

Early New Orleans Society: A Reappraisal

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MOST OF THE SOUTH HAS BEEN CONTENT WITH ONE Lost Cause, one romantic memory of a time gone by in which it has been possible to linger with mixed emotions of pride in the perfection of the past and regret for its passing. But in that most distinct of southern states, Louisiana, where loyalties have so often been confused, even the Confederacy has been unable to dominate the nostalgia of the people, and, indeed, the commiseration felt by Louisianians for the death of the ante-bellum South has been as nothing compared to their mourning over the fate of the Creole.

A veritable cult of the Creole has grown over the years, propagated by historians as well as by journalists, by scholars as well as by the often pathetic present-day representatives of this supposed tradition, confused but happy in their knowledge that once their kind had ruled these lands along the Mississippi with a grace and charm long since lost to the modern world. For those who look so longingly to the past, these old Latin ways and forms have taken on the character of a superior culture, doomed to be crushed in the eventual day of Anglo-Saxon uniformity.

But when dreams distort historical truth, it is necessary, though perhaps futile, to challenge them, and it is the purpose of this paper to re-examine the nature of New Orleans' early population, to restore some proper focus in which to view the society of the city and of the state. It was perhaps inevitable that misunderstanding should spring from the confusion that was Louisiana in the 1820's. Nowhere was this confusion more

striking than in the crossroad of the world that so dominated Louisiana life, the metropolis of New Orleans.

The population of the city in the 1820's was divided into groups and shadings of groups, whose suspicions, resentments, and hatreds fed on the isolation from each other occasioned by differences of language and tradition, and battered on the familiarity bred by inevitable competition for political and economic power. The largest single group in the community was the *ancien population*, the descendants of the French and Spanish colonial settlers, about whom so much has been written and so little has been explained. Romantic folklore, filial pride, and uncritical if effusive writings have hidden these people behind a mythological fog which even today it is socially dangerous to try to penetrate. There are few things clung to so tenaciously or taught so vehemently in New Orleans as the doctrine of the Creole, which might be summed up as the religious belief that all those who bore that name were Louisianians born to descendants of the French and Spanish, that they were almost uniformly genteel and cultured aristocrats, above the lure of money, disdainful of physical labor, and too sensitive to descend into the dirty business of political and monetary struggle with the crude *Américains*, though they were influential enough to engulf the barbarism of the latter and give social and artistic tone to the city.

Nothing so infuriates the apostles of the Creole myth as the widespread belief in some outland quarters that the term implies a mixture of white and Negro blood, and they insist with an air of finality and aggressiveness that no Creole has ever been anything but a native white Louisianian descended from the Latin colonial stock. Even the descendants of the Acadian migrants from Canada are ruled out of this select society—they may be Cajuns, but never Creoles, for who has ever heard of a lowly Creole? Poor, perhaps, but never lowly. Only on one point is there any compromise, and that is in the willingness of the elect to admit that "Creole" may be legitimately used as an adjective to classify any number of things as native to the state, so that one may speak correctly of a slave as a "Creole Negro," for example, if never simply as a "Creole." Some latitudinarians will

even concede a place to those such as the scions of the German settlers who came into Louisiana under John Law, or to post-Purchase French migrants, since all these eventually became identified with the Gallic culture of the community. But the more frequent insistence is on the narrower definition.

It must be admitted that these Creoles of fancy are a charming and thoroughly delightful people. After all, they possessed physical and moral qualities, if we are to believe the tradition, which placed them among the favored of Providence. Their girls were models of beauty and feminine virtue, protected from the crudities of life by a rigid and almost incredible family supervision and training, yet the very epitome of those social graces and accomplishments which make for the delight of men. The women were deferential wives and mothers, arbiters of style and behavior, mistresses of gracious households. And who would not recognize the men—the dark and lithe youths, handsome, gallant, and brave, educated in France or select American colleges, and equipped with an electric pride which sparked at the slightest contact and led inevitably to numberless duels, generally of the gentlemanly kind involving slender swords and as little vulgar gore as possible; or the older, dignified, and chivalrous aristocrats, wise in the ways of the world, urbane and courtly, the very soul of honor and hospitality.

Their great accomplishment, we are told, was to know how to live. Not for them the rush and greed of the grasping American, whose god was the dollar and who had little time or inclination for the joys of the theater or the appreciation of beauty. It was breeding, never money, which counted with the Creole of tradition, and family pride made it impossible for him even to consider an economic pursuit which required the removal of his coat or the laborious use of his hands. He could be a banker, of course, which was eminently respectable, a professional man, a planter, or even a merchant, if on a large enough scale. But it should occasion no surprise that he fell farther and farther behind in the economic race with the Yankee—no man of his sensibilities could be expected to care enough for mere money to chase it with the almost frightening determination of a John McDonogh, or to allow the bothersome details of business to interfere with the serious things of life such as the theater, the

opera, the ball, or the hunt. One could not be expected always to have an eye on the Americans! Thus life for the traditional Creole had few sharp edges—he moved in the circles of his society with gentility of manner and an awareness of all the subtleties of good living which could only have come from his noble lineage. Paragon of style, judge of good wine and fine food, connoisseur of handsome women, he was to the manner born.¹

The only serious fault with this hallowed doctrine of the Creole is that it does demonstrable violence to historical truth. It is abundantly clear that in the 1820's and 1830's "Creole" was generally used in Louisiana to designate any person native to the state, be he white, black, or colored, French, Spanish, or Anglo-American, and used not as an adjective but as a noun. Thus the terms "Creole" and "native" were interchangeable, and if one wished to speak only of those Latin Louisianians who could trace their ties to the soil back to colonial days, the only precise form for so doing was that of the "*ancien population*." It is true, of course, that since the great preponderance of Creoles were of this original stock it was not at all unusual to find "Creole" being used as a more convenient term than "*ancien population*," especially when one considers that the Anglo-American Creoles were neither numerous enough nor generally old enough in the 1820's and 1830's to make necessary the more limited and accurate terminology during the heated racial conflicts in the community, and certainly it was realized that no one would think of considering the Negro as being at all involved in any of these factional distinctions among white men. Moreover, the *ancien population* almost universally insisted upon identifying their interests as those common to all *native* Louisianians, and they deliberately embraced the non-Latin native as one of themselves. There could be no question, therefore, of denying him the title of Creole. It follows naturally that the Acadians were

¹ The traditional approach to the Creole is most succinctly summed up by Roger Baudier in his "The Creoles of Old New Orleans" (typescript, Howard-Tilton Library, Tulane University), but is also to be found in practically every treatise on Louisiana. That this concept has become a matter of dogma with the present New Orleans Creoles is demonstrated by the study of Ben Avis Adams, "Indexes of Assimilation of the Creole People in New Orleans" (M.A. thesis, Tulane University, 1939).

likewise full-fledged members of this group, and there was certainly never any attempt in the press or the hustings to consider them in any other light.

The evidence on all these points is quite clear. Innumerable newspaper advertisements refer matter-of-factly to Louisiana-born Negroes as Creoles; Isaac Johnson, native of the Florida parishes, completely Anglo-American in speech and culture, was proud of his right to the Creole label; and Alexander Mouton, Acadian Jacksonian from Lafayette, was certainly considered by his contemporaries as a major leader of the Creole group.²

It was as a native Louisianian, as a matter of fact, that the Latin Creole primarily thought of himself, for he saw in that powerful and mystical bond which ties most men to the soil of their birth the principal justification for his determination not to become a forgotten man in his own land. The danger of that

² It is difficult to understand how the traditional definition of "Creole" could have survived for so long and been so generally accepted even in scholarly circles when one considers the evidence from the contemporary press: Joseph Veillon advertises to sell "three fine negro slaves, creoles" (*New Orleans Louisiana Courier*, June 11, 1828); Mrs. Plantevignes, "being about to depart for France, desires to sell the following servants, all creoles of this city" (*ibid.*, April 3, 1828); or, "Wanted to purchase, a seamstress who can also wash and iron . . . she must be a creole or acclimated" (*ibid.*, June 24, 1828).

As for the Latin requirement, the evidence is again overwhelming. Benjamin M. Norman, *Norman's New Orleans and Environs* (New Orleans, 1845), 73, says: Creoles are those "who are born here . . . without reference to the birth place of their parents." The *New Orleans Mercantile Advertiser* (quoted in *New Orleans Bee*, September 2, 1833) refers to J. B. Dawson, incorrectly, but definitely, as a "creole of Louisiana . . . a native of the parish in which he resides, the district of Florida," though Dawson was in no way allied to the Latin element of the state. It is significant, too, in rebuttal to those who hold that such admission into Creole ranks was granted to those who became assimilated into the traditional Latin culture, that although Edward Douglas White had been raised since infancy in the Lafourche stronghold of the Latins and spoke French as well as he did English, he was never allowed the Creole title. Moreover, the press regularly included the Acadian areas in their enumeration of the Creole parishes. (*New Orleans Louisiana Advertiser*, March 4, 1834.)

In 1834 Isaac Johnson, a leader of the Florida "American" faction, told White: "I am a creole . . . I had considered myself a Creole in the ordinary acceptation of the term," which to him meant simply native-born. (*New Orleans Mercantile Advertiser*, July 1, 1834.)

Harriet Martineau reported in her *Retrospect of Western Travel* (3 vols., London, 1838), II, 136: "Creole means *native*. French and American creoles are natives of French and American extraction." And the equally observant J. H. Ingraham in the preface to his novel *The Quadroone: or, St. Michael's Day* (2 vols., New York, 1841), I, ix, tells his readers: "The term *Creole* will be used throughout the work in its simple Louisiana acceptation, *viz.*, as the synonyme of *native*. . . . The children of northern parents, if born in Louisiana, are 'Creoles.'"

eventuality coming to pass was by no means slight in the 1820's and 1830's. For two other major groups in New Orleans and throughout the state had gradually come to dominate the affairs of the community to the growing exclusion of all others: the Anglo-Americans and the so-called "foreign French."³

The Americans, of course, were of all kinds and from all places. They had come down into Louisiana principally after the Purchase to seek their fortunes in the rich acres of the new territory and in its markets, banks, courts, and thriving trading centers. There had been other Americans in New Orleans before 1803, to be sure, and they had generally been of a breed that was not easy to forget. Rough, violent, profane, and brawling, the floating adventurers, the river bullies, and the backwoods denizens come to market had made the American and Kentuckian names things to be feared and often detested among the citizens of the great port, who welcomed the trade but regretted the traders. One did not need the pride of the Creole of tradition to decide that he would have little to do with men such as these.

Louisiana folklore has, unfortunately, too greatly stressed this vulgarity and barbarism of the early Americans in Louisiana, and a part of the Creole myth would have it that for many decades the Creoles held aloof from the newcomers, confident of their own evident superiority, keeping alive the social, artistic, and cultural traditions of the community while the Yankee changed money in the temple. Nothing could be further from the truth, for it is a misrepresentation of both the Latin Creole and the Anglo-American types.

The plain truth of the matter is that the *ancien population* of the early nineteenth century, the Latin Creoles, were hardly the same sort of people met with so delightfully in the Creole myth. That they were charming in their way can hardly be denied, but theirs was a charm springing from simplicity, from a natural, sensate joy in life, and from the fervid and mercurial emotionalism of their temperaments, rather than the charm of a highly cultured or accomplished people. Many of them unquestionably possessed the courtliness of manner which had sprung from the days of the greatness of France and Spain, but the form had long out-

³ New Orleans *L'Ami des Lois*, March 3, 1824; New Orleans *Louisiana Gazette*, June 28, 29, 1824.

lived the substance of any aristocratic heritage. Illiteracy among the Latin Creoles was appalling, for example, and was certainly not limited to the less fortunate of their members. Even such men as Jacques Villeré and Bernard Marigny were notoriously limited in education, though both had spent time in France and were unquestionably among the elite of Creole society. At one time both of these men were charged, not by Anglo-Americans but by other Latin Creoles, with being unable to write a simple sentence. Marigny, indeed, the so-called "Creole of Creoles," is reliably reported to have eaten with his fingers instead of the more customary knife and fork.⁴

Educational facilities had been severely neglected in the colony before 1803, and it was the rare exception rather than the rule for Louisianians to do much studying anywhere, France included, until well after the Purchase. Nor had their status as colonials allowed the Louisianians opportunity to develop any of the faculties which might have allowed them to compete on an even footing with those who moved into their country after 1803. They had known no banks under France and Spain, had had no opportunity to produce any commercial princes or political leaders of their own, and were by and large a people with little initiative and a limited awareness of the facts of nineteenth-century life. Provincial in outlook, style, and taste, the typical Latin Creole was complaisant, unlettered, unskilled, content to occupy his days with the affairs of his estate or the demands of his job, for it should be obvious that the average Creole was no more wealthy than the average man anywhere and worked where work was to be had. He lived in sensation rather than reflection, enjoying the balls and dances, betting heavily at table, or perhaps at the cockpit, endlessly smoking his inevitable cigar, whiling away hours over his beloved dominoes, busying himself with the many demands of his close-knit family life. Seldom a fashion plate, he was more often than not adorned in pantaloons of blue cottonade, coarse and ungainly in appearance and separated from misshapen shoes by a considerable visible stretch of blue-striped yarn stockings. A hat of no standard style and an

⁴ [John S. Whitaker], *Sketches of Life and Character in Louisiana* (New Orleans, 1847), 83.

ill-fitted coat with long, narrow collars and skirts usually completed the costume.⁵

The women, fortunately, displayed greater taste in their dress, but were given to an ornateness which was more appreciated by the French than by the Americans.⁶ It must be stated regretfully, as well, that the Creole belle did not sweep all before her. To many she was beautiful, to be sure, with clear classic features and magnificent black hair, but others preferred the charms of her American sister, and even her admirers admitted that she generally ran to plumpness too early in life. As to her manners, some found them an interesting and gay mixture of small talk and flirtation, while others were left cold by the shallowness of young girls and matrons whose whole education consisted frequently of small instruction in dancing and music.⁷

Even the romanticizers of the Latin Creole have seldom presented him as an intellectual, it must be admitted, which is just as well, since literature, art, and scientific knowledge actually had little appeal to the *ancien population*. Every library begun in New Orleans from 1806 to 1833, for example, seems to have been the product of Anglo-American rather than Latin planning.⁸ An observant Prince Achille Murat noted also that New Orleans in 1832 was a "striking contrast to all the other large cities," intellectual conversation being met with there rarely and the whole place containing only three libraries, "while the book-stores contain works of the worst description of French literature." But the prince had seen all of New Orleans, and he hastened to point out that if there was little conversation of note, "ample means are afforded for eating, playing, dancing, and making love."⁹

It was as a patron of the theater, of course, that the Latin

⁵ [J. H. Ingraham], *The South-west. By a Yankee* (2 vols., New York, 1835), I, 114, 188.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 188.

⁷ Karl Bernhard, Duke of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach, *Travels through North America, during the Years 1825 and 1826* (2 vols., Philadelphia, 1828), II, 58, 72; Charles A. Murray, *Travels in North America during the Years 1834, 1835, & 1836* (2 vols., London, 1839), II, 188; J. S. Buckingham, *The Slave States of America* (2 vols., London, 1842), II, 345; *New Orleans Argus*, December 18, 1826, January 17, 1827.

⁸ Roger P. McCutcheon, "Libraries in New Orleans, 1771-1833," in *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* (Baton Rouge, 1917-), XX (1937), 152-58.

⁹ Achille Murat, *America and the Americans* (New York, 1849), 247.

Creole is supposed to have demonstrated the most exquisite taste and refinement, but here again the historical record fails to substantiate any claim of such superiority. For all their love of the famed Théâtre d'Orléans, the native population was so sparing in its attendance in 1824, for example, that manager John Davis announced reluctantly that he would shortly be forced to close his doors, and such crises were by no means infrequent in the next decade.¹⁰ By the early 1830's, as a matter of fact, the enterprising James Caldwell had developed the American theater in the city to the point that even such rabidly French papers as the *Bee* had more or less come to slight the older but backward Orléans.¹¹ As for the quality of presentation and performance, the French theater was hardly distinguishable from the American in a period in which all taste was seemingly execrable. If the Anglo-Americans rejoiced in the exhaustive antics of *Tom and Jerry*, the Latin Creoles had their *Jocko, or the Monkey of Brazil*.¹² It is noteworthy, too, that the first real season of grand opera in New Orleans was the work of the Englishman Caldwell, rather than of a French or native impresario.¹³

It is reassuring to realize, moreover, that the Creole was not unlike every other New Orleanian where money was concerned—which means that he would grasp practically any means to acquire it. Wealth was the all-consuming aim of practically everyone in the community, and if the Creole's imagination was limited in devising new ways of growing rich, he could and did pursue the known ways with a passion and relentlessness which yielded nothing to that of the Yankee, even if he was seldom as successful. Political privilege, deception, trickery, even outright fraud, were no monopolies of the Anglo-Americans in business and trade. The Creoles played at that game too, and as frequently fell athwart the law. It happened to Major Bartholomew Grima, for example. One of the best-known sons of a prominent old family, a dealer in crockery and glassware, the major late in 1825 forged the name of Nicholas Girod to \$120,000 worth of notes, gathered his considerable if ill-gotten gain, and quickly

¹⁰ New Orleans *Louisiana Advertiser*, May 19, 1824.

¹¹ New Orleans *Bee*, February 21, 1831, May 13, 1835.

¹² See, for example, New Orleans *Argus*, March and April, 1827.

¹³ New Orleans *Bee*, March 6, 1836.

fled the city of his birth.¹⁴ Romance to the contrary notwithstanding, "breeding" and "gentility" felt the universal pull of the dollar. New Orleans in the 1820's was that kind of city.

And so we must take the Creole as he actually was, rather than as some would give him to us: a provincial whose narrow experience and even narrower education left him pitifully unprepared to compete for leadership with the Anglo-Americans and foreign French. He could surpass them in nothing but numbers. Generally illiterate, almost always politically naive, genuinely uninterested in intellectual or artistic concerns, and not unduly fastidious in his theatrical tastes, the Creole was basically a simple man averse to change. He was no more an aristocrat than he was an Ottoman Turk.

But he was human, and he could not help but resent the Anglo-Americans and the foreign French, because they represented in many ways everything that the Latin Creole was not. Most of the Americans who settled in the state after 1803, for example, were a far cry from the ignorant roustabouts and backwoodsmen, who, though they might continue to plague the city during the busy season, were after all transients who played no part in the continuous life of the community. Those who came to stay were more often than not men of some ability and even greater ambition. They had seen the opportunities opened in the newly acquired territory of the Union, and they had flocked there to take advantage of them: young lawyers with their eyes on the many administrative jobs in the new territorial government, or very much aware of the demand for legal talent in the booming commercial and maritime concerns of the region; merchants anxious to share in the prosperity of the strategic position at the mouth of the Mississippi; thousands of junior clerks, with dreams of serving out an apprenticeship under those already established and then going on to enterprises of their own; physicians anxious to grapple with the notorious plagues of the "wet grave"; divines equally inspired to bring salvation to the people of this new Sodom; and planters to whom the rich soil of the state held out hopes for all those things which had not been forthcoming in the

¹⁴ Alexander Porter to Josiah Stoddard Johnston, December 23, 1825; Nathaniel Cox to Johnston, December 23, 1825, in the Josiah Stoddard Johnston Papers (Historical Society of Pennsylvania).

older settlements now left behind. The very fact of their migration was testimony to their initiative and independence; they were in a real sense a select strain of the American stock. Not, of course, that they were necessarily possessed of any greater refinement of spirit or higher sense of morality; they were no more aristocrats than were the Latin Creoles, and they as frequently succumbed to the lure of wealth and power. But they knew what they wanted, and they were as a rule better equipped to get it than were the native Louisianians. Better educated, more sophisticated politically, economically, and even culturally, the Anglo-American generally possessed an energy and inventiveness, an ability to devise new and better ways of doing things, which the Latin Creole usually found himself unable to match, though frequently able to copy.

It was inevitable that the Latin Creole should rapidly react toward these newcomers with feelings of envy, jealousy, and an overwhelming sense of inferiority. He naturally resented the Anglo-American assumption that the natives were too backward to understand the nature of republican government; he bridled when English was made the legal language of the community; and he fumed at the staid New England propriety which insisted he was headed straight for hell because he managed to enjoy himself on Sundays. He knew full well his own limitations in this struggle for supremacy, and he finally in desperation sought help from those who were closer to him in blood, language, and heritage—the foreign French—though these too he hated and feared for their superiority and their condescending manner. There was little else which he could do, however. Very few, indeed, were the Creoles who were leaders at the bar, and fewer still were those able to fill the important editorial chairs which so influenced public opinion—for such important tasks the natives were forced to depend on foreign talent.¹⁵

The foreign French were not at all loath to make a bid for power in the state. Like the Americans they were generally men of at least some education and training, with initiative enough to have triumphed over disaster or misfortune in their original

¹⁵ Everett S. Brown, "Letters from Louisiana, 1813-1814," in *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* (Cedar Rapids, 1914-), XI (1924-1925), 571-79; Dunbar Rowland (ed.), *Official Letter Books of W. C. C. Claiborne, 1801-1816* (6 vols., Jackson, Miss., 1917), III, 299; *New Orleans Argus*, May 15, 1827.

homes and with stamina sufficient to have brought them to this new world for the fashioning of new careers. They were frequently skilled in the intricacies of political competition; many were deeply versed in the law; and others were quite at home behind an editorial desk. Some of them, to be sure, were leaders of such outstanding accomplishment that they would have made their marks probably in any community of the world, men such as Etienne Mazureau, the brilliant lawyer and orator; Louis Moreau Lislet, the profound student of the civil code; or Pierre Soulé, the fiery political spellbinder.¹⁶

They had been coming into Louisiana ever since the early days of the French Revolution, fugitives from the continental Terror, victims of Napoleonic oppression, *émigrés* from the conservative strictures of the Bourbon Restoration, escapees from the nightmare of slave insurrection in Santo Domingo. In Louisiana they found not only a safe refuge but a society with which they had much in common, including language, religion, mores, and law, and from the very beginning they had become a major force in their new community.¹⁷ It was evident, however, that they had failed to endear themselves to the Louisianians. Conscious of their general superiority, they had been quite free in their ridicule of Creole provincialism, criticizing local styles and deploring native backwardness. Never blind to their own advantage, most of them readily accepted United States citizenship, with loud avowals of loyalty,¹⁸ and yet they had more cause even than the Creole to hate the new Anglo-American settlers. For not only did these latter threaten a disruption of those Gallic forms and ways of life which the refugee had good reason to cherish, they were also the major competitors for that mastery of the affairs of the state which the foreign French were determined to enjoy themselves. It was a prize worth fighting for, and the Anglo-Americans soon felt the effectiveness of this leadership against them. These French, not the Creoles, were to be the most potent enemy, and as much as the Americans might detest this "foreign faction," they did it the honor never to underestimate its skill or prowess.¹⁹

¹⁶ *New Orleans Louisiana Gazette*, October 3, 1825, January 3, 1826.

¹⁷ *New Orleans Argus*, January 18, 1827.

¹⁸ G. W. Pierson, "Alexis de Tocqueville in New Orleans," in *Franco-American Review* (New Haven, Conn., 1936-1938), I (1936), 34.

¹⁹ *New Orleans Louisiana Gazette*, April 14, 1824, October 3, 1825.

The other major foreign elements in the city's population, such as the numerous Irish and Germans, lacked the cohesion and leadership which made the foreign French such a power in the community. With little to build on except their own brawn, the Irish had turned to the boisterous life of draymen, canal diggers, or street laborers, some to suffer the indignity of expending themselves in competition with convicts or slaves, others to enjoy the freeman's privilege of dying in droves to push the New Basin Canal through pestilential swamps to the lake behind the city.²⁰ All were subject to the ravages of the whisky which at least helped make such a life livable. The more stolid and phlegmatic Germans, meanwhile, contented themselves generally with less exciting and demanding tasks as butchers, hired hands, and mechanics.²¹ Some, however, found places on the police detail of the city, the New Orleans Guard, a notorious force of heavily armed gendarmes equipped with swords, pistols, muskets, and bayonets, whose frequent drunken and riotous violence made them as much a menace as a protection to public safety. The greater part of the Guard, however, seems to have been recruited from that section of the city's population which remained least integrated into the normal pursuits of the populace, the Spanish and Mexican residents of the Faubourg Marigny.²² There in their retreat below the Quarter, apparently divorced from the interests of the rest of the city, these dark and silent people were wrapped in their own concerns, difficult to discern from the forbidding and dangerous-looking men who lounged endlessly along the levee, enfolded in their great cloaks of foreign design, with no seeming occupation except that of leisure.²³

A large part of the city's population, giving as much character and vitality to the community as the white group, were the Negro slaves and the free persons of color, whose relative numbers were estimated at 20,000 and 15,000 out of the over-all 60,000 perma-

²⁰ Henry Didimus, *New Orleans as I Found It* (New York, 1845), 16; James E. Alexander, *Transatlantic Sketches, Comprising Visits to the Most Interesting Scenes in North and South America, and the West Indies* (2 vols., London, 1833), II, 29; *New Orleans Louisiana Gazette*, October 23, 1823; *New Orleans Bee*, February 24, 1834.

²¹ *New Orleans Louisiana Advertiser*, February 26, 1828; Bernhard, *Travels*, II, 84.

²² *New Orleans Mercantile Advertiser*, June 25, 1831, February 17, 1834; *New Orleans Louisiana Advertiser*, February 14, 1834.

²³ Ingraham, *South-west*, I, 90.

nent residents of New Orleans in 1835.²⁴ Their lot in a city which was continually reminding itself of its perilous exposure to racial conflict was unbelievably free and undisciplined. Slaves were seemingly masters of their own time in a great number of instances, free to come and go where and how they pleased. Hiring themselves out as draymen, laborers, and mechanics, they were frequently under no obligation except that of bringing to their masters a fixed portion of their incomes, beyond which they were at liberty to establish themselves in separate dwellings in various parts of the city, to roam the streets at will, or to frequent their own gambling dens and public houses.²⁵

They made a picturesque sight, especially on Sundays, when they openly defied the rule which confined their gatherings to Congo Square, and were often to be seen, hearty and fat, fitted out in princely style in the best broadcloth and the finest of hats, headed for balls and carousals, raising their voices in joyous and carefree song to a reigning favorite—"Rose, Rose, coal black Rose."²⁶ They loved to hire carriages for themselves on a Sabbath afternoon, and on the gala occasion when the Pontchartrain Railroad made its first run in 1831, slaves in hacks crowded around the road and even added to the congestion before the City Hall.²⁷ One disgruntled white man went so far as to protest in 1836 against the nuisance of having to dodge the smoke from slaves puffing cigars in the streets, but little seems to have come from his complaint.²⁸

The whole behavior of the Negro toward the whites, as a matter of fact, was singularly free of that deference and circumspection which might have been expected in a slave community. It was not unusual for slaves to gather on street corners at night, for example, where they challenged whites to attempt to pass, hurled taunts at white women, and kept whole neighborhoods disturbed by shouts and curses. Nor was it safe to accost them, as many went armed with knives and pistols in flagrant defiance of all the precautions of the Black Code. Unquestionably, much

²⁴ *New Orleans Bee*, September 30, 1835.

²⁵ *New Orleans Mercantile Advertiser*, January 20, May 4, 1825; *New Orleans Louisiana Gazette*, August 8, 1823; *New Orleans Louisiana Advertiser*, October 23, 1823.

²⁶ *New Orleans Bee*, June 13, 1833.

²⁷ *New Orleans Commercial Advertiser*, April 26, 1831.

²⁸ *New Orleans Bee*, July 2, 1836.

of this independence might be traced to the clandestine familiarity which prevailed to a great extent between black and white in almost every part of the town. In Tchoupitoulas, Camp, Julia, and New Levee streets, for example, were to be found houses in which both races, bond and free, caroused together in what might well be called intimacy.²⁹

The free persons of color were no less unrestrained and enjoyed a status in Louisiana probably unequaled in any other part of the South.³⁰ Members of this class were often to be found as owners of cabarets and especially of gaming houses where slaves and free Negroes might consort without interference from the authorities, even after the curfew gun.³¹ Many were artisans, barbers, and shopkeepers, and became so prosperous as to own slaves of their own and to acquire large holdings of real property in the Quarter. What objection there was to the presence of Negro dwellings in the midst of a white neighborhood, interestingly enough, does not seem to have stemmed from any protest against the Negroes themselves, but against their frequent inability or refusal to keep their buildings in the proper state of repair.³²

It was the free Negro women, actually, who proved themselves to be the most enterprising. Many, of course, burdened by age, ugliness, or a sense of righteousness, contented themselves with modest shops or presided over oyster, gumbo, and coffee stalls along the levee.³³ But a large if undetermined number monopolized the task of accommodating the licentiousness of the male part of New Orleans, no mean ambition when it is remembered that perhaps half of the city's men were bachelors living in rooming houses or husbands whose wives were still in the North. Those of the women favored by nature set themselves up in bordellos all over the city, even in the most respectable neighborhoods, or roamed the streets in open pursuit of trade.³⁴

²⁹ New Orleans *Louisiana Gazette*, November 6, 1823; New Orleans *Mercantile Advertiser*, October 29, November 4, 1825; New Orleans *Argus*, August 15, 1829; New Orleans *Louisiana Courier*, July 30, 1833.

³⁰ Annie Stahl, "The Free Negro in Ante-bellum Louisiana," in *Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, XXV (1942), 376.

³¹ New Orleans *Mercantile Advertiser*, October 29, 1835.

³² New Orleans *Bee*, May 13, 1836.

³³ *Ibid.*, September 24, 1831.

³⁴ New Orleans *Mercantile Advertiser*, September 29, October 6, 1825; New Orleans *Argus*, August 1, 1829.

The most famous of these Negro women, the quadroons, have been translated into another of the almost sanctified myths of New Orleans. Tradition notwithstanding, there is little evidence to suggest that these most handsome of the Negro population, "Heaven's last, worst gift to white men," as one irate New Orleans housewife called them,³⁵ were anything far removed from their less striking prostitute sisters. Any fairly light Negro woman, as a matter of fact, could seemingly qualify as a "quarteroon," and the activities of the class as a whole are not nearly so shrouded in mystery as has so often been reported. The newspapers, for example, were quite open in their frequent discussions of these people, and the facts are there for anyone to read.³⁶

As the most beautiful of the Negro women, they were frequently set up as mistresses of white men, usually in the picturesque row of low white houses which lined Rampart Street to the rear of the Quarter.³⁷ But not all of the quadroons were so fortunate nor all of the white men so constant in their attentions. The famed "Quadroon Balls," those traditional functions of high propriety where the tawny girls were supposedly decorously courted by the young bloods of the city, were actually disreputable and usually violent assemblies which deserved nothing so much as the proper title of interracial orgies.³⁸ Here at the St. Philip Street Theatre or the Washington Ball Room, there were met together common quadroon prostitutes, who on occasion delighted the crowd by parading in their night clothes,³⁹ and large numbers of white women who attended out of curiosity "if not other motives," as the *Bee* reported in a nicely turned phrase. The city fathers took a slightly dimmer view of the presence of these white intruders at the quadroon affairs, which Acting Mayor Culbertson described in 1835 as sinks of the "most dissolute class

³⁵ *Niles' Weekly Register* (Baltimore, 1811-1849), XXIX (November 5, 1825), 160.

³⁶ *New Orleans Mercantile Advertiser*, January 18, September 29, 1825; *New Orleans Louisiana Advertiser*, January 27, February 10, 1826.

³⁷ Martineau, *Retrospect of Western Travel*, II, 127.

³⁸ *New Orleans Mercantile Advertiser*, January 18, 1825; *New Orleans Louisiana Advertiser*, February 10, 1826; Jabez W. Heustis, *Physical Observations, and Medical Tracts and Researches, on the Topography and Diseases of Louisiana* (New York, 1817), 26-27; Pierson, "Alexis de Tocqueville in New Orleans," 36.

³⁹ Herbert A. Kellar (ed.), "A Journey Through the South in 1836: Diary of James D. Davidson," in *Journal of Southern History* (Baton Rouge, 1935-), I (1935), 362.

of women," attended by white men of the most desperate character. But they did nothing to prevent their continuance.⁴⁰

Men of color were rigorously excluded from these affairs, and this, together with the psychological confusion which beset them as persons intermediate between slave and white, made them frequently a bitter and contentious part of the community. They were quick to assault whites on the streets, and on more than one occasion they rioted in cabarets and railroad coaches, with shouts that they were as good as white men, rather than accept what they considered persecution from the dominant caste. Cowering was no more the fashion with them than it was with the slaves.⁴¹

Who could say then, in simple terms, what New Orleans was, this mixture of men and tongues? The roving Captain James E. Alexander had warned in 1833: "let no one judge of America from New Orleans, for it is altogether *sui generis*."⁴² He could with all accuracy have said the same for the whole state.

⁴⁰ New Orleans *Bee*, November 21, 28, 30, 1835.

⁴¹ *Niles' Weekly Register*, XLIV (August 24, 1833), 423; New Orleans *Mercantile Advertiser*, November 24, 1825; New Orleans *Bee*, August 24, 1830, September 30, 1835, July 2, 1836; New Orleans *Louisiana Courier*, July 30, 1833.

⁴² Alexander, *Transatlantic Sketches*, II, 31.