



Creoles born to Europeans, Africans in Louisiana

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“What exactly is Creole?” This is one of the most common questions I receive when people hear that I do research related to Creoles in New Orleans. Depending on how one approaches the question, the answer is either quite simple or very complex.

At the most basic level, “creole” refers to being born in, or of, the Americas. In this sense, the word was applied not only to people but also to livestock or produce raised in the Americas.

Consider, for instance, the title of an 1871 sketch entitled, “A Bit of Creole Market Garden, or Gathering Gumbo,” by Alfred Rudolph Waud, which portrays two figures in a garden, baskets in hand with the river flowing behind them (*Alfred R. Waud Collection, Historic New Orleans Collection*). This meaning of creole continues to be present today in the city’s annual Creole Tomato Festival.

Distinction among slaves

The term was also used to distinguish “creole slaves” – enslaved persons of African descent born in the Americas – from “bos-sales,” the enslaved who were born in Africa and forcibly transported to the Americas. Both kinds of enslaved persons brought particular kinds of value: those born in Africa were targeted because of specific kinds of knowledge, for instance, a knowledge of growing rice; while creole



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Portrait of an elegant woman dancing and carrying a mask. Between 1750-1770. Permanent collection, 1957.85.

slaves were often prized because they knew the local language and culture and were expected, in the minds of their owners, to be more docile.

“Creole” was also an identifier attached to free persons – both white and of color. Again, in each case, the focus was having been born in the Americas. In pre-Purchase Louisiana, it was well understood that persons could be Creole, regardless of their color. The situation began to change, however, once Anglo-Americans bought and began to govern the territory.

Here, too, is where the answer to the question: “What exactly is Creole?” becomes more complex.

Different cultural practices

In early 19th century New Orleans, while Anglo-Americans were officially in charge, Creoles who had come of age in French- or Spanish-controlled Louisiana continued to exercise

major social and cultural influence. Creoles had distinctive social and cultural practices that differed from those of Americans.

It is helpful to divide the distinctive aspects of Creole social life into “ethnic-cultural” and “racial-structural” dimensions. Benjamin Henry Latrobe, an American, captured Creoles’ “ethnic-cultural” distinctiveness in his 1819 diary, “Impressions Respecting New Orleans, Diary and Sketches, 1818-1820” *New York: Columbia University Press, 1951*.

He observed that Creoles were given to feasting and celebrating, even on the Sabbath, and he was alarmed to find that white Creoles allowed enslaved persons to gather unaccompanied in Congo Square to engage in marketing while also carrying on their African music and dance traditions.

It was, in fact, this Creole willingness to allow African cultural practices to flourish that gave New Orleans its unique music and dance tradition distinct from what exists in the rest of the United States. For Anglo-Americans, these French-speaking Catholic Creoles had an extraordinary and, in many ways, unfathomable way of doing things.

Distinctions still unclear

Distinctions between Creole and American ways of living have persisted into the present-day and came through in the interviews I did in preparation for my book “American Routes.” One older woman of color illustrated this distinction

when describing her husband:

“He said his grandparents were French-speaking and his father could understand French, but they didn’t look Creole. I remember my aunt asking me if he cooked American or Creole, and that’s the distinction they made if they talked about other black people.”

Another respondent, a white woman, remarks on the French and Catholic dimensions of Creole identity in contrast to being American. When asked if being Catholic was central to Creole identity for her, she responded:

“I think it is because the French and the Spanish were Catholic. It was the Americans who moved from the more northern parts of the United States southward who brought Protestantism, and Baptists snuck in there somewhere. But the Catholic Church was central to the life in New Orleans, education. So yeah, I do.”

Rearing played a role

Later in the same interview, when asked about whether or not she raised her children to identify as Creole, she explains: “Definitely. My daughter has an ear for languages. So, from a young age, I taught her French, because my sister lives in France and my brother-in-law doesn’t speak English. So, I wanted her to feel comfortable when they came around. The school she’s been in had taught Spanish, though, and at St. Joseph she’s taking Latin. So, she has always known that she is French Creole.

“And when they were in sixth grade at the Catholic school here, there’s a project of doing your family tree. And so, of course, you had multitudes of stuff on the French part of the family and going through all of that, so (she) knew. So, here’s the documentation that I am French Creole.”

Another interviewee, a white man whose ancestors were among the Saint-Domingue émigrés who fled the Haitian Revolution and ended up in New Orleans in the first years of the 19th century, also continues to strongly identify as Creole and to pass this identification down to his children.

When asked about the continued influence of the many French, Catholic Saint-Domingue émigrés who nearly doubled the population of New Orleans by 1809, he explained:

“I think there’s still quite a lot of influence. This may be affected by the fact that I’m a Creole, I consider myself a Creole. I’m Roman Catholic and I’m French, and I named my daughter French names. So, I think if you look at that, plus how I ate growing up, it was a very Creole diet, beans and rice and shrimp and seafood and gumbos. Cuisine and religion to me are the very last strongholds of a culture. When you arrive in a new world, these are the last things that die. ... My grandmother who is alive today – she’s 92 years old – she grew up in a household here in New Orleans where

See **CREOLE** page 25 ▶

Timeline of Catholic institutions in Louisiana:

- 1923: Divine Word Missionaries open seminary in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, Sept. 16
- 1923: With unprecedented lay support, participation and generosity, Archbishop Shaw opens Notre Dame Seminary on Carrollton Avenue in New Orleans. The seminary is staffed by the Marist Fathers.
- 1924: Mercy Hospital opens on Annunciation Street, March 19.
- 1925: Mercy School of Nursing opens, Sept. 1.
- 1926: New Jesuit High School opens at Carrollton and Banks in N.O., Sept. 24.
- 1932: Vo1. 1, No. 1 of Catholic Action of the South, official newspaper of the archdiocese, is published, Dec. 17; successor to The Morning Star.
- 1933: Salesians of Don Bosco take charge of Hope Haven.