

The Development of Creoles in Louisiana to the Civil War

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Louisiana had a very different background and development process than the other Confederate States. The remainder of the states that formed the United States in 1860, with the exception of Louisiana, Texas, and Florida, had been established and settled by mostly persons of English, Irish, Dutch, and German ancestry along with the native Indians found in their territories. Even though the states of Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, and Missouri had a few French and Spanish wilderness settlers, the great majority of the residents in them were of the ancestry found in the New England States. Florida had been mainly settled by Spanish with some English merchants and traders along with the native Seminole and Creek Indians until approximately 1819 when Americans started settling there and the state eventually became a part of the United States after being ceded by the Kingdom of Spain. Texas had been settled initially by the Spanish and the native Indians until the beginning of the nineteenth century when Americans were allowed to settle there. In 1835-1836 Texas won its independence from Mexico and admitted as a State to the United States in 1845 which precipitated the Mexican War in 1846.

Even though the state of Louisiana was a part of the United States in 1860, the majority of its population was of French descent. There were inhabitants whose ancestry was of other nations, Spain, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Canada, Haiti, Canary Islands, as well as the United States or Anglo-Americans—however, the French influence was the dominant factor throughout the state. The French were divided into three distinctive groups—Creoles, Cajuns, and Frankified Germans.

The word Creole is originally a term used by both the Kingdoms of Spain and Portugal. Creoles are the native born descendants of early French, Spanish, and Portuguese settlers in Latin America, the West Indies, and the Spanish and French settle areas of what is now the United States. The term is derived from the Portuguese “**crioulo**” (which means “raised at the home of the master, domestic”) and came into use in the 16th century in order to distinguish between persons born in the New World colonies of European parents from New World residents of European birth. The Portuguese term designated persons of European descent, whether Caucasian or of mixed blood as distinguished from those of African or aboriginal American descent. The Spanish word is “**ciollo**” for a male and “**criollo**” for a female.

The meaning of the term Criollo (Creole) varies considerably in different regions. In some Latin American countries, notably Mexico, it denotes local-born persons of pure Spanish extraction. In the West Indies the term is applied to the descendants of any European settlers. In the Guianas the term refers to descendants of African Negro slaves. In Louisiana the term refers to French-speaking Caucasian descendants of the early French and/or Spanish settlers, however, less commonly, it is applied to mulattoes speaking a creolized versions of French and Spanish.

These two Iberian Peninsula countries had more colonies than any other European power. The Kingdom of Spain was by far the largest colonizer. The colonies of both the Kingdoms of Spain

and Portugal had a caste system and the inhabitants were ranked in the caste system. The highest level were the “**Peninsularies**” and were those persons born on the Iberian Peninsula and who had settled in the Spanish or Portuguese colonies and the **Criollos** (Creoles) were relegated to a lower rung in the social hierarchy because they had never had the privilege of doing so. The Peninsularies enjoyed more influence because they had actually been to the mother country. In Latin America the other lower levels of the caste system were made up of various mixtures of Spanish or Portuguese blood with Negroes or native Indians. They were termed Castizos, mestizos, cholos, mulatos, indios, and zambos.

The Creoles in the Old South of the United States lived between Baton Rouge, Louisiana and the coast of the Gulf of Mexico as well in small communities in eastern Missouri and southern Alabama. One of New Orleans’ pre-eminent cultures is **Creole**, through it is one of the most confusing ethnic labels in the United States. Two distinct groups claim the label of Creole the themselves. Caucasian Creoles use the word to describe themselves as people of European colonial parentage (primarily French and Spanish). They are very proud descendants of the old “artiocratic” families who trace their ancestry back to French and Spanish colonists who had come to the colony of Louisiana. The other group who lay claim to the title are mulattos, quadroons, and octroons—light skinned African Negroes bearing many of the same French and Spanish surnames as the Caucasian Creoles and tracing their lineage back to some of the same ancestors.

The first portion of the colony period of Louisiana (1699—1768) was one of slow development with the majority of the inhabitants residing in or near New Orleans, Opelousas, and Natchitoches. The colonist had come from France and French Canada while smaller groups had come from Germany, Switzerland, Italy, and Portugal. Immediately after the **French and Indian War (1754-1763)** a small group of French Acadians (Cajuns), who were escaping the English prosecution in the ex-French colony of Acadia, arrived in New Orleans and were settled at Pointe Coupee and in the Attakapas District.

After the **Louisiana Revolution (1767-1768)** and once the Spanish took possession of New Orleans and the Louisiana Colony in 1768, the Spaniards began to use **Criollo** with regards to the French residents of the colony. The term was adopted, albeit in modified form because the French had to make it their own word before they would avail themselves of its use, and it became Creole. The French and Spanish born in New Orleans and the rest of the colony of Louisiana were **Creoles**. Those born in the old word were simply called French or Spanish.

The New Orleans Creoles themselves again advantageously altered the meaning of the word. They quickly grasped the understanding of the Spanish cast system and a Creole of mixed lineage was a step closer to the Kingdom of Spain than one whose parents were both French and thereby could aspire to greater things than one who was solely French. It began to be used to signify only the progeny of unions where there was the mixing of French and Spanish blood, and ceased to be applied to those exclusively of French descent. To be a Creole meant to be at once of the Kingdom of Spain and the Kingdom of France. Of course, most of the inhabitants of new Orleans could claim ancestors of both nationalities after only a few generations.

The word Creole was first associated with **persons of color** in New Orleans by the Creoles

themselves. They used it to describe their property and Creole, as an adjective, came to be commonly seen as meaning “from the city” (New Orleans).

The Roman Catholic Church in Louisiana was the first to call non-Caucasian and bi-racial individuals Creoles instead of merely describing them as such Free persons of color of Santo Domingo (Haiti) descent born in the colony were called “**Creoles de couleur**” and Negro slaves born in New Orleans were described as “**Negroes Creoles**”. This information was included in baptismal records to indicate domestic birth, in effect distinguishing the baptism of converts from the baptism of babies born to Roman Catholic parents. In part, these records were necessary to show compliance with the **Code Noir**, which dictated that all Negroes slaves be required to be baptized as Roman Catholic by their owners.

By 1790, the city of New Orleans had a population of 8,000 souls, including Creoles, Free People of Color, and Negro slaves. At the dawn of the 19th century, a time of social and political upheaval throughout much of the world, another group of French-speaking refugees arrived who were to have a minor social impact on the city of New Orleans—those fleeing from Toussaint L’Overture’s Negro slave revolution against the French Settlers in Santo Dominique (Haiti). Many cane planters packed up their households—family and negro slaves—and fled to the colony of Louisiana. One of the new émigrés was John James Audubon, the famous naturalist painter, whose mother—alleged by some to have been a Creole of color—had been killed in the revolution. Another was James Pitot, who from 1804 to 1805 served as the second mayor of the city of New Orleans under American rule.

Creoles as landowners and Negro slaveholders during the antebellum period were perceived as aristocrats who took pride in gracious living and courtly manners. The Acadians (Cajuns), even though they also owned slaves and like many Creoles had sexual intercourse with their female Negro slaves, they were in more of the working or poorer class of residents of the area.

Free People of Color (Gens de Couleur Libre) were a distinct caste of Negroes, living in New Orleans. Many were the offspring of wealthy French or Spanish Creoles and their concubines and were also called Creoles of Color. They were educated, cultured, and prod. They stood aloof from the Negro slaves, who resented their “high-clown ways”. Free People of Color were not really free. They were never given political freedom, not even the right of free speech. Some, though, were men of wealthy, Paris educated, sculptors, poets, or artists. A few owned plantations and Negro slaves.

Quadroon woman were often beautiful, carefully trained, and educated to become mistresses of French or Spanish Creole gentlemen, who vied for their attentions and sometimes fought duels over them. As the insistence of Caucasian French and Spanish Creole ladies, who resented their “brazen intrusions”, authorities periodically set limits on their dress and mobility.

The Quadroon Balls which were held annually were the Caucasian French and Spanish Creole young gentlemen could meet and woo Quadroon Free Woman of Color who would eventually become their mistresses. The Quadroon Balls had become a fixture of Creole society in New Orleans. These Quadroons Free Women of Color were anything but prostitutes. They were trained by their mothers who guarded their chastity and refinement in order to make a “proper match”

with a Caucasian French or Spanish Creole “protector.”

The Quadroon Balls had begun around the turn of the 19th century and flourished in the old Orleans Ballroom until 1860. They were, like many Negro slave pageants in Congo Square in New Orleans, “exotic” tourist attractions. More duels were fought over ladies at the Quadroon Balls than anything else in New Orleans. There were murders, too, committed by jealous quadroon males.

The Creoles clung to their history as tenaciously as powder sugar sticks to beignets. There is an old riddle, “What do the Creoles have in common with the Chinese?” The answer is that they both eat a great deal of rice and worship their ancestors. Creoles take great pride in the European heritage, despite the fact that every time things “hit the wall” in France, many of the old guard packed up their pedigrees and pretensions and high-tailed it to Louisiana.

European New Orleanians wanted to distinguished themselves from the Anglo-Americans after 1803 and the **Louisiana Purchase**. Similarly, it is thought that French speaking free people of color adopted the Creole label after the Union Army occupation in the 1860s as a means of differentiating themselves from the English speaking former Negro slaves who were pouring into the occupied city of New Orleans. Interestingly, while Negro Slavery existed in New Orleans until the 1860s, most Seventh Ward Creole-of-Color families had been free people since the late 1700s.

Creoles exist in many countries around the world. There are descendants of Russian settlers in Alaska that consider themselves Creoles and are recognized as such by the Creole Studies Division of the University of Northwestern which does not have a definite definition of the word. There are different meaning of the word Creole in the countries of South and Central America as well as the islands of the Caribbean Sea and the Leeward Islands. An example of a famous Creole from one of these Caribbean Sea islands, Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte’s first wife, Marie Josephe (Josephine) Rose Tascher de la Pagrie, was the daughter of a wealthy Caucasian Creole sugar planter family on the island of Martinique. There are also those who tend to confuse the meaning of the word and give it a racial meaning. For example, there is a group based out of Lafayette, Louisiana called C. R. E. O. L. E which propagates the idea that the word Creole means to be of the Negro race. While there are Creoles of mixed Caucasian and Negro blood, the word does not denote race.

The Louisiana Creole is a person—Caucasian or mixed Caucasian and Negro blood—who is descended from the original French and/or Spanish settlers of the colony of Louisiana between 1699 and 1803. Technically, by this definition, even the French Cajun population of Louisiana can be termed as Creole.

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