to the president of the Auxerre courthouse in 1846 requesting that Miltiade be given the role of deputy judge. The position was formally held by judge Leclerc de Fourolles, who was to be appointed in Joigny.

On the 3rd of June 1849, however, Miltiade was appointed deputy judge at the Tonnerre courthouse, replacing judge Durant who had been appointed to Chartres.

Feeling somewhat isolated by the drudgery of courthouse dealings, Miltiade struck up a friendship with judge Baillot.



THE DE BRESSE CASE

In Tonnerre, letters spreading “odious and relentless defamations” against local respectable families had been circulating for many years. These letters were reported on by the local newspaper *La Constitution*, and many of them predated the arrival of the de Bresses in Tonnerre.

Then, on the 25th of January 1856, a legal civil servant from the court of appeals and a public prosecutor carried out searches of the properties of Miltiade and Baillot following an anonymous tip. There they found a “large number of defamatory writings”.

The Yonne press decried the scandal, which threatened the integrity of the courts. The capital sent out a prosecutor and a judge to lead the investigation, and Miltiade was interrogated for approximately 23 hours despite his claims of innocence.

On the 26th of January 1856, Baillot (44) shot himself in the chest but did not die until 5 hours later. He denied all association with the letters but claimed he was unable to live after such an attack on his character.

After a second investigation, Miltiade handed in his resignation, in the hopes that this would allow the trial to be held by the Tonnerre tribunal. This was denied, and the case was to be tried in Paris as soon as possible. Miltiade was summoned on the 11th of March to appear in court the next day, the journey made possible thanks to the recently installed railway service.

The trial began on the 5th of April. The prosecution asked for the case to be private on the pretext of disrupting public order and public values. On the 7th of April on Tonnerre, 17 witnesses were interviewed. Handwriting experts confirmed that certain letters were written by Miltiade. Baillot was exonerated due to his suicide, and public opinion toward him has since shifted in his favour.



THE TONNERRE LETTERS

La Romance de Firmin

*Que de cocus dans notre ville
 Maître Firmin, sans vous compter
 Morbleu, cessez de plaisanter
 Un railleur m'échauffe la bile
 Hé bien, soit je change de style
 Déridez ce front mécontent
 Que de cocus dans notre ville
 Maître Firmin en vous comptant.*

Firmin's Romance

*There's only cuckolds in our town
 Master Firmin, you don't count
 Good lord, now don't play around
 A joker really makes me frown
 Ok then, I'll change my tone
 Unfurrow that unhappy brow
 There's only cuckolds in our town
 And Mister Firmin, we mean you now.*

The Mare of Peasant Firmin

This poem is an extract from a play of around 900 verses, describing scandalous relationships in Tonnerre. One of these purported relationships involves judge Firmin Roze, judge Cassemiche, the archbishop of Sens and the vicar of Letteron in an illicit affair.

Commenté [Andrew Hi2]: Inconsistency in the title given to 'Firmin' (Master/Mister) in the text box, which is not editable.

On the 9th of April 1856, Jean Étienne Miltiade de Bresse was found guilty of having copied, stored and spread the defamatory letters, but not of having written them. To add salt to the wound, the judge found de Bresse lacked the intellectual capacity to write such letters.

Miltiade was sentenced to 6 months in prison and was fined 5000 francs, an enormous amount at the time which included the costs of the investigation and trial. His ambitions were thwarted and only then was his resignation accepted. Order was restored in the Tonnerre courthouse, and the integrity of the court was maintained.



The citizens of Tonnerre, much like in the rest of France, endured many hardships during the first half of the 19th century (the First French Empire, the Bourbon Restoration, the revolution of 1830, Napoleon III) and had become ultra-conservative in the wake of it. Due to this, they viewed the arrival of an anti-royalist Bonapartist soldier from the haughty city of Noyers with disdain and animosity.

Captain de Bresse did not support Mr. Rétif in the legislative elections, and his wife Caroline was resentful, adapting poorly to her new bourgeois surroundings. Miltiade on the other hand was named deputy judge of the Tonnerre courthouse, where he likely envisioned a new start for himself. Judge Rétif however described him as “weak, narrow-minded, and stubborn.”

Miltiade, on account of his overprotective mother, never learned how to defend himself. He and the deceased judge Baillot were thus reframed as the perpetrators of the letter scandal in Tonnerre. Could it be that Miltiade rewrote and stored these inflammatory letters? Maybe, but he certainly didn’t send them. The true authors of the letters were never found.

Any plans for marriage that Miltiade had were ruined by the remarks made by judge Rétif about the de Bresses. Rétif retired at the age of 70, which freed up a position for his son who had been a deputy judge in Mantes.

After the letter scandal the de Bresses moved to Paris – 60 *rue Saint Placide*. Caroline tried in vain to use her connections to free her son. She sought clemency from Napoleon and Josephine 4 times, all of which were ignored.



Miltiade was imprisoned at Sainte Pélagie prison on the 1st of August 1856 and was released on the 31st of January 1857. During this time, he wrote about his experiences in prison and in the society of Tonnerre.

After captain de Bresse's death in 1851, Miltiade moved to Paris to be near his mother who defended him until her death in 1873. There he lived the life of an intellectual, cultured man, and an eclectic collector of all things.

Having had tender memories of a happy childhood, Miltiade was very attached to Noyers and its school. Therefore, he renovated a room in the La Borde farm, a Simonnet asset, which he would stay in frequently.

On the 17th of January 1876, aged 56, he died alone in Noyers. Before his death he drafted a will in which he bequeathed all his belongings to the city of Noyers, so that a museum and library could be built.

NOYERS CEMETERY

Miltiade arranged his family's final resting place, with a sixth plot for him for when dies. "Here lies Jean Étienne Miltiade de Bresse de Préfontaine, former judge, born in Noyers on the 7th of January 1820". He remained forever faithful to his family's adage "In variis nunquam varius" and prevailed as an honest man despite the slander and injustices he faced.



"Here lies
"Étienne de Bresse de Préfontaine
"Captain of the armoured cavalry
"Officer of the Legion of Honour
"Died on the 2nd of January 1851 in Tonerre
"Aged 82
"His core belief was
"Honour and Country
"Pray to God for him."



MILTIADE'S LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT

Read on the 18th of July 1876, he designated the city of Noyers as his sole inheritor. The Ferme de La Borde, multiple French lettings, mortgages, and railway investments were to be sold for the benefit of his project.

“We declare here, first and foremost our wishes; we hope and want the entirety of our income to benefit our small city. (...)

Similar to the library, the museum must display a plaque inscribed with: *Musée de la ville de Noyers, Fondation Simonnet de Bresse*.

These two establishments would preferably occupy the former school's building. This would serve to revive the past, and the memory of an honourable foundation, worthy of not being forgotten by our town (...)

We are happy to think that we have done some good during our time on Earth, and to have been helpful to our country. The pain caused by the defamations we have endured has been softened.

The collection should be expanded via subscriptions and acquisitions. Objects old and new. Automated and inanimate. Miracles of man and of nature. Civilised and primitive. Objects from the earth, the sea, the sky, from any time and from any country. India, China, Iceland, Lapland, Timbuktu, from Rome or from Paris.

These objects will serve to share knowledge that is comprehensive, worldly and practical. They will embody science and the good it does. They will encompass the cantons and the communes, to historical events and figures.”

The municipality established the museum and the library in 1878 in the former Noyers school building, while Victor Gautherin was mayor and with Henri Mossand as its first librarian.

The responsibility of overseeing and managing the establishments fell to the head librarian. A yearly inventory was to be undertaken by the administrator and three members of the council. A supervisory committee made up of 3 councillors and free members would meet six times a year.

Thus, Miltiade de Bresse's wishes were honoured and the museum and library opened their doors under the name "*Fondation Simmonet de Bresse*". Although the library's collection is vaster than the museum's, the eclectic nature of the latter's inventory made it harder to classify.

150 years of the Museum

After Miltiade's initial donation, the collection was expanded by private donors, notably Dr. Soupey; a navy doctor who donated a large amount of exotic ethnographic objects, as well as a collection of sketches by the Japanese master Hokusai.

The museum became less active between 1920 and 1970 but was given a new lease of life by the association of *Amis du vieux Noyers*. This was accomplished by establishing a yearly series of exhibitions backed by the municipality.

From 1988, the museum would start housing the vast collection of naïve art by Yankel. Over the years the assortment of his art grew little by little until his death in 2020.

Son of painter Kikoïne, Yankel was born in 1920 and grew up in Paris. During his stay in Annay he resided at the family's secondary home, with Noyers and its museum serving as the natural home for his artistic legacy in the region.

After the war he went to Africa as a geologist but ultimately chose a career in the arts. As an established collector he had a penchant for naïve art which he kept an eye out for.

With strong relations in the art world, a determined will and a strong discernment for pieces, he ended up collecting a large amount of art from the naïve art movement. He was resolute on displaying these in the Noyers museum, leading to its refurbishment.

Then in 2001 the couple Yvon Taillandier and Jacqueline Seltz added to the growing collection, as they were both collectors of naïve art. This is when the museum was renamed "*Musée des Arts Naïfs et Populaires de Noyers*" giving it a new start.

What has become of the foundation?

In his will, Miltiade outlined the foundation's commitment to eclecticism, open-mindedness and interest in other cultures. Even after his death he would only be able to be thrilled by the acquisitions. Should the man who suffered so much injustice at the hands of his peers also have to suffer the disappearance of '*Fondation Simmonet de Bresse*' from the museum? A name officially agreed upon by the municipality?

But then again, in his final wishes did he not mention Noyer's history and the search for its great men? Should we not remember these notable figures who were lords of Noyer? But we've barely scratched the surface in the topics we've discussed. Visitors keen on the Middle-Ages may be surprised by the lack of information about these times long since passed. Especially for a city that describes itself as a 'medieval jewel'.

SOURCES

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Further reading :

« Fond de Bresse », Yonne archives, 4 E280.

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