



# 20-year migration of Saint-Domingue exiles from Haiti

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In the last decade of the 18th century, when Anglo-Americans started migrating to Louisiana, the first exiles from the Haitian Revolution made New Orleans their home. In the next two decades, between 15,000 and 20,000 of them came to Louisiana, with 80 to 90 percent settling in the Crescent City.

Although individuals and family groups arrived throughout the 20-year period, the movement was marked by successive waves of mass migration. The first one occurred at the time of Haitian independence, in late 1803, and the next two when the authorities of Jamaica (1803-04) and Cuba (1809-10) declared French citizens exiled on their islands “personae non gratae” in response to Napoleon’s disputes with Britain and Spain.

Those who had taken refuge on these two islands settled in New Orleans. Several thousand refugees, who had settled on the Atlantic coast of the United States, also chose to join their families, friends and fellow exiles in New Orleans, attracted by the cultural environment they found there. New Orleans was so similar to the Haitian society they had left behind that they remained and established long-lasting roots.

New Orleans was indeed the closest they could find to their lost colony in the Americas. Despite four decades of Spanish rule and the sale of Louisiana to the United States by Napoleon, the population of New Orleans was still overwhelmingly French-speaking. The society the newcomers found was a Catholic slave so-



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## A slave revolt in Saint-Domingue sparked immigration to New Orleans.

ciety, organized in three tiers, as was Saint-Domingue before the revolution. The incoming population counted three numerically almost-equal contingents of the three socio-racial groups. In January 1810, for instance, the last wave from Cuba, the best documented by the new American officials of Louisiana, counted 2,731 whites, 3,102 free people of color and 3,226 slaves.

## Carried a rich French culture

These newcomers, who had lived in the French colony of Saint-Domingue (Haiti) before it was shaken by the slave rebellion, brought with them an extremely rich heritage. Saint-Domingue was, in the late 18th century, the richest colony in the West Indies, with a flourishing agriculture, a busy harbor and a relatively developed infrastructure. There were hospitals, stores selling luxury goods from Paris and an intellectual life that could almost compete with that of European cities.

Saint-Domingue had newspapers, libraries, bookstores, six theaters, including one that could accommodate 1,500 persons at three weekly performances. It even had a Royal Society of the Sciences

and Arts, which boasted Benjamin Franklin as a member.

Receiving a large group – that more than doubled the city’s population in a few years – of people who had lived in such an environment was a defining moment for New Orleans. The exiles brought with them a strong political awareness and experience, agricultural expertise and an interest in the arts and sciences. They were educated and opened educational facilities at all levels and for all population groups; they established fencing schools, art schools and founded newspapers, theaters and even an opera house.

## Mixed with Protestant influx

Their influence was enhanced by the timeliness of their arrival. Even as New Orleans was receiving an important influx of Anglo-Americans committed to bringing with them the common law, Protestantism, a biracial vision of the world and an Anglophone environment, linguistically and culturally, the Saint-Domingue exiles helped the French-speaking Catholic population remain a numerical majority well into the mid-19th century.

Together with the people

still emigrating from France, they reinforced the Creole group and helped maintain the French language, French culture and Catholicism in New Orleans.

The various groups prevented rapid expansion of Anglo-American influence in all fields. The Anglicization of the slave population, for instance, was slowed down by their input. The free people of color were extremely active in the fight to maintain the privileges of their group. Their descendants, the Desdunes, the Roudanez, the Trevignes and many more were among the leaders of the first civil-rights movement that developed in Louisiana after the Civil War, fighting inequality, segregation and the stigmatization of racial differences.

The consequences of the

Saint-Domingue immigration were significant. They helped New Orleans become the northernmost Caribbean territory by reinforcing its already creolized culture. In their wake, the Creole language, the voodoo cult and a strongly Caribbean folk culture enriched the culture of New Orleans.

Because the immigrants had maintained connections with the exiled diaspora, and with Spanish or British colonials they had met and befriended during their stay in Cuba or Jamaica, they were the main actors of the development of exchanges of populations, goods, ideas, cultures. They made New Orleans a landmark of the greater Caribbean.

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descent. ... She was a polite kid. She kept her mouth shut. She really wanted to say, ‘No lady, there’s more definitions than that,’ but ... she told me about it when she got home.”

Today, in 2017 and on the eve of the Tricentennial of New Orleans, there is still considerable confusion over how to answer the question: “What exactly is Creole?” What I hope is clear from this brief exploration is that being Creole involves multiple dimensions.

On the one hand, being Creole within the context of Louisiana means being descended from and shaped by Creole ancestors and cultural practices going back to 18th-century French- and Spanish-controlled Louisiana. These

traditional cultural practices include a love of the French language, French naming traditions and Catholic faith.

On the other hand, being Creole in New Orleans also means being heir to an historical approach to race that allowed many mixed-race children to be publicly acknowledged as part of the extended family.

These are historical practices that continue to shape the beauty and complexity of Creole identity and that continue to interest and intrigue many who attempt to understand New Orleans’ past and present.

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