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La madame et la mademoiselle: Creole women in Louisiana, 1718-1865

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LA MADAME ET LA MADEMOISELLE:
CREOLE WOMEN IN LOUISIANA, 1718-1865

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

The Department of History

by
Katy Frances Morlas
B.A., Louisiana State University, 2003
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Abstract

In Louisiana during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a unique group of people known as Creole created a culture that differed from the rest of the United States. Descendants of the first French and Spanish settlers, Creoles both black and white struggled to maintain their heritage despite an influx of Anglo-American Protestants into Louisiana; women in particular sought to preserve their culture. Although black Creole women have received significant attention, their white counterparts remain virtually absent in scholarship. This thesis focuses on the lives of white Creole women in the River Parishes and New Orleans and seeks to recreate the lives of both independent women plantation owners as well as women who served as wives and mothers.

Creole women in Louisiana differed from women in the rest of the United States in their language, religion, legal system, and traditions; they also resided in a more racially fluid environment. Creole women spoke French, and most refused to allow their children to learn English. They were governed by civil rather than common law, which included a system of community property that enabled them to own property, resulting in a large number of female plantation owners. This legal system also gave them the right to draft their own wills, obtain legal separations from their husbands, and act as private business owners. Catholicism provided these women with the Blessed Virgin Mary, a powerful model of female authority and virtue absent in the Protestantism dominant in the rest of the country at the time. Creole women often had family members who were both black and white and faced complex tensions that arose from the mixing of races. Unlike many women in the rest of the South, Creole women plantation owners viewed themselves as masters capable of running a plantation and disciplining their

slaves without hesitation. All these factors created distinct differences between Creole women in southeast Louisiana and the women in the rest of their state and nation.

Introduction

Turning History Wrong Side Out

For very little is known about women. . .Of our fathers we know always some fact, some distinction. They were soldiers or they were sailors; they filled that office or they made that law. But of our mothers, our grandmothers, our great-grandmothers, what remains? Nothing but a tradition. One was beautiful; one was red-haired; one was kissed by a Queen. We know nothing of them except their names and the dates of their marriages and the number of children they bore.¹

With the publication of historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*, slaveholding women of the antebellum South received the most well-researched scholarly analysis given them since Anne Firor Scott first brought them to light almost twenty years before. While their male counterparts have attracted the attention of numerous historians and been the subject of a plethora of books and articles, Southern women, especially those tied to plantation society, have more often served as the inspiration for sweeping epic novels than for nonfiction social histories. Though most Southern women bore little resemblance to Scarlett O'Hara, this fictional character is the way they are best known. Even in scholarship, the Southern woman has until recently been narrowly confined to the diaries of Mary Boykin Chestnut and a small handful of others like her. Despite Fox-Genovese's success at broadening the scope of women studied, *Within the Plantation Household* fails to convey the diversity that existed in certain enclaves of the South; she portrays a region homogenous in both ethnic background and religion, neglecting southeast Louisiana and

¹Woolf, Virginia. "Women and Fiction" in Michele Barrett, ed. *Virginia Woolf: Women and Writing*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York: 1979, 44. This essay first appeared in *The Forum*, March 1929.

the South's largest city, New Orleans.² Fox-Genovese avoids Creole women because their religion, language, ethnicity, and more urban surroundings created a society so different from the rest of Southern women that they might as well have existed in another world.³ Her decision to ignore the Creoles of Louisiana, while easily explained, reveals an area ripe for scholarship.

The word *creole*, of Portuguese origin, simply means native born. This basic definition suggests that anyone born in Louisiana, whether of Anglo, French, Spanish, or African background, could be considered a Creole.⁴ However, both in the past and at present in Louisiana, a person would be considered Creole if she descended from the first French and Spanish settlers. Although the meaning of Creole has evolved in terms of race, with some people insisting Creoles are pure white and others arguing that Creole now connotes mixed race, the most widely accepted definition of Creole includes descendants of the early French and Spanish settlers, both white and black; this usage of the term Creole will be the one applied in this work.⁵ Creole culture differed dramatically not just from the rest of the South but also from most of the United States, a variation resulting from French and Spanish influences remaining long after the United States purchased Louisiana. While the mostly Anglo United States attempted to impose a

²Fox-Genovese is not the only scholar to ignore Louisiana and its Creole culture. See also Peter Kolchin's *American Slavery* and George Rable's *Civil Wars*. For another work on women in the antebellum South see Faust, Drew Gilpin. *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War*. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC: 1996. Also, for a discussion of gender roles in the yeoman society of South Carolina, see McCurry, Stephanie. *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country*. Oxford University Press, New York: 1997.

³Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth. *Within the Plantation Household*.

⁴ Wall, Bennett H., ed. *Louisiana: A History*. Harlan Davidson, Inc., Wheeling, IL: 1984, 98.

⁵Tregle, Joseph G., Jr. *Louisiana in the Age of Jackson: A Clash of Cultures and Personalities*. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge: 1999, 23-26, 337, 338; Dominguez, Virginia R. "Social Classification in Creole Louisiana," *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (Nov. 1977); Gayarre, Charles. *History of Louisiana, Vol. II*. F. F. Hansell & Bro., New Orleans, LA: 1903.

new legal system, form of government, language, and religion upon Louisiana, Creoles clung to their French and Spanish traditions, including the Napoleonic code, a non-republican government in which the majority were ruled by a few elites, the French language, and Catholicism. Even basic social customs separated Creoles from their Anglo American counterparts. Despite the large influx of Americans, Louisiana Creoles continued to maintain their unique culture even fifty years after statehood at the time of the Civil War.⁶

This study focuses on an area along the Mississippi River from Baton Rouge to New Orleans known as the River Road and encompassing what are known as the River Parishes, including Ascension, St. James, St. John the Baptist, and St. Charles parishes. This area, once the heart of Creole plantation country, still contains vestiges of Creole culture today. Prior to the twentieth century, the French language prevailed in this region, and the majority of the population was either Creole or Cajun and practiced the Catholic faith.⁷ These were the first parishes formed after Orleans parish and the location of some of the earliest land grants. The soil in these parishes, nourished by the Mississippi River much like the Nile delta, aided in the creation of great wealth through the production of sugar cane. Large plantations made possible through slave labor became characteristic of the River Parishes; many of these estates were owned and run by Creole women who shared the blessings of wealth and the curse of slavery as much as any of their male counterparts.⁸ Also, the city of New Orleans naturally figures into this

⁶ Tregle, Joseph G., Jr. *Louisiana in the Age of Jackson*; Newton, Lewis William. *The Americanization of French Louisiana*. Dissertation, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL: 1929.

⁷ Cajuns, or Acadians, descended from the French settlers exiled from Nova Scotia by the British in 1755. See Sternberg, Mary Ann. *Along the River Road*. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, LA: 2001, 18.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 30-34.

work, for along with its being the capital of Creole society, it was also the home of most Creoles for at least part of the year. Though isolated on their plantations in the River Parishes during the spring and summer, Creoles resided in their often luxurious townhomes in New Orleans through the late fall and winter in order to celebrate Carnival, participate in the social season, and attend the opera and theatre.⁹

Louisiana's legal system enabled Creole women to maintain a certain amount of autonomy after marriage. Based on a concept of Roman law that acknowledged husband and wife as two distinct persons, the community property system allowed husband and wife to be co-owners of property obtained during their marriage. This system, practiced only in Louisiana during all of the eighteenth and much of the nineteenth centuries, sharply contrasted with the rest of the United States and created an environment in which women could attain economic independence, participate in business, and achieve the most coveted status in the plantation South, that of plantation owner.¹⁰ In the rest of the United States during the colonial period and much of the antebellum, women were either completely deprived of or greatly restricted in their ability to own property after marriage. The remarkable differences in the legal rights of women in Louisiana as compared with the rest of the nation stemmed from differences in heritage. While England settled the first thirteen colonies that were to become the United States, France and Spain founded Louisiana; the English and French left distinctly different legal heritages in these areas, which would have profound effects for women. The English colonies operated under

⁹ Sternberg, Mary Ann. *Along the River Road*, 79.

¹⁰ Warbasse, Elizabeth Bowles. *The Changing Legal Rights of Married Women 1800-1861*. Garland Publishing, Inc., New York: 1987, 48-49.

the English common law, while the French and Spanish colony of Louisiana knew only a Roman civil law system. Under common law, husband and wife were viewed as united, almost as one and the same person, whereas civil law saw them as separate entities who could possess separate estates, separate debts, and separate contracts. In contrast, the system of English common law allowed for no separation of estates between husband and wife, stripped wives of all property, and denied wives the ability to enter into contracts.¹¹ William Blackstone explained the rationale of this system, “A man cannot grant anything to his wife, or enter into covenant with her: for the grant would be to suppose her separate existence, and to covenant with her, would be only to covenant with himself.”¹² Such an attitude went beyond the legal system, creating social implications as well. Though women in both societies occupied subservient roles, women in the British colonies, later the early states of America, were seen not as individuals but as possessions of their husbands; in colonial Louisiana and later the state of Louisiana, women’s existence as separate individuals was acknowledged, thus enabling them to rise to positions of wealth and respect normally reserved just for men. As Elisha Hurlbut wrote, “The civil law is the friend of woman, and as respects her moral freedom and her right of property tends to exalt her condition and to render her conscious of her equality with man.”¹³

After the Louisiana Purchase, the newly-acquired territory was divided into two sections, and while the area that would become the state of Louisiana remained under the system of civil

¹¹ Salmon, Marylynn. *Women and the Law of Property in Early America*. The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC: 1986, 6; Warbasse, Elizabeth Bowles. *The Changing Legal Rights of Married Women 1800-1861*, 5, 7, 49.

¹² Blackstone, William. *Commentaries on the Laws of England, Vol. I*. Oxford: 1765-69, 430.

¹³ Hurlbut, Elisha P. *Essays on Human Rights and Their Political Guarantees*. New York: 1839, 171-172.

law, the rest of the vast territory adopted the English common law system in practice in the rest of the nation, making Louisiana even more unique.¹⁴ While in many states women were not even allowed to have their own will, in Louisiana, wives were able to make up their will without their husbands' consent. Louisiana wives could also petition for a separation of property if their husbands were mishandling their affairs, a protection that was not afforded women in much of the rest of the nation. Timothy Walker of Massachusetts complained of his state's position, stating that a husband "may squander a personal estate worth a million dollars, and leave a wife and children paupers, and the wife cannot, in this State, invoke the aid of a court to prevent it."¹⁵ In Louisiana, upon the death of her husband, a wife possessed half of the community property, yet in the rest of the nation, all of the property went to the husband's estate with the exception of the wife's dowry. Louisiana also enabled wives who were considered public merchants to engage in business contracts under their own names without needing their husbands' approval. Even regarding guardianship of children, husbands in most of America came out ahead of their wives. Under the common law system in practice across all of the United States but Louisiana, a man was allowed to appoint a person other than his wife as the guardian of his children at any time. However, in Louisiana, even though the husband's authority was superior to the wife's over their children, upon his death, the guardianship of the children would go automatically to her.¹⁶

¹⁴ Warbasse, Elizabeth Bowles. *The Changing Legal Rights of Married Women 1800-1861*, 51-52.

¹⁵ Walker, Timothy. *Introduction to American Law, Ninth Edition*. Boston: 1887, 272.

¹⁶ Warbasse, Elizabeth Bowles. *The Changing Legal Rights of Married Women 1800-1861*, 50-56.

The English common law fit well with the patriarchy New England strove to establish in colonial times and to maintain up until two decades before the Civil War. The wife's submission to the husband's authority stood as one of the main principles of Puritanism, and male citizens of Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania sought to alter the provisions of English law, which enabled women to inherit and that protected women from coercion, in order to fit this tenet of their religion.¹⁷ Puritans considered separate estates to be a corrupt practice of the landed aristocracy of Europe and a means to obtain an informal divorce. The notion of separate estates or community property conflicted with the Puritans' ideology of marital unity; historian Marylynn Salmon explained, "Under that ideology, women's financial autonomy represented a threat to the family rather than a safety valve."¹⁸ The attitudes of these states and the patriarchy Puritans sought to enforce spread across the United States as new land was obtained and settled, and thus these restrictive notions were adopted into law as new states formed. When a new code similar to the civil code of its neighboring state of Louisiana was proposed, Mississippi rejected it in favor of common law. The threat of the community property system prompted Robert Josselyn of Lafayette County, Mississippi to write, "The maxim of the law that the husband and wife are one, will be no longer true. . . Children will disregard the advice, the admonitions, and the commands of their father; if their mother holds the property, they will look up to her and not to him."¹⁹ Josselyn's remarks confirm that the Puritans' desire for a patriarchy had extended as

¹⁷ Salmon, Marylynn. *Women and the Law of Property in Early America*, 6-9, 121.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 122-123.

¹⁹ *Mississippi Free Trader*, February 26, 1839.

far south as Mississippi and suggest that he and other Anglo Americans viewed Louisiana as a place in which patriarchal society was challenged.

Harriet Martineau visited much of the United States and commented upon Louisiana's unique legal system and attitude toward women's property rights, writing, "If this condition of the marriage law should strike any English persons as a peculiarity it is well that they should know that it is the English law which is peculiar, and not that of Louisiana. . .I never met with any lawyer, or other citizen with whom I conversed on the subject, who was not ashamed of the barbarism of the law under which a woman's property goes into her husband's hands with herself."²⁰ Apparently, Americans began to agree with her. Mississippi became the first state to adopt a married women's property act in 1839, followed by Maryland in 1843 and Arkansas in 1846.²¹ In 1840, Texas began to practice a system of community property like that of Louisiana.²² Not until the late 1840s did Massachusetts and Connecticut enact statutes that gave women the right to property after marriage and the ability to sue or to enter into contracts.²³ By this time, Louisiana had provided for women's property rights for nearly a century and a half.

Much like Southern women, Creoles have received more attention in fiction than in scholarship; the novels and stories of George Washington Cable, Kate Chopin, and Grace King all provide charming portraits of Creole society along with darker comments on the racial hierarchy of southeast Louisiana and its plantation society. Despite these well-known fictional

²⁰ Martineau, Harriet. *Society in America, III*. London: 1837, 121-122.

²¹ Warbasse, Elizabeth Bowles. *The Changing Legal Rights of Married Women 1800-1861*, 155, 159.

²² *Ibid.*, 160.

²³ Salmon, Marylynn. *Women and the Law of Property in Early America*, 139.

portrayals, few scholars have ventured to study Creole culture, and thus the stories penned by nineteenth century writers continue to exist as the sole commentary on a now dissipating culture that lends itself to be romanticized as much as the Old South myth.²⁴ These early Americans, who were at first adverse to identify with their new country, deserve to be researched by contemporary historians. Creoles served as the first and largest example of diversity in the American story; before the onslaught of immigrants in the mid-nineteenth century added their heterogeneous mix to the American melting pot, Creoles, who spoke a different language, practiced a different religion, and held vastly different legal and governmental beliefs than most Americans, faced the challenge of how to maintain their own culture while at the same time become part of a country known as the United States. Theirs is the great American story, set years before the first waves of Irish, Italian, and German immigrants excited native born Anglo-Americans into Know Nothingness. Creole society also distinctly contrasted with American mores in that it put fewer constraints on women; Creole women could and did own property, possess assets separate from that of their husbands, and act as successful and respected business owners.²⁵

While Creole culture is discussed in terms of its relation to the women within it, the evolution of Creole culture as a whole will not be described in great detail. Although the fact that these women were Creole is the very essence of their unique nature and their need to be studied, it is important to remember that this work will address the lives of these women and

²⁴ Howell, Elmo. "Kate Chopin and The Creole Country," *Louisiana History*, Spring 1979, Volume XX, No. 2; Tinker, Edward Larocque. "Cable and the Creoles," *American Literature*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Jan. 1934).

²⁵ Gehman, Mary and Ries, Nancy. *Women and New Orleans: A History*. Margaret Media, Inc, New Orleans, LA: 1988. This book provides a brief overview on Creole women and the rights of women in Louisiana.

their roles in Creole society; at no time will their lives take a backseat to a discussion of the transformation of Creole culture from the colonial to antebellum periods, its means of serving as a distinctive class, and its reaction to American control. So much can be said about the Creole culture as a whole that it extends beyond the scope of this project. Also, a great deal more scholarship has been devoted to the study of Creole culture over the years; this scholarship has established a base of knowledge about Creole culture from which we can now depart and take a look at specific elements of the culture, particularly the women within it.²⁶

African American Creole women, so long neglected in the historic narrative, have been the subject of increasing amounts of scholarship. These women faced not only the hardships of slavery and the racial hierarchy of southern Louisiana, but they also had to cope with their heritage of mixed race and the challenges that came with straddling a precarious position between black slaves and free whites. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall's research on slavery in colonial Louisiana and the formation of a distinct, Africanized Creole culture succeeded in what could be considered the greatest contribution to the study of Creoles of mixed race and the influence of Africans on Creole culture. Hall particularly noted the role of African American women and

²⁶For detailed accounts and analyses of Creole history and culture, consult the following works. Benfey, Christopher E.G. *Degas in New Orleans: encounters in the Creole world of Kate Chopin and George Washington Cable*. University of California Press, Berkeley: 1999; Cable, George Washington. *The Creoles of Louisiana*. Charles Scribner's Sons, New York: 1884; Deiler, J. Hanno. *The Settlement of the German Coast of Louisiana and the Creoles of German Descent*. Genealogical Publishing Company, Baltimore, MD: 1969; Giraud, Michel. *A History of French Louisiana*. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, LA: 1958; Hirsch, Arnold R. and Logsdon, Joseph, ed. *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, LA: 1992; Huber, Leonard V. *Creole Collage: Reflections on the Colorful Customs of Latter-Day New Orleans Creoles*. University of Southwestern Louisiana, Lafayette, LA: 1980; King, Grace. *Creole Families of New Orleans*. Claitor's Publishing Division, Baton Rouge, LA: 1971; Newton, Lewis William. *The Americanization of French Louisiana*. Dissertation, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL: 1929; Tregle, Joseph G., Jr. *Louisiana in the Age of Jackson: A Clash of Cultures and Personalities*. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge: 1999; Vella, Christina. *Intimate Enemies: The Two Worlds of the Baroness de Pontalba*. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, LA: 1997.

women of mixed race in preserving their African heritage and resisting or undermining the system. Not only did Hall's *Africans in Colonial Louisiana* shed light on a time and people little acknowledged or researched, her database of documents pertaining to slavery, including all the remaining bills of sale of slaves until the early American period in Louisiana, enables further research into this fascinating subject.²⁷ Judith K. Schaffer also contributed to scholarship on Creole women of color in her book *Slavery, the Civil Law, and the Supreme Court of Louisiana*, which discusses the women who sued for their freedom and women who served as mistresses to their white owners.²⁸ *Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana's Free People of Color*, edited by Sybil Kein, contains articles that deal solely with *gens de couleur libres* or free Creoles of color and that address *placage*, the system in which free women of color served as mistresses of wealthy Creoles, and the children that resulted from these unions.²⁹ Gary B. Mills's article "Coincoin: An Eighteenth-Century 'Liberated' Woman" delves into the life of a free woman of color in Natchitoches who ultimately became a slaveholder and plantation owner.³⁰ These are only some of the many works that have added to the scholarship on Creole free women of color, indicating that Creole women of color have actually received more attention and been the subject

²⁷ Hall, Gwendolyn Midlo. *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, LA: 1992; Hall, Gwendolyn Midlo, comp. *Afro-Louisiana History and Genealogy, 1718-1820 (Slave)* [database online]. Provo, Utah: MyFamily.com, Inc., 2003. Original data: Hall, Gwendolyn Midlo, comp. Database downloaded from <http://www.ibiblio.org/laslave/>, 2003.

²⁸ Schafer, Judith Kelleher. *Slavery, the Civil Law, and the Supreme Court of Louisiana*. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, LA. 1994.

²⁹ Kein, Sybil, ed. *Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana's Free People of Color*. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge: 2000.

³⁰ Mills, Gary B. "Coincoin: An Eighteenth-Century 'Liberated' Woman," *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (May, 1976).

of more research than their white counterparts.³¹ While a comparison between these two groups of women can and should be undertaken in the future, this study, though mentioning free women of color and their role in the Creole world, attempts not a comparison of both groups but instead a detailed study of one. Though a relatively clear picture of the lives of free Creole women of color has been established, a comparative study in the future would be possible only if there is some understanding of what life was like for white Creole women. A subject ripe for further study can be found in the interactions between white and mixed race Creole women, how they were connected, what they thought of each other, and the differences and similarities between their lives.

While many historians have overlooked Creole culture, Creole women in particular have been entirely ignored, an astonishing omission from history when their economic independence was comparatively greater than other American women and their culture as a whole so unique.³²

³¹ See also Clinton, Catherine and Gillespie, Michele, ed. *The Devil's Lane*. Oxford University Press, New York, NY: 1997; Dominguez, Virginia. *White By Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana*. Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ: 1986; Gehman, Mary. *The Free People of Color: An Introduction*. Margaret Media, Inc., New Orleans:1994; Hirsch, Arnold R. and Logsdon, Joseph, ed. *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, LA: 1992; McCants, Sister Dorothea Olga McCants, ed. and trans. *Our People and Our History: Fifty Creole Portraits*. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, LA:1973. For an example of scholarship on free women of color in the rest of the South, see Lebsack, Suzanne. *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860*. Norton, New York: 1985.

³² The few examples of scholarship on Creole women or subjects relating to them are confined mostly to articles or to accounts on individual women. See Baker, Vaughan B. "Cherchez les Femmes: Some Glimpses of Women in Early Eighteenth-Century Louisiana," *Louisiana History*, Winter 1990, Volume XXXI, No. 1; Darkis, Fred R., Jr., "Madame Lalaurie of New Orleans," *Louisiana History*, Fall 1982, Vol. XXIII, No. 4; Dart, Henry P. "Marriage Contracts of French Colonial Louisiana," *The Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 2, April, 1934; DeGrummond, Jane Lucas. "Cayetana Susana Bosque Y Fanqui, 'A Notable Woman,'" *Louisiana History*, Summer 1982, Volume XXIII, No. 3; Hart, W.O. "Rights of Women in Louisiana," *The Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 4, October 1921; Howell, Elmo. "Kate Chopin and The Creole Country," *Louisiana History*, Spring 1979, Volume XX, No. 2; Labbe, Dolores Egger. "Mothers and Children in Antebellum Louisiana," *Louisiana History*, Spring 1993, Volume XXXIV, No. 2; Price, Edith Dart. "La Dame de Ste. Hermine," *The Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No.3, July 1938; Price, Edith Dart. "The Expense Account of a Grande Dame of French Colonial Louisiana," *The Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 3, July 1938.

Some may conclude that lack of sources are to blame; in fact, while numerous diaries of Anglo American Southern women are intact, diaries or journals of Creole women prior to the Civil War are difficult to find and the letters of many of the most prominent Creole women plantation owners remain privately owned by their original families. Robert Tallant wrote in *Romantic New Orleans*:

There were belles and there were beauties. New Orleans history is filled with them, for to the romantic New Orleanians every young woman was one or the other, or both. Yet the earlier ones left little record of their existence, except in unusual instances, this being largely due to the fact that Creoles were so opposed to any mention of the women in their families appearing in print. Only those as dynamic as Micaela Leonarda Almonester y Roxas de Pontalba and her beautiful mother, Louise de la Ronde. . .and the suspect sadist Mme. Lalaurie. . .and a few others, become immortal.³³

Tallant reveals several typical assumptions that have been made about Creole women over the years. Despite the dearth of diaries and plantation records kept by Creole women, there remains a wealth of sources if a researcher dares to undertake a bit of digging to uncover them. Though they often carry the names of male members of the family, the numerous collections of Creole family papers contain letters penned by women, often so many that it would require months to read them all. Perhaps the true reason historians have lacked the motivation to research such interesting women lies in the language barrier. Most Creole women composed their letters in a French that does not adhere to the Parisian standard and did so in such intricate script as to make legibility difficult. To truly research Creole women, a scholar must transcribe and then translate copious pages of difficult, often trying French.

³³Tallant, Robert. *The Romantic New Orleans*. E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc. New York, NY:1950, 237.

As Tallant also pointed out, the few women who come to mind when associated with Creole culture are Marie Laveau, the voodoo queen, Delphine Lalaurie, the torturer of slaves, and Micaela Almonester Pontalba. Though intriguing, these women do not adequately represent all Creole women; they are famous, or in one case infamous, because they are exceptional. Micaela Almonester Pontalba, who was a baroness, real estate developer, divorcee, and business woman, remains deservedly well-known, yet she will not be mentioned in this work.³⁴ Instead, focus will shift to other Creole women, many whom like the Baroness Pontalba were business-oriented and independent, but who have been overlooked. Due to the tendency to remember them only as belles or beauties, good Catholic mothers and wives akin to the Virgin Mary herself, Creole women have been idealized into anonymity, and, as a result, are missing in the written history of their state and their culture. Though most of the women mentioned were considered the elite of their time, they were the ones who left vestiges of their lives upon a page and who lived most independently due to their economic advantages. The mundane details have been combined with the exceptional details in order to create an accurate portrayal of what life would have been like for a Creole woman in colonial and antebellum Louisiana. Virginia Woolf commented upon the merits of a study of this kind:

Anyone who should seek among those old papers, who should turn history wrong side out and so construct a faithful picture of the daily life of the ordinary women. . .would. . .write a book of astonishing interest. . .The extraordinary woman depends on the ordinary woman. It is only when we know what were the conditions of the average woman's life. . .it is only when we can measure the way of life and the experience of life made possible

³⁴ For an outstanding work on the Baroness Pontalba see Vella, Christina. *Intimate Enemies: The Two Worlds of the Baroness de Pontalba*. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, LA: 1997.

to the ordinary woman that we can account for the success or failure of the extraordinary woman. . .³⁵

Though she had in mind the women of England during the time of Shakespeare or Milton, Virginia Woolf could just as easily have been speaking of Creole Louisiana. Thus, the intention of this thesis is to “turn history wrong side out,” to illuminate as accurately as possible the lives of both the exceptional and the ordinary women of Creole society.

³⁵Woolf, Virginia. “Women and Fiction,” 44.

Chapter 1

Paragons of Perfection

“Deceased in this city the third of this month after a short illness, Madame Widow Becnel, of the parish of St. John the Baptist, at the age of seventy five years.”¹ At the end of her life, the only public statement about Magdelaine Haydel Becnel merely reported the date and location of her death and her marital status as widow of a man long dead. Since her husband’s death, the Widow Becnel ran their sugar cane plantation in St. John the Baptist parish, several thousand acres of land from which she managed to extract a healthy profit for her sons and daughters. The omission of the business that occupied much of her life reveals that the only occupation her society deemed appropriate for her was that of wife and mother. The death notice continued, “Her numerous family will lament for a long time the event which deprived them of the most traditional and respectable of mothers.”² This statement emphasizes Magdelaine Becnel’s role as wife and mother and her ability to maintain societal standards of propriety while at the same time taking on an authoritative position in business. At the end of her life, her children wished to remember her not as the strong, competent manager of a large scale agricultural operation but as the traditional mother conscious of her respectability in the eyes of the community.

In Louisiana Creole society, young girls spent their formative years anticipating their eventual roles as wife and mother and learning the skills deemed appropriate. In Louisiana’s

¹*The Argus*, February 5, 1830. Trans. from French to English by the author.

²*Ibid.*

early years as a colony, women of European descent were scarce. Few inhabitants brought wives and daughters with them from France, as the bulk of the settlers were unmarried soldiers. Colonial officials made great efforts to bring women to Louisiana to serve as wives and increase the struggling colony's population, thereby creating some stability in frontier life.³ Just as male colonists served to clear land, maintain relations with Indians, and produce cash crops, women in colonial Louisiana were expected to produce as many children as possible who would provide another kind of wealth through labor. Pierre de Laussat, colonial prefect in Louisiana during Napoleon's reign, commented on the large families characteristic of Catholic colonial Louisiana.

There are nine children in the Lebourgeois family; eight in that of M. d'Estrehan. Ten or twelve is not uncommon, and eighteen to twenty astonished no one. Second and third marriages are also very common. Yet, what a vast wilderness still remains to be populated!⁴

In 1704, twenty-three marriageable women aboard the Pelican arrived at Mobile Bay, many of whom were French-Canadian and married some of the most successful male settlers in the colony.⁵ However, the majority of the first women brought to Louisiana were eventually deemed unacceptable mates for the settlers, as they had been taken from prisons and the streets by government officials anxious to propagate the colony. Some women were forced immigrants who came alongside husbands imprisoned for debt; these included in 1721 the wife of forced immigrant La Violette and the mother of a man named Christophle along with eleven other

³Baker, Vaughan B. "Cherchez les Femmes: Some Glimpses of Women in Early Eighteenth-Century Louisiana," *Louisiana History*, Winter 1990, Volume XXXI, No. 1, 25.

⁴de Laussat, Pierre Clement. *Memoirs of My Life*. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, LA: 1978, 63.

⁵Maduell, Charles R, ed. *The Census Tables for the French Colony of Louisiana From 1639 to 1732*. Genealogical Publishing Company, Baltimore, MD: 1972.

women listed on the census.⁶ Many women were outright criminals, “accused of theft, debauchery (sometimes with married men), prostitution, repeated lies, blasphemy, irreligion, and assassination.”⁷ According to historian Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, one woman had been accused of murder fifteen times.⁸ In 1719, just one year after the founding of New Orleans, the lieutenant of police, acting on behalf of John Law’s Company of the Indies, arrested two hundred and nine women “who were of a character to be sent to the French settlement in Louisiana.”⁹ In that same year, one hundred and eighty women, forced to find husbands among male prisoners, were then chained and transported to the colony.¹⁰ Many soldiers and settlers, desperate for wives, still refused to marry these women. Chassin, a concessionaire, discussed his need for a wife but also his disdain for the women already brought to the colony:

You see, Sir, that the only thing that I now lack in order to make a strong establishment in Louisiana is a certain article of furniture that one often repents having got and which I shall do without like the others until. . .the company sends us girls who have at least some appearance of virtue. If by chance there should be some girl with whom you are acquainted who would be willing to make this journey for love of me, I should be very much obliged to her and I should certainly do my best to give her evidence of my gratitude for it.¹¹

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷ Hall, Gwendolyn Midlo. *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, LA: 1992, 6.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹Blumenthal, Walter Hart. *Brides From Bridewell: Female Felons Sent to Colonial America*. Charles E. Tuttle Co, Inc., Rutland, VT: 1962, 81.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 81.

¹¹Chassin to Bohe, July 1, 1722, Mississippi Provincial Archives, 1729-1740: French Dominion, 3 vols. (Jackson, Miss., 1927-1929), II, 278-279.

To Chassin and many other eighteenth century Louisianans, women could be equated to pieces of furniture, but at the same time were necessary in order to establish a household in a new colony.

Later, women with more reputable backgrounds became attracted to Louisiana after John Law's Company began to offer benefits to those willing to settle. The Company often paid the passage of women if they agreed to marry once they arrived in the colony. A woman could receive 200 livres for her trousseau and 15 sols per day for living expenses. Though this plan of the Company was shortlived, it attracted quite a few women, including widows wishing to start anew in the colony and those young women known as *filles de cassettes*, or "casket girls," referring to the boxes that contained their trousseaux.¹² These *filles de cassettes* were typically from twelve to sixteen years of age, educated in convents, and of respectable though not noble parentage.¹³

Life in early Louisiana proved difficult, especially for women. They struggled for survival as the high death rate for women in colonial Louisiana exacerbated the colony's demand for female settlers and perpetuated an unstable society. Between the years 1785 and 1803, the median age of death for white females was 18.1 years, compared with 30.6 years for males. For every 175 white males in New Orleans, only 100 white women were present in 1777.¹⁴ Even if a

¹²Giraud, Marcel. *A History of French Louisiana, vol. V*. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, LA: 1987, 261.

¹³Gehman, Mary and Ries, Nancy. *Women and New Orleans: A History*. Margaret Media, Inc, New Orleans, LA: 1988, 2.

¹⁴Hanger, Kimberly S. "Coping in a Complex World: Free Black Women in Colonial New Orleans," in *The Devil's Lane: Sex and Race in the Early South* edited by Clinton, Catherine and Gillespie, Michele. Oxford University Press, New York, NY: 1997, 220.

woman survived the outbreaks of cholera, yellow fever, and malaria, she remained threatened by the dangers of child birth.

As a consequence of the late founding of the colony and lack of funding, quality of life in Louisiana remained unimproved through most of its colonial existence. Poverty, high prices, and shortages characterized life. During years of war and blockade, the colony experienced a famine. Basic goods were either non-existent or of such an exorbitant price that they were impossible to acquire. Life in Louisiana in colonial times was far different than that of France, and in leaving their home country, these women consigned themselves to lives of deprivation and crudity.¹⁵ Even the wealthiest found that they must labor and accept certain hardships of frontier life. Laussat's account of his visit to the habitation of the well known sugar planter Jean Noel Destrehan revealed the harsh realities of life in Louisiana. Laussat wrote, "In order to give an idea of the customs here, I will say that although she came from one of the first and wealthiest families in this colony, Madame d'Estrehan, together with her daughters, was looking after the salting and preserving of beef on this day. This was harvest season."¹⁶ He further commented upon conditions at the plantation of the Livaudaises, also prominent colonial citizens.

Their simple manners were marked by amiability and honesty. The grandmother, the father and mother, the son and his wife and two children—four generations—all lived together in harmony. They had sixty Negroes and more than 100,000 francs of income.

¹⁵Giraud, Marcel. *A History of French Louisiana, vol. V*, 261, 267.

¹⁶ de Laussat, Pierre Clement. *Memoirs of My Life*, 59. A *habitation* was the French term for plantation. Destrehan's plantation was located in St. Charles parish across the river from the present-day town of Hahnville. This plantation would be passed on to Destrehan's daughter and son-in-law and would continue to operate as a prosperous sugar cane plantation throughout the nineteenth century.

They were badly and humbly lodged, obviously sacrificing pleasure to utilitarian considerations.¹⁷

Even public balls reminded colonial women that they were no longer in Paris. According to historian Christina Vella, “Women of all classes attended, walking barefoot through the mud, the wealthy ladies accompanied by slaves who carried the gowns and shoes their mistresses would put on at the hall. Young mothers brought their babies and nursed them in between the dances, for public balls like private parties lasted far into the night.”¹⁸ Yet women came to Louisiana and remained there, creating a life for themselves and their families.

According to the 1721 census, six women lived as heads of households within the city of New Orleans, then only three years established. Three of these women were widows, two were identified as wives who were designated heads of households possibly because their husbands were away, and one was a daughter of a settler. All of these women possessed at least one servant, and two were mothers. Thirteen female forced immigrants also lived within the city’s boundaries. Sixty-six women of European descent, not including French domestics, resided in nearby concessions such as Chapitoulas, Cannes Bruslee, and Chaouchas. In the 1722 census, which included areas known as the German Coast and what would become Baton Rouge, sixty-six women were present, along with a number of children.¹⁹

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁸ Vella, Christina. *Intimate Enemies: The Two Worlds of the Baroness de Pontalba*. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, LA: 1997, 32.

¹⁹ Maduell, Charles R. *The census tables for the French Colony of Louisiana from 1699 through 1732*.

Along the German Coast in 1724, six women headed households, all of whom were widows except for Marguerite Reynaud, a forty-six year old woman living alone with her seven year old daughter after separating from her husband.²⁰ All of these women were over thirty-seven years of age, with the majority around fifty, and all with the exception of one had children. These women proved exceptional in that they were willing to remain in a sparsely settled area on concessions typically run by men rather than removing to the city of New Orleans, as many women in their position would have done. One of the best examples of these women is Madame Trepagnier, who after her husband's death remained on their concession with her five children. According to the 1726 census, Trepagnier had six domestic servants and seventeen slaves, a large number considering the first slaves had only recently arrived in Louisiana and were both rare and highly valuable at that time. In fact, she is the only woman on the list of settlers requesting slaves from the colony in 1726. Madame Trepagnier came to Louisiana as Genevieve Burel with her sister Marguerite aboard the Pelican in 1704. Though she would later remarry, she supported herself and her family in the interim as both a concession holder and a merchant, continuing the business in which her husband had formerly engaged.²¹ Due to her perseverance, the Trepagnier family became prominent plantation owners in St. Charles parish by the 1800's. Because records exist that make it possible to achieve a decent understanding of her life, Gabrielle Trepagnier

²⁰ The settlements along the river in present day St. Charles and St. John the Baptist parish were considered the German Coast. See Deiler, J. Hanno. *The Settlement of the German Coast of Louisiana and the Creoles of German Descent*. Genealogical Publishing Company, Baltimore, MD: 1969.

²¹Giraud, Marcel. *A History of French Louisiana, vol. V*, 274.

stands out from other colonial women, yet she represents numerous other Louisiana women who refused to give up their livelihood or home upon their husbands' deaths.²²

By 1732, twenty-four women served as heads of households in New Orleans. Though the majority were widows, a considerable amount were listed as “Madame” but without any husband reported in residence. Ten of these women owned slaves, indicating that they were financially well-off. Emphasizing the importance of marriage in the colony, female settlers were separated into the categories of “women” and “marriageable girls.” Twenty four women were among those listed as property owners of New Orleans in 1731, including Madame Trepagnier. Fourteen of these women were widows, one was listed as a “demoiselle” or young unmarried woman, and two were women of color. Interestingly, women who were not widows had beside their names in parentheses the notation “a woman,” suggesting that women were often defined by their relationship to men. When census takers encountered women heads of households who were not widows, they found it exceptional enough to make a notation of their gender. The 1731 list of landowners along the Mississippi River from its mouth to the German Coast revealed that although only four women were listed as property owners the list included thirteen male property owners who acquired their land through marriage to widows who had received the land through grants. Thus, many male settlers gained their property and status through marriage to already well-established Louisiana women.²³

²²Maduell, Charles R. *The census tables for the French Colony of Louisiana from 1699 through 1732.*

²³Maduell, Charles R. *The census tables for the French Colony of Louisiana from 1699 through 1732.*

Magdelaine Haydel Becnel exemplified the strong tradition of women of means maintaining their property and livelihood rather than ceding control to male relations after the death of their husbands. Born in 1755 in the latter days of French Louisiana, Magdelaine came of age on her father's farm along the German Coast in what would later be known as St. John the Baptist parish. Her father, Christophe Haydel, son of Ambroise Haydel, one of the Germans attracted to Louisiana by John Law's propaganda, established himself as one of the most successful concession holders in the area. Her mother, Marguerite Brou, of French extraction, caused the family to adopt Creole culture.²⁴ German immigrants in St. Charles and St. John the Baptist parishes quickly assimilated into French Creole life, adopting the French language, French customs, and of course Catholicism. Thus, though Magdelaine's ethnic background was both German and French, she was raised in the Louisiana Creole culture.²⁵ She married Pierre Becnel, an assimilated Creole as is made evident by his French first name, at the age of seventeen. Typical of a Creole, Magdelaine was quite young at the time of her marriage, though not as young as many Creole girls, who not uncommonly married at the ages of fourteen or fifteen. Pierre Clement de Laussat commented on this in his memoirs when describing a visit to the Andry family habitation in St. John the Baptist parish.

The eldest son in the household, who was seventeen or eighteen years old, had married the evening before Mademoiselle Glapiant [Catherine Sophie de Glopion], thirteen or fourteen years old. Early marriages are frequent in these parts. The children here, in this

²⁴Thomas, LaVerne III. *Ledoux: A Pioneer Franco-American Family with Detailed Sketches of Allied Families*. Polynathos, New Orleans:1982, 239-249; Wilson, Samuel Jr. "The Building Contract for Evergreen Plantation, 1832," Louisiana History, Winter 1990, Volume XXXI, No. 4.

²⁵Deiler, J. Hanno. *The Settlement of the German Coast of Louisiana and the Creoles of German Descent*. Genealogical Publishing Company, Baltimore, MD: 1969.

particular case, had been asking to be married for the past two years, and the parents gave in. Madame Andri was none too pleased, fearing that such a youthful daughter-in-law would make her look older.²⁶

Though the Andry son and Glopion daughter apparently arranged their own marriage, most young Creoles were forced to abide by their parents' choices for their spouse. With love as an afterthought, Creole marriages were based on monetary and landed wealth, status, and familial connections. Often, marriage between cousins was encouraged to prevent property from seeping out of the family. Other times, a young girl's future husband served not as a love interest for her but as a companion and business partner for her father.

Perhaps the wealthiest man of his time on the Acadian Coast, Marius Bringier, progenitor of the Bringier dynasty whose plantations dotted the levees of Ascension and St. James parishes, had two daughters for whom he chose husbands. For his eldest daughter, Elizabeth or Betzy, as she was called, fourteen at the time, he selected Augustin Tureaud, for whom "women wept and quarreled with their sweethearts or husbands," who "had his pick of boudoirs for miles in all directions," and who "developed an alarming penchant for the duel."²⁷ Though Tureaud recorded a rather lukewarm statement in his diary of Betzy that "without being a beauty, she was rather good-looking than otherwise," he immediately agreed to Bringier's request that he be his son-in-law and business partner.²⁸ Since Tureaud had little money of his own, Bringier established him in business with the understanding that Tureaud would marry Betzy. Bringier, however, did not

²⁶ de Laussat, Pierre Clement. *Memoirs of My Life*, 63.

²⁷ Kane, Harnett T. *Plantation Parade*. William Morrow and Company, New York, NY: 1945, 65. Kane had access to the letters and diaries of the Bringier, Tureaud, and Colomb families.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.

expect rebellion from his fourteen-year-old daughter. When informed of her upcoming marriage, Harnett Kane says that Betzy began crying at the prospect of the wedding, as Tureaud was thirty-eight years old and a stranger. She had also learned that because of a wound during a duel, Tureaud, incapable of lying on his back, had to be propped up with pillows in bed. Understandably, the sheltered young girl was frightened at the idea of wedding a man who seemed to be committed to both womanizing and violence. Ironically, Tureaud's interpretation of the engagement was entirely positive. In his words, Betzy "placed herself in my arms, and the kiss which she gave me made me understand that her mouth was the interpreter of her heart."²⁹ Although she initially threatened to become a nun, by the time Betzy turned fifteen in 1803, she resigned herself to marriage, though she both cried and prayed an exorbitant amount on her wedding day. Marius Bringier gave his daughter and new son-in-law Union plantation. Kane claimed that Tureaud became "a model husband," who was both a pillar of the community and a judge as well as the father of Betzy's eight children. Kane concluded by stating, "Perhaps Papa had known best," voicing the ideas of the era.³⁰ Thus, women had little choice in whom they married, and even when they were absolutely against marriage, they were expected to trust in their father's judgement and disregard their own.

Laussat visited the Bringier plantation shortly after the wedding of Betzy's sister. Just before he arrived at the Bringier plantation, he encountered a young woman who even further illustrates the restrictive nature of social customs in Creole Louisiana.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 69.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 71.

We were nearly there [the Bringier plantation, White Hall] when, at the height of the day's heat, we came upon a pretty, slender young lady riding a horse and dressed with elegant simplicity, a straw hat on her head. 'Isn't that,' we said to her by way of opening a conversation, 'the house of M. Bonaventure Gaudin?' She answered, 'No, sir. You have just passed it.' We then asked, 'Are we far from the house of M. Bringier?' She said, 'I don't know,' and proceeded on her way. 'Surely you are from M. Bonaventure Gaudin's household,' we said. 'No.' And she galloped away resolutely. This wood nymph in the heart of these solitary forests—her youth, her elegance, her beauty, the way she rode—provided momentary and pleasant amusement on our trip. Upon dismounting, we learned that she was a Creole, thirteen or fourteen years old, who was married six months ago.³¹

Without knowing better, this young girl could be mistaken for Betzy Bringier Tureaud, and because of her anonymity, she easily represents all Creole girls of the time. Laussat's observations on his meeting with this Creole woman emphasized both her beauty and aloofness, her elegance, which would be in keeping with social customs, as well as her headstrong nature, which would clearly have been one of the character traits of which patriarchs like Marius Bringier would try to rid their daughters. While Laussat deemed her a pleasant relief from the boredom of the journey, this young girl's new husband might not have found her so amusing. Laussat portrayed her as almost a child, and, though he does not state it, his discovery that she had been married over six months was startling.

Betzy's sister Francoise Bringier, or Fanny, endured a similar fate at the hands of their father. Marius Bringier chose Christophe Colomb for a son-in-law, a survivor of both the French and Haitian revolutions and also of several duels. His experiences made him garrulous, and he

³¹ de Laussat, Pierre Clement. *Memoirs of My Life*, 65.

also appeared to be a talented musician and artist, two traits Bringier found extremely attractive.³²

Laussat described the Bringier plantation White Hall and the Colomb marriage as follows:

The house where we stayed offered another more striking example of marriage customs in these lonely regions. A second-rate dauber in paints by the name of Colomb, who fancied himself a descendant of the illustrious navigator, went in 1788 from Paris, where he was born, to the United States. Coming down to New Orleans, he stopped at the home of M. Bringier in order to paint his apartments. Here he married the daughter of his host. Marriages in the smartest families are not arranged otherwise, and Colomb was installed in the home as a son.³³

Fanny seems to have had no input. Yet, more practical than Betzy, she agreed to the marriage—Kane described her as “the calmest of the Bringier women, not oversentimental, not overmalleable”—and she received Bocage plantation from her father as a wedding present. After a few months, it became apparent to the entire family that Colomb, admittedly more concerned about his social life than business, neglected all his responsibilities as a planter. Though she may initially have turned to her father, Fanny, just over fourteen, took on the business of running a sugar plantation, and while Colomb rested, breakfasted, sang, played, and traveled downriver in a canopied barge, Fanny became a shrewd planter, increasing the plantation in both acreage and profit at a time when sugar was increasing in market value.³⁴ Beneath the photograph of Bocage included in his book, Kane wrote the caption, “Master Sang, Mistress Ran It.” This quite fittingly summarizes the situation at the Colomb plantation.

³²Kane, Harnett T. *Plantation Parade*, 89-92.

³³ de Laussat, Pierre Clement. *Memoirs of My Life*, 65.

³⁴Kane, Harnett T. *Plantation Parade*, 93-94.

Along with young girls, widows with property were also in high demand in colonial Louisiana. Often marriages occurred as mutual contracts of security; a woman of means could be assured safety by acquiring a husband, a man could obtain financial security and status through marriage. Many women remarried after the death of each of their husbands, until they accumulated multiple husbands and names over their lifetimes. Genevieve Trepagnier married the settler Marcilly several years after her husband's death.³⁵ When she was fourteen, Francoise Petit de Coulange married Jean Baptiste Boucher de Monbrun, sieur de St. Laurent, a marriage that lasted a little over a year. At seventeen, the widowed Francoise married Vincent Guillaume Le Senechal D'Auberville, interim commissaire-ordonnateur of Louisiana and chief judge of the Superior Council, an excellent match in status and wealth that lasted eight years and produced two daughters. Her last marriage occurred when she was twenty-nine years old and met Jean Pierre Robert Gerard, chevalier de Vilemont, lieutenant colonel and second in command in Spanish Louisiana, with whom she had two sons. Francoise, who began with a considerable dowry consisting of both monetary and landed assets and slaves, accumulated more wealth with each marriage and thus had much to offer her prospective husbands; in return, she received the protection of a man and a capable administrator of her affairs.³⁶ The list of landowners along the Mississippi River in 1731 further emphasized a man's ability to accumulate wealth through marriage. Eleven men received their land grants not from the crown or the company but from marrying a widow; some even purchased these concessions from the widows they married.³⁷

³⁵Giraud, Marcel. *A History of French Louisiana, vol. V*, 274.

³⁶Martin, Fontaine. *A History of the Bouligny Family and Allied Families*. University of Southwestern Louisiana, Lafayette, LA:1990, 35-89.

³⁷Maduell, Charles R. *The census tables for the French Colony of Louisiana from 1699 through 1732*.

Like Françoise Bringier Colomb, Magdelaine Becnel's circumstances forced her into running her family's plantation. Sometime after her marriage, Christophe Haydel, Magdelaine's father, gave her a plantation in St. John the Baptist parish. Upon the death of her husband Pierre in 1790, Magdelaine assumed the responsibilities of running the plantation. Like Betzy Bringier Tureaud, Magdelaine gave birth to eight children, four boys and four girls, the eldest eighteen at the time of his father's death.³⁸ Though Magdelaine could easily have left the management of the plantation to her son or one of her brothers, or possibly even sold the plantation for a nice profit, she chose not only to keep the plantation but to manage it herself. In the 1810 census of St. John the Baptist parish, Magdelaine Haydel Becnel appears as "Veuve" or Widow Becnel and the head of her household. She had within her household a boy and girl under the age of ten, two boys and two girls between the ages of sixteen and twenty-six, all presumably her children or grandchildren, and forty slaves.³⁹ At this time, due to the death of her son Drozin and his wife during the smallpox epidemic of 1804, she also served as the guardian of Pierre Clidamont Becnel, her grandson.⁴⁰

At the time of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, colonists had lived under the flags of both France and Spain and were anticipating that of the United States. With the onslaught of Americans into the vast new territory, all mostly Anglo, Protestant, and English speakers, Louisiana natives realized the unique nature of their culture. Because of this, natives of

³⁸Conrad, Glenn R., ed. *A Dictionary of Louisiana Biography, Vol. I*. Louisiana Historical Association, New Orleans, LA: 1988.

³⁹Ardoin, Robert Bruc L., ed. *Louisiana Census Records, Vol. III*. Polyanthos Inc., New Orleans, LA: 1977.

⁴⁰Wilson, Samuel Jr. "The Building Contract for Evergreen Plantation, 1832," 399.

Louisiana began to redefine themselves not as Frenchmen or Spaniards but as Creole, also known as *l'ancienne population* or *l'ancienne regime*.⁴¹ Aware of their cultural bond, Creole Louisianians united and challenged what they perceived as an American assault on their politics, law, religion, language, and culture. Determined to maintain their position of power in Louisiana as well as to assert the superiority of their culture, Creoles continued to speak French, resist republican government, worship as Catholics, and strengthen their distinct traditions. Laussat described the collision of cultures that occurred at the ball celebrating the transfer of Louisiana from France to the United States:

During the night of the eighth of January, an unfortunate potential for trouble broke out between the French and Anglo-Americans at the regular public ball. Two quadrilles, one French, the other English, formed at the same time. An American, taking offense at something, raised his walking stick at one of the fiddlers. Bedlam ensued. . . In the end, he [Claiborne] resorted to persuasion rather than to rigorous measures in order to silence the American . . . The French quadrille resumed. The American interrupted it again with an English quadrille and took his place to dance. Someone cried, 'If the women have a drop of French blood in their veins, they will not dance.' Within minutes, the hall was completely deserted by the women.⁴²

Although it was their fathers, brothers, and husbands who struggled for power in the political arena, Creole women stood as the guardians of their culture in the midst of the chaos of what they deemed an invasion, insisting that only French be spoken at home, raising their children as good Catholics, and instructing them in proper etiquette and matters of class.⁴³ Magdelaine Becnel, a survivor of French, Spanish, and American rule, proved no exception. Her children

⁴¹Tregle, Joseph G., Jr. *Louisiana in the Age of Jackson: A Clash of Cultures and Personalities*. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge: LA, 1999, 23. *L'ancienne population* means the old population, and *l'ancienne regime* means the old regime. These terms are reminiscent to those used in post-Revolutionary France.

⁴²de Laussat, Pierre Clement. *Memoirs of My Life*, 92.

⁴³Tregle, Joseph G., Jr. *Louisiana in the Age of Jackson*, 23, 55, 84, 85.

married other Creoles, her obituary was printed only in French, and her home remained in the Creole architectural style during her lifetime, no mere coincidences. As the matriarch of her family, she provided for her children and grandchildren spiritually and monetarily, but perhaps she also provided stability by instilling in them the importance of tradition in a society facing enormous change.

Though not so strict during colonial times, by the early national period, Creoles began to observe rigid rules governing courtship and marriage. As was the case with the Bringier son-in-laws, Creole sons could live freely and unrestrained during their youth, duelling, gambling, drinking, and accumulating a fair share of illicit affairs, both white and black. This carefree attitude toward the behavior of sons is even reflected in Creole architecture. Creole planters built separate lodgings from the mainhouse for their sons, called *garconnieres*, on both their plantations and New Orleans townhomes, enabling their sons to come and go at all hours without intruding upon the family or having the family intrude upon them.⁴⁴ Louis Favrot, son of a planter in West Baton Rouge parish, wrote to his brother about his career choices and of his popularity with women:

The knapsack or the cassock; such is my destiny. While I am taking steps toward one I do not forget the other. I try to have as many feminine partisans as possible; it is the main point. Almost all the women in Baton Rouge favor me, that is to say, in view of my being their spiritual director. Do you imagine what glory I would acquire through the conversions I might obtain? I am quite excited about this; I already picture myself among illustrious men.⁴⁵

⁴⁴Sternberg, Mary Ann. *Along the River Road*. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, LA: 2001, 24. Garcon means "boy" in French, thus a *garconniere* was a residence for the boys of the household.

⁴⁵Louis Favrot and Marie-Francoise Gerard Favrot to Philogene Favrot, May 13, 1813 in Meneray, Wilbur E. *The Favrot Family Papers, Volume V, 1810-1816*. Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, New Orleans, LA: 2001, 154.

Louis Favrot, in his own mind gifted in charming women, decided he could use his relationships with women to benefit him no matter what his career choice; if he chose the priesthood, he would be able to inspire women to be more religious, and if he decided in favor of a military career, he would be assured many female admirers who would mourn when he went off to battle and welcome him home upon his return. Later Philogene Favrot wrote to his mother about his brother Louis's behavior, which he deemed inappropriate:

My dear brother is beginning his novitiate in a really edifying way. After he wrote me some very pious letters, he started chasing a young lady and jeered at her husband. This is really scandalous, but the fox will not change his skin. This affair worries me. I am impatiently awaiting the next mail. I would feel more at ease if Mr. Favrot had a little portion of this wise calm I like to exhibit.⁴⁶

While Philogene was concerned about his brother's behavior, Louis did not appear to have caused a scandal; however, had it been his sister Josephine pursuing another woman's husband, no semblance of piety could have restored her reputation. Ironically, Philogene Favrot's "wise calm" would later cause him to die in a duel.⁴⁷ Thus, both sons' unruly behavior, rather than proving the exception, represented the lives of most upper class Creole men.

While young men were public figures, Creole women, especially young girls, were required to lead very private lives, restricted from the outside world and certainly from any society but that of other Creoles. Creole families kept watch upon their daughters at all times; young girls were rarely ever alone, even in the midst of their day to day lives and certainly not

⁴⁶Philogene Favrot to Marie-Francoise Girard Favrot, June 8, 1813 in Meneray, Wilbur E. *The Favrot Family Papers, Volume V, 1810-1816*. Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, New Orleans, LA, 164.

⁴⁷Arthur, Stanley Clisby. *Old Families of Louisiana*. Claitor's Publishing Division, Baton Rouge, LA: 1971.

during visits from young men. As Baudier, an expert on Creole society as well as a member himself, observed:

The chaperon was one of the most important characters in Creole social life. One of the old aunts or cousins usually took the role, and she regarded it as a privilege. The chaperon had to be an authority in matters of propriety, etiquette, and decorum. She attended all dances and affairs to which young girls went and when they were not accompanied by their parents. The role of the chaperon was not all burdensome—it gave these ladies ‘an opportunity not only to display all their knowledge of an experience in the elegancies of life but also to enjoy diversion.’ In addition, tante or cousine got the rare treat of indulging in a few rounds of dancing with some young men, who in this way won everlasting high esteem.⁴⁸

Thus, serving as a chaperone afforded older women, often single or widowed, with a position of power in Creole society as well as an opportunity to continue to be a part of social life without being active participants. While in New Orleans during his military service in the War of 1812, Philogene Favrot wrote home to his mother Marie Francoise Gerard Favrot on their plantation in West Baton Rouge parish about his courtship of several demoiselles and the involvement of their chaperone. His mother reprimanded him for his conduct toward these girls, or perhaps for becoming close to them, as she warned him of “female enemies,” prompting him to describe his behavior to her:

Let us come to my conduct with the inhabitants of the chicken coop. First, I called on them only once a week at the most. Second, I have never failed to be extremely polite toward them, especially toward their chaperone, who, because of her age and infirmities, deserves all the respect due to senility.⁴⁹

⁴⁸Huber, Leonard V. *Creole Collage: Reflections on the Colorful Customs of Latter-Day New Orleans Creoles*. University of Southwestern Louisiana, Lafayette, LA: 1980, 7.

⁴⁹Letter from Philogene Favrot to Marie-Francoise Gerard Favrot, October 12, 1812 in Meneray, Wilbur E. *The Favrot Family Papers, Volume V, 1810-1816*. Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, New Orleans, LA, 92.

Though young girls resented the prying eyes of their chaperones, often referring to them as “the policeman, the major, the duenna, or the guard,” they also respected and feared these elder women enough to immediately correct any behavior that the chaperon deemed inappropriate.⁵⁰ Often, demoiselles even modeled themselves after their chaperones. Philogene Favrot continued to describe to his mother his experience courting:

I looked more critical of the little chickens than of their chaperones. It may be true, but those same chickens were imitating their chaperones, whose habit is to ridicule everything. They are lucky to deal with me, as I have more control than they have.⁵¹

Not only did Favrot refer to the girls as chickens in a coop, a fitting example of the way Creole girls were confined almost like birds in a cage, but he also showed the ridiculousness of both these girls and their chaperones. He directly stated that he had more self-control regarding flirtation than these young ladies possessed and that they were fortunate to be in the presence of a restrained gentleman, or else the consequences could be dire.

In fact, many men viewed women not as innocent, virtuous young girls but as seductive beauties waiting to entrap seemingly helpless young men. Philogene Favrot’s father, Pierre-Joseph, revealed this attitude when he tells his son, “. . .the tiger is in town. I did not expect you to start this correspondence again according to what you know about this mischievous little girl—to be discussed verbally.”⁵² Considering that Philogene Favrot courted many women,

⁵⁰Huber, Leonard V. *Creole Collage*, 7.

⁵¹Letter from Philogene Favrot to Marie-Francoise Gerard Favrot, October 12, 1812 in Meneray, Wilbur E. *The Favrot Family Papers, Volume V, 1810-1816*. Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, New Orleans, LA, 92.

⁵²Pierre Joseph Favrot to Philogene Favrot May 6, 1813 in Meneray, Wilbur E. *The Favrot Family Papers, Volume V, 1810-1816*. Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, New Orleans, LA, 152.

gambled, fought duels, and was serving as a commissioned officer in the military, it is doubtful that a sheltered young Creole girl, though perhaps mischievous, could truly be threatening. Perhaps the girl herself was not to be feared so much as the state of matrimony. Philogene Favrot wrote his mother, “I have not heard anything about Valery. He could just as well be on the other side of the world or be married. Give me some news of him if you have any.”⁵³ For Philogene, who longed to maintain independence and a carefree lifestyle for himself and his friend as long as possible, Valery marrying would be equivalent to his residing on the other side of the world.

Under constant watch, young girls were also required to perpetually maintain a state of humility and decorum. Romantic intrigue and flirtation were difficult because of the fear of condemnation by Creole society and the scrutiny under which Creole girls lived. Even when dancing, the most overtly public activity in which the girls engaged, they were required to divert their eyes constantly, as it was considered improper for a demoiselle to look into the eyes of her partner.⁵⁴ Expected to serve as models of perfection physically, spiritually, and socially, many Creole girls faced rejection if they did not live up to these standards. Louis Duparc and his wife found their daughter Eliza’s acne unacceptable, and desperate to attain the standard of beauty necessary for her to thrive as a Creole belle, they brought her to a specialist in Paris whose treatment caused her death.⁵⁵ In a letter written on February 26, 1810, Marie Françoise Favrot

⁵³Philogene Favrot to Marie Françoise Gerard Favrot, May 4, 1813 in Meneray, Wilbur E. *The Favrot Family Papers, Volume V, 1810-1816*. Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, New Orleans, LA, 148.

⁵⁴Huber, Leonard V. *Creole Collage*, 7, 8.

⁵⁵Gore, Laura Locoul. *Memories of the Old Plantation Home*, Norman Marmillion and Sand Marmillion, eds., The Zoe Company, Inc., Vacherie, LA: 2001, 16-17.

chastised her daughter Josephine for not fulfilling her social obligations and instructed her on proper etiquette for a lady, telling her:

I am sure that your Papa is already angry with you on account of your refusals. Take advantage of the last days of the Carnival to have a good time and to call on all the people to whom you owe a visit; you will fill my heart with joy. Also, do not assume a timid look which resembles embarrassment. . . a sensible young lady must be reserved without appearing ill at ease and stiff in her conversation.⁵⁶

Apart from maintaining social status, the goal of these parental efforts to create the most beautiful, sociable, and decorous daughters was to ultimately marry them off into families of reputation and wealth.

Marriage was so common a part of Creole life that for men it was almost not noteworthy enough to consider news. Louis Favrot, writing to his brother Philogene in 1813, told him, “Nothing new has happened here except that Mlle. Pauline became a Madame by marrying Mr. Leroi last Saturday.”⁵⁷ Yet for women, marriage was both a major life event and one of the most consuming sources of excitement and gossip in their lives. Conscious of social class as well as familial obligation, most Creoles looked within their own family circles for spouses, often resulting in the marriage of cousins. Louise Perret, a native of St. Charles parish, married her cousin Drausin Perret, a planter in neighboring St. John the Baptist parish. After Drausin Perret’s death, Louise married P.A. St. Martin, another planter in St. John the Baptist parish and

⁵⁶Marie Françoise Girard Favrot to Josephine Favrot, February 26, 1810 in Meneray, Wilbur E. *The Favrot Family Papers, Volume V, 1810-1816*. Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, New Orleans, LA, ??.

⁵⁷Louis Favrot, Marie-Françoise Gerard Favrot, and Pierre-Joseph Favrot to Philogene Favrot, April 5, 1813 in Meneray, Wilbur E. *The Favrot Family Papers, Volume V, 1810-1816*. Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, New Orleans, LA, 140.

the elder brother of her daughter's future husband, Louis St. Martin. Thus, mother's name was Louise Perret St. Martin and daughter's name was Louisa Perret St. Martin.⁵⁸ Before a Creole girl married, her father, mother, aunts, and uncles carefully assessed her suitor's background and ancestry. Laura Locoul Gore's memoir *Memories of the Old Plantation Home* described her great-grandfather Guillaume Duparc and his marriage to her great-grandmother Nanette Prud'Homme, deemed "a marriage intended to be of social equals."⁵⁹ The Prud'Homme family settled in Louisiana in 1699 and descended from Louis XV's court physician. Duparc, a decorated military hero and Commandante of the post at Pointe Coupee, also received the gift of a concession for his service. Laura Locoul's grandfather, Raymond Locoul, found it necessary to bring letters of introduction from France in order to enter Creole society; without these assurances of his ancestry and background, it is doubtful that he would have been allowed to court and then marry Creole heiress Elisabeth Duparc.⁶⁰

Once deemed suitable, Creole engagements lasted about a year, during which time they visited all of the relatives on both sides of family *pour faire part du mariage*, to announce the engagement and invite everyone to attend the wedding.⁶¹ During these visits, the bride would be reviewed just as the groom had been assessed prior to the engagement; although background and ancestry also mattered, the bride often faced scrutiny of her physical appearance as well. A Creole girl was raised with the expectation of becoming a wife and mother and with this she was

⁵⁸St. Martin family papers, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University.

⁵⁹Gore, Laura Locoul. *Memories of the Old Plantation Home*, 122.

⁶⁰Ibid., 132.

⁶¹Huber, Leonard V. *Creole Collage*, 28.

required to live up to the standards of her society, which harbored an idealized view of the Creole Lady and the Creole Mother.⁶²

For Baudier, the ultimate Creolephile, the Creole lady existed as a “paragon of perfection.” He describes her as “sweet and simple in her ways, gay but suppressed by a strict code of etiquette, pious and faithful to her religion, beautiful of face, with large, dark, lustrous eyes and a wealth of ebony hair, of marvelous complexion, never marred by cosmetics, passionately fond of dancing and music, an ardent and loyal lover, but usually bending to parental wish and direction, such was the Creole girl.”⁶³ This effusive portrayal captures a mythic ideal of the Creole woman to which she herself often does not comply. Madeleine Hachard, an Ursuline nun, reported that many women wore make up during the early years of Louisiana; she also asserted that many were neither pious nor faithful to their husbands.⁶⁴ However, as Louisiana society began to gain stability, Creole girls did receive an upbringing that differed strongly from that of their predecessors. They were forced to observe strict rules of behavior and, as with Fanny and Betzy Bringier, adhered to their parents’ expectations and demands of them, often to their own detriment and certainly leading to the suppression of their own identities. Joseph G. Tregle, Jr. identifies this idea of Creole women as part of the larger “creole mythology.”⁶⁵ Tregle describes the aura surrounding Creole women as follows:

⁶²*Ibid.*, 14, 20.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 14.

⁶⁴Costa, Myldred Masson, trans. *Letters of Marie-Madeleine Hachard Ursuline of New Orleans 1727-1728*. Laborde Printing Company, New Orleans: 1974.

⁶⁵Tregle, Joseph G., Jr. “Creoles and Americans,” in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization* edited by Hirsch, Arnold R. and Logsdon, Joseph. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, LA: 1992. 132.

Women of the demi-paradise shine as paragons of gentility, style, and grace, matrons ruling as arbiters of all the nuances of polite society, demoiselles reigning as cameos of beauty and flirtatious charm. Small wonder that it could be said of them, “The people of New Orleans were looked upon, even by the French, as the most cultured people in the world.”⁶⁶

Tregle goes on to assert that such a view of Creole women and of the Creole culture provides an erroneous depiction of the past and exaggerates a whole people, making them mere caricatures of themselves and leaving no room for individuality.

However, many successfully evaded the seductive myth, including several male visitors to Louisiana during the period of early statehood. Due to her Catholicism, seemingly exotic nature, Gallic language and ways, and lack of progressivism, many American men rejected the Creole lady as a remnant of a feudal past, decadent, papist, and wholly un-American. H.C. Whittridge wrote in 1838 that he “would not marry a girl born & brought up in New Orleans, if she was the most beautiful thing on earth & owned every plantation in Louisiana and Mississippi!”⁶⁷ As a true Anglo-American and good Protestant, Whittridge rejected the wiles of the Creole lady, an exotic siren trying to lure him into a backward and immoral civilization. Harris, a visitor to Louisiana, provided another perception that contradicts the myth of the Creole lady.

The great drawback to Creole beauty is, that though it blooms early, it is of but brief duration. From the age of twenty-five the Creole woman is apt to grown corpulent, and to become sallow. The elderly ladies, who are fond of sitting long over their black coffee and their garlic dishes, have lost all the grace and charm of their youth, and their matronly proportions are anything but attractive. Many an American man, I have been told, who

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 136

⁶⁷H.C. Whittridge to Benjamin Rotch, April 3, 1838, in Rotch Papers.

has cast longing eyes at a Creole girl has been saved an unhappy manhood by looking at her mother and seeing what her daughter will be after twenty years.⁶⁸

This very telling description revealed Harris's perspective as an Anglo-American, for he clearly viewed these women as a foreign element, drinking black coffee when most American women drank tea and serving seasoned food to which he attaches garlic, associated by many with immigrants. Interestingly, Harris identified those saved from unfortunate unions with Creole women not just as "many a man" but "many an American man." The disgust he felt toward older Creole women seemed to be connected with their "matronly" physical attributes, a reminder that the Creole lady did not remain a virginal maid forever; in fact, she quickly attained her ultimate goal, motherhood, which fundamentally changed her both physically and emotionally and assigned to her what was considered her most important role in society.

Thus the Creole lady fell into another idealized type, the Creole mother. Creole mothers, due first to a need to populate the territory and later to both tradition and Catholicism, gave birth to many children and were expected to raise large families. Baudier provides a description of the Creole mother that is separate from that of the Creole lady, as if the virginal demoiselle and the matronly madame could never be confused with each other or one evolve into the other, though societal expectations required it.

The Creole mother was a tremendous influence in the home and on the family. The father might appear to be a dictator or a feudal baron, but the gentle persuasion of the wife, her example and her status in Creole life, all had a potent influence on the decisions and

⁶⁸Huber, Leonard V. *Creole Collage*, 15.

actions of the father. Her silence could often do more than un mauvais quart d'heure [a bad quarter hour] with her husband.⁶⁹

Thus, the Creole mother possessed a certain kind of passive, subtle power over that figure which seemed omnipotent, the Creole father. Baudier makes it clear that although the mother remained socially active, visiting friends and neighbors and occasionally going to the theatre, opera, or a ball, her first duty was to serve family and home and sacrifice was the theme of her life. In fact, the Creole woman's model was the greatest of mothers, the Blessed Virgin Mary. For the Creole woman to live up to this idealized type, and to emulate the Virgin Mary, required a delicate balance of humility and pride, elegant grace and hard-working sacrifice, piety and vivacity, beauty and homeliness. In short, she strove toward an oxymoronic impossibility. Society asked that she bear a dozen children but still be the epitome of beauty, possess the confidence and pride that her class afforded her while at the same time humbly deferring to the men in her life, and, at different times, appear to be a virginal maiden, a wholesome matron, and an enticing beauty. The more capable she was of maintaining a semblance of all of these personas, the more power she gained.

The ideal types of the Creole lady and the Creole mother sprang from a Southern society founded on the notion of paternalism. While the concept of paternalism is ordinarily linked to the relationship between master and slave, historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese explains how the master-slave relationship also applies to the household, indeed the whole plantation:

Just as the family fell to the authority of the father, the household fell to that of the master, and father and master were one and the same. The man who exercised the two

⁶⁹Huber, Leonard V. *Creole Collage*, 20.

roles drew upon each to strengthen the other: The beneficent paternalism of the father was ever shadowed by the power of the master, just as the power of the master was tempered by the beneficent paternalism of the father.⁷⁰

Women were acutely aware of their subordinate position in both their households and in society and often thought of themselves in terms of their relation to the master or father figure, as his daughter, sister, wife, or mother. The master expected obedience from all members of his household, both slave and free; a challenge by his wife or daughter could be just as dangerous as a challenge by a slave, for it could undermine his position of authority in both the household and on the plantation. One essential difference between paternalism as it existed in the North as compared with that in the South was the fact that the household and the plantation were one in the South. Unlike the more urban industrial North, where household and place of production or employment were evolving into two separate entities, the South continued to blend household and place of production. Particularly for Creoles, family was business and business was family. The lack of distinction between the two determined that the father of the household, who was usually also the owner of the plantation, held the authority.

Many women were not averse to the idea of male domination, as they viewed it as being ordained by God for the protection of themselves and their children. Also, upper class women of Creole society valued their status and thus supported, even encouraged, a hierarchical society based on paternalism. They often welcomed the idealization that came with the notion of the Creole lady and Creole mother, as it provided them with security and prestige. Elizabeth Fox Genovese states, “The privileged roles and identities of slaveholding women depended

⁷⁰Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth. *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC: 1988, 101.

upon the oppression of slave women, and the slave women knew it. Slaveholding and slave women shared a world of mutual antagonism. . .”⁷¹ This idea applies, though in a lesser degree, to elite Creole women’s attitudes toward poor whites.

However, while Creole society was based in many ways on paternalism, it was not decidedly male-dominant. From the beginning, women in Louisiana possessed more rights than women in other sections of the country, including the South. Fox-Genovese’s discussion of paternalism, indeed her entire book *Within the Plantation Household*, does not incorporate the Creole population of Louisiana. Deviating from the norm, Creole women possessed dower rights, the right to own property, and the right to vote in matters that concerned their property.⁷² Even in the earliest days of colonial Louisiana, Creole women sued for divorce and were active participants in other legal suits as well.⁷³ Most telling of all, a large number of Creole women owned and operated their own plantations, thus turning the typically patriarchal household into a matriarchy. The lack of stability in early Louisiana, stemming from the fact that it was both settled later and more sparsely inhabited, led to a broader role in society for both women and slaves.⁷⁴ With the coming of the Americans and their cultural ideas, including the notion of paternalism that dominated the rest of the Anglo South, Creoles’ views of women became more constricted, yet throughout the nineteenth century, the older and more fluid idea of women’s

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 35.

⁷²Gehman, Mary and Ries, Nancy. *Women and New Orleans*, 25-27.

⁷³Cruzat, Heloise H. “Records of the Superior Council of Louisiana,” *Louisiana Historical Quarterly*.

⁷⁴Hall, Gwendolyn Midlo. *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 128.

roles would remain pervasive.⁷⁵ In the midst of this changing atmosphere in Louisiana, women like Magdelaine Becnel took a risk in ascending to a position of authority, in assuming responsibility for self and family and acting independently of men. However, they also risked financial ruin and the separation of family if they chose to rely solely on men, especially if there were no longer any men present in their lives who could act for them. Thus, by defining themselves not by who they were to men but by their own actions, women like Magdelaine Becnel threatened Creole society, and the paternalism that characterized it, at the same time they struggled to maintain it.

In 1810, eighty-five women headed households in the river parishes of St. John the Baptist, St. James, and Ascension. These parishes contained nine-hundred and forty-eight households; thus, nine percent of households in these parishes were headed by women. In the individual parish of St. James, 10.9 percent of households had a woman as a head, the highest percentage in the River Parishes. Seventy-three percent of these women owned slaves. Perhaps one of the reasons these women were capable of living as heads of their own households was due to their wealth as slaveholders. Sixteen of the eighty-five women, or nineteen percent, owned ten or more slaves.⁷⁶ In contrast to the large number of women who owned their own plantations and headed their own households in the Creole sugar parishes of St. John, St. James, and Ascension, parishes in North Louisiana, dominated by Protestant Anglo Americans who grew cotton instead of sugar, had far fewer women in such authoritarian roles. Ouachita, Catahoula, and Concordia

⁷⁵Schafer, Judith Kelleher. *Slavery, the Civil Law, and the Supreme Court of Louisiana*. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, LA. 1994, xiv, 2, 6.

⁷⁶Ardoin, Robert Bruc L., ed. *Louisiana Census Records*.

parishes bordered the river, like the River Parishes, and would eventually produce much of the state's cotton and develop a plantation culture of its own. In 1810, of the five hundred and thirty-two households in these three north Louisiana parishes, only seventeen were headed by women.⁷⁷ Thus, only 3.2 percent of households in these three northern parishes in the cotton belt were headed by women, compared to 9 percent of the households in the River Parishes that had women as heads. While differences such as population and economic status might have influenced this statistic, cultural differences between the predominantly Anglo American parishes in the north of the state and the Creole parishes in the south certainly contributed to the number of households run by women.

On the property adjacent to the Becnel plantation, in a house identical in floor plan to Magdelaine Haydel Becnel's and constructed by the same family, Azelie Haydel lived with her family.⁷⁸ Azelie married Magdelaine Haydel Becnel's first cousin Marcelin Haydel, and after his death, like her cousin by marriage Magdelaine, Azelie continued to run the plantation. In 1820, the Haydel plantation measured twenty-five arpents facing the Mississippi River, ten arpents of which covered a double concession and the rest forty arpents deep, the standard. Many buildings stood on the property, including two master's dwellings, a kitchen, storehouses, mills for rice and maize, a sugarhouse with a mill, stables, and cabins for fifty-seven slaves.⁷⁹ By the 1840s, Azelie

⁷⁷Ardoin, Robert Bruc L., ed. *Louisiana Census Records*.

⁷⁸Sternberg, Mary Ann. *Along the River Road*, 300-301. Two Haydel brothers constructed these plantations. By the twentieth century, Anglo Americans acquired the plantations and re-named them. The Haydel plantation is now known as Whitney Plantation, and the Becnel plantation is now known as Evergreen. They are situated between Wallace and Edgard in St. John the Baptist parish.

⁷⁹St. John the Baptist Parish 1820, Conveyance Records, book C, p. 120.

Haydel was successfully running the plantation. In 1844, Azelie's plantation produced three hundred and twenty-six hogsheads of sugar, and in 1854, production eclipsed at three hundred and ninety hogsheads. Due to an early frost, only sixty hogsheads of sugar were produced on the plantation in 1855, a disaster that was felt all over the River Parishes.⁸⁰ Azelie also actively expanded the plantation, adding two tracts at the back of the property in 1852 and 1853. The property remained in the Haydel family until 1867.⁸¹

Throughout the River Parishes, Creole women like Azelie Haydel and Magdelaine Becnel oversaw the operation of their family's plantations, participated in business activities, and stood as strong matriarchs in their families. In St. Charles parish, the Widow Trepagnier owned Diamond Plantation until 1876. Aglae Bringier operated White Hall plantation in Ascension Parish from 1847 until after the Civil War. In 1858, Widow H. Boudreau owned St. Mary plantation near Donaldsonville. Marianne Decoux bought Longwood in 1794, an East Baton Rouge parish plantation with fifteen arpents of river frontage and between four hundred and fifty and five hundred arpents in cultivation. Mrs. H. L. Vaughn owned White Castle Plantation in Ascension Parish, and just down the road, Modeste Babin owned the property named for her. Celeste Plantation, a three thousand acre property established in 1807 by Edward Lauve, was run by his widow Celeste from 1843 until her death at age eighty-one in 1869.⁸² Unlike the rest of

⁸⁰Champomier, P.A. 1844, 1855, 1856. *Statement of Sugar Made in Louisiana*. New Orleans:P.A. Champomier.

⁸¹St. John the Baptist Parish 1852-1853, book Z, pp. 32, 224; St. John the Baptist Parish 1867, book ANS, p. 285.

⁸²Sternberg, Mary Ann. *Along the River Road*, 128, 172, 174, 200, 201, 254, 257, 260.

the South, where sons were favored and daughters rarely received land from their fathers, many Creole women in Louisiana inherited plantations from their fathers.⁸³

Perhaps the most well-known and successful female plantation owners lived in St. James parish on what would become known as Laura Plantation. Laura Plantation was run by three women from its beginning in 1805 until it was sold in 1891. At age forty-one, Nanette Prud'Homme Duparc became the first woman to run the plantation, then just a burgeoning sugar farm with seventeen slaves. Over the next twenty-one years, Nanette transformed the plantation into one of the largest sugar producers in the River Parishes as well as raised three children. She proved a capable businesswoman, diversifying crops and negotiating a retirement settlement in which she received 1,000 piastres a year from her children. At sixty-two, she moved into the home she had built for herself just a few feet away from the big house and watched as her daughter Elisabeth Duparc Locoul, more responsible and business savvy than her two sons, took over the plantation. Under Elisabeth the entire operation expanded in its number of slaves, in cultivated acreage, and in diversity of crops. She traveled a great deal between her townhouse in New Orleans and her plantation in St. James parish, not as most women did in order to spend the social season in the city, but instead to conduct business. By 1860, the Duparc-Locoul plantation measured well over 2,000 acres and was valued at \$80,000 not including machinery and livestock. Eventually, Elisabeth's granddaughter Laura Locoul Gore would rise to the position of plantation manager.⁸⁴

⁸³ Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth. *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC: 1988, 108.

⁸⁴Gore, Laura Locoul. *Memories of the Old Plantation Home*, 123-124, 135-138.

While not uncommon, at the same time, these exceptional women were not the norm. As Laura Locoul Gore states in her memoir:

After her husband's untimely death, my Grandmother Cephalide would have preferred being in Alexandria with her two daughters. . .It was, at that time, contrary to custom and good form for a young widow to live alone with her children so, she had to return to Natchitoches to live with her mother (Memee Aurore Lambre Metoyer) and the enormous family of sisters and brothers and their families.⁸⁵

Similarly, when Felicite La Branche Fortier's husband Louis died, she left Homeplace, their plantation in St. Charles parish, and moved to a townhouse in New Orleans. She sold the plantation to her son, and when he died, his widow Anne Amelie Brou Fortier and her four children, the youngest only six months old, moved in with her mother-in-law in New Orleans. Upon her mother-in-law's death, Anne Fortier and her family returned to her parents' plantation in St. Charles parish.⁸⁶ Many women disliked or were even afraid to spend a few nights on their plantations without a man present, preferably their husbands, to protect them, demonstrating the way women occasionally encouraged paternalism. St. James parish resident Marie Bouligny Villere wrote to her sister Therese Bouligny:

Would you believe, several days ago when Edouard was on jury duty, that they couldn't agree and were locked up for the night, so I was alone all day and all night. I was sorry that you were not here to stay the night with me, even though I think you would have been afraid to spend the night alone without a man in the house. And I well assure you that I was braver than Sarah, who barricaded the door and windows, and begged me to let her sleep in the same room with me.⁸⁷

⁸⁵Gore, Laura Locoul. *Memories of the Old Plantation Home*, 23.

⁸⁶Cochran, Estelle M. Fortier. *The Fortier Family and Allied Families*. Estelle M. F. Cochran, 1963, 80, 107.

⁸⁷ Marie Bouligny Villere to Therese Bouligny, undated, Roman Family Papers, Howard Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University.

Thus, women like Magdelaine Becnel, Azelie Haydel, and Laura Locoul Gore's paternal grandmother went against custom and social mores, either out of necessity or by choice, in remaining on their plantation after they were widowed. Perhaps the fact that they were older widows made their choice more socially acceptable.

Some Creole women chose to reject social norms entirely by obtaining legal separations from their husbands. The column "Le Catechisme Conjugal" appearing in *L'Avant Coureur*, the local newspaper of St. John the Baptist parish, cited one of the principles of marriage, indeed of all society, as, "The wife is a property that one acquires by contract. . .she belongs to you [the husband]." The "Conjugal Catechism" further elaborated on this point, proclaiming, "Worry nothing of her murmurs, of her cries, of her sorrows; nature makes her to our usage and for all to bear: children, chagrins, cuts and pains of the man."⁸⁸ While this servile view of women may have been the prevalent attitude, even in the earliest days of colonial Louisiana, some Creole women challenged society's expectations, refusing to passively accept the role of martyr or victim; indeed, a surprising number of women felt that marriage was a contract they were willing to break if it meant they were to be considered the property of their husbands. The case of Marie Magdelaine Mangon de la Tour provides one of the earliest examples of a petition for separation, which was filed on July 31, 1727 against her husband, St. Malo for "cruelty and petty tyranny."⁸⁹ Marie Magdelaine, who was *enciente*, or pregnant, at the time, took "refuge with Robert and his

⁸⁸"Le Catechisme Conjugal" in *L'Avant Coureur*, Sunday 26 May 1854, Vol II, No. 19. Trans. from French to English by author.

⁸⁹"Records of the Superior Council of Louisiana, No. XI.," *The Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 2, April 1921., 224.

wife” due to her husband’s “dissolute” behavior.⁹⁰ However, on August 9, 1727, the date of the Superior Council’s decision, her husband was “willing to behave becomingly and would avoid disgrace,” so Marie Magdelaine returned to him, though it is unclear how willingly or happily she did so.⁹¹ Marie Magdelaine’s case emphasizes the disgrace associated with divorce as well as the difficulty facing a pregnant woman in colonial Louisiana who wished to separate from her husband.

Less than a year after Marie Magdelaine’s failed attempt for separation, Louise Jousset La Loire filed for legal separation from her husband, the surgeon Pierre de Manade, for his “violent cruelty.”⁹² She went to live at the Ursuline Convent and on March 13, 1728 sought to recover her “marriage portion” or dowry as well as an allowance for board of 800 francs a year.⁹³ Under French law in colonial Louisiana, a contract was drawn up before marriage outlining the assets brought to the marriage by both the bride and the groom; while the property acquired during the marriage would be considered community, the assets a woman brought to her marriage as her dowry remained hers for the rest of her life.⁹⁴ Thus, women in colonial Louisiana possessed a level of economic independence unknown to women in the rest of colonial America. Louise

⁹⁰“Records of the Superior Council of Louisiana XII,” *The Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 4, October 1921, 225.

⁹¹*Ibid.*, 488.

⁹² Records of the Superior Council of Louisiana, No. XI,,” *The Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 2, April 1921, 243.

⁹³*Ibid.*, 247.

⁹⁴Dart, Henry P. “Marriage Contracts of French Colonial Louisiana,” *The Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 2, April, 1934; Hart, W.O. “Rights of Women in Louisiana,” *The Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 4, October 1921.

could feel somewhat secure in her suit against her husband, as she was aware that her dowry could be restored to her and used as a means of financial support if she was in fact granted a separation. On June 18, 1728, Manade agreed to a separation of their goods but refused to give up Louise's dowry, as he was "zealous for the general morals of matrimony." The record of the Council stated his position, "Were dowry surrendered and board allowance granted, then plenty of other wives might desert their husbands and live possibly in disorder." However, the Council seemed not to agree with Manade; they granted Louise a separation and ordered that her dowry of 10,476 francs be returned to her.⁹⁵

On August 9, 1752, Marie Catherine Vincennes filed for separation against her husband Jean Baptiste Baudreau, citing both his bad character and his complete misgoverning of her finances. The Superior Council awarded her the thirteen head of cattle she brought to the marriage as well as her house and lot and the "negress Marie and her family and Valentin." This decision came after numerous witnesses testified against her husband, calling him a "libertine" and revealing that he both drank and gambled. According to several sources, he "was not at all attached to his family." One witness stated that Baudreau was "a man of bad conduct, without morals, wasting all he has, debauched with women, having no care of his family." As a result, Marie Catherine renounced the community property she had acquired with her husband during their marriage, a small sum due to large debts, and succeeded in recovering all that she brought to the marriage in her dowry.⁹⁶ Similarly, when Eleonore Monsanto filed for separation from her

⁹⁵ "Records of the Superior Council of Louisiana, No. XII.," *The Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 4, October 1921, 243., 489, 497, 501.

⁹⁶ Cruzat, Heloise H. "Records of the Superior Council of Louisiana LXXVI," *The Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 3, July 1938, 887, 889, 890-892.

husband Pedro Andres Tessier, an “abandoned man, possessed of many vices and bad, dissipated habits,” in 1779, she was awarded a separation along with the 4200 pesos that came with her dowry. One witness testified that she was “capable to manage it [her marriage portion] herself because of her good conduct and executive ability,” an assessment with which the court agreed.⁹⁷

The Council’s finding in favor of these women demonstrates that Creole wives had some recourse if trapped in cruel and loveless marriages. In 1799, Marie Sophie Carrier Despau was granted a separation from her husband, and in 1829, Marie Jacqueline Feliciana Rigaud filed for divorce from her husband, who had abandoned her twelve years before, and received a separation.⁹⁸ Irma Roman, of the prestigious Roman family of St. James parish, was granted a separation of bed and board from her husband in May 1842.⁹⁹ One of the Roman’s neighbors, Caroline Trudeau, was “judicially separated in property from her husband” Edouard Robin Delogny, a well-known Creole gentleman.¹⁰⁰ On June 25, 1854, Marie Madeleine Madere’s succession at her death listed her as “the divorced wife of Hugh Keten.”¹⁰¹ These are only a few examples of the numerous cases of women filing for divorce from their husbands, suggesting legal separation was not uncommon in Louisiana prior to the Civil War. However, while women like Louise Jousset La Loire and Marie Catherine Vincennes, who came to their marriage with a

⁹⁷Porteous, Laura L. “Index to the Spanish Judicial Records of Louisiana XLII.,” *The Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 2, April 1934, 391-394.

⁹⁸Daine, Marie J. F. R. Judgment, 1829, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University; Despau, Marie S. C. Document, 1799, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University.

⁹⁹Roman Family Papers, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University. Note on Irma Roman’s mental health.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*

¹⁰¹*Le Meschacebe*, Sunday June 25, 1854.

handsome amount of money and property, could obtain a separation without forfeiting their security—in fact, they obtained a separation as a means of preserving their finances from reckless husbands—women from less privileged backgrounds with smaller dowries, or no dowries at all, probably viewed separation as virtually impossible. Also, as Marie Magdelaine de la Tour’s case suggested, the social disgrace as well as the moral dilemma a Catholic Creole woman faced in choosing divorce was often so great as to discourage filing for separation.

Though not uncommon, women separated from their husbands did not constitute the norm in southeast Louisiana. Most Creole women lived in households led by men where they served as wives and mothers and very rarely faced business decisions or the opportunities afforded to women who ran their own plantations. These women were more likely to fit the stereotype of the Creole mother and the idealized Creole lady. Their interactions with their husbands and children serve to both reinforce the stereotypes as well as refute them. Though perhaps not as overtly interesting as their more independent counterparts, these Creole wives and mothers were just as complex individuals as the Magdelaine Becnels around them.

Upon Therese Bouligny’s engagement to Henri Roman, son of the planter who owned Oak Alley plantation in St. James parish, her sister Marie Villere offered her advice on how to be a good Creole wife:

I believe that you will be happy my dear little sister. Henri is a good boy. . . Well, he will have a little wife who has judgment and reason when she wishes, who will know how to influence him without appearing to do so, and all in being sweet and submissive and all will go very well. But above all make sure that he puts you in your own house. . . in your

own place, I think that you will be much happier and he as well. Now my sermon is over.¹⁰²

Marie underlined the most important words in her message to her sister. Creole women were expected to be submissive to the will of Creole men, yet, as Marie indicated, they possessed skills that gave them a certain power over their husbands if used with judgment and reason, the skills of guile and persuasion. While ostensibly the “little wife,” Therese used the charms and sweetness her husband expected of her to actually manipulate him, possibly to acquire her own household independent from that of her mother-in-law, as her sister suggested. However, some husbands suspected their wives of manipulation to the point of absurdity. Benjamin Tureaud’s brother-in-law, Martin Gordon, who was married to Louise Bringier, daughter of Fanny and Betzy’s brother, confided in him:

When a wife calls out to a husband that it is time to come to be bed—God only knows what may be the consequences “nine months thereafter,”—I once heard a story about a wife’s waking up her husband by making a noise herself and exclaiming—oh my dear—don’t you hear a rat! No—my darling—I do not—but I smell a rat—The “rat” was run back to his “hole”—and the loving couple went to sleep.¹⁰³

Perhaps the rat is not his Louise, who is simply fulfilling her duty as his wife by bearing his children, but Martin Gordon, who seemed to honestly believe that his wife tricked him into bed in order to become pregnant again.

¹⁰²Marie Bouligny Villere to Therese Bouligny, undated letter. Roman Family Papers, Howard Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University.

¹⁰³MG (Martin Gordon) to My dear Ben (Benj. Tureaud), Sept. 19, 1850. Benjamin Tureaud Family Papers, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University.

Often husbands treated their wives as if they were children. Jacques Telesphore Roman, the wealthy planter who owned Oak Alley, scolded his wife in the letter he wrote to her on Christmas Eve 1841, telling her, “Don’t fuss, my dear Celina, if I haven’t done your errands.”¹⁰⁴ In the same letter, Roman complained of rheumatism, but assured his wife, “Certainly one doesn’t die from it, so you can’t yet take a young conjo [mate] for your husband who doesn’t grumble, & who will not always be an old peeve.” Though unclear whether Roman was merely teasing Celina or if he meant the statement as a barb, history does show that Celina never remarried after her husband’s eventual death. When his wife Louise was expecting one of their children, Martin Gordon again revealed a deprecating attitude toward his wife, writing to Benjamin Tureaud, “Miss Louisa is as big as a hgsd [hogshead of sugar] and if ‘coming events cast there [sic] shadows before them’ why then I must look out for at least two.”¹⁰⁵ Gordon fears he will be the father of twins due to his wife’s size during her pregnancy.

One marriage with a bit more respect but no less tension is that of Louis St. Martin and Louisa Perret St. Martin. Louis and Louisa, both children of planters in St. John the Baptist parish and distant cousins through their mothers, married in 1847 and had their first child, Corinne, in 1848. As Louis was absent during most of the early years of their marriage, his resulting correspondence with Louisa provides a unique window into their relationship and that of many Creole marriages. During his time as the register of the land office under President Polk, Louis lived in New Orleans, while Louisa remained on her mother and stepfather’s

¹⁰⁴Jacques Telesphore Roman to Celina Pilie Roman, December 24, 1841. Roman Family Papers, Howard Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University.

¹⁰⁵Martin Gordon to Benjamin Tureaud, May 3, 1851. Benjamin Tureaud Family Papers, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University.

plantation in St. John the Baptist parish. Louis's letters to Louisa begin as a young husband, very much in love with his new wife. He wrote on March 12, 1848:

. . .far from you. . .I will never be happy. Destiny wants us to be separated. Please God that it will not be for a long time. . .Maybe you would like to come stay with me in the city. Our good future will perhaps depend on it. A rather brilliant future opened up for me in New Orleans. Maybe I was wrong in leaving I feel that I cannot live far from you and if the feelings which detain you in St. John the Baptist are stronger than the interests which force me to stay here I will make all the personal sacrifices to live near you.¹⁰⁶

Though Louisa's reply is missing, it seems unlikely that she visited her husband in New Orleans that year as she had just given birth to their first child and probably wanted to be near her mother. Her reluctance to leave her mother in St. John the Baptist parish manifested itself again in April of 1849 when Louis repeated his desire for Louisa to come to visit him in New Orleans and attempted to entice her by mentioning the Carnival season.

Why my good friend do you not want to come stay a few days in the city? The season of pleasure is going to begin again. . .Prepare yourself to come; because I am going to employ all my eloquence to persuade you to come to the city.¹⁰⁷

Perhaps Louis's eloquence succeeded in convincing Louisa to journey to New Orleans, though no evidence exists to confirm it. For most of their marriage, Louis's job called him away from his family, while Louisa, a young wife and mother, preferred the comforts of home.

In 1850, Louis was elected to Congress and went to Washington, leaving Louisa, now pregnant with their second child and first son, Albert, behind in St. John the Baptist parish. After

¹⁰⁶Louis St. Martin to Louisa St. Martin, March 12, 1848. St. Martin Family Papers, Howard Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University. Trans. from French to English by the author.

¹⁰⁷Louis St. Martin to Louisa St. Martin, April 11, 1849. St. Martin Family Papers, Howard Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University. Trans. from French to English by the author.

only three years of marriage, the couple had been separated from each other the bulk of the time.

No letters from Louisa survive what was probably a difficult time for her, but Louis's letters remain, including one produced at the end of his first year in Congress, in which he wrote

Louisa:

. . .and two big tears cover my eyes in thinking of my good Louisa who I have rendered so unhappy and the dear children who are deprived of their dear papa. Know why I am saddened? Is it not for the future happiness that I deprive myself of happiness. . .Musn't I suffer a little to give them, a sound name and a dignified future?"¹⁰⁸

While at first this passage seems to be a mundane love letter, the more Louis wrote, the more he revealed the guilt he felt for being away as well as the pain Louisa must have expressed to him in her letters. Rather than asking her to come visit him, Louis, understanding the futility of his requests, began to justify his absence from his family, telling Louisa that he must serve as a congressman in order to ensure their children's reputation and future. Louis used the paternalistic nature of his society to explain his time in Washington, as he was providing for his family's monetary and social well-being by serving in Congress. While Louisa may have felt Louis was sacrificing the present for the future, as breadwinner and male head of the household, he had the final say. Thus, Louisa remained in south Louisiana and raised her children mostly without the assistance of her husband. However, just in case Louisa changed her mind, Louis urged her to "cultivate a little English because here no one speaks a word of French," a statement that emphasizes the differences between Creole Louisiana and the rest of the nation.

¹⁰⁸Louis St. Martin to Louisa St. Martin, December 7, 1851. St. Martin Family Papers, Howard Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University. Trans. from French to English by the author.

By 1852, Louis seemed to have adjusted to life in Washington, D.C. He ceased to lament Louisa's absence or ask her to leave St. John the Baptist parish. In his January 19, 1852 letter, Louis described his active social life in Washington, D.C. to Louisa:

I made the acquaintance of Madame Delery and her daughter Emilie. . .and I am to become completely a Ladies man. I have still not missed a soiree or ball. I dined at the home of all the ministers and as a gallant knight I promised my compatriots I would accompany them to all the balls, the theatre. . .I took them to see Madame Hayes a celebrated singer, and I accompanied them again two times to balls. Madame Delery's sister who lives here promised me that if I would fall ill, I would be well taken care of at her home. . .We gave a soiree [Louis and his fellow housemates] at our home and I regret that I had not brought my flute with me because I could have made a dance for the ladies.¹⁰⁹

Apparently, Louis was no longer lonely in Washington. His remark about being a "ladies man," which he made sure to underline, as well as his detailed and lengthy description of the time he spent chauffeuring other women to events could perhaps be innocent, but was more likely intended to make Louisa jealous enough to travel to see him. While he seems to recount his activities innocently, Louisa, at home in rural Louisiana with her two toddlers, far from the balls and soirees of the city, must have bristled at her husband's enjoyment of the company of other women and his exciting social calendar.

Louisa's silence confirmed her hurt feelings over Louis's behavior. He did not receive another letter from her for a whole month. On February 29, 1852, he wrote to Louisa:

I was beginning already to believe that you were all dead or sick. I do not know how to interpret your long silence. You will tell me it is true that you wrote me more often than I wrote you but imagine the difference there is between the two situations. You find yourself in the milieu of your family surrounded by your children in the country of your

¹⁰⁹Louis St. Martin to Louisa St. Martin, January 19, 1852. St. Martin Family Papers, Howard Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University. Trans. from French to English by the author.

birth; me from my coast, I find myself isolated in a milieu of strangers, deprived of the society of all who are most dear to me in the world, my wife and my children. You see thus well that. . .it is necessary for you to write to me no less than three letters for each one that you receive from me. And then think on the fact that I am obligated in order to fulfill my mandate to my constituents to describe in no less than ten letters each day my affairs.¹¹⁰

Louis no longer assuaged Louisa by assuring her of his longing to be home; instead, he attempted to make her feel guilty. In Louis's view, Louisa got to remain in a familiar setting with her family, while he was forced to face a city devoid of the comforts of home or family while attempting to carry out his duties as a congressman, a sacrifice he made for his children. For Louis, it was unthinkable that Louisa might be jealous of his traveling, parties, and social life as well as his ability to absent himself from his children and familial responsibilities, as Louisa's role and the role of women in their society would not have found this attitude socially acceptable for her. As "Le Catechisme Conjugal," a column in the St. Martin family's local newspaper, *L'Avant Coureur*, stated, "The wife is for her husband that which her husband makes her."¹¹¹ Louis intended for Louisa to be a silent and supportive wife and mother, not his critic. In his letter, Louis described taking Madame and Mademoiselle Delery to the home of a millionaire, a "palace" where they ate on gold plates. He told her of dining with the Russian minister, the Spanish minister, the Vice President, and senators who refer to him as "the little Frenchman." Though he might be one Frenchman from Louisiana whose world had expanded, his wife Louisa remained confined to the woman's sphere of family and home, and through her husband's letters,

¹¹⁰Louis St. Martin to Louisa St. Martin, February 29, 1852. St. Martin Family Papers, Howard Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University. Trans. from French to English by the author. The term "coast" refers to the areas along the Mississippi River in St. Charles and St. John the Baptist parishes known as the "German Coast" and the areas along the Mississippi River in St. James and Ascension parishes known as the "Acadian Coast."

¹¹¹"Le Catechisme Conjugal" in *L'Avant Coureur*, Sunday 26 May 1854, Vol II, No. 19.

Louisa literally watched as his world grew and hers contracted. Also, Louis's admiration of other women while away from home probably did not provide Louisa with much reassurance. Louis says of the Spanish minister's sister-in-law, "If I did not have you constantly before my eyes, God forgive me, I believe that I would have become passionately amorous."¹¹² While Louis means Louisa's constant presence figuratively, Louisa must have been well aware that she was not literally before his eyes most of the time.

In contrast to Louis's letters describing different cities, ministers, senators, and parties, Louisa's letters focused on family, particularly her children, and the day to day life of the plantation household. The contents of her letter on January 14, 1853 are typical.

Corinne and Albert are in perfect health and they kiss you. Albert is very attached to me. . .but he is also very mutainous, he likes very much to battle me. . .he told me no no he will be good. . .yesterday evening he fell from bed. He failed to kill himself, he had a bump in front [of his head]. Corinne is always good and wise like a big girl; she prays me only to go look for a little sister for her like that of Anna [her cousin].¹¹³

However, Louisa's letter to her husband two weeks later proved to be a bit more exceptional in that she included subtle messages that expressed her displeasure at his absence and disapproval of his haphazard writing.

You occupy your days. . .with lots of people because there was in The Bee [the New Orleans newspaper] an ad that you were very ill. Happily your letter of the tenth already arrived. . .without that I would have been very worried. . .Continue to write me often [so I

¹¹²*Ibid.*

¹¹³Louisa St. Martin to Louis St. Martin, January 14, 1853. St. Martin Family Papers, Howard Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University. Trans. from French to English by the author.

can] see to the pleasure that you think a little more often to your wife than last year. I excuse you because I believe Madame Delery was there a great deal.¹¹⁴

Despite her reproaches, she still succumbed to apologies for not writing Louis often enough; apparently, she was not sending him three letters for every one of his, as he had asked.

You make me, my dear Louis, some reproaches in your last letter for not receiving news of me often enough, you are not wrong. . .but for some time I have become so apathetic for all that I do not understand myself. I pray to you to excuse me because I attribute this very much to my state. . .

In addition to the fact that Louisa's household seemed to be in an uproar with remodeling, 1853 was also the year in which the St. Martin's third child, Stephanie, was born. Louisa was most likely pregnant at the time, creating her state of apathy and her feelings of not being herself.

Again Louis remained absent during a stressful time in Louisa's life, and she had to shoulder the burden herself.

The argument between Louis and Louisa over payment of a debt reveals perhaps the most about relations between the St. Martins and between husbands and wives in general in Creole society. Louis accrued debts from his political involvement and his lifestyle. In his letter on February 29, 1852, Louis censured Louisa for having paid one of his debts, saying:

The account of Mr. Luminais is an affair that regards me personally and I regret that my wife took care of. . .paying an account that I must not find fair. . . I excuse you because I know that if you did it it is in the best intentions. But imagine what the public would say if they knew you paid a debt that I refuse to pay. The wife will be proof against the husband.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴Louisa St. Martin to Louis St. Martin, January 28, 1853. St. Martin Family Papers, Howard Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University. Trans. from French to English by the author.

¹¹⁵Louis St. Martin to Louisa St. Martin, February 29, 1852. St. Martin Family Papers, Howard Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University. Trans. from French to English by the author.

Although Louisa tried to ameliorate her family's financial situation, her actions were, in the eyes of her husband, erroneous, almost a betrayal. As the husband, Louis controlled the business and finances of his family; as the wife, Louisa oversaw her children and domestic duties. She overstepped her bounds in paying off their debt, an interference Louis did not take lightly. Public perception was foremost in his mind, and he worried that people would deem him an ineffectual and dishonorable husband due to Louisa's behavior. By trying to care for and protect her family, Louisa was in fact acting against her husband in his mind, stripping him of his paternal role.

Over the years, despite his wife's opposition, Louis continued to insist that Louisa practice her English and encourage their children to do so as well. As a congressman, he realized that Louisiana was unlike the rest of the nation, and, though he remained faithful to Creole society, he was aware that in order for his children to be successful in the future, they must accept the slow encroachment of Anglo American ways. Similarly, Pierre Clidamont Becnel remodeled his family's Creole plantation into one of the Greek Revival style of architecture when he took over after his grandmother Magdelaine's death.¹¹⁶ The Anglo American white classic plantation house was gaining quite a presence in the River Parishes, competing with the traditional, colorful, and more modest Creole home. However, though Pierre Becnel chose to succumb to the fashion of the time, he and his family continued to speak French, worship as Catholics, and adhere to the strict code of etiquette that characterized Creole society. Due to women like Magdelaine Becnel and Louisa St. Martin, Creole society would continue thrive for almost another century.

¹¹⁶Wilson, Samuel Jr. "The Building Contract for Evergreen Plantation, 1832," 398-405.

Chapter 2 The Devil's Empire

From the time of its settlement, people denounced the colony of Louisiana for its uncivilized reputation. Marie Madeleine Hachard, who journeyed with the first group of Ursuline nuns to the colony, described a backward land peopled with hedonists entirely ignorant of the basic teachings of the Catholic Church or even of the existence of God. On October 27, 1727, Marie wrote to her father, “We have a great need of [a priest] here—not to inspire women to become Nuns but to gather faithful followers because, as one of the Reverend Capuchin Fathers assured us the other day, there are none in all the country or its environs.”¹ She continued with alarm over ten pages later, “The most devout [of the settlers in Louisiana] are those who do not publicly lead scandalous lives!”² The faith of the colony’s women particularly concerned her. Women were among the first people to bring religion to Louisiana and would remain the staunchest guardians of its morality as well as the most defiant challengers to the Church’s authority.

Many of the first settlers of Louisiana were criminals forced to immigrate, suggesting a lack of piety and little concern for morality. Other settlers quickly adopted their religious apathy and created a colony in which the authority of the Church was ignored or even disregarded and the structure it provided was almost entirely absent. According to historian Carl Brasseaux, only about half of settlers attended Mass in the 1720s, and by the 1750s and 1760s, attendance had

¹Costa, Myldred Masson. *Letters of Marie-Madeleine Hachard Ursuline of New Orleans 1727-1728*. Laborde Printing Company, New Orleans, LA: 1974, 21.

²*Ibid.*, 34.

decreased to about twenty-five percent of settlers.³ The colonists' apathy was exacerbated by the inexperienced and occasionally morally suspect priests who ministered to them, causing the development of an anti-clerical tradition in Louisiana. Laussat discussed the motley origins and motives of parish priests in early Louisiana, saying, "The social status of the parish priests at the time was not very respectable. Adventurers, gluttons, drunkards, often unfrocked monks, they were asked but one thing by their parishioners—that they be, as was said, 'good natured.'"⁴ This negative attitude toward the clergy also derived from priests' desire to address social issues, such as gambling, prostitution, drinking, and adultery, rather than confining themselves to purely religious subjects, and the egalitarian influence of the French Revolution.⁵ As Steven G. Reinhart points out in his comments on Brasseaux's "The Church and the Immoral Majority in French Louisiana," colonial Louisianians did not cast aside religion but instead chose to selectively observe religious teachings, using their distance from France to create a society in which nonconformity was possible.⁶ Thus, Marie Madeleine Hachard and the Ursuline nuns faced the daunting task of trying to enforce religious precepts on a colony unwilling to adhere to them.

³Brasseaux, Carl A., "The Immoral Majority" in Boucher, Ed. Philip B., ed. *Proceedings of the Tenth Meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society*. University Press of America, Inc., Lanham, MD: 1985, 274.

⁴de Laussat, Pierre Clement. *Memories of My Life*. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, LA: 1978, 61.

⁵Ancelet, Barry Jean., "Ote Voir Ta Sache Soutane: Anti-clerical Humor in French Louisiana" in Boucher, Ed. Philip B., ed. *Proceedings of the Tenth Meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society*. University Press of America, Inc., Lanham, MD: 1985, 275.

⁶Reinhardt, Steven G., "The Church and the Immoral Majority in French Louisiana Comments" in Boucher, Ed. Philip B., ed. *Proceedings of the Tenth Meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society*. University Press of America, Inc., Lanham, MD: 1985, 279, 283.

Marie and her fellow Ursulines were particularly scandalized by the women they encountered in Louisiana. Marie wrote to her father back home in France:

While the women ignore facts pertaining to their salvation, they ignore nothing when it comes to vanity. The luxury in this city is such that one can distinguish no one; everyone is of equal magnificence. Most of the women and their families are reduced to living on sagamite, a sort of gruel. However, notwithstanding the expense, they are dressed in velvets and damasks covered with ribbons, materials which are regularly sold in this country for three times their cost in France. The women here, as elsewhere, use red and white paint and patches, too, to cover the wrinkles in their faces. The devil here possesses a large empire, but this does not discourage us from the hope of destroying him . . .⁷

Marie, appalled by the vanity of the female colonists and the luxury they acquired at the expense of their families, viewed these made up matrons as lacking in the modesty and humility that characterized good Catholic wives and mothers. Laussat confirmed Marie's description of women in colonial Louisiana:

The women were drowned in luxury. Inside and out, they were gluttons with superfluous things, but often lacked necessities. They had taste, elegance, coquetry, and a precocious frivolity; but they could not be counted on either for intellectual resources or for conversational charm. Generally, there prevailed a great deal of idle gossip in their society. They knew even the shadiest stories about other women and kept the secret badly.⁸

During this time of instability in Louisiana, when the structure of both Church and state had yet to be strictly imposed, women chose not to confine themselves to stereotypes but instead flagrantly traversed the streets with painted faces and ribbons, engaged in flirtations, and gossiped. For Marie and colonial officials, this crude environment, in which the teachings of the

⁷Costa, Myldred Masson. *Letters of Marie-Madeleine Hachard*, 55.

⁸de Laussat, Pierre Clement. *Memories of My Life*, 101.

Church were almost entirely absent, threatened the moral fiber of every young colonial girl and must be changed if the colony were to ever have a stable, law-abiding population.

Although the Ursulines were brought to serve as nurses in the colonial hospital, their primary role became teaching young girls. Colonial Louisiana lacked any means of educating its daughters until the arrival of the Ursulines. The nuns provided the colony with educated, pious daughters ready to serve as wives and mothers once they came of age. Upon their arrival in New Orleans, the Ursulines almost immediately received thirty requests from parents who wanted their daughters to board at the convent. According to Marie Hachard, by April of 1728, the Ursulines had twenty boarders living with them, eight of whom had just made their first communions, along with three “lady boarders,” three orphan girls, and seven slave boarders along with their day students. Marie, very aware of the colony’s need for the Ursulines’ services, wrote, “The custom here is to marry girls of twelve to fourteen years of age. Before our arrival a great number of these girls had been married without even knowing that there was a God. . . but since we are here, girls are only married if they have come to our instructions.”⁹ While Marie might have been exaggerating when she stated that some girls were entirely ignorant of God, she conveys that they were completely unaware of any of the teachings of the Catholic church, which to a woman like Marie would be the equivalent of no spiritual belief at all. With the coming of the Ursulines, part of the requirements for a girl to be deemed ready for marriage was a knowledge of religion and the adoption of a Catholic lifestyle. From the late 1720s on, Creole women would be expected to be trained as good Catholics before they could become wives and mothers.

⁹Costa, Myldred Masson. *Letters of Marie-Madeleine Hachard*, 59.

Despite the Ursulines' desire to convert colonial girls and encourage them to dedicate themselves to Catholicism and Christ, government officials made sure the nuns did not become too carried away on their mission. Marie Hachard reported to her family:

These boarders of twelve and fourteen years have never been to Confession, nor even to Mass. They were brought up on their plantations, a distance of five or six leagues from the city, and consequently have received no spiritual help. In short, they had never even heard of God. For them the most ordinary things we tell them become oracles out of our mouths. We have the consolation of finding in them much docility and a great interest in learning. All of them would like to become nuns. This is not at all to the liking of Rev. Father de Beaubois, our very worthy Superior. He finds that it would be better for them to become Christian mothers and thereby establish Religion in this country through their good example.¹⁰

While the girls seemed eager both to learn and to participate in religion, priests and officials did not let the Ursulines, and thus the girls, forget their ultimate purpose: to provide wives for settlers and in turn populate the colony. Thus, religion was acquired not so much for the girls' individual benefit but to make them better mothers who would produce suitable colonists, who would be active in colonial government and in increasing the colony's finances through agriculture and trade. Creole society believed that moral mothers would result in moral colonists, and moral young girls would assuage the colony's problem of prostitution and its effects on male colonists.

Girls could apply to the Ursulines' school if they were over the age of six, and they did not have to pay tuition if they attended the day school. The Ursulines soon recognized that applying the same standards of admission as that of France was impracticable in colonial Louisiana; thus, students were not required to know their alphabet. At first, only practical subjects were taught, such as the catechism, reading and writing, and needlework, all basic skills

¹⁰Costa, Myldred Masson. *Letters of Marie-Madeleine Hachard*, 59.

the girls would need in order to manage their households upon marriage. Later, subjects expanded to include the “study of French, English, geography, arithmetic, and history, as well as courses in music, sewing, and domestic skills.”¹¹ The Ursulines offered an education not only to girls from wealthy white families but also to the poor, free African Americans, slaves, and Indians. The Ursuline convent, along with several later orders, continued to be the main source of education for both black and white Creole women into the twentieth century.

Vice, especially prostitution, greatly concerned both religious and governmental officials. Perier, the commandant, was more active in combating prostitution than any other colonial official. According to Marie, “He has established a regular police for this area and declared war on vice. He sends away anyone who leads a scandalous life and has corporal punishment for girls leading a bad life.”¹² Perier also wanted the Ursuline nuns to oversee “girls and women of ill-repute,” and he planned to construct a building at the end of the convent to “lock up these people,” though he never followed through with this plan.¹³ Though prostitution was common in early Louisiana, those who practiced it were severely punished. Women who were prostitutes, or those who appeared to be prostitutes, faced the wrath of colonial officials intent on imposing moral standards on the fledgling colony. Marie described the brutal punishments of prostitutes, “As for the girls of bad conduct, they are watched closely and severely punished by being placed on a wooden horse and flogged by all the soldiers of the Regiment that guards our city. In spite

¹¹Greene, Karen Denise. “The Ursuline Mission in Colonial Louisiana.” Masters thesis, Louisiana State University, August 1982, 52.

¹²Costa, Myldred Masson. *Letters of Marie-Madeleine Hachard*, 50.

¹³Ibid., 50; Greene, Karen Denise. “The Ursuline Mission in Colonial Louisiana,” 60.

of all this there are still just too many of these women to be put in a house of refuge.”¹⁴ In a letter written to her father on April 24, 1728, Marie stated that Commandant Perier was using the Ursulines’ home to imprison a woman who was separated from her husband and “began to be bored at the Convent and wanted to have secret relations with a layman.”¹⁵ This woman was imprisoned with her husband’s consent, and Perier intended to send her back to France. Though this woman could have been one of the felons sent to Louisiana to wed, she may also have been a woman abused or mistreated by her husband who sought refuge with the Ursulines. For priests and officials intent upon challenging the lax moral code of colonial Louisiana, a white female colonist rejecting her husband and interacting with another man could not be tolerated. This woman, though not engaged in the sexual trade, would easily be grouped with the prostitutes of the colony, as Marie’s account of her suggests.

The applications for marriage dispensations for the Catholic Diocese of New Orleans provide a glimpse into the religious and social mores of Spanish Louisiana. Dispensations were necessary in order for anyone related through the sixth degree to marry or for Catholics to marry Protestants. Marriage between cousins or in-laws occurred quite often in Louisiana, and thus many couples were forced to apply for a dispensation before a priest would marry them. Often, religious reasons were cited for desiring a dispensation. When Captain Jorda wanted to marry his deceased wife’s sister, Maria Elena de Reggio, he provided several reasons a dispensation should be granted, including his children’s religious well-being, stating that, “His fiancée’s father is dead; she is from one of the most distinguished families of the province. She is over thirty-six

¹⁴Costa, Myldred Masson. *Letters of Marie-Madeleine Hachard*, 58.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 66.

and there are advantages for her in this marriage and also it secures the Christian education of Jorda's daughter."¹⁶

On other occasions, marriages between cousins were purposely arranged in order to preserve family prestige, as is the case of Louis Baure's marriage in 1800 to his first cousin, Isabel Trepagnier, both "of the old families of the colony and Baure's mother on her death bed asked him not [to] abandon the succession of their family."¹⁷ This intentional matching of cousins would continue into the nineteenth century, as is made evident by the marriage of first cousins Jean Berthelot and Adeline Loup in 1839. Their dispensation notes, "The Berthelots and Loups have intermarried for three generations."¹⁸ In other cases, marriage between cousins seemed unavoidable, as the population of Louisiana was small and Creoles only married other Creoles, thus limiting themselves. As a postscript attached to George and Maria Luisa Toups' 1802 dispensation stated, "Most of the inhabitants of this Coast [First German Coast] are related."¹⁹ Father Dupuy of Iberville parish echoed this sentiment as late as an 1838 dispensation, stating, "The Creole families are nearly all related so there is rarely a marriage without impediment."²⁰ Thus, it seems that the Catholic church in Louisiana wholly accepted these family alliances through marriage, though it did continue to require that dispensations be obtained.

¹⁶Marriage Dispensations for the Catholic Diocese of New Orleans, Louisiana, University of Notre Dame Archives.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰*Ibid.*

Poverty or dissipating finances were the most common reasons given in dispensations for marriages between cousins. Joseph Babin's dispensation of May 19, 1801 said of his bride, "Margarita is very poor as all her father has are two old negroes and he has seven daughters." Similarly, the bride in the Denesse-Martin dispensation of 1801 had a father who was "old and infirm with eleven children with only a poor house, an old slave, and one other boy." Apparently, these men felt that they were aiding their families by removing these women from impoverished households and providing for them. Often, poverty and lack of priests caused many early Louisianians to live together before marriage. According to an April 1801 dispensation, "Because of the lack of priests and because of their poverty, which prevents them from going to Mobile or the capital, Ladner. . .has lived for two and a half years with his cousin Rosalia and they have a daughter."²¹ This practice of living together and having children without actually marrying in the church, while not the rule, does not seem uncommon. However, it does appear that it occurred more often in rural settings farther away from the city of New Orleans and in middle to lower class families.

The dispensations also reveal that, while common law marriage was not the norm for wealthier inhabitants, premarital pregnancies did occur in families that considered themselves distinguished or of noble descent. One example that points toward scandal, possibly the approaching birth of an illegitimate child, was described in the 1801 dispensation for first cousins Zacharie Hebert and Helene Dupuy. Though Zacharie had "sought in marriage

²¹*Ibid.*

Heleine[sic],” he did not inform his father of his intention until eight months before the dispensation was requested, which goes on to say, “Because of unforeseen circumstances which might lead to disgrace he hopes it will be accorded.”²² Similarly, the 1802 dispensation of third cousins Drosen Becnel and Carmelita Brou stated, “Drosen Becnel of St. John Baptist parish. . .has frequently visited her [Carmelita] in St. Charles parish of the German Coast. This has created a scandal and they wish to marry.²³ Perhaps neighbors and friends were merely scandalized by Becnel’s frequent visits without intentions of marriage, or the scandal may have been a more tangible threat that would manifest itself nine months later. Certainly the dispensation granted to Michel Fortier and Julia Fortier, the widow of Francisco Ayme, suggested pregnancy, stating, “Haste is necessary to avoid scandal in a large and distinguished family and he [Fortier, Captain of the Artillery and father of Julia] asks that this marriage be performed in strictest secrecy.”²⁴ Another dispensation issued in 1803 leaves no room for speculation. The dispensation of second cousins Leonardo Monteret and Maria Mazenge, both of New Orleans, expressly stated, “Maria is pregnant.”²⁵

Despite the loosened morality of colonial Louisiana, most settlers accepted the Catholic Church’s presence, and as time passed, the Church became a normal part of their everyday lives. Marie described a Holy Week retreat for the Ursulines and their boarders that attracted followers

²²*Ibid.*

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵*Ibid.*

from the ladies of the city, sometimes numbering as many as two hundred.²⁶ By the end of the Spanish era, the Ursuline nuns were responsible for the education of seventy boarders, one hundred day students, and an unknown, though probably numerous, amount of orphans, indicating that settlers wanted the Church and its teachings in the lives of their sons and daughters.²⁷ Parson Theodore Clapp, who first visited Louisiana in 1821 and would later become pastor of The Strangers' Church of New Orleans, discussed the Catholic Church's early and continuous influence in Louisiana in his autobiographical sketches. He wrote, "Now, the Catholic church, as I have described it, went along with the first colonists, who settled themselves on the banks of the Mississippi. It has grown with their growth and strengthened with their strength, and the religious wants of the people of Louisiana have been as well supplied as those of Massachusetts, all things considered."²⁸ As the population of Louisiana increased and some degree of stability and structure was achieved, Creoles' apathy toward religion waned, and the Church became more dominant, especially when Anglo American Protestants began arriving, whom they perceived as a threat. Parson Theodore Clapp confirmed that many Americans came with prejudices against Catholicism and thus against the native population as a whole. In fact, to many Protestants, Louisiana was a land peopled by ignorant heathens.

Multitudes suppose that genuine Christianity was not introduced into New Orleans till after its cession to the United States. . . Yet the Catholic religion had been flourishing in that place from its commencement. . . Churches, schools, asylums, nunneries, and other institutions. . . had been built, with great labor and expense. . . I was told by divines of my

²⁶Costa, Myldred Masson. *Letters of Marie-Madeleine Hachard*, 58.

²⁷Greene, Karen Denise. "The Ursuline Mission of Colonial Louisiana," 191.

²⁸ Duffy, John, ed. *Parson Clapp of the Strangers' Church of New Orleans*. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, LA: 1957, 122, 123.

own denomination, that if I went [to New Orleans], the most formidable enemy of the gospel would be arrayed against me—namely, the Papal church. From a child I had been taught to regard Popery as . . .the great adversary of all goodness. . .It should be counteracted, they said. . .by sending out Protestant missionaries. . .One can hardly imagine how strong, blind, and hateful were the prejudices against this Christian sect which deluded my mind. . .²⁹

Unlike most Americans who came to Louisiana, Clapp wrote openly of Protestants' animosity toward Catholics and of the way in which they targeted Creole Louisiana for conversion.

Clapp's identification of the religious tension that existed between Catholic Louisiana and the rest of the United States strongly manifested the distinctive nature of the Creoles. In his autobiographical sketches, Clapp praised Catholics in Louisiana, stating that they were very moral people, that they in fact did more for the poor than any Protestant denomination, and that in times of trouble when Protestant ministers would desert the city, such as the yellow fever epidemics, all Catholic priests remained.³⁰

In this environment, Creoles strove to preserve their culture and protect their children from Protestant influences by sending their daughters to convents for their educations, continuing the tradition established by the Ursuline nuns in the late 1720s. In 1810, Octavine Favrot entered a convent in New Orleans at the age of fifteen; she was accompanied by her older sister Josephine, who received numerous instructions from their mother, Marie-Francoise Gerard Favrot, back at home on the family's plantation:

Your Papa wrote to me that my dear Octavine will receive Communion on March 3. He is quite pleased with this, since she will have time to attend three balls. I do not approve of this haste after such a solemn act. She should remain in the convent for three days to

²⁹*Ibid.*, 117.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 56, 58, 113, 121.

express her thanksgiving; then she would leave only on the 6th and Ash Wednesday is on the 7th. I do not see how she can go to the ball without failing to observe her religious duties. I am convinced that those ladies [the nuns] would not approve of this.³¹

Madame Favrot, acutely aware of both social and religious expectations, faced the dilemma of many Creoles, how to appropriately observe religious responsibilities while at the same time celebrate Carnival. Madame Favrot solved this problem by instructing Josephine to make Octavine solemnly reflect upon her first holy communion for most of Carnival, allowing her to attend a ball only on Mardi Gras day. Her concern with the opinion of the nuns is particularly noteworthy. Octavine made her first communion at fifteen, a typical age considering Creoles regarded twelve or thirteen as the earliest age of Communion, generally preferring a little bit older.³² Octavine probably received instructions on the catechism prior to her communion from a lay woman, as most Creole children did. Creole children were required to observe a retreat for three days before their communion; during this time, they were kept indoors and required to remain silent and refrain from laughing or playing.³³ Madame Favrot's insistence on three days of solemnity after communion as well meant that Octavine observed an entire week of solemn prayer and pious behavior surrounding her communion.

While Madame Favrot straddled the boundaries of both social and religious obligations, her son Philogene, while visiting Nashville, Tennessee during the War of 1812, told his mother of the American women, "The ladies here are very pious. Some of them not only do not dance

³¹Marie-Francoise Gerard Favrot to Josephine Favrot, February 28, 1810, in Meneray, Wilbur E. *The Favrot Family Papers, Volume V, 1810-1816*. Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, New Orleans, LA: 2001, 10.

³²Huber, Leonard V. *Creole Collage: Reflections on the Colorful Customs of Latter-Day New Orleans Creoles*. University of Southwestern Louisiana, Lafayette, LA: 1980, 59.

³³*Ibid.*, 59.

on Sundays, but also even abstain from it on weekdays.”³⁴ These Anglo American girls proved quite different from Creoles girls, who were permitted to dance and attend balls so long as they also properly balanced their frivolous behavior with solemnity at their convent schools.

Philogene’s mention of Sunday observances highlighted one of the most noticeable cultural differences between Catholic Creoles and Protestant Anglo-Americans. Most Anglo-Americans refrained from any kind of activity on Sundays and remained circumspect the entire day. In contrast, Creoles regarded Sundays almost as a kind of celebration. Harris described a typical Sunday for Creoles in New Orleans:

Sunday in a Creole family is of course very different from Protestant Sunday. It is a combination of religion and amusement. Madame rises early, kneels a short time before the image of the Virgin and ever-burning candle in her room, and is by seven in church and at early Mass. When that is over, she goes to the French Market. . . There she buys material for a dinner that costs more than all the six dinners of the week before. When she returns home, the rest of the family are up for a nine o’clock breakfast. At ten the girls go to High Mass, and at twelve they are joined at the Cathedral doors by the young men, and both together they proceed to the matinee at the opera. This lasts until four. The great dinner of the week follows, and then there is high revelry until late in the evening—music, dancing, card playing, for the young, and conversation for the old. Happier people I never saw than the Creoles on a Sunday.³⁵

This kind of activity and revelry on the most holy day of the week alarmed many Protestant Anglo Americans and caused them to consider Creoles irreverent or even outright immoral. A. Oakey Hall, a New York transplant, commented in his memoirs on what was to him the odd character of Sundays in the Catholic city.

³⁴Philogene Favrot to Marie-Francoise Gerard Favrot, October 24, 1813, in Meneray, Wilbur E. *The Favrot Family Papers, Volume V, 1810-1816*. Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, New Orleans, LA: 2001, 179.

³⁵Huber, Leonard V. *Creole Collage*, 54.

Not a New England town but contains more churches; the theatres and the opera are open of a Sunday night; bulls are sometimes baited in the Third Municipality of a Sunday afternoon. . .cavalry in active exercises deaden the eloquence of a popular preacher; firemen in parade jostle returning congregations. . .crowds of merchants throng the post-office lobbies at noontime.³⁶

The activity in New Orleans on Sundays along with the participation of religious Catholics, especially women, in this activity struck Protestants as both strange and immoral.

Many Creole daughters suffered a great deal when separated from their families and brought to the convents. Laura Locoul Gore wrote in her memoir that her grandmother, Cephalide Metoyer, the oldest of fifteen children born to a prominent Creole planter, “was sent to New Orleans to be educated at the Ursuline Convent, where she remained ten years without seeing her mother,” for “at that time, transportation was long, difficult and slow.”³⁷ Cephalide would see her father once a year when he would come to New Orleans to sell his crop and celebrate Carnival. According to Gore, “When Cephalide returned to the Metoyer Plantation. . .she did not recognize her mother, having been away from home for so long a time.”³⁸ Amelia Armant Becnel, daughter of one of the most prominent sugar planters in St. James parish, attended Sacred Heart Convent during at least the 1852 school term. On January 12 of that year, her mother sent her a packet of cakes, candy, shoes, and gum along with a letter in which she wrote:

³⁶Hall, A. Oakey. *The Manhattaner in New Orleans*. J.S.Redfield, Clinton Hall, New York, NY: 1851, 87.

³⁷Gore, Laura Locoul. *Memories of the Old Plantation Home*, Norman Marmillion and Sand Marmillion, eds., The Zoe Company, Inc., Vacherie, LA: 2001, 21.

³⁸Gore, Laura Locoul. *Memories of the Old Plantation Home*, 22.

I begin to have a desire to see you. . .the whooping cough of Anais's children has begun to diminish, your sisters kiss you. . .Goodbye my dear girl I kiss you tenderly. . .³⁹

Madame Armant signed the letter, "Your attached mother A. A." Obviously, Madame Armant missed Amelia a great deal during her absence and attempted to stay connected with her daughter by including mundane facts of life at home on the plantation as well as sending her things to comfort her and remind her of home. Madame Armant's words are hurried and blend together, suggesting that the demands of running a household left her little time to correspond with her daughter. Yet she always sent things to Amelia that were both thoughtful and practical and ended her brief notes affectionately.

Louisa St. Martin, wife of congressman Louis St. Martin, complained to her mother about her husband's choice of schools for their children.

We have changed our children's school. Albert is at the home of Mr. Perrie and my little girls at the public school which makes me feel a great deal repugnant I assure you but the papa says that it is for them to familiarize themselves with English If it depends on me they will not stay a long time because I cannot take the idea that my girls are students in a public school also it gives me much disappointment. . .⁴⁰

A letter from her mother, Louise St. Martin, in which she mentions a woman Louisa "would know. . .because she was a student at the convent of the Sacred Heart," indicated that Louisa probably attended school at this convent herself; thus, Louisa lamented the fact that not only were her children being denied the opportunity she received but also that they missed being

³⁹A.A. (Madame Armant) to Amelia Armant, January 12, 1852, Armant-Becnel Family Papers, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University. Trans. from French to English by the author.

⁴⁰Louisa Perret St. Martin to Louise Perret St. Martin, March 9 1861, St. Martin Family Papers, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University. Trans. from French to English by the author.

educated in the Catholic faith on a daily basis.⁴¹ In April 1857, Louisa received a letter from her stepsister Amelie, who was the same age as Louisa's daughter Corinne, in which Amelie attempted to convince Louisa to send Corinne to the same convent she attended.

The only thing that disappoints me is to see that Corinne does not want to go to school with me, I pray you my dear sister to send her there, the sisters are so good, that they will be content to receive her at their school because they ask me all the days why Corinne does not come with me She would enjoy herself more if she would go there. . .⁴²

Obviously, the St. Martins' choice not to send their daughter to a convent school prompted questions from both the nuns and other family members. It was almost unheard of for a Creole of the St. Martins' class and background to attend anything but a Catholic school or convent, making Louis St. Martin's choice a step down in status and thus further reprehensible to Louisa. Yet Louis, forward-thinking and already aware that Creole society was fading, sought an education for his children in which they could be exposed to English, thereby "Americanizing" them. Ironically, what to Louis was beneficial for his children seemed to Louisa to be both dire for her culture and humiliating for her class. Thus, for Creoles like Louisa St. Martin, Catholicism was not just a matter of culture but also that of class, as English was taught in public schools, a step down from the expensive private schools and convents in which French was the only language spoken.

⁴¹Louise Perret St. Martin to Louisa Perret St. Martin, October 25, 1856, St. Martin Family Papers, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University. Trans. from French to English by the author.

⁴²Amelie St. Martin to Louisa Perret St. Martin, April 22, 1857, St. Martin Family Papers, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University. Trans. from French to English by the author. Amelie and Corinne were both nine years old at the time this letter was sent, suggesting that Louise Perret St. Martin, Amelie and Louisa's mother, suggested Amelie include the request. Amelie would later become a nun.

Unlike Protestants, who did not place her on the same highly revered pedestal, Creole women possessed a model of the pinnacle of virtue and sacrifice in the Blessed Virgin Mary. They aspired to her selflessness and virtue, and while others may have shied from martyrdom, they gladly accepted it. In keeping with this notion of martyrdom, Celina Roman wrote her son, Henri, who remained on the plantation during the Civil War, begging him to flee to New Orleans, which she believed was safer than the country.

I see that I have not succeeded in my prayers and that you aren't coming here where it would have been wiser and more prudent, but do as you want. I don't have the gift of persuasion. I shall be glad to offer a mass for you praying to God and our good Mother to protect you and preserve you from all dangers. . .Farewell, my dear son, and think of your poor mother who loves you.⁴³

Celina routinely invoked the idea of herself as the long-suffering and forgotten mother; she constantly reminded Henri of her trials and of the difficulties she endured for him.

. . .you would not want with a light heart to break that [heart] of she who carried you nine months in her flesh and who suffered to bring you to light and from whom all the care and devotion surrounded you and who has spared nothing to make you happy and to make a man from that weak little being who demanded from her protection at birth. No, my son, you cannot understand the sentiment of a mother.⁴⁴

She ended this same letter by telling her son, "Receive the blessings of your mother. God will hear them and will send you as much happiness as I have pain." For Celina, a widow who relied on her son for much of her livelihood and that of her unmarried daughter, her role as Henri's

⁴³Celina Pilie Roman to Henri Roman, December 29, 1862, Roman Family Papers, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University.

⁴⁴Celina Pilie Roman to Henri Roman, March 14, 1860, Roman Family Papers, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University.

mother served as her most influential means of securing her finances, using his guilt or feelings of obligation to ensure that her wealthy lifestyle would be maintained and with that her social status. Thus, Celina and other Creole women acquired a kind of subtle power by using their religion's reverence for the most holy of mothers to give them added importance and reinforce their sons and daughters respect for them.

Many Creole women truly believed that a life of sacrifice was required of them as good Catholic mothers. Louise Perret St. Martin, aware of the difficulties her daughter was encountering as a wife and mother, comforted Louisa, writing her, "I regret especially a great deal my dear girl of not having the power to be every day with you to aid you in your moments of pain and suffering, which are perhaps again above your strength."⁴⁵ Louisa wished she could also share in her mother's hardships; her letters to her mother were far more numerous than those to her husband and often included unrestrained expressions of her emotions, which were almost wholly absent from her correspondence to her husband. Louisa's reverence for her mother was quite apparent. She wrote her mother on May 22, 1864:

I am so pained that you could take. . .my silence for indifference no my dear mama I would be too full of ingratitude on my part to forget such a good mother there does not pass a day that I do not think to you and that I do not pray God to change your position in the end that you will have the power in your old days to have. . .good times. . .[I]

⁴⁵Louise Perret St. Martin to Louisa Perret St. Martin, January 29, 1859, St. Martin Family Papers, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University. Trans. from French to English by the author.

persuade my dear mama that far from you I participate well in all your pains my heart is wounded with sorrow in thinking that in your old days you will be obligated to work.⁴⁶

While Louisa's fear of her mother's having to work in her old age seems rather absurd considering that her husband P.A. St. Martin owned \$50,000 worth of real estate and had a personal estate of \$100,000, she actually expressed anxiousness in a time of uncertainty and chaos.⁴⁷ In the midst of the Civil War and the occupation of New Orleans, Louisa, wife of a congressman, must have been aware that slavery would soon be a thing of the past and that her stepfather's wealth, much of which was in human flesh, would disappear with emancipation. All of Louisa's hopes and fears for her mother were intimately bound with God; prayer and religion was a constant and natural part of Louisa's life.

Death also constantly haunted the lives of Creole women, particularly the death of a child. Women used religion to cope with death and to reassure them in continuing to have more children after the pain of losing one. In 1847, Azelie Chalmette received a letter from her friend Celeste Duplessis describing the effects of a child's death on a family as well as the use of religion to comfort them in their grief.

We have passed a very sad week. . .the poor Madame Graille lost her little Cecile of a bad sore throat. . .dear Madame Roste. . .was obliged to watch over the little corpse eight days until it was sent with them but God gives the strength to support them. . .⁴⁸

⁴⁶Louisa Perret St. Martin to Louise Perret St. Martin, May 22, 1864, St. Martin Family Papers, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University. Trans. from French to English by the author.

⁴⁷ United States Department of the Interior. *Eighth Census of the United States*. Louisiana, St. John the Baptist parish, M653, Roll 424, 676.

⁴⁸Celeste Duplessis to Azelie Delino Chalmette, September 26, 1847, Chalmette papers, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University. Trans. from French to English by the author.

Josephine Favrot received a letter from her cousin Caroline Declouet Benoist that discussed both the tragic separation of mothers and children through death, an especially terrifying ordeal for Creole women, and the routine nature of death.

. . .poor Mrs. Valier. What a loss their mother's death is for those poor little girls! I think of her constantly. I cannot believe poor Celeste is dead! Death is a common fate; yet, we cannot get accustomed to it. . .Enough speaking about illness, death and sad things, but at the present time, I am so crushed that I cannot mention anything else.⁴⁹

During the season of yellow fever in New Orleans, Louise St. Martin pleaded with her daughter Louisa to leave the city and loan out her slave to her friend and neighbor Madame Biolley; the same day that Louise penned her letter, Louisa wrote to her of the sickness all around her and of the sufferings of Madame Biolley:

That poor Madame Biolley has been in bed since Friday with the yellow fever, Saturday I went to see her I found her very ill I assure you her doctor found her out of danger that morning when he made me tell her that she was delivered that night of a dead infant (a little girl) poor woman. . .⁵⁰

Madame Biolley's delivery of a stillborn child while she was ill with yellow fever probably greatly affected Louisa, especially since she seemed to have broken the news of the newborn's death to the mother. At the time of Madame Biolley's infant's death, Louisa was the mother of four children, and she would have another in two years. The death of Louisa's friend's baby

⁴⁹Caroline Declouet Benoist to Josephine Favrot, October 26, 1813, in Meneray, Wilbur E. *The Favrot Family Papers, Volume V, 1810-1816*. Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, New Orleans, LA: 2001, 180.

⁵⁰Louisa Perret St. Martin to Louise Perret St. Martin, August 10, 1858, St. Martin Family Papers, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University. Trans. from French to English by the author.

foreshadowed the event Louisa would endure in the midst of war, the death of her own infant son, Eusebe, in 1863, when he was only about a month old. During such times, Louisa must have turned to religion to both comfort and guide her; her many religious references in her letters exhibit her devotion to Catholicism and her dependence upon her faith in difficult times. In 1864, less than a year after Eusebe's death, Louisa told her mother in a letter that she had a fever and explained:

I suppose that it is the fatigue which gives me it, as. . .I am obligated to do all my housework except washing. . .If God gives me pain and affliction, he gives me also the force of his support with patience because as it is said he never gives more than the strong [can bear?] and I believe it. . .⁵¹

Louisa endured both the profound tragedy of the loss of her child as well as the mundane but exacting work of keeping house by seeking strength in God. Thus the religion she learned first at her mother's side and then as a student at Sacred Heart Convent protected and fortified her, further conveying her need to pass on her Catholic faith to her children by having them attend parochial, not public, school.

During the Civil War, the Catholic faith not only served to comfort Creole women upon the deaths of husbands and brothers but also to justify the Confederate cause. Louisa, all too familiar with the loss of a child when she wrote her mother in 1864, attempted to comfort Louise about her son's service in the Confederate army:

I see my dear Mama. . .that Felix torments you. . .you have reason, it is impossible that a mother does not have sadness when she believes that her child suffers or that her son is in

⁵¹Louisa Perret St. Martin to Louise Perret St. Martin, May 22, 1864, St. Martin Family Papers, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University. Trans. from French to English by the author.

danger it is a terrible thing for the heart of a mother. . .Louis [her husband] saw the list of the killed and wounded the name. . .of Felix was not there⁵²

Wives and mothers suffered the losses of loved ones while still trying to remain faithful to both God and cause, questioning neither openly. Amelia Armant Becnel employed all the lessons of faith she acquired at Sacred Heart Convent to cope with the absence and eventual death of her husband Lezin Becnel, a second lieutenant in the Confederate army and great grandson of Magdelaine Becnel. At a ceremony on April 5, 1862, a troop of men from St. John the Baptist parish about to leave for war heard their priest, Father Mina, instruct them to “prove themselves worthy of their origin” as Louisiana Creoles and received a flag from a young lady representing the women of the parish. Captain Lezin Becnel gave a speech to rally the troops and to thank the women of St. John the Baptist parish, instructing them in much the same way the priest did the troops.

I will add that every woman, who believes in God, should feel that instead of trying to discourage the firm resolution of her husband, of her son or of her betrothed, should on the contrary, be the first to show unlimited resignation; because if God has endowed man with physical strength to fight his enemies, he also gave to woman the moral courage to submit without a murmur to her wish.

If it be the dictum of Providence that we go far, probably very far to defend our families, be sure, ladies that wherever our Country calls us, imbued with courage and assured of your resignation, we shall answer without hesitancy to its call. . .⁵³

In his address to his parish, Lezin Becnel outlined the roles of men and women in the war effort and also tied the Confederate cause to God. Women were expected to support their male

⁵²*Ibid.*

⁵³“Newspaper Article Fifty-Five Years Ago,” translated from *Le Meschacebe*, April 5, 1852, Armant-Becnel Family Papers, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University.

relations, refrain from complaining, and turn to religion to comfort them; in contrast, men took on the active role of combating enemies and physically defending their homes and country. These gender specific roles were ordained by God, according to Becnel and other patriarchs of his society. His emphasis on the necessity of women's "resignation" dominated his letters to his wife and friends. On October 9, 1863, he wrote to an unknown woman that his wife was "full of courage and resignation which makes me support with a great deal more calm this painful separation."⁵⁴ On April 12, 1862, he told Amelia, "You are always resigned and patient."⁵⁵ Amelia also adopted this term in her letters to him.

Even more central to the cause than women's resignation was both male and female religious devotion. Each expected it from the other and praised each other when it was demonstrated in letter or deed. In her letter to Lezin on April 25, 1862, Amelia told him that she hoped "that she will find you always [a] firm and true Christian soldier as I know you are."⁵⁶ In his letter to his wife on April 15, 1862, Lezin Becnel called her "dear and little Melia, devoted and Christian spouse."⁵⁷ Thus, Lezin put on the role of Christian soldier and Amelia wore the garb of the Christian wife and mother. She continued this religious fervor throughout her letter, telling Lezin:

⁵⁴Lezin Becnel to "Madame," October 9, 1863, Armant-Becnel Family Papers, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University. Trans. from French to English by author.

⁵⁵Lezin Becnel to Amelia Armant Becnel, April 12, 1862, Armant-Becnel Family Papers, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University. Trans. from French to English by author.

⁵⁶Amelia Armant Becnel to Lezin Becnel, April 25, 1862, Armant-Becnel Family Papers, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University. Trans. from French to English by author.

⁵⁷Lezin Becnel to Amelia Armant Becnel, April 15, 1862, Armant Becnel Family Papers, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University. Trans. from French to English by author.

. . .that God protects you and us with you. . .that I will console myself of being separated by drawing in the true courage [of] a feeble good Christian You know me my tender and great love you know that all my confidence is in God. . .and you know that the duty of [a] Christian is to love the cross our Savior Jesus Christ suffered for us must we be better than our Savior? No!. . .Do not be sad dear I will be that which I must be I will look after myself for you. . .each day that I can I will draw myself closer to the sacraments I will make them to draw the true strength, and you also my good love make them often it is the only means of consoling yourself. . .recount to your confessor your little pains and you will see that you will find them well. If you can take the scapula take it I have great confidence in that devotion it is a devotion which is always well [for] soldiers.⁵⁸

Amelia's letters to Lezin teemed with religious references. Her good Catholic upbringing at Sacred Heart Convent manifested itself in this particular letter, as she evoked religious practices and articles that are uniquely Catholic, such as the sacraments, particularly the sacrament of confession, and the scapula. She did as Lezin instructed her, what she considered her duty, consoling herself with God while he was away and in danger. As she told her husband, as he expected of her, she would "be that which [she] must be," conveying her lack of choice. This is not to suggest that she unwillingly put on the mantle of Christian wife and mother, but that she saw this as a unchallengeable and ordained duty or obligation. She called Lezin and his fellow soldiers "brave martyrs" whose efforts "God will venerate." Again, her Catholicism was evident as well as her desire to fulfill her role in the cause when she stated at the end of her letter:

I think that you have a priest with you my God if I could know it: "Brave patriots that the remembrance of your dear families do not discourage you, redouble [your] ardor God learn your wife to support the sadness and also you; relieve the black ideas. . .you suffer. . .physically but know that God wants you to offer your sacrifices to him. . ."⁵⁹

⁵⁸*Ibid.*

⁵⁹*Ibid.*

The idea of sacrifice, already well-known and embraced by Creole women, became even more important when applied to the Confederate war effort. Women like Amelia reminded their husbands and themselves that as Jesus Christ suffered upon a cross they would suffer for their country, families, and ultimately sacred cause. Religion seemed to be the only thing holding her together at this point in the war as from her own home she watched Union gunboats moving along the Mississippi River and received letters from her husband telling her that his men had not eaten since the day before and that he did not have provisions.⁶⁰

Amelia fulfilled her role as a Christian wife and supporter of the cause startlingly well; Lezin and other Creole men, aware of their wives' deep religious devotion, appealed to this fervor to get them through the separation and fears caused by war as well as to encourage their zealous support of the Confederate cause. Yet, despite their ardent support of the cause, many Creole women spoke of it only with religious rhetoric and did not address the goals of the war or any of the political reasons behind the Confederacy. Most Creole women believed that God sanctified the Confederate cause and protected their husbands from death; upon the inevitable deaths of many of their husbands, brothers, and fathers, these women took comfort in the fact that their devotion to God and sacred cause would ensure them eternal salvation. Upon both her husband Lezin's death and her brother Leopold Armant's death at the Battle of Mansfield in 1864, Amelia received numerous letters reminding her that devotion to God would serve her in this crisis and that Lezin's death brought him both martyrdom on earth and a place in heaven. On December 5, 1864, Father Mina, the parish priest who had known Lezin since he was a child,

⁶⁰*Ibid.*; Lezin Becnel to Amelia Armant Becnel, April 12, 1862, Armant-Becnel Family Papers, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University. Trans. from French to English by author.

wrote to Felicie, either a relative or close friend of the Becnels, “We cry with you [for] the noble victim who sacrificed himself for the cause so sainted and so sacred. . . Often I think to the heroic martyr of Mansfield.”⁶¹ Thus, their own priest told both family and friends that Lezin’s death equated a kind of martyrdom, which was supposed to serve to comfort them. A cousin wrote to Amelia, “I will tell you that since your sorrow, evening and morning I pray for your dear friend [her husband Lezin] whom I am sure does not need our prayers, his Christian death does not let us doubt.”⁶²

No letter remains to reveal Amelia Becnel’s feelings about her husband’s death. Due to her extreme religious fervor as well as her desire to fulfill her role, it may be safe to assume she became a deeply religious widow who mourned her husband’s death but viewed it as a necessary sacrifice to the cause. No stranger to death, Amelia lost three of her eight siblings in the 1831 yellow fever epidemic.⁶³ However, this time she faced the loss of both her husband and her brother and the economic and social repercussions that her husband’s death entailed. She also received gruesome evidence of what caused his demise; along with his personal effects, sent back to her by a cousin, she received the bullet that killed her husband.⁶⁴ She was also left with a young son who would not know his father. Though she had said in a past letter to her husband, “our son will know his papa because I will teach him,” this prospect probably weighed heavily

⁶¹Mina to Felicie, December 5, 1864, Armant-Becnel Family Papers, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University. Trans. from French to English by author.

⁶²Unknown author to Amelia Armant Becnel, November 22, 1864, Armant-Becnel Family Papers, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University. Trans. from French to English by author.

⁶³ Thomas, LaVerne III. *LeDoux: A Pioneer Franco-American Family With Detailed Sketches of Allied Families*. Polyanthos, Inc., New Orleans: 1982, 600, 601.

⁶⁴ Armant-Becnel Family Papers, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University.

upon her.⁶⁵ In a letter written in Augusta, Georgia, on September 8, 1864, a fellow soldier, possibly another officer who served with Lezin, recounted the events surrounding her husband's death and directed the unknown recipient of this letter as to how Amelia should behave as a widow, stating, "It is necessary that Amelia show herself [to be] the dignified wife of her husband, who, by his devotion to his country, his patience in his sufferings and the dangers of military life, and his great piety, merits the name of 'Christian Patriot.'"⁶⁶ Thus, patriotism and piety were inextricably linked, and Catholicism took on a mantle of violence. Again, another man instructed Amelia to resign herself, this time to death. Interestingly, he pointedly instructed that she should show a certain dignity. Was this display meant to set an example for other widows, or was it necessary because the honorable Lezin Becnel deserved nothing less and would have expected such behavior? Again, Amelia Becnel was required to play a role, putting aside whatever confusion, anger, fear, or despair that was plaguing her in order to act as a devoutly religious widow and mother, a decision that Lezin Becnel and the other men in her society would have deemed suitable.

Thus, by the Civil War, Creole Louisiana had abandoned its loose code of frontier morality and lax religious participation for a more strict conventional morality adhering to Catholic doctrine. Religion had become an integral part of Creole women's lives, due in part to the Ursuline nuns and other orders that established convents in which women were educated. Creole women and the Catholic Church had successfully tamed "the devil's empire."

⁶⁵Amelia Armant Becnel to Lezin Becnel, April 25, 1862, Armant-Becnel Family Papers, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University. Trans. from French to English by the author.

⁶⁶Unknown author to Amelia Armant Becnel, September 5, 1864, Armant-Becnel Family Papers, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University. Trans. from French to English by the author.

Chapter 3

Always the Masters

On January 3, 1862, Celina Roman, widow of sugar planter Jacques Telesphore Roman and mistress of the plantation that would become known as Oak Alley in St. James parish, wrote in a letter to her son, “We will always be the masters.”¹ In the midst of the chaos of war, Celina remained resolute, refusing to alter her belief in a racially stratified society or to cede her elite position within it. Such certainty did not always characterize perceptions of race in Louisiana. In the early days of the colony, even into the beginning of statehood, Louisianians ascribed to a more flexible view of race relations. The almost fluid society that existed in colonial Louisiana stemmed from an unstable population just struggling to survive.

The first slave ships from Africa arrived in Louisiana in 1719, only a year after the founding of New Orleans.² Twenty-three ships brought slaves to Louisiana in the French period alone, almost all embarking prior to 1730.³ The need for labor on the large concessions proved so great that officials found themselves unable to satisfy the colonists’ demand for slaves.⁴ Thus, the large number of slaves brought over to supply colonists with free labor soon resulted in enslaved Africans outnumbering free whites. In 1741, four African slaves lived in the colony for every 1.2 free white. Although by the end of French rule, the ratio had balanced out to 4.6 slaves

¹ Celina Roman to Henri Roman, January 3, 1862, Roman Family Papers, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University.

² Hall, Gwendolyn Midlo. *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, LA: 1992, 57.

³ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

for every 3.7 free people, slaves still existed as the majority and would continue to make up a large percentage of Louisiana's population for the next century.⁵ As cotton and sugar became commercial cash crops due to Eli Whitney's cotton gin and Etienne de Bore's refining process and the need for labor on large plantations became even greater, certain areas of Louisiana, such as the cotton belt along the Mississippi River above the Felicianas and the sugar region along the river from Baton Rouge to below New Orleans, would have a much greater population of slave than free.

This unbalanced population combined with high mortality, the threat of conflict with Native Americans, shortages of food and goods, and isolation produced a colony in which African, French, and Spanish cultures blended to create a unique culture known as Creole. Because most of the Africans arriving in Louisiana were of one nation, the Bambara, they succeeded in preserving their language and culture and, through their solidarity, ultimately acted as an Africanizing influence on Louisiana. European colonists, aware of their precarious position in the colony, were inclined to work together with slaves and afford them some rights under the *Code Noir*.⁶ While the system was certainly brutal for African slaves, the harsh conditions of life in Louisiana resulted in difficulties for all settlers. Since many of the colonists were themselves rejected by French society and forced into exile in Louisiana as criminals or debtors, historian Gwendolyn Midlo Hall states, "Africans arrived in an extremely fluid society where a socio-

⁵*Ibid.*, 10.

⁶ The *Code Noir* was established in 1724 to regulate slavery in colonial Louisiana. The *Code Noir* stated that slaves were to be instructed in the Catholic faith, given food and clothing allowances, and allowed to rest on Sundays and the right to petition a public prosecutor if they were mistreated. Also, young children had to be sold with their mothers. The *Code Noir* prohibited slaves from owning property or testify against whites. For more on the *Code Noir* see Schafer, Judith Kelleher. *Slavery, the Civil Law, and the Supreme Court of Louisiana*. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, LA: 1994, 1-2.

racial hierarchy was ill defined and hard to enforce.”⁷ Hall expertly sums up the situation in colonial Louisiana, stating, “Desperation transcended race and even, to some extent, status, leading to cooperation among diverse peoples.”⁸ Though the arrival of Anglo-Americans with the Louisiana Purchase resulted in stricter laws governing slavery and narrower views in terms of race, Louisiana society would remain more diverse, fluid, and racially ambiguous than the other Southern slave states.

Creole women contributed to the rise of slavery and plantation society as much as their male counterparts. Early records reveal that from the beginning, women engaged in the buying and selling of slaves and ran their own plantations and households with slave labor. According to the 1726 census, the Widow Trepagnier’s household consisted of herself, her five children, and her seventeen African slaves. Her name also appeared on the “List of Persons Requesting Negroes from the Colony” in October of that same year. In her New Orleans residence on Royal Street, the Widow Candel and her two children lived with her four slaves. On Rue du Conde, the Widow Drilland, mother of two, owned one slave, and nearby, the Widow Saussier [Saucier] oversaw a household consisting of her five children and one slave.⁹ Just a year later, the Widow

⁷*Ibid.*, 128. Other historians, such as Peter M. Caron and Gilbert C. Din challenge Hall’s assertion that the Bambara tribe from the Senegambia region made up the majority of slaves sent to colonial Louisiana. Instead, Caron and Din state that *bambara* was a term used throughout Africa and that often Africans in colonial Louisiana were imprecisely labeled with the generic term *bambara*. However, even if the origin of slaves was more diverse, the profound influence of Africans on Creole culture cannot be denied. See Din, Gilbert C. *Spaniards, Planters, and Slaves: The Spanish Regulation of Slavery in Louisiana, 1763-1803*. Texas A&M University Press, College Station, TX: 1999, 5-6.

⁸*Ibid.*, 131.

⁹Maduell, Charles R. *The census tables for the French Colony of Louisiana from 1699 through 1732*. Genealogical Pub. Co., Baltimore, MD: 1972.

Saucier lost one of her children but gained two more slaves. Her neighbors on Royal Street, Madame Trudeau and the widow Francoise Le Feuvre owned four slaves and two slaves respectively. On the left bank of the river above New Orleans, Madame Richaume, a widow with four children, oversaw a household of five slaves and one French domestic.¹⁰ When Marie-Madeleine Hachard left for Louisiana with the Ursuline nuns in 1727, she wrote her father, “Please do not be scandalized by this, but we are taking with us a Moor to wait on us—as it is the custom of the country.”¹¹ Immediately following this statement, she added that they were also bringing a cat with them. Apparently after only eight years of existence in the colony, slavery was already considered customary in Louisiana, and equating black slaves with animals, property, or money had become a part of the colonial psyche. Marie further confirmed this in an October 1727 letter in which she stated, “When we arrived here, the Reverend Father de Beaubois told us that he had just lost nine Negroes who had all perished at one time from a North Wind; this was a loss of nine thousand livres.”¹² Even the Ursuline nuns owned slaves; they were presented with them at their arrival, seemingly a proper introduction to colonial Louisiana. Marie described her order’s new slaves to her father:

Fifteen days ago, the Company gave us eight, two of which have already escaped into the woods or elsewhere. Fourteen or fifteen ran away from the Company on that same day. We kept a handsome woman to wait on us and the rest we sent to our plantation which is only about a league from here to cultivate the land. We also have over there an overseer and his wife who are careful to protect our interests.¹³

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹Costa, Myldred Masson. *Letters of Marie-Madeleine Hachard Ursuline of new Orleans 1727-1728*. Laborde Printing Company, New Orleans, LA: 1974, 10, 11.

¹²*Ibid.*, 20.

¹³*Ibid.*, 20.

The Ursulines seemed to have no qualms that their business “interests” happened to be human beings; they easily accepted the mores of colonial Louisiana, in which the Church and its clergy could remain morally incorruptible while owning slaves. During the colonial era alone the Ursulines sold fifty-seven slaves and accumulated a net profit of 13,278 pesos.¹⁴ The Church’s acquiescence to the system further negated any moral questions colonists may have had regarding slavery.

By 1731, several women appeared to own their own concessions, the earliest form of a plantation, indicating that these women owned property in both land and slaves and used these slaves to cultivate the land. Again Widow Saucier appeared, this time owning land along the river below the city on which seven adult slaves and three slave children lived. Along the left bank of the river from Pointe Coupee to New Orleans, Widow Allain, Cristianne Crebert, and Widow Rivard held concessions. Each owned one mulatto slave. The Widow Allain owned one slave child, and Widow Rivard owned nine, along with sixteen adult slaves, a large number for the time.¹⁵ By 1732, ten of the 169 women within the city of New Orleans held slaves. As the early French and Spanish censuses often overlooked many colonists, it is likely that even more women were slaveholders.¹⁶

¹⁴ Greene, Karen Denise. “The Ursuline Mission in Colonial Louisiana.” Masters thesis, Louisiana State University, August 1982, 170.

¹⁵ Maduell, Charles R. *The census tables for the French Colony of Louisiana from 1699 through 1732*.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

The Becnel plantation provides a good example of the evolution of Louisiana's slave society from the colonial era into the early national and then antebellum period. In 1790, upon the death of her husband Pierre, Magdelaine Becnel participated in an inventory of her husband's property, a customary measure. Surviving records document a total of fourteen slaves, a decent number for 1790. All of the Becnels' slaves were black with the exception of twenty-six year old Therese, listed as a *metis*, or of an indeterminate mixture of white and Indian. Though worth 350 piastres, Therese was "granted her freedom by the authority of a judge due to her Indian heritage," in keeping with Spanish laws of the time. By 1790, Indian slavery was illegal and was nearing an end in practice. The Becnels' also had a family group of slaves, including a mother, Marie Joseph, and her two sons and two daughters, worth together 650 piastres. As ordered by the *Code Noir*, Marie Joseph and her children were inventoried together and could not be sold separately, as the children appeared to be under the age of fourteen.¹⁷ Eight male slaves were included in the inventory, valued at a total of 2850 piastres. All possessed French names, with the exception of Tetemac, and ranged from twenty to thirty years of age. None of the men were Creole, or born in the colony.¹⁸ Two were Bambara, two Fulbe/Pular, and the rest of various African groups, including Mandingo, Moor, Soso, and Konkomba. Four shared the Mande dialect or language, while the other four spoke some kind of West African language.¹⁹

¹⁷ Schafer, Judith Kelleher. *Slavery, the Civil Law, and the Supreme Court of Louisiana*, 1-2.

¹⁸ When applied to slaves, the term Creole referred to slaves born in the colony of Louisiana.

¹⁹ Hall, Gwendolyn Midlo, comp. *Afro-Louisiana History and Genealogy, 1718-1820 (Slave)* [database online]. Provo, Utah: MyFamily.com, Inc., 2003. Original data: Hall, Gwendolyn Midlo, comp. Database downloaded from <http://www.ibiblio.org/laslave/>, 2003.

By 1810, Magdelaine Becnel significantly increased her property and her slaves through her sugarcane production, a burgeoning new crop due to Etienne de Bore's successful crystallization of sugar on a commercial scale in 1795.²⁰ According to the St. John the Baptist parish census of 1810, Magdelaine Becnel owned forty slaves, making her the largest slaveholder of the parish's twenty-five women heading households.²¹ In the 1820 census, she appeared as "Widow Becnel and Son," indicating that she had made her son a partner in a plantation that included ninety slaves, seventy-three who were engaged in agricultural labor. Thirty of the fifty women on the plantation and twenty-five of the forty men on the plantation were between the ages twenty-six and forty-five. There were ten children of each sex, and ten women over forty-five as compared with five men over forty-five.²²

After Magdelaine's death in 1830, her grandson took over the plantation. By 1856, her great grandson, Lezin Becnel, and his brother Michel operated the plantation, which now had ninety-six adult slaves and twenty-one slave children, for a total of 117 slaves. With sixty-seven adult male slaves and twenty-nine adult female slaves, the sex ratio on the plantation was quite skewed in favor of women. In contrast, there were six male children and fifteen female children. Sixteen of these slaves served as domestics, probably managed by Amelia Becnel, Lezin's wife. Of these sixteen, ten were women, emphasizing that house slaves were typically women. While the slaves' names remained primarily French, some names indicate the Anglo-American

²⁰ Sternberg, Mary Ann. *Along the River Road*. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, LA: 2001, 73.

²¹ Ardoin, Robert Bruc L., ed. *Louisiana Census Records, Vol. III*. Polyanthos Inc., New Orleans, LA: 1977.

²² Ardoin, Robert Bruc L., ed. *Louisiana Census Records, Vol. III*. Polyanthos Inc., New Orleans, LA: 1977.

influence and the influx of American slaves, who often had last names from previous owners, including Bill Starling, Abraham V, Tom Brower, William B., and Smith.²³ At the time of the 1860 census, the Becnels had amassed \$150,000 in real estate and a \$125,000 personal estate.²⁴ With the Civil War only a year in the future, the Becnel plantation had grown into a major operation with an entire complex of buildings, families, and equipment and could be considered a typical Creole plantation of its time.

Creole plantations proved significantly different from other plantations across the South, including even those Anglo-American plantations within the state of Louisiana. Not only could Creole plantations recall French and Spanish laws and customs and looser ideas of race, but they were also as likely to be run by women as by men, thus shattering the dominant Southern notion of authority and brutality lying with the master and passivity and benevolence personified by the mistress. Since in many cases a woman stood as the head of household, contradicting mores in the rest of the South and even the entire nation, she assumed the authority that came with the master role and often cast aside the more abject role of mistress in exchange for a kind of paternalism used by men in the rest of the South to justify slavery and maintain control over slaves. Historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese discusses the common associations of master and mistress throughout the South, conveniently excluding Creole South Louisiana from her study and thus indicating that the Creole plantation was in many respects a different world. Fox-Genovese states that slaves were well aware of the inherent differences between master and

²³“1856 Negrillons” and “Noms de negres 1856,” Armant-Becnel Family Papers, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University. Trans. from French to English by author.

²⁴ United States Department of the Interior. *Eighth Census of the United States*. Louisiana, St. John the Baptist parish, M653, Roll 424.

mistress and were more likely to challenge their mistresses than their masters, whom they considered dominant. According to Fox-Genovese, “The law—not to mention the social emphasis placed on male governance of the household and its members—discouraged women from managing slaves.”²⁵ Thus, in most Southern households and for many slaves, master was synonymous with male and power. While Fox-Genovese’s assessment might be true for the rest of the South, Creole Louisiana, where women were often heads of households and property owners, proved exceptional. For a large portion of Louisiana slave society, master was mistress, a woman with all the unchallengeable authority and power of a patriarch. Fox-Genovese mentions the feminine face of a paternalism in reference to plantation mistresses across the South, but female Creole plantation owners, who could more aptly be referred to as masters than mistresses, did not merely take paternalism and soften it into their own feminine form; these Creole women actually practiced paternalism *in toto*. The same mixture of dominance and benevolence associated with male plantation owners was instead applied by women who were just as strong and sometimes even more brutal.²⁶

Elisabeth Duparc Locoul, one of the wealthiest and most successful planters, male or female, embodied mistress turned master and employed a paternalism not softened by femininity. Elisabeth governed her plantation with a heavy hand and, though she fed, housed, and clothed them, refused to be challenged by either her son or her slaves. Not only did her son’s desire to practice law instead of managing the plantation strike Elisabeth as a rejection of his Creole

²⁵ Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth. *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC: 1988, 110, 97.

²⁶ Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth. *Within the Plantation Household*, 132.

culture, but Emile's attitude toward their slaves also infuriated her. Accusing her son and daughter-in-law of having "spoiled every servant they had," she called them "'des gateurs des negres'" or "'negro spoilers,'" revealing her hard nature when it came to slaves. Her granddaughter, Laura, recounted her Grandmother Elisabeth's mercilessness toward those slaves who challenged her authority. Beginning her story by describing her dislike of witnessing the branding of the cattle on the plantation, she went on to tell of Pa Philippe, a former slave of her grandmother's who had stayed on after the war:

On his creased and wrinkled old face I saw the letters 'V.D.P.' I pointed my finger to his face and asked, 'Oh, Pa Philippe, what is that mark on your forehead?' He turned to me and laughed in a hard, cackling, old voice saying, 'Lord, child, don't you know this is where they branded me when I used to run away?' . . . I was horror stricken and ran into the house to my mother, saying, 'Oh, Mamma, they branded Pa Philippe like they do the cattle.'"²⁷

Laura would later realize that the initials were those of her great-grandmother's, Veuve Duparc Prudhomme, Elisabeth's mother and her model as a master of slaves and businesswoman. She went on to discuss her grandmother's continued animosity to Pa Philippe and the reasons why this existed:

Pa Philippe must have been hard to manage in his early years because Grandmother Locoul never had a kind word for him and, when he would pass in the yard, driving the cattle, she hurled epithets at him which no one but herself could say as fast and with as much meaning. Her pet expressions were: 'coquin, canaille, voleur and pichon,' all screaming, more or less, degrees of 'thief.'²⁸

²⁷Gore, Laura Locoul. *Memories of the Old Plantation Home*, Norman Marmillion and Sand Marmillion, eds., The Zoe Company, Inc., Vacherie, LA: 2001.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 39.

An 1816 advertisement in *The Louisiana Courier* for the capture of runaway slaves further confirmed Laura's story. Six American slaves had fled the Duparc plantation that month, all of whom were named and well described. The sixth runaway, Philip, was "of the age 20 years, of the height of 5 feet 6 in, slender body and red skin" and was "branded on the two cheeks V.D.P. (for the Widow Duparc PrudHomme)." A \$200 reward was offered for jailing the slaves or returning them to the plantation.²⁹ His multiple attempts to run away along with some alleged incidents of theft prompted both Elisabeth and her mother to distrust and abuse Pa Philippe, exhibiting the brutality of paternalism. Elisabeth provided food, clothing, and shelter for him, and he in turn betrayed her; Elisabeth retaliated with a vengeance against him, displaying to the other slaves on the plantation her mercilessness toward runaways and thieves. Yet, rather than casting him out, Elisabeth neither sold Pa Philippe during the antebellum years nor did she cease to employ him after the war, thus manifesting the curious other side of paternalism, which included providing for those deemed part of the household.

Elisabeth Duparc Locoul recognized the monetary value of slaves and their labor. Her actions to improve the operation of her plantation during the early years of her ownership confirmed the dehumanizing nature of slavery and her inability to associate her slaves with anything more than animals, her denial of their human dignity. Harkening back to the idea of cattle, in 1830, Elisabeth purchased thirty female slaves to breed more stock for the plantation. By the 1840s, the slave propagation plan had resulted in so many young slave children that Elisabeth built sixty-nine new cabins for her slaves. By 1860, Elisabeth operated a plantation

²⁹*The Louisiana Courier*, December 6, 1816.

consisting of 183 slaves and over 2000 acres, all her property and all part of her immense household.³⁰

As slaves were considered part of a household, many plantation owners referred to their family as consisting of both black and white members, including their slaves in this circle. In this sense, Elisabeth Duparc Locoul's family consisted not only of her favored daughter and rebellious son but also of the unruly Pa Philippe, all of whom depended upon her and for whom she must provide, another example of a Creole woman adopting a paternalistic attitude.

Philogene Favrot, away from his family during his military service in the War of 1812, revealed this attitude in his letter to his parents at home on the plantation. He stated, "I just asked Manuel what he wanted to say to his family." However, Manuel did not seem to consider the Favrots his family, as his response to Philogene's question indicates. "His answer was, 'Nothing.' He is in very good health."³¹ Philogene's last remark exhibited a very important aspect of plantation life and one which often concerned owners, the health of slaves. Many owners paid close attention to slave health not out of altruistic intentions but from a desire to preserve their financial investments. The letters of Creole women reveal that, accompanying their overall obsession with talk of sickness and remedies, they often tended to their slaves in times of sickness and discussed their slaves' health as much as their own.

Caroline Declouet Benoist wrote her cousin Josephine Favrot about the loss of a slave to illness:

³⁰Gore, Laura Locoul. *Memories of the Old Plantation Home*. The Zoe Company, Inc., Vacherie, LA: 2001, 136-138.

³¹Philogene Favrot to Marie-Francoise Gerard Favrot in Meneray, Wilbur E. *The Favrot Family Papers, Volume V, 1810-1816*. Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, New Orleans, LA: 2001, 194.

At home, I saw our best slave die. He was my age, a Creole, born in Louisiana, a house servant. He had cost us a thousand dollars but if two thousand more could have saved him, Mr. Benoist would have found them promptly. We had him brought to the house in order to care for him better.³²

Despite Caroline's seeming concern over the loss of a slave for whom she obviously cared, she ultimately returned to the slave's monetary value, making the loss no longer one of a human being but of property. That he was a house servant implies that Caroline was probably more familiar with him than an ordinary field hand and would thus be more affected by his death. Perhaps the death of a field hand would not have even registered in her mind as worthy of being recorded in a letter. At the same time that she illustrated how she and her husband would have done anything to save the slave, demonstrating the benevolent side of paternalism, she again returned to the amount he cost and used this as a measure of how much he meant to them, as they were willing to spend twice what he was worth. Thus, slave as human being and slave as piece of property blended in her mind and could somehow exist simultaneously without any real conflict.

Caroline's aunt, Marie-Francoise Favrot, aware of her duties as mistress, nursed her slaves during sickness, but with great reluctance. In a letter to her daughter, she stated:

. . . I am writing to your Papa about this Negress's condition which is giving me so much trouble. She has been as sick as it is possible to be. I did not think she would survive through Saturday night. I had to fulfill a charitable duty toward her which is very painful for every sensitive soul, especially me. . . This unfortunate woman wants me to be near

³²Caroline Declouet Benoist to Josephine Favrot in Meneray, Wilbur E. *The Favrot Family Papers, Volume V, 1810-1816*. Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, New Orleans, LA: 2001, 181.

her all the time and to recite prayers. You may imagine how I suffered to give her this satisfaction. She is much better. I do not know if this will continue.³³

Madame Favrot disregarded her slave's suffering and instead focused upon her own dislike of the inconvenience of nursing. She completely overlooked the fact that, while she insisted she was suffering, her slave was ill and not her. She approached this "charitable duty" as she would a penance, suggesting her ties to religion, yet she resented the time it took to pray for her slave and provide her with comfort. While many women may have disliked aiding the sick, they would have hesitated to complain about serving as nurse to their children or white family and friends; only when speaking of slaves could they reveal their true feelings about helping the sick. Again, the notion of paternalism was reinforced; Madame Favrot provided comfort and care for her slave, but she did so because it was expected of her and not out of any true feelings of compassion.

Louisa St. Martin wrote to her mother about her sick slave, Sinthia, and her suspicions that Sinthia was exaggerating her illness.

I could tell you also that Sinthia is always sick seven weeks she received treatment. . .find her better she says always the same, she has never had a fever she goes and comes in the course but she does not find herself well enough to work I made her take many sedative bathes in the hope that they would restore her but she is so full always in her stomach I believe on my part that while Sinthia is not at the plantation that she will say always that she is sick because it is her only desire to see her own cabin. . .³⁴

³³Marie-Francoise Gerard Favrot to Josephine Favrot in Meneray, Wilbur E. *The Favrot Family Papers, Volume V, 1810-1816*. Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, New Orleans, LA: 2001, 7.

³⁴Louisa St. Martin to Louise St. Martin, August 10, 1858, St. Martin Family Papers, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University. Trans. from French to English by author.

Louisa's mother had loaned Sinthia to her to help care for the children and assist Louisa in household chores. However, Sinthia seems to have been ill most of the time that she was with Louisa, and perhaps part of it can be attributed to Sinthia being homesick for the plantation in St. John the Baptist parish and her own home. Sinthia may have had her own family that she left behind when coming to assist Louisa. While most slaves received haphazard and often unsatisfactory health care, the St. Martins appeared to be rather conscientious when it came to their slaves' health. When Sinthia first became ill in July 1858, Louisa sent for Dr. Perret to treat her. In October 1859, one of the St. Martin's slaves underwent an operation that apparently cured him.³⁵

The Roman family, one of the largest slaveholders in Louisiana, had a hospital for their slaves on their plantation. According to court records in which Celina Roman ceded some of her property to her son when he came of age to take over the plantation, "a new position, that of nurse for the hospital for sick slaves was filled by Thalie," who was herself a slave.³⁶ Celina's large purchases from the Dufilho pharmacy in the French Quarter must have been in part for the slaves on her plantation.³⁷ Also, the Romans paid for certain slaves to be buried in the church cemetery rather than just burying them on their plantation. A receipt dated September 30, 1848 stated "Mme. Wdw. J.T. Roman for the sepulcher of her young slave Celeste about 8 years of age

³⁵ Louisa St. Martin to Louise St. Martin, July 8, 1858, St. Martin Family Papers, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University. Trans. from French to English by author; Louisa St. Martin to Louise St. Martin, October 6, 1859, St. Martin Family Papers, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University. Trans. from French to English by author.

³⁶ Cession of property of Celina Roman to Henri Roman, April 24, 1860, Roman Family Papers, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University.

³⁷ Celina Roman 1853 Account, Roman Family Papers, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University.

owes the Church \$3.50.”³⁸ Perhaps Celina favored Celeste, or the Roman family may have actively encouraged their slaves to adopt the Catholic faith, which would require burial on holy ground. When traveling, Celina brought a small caravan of slaves with her. An 1848 receipt for the steamer Belle Creole shows that Celina spent \$21 for the passages of herself, her four children, six servants, and three “little servants,” giving her and her children two slaves a piece.³⁹ In June 1854, she paid \$30 for the passages of herself, four ladies, two children, and “8 servants 4 grown & 4 small.”⁴⁰ Apparently, she usually brought eight slaves with her during her trips.

For women like Celina Roman, running a large household required the training of slaves and overseeing their performance of domestic tasks. While most wealthy households maintained a particular workforce of slaves for many years, sometimes for the whole lifetime of a slave, some slave owners, struggling with debt after a bad sugar crop or poor investments, were forced to sell off slaves. Marie Villere wrote to her sister Therese Bouligny Roman, Celina’s daughter-in-law, about such circumstances:

I have a house servant on a trial basis for a few days. They are selling her because they need the money according to the information which Edouard got. It seems to be true, that her master is very poor and that he must sell. The mistress came to bring her to me herself and recommended her highly. She assured me that she had never caught her stealing, that she was always of good will in a good mood, and that if she had anything to reproach her for it would be for being a little dense; but for the rest, ‘Madame,’ she said to me, ‘that’s often better than too much intelligence.’⁴¹

³⁸ Roman Family Papers, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Marie Bouligny Villere to Therese Bouligny Roman, undated letter, Roman Family Papers, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University.

The woman who loaned the house slave to Marie Villere captured a prevalent attitude concerning the intelligence of slaves. While slave owners did desire slaves who were bright enough to effectively complete their work, they preferred their slaves not to be overly intelligent, for a smart slave might eventually question his enslaved condition and attempt to challenge his master or run away. By creating laws that forbade literacy in slaves, slave owners attempted to minimize slaves' intelligence and their capacity to resist the system or their master's authority. Also, by acknowledging a slave's intelligence, slave owners would contradict one of their justifications for the system, that blacks were inherently inferior to whites and thus belonged in slavery.

Marie Villere expressed this deprecating attitude when telling her sister Therese about her slave Sarah, writing, "Sarah tells me to tell you hello. When I got your last letter, I pretended to read 'hello to Sarah': She was enchanted."⁴² Marie humored Sarah as if she were a child and believed Sarah to express the kind of pleasure a child would at such a gesture. Perhaps Sarah was not as enchanted as Marie thought, and instead she just acted in a manner she assumed her mistress would expect. Thus, both Marie and Sarah engaged in a kind of pretense; Marie pretended that Therese thought of Sarah, and Sarah pretended to be excited about the remembrance. This pretense appeared to amuse Marie, seemingly at Sarah's expense. Later, Sarah would be a part of the dowry Therese Bouigny brought to her marriage with Henri Roman, Celina's son. Sarah was listed in the fifth article of the marriage contract as a "mulatress 16 years of age, chambermaid evaluated at fifteen hundred dollars;" her brother William, "mulatto

⁴²*Ibid.*

18 years of age, house servant, estimated at sixteen hundred dollars,” was also included in Therese’s dowry.⁴³

Terms like “mulatto,” “mulatress,” “octoroon,” and “quadroon” were common in Creole Louisiana parlance, resulting from the fact that often the metaphorical family both white and black was actually a literal truth. Since colonial times, white Creole men had engaged in *placage*, a practice in which they established a woman of mixed black and white ancestry in a home of her own, typically in the upper Quarter, supported her financially, and had children with her. The practice of having a second family with a free black woman was quite common for white Creoles; occasionally, these men chose not to marry a Creole woman and instead viewed the octoroon or quadroon women as their wives and their mixed race offspring as their legitimate children, despite the illegality. Regardless of whether or not a white, “legitimate” family existed, Creole men often provided for the support and education of their mixed race children and acknowledged them in their wills.⁴⁴ These liaisons and the almost open acknowledgment of the children produced by them scandalized Anglo-Americans new to New Orleans and its surrounds. Outraged by what they deemed immoral acts, people outside Creole society, especially Protestant evangelicals, felt particular sympathy for white Creole women silently suffering their husbands’ adultery with black women. Ernst von Hesse-Wartegg, a German visiting Louisiana, stated in his essay on Creole women:

⁴³Marriage Contract between Henri Roman and Therese Bouligny, July 20 1860, Roman Family Papers, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University.

⁴⁴Martin, Joan M. “*Placage* and the Louisiana *Gens de Couleur Libre*” in Kein, Sybil, ed. *Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana’s Free People of Color*. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge: 2000.

Her husband, often indifferent, does not care about her. He chases the plantation's young Negresses. Early in marriage she feels passion for him, like a lioness. It soon expires. She repays neglect in kind. She bestows tenderness on her children.⁴⁵

Hesse-Wartegg concluded his essay by discussing what he felt was the cause of “the sad state among Creoles,” deciding, “But mulattoes and quadroons are the chief problem. If Creole men had the strength to resist them, Creoles would enjoy better prospects than the only one they face now: RUIN.”⁴⁶

According to the 1810 census, thirty-four households in St. Charles parish, twenty households in St. John the Baptist parish, and twenty-two households in St. James parish had free people of color living in them. By 1820, the total number of households containing free people of color in St. Charles and St. John the Baptist parishes had risen to thirty-two and twenty-eight respectively. These households included such well-known Creole families as Perret, Darenbourg, Destrehan, Labranche, Fortier, Becnel, Marmillion, and Bringier.⁴⁷ While a number of factors could have contributed to the free black population, including manumission or the buying of freedom by slaves, the fact that many Creole men did have relationships and children with female slaves or free blacks could also be a factor. According to the 1860 St. John the Baptist parish census, two free mulatto women, Adele and Marie, lived as heads of a household that included eleven children, aged twenty-two to two months, all listed as mulattoes. This family shared their last name with the Becnels, one of the wealthiest white planter families

⁴⁵Trautmann, Frederic. *Travels on the Lower Mississippi 1879-1880: A Memoir by Ernst von Heese-Wartegg*. University of Missouri Press, Columbia: 1990, 226.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 229.

⁴⁷Roux, Kenneth D. and Roux, Vincent M., comp. *Louisiana's Households of Free People of Color Residing Outside of Orleans Parish and the City of New Orleans in 1810 and 1820*. San Francisco: 1995.

in the parish. Another family of mulattoes and blacks, headed by Rosalie Becnel, age sixty, also resided in the parish.⁴⁸ Throughout the parishes of southeast Louisiana, free black women, known only by their first names, presided over households of numerous children of mixed race. Adele, Marie, and Rosalie are unusual for the River Parishes, where most free black women only listed first names on censuses, but typical of the city of New Orleans, where many prominent white Creole families shared their surnames with free blacks.

The Macartys, a family who fit this profile, were among the oldest, wealthiest, and well-known Creole families of New Orleans. During the late eighteenth and then the nineteenth centuries, two sides of the Macarty family grew and thrived in the city of New Orleans, one white and one black. Jean Jacques and Barthelemy de Macarty arrived together in Louisiana in 1732 and established plantations along the river south of New Orleans. Their progeny included a mayor of New Orleans, a wife of a governor, and an officer in the French military.⁴⁹ Free women of color with the Macarty surname appear in several documents from the colonial era, including sales of slaves. In 1797, Francoise Macarty, a free black woman, purchased a thirty-five year old slave named Mariana from Juan Pol. Francoise also bought a thirty-seven year old slave named Maria in 1800 for 400 piastres.⁵⁰ Decades later in 1834, Francoise Macarty claimed a tract of land in Jefferson parish, stating that she had held “uninterrupted possession and constant

⁴⁸ United States Department of the Interior. *Eighth Census of the United States*. Louisiana, St. John the Baptist parish, M653, Roll 424, 665, 673.

⁴⁹ Arthur, Stanley Clisby. *Old Families of Louisiana*. Claitor’s Publishing Division, Baton Rouge, LA: 1971.

⁵⁰ Hall, Gwendolyn Midlo, comp. *Afro-Louisiana History and Genealogy, 1718-1820 (Slave)* [database online].

habitation and cultivation of the said tract. . . ever since the year 1783.”⁵¹ She died nine years later at the age of ninety.⁵² Another free woman of color with the surname Macarty, Cecee, was the largest slaveholder of all the free people of color; by 1850, she owned thirty-two slaves and was in the process of building an importing business that would eventually be worth \$155,000.⁵³

In 1820, Madeleine Carpentier [sic], a free woman of color, purchased a forty-five year old slave named Marie and her five female children from Barthelemy Macarty for \$6000.⁵⁴ This transaction was not the only connection between Magdelaine Charpentier and Barthelemy Macarty. Magdelaine gave birth to a son, Henry Armand de Macarty, in 1813; Henry’s father was listed as Jean Baptiste Barthelemy de Macarty, and Henry’s race was recorded as colored. Two years later, Laurent Gustave de Macarty was born; parents were listed as Magdelaine and Barthelemy and race as colored.⁵⁵ Magdelaine and Barthelemy’s circumstances were not unusual; numerous Macartys of both races and all ages are listed in the Orleans Parish Birth and Death Indexes. Eulalie Mandeville Macarty, a free woman of color who died in 1848 at the age of seventy-four, embodied the union of two of the most powerful and aristocratic Creole families and the racial blending that these families underwent throughout the nineteenth century. Eugene Macarty, a white Creole, lived with Eulalie for nearly fifty years, from 1796 until his death in

⁵¹ American State Papers, Public Lands, 21st Congress, 1st Session, 1834, No. 164, 693.

⁵² Orleans Parish Death Index, reel 1, Vol. 10, 248.

⁵³ Gehman, Mary. “Visible Means of Support: Business, Professions, and Trades of Free People of Color in Kein, Sybil, ed. *Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana’s Free People of Color*. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge: 2000, 215.

⁵⁴ Hall, Gwendolyn Midlo, comp. *Afro-Louisiana History and Genealogy, 1718-1820 (Slave)* [database online].

⁵⁵ New Orleans Birth Index, 1796-1900, Vol. 10, 23; New Orleans Birth Index, 1796-1900, Vol. 10, 93.

1845, when he left property worth \$12,000. Eulalie, who identified herself as Mrs. Macarty, operated a dry-goods business and left her children with an estate valued at \$155,000 upon her death. Eulalie bore Eugene five children, whom his white heirs later unsuccessfully attempted to disinherit.⁵⁶

The Macartys manumitted several of their slaves over the years, as did many other Creole families. Under Spanish colonial law, slaves could earn the money to purchase their freedom. Once Louisiana became an American state, it became increasingly difficult to free slaves, until on the eve of the Civil War, laws were enacted to make it next to impossible.⁵⁷ Felicite La Branche Fortier, mistress of Home Place Plantation in St. Charles parish, made special provisions detailing the fates of her slaves upon her death. According to her will, she ordered “the freedom of my slaves Nancy, Josephe, Betsy, Betsy Begue, and mulatress Marie, their good and loyal services meriting this recompense.” She also requested that “the slave Cecilia be re-bought, by funds in [my] succession, and given to [my] daughter Octavie. . .because [my] daughter, as soon as she is able, will set this slave free, in recompense for her good care of [my] old friend, Mrs. Regnier, and thus will all wishes be realized.” Felicite wanted her former slaves Pierre and Euphrosine to be bought back and given to her daughter Natalie, as she wanted to “reunite them with their daughter Francoise, who already belong[ed] to Mrs. Ganucheau.”⁵⁸

⁵⁶Bryan, Violet Harrington. “Marcus Christian’s Treatment of *Les Gens de Couleur Libre*,” in Kein, Sybil, ed. *Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana’s Free People of Color*. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge: 2000, 49.

⁵⁷ Schafer, Judith Kelleher. *Slavery, the Civil Law, and the Supreme Court of Louisiana*. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, LA: 1994, 6.

⁵⁸Cochran, Estelle M. Fortier. *The Fortier Family and Allied Families*. 1963, 81.

While Felicite Fortier appeared upon her death to be a more benevolent slave owner than most, many Creole women treated their slaves mercilessly, exhibiting the immense cruelty their power enabled them to inflict. Celina Roman's letters revealed no compassion for her slaves. Writing to her son during the Civil War, Celina complained about slaves who had run away and advised her son to treat them harshly.

Now, let me tell you that I have no news of your servants, Zabeth and Nancy, and for the rest, I am looking for them and if they are found they will be caged up right fast. I have three of them in prison now. This costs \$36 a month and when we find a way to send them to the country I shall send them back and I beg you to put them to work in the fields and lock them up in the evenings and on Sundays. That will help you in your work and will help me too.⁵⁹

These frightening machinations occurred in the midst of talk of going to Mass and praying, of sending "the sweetest kisses" to her child and grandchild, of sending picture books to her granddaughter, and holding her sick grandchild. For Celina, discipline of slaves was as much a part of life as Mass, books, kisses, and children; cruelty existed as her reality, her means of maintaining control. Imprisoning slaves was not new for her; apparently, sending his slaves to jail was one of Celina's husband's recommended means for her to assert authority and dole out punishment. In an 1841 letter, Jacques Telesphore Roman wrote his wife, Celina, "If your cook is bad, better have him put in jail, & get your former one back."⁶⁰

With the coming of the Civil War and the occupation of New Orleans in 1862, slaves, aware of the changing situation and empowered by the idea of their eventual freedom, challenged

⁵⁹ Celina Roman to Henri Roman, January 3, 1862, Roman Family Papers, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University.

⁶⁰ Jacques Telesphore Roman to Celina Roman, March 15, 1841, Roman Family Papers, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University.

their masters' authority. They left the plantations and their masters and congregated in the swamps or in camps with Union soldiers. *The Daily Picayune* reported on September 10, 1862 that "the slave Betsey, belonging to Mrs. N. Bienvenue, was last night arrested on a charge of having grossly abused and threatened her mistress."⁶¹ Three days later, the same newspaper contained the following account:

We understand that a collision occurred last night between a party of runaway negroes from the coast plantations below the city, and the guard stationed at Camp Chalmette. It is said that some blood was shed on the occasion. . . We also hear complaints of the ill-treatment of white men and women by the negroes now quartered at the Touro Almshouse in the Third District, and some of the police are engaged in an endeavor to ferret out the offenders.⁶²

Residing in the townhouse in New Orleans that she had brought to her marriage in her dowry, Celina had access to numerous newspapers and must have been aware of and frightened by what she would have perceived as a threat of mass insurrection and complete chaos. As racial tension heightened during the Civil War, Celina's urge to discipline her slaves grew; in many ways, she seemed to internalize the atmosphere of chaos and fear around her. On January 3, 1863, Celina Roman assessed the situation for her son:

Send me your news often and let me know if your negroes return to you. The first of January there were rumors in the streets that the blacks would no longer serve their masters. I don't know if this will continue but they are more insolent than ever. Rosalie threatened again to leave this morning and I wanted to put her out immediately but she didn't want to go. I slapped her to get rid of her but she stayed even so. I think that this is a good way to show them that we aren't afraid of them.⁶³

⁶¹ *The Daily Picayune*, September 10, 1862.

⁶² *The Daily Picayune*, September 13, 1862.

⁶³ Celina Roman to Henri Roman, January 3, 1863, Roman Family Papers, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University.

The conflict between Celina and her slave Rosalie illustrates the heightened racial tension caused by the Civil War. Neither Celina nor Rosalie knew whether to stay or to go; Rosalie threatened to leave, then thought better of it, probably unsure of where she would go or how she would provide for herself; Celina, at first angered at the idea of Rosalie challenging her and leaving, later claimed she tried to get her to leave by hitting her. Neither woman was fully aware of her evolving role in the new order. Most Creole women refrained from discussing such messy and uncouth business as slapping a slave, but Celina, believing she was fast losing control in her home and her society, unabashedly described to her son her struggle to maintain the status quo.

Laura Locoul Gore described her grandmother's attempt to sell a slave named Anna and her child Toussaint, intentionally trying to separate the family. According to Laura, her mother told her father, "Wouldn't that be the same as if your baby were taken from us?" She further wrote of the incident, "Fired with paternal feelings, Father walked up to the man" and purchased Anna and Toussaint himself in order to preserve their family. Laura went on to say, "Anna never forgot the incident that had saved her child and worshiped the ground my father and mother walked on." Anna would serve as Laura's nurse and remained with the family even after the Civil War, until Laura married and left New Orleans. Laura's description of what occurred along with other family documents suggest that Emile Locoul's paternal feelings were more than just that of master for slave. The question that Desiree Locoul posed to her husband indicated that she, too, may have been aware that the situation was more than it appeared. Laura Locoul Gore chose her words very carefully; she wrote two versions of her memoir, one for her children and another for her cousins in France, and in the latter version, she only briefly described the incident and omitted any words that would imply a familial connection with the slaves. Thus, based on

Laura's own words and other family documents, Emile Locoul having fathered Anna's child Toussaint seems almost indisputable. Given Emile's connection with Toussaint, Elisabeth Locoul's determination to split up mother from son and eradicate reminders of the black members of her own family exposed one of the darkest sides of slavery.⁶⁴

The Creole woman most notorious for her gross abuse and torture of her slaves was in fact born a Macarty. Marie Delphine Macarty, a product of one of the city's most illustrious and racially blended Creole families, accrued great wealth through inheritance, business ventures, and her three marriages. Her husbands came and went, fading into the background while she acquired large tracts of real estate, numerous slaves, and social prestige. Renowned as an impressive hostess, she could also stand beside any of the richest Creole men of the city as a shrewd and successful businesswoman. Several accounts suggest that she may have been romantically connected with Paul Tulane, for whom the university was named. The Creole Delphine Macarty, with her three last names, social grace, beaux, and business savvy, suggests that she was more Scarlett O'Hara than any woman living in Georgia at the time. Yet behind this exterior of beauty, intelligence, and grace lay cruelty unmatched in Creole society of the time.⁶⁵

During the early 1830s, Delphine's treatment of her slaves began to be questioned. Most people viewed her relationship with her slaves as normal, possibly even benevolent. Harriet Martineau, a visitor to New Orleans, wrote of a story told to her of Delphine's behavior at dinner

⁶⁴Gore, Laura Locoul. *Memories of the Old Plantation Home*, 32, 33.

⁶⁵Benfey, Christopher E.G. *Degas in New Orleans: encounters in the Creole world of Kate Chopin and George Washington Cable*. University of California Press, Berkeley: 1999, 34-36; Navard, Andrew J. *Stories of New Orleans*. New Orleans: 1945, 59.

parties she hosted, during which she “would hand the remains of her glass of wine to the emaciated negro behind her chair, with a smooth audible whisper, ‘Here, my friend, take this; it will do you good.’”⁶⁶ Her father, Barthelemy Macarty, freed his slaves Clemence and Philemon in 1827 and Henriette in 1829. Delphine emancipated her slaves Jean Louis in 1819 and Devince in 1832.⁶⁷ Yet the slave quarters of her Royal Street mansion had locks seven inches in diameter on the doors and iron shutters across the windows, atypical of most Creole residences.⁶⁸ A legal inquiry was conducted, and nothing found; Delphine proved so convincing to the young lawyer who undertook the investigation that he returned “full of indignation against all who could suspect this amiable woman of doing anything wrong. . .she could not harm a fly or give pain to any human being.”⁶⁹ However, rumors were again fueled when a woman living next door claimed she watched as Delphine chased a slave girl with a cowhide until the girl plummeted to her death from the upper story of the mansion; this same woman stated that she later watched as the child’s body was buried in the courtyard that night.⁷⁰ Another legal inquiry occurred and this time Delphine was found guilty of abusing her slaves. Although the slaves were brought to the market, one of Delphine’s relatives purchased them and returned them to her.⁷¹

⁶⁶Martineau, Harriet. *Retrospect of Western Travel, Vol. I.* Harper & Brothers, New York: 1838, 263-76.

⁶⁷ Orleans Parish Court, Index to Slave Emancipation Petitions, 1814-1843, City Archives and Special Collections, New Orleans Public Library.

⁶⁸ Benfey, Christopher E.G. *Degas in New Orleans*, 36.

⁶⁹ Martineau, Harriet. *Retrospect of Western Travel, Vol. I.* Harper & Brothers, New York: 1838, 264.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 265.

⁷¹ Benfey, Christopher E.G. *Degas in New Orleans*, 38.

On April 10, 1834, all speculation ceased. The Lalaurie mansion, known by the name of Delphine's most recent husband, became ablaze after the cook deliberately set a fire in the kitchen, supposedly to expose the terrible conditions under which the slaves were living there. She herself had been confined to the area surrounding the fireplace with an eight-foot chain. While Delphine called for friends and neighbors to help save the valuables in the house, they instead hurried to the locked slave quarters and uncovered what many considered a torture chamber.⁷² *The New Orleans Advertiser* described finding one of the male slaves with "a large hole in his head; his body from head to foot was covered with scars and filled with worms. . . those who have seen the others represent them to be in a similar condition."⁷³ *The Bee* stated of the seven slaves found, "They had been confined by her for several months in the situation from which they had thus providentially been rescued, and had been merely kept in existence to prolong their sufferings and to make them taste all that the most refined cruelty could inflict."⁷⁴ The next day, Delphine Macarty Lalaurie, ostensibly setting out for a drive around the lake, left her mansion in a carriage driven by a male mulatto slave. Instead she crossed the lake to Mandeville and from there fled to France, where she remained under an assumed name for the rest of her life until her body was returned to New Orleans and secretly interred in the St. Louis Cemetery Number One. After her escape, New Orleanians of "all classes and colors" proceeded to destroy the house, removing the contents and filling the walls with graffiti. Furniture was

⁷² *The Bee*, April 11, 1834; "Shocking Brutality," Washington, D.C., *Daily National Intelligencer*, April 29, 1834.

⁷³ *The New Orleans Advertiser*, April 11, 1834.

⁷⁴ *The Bee*, April 11, 1834.

burned, bedding ripped and strewn in the streets, and fine china smashed.⁷⁵ According to Martineau, “The rage of the crowd, especially of the French creoles, was excessive.”⁷⁶ Later, Delphine would be labeled as demented, sadistic, and entirely unrepresentative of Creole culture or its treatment of slaves.

Delphine Macarty Lalaurie survives as the most horrifying example of brutality toward slaves; she embodied the appalling but logical result of a slave society and the impact of power on the psyche. As Harriet Martineau wrote, the horror of Delphine Macarty’s abuse “is a revelation of what may happen in a slaveholding country, and can happen nowhere else.” She went on to label New Orleans as “the last place in which men are gathered together where one who prizes his humanity would wish to live.”⁷⁷ Many residents of Louisiana, unwilling to indict the system by which they lived, instead vilified Delphine Macarty, calling her evil or psychotic. Despite the thin evidence some scholars have presented to attempt to refute or lessen the charges, there remains no doubt that Delphine was a cruel and brutal master guilty of the crimes of which she was accused.⁷⁸ Yet most people, both her contemporaries and the writers and historians who have since commented upon her, allowed themselves to be so blinded by her appalling cruelty that they have neglected to consider the factors that may have caused her brutality. Instead,

⁷⁵*The Courier*, April 11, 1834; Cable, George Washington, “The ‘Haunted House’ in Royal Street,” in *Strange True Stories of Louisiana*. Reprinted by Pelican Publishing Company, Gretna, LA: 1994, 197.

⁷⁶ Martineau, Harriet. *Retrospect of Western Travel, Vol. I.*, 267.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 276.

⁷⁸ Darkis, Fred R., Jr., “Madame Lalaurie of New Orleans,” *Louisiana History*, Fall 1982, Vol. XXIII, No. 4. Darkis attempts to redeem Delphine Macarty Lalaurie. While he does not succeed in exonerating her, he does bring up certain points that emphasize the complexity of the situation and the many unanswered questions surrounding the event.

reality merged with myth until her story became that of a feminine Simon Legree, a stock character that would lend itself to the greatest ghost story the city had ever told. As Fred R. Darkis, Jr. points out in his article, the huge publicity surrounding the incident, containing words such as “vengeance,” “criminal,” “shocking brutality,” and “horrible affair,” may have spawned exaggerated accounts of the event.⁷⁹ Suddenly, everyone in the city of New Orleans was somehow connected to the hideous Madame Lalaurie and could regale one with stories of her brutality. For example, the story the neighbor told of watching the burial of the slave girl whose death she claimed Delphine caused proved suspect, as no body was ever found in the Lalaurie courtyard.⁸⁰ More importantly, perhaps Louisianians were eager to exaggerate and magnify her brutality in order to take attention away from their own and to differentiate her from the norm, which they believed consisted of benevolent slaveholders. Despite the outrage, no legal attempts were ever made to apprehend her prior to or after her flight.⁸¹ At any rate, certain pieces of her story prove incapable of fitting together to create the simple picture of an evil, sadistic woman.

As Christopher Benfey keenly suggested, since the fire in 1834, no one has been able to look beyond the sadistic slave owner to consider Delphine Macarty the woman. Perhaps an examination of the role gender played in this incident would aid in uncovering an explanation. Delphine was one of the most wealthy, powerful women of her time. In fact, her wealth and power exceeded that of most men, probably leading to jealousy amongst many of her

⁷⁹“Vengeance du Ciel! Decouverte d’un grand crime,” and “Reseiñements sur les criminels Lalaurie,” *The Bee*, April 11, 1834; “Shocking Brutality,” *Daily National Intelligencer*, April 29, 1834; “A Horrible Affair,” *Niles Weekly Register*, XLVI, 1834, 152.

⁸⁰ *The Bee*, April 15, 1834.

⁸¹ Darkis, Fred R., Jr., “Madame Lalaurie of New Orleans,” 396.

contemporaries. Her family and connected families participated in many lawsuits, which were often decided in favor of her or of her own branch of the family, creating resentment.⁸² Society held certain expectations for women, and Delphine certainly did not fit the ideal or norm. As a Creole woman, she possessed an amount of independence and opportunity not offered to women in the rest of the nation and often not deemed acceptable by the Anglo Americans flooding into Louisiana since the time of statehood. Although many women did own slaves, the idea of “master” was inherently male, and Delphine certainly conducted herself as more of a master than a mistress, an idea that can also be applied to her role as wife. Her three husbands, particularly her last, Louis Lalaurie, who was younger than she was, took a backseat to her; Benfey describes him as “the inconspicuous Dr. Lalaurie, who barely figures in accounts of his radiant wife.”⁸³ According to Harriet Martineau, Dr. Lalaurie “had nothing to do with the management of her property, so that he has been in no degree mixed up with her affairs and disgraces.”⁸⁴ Perhaps Delphine’s continued refusal to accept the passive role of wife ignited resentment in both husbands and wives conforming to more conventional, socially accepted notions of marriage. Dr. Lalaurie’s assumed innocence merits questioning. Was it because the slaves were all hers, and he was known to be uninvolved in her affairs? Even still, he had to have been aware of the abuse and thus was complicit by remaining silent. No direct evidence exists to link him to the torture; yet nothing remains to suggest that he was not privy to or even party to the cruelty. That everyone assumed Delphine guilty, and guilty alone, seems interesting and illogical.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 393.

⁸³Benfey, Christopher E.G. *Degas in New Orleans*, 35.

⁸⁴ Martineau, Harriet. *Retrospect of Western Travel, Vol. I.*

Most importantly, why does the case of Delphine Macarty Lalaurie remain the most notorious example of brutality toward slaves, and she the most vilified slave owner, when many other examples of comparable or even worse abuse of slaves exists?⁸⁵ Perhaps what shocked Louisiana society and the rest of the nation even more than the extent of the torture was the fact that it was performed by a woman, a practicing Catholic, wife and mother, of the best society and the greatest beauty. *The Bee*'s account supports such a reaction, stating, "These slaves were the property of the demon, in the shape of a woman."⁸⁶ No one expected that a woman would be capable of such cruelty, and, outraged by the implications, people vilified her as an aberration, inhuman, demonic, so as to separate her from other women and protect their status as idyllic, gentle Madonnas, refraining from contradicting society's accepted notion of gender roles.

Was Delphine Macarty truly a born demon, or was she instead a product of the racial oppression of her time, broken down by it until she lashed out at the easiest, most vulnerable targets of her frustration, her slaves? How does a woman who emancipated at least two of her slaves and witnessed her father's emancipation of several of his own come to torture her remaining slaves? The history of the Macarty family lends itself to making sense of Delphine's story. Delphine was part of a proud line of wealthy, prestigious white Macartys thriving side by side, within the same city, as an equally proud, wealthy, and prestigious family of Macartys who happened to be black. In fact, these two Macarty lines came from one and the same family. An intelligent, active woman like Delphine had to have been aware of the black Macartys, many of whom were lawyers, business and plantation owners, and slave holders; in fact, she may have

⁸⁵ Schafer, Judith Kelleher. *Slavery, the Civil Law, and the Supreme Court of Louisiana*, 28-57.

⁸⁶ *The Bee*, April 11, 1834.

openly encountered them.⁸⁷ The aforementioned Eugene Macarty, who considered Eulalie Mandeville his wife and their children his rightful heirs, was Delphine's uncle; her family sued Eulalie for Eugene's assets after his death and lost, the judges deciding entirely in favor of what some would term her uncle's concubine and others his wife.⁸⁸ Several documents exist that suggest Delphine's father, Barthelemy Macarty, also had a liaison with a woman of color.⁸⁹ George Washington Cable described this system of placage as "threatening the moral destruction of private society, and hated—as only woman can hate enemies of the hearthstone—by the proud, fair ladies of the Creole pure blood, among whom Mme. Lalaurie shone brilliantly."⁹⁰ Delphine, proud of her lineage and her family name, may have felt threatened, even enraged, by the presence of blacks sharing both her name and line in the city her ancestors helped establish. Her anger may even have been motivated by moral outrage as a good Catholic, disgusted with her male family members' adultery and the illegitimate children it produced. In addition to this, another one of Delphine's uncles, Louis Le Breton, was murdered

⁸⁷ Bryan, Violet Harrington. "Marcus Christian's Treatment of Les Gens de Couleur Libre" in Kein, Sybil, ed. *Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana's Free People of Color*. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge: 2000, 49; Gehman, Mary. "Visible Means of Support: Business, Professions, and Trades of Free People of Color" in Kein, Sybil, ed. *Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana's Free People of Color*. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge: 2000, 215.

⁸⁸ *Macarty et al. v. Mandeville*, 3.

⁸⁹ Hall, Gwendolyn Midlo, comp. *Afro-Louisiana History and Genealogy, 1718-1820 (Slave)* [database online].

⁹⁰ Cable, George Washington, "The 'Haunted House' in Royal Street," in *Strange True Stories of Louisiana*. Reprinted by Pelican Publishing Company, Gretna, LA: 1994.

by his slaves, and several accounts of Delphine's story, including that which is included in the WPA guide to Louisiana, purports that Delphine's mother was also murdered by her slave.⁹¹

Delphine was born into this environment of racial tension, an uneasy co-existence that often resulted in violence, and witnessing this precarious balance and its repercussions, she eventually succumbed to the violence herself. Incapable of striking out against the men who perpetrated what she considered sins or the individual slaves who took the life of at least one of her relatives, Delphine snapped and, feeling a victim herself, made her slaves the victims of her own brutality and rage. Delphine was exceptional in that she acted out her desire for vengeance; she was not exceptional in her desire for vengeance or in her capacity for violence. She was in every way representative of Creole society and, until her cruelty overcame her, epitomized Creole womanhood. Like so many other Creole women of her time, Delphine possessed power, wealth, and beauty; she moved in the best circles and came from an old family considered by all to be aristocratic. She was a mother of two daughters and a son who died in infancy, she was Catholic, and she owned slaves.⁹² She exhibited both benevolence, through her emancipation of some of her slaves, and cruelty, in the torture that would ultimately come to define her. Stripped of property, reputation ruined, slaves taken from her, she would not return to her native land until her death when, upon her request, she was laid to her final rest in her city, New Orleans.

⁹¹Porteus, Laura L. "Official Investigation of the Murder of Juan Baptiste Cezaire Lebreton on the Night of May 31, 1771. . .," *The Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 8. Juan Baptiste Lebreton's slave Temba, a hunter, with the help of other slaves, killed Lebreton. Lebreton refused to allow Temba to sleep with a female slave on another plantation. Temba stated that Lebreton was "bad, and did not give them time off."

⁹²Nolan, Charles E., ed. *Archdiocese of New Orleans Sacramental Records, 1807-1809*, Vol. 9. Archdiocese of New Orleans, New Orleans: 1994, 37; Nolan, Charles E., ed. *Archdiocese of New Orleans Sacramental Records, 1813-1815*, Vol. 11. Archdiocese of New Orleans, New Orleans: 1996, 40; Nolan, Charles E., ed. *Archdiocese of New Orleans Sacramental Records, 1828-1829*, Vol. 18. Archdiocese of New Orleans, New Orleans: 2000, 228-229.

Delphine exemplified all Creole women, capable of extreme good and extreme evil, conscious of her place in society but willing to push the limits, shaped by a society in which the master-slave relationship proved the defining element. As she found out, and Celina Roman later discovered, they would not always be the masters.

Conclusion

The Reins of Government

Did you ever hear of the Napoleonic code, Stella? . . . Now we got here in the state of Louisiana what's known as the Napoleonic code. You see, now according to that, what belongs to the wife belongs to the husband also, and vice versa. . . It looks to me like you've been swindled baby. And when you get swindled under Napoleonic code, I get swindled too and I don't like to get swindled. . .¹

Although Stanley Kuwalski's remarks in Tennessee Williams' play *A Streetcar Named Desire* seem in line with his characteristic chauvinism, Stanley unwittingly points out an element of Louisiana's French legal heritage that actually benefitted married women during a time when other states' laws remained discriminatory. The Napoleonic code gave married women the right to own property and enabled them to challenge their husbands legally if their husbands attempted to swindle them.² The state of Louisiana's legal system was not the only way in which it differed from the rest of the country. Throughout southeast Louisiana, Creoles spoke a different language, practiced a different religion, participated in different traditions, and held different views of race than were prevalent in the rest of the nation. Creole women struggled to maintain the French language and continued to speak and write in French well into the beginning of the twentieth century. Through the figure of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Catholicism provided Creole women with a model of both passivity and authority, suffering and strength, that did not exist for the mostly Protestant women in the rest of the country. Despite most Southern women's hesitance in disciplining their slaves and reluctance to see themselves as masters, Creole women

¹Williams, Tennessee. *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Signet Books, New York: 1947, 34-35.

²Warbasse, Elizabeth Bowles. *The Changing Legal Rights of Married Women 1800-1861*. Garland Publishing, Inc., New York: 1987, 48-49.

who owned plantations identified themselves not as mistresses but as masters and had no qualms about exacting harsh punishments on their slaves.

Louisiana's legal system allowed women like Magdelaine Becnel, Nanette Duparc, and Elisabeth Locoul to run their own businesses and plantations, solely manage and possess their own finances and property, and have their own wills. The economic independence afforded to them by law enabled them to thrive without the aid of men and to be more than just wives and mothers. They adhered to tradition by serving as guardians of their unique Creole culture and as devout Catholics but challenged the traditions of the rest of the nation and the some of the patriarchal notions present even in their own culture. These women were exceptional not just for their region but for all of the nation, not just because of their distinct culture but because of their business savvy, strength, and independence. The success of these Creole women reveals the potential of other women across the nation had the law not denied them the opportunity to achieve the same success and had their society not possessed such puritanical views of women's roles. Laura Locoul Gore wrote of Elisabeth Duparc Locoul, "Grandmother was a very bright woman, but strong-willed. She had never wanted to give up the reins of government," even when she was almost eighty years old.³ That Elisabeth Locoul had access to "the reins of government," that she chose to grab hold of them and guide the course of her destiny and that of her family's, is a testament to her own ambitious drive and intellect, to the scores of women across the River Parishes just like her, to the legal system of Louisiana, and to the Creole culture

³ Gore, Laura Locoul. *Memories of the Old Plantation Home*. The Zoe Company, Inc., Vacherie, LA: 2001, 51.

that produced it all, a culture that neither underestimated its women nor forced them into dependence.

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