A Class All Their Own: Economic and Educational Independence of Free People of Color in Antebellum Louisiana

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This work delves into the unprecedented degree to which educational opportunity was afforded Louisiana's Free People of Color from the early 1700s to dawn of the Civil War over one hundred years later. The study of this community is intended to add breadth to the discussion of education for People of Color in the antebellum period by including an alternate story line in which a community of Color was at liberty to pursue education fully resourced and on their own terms. Moreover, this work complicates conceptions of educational achievement based on race; the experience of this community of Color challenges the understanding that all Black educational achievement in the antebellum South was impeded by Whites as it demonstrates the unusual coinciding circumstances of economic independence and non-interference by Whites in the education for Free People of Color. Not all communities of Color fell behind Whites, and not all White communities sought to confound or manipulate Black education.

This class was most respectable; they… led lives quiet, dignified and worthy, in homes of ease and comfort… it is always to be remembered that in their contact with white men, they did not assume that creeping posture of debasement — nor did the whites expect it — which has more or less been forced upon them in fiction.[1]

~ Charles Etienne Gayarré ~

From the time of French and Spanish rule in the eighteenth century to the onset of the Civil War relations between Black and White society in southern Louisiana, particularly in the city of New Orleans, have presented a contradiction to the common narrative characteristic of Southern race relations of the period. Due to civil structures and social conditions unique to the region, the port town of New Orleans and its surrounding parishes, came to be home for a sizable population of Free People of Color who, for a time, lived within a particular space of economic and educational freedom. This community of Color included a notably large number of Creoles of color and Mulattos.[2] According to the 1850 Census the free Mulatto population in the state of Louisiana was 14,083 in comparison with a free Black population of only 3,379, and it is

[1] Quoted in Grace King, *New Orleans; The Place and the People* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1926), 345. Reprint of 1895 original.

[2] Historical documents and, consequently, historians use various terms to describe persons of Color in Louisiana during this time period; including Black, Negro, Creole, Creole of Color, Mulatto, Quadroon (one quarter Black), Octoroon (one eighth Black), and Griffe (Mulatto or Black mixed with Native American). Pinning down one term proves problematic as terms like *Creole* at times refer to people of Frenc8h and Spanish lineage without any African blood, and at other times refer distinctly to those of mixed African and French or Spanish background. *Mulatto* serves to designate all persons of mixed White and African lineage, however this term then excludes those of unmixed blood; and *Creole of Color* proves even more exclusive. Historically, *Negro*, and *Black* have served to designate anyone who contains even a fraction of African heritage, however, these terms do not serve to accurately characterize the unique and heavily mixed-race demographic in Louisiana during this time period.

In order to encompass the diverse backgrounds, and in an effort not to exclude those not of the group typically characterized as fair-skinned Creoles of Color in the region at this time, when discussing a free person or group of free people of Color within this region I will refer to them as *Free People of Color*, or *Mulatto* in instances in which the literature or historical documentation has done so, as well as cases in which the mixed-race nature of those being discussed is meaningful. When discussing people or groups of Color outside of this region I will use the term *Black* unless otherwise noted.

probable that these figures may underestimate the former as many Mulattos were possibly reported as White.[3] This free class, collectively known as *gens de couleur libre*, consisted of Creoles of Color who were, "the free mixed-blood, French-speaking descendents of immigrants from Haiti" and other French parentage, Creoles of Color with Latin blood, and various other free Blacks.[4] The particular French and Spanish cultural origins of this group established them in a cultural circumstance that treated race quite differently from conceptions exemplified throughout the regions of the nation colonized by the British. In 1866 Nathan Willey pointed out the unique way in which Louisiana's forbearers viewed slavery:

> Among the French and the Spanish settlers and their descendents, the *condition* of the colored people, rather than their *color* as a badge of slavery, has been the subject of popular prejudice. They looked upon a slave and his descendants as an inferior class, simply because they were in a degrading condition of servitude, and not because they bore darker skin. In the North and in States settled by the English the prejudice is one of color rather than a condition.[5]

While the extent to which French and Spanish colonists disregarded differences of race may be overstated by Mr. Willey, the distinction between the attitudes of this group and English colonials is an important one. Ultimately, class played a crucial role in race relations for Free People of Color in this region. As a result of this alternate treatment of race, persons of Color in New Orleans, while not exempt from Southern standards of deference to Whites, were bestowed with certain rights and privileges not granted Black communities throughout the North and South.

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[3] Gwendolyn Midlow Hall, *Africans in Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 238-240; Harold E. Sterkx, *The Free Negro in Ante-Bellum Louisiana* (New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1972), 102.

[4] *Gens de Couleur Libre – Free People of Color*. Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes, *Our People and Our History: Fifty Creole Portraits*, trans. and ed. Sister Dorthea Olga McCants (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), translator's introduction. This work was initially written and published in French in 1911.

[5] Nathan Willey, "Education of the Colored People of Louisiana," *Harpers*, July 1866, 246.

As a direct consequence of the privileges enjoyed by Louisiana's Free People of Color, as well as the wealth afforded them, whether through lineage, ingenuity, or both, a three-tiered social structure developed in which scholars have placed Whites at the top, slaves at the bottom, and Free People of Color in the middle.[6] However, the characterization that this community occupied a middling status is misleading; evidence indicates that, although Free People of Color in Louisiana prior to the Civil War did not enjoy the wholesale liberties and protections of citizenship that Whites did, many used their wealth and sophistication to wield power within their own community as well as in dealings with Whites. The status of this group existed on a continuum in which a significant representation of this class was positioned considerably above the status of slaves while only moderately below the status of White society as a whole, and in some circumstances above less affluent Whites.[7] Many were able to amass substantial wealth, at times matching that of White high-society, and the children of these families were educated in a manner agreeable to that station.[8] Private schools were created, pupils were sent north for schooling, tutors were hired, and many even felt that an education consistent with their status could only be acquired through travel to Paris for schooling.[9] Ultimately, the socio-cultural and economic differentiation between slaves and Free People of Color solidified into a caste system in which those within the second tier found themselves generally unhindered in economic and educational progress.

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[6] Carl Brasseaux, *Creoles of Color of the Gulf South*, Ed. James H. Dormon (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1996), 72.

[7] While it is true that People of Color were unable to vote, and some scholars have held that at times they *did* vote, it is also true that colonial Louisiana existed under imperial control until the Louisiana Purchase in 1803; civic freedom was not necessarily the linchpin of empowerment during this period.

[8] Laura Foner, "The Free People of Color in Louisiana and St. Domingue: A Comparative Portrait of Two Three-Caste Slave Societies," *Journal of Social History* 3, no. 4 (1970), 407.

[9] John W. Blassingame, *Black New Orleans* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973), 11; Sterkx, 227, 258, 268 – 274; Willey, 246.

This work delves into the unprecedented degree to which educational opportunity was afforded Louisiana's Free People of Color from the early 1700s to dawn of the Civil War over one hundred years later. The study of this community is intended to add breadth to the discussion of education for People of Color in the antebellum period by including an alternate story line in which a community of Color was at liberty to pursue education fully resourced and on their own terms. Moreover, this work complicates conceptions of educational achievement based on race; the experience of this community of Color challenges the understanding that all Black educational achievement in the antebellum South was impeded by Whites as it demonstrates the unusual coinciding circumstances of economic independence and non-interference by Whites in the education for Free People of Color. Not all communities of Color fell behind Whites, and not all White communities sought to confound or manipulate Black education. Finally, this research explores how Black educational achievement was dependent on the broader social and economic opportunities afforded Free People of Color in this peculiar society. In New Orleans liberal social norms created a space for economic opportunity, which was essential not only to afford educational opportunity, but to then allow People of Color to participate in occupations in which skill and knowledge could be exercised; perpetuating further need, means, and desire for education. While no other factor can be said to have at any time trumped race in this narrative, its effect was moderated in southern Louisiana during the antebellum period, allowing class to play a much more significant role than in other Black communities. This is an endeavor that is not yet complete, and further excavation is required in order to untangle the complex interactions of race, class, and society in the particular educational space inhabited by this singular community.

Existing Scholarship, Examining the Subjective

This research relies on multiple primary sources; to that end archival materials were shared by the New Orleans Public Library archives, the Amistad Research Center at Tulane University, The Historic New Orleans Collection at the Williams Research Center, and Louisiana State University's Hill Memorial Library archives. The Library of Congress *Chronicling America* digital newspaper archive as well as newspaper archives shared by the University of Illinois and the University of Wisconsin were also instrumental to this research. Materials include Black and White newspapers, notarial records, personal diary entries, family ledgers, receipts and other historically relevant documentation. All sources were instrumental in my attempt to weave together a deeper understanding of how this community came to be, how they approached their personal and business affairs, and to begin to grapple with how they might have viewed themselves in the broader context of Antebellum Louisiana. In addition, these primary materials aided my consideration of multiple perspectives, including Free People of Color, Whites who had contact with this community, and the civil position of Louisiana's various governing bodies to the dawn of the Civil War. As the social and economic lines in Louisiana were not drawn merely in a Black and White binary, interactions as characterized by both groups are necessary to better understand what made this history unique. Utilizing society, class, and place as units of analysis, this research explores the historical conception of race relations and interrogates the contingencies that beget this counter narrative.

Scholarship in the field has focused on the question of what kind of education Blacks received from the time of slavery to well past Reconstruction, and the methods by which it was pursued. In 1915 Carter G. Woodson engaged the subject of Black education with a nationally focused, pre Civil War study. His goal was to fill in the gap in scholarship with, "the accounts of

the successful strivings of Negros for enlightenment under most adverse circumstances;" accounts that, "read like beautiful romances of a people in a historic age."[10] In his 1933 work, aptly titled *Mis-Education of the Negro*, Woodson addresses the perceptions of the Black community that have consistently surfaced at the root of Black education:

> Unlike other people, then, the Negro, according to this point of view, was an exception to the natural plan of things, and he had no such mission as that of an outstanding contribution to culture. The status of the Negro, then, was justly fixed as that of an inferior… Negroes have no control over their education and have little voice in their other affairs pertaining thereto.[11]

This assessment bears out across multiple locations and contexts in the south and the north, however, the broader generalization across myriad contexts overlooks the uncommon circumstances presented by Louisiana's class of Free People of Color.

More contemporary scholars have re-considered White intervention and the potentially detrimental influence that it has had on this community's educational advancement. James Anderson's analysis of Black education as imagined by northern, White philanthropists allows the historically-lauded benefactors to clearly stake out their positions on Black education; the beliefs that, "We must recognize in all its relations that momentous fact that the negro is a child race, at least two-thousand years behind the Anglo-Saxon in its development," and that, "[industrial] training of the negro for the life that now is as shall make of him *a producer – a servant* (emphasis added) – of his day and generation in the highest sense."[12] Utilizing the most

[10] Carter G. Woodson, *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861: A History of the Education of the Colored People of the United States from the Beginning of Slavery to the Civil War*(New York: G.P. Putnam's and Sons, 1915), author's preface.
[11] Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), 19-20.
[12] James D. Anderson, *The education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 85, 134.

powerful evidence of all, the words of the White actors who sought to confound Blacks' efforts toward scholarly enlightenment, Anderson leaves little doubt as to the guiding doctrine of white supremacy behind the large sums that were sent south in "aid" of this newly liberated caste. Ronald Butchart succinctly summarizes the point in the preface to his work, *Schooling the Freed People*; "Indeed, the efforts of whites in black schools from the dawn of freedom into Reconstruction were often equivocal and contradictory to the best interests of a truly free people."[13] The work taken up by these scholars, as well as several others, explores the ways in which slaves obtained education during the antebellum period and, focusing largely on southern Black education, scrutinizes the challenges faced in claiming the right to education after the end of the Civil War.[14]

Additionally, Hilary Moss has probed into the *pre*-war efforts of northern free Black communities to establish schooling in the cities of New Haven, Baltimore, and Boston. Even as public schools were becoming the norm in northern states, Blacks were denied access to the education provided. Moss says of Baltimore; "That they did not consider creating separate schools for black children attests to how slavery worked to exclude all people of color, enslaved and free, from the body politic in the white imagination."[15] In addition, the Black community's exclusion from the benefits of the public system was exacerbated by a dearth of private modes of instruction due to the impeding influence of Whites, born of "anxieties over black aspirations."[16]

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[13] Ronald E. Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People: Teaching, Learning, and Struggle for Black Freedom, 1861-1876* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 3.
[14] Midlo Hall, Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Christopher M. Span, *From cotton field to schoolhouse: African American education in Mississippi, 1862-1875* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Ronald E. Butchart, *Northern Schools, Southern Blacks, and Reconstruction: Freedmen's Education, 1862-1875* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980).
[15] Hilary J. Moss, *Schooling Citizens: The Struggle for African American Education in Antebellum America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 101.
[16] Moss, 54.

Therefore, while these northern experiences demonstrate comparably greater allowances than granted the majority of Blacks across the South, these communities still faced myriad obstacles to obtaining education; education remained largely an endeavor of moral suasion and racial uplift.

The complexity of the historical examinations articulated in the work of these scholars is extremely valuable in the study of Black education prior to, and particularly after, the Civil War. Centered in the communities of Color they investigate, the broad scope of this body of work illustrates the prevalent conditions encountered in Black education into the twentieth century, conditions inconsistent with the context of eighteenth and nineteenth century southern Louisiana. Nonetheless, the depth of inquiry and analysis they provide serve to bring the anomalous conditions in Louisiana into greater relief. The crucial point of divergence between these narratives and the experience of Louisiana's Free People of Color is that the struggles illuminated by these historians highlight Black educational efforts beleaguered with obstacles, while the case of Free People of Color in and around New Orleans presents a circumstance of critical social and economic advantages, which afforded much greater latitude in available opportunities, notably in education. Unlike Louisiana's Free People of Color, Black communities often lacked the economic resources to pursue education without White assistance; as Woodson describes, they were, "nominally free, but economically enslaved."[17] Moreover, if the means were available to pursue education on their own terms, these communities were deprived the forbearance of proper instruction by their suspicious White neighbors. Historians' accounts aptly underscore the challenges that were faced by Blacks in obtaining education as well as how those difficulties were circumnavigated by Black communities in their quest for

[17] Woodson, *Mis-Education of the Negro*, 14.

literacy; a struggle that has continued to be chronicled through contemporary times. The common thread woven throughout these narratives is one of adversity; a tale of scholarly knowledge, if obtained, so accomplished despite myriad obstacles. Historical inquiry has pointed overwhelmingly to the fact that Blacks were able to gain literacy and schooling in spite of detrimental intervention of the White community, but scholarship has yet to deconstruct all too rare examples of Black education absent paternalism and hardship.

In addition to the study of Black education, historians have undertaken extensive research on the origins and circumstances of the free Black community in Antebellum Louisiana, and New Orleans in particular.[18] Several scholars such as Carl Brasseaux, Lauren Schweninger, Laura Foner, and Kimberly Hanger have framed inquiry around the particular variables that created the unique economic and social character of this Louisiana community in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Their work has revealed example upon example of the ingenuity and exceptional economic success achieved by Free People of Color during this period.[19] However, very little attention has been given to the importance and implications of educational achievement for this community, as well as the role that economic freedom played in enabling educational opportunity.

Further, many accounts have depicted this group as elitist and self-involved. Louisiana's Free People of Color, particularly those of its large, mixed race community, have been portrayed

[18] Blassingame; Harold E. Sterkx, *The Free Negro in Ante-Bellum Louisiana* (New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1972); Gary B. Mills, *The Forgotten People: Cane River's Creoles of Color* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977).

[19] Laura Foner, "The Free People of Color in Louisiana and St. Domingue: A Comparative Portrait of Two Three-Caste Slave Societies," *Journal of Social History* 3, no. 4 (1970), 406-430; Kimberly S. Hanger, "Origins of New Orleans Free Creoles of Color," in *Creoles of Color of the Gulf South*, ed. James H. Dormon (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1996) 1-27; Loren Schweninger, "Socioeconomic Dynamics among the Gulf Creole Populations: The Antebellum and Civil War Years," *Creoles of Color of the Gulf South*, Ed. James H. Dormon (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1996) 51-66; Carl A. Brasseaux, Keith P. Fontenot, and Claude F. Oubre, *Creoles of Color in the Bayou Country* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994).

as aspiring to whiteness in an effort to expunge any trace of color from their heritage.[20] This attribution is notably evident when historians discuss class and education:

> Management of slaves was merely one facet of the free blacks' economic and cultural *mimicry* of white planters. *Like* members of the white elite, leading free black families valued education, and *like* rich whites, they educated their children either by means of tutors or private schools.[21] [emphasis added]

This characterization assumes that being White, not merely enjoying the liberties enjoyed by Whites, was the ideal, and therefore, grounds historical inquiry on an assumption of whiteness as this community's benchmark for citizenship, liberty, and humanity. I contend that, while many of Louisiana's Free People of Color did represent an elite class, the unique heritage in which they maintained great pride was not merely an arrogance of assumed whiteness. To make such attributions is damaging as it diminishes the accomplishments of this group as *People of Color*, and therefore dismisses their experience as not applicable to the race as a whole.

The division between this community and the enslaved was a product of class and cultural distinctions as much as it was race. To some extent skin tone remained consistent with class divisions, the lighter in tone commonly counted among the upper classes, however, French and Spanish sensibilities of the time gave far more credence to class divisions than was the case for those of British heritage in the still young republic. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall holds that, "By the nineteenth century, the mixed-blood creoles of Louisiana who acknowledged their African descent emphasized and took greatest pride in their French ancestry... [they] distinguished themselves from and looked down upon blacks and Anglo-Afroamericans, though their disdain

[20] "…economically successful families had come to share, to a considerable degree, the culture of the white Creole elite, whom they emulated obsessively." (Brasseaux et al, 68).
[21] Brasseaux et al, 73.

stemmed from cultural as well as racial distinctions."[22] While Hall asserts that mixed-blood Creoles in Louisiana did hold themselves above Blacks and those Free People reared under the British tradition, she also maintains that the circumstances behind this relationship tells of complexities beyond mere race that made this so. Due to the unique cultural context that developed in antebellum Louisiana, race relations cannot be understood as a binary of Black and White. Relationships between slaves, Whites, and Free People of Color, which included free Blacks *and* Creoles of Color, were fluid and variable.

Coincidentally, Anglo-Americans acculturated under the ethos of the Revolution clung to the ideal of a classless society in which "all men are created equal," yet, their treatment of Blacks belies the assumption that all people could be counted as "men." The moniker remained applicable to only a small faction in society; "all men" did not signify that *all people* were considered to be men. Reared in aristocratic sensibilities and unrepentant of their biases, many early Louisianans of both races struggled against any association with the culture of English speaking Americans. In an 1835 bulletin, issued in French, Jean Boze conveyed the common sentiment regarding the influx of English influence in the region; "In 1809 there was peace among families and in society but Americans have brought all kinds of death in their wake."[23] The adherence to French culture shared by many Whites and Free People of Color in southern Louisiana proved, for this short time in history, to foster a taste for class differentiation and a shared disdain for American norms; puritanic republican beliefs which censured Louisiana's aristocratic hedonism .

[22] Ibid, 158.
[23] St Gème Family papers, f. 258, p. 9-10, Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection.

Therefore, this community didn't merely distance itself from Blacks in an effort to enviously mimic Whites. This community of Color culturally distanced itself from a society that equated blackness with slavery as it conflated whiteness with citizenship and opportunity. It distanced itself from what blackness meant in America, slavery. Educational and economic ambition of Louisiana's Free People of Color was not representative of some futile grasping at whiteness; it was the consequence of their ability to, in spite of the discrimination they could not entirely escape, embrace their humanity. This community of Free People of Color, like numerous Black communities after them, strove for affluence and pursued education not because it was something that Whites did, but because it was something that, as free people, was their right to obtain. The educational achievements of this group were an esteemed hallmark of their own desire to pursue knowledge and prosperity.

***Gens De Couleur Libre*, Steeped in Context**

Louisiana's treatment of race was a result of the civil and social standards established by the French government in the foundling colony which, consequently, advantageously affected the economic outcomes of the state's Free People of Color. The Black Code, or *Code Noir*, enacted by edict of Louis XIV in 1685, outlined a system of slavery which dictated legal sanction for the mistreatment of slaves, laid out a decisive pathway to liberty for the enslaved, and prescribed a standard of citizenship for Free People of Color. Most notably, although liberty was still bounded for non-whites, the *Code* dictated that manumission bestowed all rights and privileges due a Free Person of Color upon freed slaves:

> Article LIX. We grant to freed slaves the same rights, privileges and immunities that are enjoyed by freeborn persons. We desire that they

> are deserving of this acquired freedom, and that this freedom gives them, as much for their person as for their property, the same happiness that natural liberty has on our other subjects.[24]

Free People of Color in New Orleans were able to enter into civil contracts with Whites and had legally protected property rights which they could pursue and defend under the auspices of the courts.[25] The 1802 notarial records of Pedro Pedesclaux reveal multiple transactions between Free People of Color and Whites, including several obligations of mortgage to Free People of Color by Whites.[26] In fact, Carl Brasseaux found that "Creoles of Color… won all of their civil suits against white debtors during the period of 1800 to 1820."[27]

The tenets of *Le Code Noir* served as a reflection of French and Spanish social dispositions regarding slavery and Free People of Color, and they proved to be in significant contrast to the measures adhered to by Louisiana's neighboring states. In the state of Mississippi the Supreme Court inextricably bound social and civil status to race when it stated that, "the laws of this state presume a negro *prima facie* to be a slave."[28] Further, if any white man hired a, "negro who claimed to be free," but who could not produce proof of his freedom, he was subject to a fine.[29] Given the tenuous nature of liberty coupled with substantially diminished opportunity for employment in the state, it is not surprising that the free Black population in

[24] *Le Code Noir*.
[25] For a discussion business partnerships with Whites see Sterkx, 60 and 178. For legal and contractual privileges see Sterkx, 54, 88, and 171-173. Also see Gary B. Mills, *The Forgotten People: Cane River's Creoles of Color* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977).
[26] Francisco & Augusto Dauphin, free mulattoes, to Pedro Latigue – Sale of property, November 29, 1802; Louisa Baure, free negress, to Jose Cheron - Sale of Property with Mortgage, September 22, 1802; Pedro & Luis Calpha, free mulattoes, to Juan Barroy – Sale of Property with Obligation, September 27, 1802. New Orleans Notarial Archives, *Pedro Pedesclaux*, Vol. 42, 1802.
[27] Brasseaux et al, 46.
[28] Charles S. Sydnor, "The Free Negro in Mississippi Before the Civil War," *The American Historical Review* 32, no. 4 (1927), 769.
[29] Ibid, 770.

Mississippi barely topped 900 individuals by 1850.[30] In fact, as Louisiana courts were apt to uphold civil rights for Free People of Color, the judiciary powers in other slaveholding states were just as inclined to maintain the abject status of free Blacks. A South Carolina Court of Appeals did not mince words when it officially opined that, "a free African population is a curse to any country … [and] a dead weight to the progress of improvement."[31] In a Galveston, Texas ordinance free Blacks were prohibited from being "found abroad at unseasonable hours of the night." In this case "unseasonable" meant after eight o'clock in the evening.[32] Likewise, Blacks in Texas were unable to protect their property rights in the collection of debts through the courts as, although they had the right to sue, they did not have the right to bear witness against White debtors.[33] By considerable contrast, in 1850 Louisiana's Supreme Court went on record with a favorable estimation of the ability of the state's Free People of Color to testify in the courts:

> …free persons of color… are respectable from their intelligence, industry and habits of good order. Many… are enlightened by education, and the instances are by no means rare in which they are large property holders… such persons as courts and juries would not hesitate to believe under oath… No reason has been suggested why a distinction should exist in respect to their competency in civil and criminal cases in which white persons are parties.[34]

Spanish and French attitudes towards slavery were not only written into the *Code*, but they were upheld civilly. These regulations established a strong foundation for the rights of Free People of Color in the region.

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[30] The 1850 Total Population of Blacks and Mulattos was 930, Seventh Census.
[31] James M. Volo and Dorothy Deneen Volo, *Encyclopedia of the antebellum South* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000), 109.
[32] Harold Schoen, "The Free Negro in the Republic of Texas," *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (1937), 93.
[33] Ibid, 99.
[34] Annie Lee West Stahl, "The Free Negro in Ante-Bellum Louisiana," *The Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 25, no. 2, 315-316.

The social circumstances under which Louisiana's race relations developed are grounded in its early colonization; in her extensive study of Louisiana's colonial development Gwendolyn Midlo Hall asserts that, "In early New Orleans… being black did not necessarily mean being a slave. Nor was whiteness associated with prestige and power. The first African Americans arrived simultaneously with the rejects of French society who had been deported to Louisiana."[35] Although the Black population was introduced to Louisiana in a state of servitude *Le Code Noir* made the manumission of slaves legally sanctioned, binding, and, for a time, commonplace occurrences.[36] Often relationships between the races, whether intimate or otherwise, resulted in the emancipation of favored bondsmen, women, and the progeny of illicit relationships between White men and their enslaved mistresses.[37] Free People of Color, as slave owners, also utilized this system to not only purchase the liberty of family and other loved ones, but to likewise grant freedom to respected bondsmen. In fact, 788 acts of manumission were recorded in New Orleans from 1770 to 1803, and records reveal that Pedro Pedesclaux alone notarized 48 manumissions between January and December of 1803.[38]

Augmented by a mass migration of Free People of Color fleeing the Haitian revolt at the turn of the nineteenth century, the period of liberally granted freedom, and the relationships that compelled these emancipations, aided the substantial growth of this community.[39] Many men who freed their mistresses often did so to ensure the liberated status of their children as the *Code*

[35] Ibid, 130.
[36] Article LV. Masters twenty years of age may free their slaves by any act toward the living or due to death, without their having to give just cause for their actions, nor do they require parental advice as long as they are minors of 25 years of age.
[37] According to the 1810 of the Territory of Orleans "Twenty-four of forty white-dominated households (60 percent) contained no white women." Brasseaux et al, 8.
[38] Midlo Hall, 278. New Orleans Notarial Archives, Pedro Pedesclaux Index, Vol. 43-45.
[39] In 1804 thousands of refugees from the Haitian revolution more than doubled Louisiana's population of Free People of Color; their numbers topped 16,000 by 1830. Fifth Census.

determined that a child's condition followed that of its mother.[40] Concubinage of African slaves was not uncommon as in the colony's nascence a shortage of White women of suitable age and comparable status to White male officers and soldiers stationed there brought down immediate barriers to illicit unions across racial lines.[41] In addition, the interdependence and social intimacy between Blacks, Whites, and Native Americans that Gwendolyn Midlo Hall describes was quite unlike the distance maintained between races in rural, as well as more populous areas, across the north and south:

> The insecurity of this frontier world created a society in which the three races were deeply dependent upon each other and physical survival was often more important than accumulation of wealth. Racial lines were blurred and intimate relations between all three races flourished.[42]

The close contact between the races in this region, which served to literally soften rigid color lines, brought about a gradual increase in the free, mixed-race population, and consequently evolved into regional social norms that were maintained well after the White male to female ratio had reached relative balance.[43]

Due to the fact that even in Louisiana marriage between the races was not legal, agreements known as *plaçage* became accepted proxy for socially binding, spousal relationships. Plaçage consisted of a "contract" in which a White man agreed to terms under which he would financially support his mistress, or *placée*. These arrangements legitimized, at least to some extent, a level of commitment in unions between White men and Women of Color. Quadroon

[40] Article XIII. We desire that if a male slave has married a free woman, their children, either male or female, shall be free as is their mother, regardless of their father's condition of slavery. And if the father is free and the mother a slave, the children shall also be slaves… *Le Code Noir.*
[41] In 1721 New Orleans there were 145 White men, 65 White women and 172 People of Color. Roussève, 21. In 1746 New Orleans only had 800 settlers as compared to 3,000 blacks, and in all of the settlements there were only 1,700 settlers to a Black population of 4,730. Midlo Hall, 177.
[42] Midlo Hall, 238.
[43] See Sterkx, 61-67, 250-255; Blassingame, 17-20; and Brasseaux 69, Midlo Hall, 238-241.

balls were often organized with the sole purpose of introducing wealthy male suitors to potential placées. In 1841 George William Featherstonhaugh described these affairs as he had witnessed them:

> The Quadroon balls are places to which these young creatures are taken as soon as they have reached womanhood, and there they show their accomplishments in dancing and conversation to the white men, who alone frequent these places. When one of them attracts the attention of an admirer, and he is desirous of forming a liaison with her, he makes a bargain with the mother, agrees to pay her a sum of money… as a fund upon which she may retire when the liaison terminates. She is now "une placée"… Such a woman being over-educated for the males of her own caste, is therefore destined to be a mistress, and great pains are lavished upon her education…[44]

While this account relays an oft repeated estimation of the demeaning circumstance of these young women, plaçage relationships, as well as other extramarital associations between White men and Free Women of Color, are not to be understood as a glorified system of prostitution.[45] During this period marriage was as much a function of necessity as a matter of the heart; for a cultured woman of any race, to secure a suitor was to secure her future.[46] In credence to their select status, these Women of Color were "reared in chastity," and were "esteemed as honorable and virtuous" in their commitment to one man.[47] The "infidelity" of the men involved in these arrangements was a circumstance suffered by women of both races; these men often

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[44] George William Featherstonhaugh, *Excursion Through the Slave States: From Washington on the Potomac to the Frontier of Mexico; With Sketches of Popular Manners and Geological Notices* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968), 141. Originally printed in 1844

[45] It is also unlikely that these women were "overeducated" for men of their class; in reality there were simply more *Free* Woman of Color than men. (see Brasseaux) These arrangements more aptly represent mutual opportunism on the part of wealthy White suitors and Free Woman of Color.

[46] "The body and soul of the girl in the middle twenties cries out for love of husband and children… preparation for independent careers are but consolation prizes." G. Stanley Hall, The Kind of Women Colleges Produce, Appleton's Magazine No. 3 Vol. XII, Sept. 1908.

[47] West Stahl, 310.

maintained legitimate families in another part of town. Nonetheless, although plaçage unions were extralegal in nature, they did provide some semblance of connubial commitment and security for this class; more than mere liaisons, such arrangements were not altogether void of attachment.

Historical accounts have characterized Louisiana's Free Women of Color of this period as being quite sought-after; they were described as possessing of, "discernment, penetration and finesse, and as superior to many white girls of the lower classes of society."[48] Therefore, despite the fact that these unions were not legally sanctioned, often relationships between wealthy White men and Free Women of Color evolved into something beyond that of mistress and benefactor; at times these devoted unions persisted over decades.[49] Bulletins written in 1831 tell of Maurice Abat who moved to France with his mistress and their two children, intent upon marrying her and legitimizing his heirs.[50] His mistress, Emerile Giraudeau, a Free Woman of Color, was noted to be the daughter of M. Giraudeau who served as the Justice of the Peace in 1809. In another account M. Cherbonnier, a former teacher and textbook writer, made leave for Paris with his mistress, Modèste Fouchet, the daughter of General Lacoste; his intention to marry her and legitimize their four children.[51] The law banning marriage between the races certainly delineated the limits to which some Free Women of Color could live out their affections; however, natural affection at times led these actors to circumvent statutory precepts. Moreover, the accounts of

[48] Berquin-Duvallon quoted in Sterkx, 62. Also see Featherstonhaugh, "…Quadroon Creoles having been somewhat extravagantly described to me as females beautiful beyond all others, and very conspicuous for 'une belle taille, et une gorge magnifique.' [beautiful figure and splendid neckline] I had occasion to see a good many of them during my stay… and certainly it must be allowed that they are 'bien mises' [well put together] and carry their persons very well…" 141.

[49] Nobleman and Spanish Army officer, Augustine Marcarty, lived with Free Woman of Color, Celeste Perrault, for nearly fifty years. Sterkx, 63.

[50] Jean Boze, Bulletin written in 1831, folder 180.7 and 183.5, Ste-Géme Family Papers, Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection (New Orleans, LA).

[51] "On dit aussi que Charbonnie ci devant instituteur dans cette ville se marriera arrive qu'il sera en france après son sejour au nord, avec modeste fouchet… et legitimer par ce saissement leur numbreuse familler," Jean Boze, Bulletin, 1831, folder 180.7-8, folder 164.2.

the passionate betrothals carried out by the men who absconded with these Free Women of Color treated their actions as no more scandalous than worthy of a few months' gossip. The lines written about these attachments certainly painted the affairs as clandestine, but they betrayed no strict disapproval.

The habitual persistence and unabashed acknowledgment of these types of relationships demonstrates a deeper connection in the ties forged between White men, their chosen mates, and their resulting mixed-race children. Historical documentation provides many accounts of the generous manner in which wealthy White men ensured the financial security of their illegitimate children. The importance of these attachments cannot be overstated as this parental benevolence, in fact, introduced a great deal of the initial wealth into this able community. One notable example is that of Antoine Simien, who in 1800 rendered his 1791 succession null; in its stead he had a testament drafted bestowing his wealth to his unsanctioned family. The will stated:

> He declares that he has four natural mulatto children which he has had with a free negresse, named Marie, to whom he has granted freedom, these have been baptized free under his name… and though they are not the issue of a valid marriage, that they have nevertheless in him the same heart, same love of a true father; wishing to give them a visible proof of his love… He declares that he names… his natural sons without excluding those that may yet be born of said negresse Marie, their mother by him, and whom he will recognize as his only universal heirs…[52]

In the same vein Barthelemy MaCarty created a stir when his 1832 last will and testament was said to have excluded his legitimate White family from his succession in favor of his "famille de couleur."[53] The irregularity of this succession was noted, for the most part, by the sizable

[52] Amistad – Simien Succession – Tureaud Papers
[53] Jean Boze, Bulletin, 1832, Ste-Géme Family Papers, folder 203.2.

fortune that was to be left to his heirs. Moreover, this scintillating turn of events was more than idle gossip; his mistress and heiress, Cécé McCarty, was known to own thirty-two slaves, the largest number for any Free Person of Color in New Orleans.[54] Seventy-two year old Monsieur Pierre Cazelar, a wealthy sugar planter opposite New Orleans, was also cited as having "numerous colored progeny," who would inherit his wealth.[55] Subsequently, the 1850 Census enumerated the assets of the household of a twenty-seven year old Pierre Cazelar, planter, at a substantial thirty-thousand dollars.[56] It is apparent that, like many White men of means who developed romantic bonds across racial lines, the senior M. Cazelar was not remiss in seeing to the future comfort of his mixed-heritage successors.

Although generous patronage of well-situated White fathers planted the seeds of wealth in southern Louisiana's community of Color, it was the business acumen and entrepreneurial acuity of this class that cultivated those seeds of economic advantage into continued prosperity. Though many Free People of Color were born of White fathers, they routinely married within their own class, reared families, and their wealth was maintained within the proud lineage esteemed by these families' achievements. Born of a White father, Louis Agustin Meullion, and his Mulatto slave, Marie Jean, in 1764, Jean Baptiste Meullion reared a family with Free Woman of Color Célèste Donato and operated a sizable plantation in St. Landry Parish.[57] The Meullion legacy and records paint a portrait of a man evidently adept at managing and growing his assets. In 1819 he purchased a parcel from the state of Louisiana measuring 840 arpents, or just under

[54] Charles Barthelemy Rousseve, *The Negro in Louisiana* (New Orleans: The Xavier University Press, 1937), 45.
[55] Jean Boze, Bulletin, Winter 1836, Ste-Géme Family Papers, folder 265.9, "On dit que la fortune qu'il laisse passera par son testatment a ses nombre enfans naturels de couleur…"
[56] 1850 Census assets for Free Persons of Color of $250 or greater, Blassingame, John W. collection, Amistad Research Center at Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana (New Orleans, LA).
[57] Meullion Family Papers, 1776-1906, Hill Memorial Library, Special Collections, Louisiana State University (Baton Rouge, LA).

838 acres, at the price of ten dollars per arpent; an investment of over eight thousand dollars.[58] M. Meullion regularly purchased slaves, and, like his white counterparts, shipped his cotton to market in New Orleans; he sold his 1838 cotton crop for over nineteen thousand dollars. Knowledgeable and respected, the shaky script with which this man of business notarized his transactions does not do justice to the facility with which he made his White father's legacy his own.

Free Men of Color, Albin and Bernard Soulié, were builders and commission merchants in New Orleans. They owned extensive properties and served as creditors "in considerable sums to such eminent New Orleanians as Leonidas Polk, Episcopal Bishop of Louisiana."[59] Amongst numerous transactions recorded in detail the Soulié ledgers show that in an 1843 real estate deal they shrewdly purchased a mortgage for $1,920 and subsequently sold the same lot for $7,000. Additionally, a rate of ten percent interest was typically charged on the numerous advances owed to their accounts. The business affairs of the family even reached beyond the borders of North America. In October of 1845 a bill was made payable to the Soulié order in Paris, where Albin made his residence, in the amount of 10,600 Francs; it was executed by way of Charles Latham & Co of Le Havre, France. In 1846 a note was paid to the Souliés by B.L. Fould & Fould Oppenheimer of Paris in the amount of 5,312 Francs. The circumstance of Free People of Color of this class is most striking when it is considered that in March of 1846 state taxes were paid on Soulié properties valued at $90,200, yet at this time any Soulié children would have been unable to utilize Louisiana's foundling public school system established in the next year, and which their family's money so materially contributed to. The financial success of families like the

[58] Ibid.
[59] Soulié Family Ledgers, 1843-1880, Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection (New Orleans, LA).

Souliés was invariably to the benefit of both the Community of Color and the White community, a mutual interest that the White community was not apt to curtail. In fact, testament to the substantial wealth across this community bears out in the records; Loren Schweninger has esteemed Louisiana's Creoles of Color, who at the time possessed over $1.8 million worth of land and claimed 24 percent of the property owned by Blacks in the entire South, as the wealthiest group of free Blacks in the nation during the nineteenth century.[60] In 1835 G.W. Featherstonhaugh went so far as to state that money was, "the established religion" of the state.[61]

Knowledge, Education and Schools

The confluence of civil empowerment, socially permissive conceptions of race, and economic independence created a particular space of opportunity for the ambitious pursuit of education by Louisiana's Free People of Color. The acquisition of scholarly knowledge proved the rule rather than the exception for this singular group; in 1850 Louisiana's Free Black illiteracy rate was listed as 19.4%, while the national average for free Blacks was 20.83%. The total number of illiterate Free Blacks and Mulattos was only 3,389 in 1850. Effectively, of the total population of 17,465 Free People of Color in the state, 14,076 were considered *literate*, a rate of over eighty percent.[62] At the same time the national average rate of illiteracy for Whites was 4.92%, while Louisiana's White population was noted to have an 8.3% illiteracy rate; those

[60] Loren Schweninger, "Socioeconomic Dynamics among the Gulf Creole Populations: The Antebellum and Civil War Years," *Creoles of Color of the Gulf South*, Ed. James H. Dormon (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1996), 55.
[61] Featherstonhaugh, 142.
[62] Seventh Census of the United States, 1850.

of Louisiana's White population who could neither read nor write was near double that of their counterparts across the nation.[63]

In order to understand the extent to which this community was able to carve out spaces for learning, the overall state of schooling during this period must be understood. Education in the United States prior to the Civil War, and particularly in the South, had yet to be bound to the concept of a unified system of common schools. While Northern cities were moving rapidly in the direction of universal public schooling, the South lagged obstinately behind the trend. In 1850 it was noted that, "In many of the States, particularly the South, there is no general public school system, some counties etc, supporting schools by taxes levied within their own limits, and in other cases the State contributing a proportion towards the support of private schools."[64] Skilled employment could be, and often was, obtained without what we now consider a formal education and, therefore, school attendance rates during this period remained relatively low even for Whites.

Even as formal education was not requisite for occupational advancement prior to the Civil War, economic advantage and business acumen required that Free People of Color apprehend more than the rudiments of reading. The competencies necessary for success encompassed a conception of education that extended beyond the schoolhouse. Louisiana's Free People of Color were able to acquire the training necessary to pursue vocations in the skilled trades despite a seemingly low level of school attendance. During the period before the War the city of New Orleans boasted a far greater proportion of Free People of Color employed in the

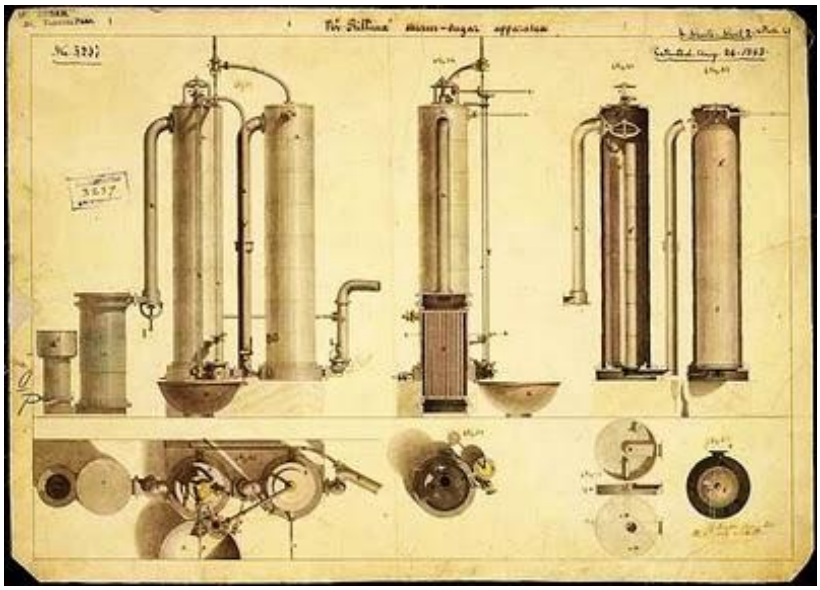
[63] Ibid. Note: The rate of White literacy is suspect as Louisiana had no free, public system of schooling until 1847, and only about half of all eligible, White, children were known to be in attendance in 1848, just two years before the Census. It is unlikely that, absent widespread access to formal schooling, the White population had attained near complete literacy by 1850.
[64] Ibid.

skilled trades than could even be found in the states that did not exploit forced labor. A mid nineteenth-century comparison of occupations of free Blacks and Mulattos in Louisiana to those held by the same group in the non-slave holding states of Connecticut and New York revealed over 1000 laborers in each of the two northern states, while Louisiana indicated only 411 of this class employed as such. By contrast, in Louisiana this same group exhibited an inordinately high number of Free People of Color working in skilled occupations such as carpentry, masonry, and cabinet making.[65] In 1856 the *Western Watchman* reported that, "Of the free colored population in New York City, sixty were clerks, doctors, druggists, lawyers, merchants, ministers, printers, and teachers… In New Orleans there were 165… engaged in similar pursuits, which may be considered as requiring education."[66] At the same time, only 1,219 "Free Colored" persons were recorded as attending school during this period as compared to almost five times that number in New York.[67] Clearly, Louisiana's Free People of color were able to receive the training necessary to gain expertise in occupations of skill outside of formal schooling, and, in turn, were empowered to openly practice their trades.

Although records attest to the unusual degree to which this community of Color could exercise their abilities in skilled vocations, they do not illustrate the extent to which these inhabitants were, in the broad sense, *educated*. In the mid nineteenth century the city of New Orleans was home to four of the six physicians of color in the state at the time; both Alexandre Chaumette and Louis C. Roudanez received medical degrees in Paris and returned to the city of New Orleans to practice their craft in 1845 and 1853 respectively. In addition, Dr. Roudanez came to be a well known publisher in the city. These men were highly regarded for their

[65] Ibid.
[66] "Emancipation at the South --The Tolerance of Louisiana," The African Repository (1850-1892); Sep 1856; American Periodicals, 276.
[67] Seventh Census.

expertise and won the patronage of both White and Black patients alike.[68] In 1846, while studying in Paris, Norbert Rillieux developed the vacuum pan method of sugar refining, a breakthrough that revolutionized the industry as it was, in time, adopted in both Europe and in the United States; he eventually returned to Paris to serve as head of the Central School.



Norbert Rilleux's plan for Sugar Refining.
(Courtesy Oxford African American Studies Center)

New Orleans was also home to one of the Nation's earliest African American owned newspapers, the *Daily Creole*, which commenced publication in 1856.[69] Unlike its postwar counterparts, the *Daily Creole* did not directly take up questions of race and oppression, but instead this paper followed the vein of most periodicals at the time operating as a means of disseminating information to the community; the paper editorialized on politics as well as local

[68] Thomas J. Ward, *Black Physicians in the Jim Crow South* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2003), 10.
[69] Library of Congress, Chronicling America: American Historic Newspapers, http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/.

current events. In an 1854 issue the daily took up the subject of astronomy informing its readers that, with the help of a four-foot wide telescope, Sir William Herschel had found, "a star-group, consisting of 5000 individuals… he inferred that those specks were star-galaxies… so far off that light-beams only flash from them by passage of close upon a million years."[70] Evidently, not only were the administrators of this publication learned, but their audience was also assumed to possess no minor level of comprehension of the then complex concepts of science. The mere existence of a newspaper run by Free People of Color in a slave-holding state approaching the dawn of the Civil War is extremely telling of the space of empowerment in which this community lived. The ambitious content of this daily suggests sophistication beyond mere mimicry of a purportedly more cultured White society. Louisiana's Free People of Color didn't merely obtain the skills needed to practice trades, they possessed knowledge.

For those at the uppermost tier of this class education proved more than a means to an end, the cultivation of knowledge came to be a reward in its own right. The wealth and subsequent prestige that was augmented and protected by this community's educational attainment in turn perpetuated an expectation that affluent Free People of Color be learned. The upper echelons of polite society necessitated not only business acumen, but knowledge of classic literature and current events alike. In 1845 Armand Lanusse published an anthology of Creole poetry, *Les Cenelles*; the first such collection written by people of Color to be published in the United States.[71] This volume highlighted the literary talents of New Orleans' accomplished *Gens de Couleur Libre*, and Rodolphe Desdunes described M. Lanusse as "blessed with a studious temperament, he loved the classics... In both his prose and verse, we find adequate proof

[70] "The Galaxy of Stars," *The Daily Creole*, 9 July, 1856.
[71] Rousseve, 67.

of his broad education."[72] Moreover, Lanusse's "contemporaries loved such things as literature, painting, music, [and] the theater…"[73] The scholarly interests of this group were not pursued as the means to some end of financial gain, but were an end in and of themselves. Literary and artistic accomplishments were neither a way to escape a debased condition nor considered frivolous endeavors; they were a realization of higher human potential.

The penchant for literary diversion went beyond the artistic set. The economic cachet of this well-heeled community was a crucial variable that afforded them the pursuit of knowledge. Their financial comfort, in turn, fostered the leisurely space for erudite engagement by which to satisfy the taste for knowledge. In an 1842 diary entry Natchez merchant William T. Johnson relayed a colorful critique of political stump speeches he had observed, noting of one hopeful that, "he made quite a lengthy spectacle… Richard the Third King Lear and several others of ancient time was [sic] represented by him in part."[74] Apparently Mr. Johnson's grasp of Shakespeare was familiar enough that his comparison, even now, evokes the melodramatic showmanship he witnessed that day. The same W.T. Johnson subscribed to several periodicals and he endeavored so far as to create a "reading room" in his home.[75] On a particular day that he did not feel well he, "repaired at an early Hour and remained Home all the evening sleeping and reading…"[76] Further, this predilection for intellectual diversion was handed down from one generation to another. In a letter from his son in New Orleans the youth solicited, "I wish you would tell sis to send me my book called Poetry and Prose of europe and america [sic] and lend

[72] Desdunes, 13.
[73] Desdunes, 19.
[74] Johnson (William T. and Family) Papers, Hill Memorial Library, Special Collections, Louisiana State University (Baton Rouge, LA).
[75] Ibid. 1837.
[76] Ibid. 1840.

me some of her Books to read…"[77] Unlike the struggles faced by the majority of Blacks during this period, as well as long after the end of slavery, Free People of Color in this region possessed the means, occasion, and uninhibited space to enjoy knowledge beyond mere economic necessity.

Education and schooling were rarely explicitly mentioned by this class as education was a taken-for-granted aspect of the lifestyle they maintained; yet it is perhaps the silence that is most illustrative of this community's unrestrained pursuit of knowledge. For Louisiana's Free People of Color opportunity did not hinge entirely upon clawing out a space in which to prove their intelligence. In the easy manner of an indulgent father untroubled about his children's prospects, Mr. Johnson briefly noted, "The Boys commenced to day to say their books again," and then confessed, "I will try and keep them at it for a time if possible, tho I know my failings so well that I am doubtful whether I will keep them at it long."[78] Apparently the young Johnson boys were expected to study, but it is also evident that their overall future success did not hinge upon whether they were compelled to "say their books;" they were at liberty to learn as they chose, and therefore, the need to do so was not an urgent one. Phoebe Smith wrote to her sister in 1844, and in like manner she stated that her daughter sent love to all of her playmates, "and also she is going to school and as soon as she can write she sais [sic] that she will wrighte [sic] to all the play mates…" Not only was this young girl learning to read and write, but the underlying tone of her mother's lines leaves the assumption that her playmates would have also been educated enough to read the letters sent them. Education for this well-situated community was not a vocation of mystery or preoccupation, but a mundane circumstance of living out their place in society.

[77] Ibid. 1859.
[78] Ibid. 1842.

Despite the fact that education was obtained through various means antecedent to the post War rise of the common school, schooling and academics did play an important role in the education of Free People of Color in Louisiana. In the slave states schooling was a matter of class and White privilege, and Blacks were unequivocally barred from public schooling in the South. However, Free People of Color in Louisiana were able to take advantage of religious as well as secular private institutions for their children's formal education. In fact, these efforts long preceded free, public school in Louisiana as, in spite of earlier efforts to establish a common school system, the state's first free school act was not adopted until May of 1847, and in 1849 less than fifty percent of the state's eligible children were said to have taken advantage of these schools.[79] By 1850 public school funds in Louisiana totaled just over $349,600, the bulk of which was raised from taxation of both Whites *and* Free People of Color.[80] At the same time Louisiana's funding for long-established private schooling, which at the time totaled about $193,000, was over half as much as was spent on public schools even as it served substantially fewer students.[81] In fact, in 1850 Louisiana's private schools had an endowment of $52,000, none of which came from tax revenues and was second only to Pennsylvania in this category.[82] Being that Louisianans chose to continue to financially support private schools at such a high level despite taxation for the fledgling public school system indicates that education was of great value to those who would not condescend to, or, as in the case of Free People of Color, could not, send their children to public schools. While the 1850 Census cites that only 1,219 "Free Colored" students attended school in the year, it is likely that the level of attendance by this

[79] In 1849 6,720 pupils from of a total of 14,258 eligible children attended the new public schools. Fay, 69-70.
[80] Seventh Census.
[81] Over 25,000 students were claimed to have attended the public schools, and just over 5,000 in private institutions. Utilizing the Census data, public school per pupil expenditure was about $13.96 per student, while private schools spent about $36.27 per student.
[82] Seventh Census of the United States. Endowment being defined by the Census as a "permanently invested fund or endowment."Pennsylvania's endowment was $73,459, and New York held the third highest at $23,185, less than half of that in Louisiana.

group is understated due to large discrepancies in school-going figures outlined for the White population.[83] The level of financial independence enjoyed by this group afforded families of Color the economic agency to opt to still have their children educated outside of the public schools, and the numbers indicate that this option was regularly exercised. Prior to the Civil War refinement through schooling, particularly in the South, was decidedly a matter of choice granted to those with the inclination to be learned and who also enjoyed the means to exercise a preference of how to achieve that end. Southern Louisiana's community of Color possessed both the desire and the capital to exploit their opportunity for education.

The earliest opportunity for formal schooling came to Louisiana's Free People of Color at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The Catholic Church can be credited with establishing the first schools in the region; in 1727 the Jesuits were instrumental in bringing the Ursuline nuns to Louisiana; a girl's school was established promptly upon their arrival. The opportunity to send their daughters to the new school was so favored by colonists that by 1728 the Ursuline school had forty-eight students; twenty-three boarding and twenty-five in the day school.[84] Notably, the Ursulines did not deny access to the education they provided either on the merits of class nor on the basis of color; the school opened its doors to Creole, French, Native American, White, and enslaved pupils. The fact that the Ursulines chose to impart education to the enslaved is unprecedented, however, during the colonial period in Louisiana slaves and settlers relied on each other for survival; knowledge obtained by the servant class could prove beneficial to the entire community. It was not yet considered dangerous to educate young slave girls in the

[83] The Seventh Census cites a total of 32,838 White students attending school (both public and private), and only 5,323 of that number were said to be in private schools. Around same time Edwin Whitfield Fay's *History of Education in Louisiana*, commissioned by the Federal Government, states that in 1849 only 6,720 (White) students were attending the new public schools, with just 22,000 by 1850. It is apparent that Census takers overstated the total school attendance by Whites.

[84] Clark Robenstine, "French Colonial Policy and the Education of Women and Minorities: Louisiana in the Early Eighteenth Century," *History of Education Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Summer, 1992), 199.

rudiments of sewing and silkworm care, skills that were seen as essential to the needs of the colony at the time. Further, *Le Code Noir* mandated that; "All slaves that shall be in our islands shall be baptized and instructed in the Roman, Catholic, and Apostolic Faith," and, "[Masters] shall give the necessary orders to have them instructed and baptized within a suitable amount of time." Therefore, educating young slaves under the tutelage of the Catholic Church was in keeping with the mores of the time.[85] The girls attended classes six days a week, slave and Indian students for only two hours each day and French and Creole students for four. All were taught reading, writing, some arithmetic, and manual training.[86]

In 1821, almost one hundred years after the arrival of the Ursulines, the Sisters of the Order of the Sacred Heart established the Academy of the Sacred Heart at Grand Coteau in St. Landry Parish, Louisiana. This academy served young women of Color, Native American, and White pupils alike. Subsequent academies under the Order of the Sacred Heart were erected in Natchitoches and Baton Rouge in 1847 and 1851 respectively; at one point the author of *Une Paroisse Louisianaise* counted the names of almost 2,600 graduates who had passed through her ranks.[87] In 1823, two years after the founding of the academy in Grand Coteau, Sister Marthe Fortière of the Dames Hospitalier opened yet another school for girls; this academy was supported by New Orleans' Free People of Color and catered specifically to young ladies of that class.[88] By 1831 this institution had been placed under the management of the Ursuline nuns, and ultimately it came to be cared for by the Sisters of the Holy Family, the second order of

[85] *Le Code Noir*, Article II. Charles Rousseve explained that in this early period religious instruction, "guaranteed the slaves by the Code Noir, brought with it instruction in the rudiments, at least, of reading and writing…" He goes on to call this, "'religion with letters,' as opposed to the scheme, derived by the English colonists for their slaves, of 'religion without letters.'" 42.
[86] Robenstine, 199.
[87] Edwin Whitfield Fay, *History of Education; Louisiana* (Washington: G.P.O., 1898), 131-132.
[88] Laura Ewen Blokker, "Education in Louisiana," *State of Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism*, 2012, 14.

Black nuns in the nation, in affiliation with St. Augustine's Catholic Church, the first Catholic Church to be founded by Free People of Color in the United States.[89] Operating as St. Mary's Academy, subsequently St. Mary's Academy for Young Ladies of Color, the course of instruction consisted of:

> Reading, Writing, Spelling, Dictation. Orthography, Grammar, Composition, Geography, Arithmetic, Algebra, History, Rhetoric, Natural Philosophy, Astronomy, Science and Etiquette. Sewing, in all of its branches, Embroidery, Crochet, Tapestry, Tarleton Flowers, Artificial Flowers, Drawing, Painting, French and Spanish, (Vocal and Instrumental). [90]

Given a southern woman's place in nineteenth century society, and particularly women of Color, St. Mary's liberally academic course of study is notable. Further, the applied courses of study that did not fall under the academic track speak of greater aspirations for pupils than a life of domestic service or manual labor. This curriculum consisted of the delicate niceties requisite of a life of feminine occupation and refinement.[91] It was to this school that Louis Drouet, a White man of means, sent his mixed-race daughter Louise Drouet.[92] Louise was born of a plaçage union, and it was most likely also the same sort of arrangement that she was being groomed for. Like many children of her class, although her lineage was never legally recognized, Louise's

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[89] Ibid.

[90] Charles B. Rousseve, *Prospectus: St. Mary's Academy for Young Ladies Directed by The Sisters of the Holy Family*, undated, Charles B. Rousseve papers, 1842-1994, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University (New Orleans, LA).

[91] St. Mary's curriculum actually bore elements, such as rhetoric, mathematics, and natural philosophy, which were considered suitable only for the education of boys and controversial in girls' education into the nineteenth century. At the same time these young ladies of Color were given training in elegant crafts that were decried by those pushing for the reform of women's education. On the one hand it was thought that, "learning in men was the road to preferment… consequences very opposite were the result of the same quality in women," and on the other hand, "Girls were said to need a new kind of education because their traditional training had been superficial and their resulting behavior shallow." These young ladies were afforded *both* forms of education. Linda K. Kerber, Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 199, 203.

[92] Justin Nystrom, "In My Father's House: Relationships and Identity in an Interracial New Orleans Creole Family," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Summer 2008), 294.

father nonetheless maintained his perceived parental responsibility and sponsored her proper education in order to enhance her prospects in life.

Parochial schools were not the only educational institutions for Free People of Color in Louisiana during this period. In 1837 the growing wealth of Louisiana's Free People of Color came to bear fruit in the establishment of their own school accessible to the larger community of Color. An act of benevolence by African born former slave Madame Marie Couvent laid the groundwork for a school expressly for children in the free community of Color. Having come to New Orleans by way of Saint Domingue, Haiti, Madame Couvent was the widow of a prominent carpenter and Free Man of Color, Bernard Couvent. Over her lifetime the Widow Couvent had shrewdly amassed considerable wealth in real estate, and realizing "that it was necessary that the children of her race should not live without having some advantages of an education," she made a provision in her will to donate a parcel of land "conditionally on the erection of a Colored Orphan Free School."[93] Negligence in the execution of the succession postponed fulfillment of the widow's behest, but after a decade-long delay *L'Institution Catholique des Orphelins Indigents*, also referred to as the Couvent School, was established in1848.[94] "Scholars of both sexes irrespective of religious creed" were admitted, and the school employed five or six instructors who taught courses up to the eighth grade level in both French and English.[95] Laura Ewen Blokker notes of *L'Institution Catholique* that, "Despite its appellation, which served to make the school sound more charity and church based – and therefore less threatening to those who opposed the education of African Americans – the school was neither solely for orphans nor

[93] *History of the Catholic Indigent Orphan Institute,* Charles B. Rousseve papers.
[94] Ibid.
[95] "They are taught from the primary to the eighth grade, French and English languages…" Ibid, 104.

run by the Catholic Church."[96] Although the Community of Color was free to operate their school unmolested, it was also necessary for them to ensure that their achievement did not appear threatening to Whites' assumption of their own supremacy. Despite the liberties afforded this community, they were still a community of Color, and it was understood by all that any pretense of equality with Whites would jeopardize those liberties. Although moderated by class, race still dictated the norms of this society.

It could be noted that the 1848 opening of the Couvent School practically coincided with the introduction of Louisiana's free public school system, a civic benefit from which Free People of Color were barred, and this believed to be evidence of Louisiana's Free People of Color taking their educational cues from the White community. However, given that the widow's behest predated this public act by ten years, it would be difficult to make the case that the community of Color's effort for free schooling was a mere mimicry of White educational standards. Having already been liberally educated in private schools for decades, this was the Free Community of Color's long-anticipated common school.

The prestige of this educational space in the community is evident in the prominent figures involved with its success. Many of those named on the Board of Directors were Free Men of Color of some means, including Thomy Lafon, Alfred Duhart, and Antoine Dubuclet.[97] Thomy Lafon's wealth was estimated at a considerable half a million dollars at the time of his death, and, amongst multiple charitable behests, "he left [the Institute] over five thousand dollars in cash and several pieces of real estate, [as well as] the rental for the maintenance of the

[96] Blokker, 13.
[97] Rousseve Papers, *History of the Catholic Indigent Orphan Institute.*

school."[98] This annuity paid for teacher salaries, custodial services, taxes and insurance, and the general upkeep of the school's properties.[99] In 1850 Alfred Duhart's household included Joseph Bazanae, a forty-six year old Mulatto man from Cuba; Bazanae's occupation was listed as *teacher*.[100] It is probable that as a part of his commitment to the institution Duhart took on the responsibility of providing room and board for instructors employed there. Brothers Adolphe and Armand Duhart were both instrumental at the school in subsequent years as well; Adolphe held the position of principal and Armand served as director. Board member Antoine Dubuclet was also a Free Person of Color of substantial wealth and reputation; in 1850 his assets were enumerated at $52,000. Dubuclet's skillful command of business and finance ultimately earned him the opportunity to serve in the distinguished position of State Treasurer from 1868 to 1879; a post from which, "he retired without leaving behind the least cause for dissatisfaction or any error in his accounts."[101]

The charitable manner in which these Free People of means, as well as many others unnamed here, gave to the Couvent School both monetarily and through service belies claims that Louisiana's Free People of Color were elitist and unconcerned with the well being of their race, or that they sought merely to fade into White society. Certainly, the status of the uppermost tier of this society possessed a great amount of pride in their unique culture and bearing; nonetheless, the Couvent School also illustrates the desire of affluent Free People of Color to not simply maintain their own status, but to also empower Free People with lesser resources to equal aspirations and capabilities. There were many schools in the city of New Orleans during this

[98] Ibid; West Stahl, 319.
[99] Persons of Color in Louisiana Possessing More Than $200 in Property at the time of the 1850, 1860, and 1870 Census, Blassingame, John W. collection, 1831-1879,Amistad Research Center at Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana (New Orleans, LA); Rousseve Papers, *History of the Catholic Indigent Orphan Institute*. Also see Desdunes, 92-93.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid; Desdunes also notes Dubuclet's service in this position - Desdunes, *Our People Our History*, 74-75.

period, but none that served families of lower means. Students who were able to pay were charged no more than fifty cents in tuition each month, a sum that never increased during the operation of the school.[102] *L'Institute Catholique* became the most well attended school by Free People of Color in Antebellum New Orleans, and, due to its prominence in the community, the school was even periodically granted public financial support from the state legislature as well as from the City of New Orleans.[103] What is most notable about this institution is that all of its teachers were Free People of Color; in fact its first teacher and principle, Félicie Cailloux, was a Free *Woman* of Color. [104] Considering that the Couvent School was coeducational, the fact that a woman was placed in such a leadership role in a time when the role of schoolmaster was still a male-dominated field is striking. If we consider the relatively high rate of literacy in the city it would be difficult to make the case that she was given this appointment for sheer lack of equally qualified male candidates. *L'Institute* was a testament to the ability of Free People of Color to establish a space for the pursuit of education on their own terms, absent interference from the White community, and largely without assistance from the White community. It was a centralized point of empowerment and pride for a group that had no misgivings about their place in society or their capabilities.

In addition to these enduring institutions multiple alternative options for schooling were available to Louisiana's Free People of Color. The relatively short period of empowerment for this caste amidst the broader narrative of the Black struggle for education, as well as a lack of overt discussion of race and schooling by this group, means that a good deal of information about the schools they attended has been obscured in the bustle of history. Nonetheless, many

[102] As of 1916: "The tuition at present are, orphans, free; half orphans, 25 cents, and other pupils, 50 cents per month." Rousseve Papers, *History of the Catholic Indigent Orphan Institute;* Also see Desdunes, 106.
[103] Desdunes, 104; Sterkx 269; Willey, 248.
[104] Ibid.

opportunities for formal education did exist and have been alluded to by those who utilized them. Charles Roussève has gone so far as to assert that, "In New Orleans before the reactionary period free persons of color did not find it difficult to use whatever educational facilities the city afforded. White teachers had no objection to having them as pupils."[105] In 1833 young William Johnson was returned home from an unnamed boarding school with a note from his teacher which lamented the unfortunate circumstances that called him home early and praised his progress, "in grammar and geography, both of which were new to him."[106] Eleven years later a letter from his brother in New Orleans stated an intention to send his own boys to school in Kingston along with William's child.[107] In an1834 bulletin Jean Boze wrote of a boarding and day high school opened for Colored students by Father L'Hoste at 82 Esplanade Street in New Orleans.[108] Several years later, to the northwest near Opelousas, the Grimble Bell School for Free Negroes, an elite private school that catered to the youth of wealthy planters, was opened in Washington, Louisiana. The monthly tuition was fifteen dollars, and four teachers were responsible for the instruction of approximately 125 students.[109] The Grimble Bell School taught all of the customary subjects, including Writing, Arithmetic, History, Bookkeeping, French, English, and Latin. The school ultimately closed in the 1850's as a result of mounting racial tensions in St. Landry Parish preceding the War; however, New Orleans contemporary, Nathan Willey, explained that, "since it has been closed many of the youth have been sent to private schools in New Orleans."[110] Apparently the closing of one school did not preclude opportunities for continued studies at another. Additionally, prior to the War Pointe Coupé Parish was home

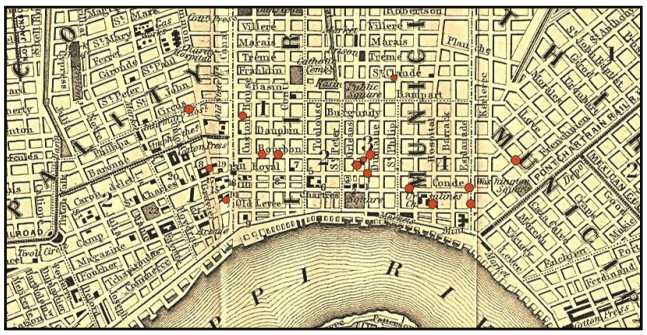
[105] Rousseve, 42.
[106] 1833 Letter, William T. Johnson Family Papers.
[107] Ibid. 1844 Letter.
[108] Ste-Géme Family Papers.
[109] Sterkx, 269.
[110] Sterkx, 270; Willey, 248.

to many families of Color who had accumulated substantial property, and who, for many decades, had supported their own schools by obtaining rooms in principal houses, hiring teachers of Color, and supporting the operation of the school through a per pupil tuition fee. The result of this education was that, out of nearly two hundred "colored" families in Pointe Coupé who were free before the war, only one was known to be illiterate at the War's end.[111]

Educational opportunities were routinely advertised in the various newspapers in and around New Orleans. *Le Propagateur Catholique* carried various endorsements for day and boarding schools; and, while it was customary for race to go unmentioned in these advertisements, in February of 1845 *Le Propagateur* announced an "*École pour les enfants de couleur*."[112] The advertisement touted that, given the Christian education received there and the progress of its students since its opening, *L'École* "deserves the patronage of the colored people who want to obtain a good education for their children."[113] In addition to this school the paper advertised several institutions, none of which explicitly mentioned race. Nevertheless, given the localities of these establishments, it is likely that many opened their doors to students of Color. Housed in the French Quarter *L'École* for Children of Color was only one block away from the site at which Father L'Hoste was said to have opened his school for the children of the city's Free People of Color, St. Mary's Academy operated less than two blocks from there, and L'Institution Catholique rested little more than half a mile from these schools. What is striking is that within just over one square mile of these schools, known to cater explicitly to Free People of Color, *Le Propagateur* advertised close to a dozen different learning establishments between 1843 and 1844 alone. Some academies served as boarding schools for young ladies or young men, and there were also day schools, both single sex and coeducational. These various

[111] Willey, 248.
[112] *Le Propagateur Catholique*, "*École Pour Les Enfants de Couleur*," 8th February, 1845.
[113] Ibid.

institutions provided instruction in French, Spanish, Latin, Greek, History and Geography, Writing, Mathematics, Physics, and Astronomy.



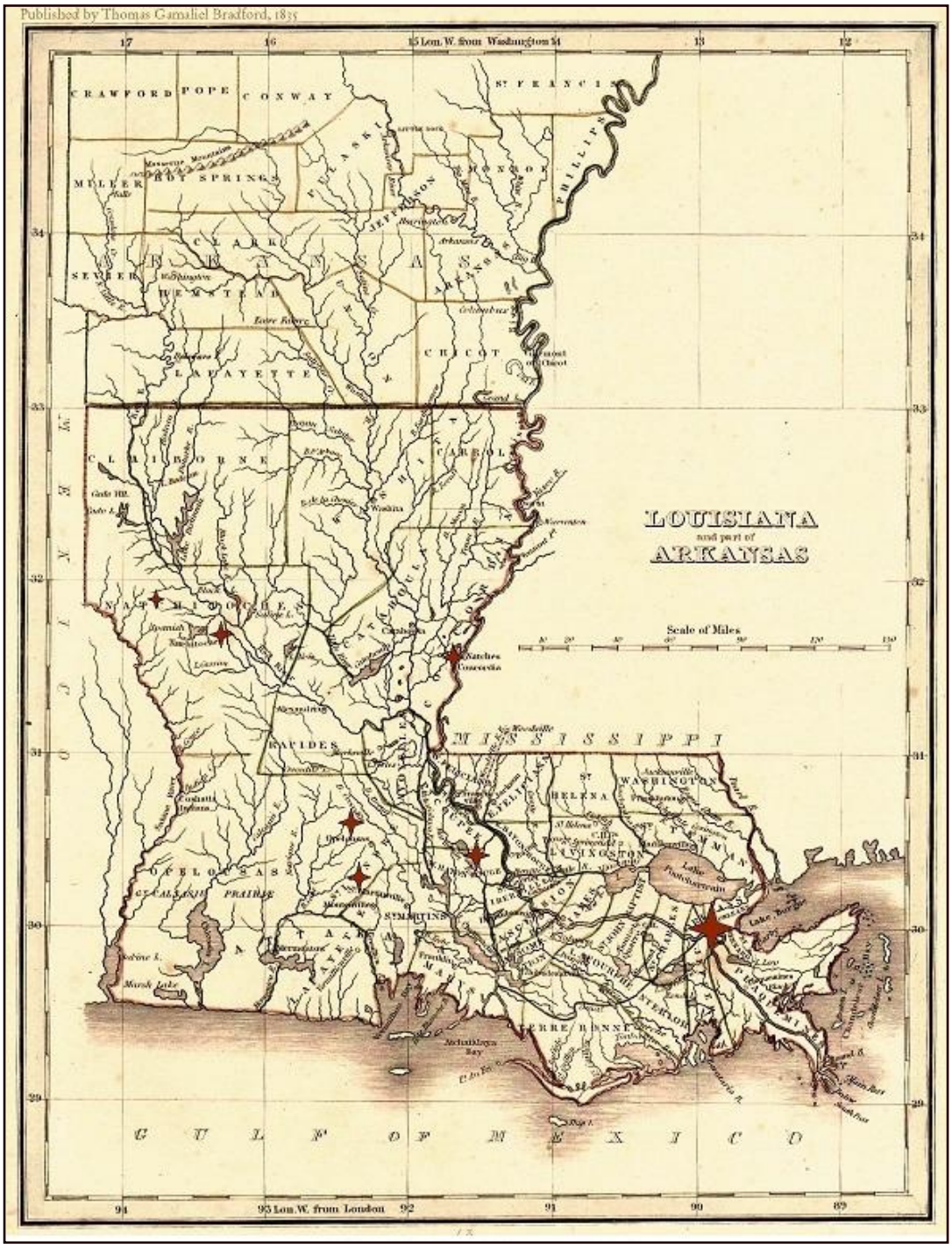
Map of institutions of learning concentrated in and around New Orleans' French Quarter in the early 1840s. Many were advertised in various periodicals, such as the *Daily Creole* and *Le Propagateur Catholique*.

The African American owned *Daily Creole* did its part to inform the community of educational opportunity. The Jefferson Academy located at 53 Bourbon Street in New Orleans, on the edge of the French Quarter, averred:

> The plan of this institution comprises a general and extensive system of education. Pupils are admitted at six or seven years of age, and can continue until their education is complete, or till they are prepared for their future pursuits in life… The premises are, perhaps, the best to be found in the city, with ample space for exercise and recreation, every necessary convenience is combined for an institution of learning on a large scale.[114]

The St. Charles Institute, unaffiliated with St. Charles College, also "[embraced] all the various branches requisite for a complete English and French education;" exercises were conducted daily in English and French, "there being about as many American as… French pupils…"[115] Courses tailored to particular subject matter were also promoted in the *Daily Creole*; instruction given in the French Language covered the modern languages of French,

[114] "Educational," *The Daily Creole*, 2 July 1856.
[115] Ibid.



Map of Louisiana Indicating the locations of
Schools Known to Serve Free People of Color
Prior to the Civil War

German, and English using the "Viva Voce System," as well as writing and bookkeeping.[116] Dolbear's Commercial College went so far as to include instruction in Phonography in its offerings.[117]

The absence of a comprehensive and universal system of schooling during the antebellum period allowed parents not only to define what constituted a proper education, but to determine where and how it could best be obtained. For the state's Free People of Color schooling beyond the primary levels was virtually nonexistent. Instead of accepting this circumstance as the inevitable conclusion to their educational progress, the community merely pursued opportunities for advanced education elsewhere; it was not uncommon for Louisiana's Free People of Color to send their children out of the South for their education. At the time of his death in 1832 the illegitimate heirs of Barthelemy MaCarty, sons aged seventeen and eighteen, were said to be attending college in the North, and two years later it was favorably stated that they were "raised very well" in the northern colleges.[118] Many young Southern elites such as the MaCartys are said to have been educated in northern schools; however, the Francophile heritage which this community proudly embraced coupled with substantial economic autonomy meant that children of this class quite often literally went to great distances to obtain advanced instruction in Paris, France. Louisiana's Free People of Color clearly expected a level of educational refinement that they felt could only be achieved in Europe for, regardless of the area of study, the most accomplished of their class in great proportion completed their educations in the country of their claimed heritage. Armand Lanusse, poet and school administrator; Victor Séjour, playwright;

[116] Ibid.
[117] "Educational," *The Daily Creole*, 9 July 1856.
[118] "…deux garcons ages… 17 a 18 ans qui se trouvent dans une college due nord pour y reçevoir une education…" Ste.-Géme Family Papers, folder 203.1, 1832; "…ses deux enfans naturels macarty tres bien élèves dans les colleges du nord un heritage qui est encore d'une grande valour…" Ste-Géme Family Papers, folder 238.6, 1834.

and Edmond Dédé, accomplished composer - all received their training in Paris. Eugène Warbourg, was an accomplished sculptor who passed the last nine years of his life working in Europe, six of which he spent studying in Paris. Professor E.J. Edmunds, a skilled mathematician who at one point held a position as chair of mathematics at New Orleans High School also finished his education in Paris.

It could be held that the aspiration of these Free People of Color to educate their children abroad was due to their inability to pursue education domestically; however, deeper consideration of their continued travel abroad for schooling, even as some Northern colleges began to accept Black students, brings to light something more. In a visit to a lecture at the Sorbonne in Paris Charles Sumner noted with curiosity young men of Color "dressed quite *à la mode*, and having the jaunty air of young men of fashion… They were standing in the midst of a knot of young men, and their color seemed to be no objection to them." He came to the conclusion; "It must be that the distance between free blacks and the whites among us is derived from education, and does not exist in the nature of things."[119] What Mr. Sumner observed at the university in Paris was the very reason that this class returned again and again to this space, and it was more than simply education; in Louisiana they enjoyed liberties and wealth on a scale beyond what the majority of Blacks across the nation could claim, but in Paris they were also Men and Women. Louisiana's Free People of Color were allowed a space in which to exercise economic and educational empowerment, yet, that space remained bounded by a presupposition of white supremacy. Their wealth, knowledge, and respected status as individuals valuable to the community could not mitigate the fact that they were still, in fact, people of Color. Nonetheless, for a time the realities of what this community could achieve, accomplishments

[119] David McCullough, *The Greater Journey: Americans in Paris* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 131.

potentially threatening the notion of White superiority, lay protected by the illusion that their attainment remained beneath that of Whites.

Conclusions

The French and Spanish underpinnings in Louisiana's colonial culture, for a time, shaped a society that placed nearly as much emphasis on financial class status as race. Race relations in Antebellum Louisiana developed under circumstances of hardship and mutual dependence, which allowed People of Color the space to become understood as more than simple laborers.[120] This region's unique social beginnings allowed for the introduction of affluence into its community of Color, and also created a space in which that community could cultivate those seeds of wealth. According to the civil standards outlined in the Code Noir, once freed, People of Color were deserving of property rights and of equal protection of their economic interests. These civil rights were legally enforceable and Louisiana's Free People of Color made ample use of the privilege. Relatively unhindered in their pursuit of wealth, Louisiana's norms subsequently afforded this community the ability to pursue education on their own terms, and to their fullest human potential.

In this liberated space Louisiana's Free People of Color proved more than educated, they showed themselves to be learned; the knowledge they acquired taken as a right rather than a privilege. In fact, apart from the occasional cursory reference, the records of Free People of Color make relatively little explicit mention of education or literacy. The white noise that exists where we assume numerous accounts of struggle and triumph, of obtaining education at all costs,

[120] Africans actually arrived in America with many useful skills such as shipbuilding, metalworking, and sugar-making. Midlo Hall, 133; Rousseve, 32-33.

must exist brings into relief the anomaly to the common narrative in Black education that this community presents. Louisiana's Free People of Color did not speak of education in the terms, nor with the frequency, that we expect in the same manner that they omitted other mundane details of their daily lives: we do not talk about that which is commonplace. Nonetheless, while Free People of Color in Louisiana were barred from public schooling, they were not denied education. The limits to their educational achievement, in fact, only went so far as their financial means could dictate. For many, this reality deemed that any education to be acquired in the United States, even should they have been allowed to participate, would not have been sufficient to their status or talents. Left to their own devices Louisiana's Free People of Color empowered themselves and leveraged their economic capacity to provide liberally for the education of their own.

The experience of this population complicates the conception of Black educational achievement in the antebellum South, and dares to add breadth to the discussion of education for People of Color in this period by including an alternate story line in which a community of Color was at liberty to pursue education fully resourced and on their own terms. Economic opportunity was essential not only to afford educational opportunity, but to then allow this community to participate in occupations in which skill and knowledge could be exercised; perpetuating further need, means, and desire for education. While race was still a significant factor, its effect was moderated in the southern region of antebellum Louisiana, allowing class to play a much more significant role than in other Black communities. Unlike other Black communities throughout the north and south, for a time, Louisiana's community of Color was able to capitalize on a liberated space both economically and educationally.

All of this being understood, the common narrative remains the *common* narrative for good reason; Blacks have repeatedly been denied opportunities to improve their lot both economically and educationally. Education for the Black community has been scraped out of hardship and negotiated around myriad obstacles; the absence of whiteness consistently attendant with a falling short. Carter G. Woodson stated it as such; "The present system under the control of the whites trains the Negro to be white and at the same time convinces him of the impropriety or the impossibility of his becoming white."[121] Woodson's assessment is timeless in its vision; the common narrative is one of the dominance and superiority of whiteness. Nonetheless, the case of Louisiana's Free People of Color should cause us to question, what does it mean to become White? Is it through literacy, wealth, empowered communities? Clearly not, as this community of Color possessed all of these, and still, they were not considered White. Louisiana's Free People of Color knew who they were, yet, contrary to the narrative of white supremacy, they did not internalize their presumed inferiority. Their education was not under the control of Whites, but firmly in their own grasp, subject to their own standards; it coincided with, and was in some instances superior to, education available to Whites. This is not the story of Black education that we have been regularly presented, and something tells us that to have achieved as they did, this community must have believed themselves to be White. I challenge us to consider why that should be so.

It must be recognized that a consequence of the liberties enjoyed by this free class is that knowledge, the taste for wealth, and all that affluence afforded created a psychological breach between themselves and the enslaved. This distance has been attributed to an unfeeling elitism and aspirations to whiteness; however, the realities of the time were much more complex than a

[121] Woodson, *Mis-Education of the Negro*, 20.

mere complicity with slavery and cultural whitewashing. In hindsight it has been determined that if this community did not make the choice to identify with their African roots and the enslaved, then they chose to blend into the White community and deny their non-white heritage. This assessment holds if we believe that enlightenment and achievement as expressed by Whites to be the norm; we, then, automatically believe that the same expressed by any other group is mimicry, a will to expunge any identity but White. However, if we assume that achievement as pursued by all peoples is the natural exercise of humanity, then we can allow for all people to aspire to their fullest human potential and still maintain an identity that is not conflated with whiteness. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall asserts that in Louisiana, "Hybrid race, culture, and language were created."[122] The French may have lightened the African bloodline, but African influence also served to darken the French culture; the transfer of knowledge was dynamic and flowed in both directions.[123] Whites had the power to impose their European culture on People of Color, but People of Color had something to contribute as well. That Whites have historically found greater economic and educational success is a fact, but this outcome is not indicative of some ability inherent in any one race. For Louisiana's Free Community of Color socioeconomic empowerment created a wedge between their privileged status and that of the enslaved. Nonetheless, it would be naïve to apply strict intentionality to this community's actions; it would be a gross oversimplification to state that in seeking education and wealth this community wished to become, or considered themselves, White. We must not diminish their achievements by claiming that they were attained in a denial of their African heritage, i.e. that they only reached elite status due to their aspiration to whiteness.

[122] G.M. Hall, 238.
[123] Ibid. 159-160, 238.

What we *can* state is that this community upends the common narrative and gives us an alternate perspective from which we can further interrogate the structures that serve to either foster or stifle community empowerment. While they may have had no little conceit as to their heritage and station, Free People of Color in Louisiana, at this time, knew all too well who they were. This community's story must compel us to question how we understand the fluid relationships between race as a social construct, class, and educational achievement. This counter-narrative must also cause us to reconsider how social norms and structures of class serve to not only define how the abilities and merits of a group of people are characterized, but how these determinants shape self-definition. The relatively permissive social conceptions of race in this region, coupled with the weighted influence of class in this society prior to the Civil War, created an anomaly in the history of Black education that could provide important implications for educational achievement even today.

Future Inquiry

This work is far from complete, many questions still remain to be posed and answers sought. There is still much to be known about the educational circumstances of Louisiana's Free People of Color prior to the Civil War. Many records have yet to be explored, including the ample archives maintained by several Catholic orders in the region. The Catholic Church was instrumental in liberally providing education for Free People of Color even before it proved to be the norm for Whites, there is much that these school records can tell us about education for Louisiana's community of Color. In addition the amount of detail provided in court testimony, as well as the opinions of the High Court, can add much needed depth to this study. Moreover, as the conception education was yet to be confined to a notion of schooling, it is important to

look at other means by which Free People of Color were able to obtain training, such as apprenticeships. I intend to closely examine all of these sources for any cues as to type of schooling this community received, as well as the level of knowledge and sophistication that their education provided.

Additionally, much has yet to be known about the kind of education obtained by, and the experiences of, Free People of Color in France. It is apparent that they frequently sought education overseas, and it is also known that they achieved a level of scholarship above that of many Whites, particularly southern Whites, of the time. However, richer detail has been decidedly lacking. Domestic records leave us to believe that France was a vacuum into which scholars of Color vanished, only to return cosmopolitan and learned individuals some years later. The archives at *L'Ecole Centrale* and the *Sorbonne* in Paris, institutions where Free People of Color were known to attend, may quite possibly provide the detail necessary to help us better understand the educational experiences of this community abroad.

This work also leads to a natural curiosity about other southern communities with similar demographics to Louisiana's community of Free People Color. Both Virginia and North Carolina had large Free Mulatto populations in 1850, much larger than their free Black populations. Louisiana maintained the highest ratio of free Mulattos to each free Blacks, about 4.2:1, but Virginia had a substantial free Mulatto population of 35,476 and North Carolina of 17,205; their ratios to the free Black population at 2.88:1 and 2.68:1 respectively. It is quite possible that evidence will reveal similar phenomena in the free communities of Color in these two states, and any differences between these communities may tell us more about the dynamic relationship between race, class, and social norms in the educational opportunities for Blacks.

Finally, my primary aim is to continue study of this particular community through the Civil War and Reconstruction as the sweeping changes ushered in by these historical circumstances visited social and economic unrest on the region. What became of the wealth and status of Louisiana's Free People of Color? The consensus among scholars who have studied this group during the Antebellum and post-bellum periods points to a general and rapid decline in the fortunes of this community. The loss of wealth, as well as civil and social cachet relegated this group, on the whole, to a status no more esteemed than that of the newly freed slaves. While there is evidence to suggest that this estimation is not altogether incorrect, additional possibilities also exist; many prominent figures in the community did become active in the fight for civil equality of all people of Color, for instance. Moreover, as the Haitian slave revolt prompted mass migration to Louisiana's shores in 1804, some evidence indicates that many Free People of Color who had not hung their fortunes on the institution of slavery utilized their still substantial means to relocate to France, Cuba, and Mexico. The space that members of this community came to occupy notwithstanding, the diminished status of Louisiana's Free People of Color, a process which began amidst growing white antipathy prior to the War and met its denouement with the fall of Reconstruction, has something to tell us about the arbitrary manner in which Americans have historically considered race. What was lost? How did the shrinking space for empowerment affect this community's ability to maintain educational achievement to the level they had grown accustomed to?

We remain separated from Louisiana's Free People of color by a relatively small passage of time in the scheme of history. This community was forged out of circumstances and social attitudes that created a liberated and empowered space quite different from that experienced by Blacks across the nation, during this period and since. It is important to recognize the struggles

and sacrifices of those people of Color who over hundreds of years have strived for knowledge and participation in the citizenship that this nation had promised to all; this against a gale of outright sabotage and paternalistic subversion. Yet, it is also important to understand how it has been, and could be, otherwise for people of Color in the United States; how the educational subjection of the Black population has not always been a forgone conclusion.

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