Toward an Ideal of Moral and Democratic Education: Afro-Creoles and Straight University in Reconstruction New Orleans, 1862-1896

Dana C. Hart

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations

Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation

https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations/3103
TOWARD AN IDEAL OF MORAL AND DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION:
AFRO-CREOLES AND STRAIGHT UNIVERSITY IN RECONSTRUCTION
NEW ORLEANS, 1862-1896

A Dissertation

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
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The School of Education

by
Dana C. Hart
B.A. University of Massachusetts, Amherst 1998
M.A. Boston College, 2002
May 2014
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To begin, this project would not be possible without the guidance and support of my excellent dissertation committee. Dr. Roland Mitchell, you provided the foundation for me and instilled a sense of excitement and awe in exploring historically Black colleges and universities. Without your support and partnership, this idea would not have come to fruition. Dr. Petra Hendry, you also offered the encouragement and intellectual capital to propel this idea forward, and challenged me to reimagine history in new and exciting ways. It was through your guidance and teaching that I developed an interest in the Atlantic World and New Orleans over its three hundred-year history. I am grateful for the opportunity to revisit the past with you and highlight the subjective, psychological side of the historical process. Dr. Paul Binford, you provided invaluable advice and insight that helped inform the archival research and writing process. I am truly grateful for your time and suggestions in developing my historical writing. I also wish to extend my gratitude to my Dean’s Representative Dr. Andrea Morris. Thank you for your guidance and support throughout this entire process. Finally, I want to extend my gratitude to my friend and colleague, Dr. Tommy Karam. Your wisdom and encouragement certainly made this process easier to navigate. I appreciate all of your advice and careful guidance.

I also want to thank Shannon Prest Cole for her expert editing efforts. This was by no means a small task. Shannon, you opened my eyes to new ways of looking at this project. Thank you for that. I also wanted to thank Ben Bourgeois and Brandon Rasberry for their formatting assistance with many of the figures and illustrations in this dissertation. Further, I especially want to thank Bill Silvia for his sage advice and continual guidance throughout my doctoral studies. I’m grateful for your support and help in my academic and professional endeavors.
I also want to thank my friends and family who also made this possible. There are so many people to thank, but without a doubt, Berlisha Morton helped me to think critically and believe in myself. Berlisha, your friendship and writing partnership means so much and you challenged me in every possible way. I am so grateful for all that you have done for me and look forward to our writing projects in the years to come! A special shout-out to my friend Eric Platt as well. Eric, thank you for your feedback and help in navigating Louisiana archives and the historical process. You definitely informed this project and helped me develop a further interest in educational history and the Gulf Coast. Thank you for that.

This has been a wonderful and challenging journey for me: one of intellectual curiosity and discovery, but also a journey of patience and perseverance. This project would not be possible without the love, advice, and support from my family. My parents—all eight of them—have provided the love and support needed to make a project like this a reality. To my brothers and sisters, thank you for always believing in me! Finally, and least significantly, I want to thank my wife Courtney. I spent considerable time away from you and Jacques, writing at the kitchen table and coffee shops in Baton Rouge and New Orleans. Courtney, your love and support kept me afloat and guided me to the finish line. I did not do this on my own; you carried me in every possible way. I am grateful to be a part of your life.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .................................................................................................................. ii

LIST OF FIGURES......................................................................................................................... vi

ABSTRACT ...................................................................................................................................... viii

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW ......................................................................... 1
  Research Questions ....................................................................................................................... 12
  Situating Straight University in a Historical Context: Possibilities and Limitations .............. 13
  Methodological Overview: Ethnographic History and Conceptually Mapping the Past ....... 20
  Organization of the Study ........................................................................................................... 25

CHAPTER TWO: ETHNOGRAPHIC HISTORY, METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS, AND THE NATURE OF ARCHIVAL RESEARCH ................................................................. 28
  Assumptions and Considerations of Ethnographic History ....................................................... 30
  Historiography and Archival Research: A Reimagined Perspective ......................................... 44
  Summary Review ......................................................................................................................... 60

CHAPTER THREE: HISTORICAL ASSUMPTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS OF AFRO-CREOLE IDENTITY AND CULTURE .................................................................................. 62
  Creole: A Curious Word and an Ambiguous Identity ................................................................. 64
  Ethnogenesis: Historical Assumptions and Considerations ...................................................... 69
  Summary Review ......................................................................................................................... 87

CHAPTER FOUR: AFRO-CREOLES AND THE FOUNDATION OF MORAL AND DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION ................................................................................................................. 89
  “Creole” Education in New Orleans ......................................................................................... 91
  An Ideal of Moral and Democratic Education: Black Women Religious .............................. 102
  Summary Review ......................................................................................................................... 110

CHAPTER FIVE: HIGHER EDUCATION IN NEW ORLEANS: SOCIAL, POLITICAL, AND PHILOSOPHICAL CONSIDERATIONS .............................................................................. 112
  A Changing Landscape: Reconstruction and Black Higher Education ................................. 122
  Summary Review ......................................................................................................................... 138
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>Sketching of Straight University</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>Photo of Dr. Louis Charles Roudanez</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>Photo of Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Sketching of St. Louis Cathedral and Chartres Street</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Map of New Orleans: Vieux Carré, Faubourg Marigny and Tremé</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Map of New Orleans, Three Municipalities and City Wards</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Photo of Thomy Lafon</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Photo of Henriette Delille</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Classroom at St. Augustine’s</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>A Sketch of Charity Hospital</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>A Sketch of the University of Louisiana</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>Photo of Leland Hall, Leland University</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>Photo of New Orleans University</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>Photo of Southern University’s Central Building</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Engraving of Mechanics’ Institute</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>Engraving of the Riot Aftermath</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>A Portrait of Seymour Straight</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>Lot Dimensions for Straight University</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>Theological Department Students</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 7.4 Faculty and Students of Straight University......................................................... 197

Figure 7.5 Straight University, Canal Street Campus......................................................... 203

Figure 7.6 Dillard University Campus............................................................................. 207

Figure 8.1 Photo of Exchange Alley............................................................................. 220

Figure 8.2 Photo of Arthur Esteves............................................................................. 226

Figure 8.3 Photo of Albion W. Tourgée ........................................................................ 229

Figure 8.4 Photo of Daniel Desdunes ........................................................................... 231

Figure 9.1 Photo of the Straight University Baseball Team ........................................... 244
ABSTRACT

The history of historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) tends to be overwhelmingly linear in structure and drawn from the interrelationships between northern philanthropy and denominational groups. While important to their origin and development, the analysis tends to be one-sided and monolithic. Moreover, little voice or perspective is given to the local community of color, their intellectual movement, and their motives and influence. In presenting a different perspective, then, this dissertation complicates the traditional narrative of black higher education and explores the different people and constituencies involved from below—that is, the people that were overwhelmingly disadvantaged, exploited, and marginalized, who articulated ideas and concerns against existing power dynamics.

This dissertation tells this story of Straight University from its founding and development in Reconstruction New Orleans to 1896. Straight University emerged as an integrated higher education institution in New Orleans in 1870 and promoted education and training for young men and women, irrespective of race, gender, or ethnicity. The university became a popular option for Afro-Creoles in New Orleans. As francophone people of African descent, Afro-Creoles were free people of color and formed a distinctive caste between black slaves and free whites within Louisiana society. Afro-Creoles represented the city’s predominantly black Catholic and French-speaking community and maintained a philosophy of political radicalism and social and political protest. This activist spirit and dissent played a significant role in developing democratic education: opportunities for education, equality, and citizenship against the backdrop of a dizzying political, social, and cultural milieu in New Orleans during Reconstruction.
As a social and educational history, this study theorizes that the progressive Afro-Creole community in New Orleans influenced opportunities and access to higher education at Straight, irrespective of race, age, gender, class, or ethnicity. It also examines how a racial consciousness in New Orleans played a role in the formation of Afro-Creole culture and identity which transcended to the development of Straight University. Through archival records and secondary source analysis, this history reveals Straight University as a democratic space, free of racial standardization and disdain, where students could attain an education to become an educated and free citizenry.
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

The providence of God seemed to favor the enterprise from the beginning; and, within these brief months, more than eight hundred students have been instructed. Its beautiful and well arranged apartments, ample modern facilities for instruction, scholarly and consecrated teachers, and the high moral tone of its culture, render it ore-eminent as a school for youth. Distinguished gentlemen, familiar with the best methods of instruction, have expressed the highest commendation. Because it is Catholic in its aims and through in its culture, several students of the Saxton [sic] race have availed themselves of its advantages; and at no distant day it is expected that all nationalities will freely enter its departments (emphasis mine).

– Colonel E. W. Mason, Freedmen’s Bureau

It is the aim of the University to meet an imperative necessity and furnish all who would enjoy its advantages; the most thorough and ample culture, and so fit them for usefulness and honor. Its aims must meet the approval, and its needs must enlist the co-operation of the liberal minded everywhere. – *Straight University Catalogue*, 1870-1871

On an early winter morning in 1870 and with little notice or fanfare, Straight University opened its doors in New Orleans on the corner of Esplanade Avenue and North Derbigny Street, in what was described as a “pleasant and healthful part of the city.” Easily accessible from the street railway and retired from the “din of business,” the campus comprised two buildings behind the outskirts of the French Quarter in Tremé. The Faubourg Tremé (or Tremé suburb or neighborhood in contemporary parlance) was territory once belonging to Claude Tremé, a native French planter who inherited the land from his spouse in 1810, a manumitted woman of color named Julie Moreau. The university occupied a spacious lot refashioned from Tremé’s antebellum plantation in 1812. It was situated below Canal Street and near the “State Fair Grounds,” and enjoyed what university benefactor and namesake Seymour Straight elatedly


3 *Straight University Catalogue*, 1901-1902, 53, Dillard Archives.

described as “an old double street car route under two rows of large shade trees.” The *American Missionary*, the American Missionary Association’s monthly circular, even went as far as to compare the idyllic setting to “the boulevards of Paris.” Despite the quaint campus façade, its true purpose and import was that it represented a space for all students and communities to gather, spanning across and within boundaries of race, gender, class, and culture. Straight emerged as an integrated higher education institution in New Orleans in which the newly signed university Act of Incorporation in June 1869 confirmed in promoting education and training for young men and women, “irrespective of color or race.”

But why study Straight University? What is its significance to the history of higher education as a field and to the cultural, political, social, and economic implications and considerations it maintains for the city of New Orleans? To be sure, Louisiana had experimented with other colleges and universities in the nineteenth century. Despite the common myth that a culture of anti-intellectualism and illiteracy existed for generations in New Orleans, the College of Orleans opened its doors as the first higher education institution in 1805. The Medical College of Louisiana was incorporated by an act of the legislature in 1835 and the state-funded University of Louisiana (later part of Tulane University) followed in 1847. Yet, these institutions shared a common practice of exclusion, where women and people of color remained shut out and relegated to the margins. It was only in the aftermath of the Civil War and the Reconstruction experiment that higher education institutions in Louisiana extended opportunities

---

5 Seymour Straight to George Whipple, AMA, Mar. 29, 1869, AMA Archives.
6 *American Missionary*, 1870, AMA Archives.
7 Straight University, *Act of Incorporation*, June 25, 1869, AMA Archives.
to women and men, black and white, against the backdrop of renewed and reimagined social and political possibilities for equality.⁹

More than one thousand students attended Straight University during the 1870-1871 academic year. Students attended various schools and departments at the university, including theology and commercial business training; other students attended the normal school and high school. Although the institution promoted collegiate-level curriculum and instruction in law and medicine with a sound curriculum and first-rate faculty, it mainly provided opportunities for students to learn basic arithmetic and acquire a “thorough English education” during its initial years of operation.¹⁰ To be admitted, students had to demonstrate good moral character; for the “moral character of the student is considered of primary importance, and no student will be allowed to remain a member of the university whose character is doubtful.“¹¹ Many of these students arrived from various towns and parishes in Louisiana, from Shreveport, Alexandria, Lafayette, Terrebonne, and Houma; others travelled from much greater distances, including Chicago, Cleveland, Philadelphia, and Havana, Cuba.¹² Yet, the majority of students hailed from the various networks of people, neighborhoods, and close-knit communities within Faubourg Tremé and Faubourg Marigny (just outside the French Quarter), and other New Orleans neighborhoods downriver, including the Bywater and New Marigny, close to Lake Pontchartrain.¹³

---

⁹ It should be emphasized that by 1884 Tulane University restricted admission to white men. Paul Tulane’s donation specified “white young persons,” which clearly barred access to people of color. However, then-president William Preston Johnston further excluded women from the enterprise, suggesting that women would defeat “the manifest purpose of the state . . . the education of males.” See Susan Tucker and Beth Willinger, ed., Newcomb College, 1886-2006: Higher Education for Women in New Orleans (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2012), 15-16.

¹⁰ Straight University Catalogue, 1870-1871, Dillard Archives.

¹¹ Straight University Catalogue, 1870-1871, Dillard Archives.

¹² Straight University Catalogue, 1870-1871, Dillard Archives.

The university emerged as a space for community and egalitarianism in the aftermath of the Civil War in the American South. Tellingly, at a time when the assertion of emancipation and civil rights redefined how people lived together in reconstructing a New South, it also illuminated the distinct challenge and struggle to link citizenship with democracy and education for the formerly enslaved and disenfranchised. In this frame, then, education became a pathway to democratic citizenship and an archetype to shape the future direction of southern society in a meaningful and tangible way. Straight University symbolized this progressive spirit and ideal in 1870 New Orleans (see Figure 1.1).

![Sketch of Straight University, 1870](image)

Figure 1.1 Sketching of Straight University, 1870.\(^{14}\)

The university also became a popular option for Afro-Creoles and Black Catholics in New Orleans, particularly within Tremé itself, since it remained a neighborhood for free people of color and immigrants from Haiti and Cuba.\(^{15}\) The vast majority of the mostly Catholic, French-speaking Afro-Creole community lived in three of the city wards that stretched across

---

\(^{14}\) Sketch of Straight University (undated), Courtesy *Straight University Catalogue, 1870-1871*, Dillard Archives.

two downtown municipalities (including the Vieux Carré, Faubourg Tremé, and Faubourg Marigny), while the majority of the uptown sector held less than 12 percent of the free black population. Afro-Creoles were free people of color, or gens de colour libre, and formed a distinctive caste between black slaves and free whites within Louisiana society. They “stood between—or rather apart—sharing the cultivated tastes of the upper caste and the painful humiliation attached to the race of the enslaved.” Afro-Creoles proved indispensable in developing opportunities for equality, citizenship, and integrated education during Reconstruction. They represented the city’s predominantly Catholic and French-speaking free black community and maintained a philosophy of political radicalism, revolution, and social and political protest.

This dissertation tells this story of Straight University from its founding and development in Reconstruction New Orleans to 1896. It is my thesis that the progressive Afro-Creole community in New Orleans influenced conditions and opportunities for democratic higher education, irrespective of race, gender, class, or ethnicity. What does it ultimately mean, though, to suggest that democratic education emerged at Straight University? Is it not the aim and purpose of education to promote a democratic society as a public right for each citizen? Democratic education represents a convergence of democratic ideals in much the way that Amy Gutmann posits, in providing “foundations upon which a democratic society can secure the civil and political freedoms of its adult citizens without placing their welfare or its very survival at

---

19 O’Neill, S.J., foreword, 1.
Accordingly, at a time when people of color navigated a climate of racial discrimination, marginality, and suspicion, Straight University promoted opportunities for democratic participation through access to the educational enterprise. It offered a democratic space, free of racial standardization and disdain, where students could attain an education to become an educated, free, and equal citizenry.

In formulating this study, I did not want to construct another historical narrative that places the role of northern philanthropy and denominational groups front-and-center in creating opportunities for higher education after the Civil War. While important, and an element I will explore, particularly from an operational and financial standpoint of the American Missionary Association (AMA), I wanted to move away from this dominant narrative and paternalistic framework that tends to direct the literature on historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Moreover, since the role of local black communities in enhancing these opportunities is often overlooked, I wanted to explore the different people and constituencies involved from below—that is, the people that are overwhelmingly disadvantaged, exploited, and marginalized, who articulate ideas and concerns against existing power dynamics.

This led me to explore the role Afro-Creoles in New Orleans. These ardent supporters of liberty and democracy were “animated by the purest patriotism and their sincerity equaled their righteousness.” They included philanthropists François Lacroix, Aristide Mary, and Thomy Lafon; poets, teachers, and patriots, such as Armand Lanusse; Henriette Delille, who established the Sisters of Holy Family, an order of nuns of color, and remained a steadfast advocate of

---

21 For the purposes of this study, I will use the terms American Missionary Association and AMA interchangeably.
literacy development;\textsuperscript{24} civil rights activists Dr. Louis Charles Roudanez (see Figure 1.2), Jean-Baptiste Roudanez, E. Arnold Bertonneau, and Paul Trevigné; and political activists Louis A. Martinet, Caesar C. Antoine, and Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes, among others. Many of these Afro-Creoles had direct experiences with Straight University. For example, Louis Charles Roudanez and Aristide Mary assumed leadership posts on the executive board of trustees; Louis A. Martinet was first a student at Straight and then became a faculty member in law and languages; and Rodolphe Desdunes matriculated as a law student, and along with Martinet, assumed a role as a political and civil rights activist in the \textit{Comité de Citoyens} (the Citizens’ Committee).\textsuperscript{25}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{roudanez.jpg}
\caption{Photo of Dr. Louis Charles Roudanez\textsuperscript{26}}
\end{figure}

I also assert the idea that opportunities to develop Straight University did not simply manifest once the Civil War ended, with northern philanthropists erecting buildings, students

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{24} Thompson, \textit{Exiles at Home}, 13.
\textsuperscript{25} For the purposes of this study, I will use \textit{Comité de Citoyens} and Citizens Committee interchangeably.
\end{flushleft}
arriving from afar, and accomplished faculty ready to teach. Rather, its genesis occurred years before its incorporation and fateful opening in autumn 1870. It emerged from the distinct historical traditions and dizzying trajectory in New Orleans during the colonial, antebellum, and Reconstruction periods: from a murky hub of a Mississippi-Caribbean frontier to French colonization; to Latin culture and Roman law as tenants of the Spanish administration after 1769; and finally to the inexorable push toward Americanization in 1803, where a nascent republic sought to impose its rule and customary racial dualism through slave labor in an antebellum plantation society.

Straight emerged within these shifting boundaries of politics, race, and class that dominated much of the city’s spatial identity and demographic composition. It evolved from the extreme race relations characterized by the bitterness, hatred, and violence across the South. Yet it also developed from and within a politically redefined city after the Civil War during the Reconstruction experiment. It is within this latter phase that I define the time frame of this study. It incorporates a broader timeline than what traditional historians typically ascribe to this period. Invariably the traditional chronological frame ranges from 1863 and the Emancipation Proclamation to 1877 with the election of conservative Redeemer Democrats in Louisiana, including former Confederate general Francis T. Nichols as governor, and the subsequent withdrawal of federal troops from southern states.

This study is marked at the beginning of 1862 when the federal occupation of New Orleans begins and extends to 1896 with Homer Adolph Plessy, an Afro-Creole shoemaker and

community activist, and his legal challenge to state-imposed segregation. Incorporating a strain of Creole radicalism, “more assertive and independent, with broader horizons and self-confidence,” Plessy and his fellow Afro-Creole activi30
tists, including Martinet, Desdunes (see Figure 1.3), Eugene Luscy, Paul Bonseigne31
ur, and others, formed the Citizens’ Committee, to challenge racial conceptions, degradations, and the imposition of Jim Crow. For Martinet, Desdunes, and Plessy, “public rights and privileges” were essential to the substance of equal rights and dignity of citizens in the public sphere.32 As a thread of an evolving Atlantic and Caribbean antiracism, the Plessy challenge to forced segregation on the railways appears less romantic and more intrinsically linked to the long-standing New Orleans-based claims of public rights and to the convictions that drew influence from events in Haiti, France, and Cuba.33

Figure 1.3 Photo of Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes34

31 Louisiana State Constitution, Title I, Article I, 1868.
34 Photo of Rodolphe L. Desdunes in Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes, Our People and Our History.
The *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision in 1896 marked an end to the liberty, social egalitarianism, and democratic ethos in the aftermath of emancipation and integrated education, the ideals that Afro-Creoles promoted and the very symbol that Straight University embodied. Although Straight sustained a devastating fire in 1877 and relocated to a new campus on Canal Street, by 1896 the city’s landscape changed, and the Afro-Creole democratic movement ended. New Orleans experienced continual redefinition and renegotiation, and the unimagined consequences and unresolved tensions of politics, identity, and race led to the uncompromising paternalistic framework of separate-but-equal, the racial restrictions and violence that extended to nearly every facet of southern life and marked the painful Jim Crow era.\(^ {35} \)

Finally, but not least significantly, a focus of my historical narrative explores the people who made the university a possibility and a reality from an historical and interpretive perspective. I recapture the distinct and rather complex nuances, personalities, and ideas that influenced people and events during this period, an attempt to rescue Afro-Creoles from obscurity and defamation to which the traditional view of higher education in Reconstruction consigned them.\(^ {36} \) Furthermore, while an emphasis is made on describing the important role of key university stakeholders and benefactors, notably Seymour Straight and the AMA, including Reverend Joseph W. Healy, Reverend George Whipple, as well as local politicians, the Freedmen’s Bureau, and other constituency groups, much of this inquiry examines Afro-Creoles of New Orleans: the poets, journalists, doctors, lawyers, philanthropists, faculty, and civil rights activists. In fact, the Afro-Creole community, representing voices of resistance and agents for

---


meaningful change, embodied an ethos of promoting equal access to education before the Civil War and before the advent of state-sanctioned discrimination and segregation.

To be sure, these ideals and standpoints emanated in *L’Union*, a French language bi-weekly newspaper founded in 1862 by Afro-Creoles Dr. Louis Charles Roudanez, Jean-Baptiste Roudanez, and Paul Trévigne, a multilingual teacher at the Catholic Institute. The newspaper published editorials, essays, and literary works that set the Civil War and the Reconstruction struggle within a context of democratic revolution. They incorporated the French and Haitian Revolutions in abolishing slavery and extending suffrage to free men of color and former slaves. These Afro-Creoles also linked a Catholic and spiritualist religious ethic that stressed charity, equality, and universal brotherhood, notably through romanticized publications of Saint Vincent de Paul and other Catholic leaders.

*L’Union* disbanded in July of 1864, and a week later, became the foundation for the first black daily newspaper, the *New Orleans Tribune*/*la Tribune de la Nouevelle-Orleans*. The *Tribune* maintained the same republican stance and character of its predecessor and it also promoted a platform for enfranchisement and public integrated education:

A good school bill put into effective operation throughout the State, is our greatest present need. It would be beyond all price. Education among our people would secure their rights more effectually than the best of laws. Good legislation we demand, but education would ensure what mere legislation never can—that knowledge and wisdom, that self-respect and respect from others, that self-reliance and independence which would place our liberty beyond all hazard, and also make it a blessing. Let our people in the city and parishes understand that without education their rights are never safe. Ignorance will bring dependence and slavery.

---

37 The Couvent School, or the Société Catholique pour l’Instruction des Orphéleins dans l’Indigence, served as a framework for the possibilities of democratic education at Straight University. Also known as the Catholic Institute for Indigent Orphans or the Couvent School, this will be highlighted in more detail in the second chapter.  
Particularly strident in their editorials and appeals for social justice and using a platform of integrated education, Afro-Creoles made their case for a unified nation, suggesting “Do not make any longer white and black citizens; let us have but Americans.”

But how did Afro-Creoles influence opportunities at Straight University? Why did such men as Aristide Mary, Charles Louis Roudanez, and Thomy Lafon, among others, lend their names and financial support to this university versus the other black higher education institutions that developed in New Orleans during Reconstruction? Undeniably, Afro-Creoles offered hope, inspiration, and political dissent though a campaign for racial equality that manifested in the South’s most progressive vision of the future—the Louisiana 1868 state constitution. The state constitution remained a powerful force in promoting equal civil and political rights, irrespective of race, ethnicity, class, and gender. The state charter mandated equal access to public education (including the funding for higher education), and it explicitly required equal treatment on public transportation and in licensed businesses and other places of public accommodation. It proved an embodiment of Enlightenment discourse, of collective, political participation, and a reflection of “democracy in action.” It is within this environment that Straight University emerged and the egalitarian ethos defined its culture and institutional identity.

**Research Questions**

In integrating this historical context, and to briefly summarize, I credit Afro-Creoles with launching a unique democratic movement that had a direct and lasting imprint on the development of Straight University. To better frame and situate the interplay of social, political, and economic forces in developing democratic education, this study is guided by the following overarching research question: how did an Afro-Creole protest tradition help create educational

---

41 *Tribune* (New Orleans, LA), Jul. 31, 1867.
opportunities for people of color in Reconstruction New Orleans? In the chapters to follow, I also answer the following secondary questions:

1. How did a racial consciousness in New Orleans play a role in the formation of Creole culture and identity, and how did this transcend to the development of Straight University?

2. What political and economic forces and specific conditions emanated during this period and how did this enhance moral and democratic education?

3. What role does democracy play in higher education and how did Straight University attempt to embody this ideal in New Orleans as part of a broader segment of higher education in the United States?

Situating Straight University in a Historical Context: Possibilities and Limitations

I began this study with a rather straightforward goal: to understand the social, political, and economic features behind the development of Straight University in Reconstruction New Orleans. As a student of higher education and historical foundations, I have always been interested in understanding the social and structural dynamics behind colleges and universities. In particular, I am intrigued by the specific historical context in which these institutions emerge and the legacy that endures (the lasting significance from a contemporary standpoint). But I am also interested in the story itself and the people who make these institutions come alive in the imagination. People like William Rainey Harper, president of the University of Chicago, who in his own right steadfastly endorsed an ideal of democratic education by promoting the value, mission, and ideas about what education should be and for whom it should be offered. Harper suggested, “Democracy has been given a mission to the world, and it is of no uncertain character . . . the university is the prophet of this democracy, as well as its priest and philosopher; that in
other words, the university is the Messiah of the democracy, its to-be-expected deliverer.”43 A passionate expert of the Old Testament, Harper’s nuanced language defined a progressivism that drew on much of the colleges and universities in the late-nineteenth century, the South included.

The history of higher education in the United States is often portrayed as a survey from the colonial era through the twentieth century that typically explores aspects of the curriculum, institutional mission and composition, funding and research, and student and intellectual life. It is often characterized as a process of fundamental transformation and change that discernibly shifts each generation, which broadly includes colonial colleges, denominational colleges, the research enterprise, and the academic revolution through expanded access and public higher education during the twentieth century. It is a national success story predating the nation’s founding and it reflects the changing society in and around colleges and universities in places like Boston, Chicago, Baltimore, and Philadelphia, among others.

But what about higher education institutions in the South? Formative works in higher education history offer little information about the development of nineteenth century southern colleges and universities except that comparatively these institutions lagged behind their counterparts in other regions. Despite the federal government’s support for land-grant colleges with such schools as Clemson, Virginia Tech, and Georgia, among others, as well as denominational institutions including Duke, Vanderbilt, and Emory, historians tend to view colleges and universities in southern cities as an educational backwater that resisted reform.44 New Orleans is one such example. The city and its people are situated within this prevailing narrative of anti-intellectualism and educational shortcomings, for “the city’s supposed lack of

---

interest in the mind was only natural for a place so engaged in the pleasures of the body.”

This myth has persisted for generations, despite the record of literacy, intellectual life, and educational opportunities through private and religious education during the colonial and antebellum periods. The initial history of Straight University during the Reconstruction period runs counter to this notion that New Orleans resisted education and academic sophistication and progress, particularly evident in its diverse curricular offerings of Greek, rhetoric, physics, logic, and political economy.

One way to explore historical foundations of higher education institutions is through institutional history. These histories examine colleges and universities from their foundation and development to the distinct organization that they represent in the present. They are often chronologically oriented, highlighting key events and developments during their history; yet, they also seem to evoke some nostalgic remembrance of their identity and sense of place in history. As higher education historian John Thelin confirms, “Colleges and universities are historical institutions. They may suffer amnesia or may have selective recall, but ultimately heritage is the lifeblood of our campuses.” This heritage is translated and conveyed by the institution’s physical expression—its “hallowed” halls, architecture, distinct symbolism, and rituals—but also the people who create them, and the inherent politics and personalities, ideas and beliefs, and passions and pragmatism that define the social condition. Hence, as historians Clarence Mohr and Joseph Gordon posit in *Tulane: The Emergence of a Modern University,*

---

47 *Straight University Catalogue, 1870-1871*, Dillard Archives.

“institutional history ultimately revolves around people rather than bureaucratic structures or social science abstractions.”

In my quest to examine Straight in postbellum New Orleans, I discovered that institutional histories of the university simply do not exist. This posed a challenge and an opportunity for my study. Straight University remains classified as an HBCU, but the institution as originally conceived is no longer in existence. Straight University closed its doors and merged with New Orleans University (another local institution for students of color) on June 6, 1930 to form Dillard University, today a leading HBCU in New Orleans. Straight’s closure, or “inability to survive,” presented a challenge for this study in formulation and purpose. As I continued to research the university, I quickly realized the lack of scholarship on this topic. A fundamental reason for the lack of published histories on the higher education institution is the paucity of archival documentation during the Reconstruction period. Little primary source materials remain with which to explore the founding and development of Straight University since 1869.

Straight is often included as part of a broader treatment of postbellum higher education, notably in such works as John W. Blassingame’s *Black New Orleans, 1860-1880*, Joe M. Richardson’s *Christian Reconstruction: The American Missionary Association and Southern Blacks, 1861-1890*, and James D. Anderson’s *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*. However, these studies only provide a cursory overview of the institution, largely from an organizational and financial perspective. Anderson does illuminate the foundation and

---

51 In this context, R. Eric Platt suggests survival “relates entirely to a college or university’s ability to remain operational and in existence.” See R. Eric Platt, “Sacrifice and Survival: The Historiographic Role of Identity and Mission in Jesuit Higher Education of the New Orleans Province” (PhD diss., Louisiana State University, 2011), 13-14.
52 In fact, Anderson references Straight by name, but only as part of a list of American Missionary Association colleges, and as a precursor to Dillard University.
development of AMA institutions, Straight University included, and the ideal of promoting and delivering a classical liberal education, suggesting “[f]or the northern missionaries and black educators, the great mission of black colleges was that of training a competent leadership, men and women who could think, who were independent and self-reliant, and who could persuade and lead the black masses.”53 This is an important dynamic since it reveals the democratic experiment the university embraced during Reconstruction, as well as the shifting identity toward primary and secondary education. Like other black colleges and universities after Reconstruction, Straight University confronted the hostile racial realities of the emergent Jim Crow South. In that sense, in the context of a regional southern political economy, Straight had to rely on financial and operational support from industrial philanthropists; and consequently, the university subordinated its liberal ideals and culture for the inexorable shift to industrial education.

Historian John Blassingame offers a more coherent narrative on the development of Straight University during Reconstruction New Orleans. In Black New Orleans, for example, his chapter on “Schools, Colleges, and Intellectual Life,” albeit short, provides a sweeping overview of education during Reconstruction, from a discussion on the Freedmen’s Bureau schools and integrated education to a brief treatment on higher education. In particular, Blassingame describes the students, curriculum, operations, and finances at Straight, and affirms, “the instructional staff . . . was as good as any in Louisiana during Reconstruction.”54 He also suggested the medical department and law department remained some of the strongest in the state, and offers a brief treatment on the medical school faculty and dean.

In an attempt to deliver a holistic perspective on black higher education in New Orleans, Blassingame also highlights the emergence of Leland University and New Orleans University, historically Black colleges that emerged after Straight. Leland emerged just after Straight in 1870, followed by New Orleans University in 1873. Like Straight, these institutions enjoyed significant financial backing and support from the local community and denominational groups. However, the majority of educators and administrators at these institutions were white, and after the initial founding, they began alienating students of color. Unlike Straight, where Afro-Creoles had a stronger voice in shaping the curriculum, this created an imbalance and concern for the Creole and African American communities in the intended purpose of the institutions as well as for learning and engagement.

In exploring journal articles on higher education during Reconstruction, only one noteworthy article exists on Straight University. Todd L. Savitt’s treatment of Straight University’s medical department after 1870 in “Straight University Medical Department: The Short Life of a Black Medical School in Reconstruction New Orleans,” explores the operational aspects of the institution and medical department and does not specifically address the democratic ethos the institution promoted during Reconstruction. Despite its engaging depiction of the medical department’s first dean, Dr. James T. Newman, against the backdrop of city and state politics, it does not illustrate the democratic character that Afro-Creoles promoted and sustained.

I also discovered unpublished dissertations that examine education in Reconstruction New Orleans. One doctoral dissertation in particular, “A History of Straight College, 1869-

55 Blassingame, Black New Orleans, 128.
56 Blassingame, Black New Orleans, 126-127.
1935” by Shawn Comminey of Florida State University, strives to construct “the first, accurate, chronological, and comprehensive study” of the institution—and largely achieves it. Although a sound interpretation, much like Savitt’s treatment, this study is more operational in scope and describes the evolution of the institution over a sixty-one-year period from its founding to the merger with New Orleans University to form present-day Dillard University. Comminey does offer viewpoints of university leadership, particularly the AMA and campus leaders, but Afro-Creoles are not part of the larger narrative and are only briefly considered for their philanthropy. Other dissertations, such as David Coughlin Marshall’s “A History of the Higher Education of Negroes in the State of Louisiana,” and “The American Missionary Association in Louisiana During Reconstruction,” by Jacquelyn Slaughter Haywood, also offer a more operational rendering that trace “the patterns of organizational growth and development of Negro higher education within the State.”

In assessing this existing scholarship on Straight University, then, I wanted to rediscover the social, political, and economic dynamics that shaped education during the Reconstruction period. As Anderson contends, “In the South, the history of black higher education from 1865 to 1935 involves largely a study of the interrelationship of philanthropy and black communities—or at least black leaders—in the development of colleges and professional schools for black youth.” In that frame, another plausible treatment of Straight University, from its initial foundation and development through the end of the nineteenth century, must consider the changing landscape of power, race, and class, as well as the communities that shaped the

60 Anderson, The Education of Blacks in the South, 239.
direction of education. The different networks of people and communities in New Orleans, and the distinct social and political milieu that permeated throughout the city emerged as a viable foundation from which to build and develop a coherent history on Straight University. Hence, this dissertation tells the story of not what happened to these black communities in developing opportunities for education, but rather what transpired within them.61

Methodological Overview: Ethnographic History and Conceptually Mapping the Past

As the intent of this dissertation is to examine Straight University, accordingly this study incorporates qualitative historical research methods to depict how an Afro-Creole protest tradition created conditions and opportunities for democratic education. The goal of my methodology is to provide a framework to better understand fundamental questions about the past and to reimagine our historical understanding of the formation of democratic higher education at Straight during this period in New Orleans. My task is to deconstruct the dominant narratives that people in New Orleans struggled to form the same linkages between democratic society and popular education that emerged elsewhere throughout colonial, antebellum, and modern-day America.62 To that end, and in the chapters to follow, I intend to bring a more holistic interpretation and meaning to this process through a multidisciplinary approach to history referred as ethnographic history.63 This approach is a convergence of anthropology and historical traditions, and includes subfields of social history, cultural history, and microhistory to reveal the symbolic meanings of everyday interaction.64 Ethnographic history illuminates how

64 Ayers, The Promise of the New South, ix.
Afro-Creoles in New Orleans and their allies and advocates created conditions for equality of access and opportunity in higher education, and it is essential to this study’s conceptualization.

As will be demonstrated, I will explore Straight University and the myriad stakeholders involved from a cultural and social historical perspective: Afro-Creoles, the American Missionary Association, politicians, educators, students, philanthropists, and civil rights activists. Yet, I will also expose the harsh realities of social and cultural hegemony and examine the role of race and class in creating opportunities to the taken-for-granted rights that Southern whites enjoyed for generations. To better confront these overlooked voices and viewpoints, and drawing on the works of such historians as Rhys Isaac, Natalie Zemon Davis, Edward Ayers, Shannon Lee Dawdy, and Michel de Certeau, among others, I aspire to provide an account that vividly depicts the people, communities, and perspectives that shaped this era in New Orleans history. Hence, ethnographic history serves as a methodology to understand social and cultural dynamics over time and space.

But to consider time and space for this study, we must also confront ways of linking geography and place, beyond a physical location or urban space. As Edward Casey affirms, places are the condition of possibility for human culture itself: “to be cultural, to have a culture, is to inhabit a place sufficiently intensively to cultivate it.” A place is not “a mere patch of ground, a bare stretch of earth, a sedentary set of stones,” it also gathers experiences, histories, memories, and identities. It is within this “social space,” as Henri Lefebvre defines it, that space embodies everyday lived experiences and social relationships. Moreover, although this dissertation is fundamentally a social history, it also examines the spatial identity of New Orleans.

---

65 Edward Casey, “How to Get From Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time: Phenomenological Prolegomena,” *Senses of Place*, ed. Steven Field and Keith H. Basso (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1999), 34.

66 Casey, “How to Get From Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time,” 26.

Orleans and the democratic space of Straight University. Why is it that New Orleans produced four historically black colleges and universities after 1870? How did the revolutionary spirit and egalitarian character of the city itself shape this process and redefine a commitment to delivering higher education to all students? In this context, spatial and social relations, and an interconnectedness of power and space in the city remained indissolubly linked, which, as Michel Foucault suggests, functioned as constitutive dimensions of social phenomena.68

This study would thus be inadequate if it did not confront the character, complexities, and blurred boundaries of race, politics, and class within and around New Orleans itself, particularly evident in social spaces of Faubourg Tremé, Faubourg Marigny, and the Vieux Carré. The myriad social and cultural dimensions within New Orleans created a place/space that remained a uniquely Southern, cosmopolitan city, as well as an intersection of human interaction and global influences. As historian Thomas Bender reminds us:

Cities are the place-specific precipitate of historical time, something most clearly evident in their layers of materiality. But they are also involved in the translocal networks, whether of markets or ideas or of people and things. Not only does the city lack firm or definite boundaries, but this quality is central to their very being. The city is not bounded; its function is to be a nodal connection or peoples, things, and ideas, and that demands open borders. This makes place extend into space, but not randomly and not abstractly. Networks are pathways of connection, making a given city a global actor, while at the same time its history—its local change over time—is significantly shaped by forces beyond its placeness, its municipal boundaries or any other purely material definition of its boundaries.69

Finally, in order to apprehend and situate the history, social dynamics, and implicit tensions Afro-Creoles encountered in establishing democracy and higher education at Straight University, archival research uncovers sources as evidence that interrogates voices from the past, or as historians Petra Munro Hendry and Ann Winfield point out, where the dead may speak

from their rendered “outcast status.” But we must not pretend that the archive is impartial. Historian Shirley Thompson cautions us that “traces and evidence of past lives surface in the archives, but never as innocently as we would have them.” Although archival research remains a process that allows the historian to derive meaning and interpretation from what he or she examines, it is important to understand why certain segments of society are marginalized, silenced, or forgotten. Navigating the impartiality of the archives—to explore what is made invisible and excluded—will remain a prominent feature in presenting and analyzing the present study. To that end, and in deriving meaning and interpretation, it is also important to examine the past, as historian John Gladdis suggests, from “a wider view.” Gladdis explains, “If you think of the past as a landscape, then history is the way we represent it, and it’s that act of representation that lifts us above the familiar to let us experience vicariously what we can’t experience directly.”

Gladdis incorporates a powerful tool to represent history: a metaphorical expression of historical mapping, and more explicitly, the use of landscape. But why use a metaphor for exploring and representing the past? Historian Robert Nisbet offers a rather nuanced definition that fits squarely within this framework. Nisbet argues:

What is a metaphor? Much more than a simple grammatical construction or figure of speech. Metaphor is a way of knowing—one of the oldest, most deeply imbedded, even indispensable ways of knowing in the history of human consciousness. It is, at its simplest, a way of proceeding from the known to the unknown. It is a way of cognition in which the identifying qualities of one thing are transferred in an instantaneous, almost unconscious, flash of insight to some other thing that is, by remoteness or complexity, unknown to us.

---

The metaphorical concept of mapping is not particularly new but remains a powerful allegory in presenting and analyzing history. Historians Fernand Braudel, Hayden White, and Michel de Certeau, for example, also explored the concept of mapping the historical past. In much the same way that a cartographer designs a map, a historian maps historical discourse. As Philip Ethington contends, “Mapping is the form of interpretation that historians practice. Their hermeneutic operation is intrinsically cartographic, or possibly choreographic, for all life is movement, despite the conceptual utility of freezing it photographically.”

Accordingly, I seek to incorporate the same allegorical usage, but will take it a step further in an attempt to unpack what is muddy or unclear. For this study, I will incorporate the concept of mapping to examine history and space, but “metaphored’ through a labyrinth. According to architect and theorist Bernard Tschumi, a labyrinth is an expressed opposition to a pyramid, which conversely offers a clear and defined vantage point to examining space, and in this context, a rational and ideal view of history. But as curriculum historian Bernadette Baker explains, the labyrinth:

... is felt, sensed, and prior to language. Space here is intuited and is unavailable to reason, irreducible to words. Once in the Labyrinth, no overview is present to provide a clue about how to get out. All sensations, all feelings are enhanced and the Labyrinth presupposes immediacy. The metaphorical Labyrinth therefore implies that the first perception carries the experience itself.”

In this frame, then, the metaphorical expression of a labyrinth will help to identify, explain, and ultimately represent an historical understanding of Afro-Creoles and higher education in

---

75 Ethington, “Placing the Past: ‘Groundwork’ for a Spatial Theory of History,”

24
Reconstruction New Orleans. A labyrinth intimates that history is about “getting lost.” It is about recursion and disrupting the past and it demonstrates that clear and objective pathways to discovery is not an outcome but a process that is unyielding, difficult, and incomplete.

**Organization of the Study**

In the following chapters, I examine Afro-Creoles in New Orleans in creating conditions and opportunities for higher education, irrespective of race, gender, class, or ethnicity. I also explore Straight University and its voices from the past during this extraordinary point in Reconstruction history. However, before presenting and examining the social, political, economic, and cultural dimensions of the Afro-Creole people and the distinct milieu from which they evolved, I begin with the theoretical and methodological foundation for the study. In the second chapter, I offer a holistic account of the ethnographic historical considerations for this dissertation. In this chapter I present my framework for incorporating a street-level view of the historical past as a way to embrace a wider view of history and apprehend the facets of daily interactions as people witnessed and experienced them.

Chapter three engages previous scholarship and situates the role of Afro-Creoles in promoting their radical agenda and in what historian Caryn Cossé Bell describes as a blueprint for “far-reaching change.”\(^78\) In providing an historical tracing of the Afro-Creole people, this chapter also examines their cultural and social identity and further establishes a frame of reference from which to develop democratic education. Although chapter three is primarily a social history, with less emphasis on education, undeniably it is important to set the stage for the remaining chapters in the study. Accordingly, chapter four embraces this Afro-Creole foundation and explores the concept and development of moral and democratic education further. In particular I examine the *Société Catholique pour l’Instruction des Orphelins dans*

l’Indigence, also known as the Catholic Institute for Indigent Orphans, and the Sisters of the Holy Family. In reimagining how moral and democratic education emerged at Straight University in Reconstruction New Orleans, it is important to understand the framework from which this developed—notably through Afro-Creole women. I also highlight the role of Afro-Creole faculty, leadership, and philanthropy in creating the foundations for education for people of color in New Orleans.

Chapter five traces the history of higher education in New Orleans before and after the Civil War, with much emphasis on the changing landscape of the New South and black higher education. I explore the institutional dynamics of Straight University, Leland University, New Orleans University, and Southern University from their inception through 1896 and the advent of Jim Crow, the formal imposition of separate-but-equal policies. Chapter six follows and reveals the distinct political environment during Reconstruction New Orleans, at the onset of federal occupation in 1862. To understand how higher education opportunities for people of color emerged is to understand the specific social and political conditions and the demographic profile of New Orleans in the 1860s. This brings Afro-Creole protest and ideals of liberté, égalité, and fraternité into the forefront. Accordingly, I analyze how a protest tradition emerged and how it translated to a Radical Republican agenda that promoted equality of opportunity in everyday life, including an ideal of democratic education at Straight University.

The seventh chapters presents a history of Straight University, whereby I highlight the students, curriculum, faculty, and leadership, but also the Afro-Creole movement in creating the conditions and opportunities to develop this higher education institution. A particular focus is on the American Missionary Association and Seymour Straight, as well as the shifting necessity of
an industrial education at the university, and the waning legacy of a liberal educational culture that defined the institution upon its foundation.

In chapter eight, I reexamine the work of Louis A. Martinet, as mentioned earlier, an attorney and Straight University law department alumnus, as well as an eloquent exponent of the Afro-Creole social egalitarianism movement. Martinet remained an ardent supporter of Homer Plessy’s legal challenge to the Separate Car Act in 1892, which resulted in the Plessy decision in 1896. This chapter reveals the complexity of power and politics in classifying race as a predetermined restriction for people of color in all aspects of public life, and concurrently illuminates the Straight University law department as a foundation from which to launch a sophisticated legal challenge and sustain a nuanced understanding of the law. Chapter eight also depicts the end of the Afro-Creole protest tradition in the nineteenth century, as the hardening lines of racial discrimination and white supremacist power dynamics became determinedly clear in all facets of daily life.

The final chapter concludes this dissertation and highlights the themes, concepts, and ideas of democratic higher education in Reconstruction New Orleans. I summarize my findings and offer implications and possibilities for further research and analysis, particularly in the frame of historically Black colleges and universities in the South.
CHAPTER TWO: ETHNOGRAPHIC HISTORY, METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS, AND THE NATURE OF ARCHIVAL RESEARCH

History is much more than a linear amalgamation of facts and events. Rather, history contains social constructions developed from the remnants and mergings [sic] of older ideologies and collective memories. History does not exist outside of the cultural milieu and is not immune to the suppositions and hypotheses of the people who live in that history. Renditions of history are used, defined, refined, and forgotten according to power differentials and contextual pressures that require of history that it be malleable. – Ann Gibson Winfield

This study incorporates qualitative historical research to support the claim that an Afro-Creole protest tradition created conditions and opportunities for democratic education at Straight University during Reconstruction New Orleans. However, in order to fully explore the methodological ways of approaching the craft of history, it is important to think historically and understand how the role of historical inquiry operates in a context-specific manner. As the social historian E. P. Thompson suggests in formulating “the discipline of historical context,” a shared understanding of historical inquiry and research is that people, events, and ideas cannot be understood apart from their historical contexts. Historical research situates this inquiry to examine people and events that occurred in the past and attempts to bring meaning and understanding as a “an unending dialogue between the present and the past.” But as Michel-Rolph Trouillot reminds us, “the search for the nature of history has led us to deny ambiguity and either to demarcate precisely and at all times the dividing line between historical process and historical knowledge or to conflate at all times historical process and historical narrative.” “Thus between the mechanically realist and naively constructivist extremes,” Trouillot approvingly

observes, “there is the more serious task of determining not what history is—a hopeless goal if phrased in essentialist terms—but how history works.”

To that end, history changes with time and reveals itself through specific narratives that are privileged or remain unnamed or silent. Since history is inevitably the product of a subjective interaction between present-day historians and an incomplete record of past events, this requires an ardent approach to identify and evaluate sources from the past, and to retell, reimagine, and recondition social memory and create a sense of cultural understanding.

But what does it mean to think historically and how can we reimagine how history is studied and portrayed from a contemporary understanding? McCulloch and Richardson claim:

Historical research is an important means of understanding and addressing contemporary concerns. It can also illuminate the structures and the taken for granted assumptions of our contemporary world, by demonstrating that these have developed historically, that they were established for particular purposes that were often social, economic and political in nature, and that in many cases they are comparatively recent in their origin.

In many ways, then, historical research is interpretative and its presentation is much more than a retelling of the past. Rather, it is a flowing and dynamic account of the past that attempts to recapture the complex nuances, personalities, and ideas that influenced the people and events being investigated. Thus the historian in this frame seeks to reconstruct and present information in ways that communicates a deeper understanding from the myriad perspectives of those who participated in them.

The goal of this chapter is to provide a framework to better pose and apprehend fundamental questions about the past and to reimagine our historical understanding of the

---

formation of democratic higher education at Straight University. Since my task is to deconstruct
the dominant narratives that people in New Orleans struggled to form the same linkages between
democratic society and popular education that emerged elsewhere throughout colonial,
antebellum, and modern-day America, I intend to bring a more holistic interpretation and
meaning to this process through a multidisciplinary approach to history: ethnographic history.86
This approach is a convergence of anthropology and historical traditions, including subfields of
social history, cultural history, and microhistory, and it strives to promote and construct a vivid
mosaic of how Afro-Creoles in New Orleans and their allies and advocates created conditions for
equality of access and opportunity in higher education.

Assumptions and Considerations of Ethnographic History

It is tempting for the historian to follow the allure of chronological linearity in
investigating and reconstructing the historical past. While chronology and sequencing are
important in understanding historical narratives, the notion of directional history has focused on
slow continuity over long periods of time, covered with a thick layer of events, and explained in
models of economic growth and sociological constants.87 Michel de Certeau suggests that
chronology “is the condition that allows a classification by periods,”88 which consequently
resembles a present-day formulation of the past that attempts to define a new time and place in
history. Attention has since turned away from vast unities like periods or centuries to what
Michel Foucault calls the phenomena of rupture and discontinuity. Since history does not fit
neatly into categories or natural classifications, it is important to explore what is uncomfortable

86 Ethnographic history is also referred to as ethnohistory, anthropological history, and historical anthropology. See
Brian Keith Axel, From the Margins: Historical Anthropology and Its Futures (Durham, NC: Duke University
1988), 90.
and what is tellingly disruptive; and undeniably, our understanding and assessment of historical time and space is part of this process. Historian Gwendolyn Midlo Hall confirms this more closely when she suggests that “[w]e must escape from the collective consciousness constructed by and for the controlling elite. We must escape from the linear, mechanistic, logical constructs that prevail in the historical profession and that have little or nothing to do with reality.” Hall further contends that:

We must reconsider how we investigate, organize, structure, and understand the past. We historians must learn from the methodologies of quantum physics. Particles have meaning only as they bounce around and interact with each other over time and space. We need to cherish and protect the disordered and disobedient places where creativity is born. This is the only way we can tap into our well springs of consciousness, conscience, and empowerment as our world shrinks, even as ethnic conflicts and violence escalate.89

In this context, the role of Afro-Creoles, protest and dissent, and the social, political, and economic constructs behind democracy and education reveal power dynamics and implicit tensions during Reconstruction that must be explored to uncover the nature of historical reality. For example, the history of historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs)—of which Straight University is a part—tends to be overwhelmingly linear in structure and drawn from the interrelationships between northern philanthropy and denominational groups. While important to Straight University’s origin and development, particularly in the case of the American Missionary Association (AMA), the analysis tends to be one-sided and rather monolithic: little voice or perspective is given to the local community of color and their intellectual movement.

To better confront these overlooked voices and perspectives, ethnographic history serves as a methodology to understand social and cultural dynamics over time and space. But why ethnography and history? How does a convergence of anthropology and historical traditions

promote a more holistic narrative and standpoint in exploring democratic education over other methodologies? To be sure, other approaches could guide and inform this study. For example, a historiographic case study in particular can explore and explain organizations, institutions, and social groups, among others, which would indeed provide a sound framework for examining Straight University. However, I decided not to employ this approach for this study. Although this dissertation examines the founding and development of a single higher education institution, whereupon a case study lends a logical approach to considering this topic, I wanted to explore this university and the myriad stakeholders involved from a cultural and social historical perspective: Afro-Creoles, the American Missionary Association, politicians, educators, philanthropists, and civil rights activists. I also sought to expose the harsh realities of social and cultural hegemony and examine the role of race and class in creating access to the taken-for-granted rights that Southern whites enjoyed for generations.

Given these considerations, anthropology emerges as a cognate discipline to identify cognitive structures on which social behavior is founded. It highlights the subjective, psychological side of the historical process: the manner of thinking and feeling particular to people of a given social and cultural community. As historian Rhys Isaac affirms:

Anthropologists cross frontiers to explore communities other than their own. Social historians cross time spans to study earlier periods. Whether one moves away from oneself in cultural space or in historical time, one does not go far before one is in a world where the taken-for-granted must cease to be so. Translation then becomes necessary. Ways must be found of attaining an understanding of the meanings that the inhabitants of other worlds have given to their own every day customs.

---

90 For an example of a historiographic case study in higher education in New Orleans, see R. Eric Platt, “Sacrifice and Survival: The Historiographic Role of Identity and Mission in Jesuit Higher Education of the New Orleans Province” (PhD diss., Louisiana State University, 2011).
91 Isaac, The Transformation of Virginia, 5.
92 Aaron Gurevich, Historical Anthropology of the Middle Ages (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 4.
93 Isaac, The Transformation of Virginia, 5.
Isaac incorporated ethnographic history in his pioneering study on social hierarchy and cultural hegemony of southern Baptists in eighteenth-century Virginia. In *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790*, Isaac endeavors to create a “humanistic historical social science.”94 A fundamental argument is that previous historians overlooked the significant contributions of the Baptist movement and counterculture in transforming the social and cultural landscape of revolutionary Virginia. For Isaac, anthropology and history developed opportunities to access the diverse mentalities of past people—Southern Baptists, in particular, and their relationship to the aristocratic gentry class—and provided a framework to promote a more gender- and race-inclusive history.95

Although a methodological sophistication for its time in Isaac’s rendering, ethnographic history had earlier iterations in content and application. During the mid-twentieth century, historians sought a better understanding of the structure of social change in history which led to the development of new methods.96 Fundamentally a reaction to the prevailing modernist approach that defined the discipline for generations, as well as the rather small and cohesive professional guild at that time, historians studied new social and cultural identities that extended beyond the accepted confines of political and institutional history. This innovative effort originated in France and was largely expressed in the interests and methods of French scholars associated with the journal *Annales: économies, sociétés, civilisations*.97

The historians associated with *Annales* confronted the history of mentalities and collective societal representations in the age of Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre; to histories of

---

95 Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia*, xxvi.
96 McCulloch and Richardson, *Historical Research in Educational Settings*, 29.
cultural identities, geographical landscapes, and social imagination through Fernand Braudel.\textsuperscript{98} The purpose of the \textit{Annales} was, as Block and Febvre explained in the very first issue in 1929, to provide a forum for various directions and new approaches to exploring and explaining the past.\textsuperscript{99} For these historians, history must turn to the conditions of \textit{everyday life} as they are experienced from below: the standpoint of common people that are overwhelmingly disadvantaged, exploited, and marginalized.\textsuperscript{100} Moreover, they rejected a modernist approach in favor of direct experiences, an understanding that comes closer to the past of this everyday life than what scientific inquiry promoted or sought to discover and explain.

In this framework, ethnographic history fit squarely in what cultural historian Peter Burke describes as “new history.” Burke suggests the traditional historiographic paradigm “has often—to too often—been assumed to be \textit{the} way of doing history, rather than being perceived as one among various possible approaches to the past.”\textsuperscript{101} This traditional historiographic paradigm is often referred as “Rankean” history, after the work of the highly influential nineteenth-century German historian Leopold von Ranke. It was Ranke’s aim to turn history into a rigorous science with an explicit demand for objective research practiced by professionally trained historians; historians who abstained from value judgments in their work.\textsuperscript{102} As Michel de Certeau suggests, “history \textit{furnishes} ‘facts’ destined to fill frameworks determined by economic, sociological,

\textsuperscript{98} Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre, and Fernand Braudel helped to transform the discipline and guild of history and presented opportunities for other historians to develop and reimage new mentalities and social identities. See Peter Burke, \textit{What is Cultural History (What is History?)}, (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2004), 4; and McCulloch and Richardson, \textit{Historical Research in Educational Settings}.


\textsuperscript{100} Iggers, \textit{Historiography in the Twentieth Century}, 102.

\textsuperscript{101} Peter Burke, \textit{History and Social Theory} (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2005), 2-3; Peter Burke, \textit{New Perspectives on Historical Writing} (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 2001), 3.

\textsuperscript{102} Iggers, \textit{Historiography in the Twentieth Century}, 25.
demographic, or psychoanalytical theory. This conception tends to direct history toward ‘examples’ which must illustrate a doctrine.’”

This traditional history was mainly concerned with politics, economics, and church and military affairs, with the arts, sciences, and philosophy treated only marginally. Ranke argued that any challenge to the established political and social institutions by “revolutionary means or extensive reforms”—notably philosophical considerations and interpretations—constituted a violation of the historical spirit. For Ranke, a precise and persistent focus on examining documents, “as it actually happened,” proved the only credible way to study and write history. But why discuss Ranke? Did his stance in defending pure objectivity trivialize the past to fit the present? This conception of history has traditionally focused on a narrative of events—“event history”—including impartial discussions of how, what, and when. It has narrowly confronted epochal moments in history, including wars and strife, as well as influential people, or “great men,” such as Napoleon Bonaparte, Alexander the Great, and George Washington. This restrained focus on individuals offers little consideration of ordinary people and events and the broader context in which they lived. In light of these characteristics the tone of traditional historical writing remains conservative: it is often geographically insular, avoids methodological controversy, and is primarily concerned with a very small segment of society from above—the governing class and intellectual elite.

The philosophical foundation of “new” history, on the other hand, confronts issues of human activity that are more socially and culturally constituted from below—the so-called subaltern classes. It captures the complicated, overlooked character in history which seeks to

---

give a sense of how people are shaped and constrained, in much the way historian Drew Gilpin Faust describes as “the world into which they are born, of how their choices are limited by the ‘taken for grantedness’ of their social universe.”

Democratization and the emergence of a mass society called for a historiography that considered the role of broader segments of the population and the conditions under which they lived. In this frame, based on the works of the *Annales*, as mentioned, a major shift developed and scholarship increasingly confronted the processes of change and development in the human character.

Accordingly, ethnographic history emerged through this process and was aimed at a deeper understanding of the structure of social change. This approach illuminates the interrelationship of power relations, temporalities (divided into deep structures, conjunctures, and immediate events) and the diverse *mentalities* which are inherent in this study. *Mentalité* history focused on intellectual mechanisms, sentiments, and behaviors, and it represented a “history of resistances” of dominant ideologies and discourses. In that sense, cultural historian Brian Keith Axel contends ethnographic history seeks to challenge the limits of discrete disciplinary epistemologies and conventions within history and instead moves toward a multidisciplinary understanding of the emerging relations and discourses between the archive and the field.

---

112 Axel, *From the Margins*, 3.
Robert Darnton examines these converging traditions in *The Great Cat Massacre*, a series of essays that explores unfamiliar views and a “vision of the world”\(^\text{113}\) from marginal voices from below. Darnton reconstructs anthropological standpoints of culture, identity, and intellectual history in eighteenth century France through counter-story and new meaning. Darnton suggests:

> Where the historian of ideas traces the filiation of formal thought from philosopher to philosopher, the ethnographic historian studies the way ordinary people made sense of the world . . . to uncover their cosmology, to show how they organized reality in their minds and express it in their behavior . . . Operating at ground level, ordinary people learn to be “street smart”—and they can be intelligent in their fashion as philosophers. But instead of deriving logical propositions, they think with things, or with anything else that their culture makes available to them, such as stories or ceremonies.\(^\text{114}\)

For Darnton, then, the main quest in ethnographic history is to capture (and recapture) otherness—in this case, ordinary people—and situate these voices in an historical context and in an imaginatively conceived way.

Other historians have approached their craft in similar and reimagined ways, which, like Darnton, focused on the cultural categories and social dynamics that pertain to a particular people, place, and time through microhistory. Historian Edward Ayers employs this approach effectively in his study of life after Reconstruction in the New South. In *The Promise of the New South*, Ayers explores everyday life in the South, when a one-party political system became ever more entrenched and a segregated society ever more complete.\(^\text{115}\) Ayers’ work is a fitting example for the present study, since it examines the social, political, and economic networks in post-Reconstruction southern society; and while the intent of this dissertation explores education during Reconstruction in particular, similar patterns of racial separateness and discrimination undoubtedly emerge in the depictions and interactions of everyday life. To highlight the social

\(^{113}\) Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*, 5.

\(^{114}\) Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*, 3-4.

\(^{115}\) Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, 438.
categories and dynamics, Ayers “eavesdrop[s] on conversations on railroad cars and in general stores, slip in the back of revival tents and juke joints, stand in front of the speaker’s platform at political rallies, and watch lynchings from a distance.” The real and often troubling imagery of life in these challenging times in the South present a prismatic understanding of history.

In search of a more “intimate and active history,” as Ayers suggests, microhistory is most often associated with this particular style of presentation—a narrative account of a single event or a single life—and with a particular set of topics—social history, in particular the social history of those at the margins. Microhistory naturally lends itself to ethnographic historical methodology in that it concentrates on the intensive study of particular lives to reveal the fundamental experiences and mentalities of ordinary people. Natalie Zemon Davis, for example, captures Darnton’s notion of otherness by presenting a more prominent depiction of sixteenth century French peasant women in a preindustrial patriarchal society. In The Return of Martin Guerre, Davis reveals a hidden world of “peasant sentiment and aspiration” that yields a portrait of a peasant woman that is both plausible and persuasive, and which seeks to pragmatically refashion a disregarded female identity.

Similarly, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich recaptures this essence of overlooked and forgotten identity in A Midwife’s Tale, in which she recounts the life of Martha Ballard, a marginalized midwife in a late-eighteenth century Maine seaport village. Using Ballard’s diary to reconstruct the historical past, Ulrich teases out her narrative by drawing on other sources from this period, such as wills, court records, deeds, and town meeting minutes, and aptly incorporates an

---

116 Ayers, The Promise of the New South, 438.
ethnographic history of ordinary, everyday life. Admittedly an interpretation, “a kind of exegesis,” Ulrich reimagines how Ballard lived her daily life and confirms that “...the very dailiness, the exhaustive, repetitious dailiness” is the real power of Martha Ballard’s story.120

Shannon Lee Dawdy also explores marginalized male and female identities in eighteenth century New Orleans, and suggests ethnographic history draws on social geographies, life histories, and the texture of everyday life. Dawdy illuminates “what makes people tick by examining micro-events, social networks, street-level conflicts, and shared cultural understandings” in Building the Devil’s Empire: French Colonial New Orleans.121 Dawdy develops this notion of the “street-level view” of history from below with much emphasis on the non-elite, the relegated otherness; the often overlooked perspectives in traditional history. Through microhistory and ethnographic history, Dawdy presents an evocative rendering of diverse social groups and textures of daily life in colonial New Orleans by illuminating disregarded viewpoints and attitudes.

It is these street-level conflicts and tensions that must be explored to access the diverse mentalities of ordinary people, the often ignored role of a marginalized, supporting cast in history recaptured in distinct political, social, and cultural milieux. Since my own investigation confronts a network of Afro-Creoles dedicated to creating opportunity structures for democratic education and the obstacles and struggles they faced in attaining this ideal, ethnographic history helps to blend history and anthropology to illuminate cultural interpretations of the past and cultural traditions of the present. Moreover, it focuses on the shared experiences and influential developments of the “non-elite,” the relegated Other, and voices and perspectives from below—in this case, Afro-Creoles.

121 Dawdy, Building the Devil’s Empire, 9.
For the traditional historian, skepticism and uncertainty undeniably counters attempts at rediscovering new social and cultural dimensions. Not long ago, if historians wished to practice ethnographic history, they virtually had to undergo a rite of passage to transfer “professional identity and fealty to anthropology,” alienating themselves from the feudal tendencies of their own discipline. However, these distinct boundaries are more permeable and blurred at present, and since history is half the essence of ethnographic history, historians remain invaluable partners in its definition and practice and continue to broaden and redefine its meaning. Now, historians and anthropologists have little difficulty agreeing that ethnographic history is essentially the use of historical and ethnographic methods and materials to gain knowledge of the nature and causes of change in a society defined by ethnological concepts and categories.

Thus with a desire to explore historically unrepresented peoples, ethnographic historians seek to tease new meanings and create new possibilities for understanding the past. For example, and in the case of the present study, ethnographic history attempts to show not merely what Afro-Creoles thought but how they thought, how they construed the world in which they lived, and how they invested in it with meaning and infused it with emotion in establishing democratic education. Lucien Febvre had made famous this notion of “mental tools” available to individuals in past cultures, particularly regarding what could or could not be thought. This is paramount for exploring the social, cultural, and intellectual movement in Reconstruction New

---

125 Darnton, The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History, 3.
Orleans and for reimagining our historical understanding of people and events during this period from a diverse standpoint.

Such an example involves prominent New Orleans Afro-Creole Louis A. Martinet. Martinet was born a free person of color in St. Martin’s Parish in the southwestern part of Louisiana. He received his law degree from Straight University in 1876 and his Doctor of Medicine degree in 1892, and remained a dedicated and passionate teacher in the college’s law department. Martinet also proved a steadfast champion of freedom and equality for people of color through his work at the Crusader, a progressive newspaper he founded in 1889. The Crusader, “a journal devoted to the best interests of the people,”127 became a progressive and “fearless” weekly newspaper that confronted politics and education, among other topics. Yet, it also symbolized a voice for protest and support of the Republican ideals promoted decades earlier in L’Union and the New Orleans Tribune. A traditional historical viewpoint might only describe Martinet’s role as a faculty member at Straight University or as the founder of the Crusader. However, Martinet embodied the ideal of “democracy in action,” and through his teaching and writing, his perspective and “street-level” view was important in exploring historically unrepresented peoples during Reconstruction New Orleans, particularly Homer Plessy and his legal fight of the Louisiana Separate Car Act.

Since ethnographic history examines historical concepts of power, ideology, perception, and identity, it problematizes previous historical accounts that present cultural categories and social dynamics from a certain outlook and place and time.128 Given this standpoint, questions indeed arise about this method’s approach and implementation, particularly from a more

---

127 Crusader, Jul. 19, 1890.
traditional historical lens. For instance, how is otherness adequately captured if the historian cannot interview subjects or conduct field work in late-nineteenth century New Orleans? Is this merely a reinvented history for the sake of “new” history? Undeniably, particular methodological challenges confront all modes of inquiry, and ethnographic history and microhistory are no different in offering some limitations.

According to historian Georg Iggers, several criticisms have been raised repeatedly against microhistorians: that their methods, with a concentration on small-scale history, have reduced history to anecdotal antiquarianism; that they have romanticized past cultures and societies; that because they work with relatively stable cultures, they are incapable of dealing with the modern and contemporary worlds marked by rapid change; and, in light of this, they are incapable of dealing with politics. A fundamental challenge for ethnographic historians, then, is that they cannot see lived experiences for themselves; they must depend on recorded observations from others: those who captured these events or experiences selectively and were not engaged in answering the historian’s questions directly. Isaac affirms, “... these informants cannot be examined directly; they must be screened in absentia.” Where empirical ethnography in the social sciences allows for closely observed nodal actions, historians, on the other hand:

are unable, in the manner of field anthropologists, to generate their own documents by looking around themselves, “notebook in hand.” They are restricted to the “notebook” entries that past record systems and the hazards of survival have left them, and so must make a virtue of their necessity through a very close reading of those “notes” that do survive (emphasis mine).

---

130 Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia*, 324.
131 Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia*, 324.
Despite these hazards of survival, ethnographic historians cannot simply make “intuitive leaps into airy climates of opinion” without pouring over sources based on evidence. If not held tightly in check by the voices of the past, traditional historians will thusly critique ethnographic history as a mere refashioning of history, upon which conceptual assumptions about the existing historical record emerge as a product of invention rather than of historical construction. For instance, the historian Robert Finlay argues against these leaps of invention and promotes a more positivist consideration for understanding the past. For Finlay, although inadequate and puzzling evidence can inevitably lead to some speculation about the past, as is the historian’s stock in trade, the historian should not make the people of the past say or do things that run counter to the most scrupulous respect for the sources.

But what if the evidence fails to give voice to people of the past? Should sources be fixed in meaning? Is it not better to venture even an inadequate interpretation or generalization of the past than to abandon the whole enterprise? In disassociating traditional constructs about the way the past functioned, Febvre, Braudel and others of the Annales sought to explore social and cultural history not merely as a product of human effort and invention, as Finlay indubitably suggests, but rather as a dimension of human existence and behavior influencing life in every aspect. Thus, only through appropriately comprehending these possibilities can historians truly understand and make understandable the consequent historical renderings and analysis of their work in a way that historicizes and contextualizes as much as the evidence allows.

While it is important to be held in check by the voices of the past, there are also possibilities in interpreting sources and reimagining historical viewpoints based on evidence. It

---

133 Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*, 261.
135 Finlay, “The Refashioning of Martin Guerre,” 571.
is within these epistemological considerations and differences that help explain divergences in conjectural knowledge and absolute truth. Thus, documents surviving from the past do allow the ethnographic historian to find remnants of people in certain circumstances in their social environment and represent a rich space for inquiry to raise new questions about old material. However, understanding how historians actually do research, and how they find meaning and interpretation over time and space is critical to develop a sound analysis of democratic higher education in Reconstruction New Orleans. Hence, to adequately confront these accounts and determine how this method can be effectively incorporated into this study, we must turn to the role of historiographic analysis, archival research, and data collection methods.

**Historiography and Archival Research: A Reimagined Perspective**

Although historians cannot perceive or directly confront the past, they can comprehend what happened from sources postulated as surviving from the past into the present. It is this evidence, from such things as artifacts, manuscripts, newspapers, photographs, and other material objects that exist in the present but have been accepted as continuations from previous times. The connections posited from the past offer valid and valued clues to the actual thoughts, activities, and experiences of those past peoples. Thus, a primary goal of the historian is to convert these continuations—or what historian Robert Berkhofer calls “survivals”—from previous times into sources. The conversion of these survivals into sources depends on a set of assumptions that govern the relationship between their present-day existence and the role they presumably played in the lives and institutions of past peoples. Sources provide the evidence

---


138 Berkhofer, Jr., *Fashioning History*, 3.

139 Berkhofer, Jr., *Fashioning History*, 3.

140 Berkhofer, Jr., *Fashioning History*, 11.
for historians’ own interpretation of the past and they derive information that supports statements about the past which can then be incorporated into histories.\textsuperscript{141}

But why do we choose to include certain ideas, elements, or themes in our historical research and writing, yet exclude others? Why is history viewed as a particular collection and recollection of facts or survivals that portend an objective viewpoint of the past and a supposed historical reality? Since history is inevitably the product of a subjective interaction between present-day historians and an incomplete understanding of past events—what is noted and what we hold to be relevant—as historians we are compelled to identify and evaluate sources and artifacts as a way to recondition historical memory. We do this (or hope to) so we can create a better sense of our social and cultural understanding, an ideal that de Certeau presents in his book, \textit{The Writing of History}. De Certeau has informed my own writing in this respect, which consequently has made me reinterpret assumptions and considerations of traditional historiography and the historical research method.

But in terms of what we include or exclude in our historical narratives, we are also limited or confined to the range of available sources and the space in which we locate and assess them, notably the archives that are often “obsessively fragmentary.”\textsuperscript{142} As de Certeau suggests:

In history everything begins with the gesture of \textit{setting aside}, of putting together, of transforming certain classified objects into “documents” . . . it consists in producing such documents by dint of copying, transcribing, or photographing these objects, simultaneously changing their locus and their status. This gesture consists in “isolating” a body—as in physics—and “denaturing” things in order to turn them into parts which will fill the lacunae inside an a priori totality. It forms the “collection” of documents . . . it places things in a “marginal system.”\textsuperscript{143}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{141} Berkhofer, Jr., \textit{Fashioning History}, 11.
\textsuperscript{143} de Certeau, \textit{The Writing of History}, 73.
\end{flushright}
Yet it is also within these limitations and spaces that historians can reimagine the past and consciously retell histories through relationships and meaning, and not *positivities* designed in “webbings of contradiction, ambivalence, and equivocation of language.”\(^{144}\) Accordingly, de Certeau challenges the dominant narratives and epistemology in historical writing and research, namely the theoretical underpinnings of modern Western historiography and the “practice” of history itself. Historical research and writing is constructed as “a function of instruction” that effectively obeys its own rules, which demand to be examined for themselves.\(^{145}\) De Certeau’s approach is both nuanced and reflexive. He problematizes positivistic tendencies and constructs within historiography and forces us to reconsider how we pose and apprehend questions about the past. Much like Michel Foucault, de Certeau concentrates on what is forgotten, unnamed, and silent. It is in this process that we begin to understand how writing produces or manufactures history.

Consequently, as I explored my own research and historical writing for this study, de Certeau has challenged me to critically examine the past, not through a “plurality of histories” in exclusively political and economic terms, but through the disruptions and discontinuities that emerge in our unyielding quest to name or define the “real.” Yet as demonstrated in the previous section of this chapter, it only reinforces our desire to scientifically explain the past and to create some objective meaning for the present which can never be adequately confronted or attained. In incorporating de Certeau’s theoretical standpoint, then, one that challenges positivistic assessments and understandings of history, we must highlight the subjective, psychological side of the historical process: the manner of thinking and feeling particular to people of a given social and cultural community.

\(^{144}\) Conley, “The Translator’s Introduction,” xi.
In order to understand and situate the history, social dynamics, and implicit tensions Afro-Creoles encountered in establishing democracy and higher education at Straight University, archival research served as the pathway to uncover such sources as evidence, as well as to interrogate voices from the past. It is a process that allows the historian to derive meaning and interpretation from what he or she examines. But before exploring these tools and methods in more detail, it is important to identify the process of doing history, or as de Certeau contends, “making history.” Thus far I have demonstrated why historical research is conducted—to explore people and events that occurred in the past and to identify the relationship that the past has to the present—but of equal importance is how historical research is conducted.

Much has been written about historical methodologies, on procedures for evaluating documents and interpreting historical data, among other specialized processes through a scientific lens; however, only a small body of literature seems to address how historians actually do research. As historian John Lewis Gladdis contends, “if time and space provide the field in which history happens, then structure and process provide the mechanism.” From a process standpoint, Glenn and Enoch suggest:

The formulation of the project and concomitant research agenda is most often the first step in historiography and archival research. Rarely do researchers identify an archive and hope to find a research project in it. Instead, they begin with a broad research question and then read widely and deeply until they begin to identify an outline of significance or basis of investigation for the project at hand. Once researchers have a handle on the topic, they consider the kind of archival documents that would support, extend, further, and energize the project.

In exploring this structure and process, an historical study usually begins with a research problem or a question, which leads a researcher to examine a relevant body of source materials

and documentation.\textsuperscript{148} Raising questions help focus the study and in turn guide the search for evidence, the interpretations of data, and the narrative of the story.\textsuperscript{149} Questions also help to isolate the intended subject of the study from a larger whole. Moreover, by isolating some part of the topic, the study becomes more manageable and will then help to relate the study to the whole in an analysis and answer the important questions of “so what?” and “who cares?”\textsuperscript{150} In my own analysis, for example, narrowing the specific research problem to democratic higher education at Straight University becomes a more tangible and accessible study, as opposed to pursuing a much larger endeavor by examining all historically black colleges and universities in New Orleans during Reconstruction. Since this study is narrower in scope and more formulated in purpose, this then creates possibilities to develop a richer account of the street-level views described earlier in ethnographic historical traditions.

Although specific research questions must be posed in order to make sense of why the investigation is relevant and meaningful to a larger audience, it is important for historians to develop a clear notion of what sources are available for a study and how to gain access to them.\textsuperscript{151} Equally important are the choices involved in using these source materials and the problems or opportunities that arise in their utilization. For historical research, an important distinction is usually drawn between primary and secondary sources.\textsuperscript{152} A review of the literature helps to identify these primary and secondary sources that contain information about the research topic and source availability and location. This identification, location, and

\textsuperscript{150} Lewenson, “Doing Historical Research,” 29.
\textsuperscript{151} McCulloch and Richardson, Historical Research in Educational Settings, 79.
\textsuperscript{152} McCulloch and Richardson, Historical Research in Educational Settings, 79.
Historiography is generally the term historians use to refer to this phase of historical research. It is the discipline of the historian; it is the study of various approaches to the historical method and writing history, which typically involves examining a coherent written history comprised of secondary sources, collecting authentic source materials, and analyzing and interpreting those materials. It is also about surveying a field, such as history of education, and assessing its strengths, posing questions, and commenting on present and future directions. Historiography can create opportunities for researchers to enhance contemporary understandings of researching and writing social, cultural, and educational histories, and it continues throughout the overall research process. It is in this phase of interpretation that the historian can better understand written records about the past, as well as answer questions about why they write history.

Education historiography, in general, has witnessed a slow evolution in critically examining broadened perspectives of social, political, economic, cultural, and intellectual historical contexts. Fundamentally, a distinction between historians and “educationists” emerged, representing a perceived difference between the attitudes of the two groups towards past and present. No stranger to historiographical critique, education history has garnered

---

some criticism from established historians throughout the twentieth century. Most influential, perhaps, is Bernard Bailyn’s early criticism of the field in 1960. In Bailyn’s adapted lecture, *Education in the Forming of American Society*, he suggests educational history lacked a broadened historical context:

The development of this historical field took place, consequently, in a special atmosphere of professional purpose. It grew in almost total isolation from the major influences and shaping minds of twentieth-century historiography; and its isolation proved to be self-intensifying: the more parochial the subject became, the less capable it was of attracting the kinds of scholars who could give it broad relevance and bring it back into the public domain. It soon displayed the exaggeration of weakness and extravagance of emphasis that are the typical results of sustained inbreeding.

Bailyn’s criticism of the field provoked a searching assessment of the discipline. Indeed, by mid-twentieth century earlier treatments of educational history developed a pattern of historical scholarship that recorded its origin and development of schooling in a vacuum, leaving out undemocratic experiences of Native Americans, people of color (free and enslaved), women, and other ethnic groups. It tended to simplify and romanticize the genesis, rise, and triumph of the common school as the engine for democratic education. Following Bailyn’s critique, Lawrence Cremin, an educational historian at Columbia University, improved the quality of scholarship and teaching in history of education. For Cremin the field remained parochial and pedantic, and he sought instead to develop a more rigorous theoretical and methodological

---

foundation to confront education in a larger sociocultural context. Cremin focused on a disciplined-based field linked to the main currents of historical scholarship and redefined the historical meaning of education through expanded parameters of inquiry. Today, education historians understand that what is central to the field and to understanding the past is a broad cultural context that includes issues of race, politics, economics, class, and other cultural categories. For as historian Roy Lowe suggests, “[j]ust as a society which is ignorant of its history is doomed to repeat its mistakes, so an education system which ignores its past is unlikely to achieve its own best future.”

In incorporating this historiographical context, I explored the social, political, and economic forces that shaped the structure of democratic higher education at Straight, as well as the specific context from which it evolved. To that end, primary source materials emerge as a viable option to explore this history. Primary sources are materials from which historians construct meaning and rewrite, revive, and reimagine events that occurred in the past. They are an object of the past or a testimony concerning past relationships on which historians depend in order to reconceive their understanding or depiction of that earlier time. It is characterized as a source in which the creator was a direct witness or in some other way directly involved or related to the event and can provide a firsthand account or rendering. Secondary sources, on the other hand, are derived from primary sources and are at least one step removed from the direct contact, involvement, or relationship with the event being researched. As such, these

162 Cremin, The Wonderful World of Ellwood Patterson Cubberley.
164 Johnson and Christensen, Educational Research, 418.
165 Johnson and Christensen, Educational Research, 418.
sources contribute to the historiography of a subject and typically provide an analysis and interpretation of primary sources. Examples of secondary sources include books, journals, and dissertations, among others, and are significant in identifying a research topic, posing specific research questions, and developing background and historical context.

In some cases an author of a secondary source may have been involved in some way in the events or issues being under review. For example, Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes was a prominent Afro-Creole leader, activist, and a Straight University alumnus, but also a leading protagonist in the events he described. He remained actively involved in the protest tradition on behalf of democracy and civil rights for people of color in Louisiana. In Our People and Our History, Desdunes presents a vivid mosaic of fifty Afro-Creoles from an historical and a then-contemporary standpoint, and situates himself within the narrative from firsthand and removed standpoints. It is therefore necessary for the historian to understand the potential biases and interests of secondary sources just as much as those of primary sources.

Primary source examples for this study included census data, diaries, personal records and correspondence, church records, wills and testaments, newspapers, government records, state constitutions, and institutional university data to draw a collective portrait of this Afro-Creole protest tradition and an ideal of democratic higher education in postbellum New Orleans. Maps and photographs also emerged as powerful visual tools to examine and understand the past, notably in exploring the social, political, and cultural influences within this study. Moreover, including maps and photographs to this study offer readers an opportunity to view and conceptualize the themes, ideas, people, and places that are presented in the text.

Primary sources are simultaneously singular and holistic: they might represent one person, place, or moment in time, yet the sources also are part of a broader history that builds

---

167 McCulloch and Richardson, Historical Research in Educational Settings, 80.
together to tell a more comprehensive narrative. As historians evaluate primary and secondary sources, they must then determine what evidence provides the meaning they seek or discover to interpret the past, as well as the specific location to access the data. Accordingly, historians can only really become historians or write history once they have been to the archive for selection, authenticity, and interpretation. However, historiography wrestles with its own tensions about the written record—that is, how it is manufactured within positivist assumptions about reality—and the inherent social, political, and cultural spaces of production. In evaluating primary and secondary sources, then, it is important to contextualize this information and ascribe meaning about how, why, and where historiographers write their specific texts. Moreover, the historiographer examines raw data to make assessments of the past, as de Certeau suggests, but inverts the process of comprehension which relates a product to a place. For the “making of history” is reinforced by “a political power which creates a space proper (a walled city, a nation, etc.) where a will can and must write (a construct) a system (a reason articulating practices).”

This notion of place, which reveals inherent power dynamics, de Certeau explains:

implies an area of elaboration that peculiar determinations circumscribe: a liberal profession, a position as an observer or a professor, a group of learned people, and so forth. It is therefore ruled by constraints, bound to privileges, and rooted in a particular situation. It is in terms of this place that its methods are established, its topography of interests can be specified, its dossiers and its interrogation of documents organized.

Where documents are kept and how they are organized reveals much about the nature of the archives and how information is accessed.

But what exactly is archival research? Where does one search, what questions are asked, and what issues are considered in broadening historiography in archival research? Archives

---

hold the primary sources that are the hallmark of historical research.\footnote{Jordan R. Humphrey, “No Food, No Drinks, Pencil Only: Checklists for Conducting and Interpreting Archival Research,” \textit{The History of U.S. Higher Education: Methods for Understanding the Past}, ed. Marybeth Gasman (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 44.} As historian Patricia D’Antonio suggests, “[p]rimary sources can be found almost anywhere, from family attics and garages to elaborate state-of-the-art government archival facilities. The majority of collections,” she claims, “those that are known and accessible to the public, exist in three allied institutional spheres: archives, special collection libraries, and museums and historical societies.”\footnote{Patricia D’Antonio, “Conceptual and Methodological issues in Historical Research,” \textit{Capturing Nursing History: A Guide to Historical Methods in Research}, ed. Sandra B. Lewenson and Eleanor Krohn Hermann (New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company, 2007), 132.} Archives also emerge as a \textit{constituted space} that is supposedly free of context, argument, and ideology, and simultaneously represent the outcome of the historical process and the very condition for the production of historical knowledge.\footnote{Dirks, “Annals of the Archive,” 48.} But we must not pretend that an archive is completely free of ideology, power, and impartiality. For example, historian Shirley Thompson claims that “[t]races and evidence of past lives surface in archives, but never as innocently as we would have them. Various perspectives and motives—many of them quite pernicious—have shaped and continue to shape these repositories of historical evidence.”\footnote{Thompson, \textit{Exiles at Home}, 21.} Although a reified space that is never definitive, archives undoubtedly serve as a repository for primary source materials. Carolyn Steedman affirms the Archive is not potentially made up of \textit{everything}, as is human memory; and it is “not the fathomless and timeless place in which nothing goes away that is the unconscious.”\footnote{Carolyn Steedman, \textit{Dust: the Archive and Cultural History} (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 68.} According to Steedman, “the Archive is made from selected and consciously chosen documentation from the past and also from the mad fragments that no one intended to preserve and just ended up there.”\footnote{Steedman, \textit{Dust}, 68.}
The term *archive* refers to both a collection of documents and a repository for housing, preserving, organizing, and making accessible documentary materials.\(^{178}\) The Society of American Archivists define an archive as a collection of materials “created or received by a person, family, or organizations, public or private, in the conduct of their affairs and preserved because of the enduring value contained in the information they contain or as evidence of the functions and responsibilities of their creator.”\(^{179}\) But it is the collection itself, as conceived and purposely assembled that recognize a given or hidden meaning. For example, de Certeau is more critical of this space and the “collection” of documents, suggesting it assumes a more positivistic orientation and classification system. He points out, “a work is ‘scientific’ when it produces a redistribution of space and when it consists, first of all, in ascribing a place for itself though the ‘establishment of sources’—that is to say, through an institutionalizing action and through transformational techniques.”\(^{180}\)

For this study, university archives, including the Hill Memorial Library at Louisiana State University, Amistad Research Center at Tulane University, Special Collections of the Will W. Alexander Library at Dillard University, as well as the New Orleans Public Library and the Williams Center at the Historical New Orleans Collection offered direct opportunities to examine Afro-Creole culture, identity, and intellectualism in promoting democratic education. The archives at Tulane and Dillard, in particular, maintain a wide array of materials on Straight University and the AMA. This allowed me to generate a deeper understanding of Straight’s founding and development during Reconstruction through detailed accounts of campus planning and construction, finances, faculty, students, and leadership. It also illuminated the AMA’s


\(^{179}\) Keith C. Mages and Julia A. Fairman, “Working With Primary Sources,” 132.

\(^{180}\) de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 75.
involvement and the distinct role the Afro-Creole community played in shaping the institution. For example, in examining Rev. J. W. Healy’s correspondence prior to Straight’s inception, he describes the relationships he maintained with local Afro-Creole leaders, notably Roudanez and Mary, as well as the leadership roles they played in Straight’s executive committee. The correspondence between Healy and Seymour Straight also revealed the challenges in developing the institution, as well as the need to include the local community to help grow and foster the university.

I also sought primary source material from the Albion Winegar Tourgée collection at the Chautauqua County Historical Society and McClurg Museum. Tourgée proved an integral voice of dissent in framing the *Plessy* challenge before the United States Supreme Court in 1896. The Tourgée collection maintains records and photographs, as well as personal letters that illuminate the distinct challenges surrounding the landmark court case. In particular, Tourgée’s correspondence with Louis A. Martinet revealed much about strategy and formulation of the Separate Car Act test case, and the unyielding support and protest of the local Afro-Creole population. This collection added a rich and comprehensive viewpoint, notably on race, politics, and civil rights that situated the *Plessy* case at a local level in New Orleans and then subsequently in the national stage of the Supreme Court.

Undeniably, understanding and evaluating primary and secondary source materials for a historical study is significant; yet understanding how to critique and interpret these sources is equally important. Once the sources have been collated and carefully researched, most historians find that the interpretation process begins to emerge and an argument becomes clear. It is noteworthy, though, to avoid making assumptions that interpreting sources is a purely intuitive

---

process. Since the nature of historical work contains within itself threats to rigor, the accuracy of sources and the quality of the interpretation ultimately leaves this process open to question.\textsuperscript{183} After all, it is the historian who selects data that is deemed significant and relevant for a particular historical account; therefore, it is up to the historian to interpret and present the information while remaining aware of one’s own pre-existing assumptions. For as Lucien Febvre cautions us, the worst of all sins for historians is anachronism—the historical error of unknowingly or negligently applying circumstances and viewpoints of the present to the past.\textsuperscript{184} Anachronism, also known as presentism, remains a constant issue for historians in confronting reflexivity and presumptions about the past based on contemporary vantage points.

Although we can never completely escape from our present—as historians we think and write in the present about the past—some degree of anachronism is inevitable in historical writing. In this regard, Berkhofer encourages reflexivity as a mode of writing, arguing that it would allow the historian to reveal assumptions that go into presenting the past.\textsuperscript{185} Reflexivity acknowledges the interaction between present and past in historical representation which allows for a multiplicity of viewpoints.\textsuperscript{186} But it should be emphasized that historians should not inject his or her contemporary consciousness into the past and avoid assuming modern meanings from concepts, themes, and ideas within historical documents.\textsuperscript{187} For instance, when examining Straight University in 1870, it is tempting to view the institution as a contemporary example of a college or university. While Straight maintained a medical and a collegiate department from its

\textsuperscript{183} Hallett, “The Truth About the Past,” 155.
\textsuperscript{185} Robert F. Berkhofer Jr., Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 45.
\textsuperscript{186} Berkhofer Jr., Beyond the Great Story, 45.
inception, and admitted “graduates of all respectable schools”\textsuperscript{188} to these specific departments, the university mainly comprised primary and secondary students. It is thus important to consider Straight as a more holistic and communal institution for students of varying backgrounds and experience levels when it first opened its doors, as opposed to modern-day assumptions and considerations of what colleges and universities are and should be. In this frame, then, it is necessary to be aware of the filtration process by which sources are channeled through one’s own prejudices and presuppositions.\textsuperscript{189} An important aspect to this process is to determine the validity of these sources and evaluating them on their own terms.

Accordingly, the most basic question about any artifact or “document” discovered as a source in an archive, special collection, or library, must be whether it is genuine or spurious.\textsuperscript{190} It is important to view every document or source critically and evaluate for its truthfulness to prevent any bias that might affect historical interpretation. As noted, bias can emerge if the historian only selects data that support his or her hypothesis or interprets the content of records in such a way that is biased by expectations.\textsuperscript{191} As part of this historical methodology and data collection, I incorporated extensive document analysis to examine primary source materials to determine validity and authenticity. To that end, I followed a multi-step process of external and internal criticism: determining the genesis, genealogy, and originality of the document; interpreting the document; determining the authorial authority of each document; and understanding the competence and trustworthiness of the observer.\textsuperscript{192}

\begin{thebibliography}{5}
\bibitem{188} Straight University Catalogue, 1870-1871, Dillard Archives.
\bibitem{190} Berkhofer, Jr., Fashioning History: Current Practices and Principles, 13.
\bibitem{191} James C. Goodwin, Research in Psychology: Methods and Design (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2009), 388.
\bibitem{192} Martha C. Howell and Walter Prevenier, From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 19.
\end{thebibliography}
Since historians interpret the past, they must evaluate “data” sources carefully for external and internal criticism. External criticism refers to the authenticity and validity of the source itself, or the genealogy and genesis of the document. Is it an original document, a copy, or is it a copy of a copy? Does the apparent or claimed origin of the source correspond to its actual origin? This is particularly the case with handwritten documents, but also for photocopies and digital images. Copies are often imperfect because of unintentional technical failures or because of voluntary and involuntary manipulations.\(^{193}\) Although perhaps one can never be completely certain about the validity of sources, it is up to the historian to determine whether the document is what it claims to be or if it has been tampered with or falsified in some way.\(^{194}\)

This example of data analysis and triangulation leads to the other type of evaluation in historical research: internal criticism. Internal criticism refers to the reliability of the information contained in the collected sources.\(^{195}\) This requires the historian to scrutinize the data source for its accuracy and trustworthiness. As historians, we must interrogate the voice behind the document to determine authorial authority and competence.\(^{196}\) In other words, was the document, diary, or photograph created by the author to whom and when it was attributed?\(^{197}\) Was the author an eyewitness or participant in the event? Did he or she have any bias toward the person, place, or event under investigation? Ultimately, historians only have partial views of an event and a glimpse of the author’s own perspective—which is often a limited, incomplete, and even distorted view of events.\(^{198}\) Understanding the author’s role in collecting information about a first-hand account is an important element to archival research, in that:

\(^{193}\) Howell and Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources*, 61.
\(^{195}\) Johnson and Christensen, *Educational Research*, 419.
\(^{196}\) Humphrey, “No Food, No Drinks, Pencil Only.”
\(^{198}\) Howell and Walter Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources*, 66.
At issue are the proximity of the document’s author to the event of interest, his or her attention to the event, to what extent a time delay occurred between the event and the document’s creation, biases or motives related to the event that the author may have had, and the competence of the author to analyze and report the event.\textsuperscript{199}

Historians thus must make strenuous efforts to locate the truly firsthand reports of an event and to trace the relationship of other existing versions of the report or story to the original record.\textsuperscript{200}

In addition to efforts at external and internal criticism, I finally corroborated and contextualized the data sources to further establish accuracy through document analysis. Corroboration refers to comparing documents to each other to determine whether they provide the same information or reach the same conclusions.\textsuperscript{201} Are there stark differences within the documents such as details of events or people involved? This involves examining several accounts of the same person or event to ensure accuracy when possible. For example, I examined AMA correspondence between Rev. Healy and Seymour Straight regarding the campus construction process.\textsuperscript{202} Both Healy and Straight, in separate communications, identify the campus location, lot size, and specific dimensions of the Straight University buildings considered for construction, as well as the funds required for development. I then compared and corroborated the content of their letters with the New Orleans Deputy Surveyor’s Office report from May 15, 1869 to ascertain the exact campus location and lot dimensions and building specifics.

**Summary Review**

This chapter examined the methodological ways to identify and evaluate sources from the past, as well as to reimagine and recondition social memory through ethnographic historical

\textsuperscript{200} Howell and Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources*, 65.
\textsuperscript{201} Johnson and Christensen, *Educational Research*, 421.
\textsuperscript{202} J. W. Healy to George Whipple, Mar. 26, 1869; Seymour Straight to Rev. George Whipple, Mar. 29, 1869, AMA Archives.
traditions. Through this multidisciplinary approach, my aim was to demonstrate how the past maintains a relationship to the present, and how historians can recapture the complex nuances, personalities, and diverse standpoints and ideas that influenced people and events being investigated. Rather than silence these voices—as is more common within traditional historical narratives and positivistic standpoints—ethnographic history confronts a “history of resistances” and conditions of everyday life as they are experienced from below. As historian Thongchai Winichakul suggests, “History, either the recovered past or the narratives, is partial and retrospective. It is created by silencing the snarls that could disrupt the dominant voices, leaving the silenced past in the shadow of the domain of history.”

Thus it is the street-level conflicts and tensions that must be explored to access the diverse mentalities of people, the overlooked role of a marginalized, exploited, and disenfranchised group of people—the Afro-Creole community, freedmen, and civil rights activists—during Reconstruction New Orleans.

In the following chapter I consider the role of Afro-Creoles in New Orleans from before and after the American Civil War and through the Reconstruction period using the ethnographic historical method. In an attempt to recapture the distinct political, social, and cultural milieus that dominated the city’s landscape, it will be through their voices, perspectives, and passion that I hope to illuminate how Afro-Creoles construed the world in which they lived and how they infused it with emotion in establishing democratic education.

---

CHAPTER THREE: HISTORICAL ASSUMPTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS OF AFRO-CREOLE IDENTITY AND CULTURE

There were three classes of people of color in Louisiana: the children of the soil, those who came originally from Martinique, and those who immigrated [sic] from Santo Domingo. All being Creoles, they lived on good terms, one group with the other, united under the same conditions: it was as though they had come from the same region and the same family. Resembling a group of people newly arrived together in a country, they formed one community, alike in origin, language, and customs. Above all, having been subjected to the same conditions in life, they experienced among themselves a strong bond of unity. – Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes

These people were not always outcasts. Under the great Napoleon they were citizens of the French Empire. It was only when the flag of the free came to cover them that they were disenfranchised; only when they were transferred to a republic that they lost their political rights. Hitherto they held themselves aloof from the slaves, and particularly from the plantation negroes; have plumed themselves upon their French descent, and thus isolated from both races, have transferred to Paris an allegiance that was rejected at Washington. – Whitelaw Reid

Our contemporary understanding of the history of race relations in New Orleans suggests that distinct binary categories existed between black and white. This emerged as part of a broader American history, particularly during the colonial and antebellum periods, caught in what historian Daniel Usner Jr. describes as “chronological obscurity,” or measuring other eras in the South backwards, particularly from an Anglo-Protestant, antebellum perspective.

Historian Emily Clark also intimates how scholars who explore the social and cultural history of Louisiana in particular succumb to teleology—that is, reading the contemporary distinctiveness of New Orleans backward and “emphasize and romanticize” Louisiana’s differences from British

204 Desdunes, Our People and Our History, 3.
205 Whitelaw Reid, After the War: A Southern Tour, May 1, 1865 to May 1, 1866 (New York, NY: Moore, Wilstach & Baldwin Publishers, 1866), 244.
Accordingly, New Orleans was thought to have maintained the same rigid, two-tiered racial structure that symbolized an unyielding color line between whites and nonwhites, evident in separate neighborhoods, occupations, and legal sanctions, among others. However, the ethnic composition and demographic profile of New Orleans during the colonial and antebellum periods instead embodied a discernible three caste racial system in the predominantly Catholic Caribbean city, in which a class of marginal status and mixed race origin remained situated between these binary considerations: Afro-Creole New Orleanians.

Afro-Creoles were free people of color, *gens de couleur libre*, native-born to Louisiana, and represented a Catholic francophone population that had emerged from French and Spanish occupation with uncommon rights and powers, most remarkably property rights and the ability and means to own slaves. They could enter into business contracts, sue and be sued, seek redress of grievances in court, and trade on the open market. Afro-Creoles could also educate themselves, be baptized in the Catholic church, and they could travel abroad, privileges that greatly affected their professional lives and distinguished free people of color from slaves. While these distinctions and privileges came under attack by mid-nineteenth century, the state of Louisiana’s unusual customs regarding free people of color differed considerably with the proscriptive laws, practices, and institutions confronting people of color elsewhere in the South.

But why consider Afro-Creoles for a study about Straight University? What was their significance in developing educational opportunities for people of color? To understand the importance of their contributions and the lasting imprint they had on education, politics, and

---

208 Logsdon and Bell, “The Americanization of Black New Orleans,” 204.
social conditions in Reconstruction New Orleans, it is important to understand the historical context and distinct social, economic, and political environment from which they evolved. This chapter engages previous scholarship and examines the historical assumptions and considerations of Afro-Creoles in New Orleans, including their specific Catholic francophone culture and identity. Although considerable treatment is given to Afro-Creoles, it is important to examine this history before presenting an earnest study of higher education.

**Creole: A Curious Word and an Ambiguous Identity**

*Creole* often eludes a straightforward definition and has been curiously redefined over time. It derives from the Portuguese word *crioulo* and the Spanish word *criollo*, both meaning slave of African descent born in the New World. As the myth maintains, it became an invention of the conquistadors designed “to distinguish the progeny of European whites in New World colonies from native aborigines and the European-born.” During the French and Spanish periods of eighteenth century Louisiana, *Creole* evolved further and developed a more local refashioning to distinguish American-born from African-born slaves. Yet according to historian Joseph Tregle Jr., this creole identity figured very little during the whole of Louisiana’s colonial experience. It was only in the aftermath of Louisiana’s acquisition by the United States in 1803 that a clash ensued between native Louisianans and migrant Anglo-Americans which “for the first time made place of birth a critical issue and gave the creole label its crucial significance.”

In this widening current of Americanization, the word *Creole* meant native born, yet it also subsequently assumed a more distinct definition as a person of non-American ancestry,

---

210 Tregle Jr., “Creoles and Americans,” 133.
212 Tregle Jr., “Creoles and Americans,” 135.
whether African or European, who was born in the Americas. Creole could also be used to distinguish French speakers of any heritage or social class from Americans. The connotation of place thus emerged as a marker in formulating a Creole identity. Historian Connie Eble contends that in 1803 the ethnic label Creole suddenly became important,

... uniting all Louisianans who had prior claim to the place and to a way of life shaped by the French language and colonial French culture, regardless of ancestry. Whites, free people of color, and slaves who had called colonial Louisiana home were all Creoles. Networks based on family, marriage, and money developed within and among the Creoles to strengthen their claims to distinctiveness. Opposed to Creoles were the Americans. The newcomers contrasted with the founder population: the Americans' forebears had come from the British Isles, they spoke varieties of English, and they were Protestants.

As Thompson affirms, the associated relationship of Americanization and Creolization is mirrored in a way the term Creole itself morphed its way through nineteenth-century New Orleans, fitting a range of individual and communal needs for both white and Afro-Creoles. Thompson further suggests, “[a] chameleon of a word, Creole has, in the most general sense, both masked and exposed anxieties over place, culture, and race. Wherever it is used,” she claims, “the term confronts the challenges posed by a radical pluralism. It attempts to name an ethic of in-between-ness—to connect multiple allegiances and to channel them into a singular identity with deep roots in a particular context.

This in-between-ness, as Thompson elaborates, often rendered Afro-Creoles a “disappearing people,” sustained in the nebulous realm between slave and free, black and white, and French and American. In addition, when the word creole uses a lowercase c, as it often was in the antebellum period, the term “benignly attributed native birth or origin;” yet, when used

---

214 Eble, “Creole in Louisiana,” 43.
215 Thompson, Exiles at Home, 8.
216 Thompson, Exiles at Home, 8.

65
with an uppercase C, the word assumed an “overtly political cast” that is attributed to Afro-Creoles and former San Dominguans and others who often violently clashed with Americans and whose numbers and influence grew steadily during the nineteenth century.\footnote{217}{Thompson, \textit{Exiles at Home}, 9.}

The complexity of meaning that the word \textit{Creole} evokes is principally a story of how race played out in New Orleans, and it elucidates the contextual parameters of changing social and cultural definitions. For instance, during French and Spanish rule from 1718 to 1803, wealthy Afro-Creoles maintained a fair amount of prestige, but their power shifted and quickly waned later in the nineteenth century, notably after 1850. In fact, in the face of an emergent American social and legal system that associated skin color with inferiority and subordination, Anglo-Americans worked diligently to supplement their \textit{de jure} authority with a changing, and rather explicit, cultural capital.\footnote{218}{Floyd D. Cheung, “\textit{Les Cenelles} and Quadroon Balls: Hidden Transcripts of Resistance and Domination in New Orleans, 1803-1845,” in \textit{The Southern Literary Journal} 29, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 6.}

Particularly in the decades preceding the Civil War, white New Orleanians sought to unambiguously redefine the term \textit{Creole} and claim it as their own.

The white Creoles systematically excluded Afro-Creoles from their group and sought to change the distinctive features of the definition of \textit{Creole}, designating it a strictly white racial category.\footnote{219}{Virginia R. Domínguez, “Social Classification in Creole Louisiana,” \textit{American Ethnologist} 4, no. 4 (Nov. 1977): 594.} They argued that a Creole was a native Louisianan of “pure white blood” descended from those French and Spanish pioneers who arrived directly from Europe to colonize the New World.\footnote{220}{Tregle Jr., “Creoles and Americans,” 132.} White Creoles, thus possessing a “superior Caucasian blood,” were never to be assimilated to the “baser liquid that ran in the veins of the Indian and the African native.”\footnote{221}{Thompson, \textit{Exiles at Home}, 12.} From this standpoint, then, while this creole rubric was now reserved and sustained by whites,
the adjective *creole* could be made to modify lesser beings and inanimate objects, such as “creole horses,” “creole tomatoes,” and “creole negroes.”

This duality embodied the racial tension, bitterness, and hostility in New Orleans, as well as the discernible shift *Creole* assumed in the mid- to late-nineteenth century: first from local birth to cultural-social allegiance and then to ancestral purity. Yet as Hirsch and Logsdon suggest, the white Creole’s vehement embrace of Anglo-American racial principles was doubly ironic:

> It was ironic, first, as an act of self-denial. Turning their backs on much of their own history, they rejected in the rush to whiteness the historic closeness, indeed, interconnectedness, of the white and black creole communities, particularly in those downtown municipalities that enjoyed a large degree of freedom from American administrators down to the 1850s. Second, the antebellum ethnic, cultural, and political divisions among whites provided the space within which New Orleans’ unique community of free people of color could flourish. The attempt to hijack the *creole* label for exclusive white use not only furnished evidence of the white creoles’ Americanization but also meant that, to the extent New Orleans’ creole character survived at all, it did so primarily among nonwhites.

This dualism produced an extraordinary cultural and racial environment in the city in which Afro-Creoles could indeed flourish.

> Through much of the 1850s, increased Americanization created a real and profound threat to the diminished importance of Afro-Creoles in New Orleans. Restrictive laws against free people of color were enacted and enforced with a new vigilance. Louisiana lawmakers added new caveats further proscribing the freedoms and mobility of Afro-Creoles, which forced them to carry passes, restricted access to public accommodations, limited their right of assembly

---

and, in some instances, required that they acquire a white sponsor.\(^{226}\) They also witnessed diminished employment and educational opportunities in the city. Skilled and unskilled people of color were subject to changing labor patterns, often replaced by Irish and German immigrants who descended on New Orleans in large numbers after 1845. By 1855, lawmakers banned charitable, scientific, and literary societies, which dealt a severe blow to free black schools.\(^{227}\)

The lack of education, employment, and economic activity and the arbitrary nature of these laws affected Afro-Creoles in their public and private lives, leaving some in this community to evade sanction by passing as white.\(^{228}\) According to historian Arthé Anthony, “passing” is used as a “metaphor for masking the real—and most often marginalized—self.”\(^{229}\) Creoles of color with light complexions, whom could effectively pass as white, did so in order to maintain a living in a city with diminished opportunities and economic viability. Yet racial passing only contributed to a growing Afro-Creole resistance to ascribing status based on race and skin color. Desdunes referred to those debating the merits of passing as persons who were mesmerized by “a foolish controversy over the color of the skin.”\(^{230}\) Desdunes further elaborates, with much disdain, that his fellow Creoles who chose to pass as white “have fallen to such a point of moral weakness that they have disowned and rejected not only their fellow blacks but even their fellow kin.”\(^{231}\) In assuming a white identity, Thompson explains people of color crossed boundaries of race and legitimate kinship, in effect to lose friends, siblings, and extended family, which resonated powerfully and personally in the intimate Afro-Creole neighborhoods in


\(^{227}\) Bell, Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana, 126.

\(^{228}\) Thompson, Exiles at Home, 10.


\(^{230}\) Hirsch and Logsdon, Creole New Orleans, 193; Desdunes, Our People and Our History.

\(^{231}\) Desdunes, Our People and Our History, 18-19.
New Orleans. Racial passing demonstrates the extreme risks some people of color often felt compelled to take in order to circumvent the extreme legal restrictions, poverty, and racial discrimination.

Within this shifting social and political context, free people of color evaded, resisted, or fled the rising tide of white supremacy in New Orleans, some even looking for safe havens in Mexico and Haiti. Consequently, between 1840 and 1850, the Afro-Creole population fell from over 15,000 to less than 10,000. It typified the struggle the gens de colour libre experienced in developing an identity within and against the widening gulf of imposed racial disjuncture, and this separation and struggle continued through the Civil War and Reconstruction. In this frame, education functioned as a means to counteract the increasingly oppressive and violent social and political order during this period.

Ethnogenesis: Historical Assumptions and Considerations

Literature on the enduring legacy of Afro-Creoles in New Orleans, particularly within a shifting social, political, and economic context during Louisiana’s history, continues to draw fascination and curious attention. Yet it was only in the last few decades that historians and scholars began to seriously examine the complex interplay between power, identity, and racial consciousness that have shaped the character and demographic profile of New Orleans during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A growing body of scholarship continues to emerge as part of an Atlantic historiography that confronts issues of race and the formation of a Creole

232 Thompson, Exiles at Home, 2; and Anthony, “Lost Boundaries: Racial Passing and Poverty in Segregated New Orleans.”
234 This historiography is derived from Atlantic History, which explores the comparative and interactive aspects of people, politics, economics, and culture in geographic areas that form the Atlantic basin. Much of this scholarship focuses on the early modern period through the early nineteenth century on an intercontinental scale. See Bernard Bailyn, Atlantic History: Concept and Contours (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); John Thornton, African and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press,
culture that assumed a Franco-African identity in New Orleans. In surveying this literature, understanding and conceptualizing race as an identity and as a social and political construct for Afro-Creoles is central to exploring the foundations of democratic higher education in Reconstruction New Orleans.

The challenge in studying Afro-Creoles, as historian Mary Niall Mitchell points out, is that free people of color are fascinating, yet difficult subjects of historical and cultural study. The difficulty lies in attempting to present a vivid portrait of their ethnogenesis and protest tradition. Mitchell suggests that their story, which is “complicated and unfamiliar” to most readers, requires an explanation of “the precarious yet prosperous existence of a group of French-speaking free people of color, with ties to Europe and the Caribbean, in the midst of a U.S. slave society.” She further elaborates:

Although most were well educated, and many of them were writers and intellectuals, few of their personal papers are stored in archives (most of those that have survived remain in private hands). Scholars, therefore, must look to a variety of sources to piece together the history of Creoles of color.

Many scholars have incorporated such disparate sources as legal and property records, newspaper articles and editorials, diaries, and travelogues to piece together a carefully constructed historical narrative on Afro-Creole culture and identity. For example, in assimilating an exhaustive review of slave records, census data, and property accounts, historian Gwendolyn Midlo Hall presents a nuanced perspective on the origins of a “constant and formidable” African imprint and culture in eighteenth-century New Orleans that seems to steer away from the often static interpretation of slave societies in the South.


237 Mitchell (Reviewer), *Exiles at Home*, 661.
The derivation of Afro-Creoles in Louisiana thus dates back to this colonial era when French and Spanish settlers took black women and Native Americans as their wives and mistresses, which created a racial and cultural amalgamation against a sex imbalance among its inhabitants. Historian Kimberly Hanger affirms diseases such as smallpox, influenza, yellow fever, and malaria remained common in the Louisiana colony and often decimated the fledgling population. Therefore, in maintaining its authentic reputation as a land of famine and disease, many white women who arrived from France suffered high mortality rates. Demographic statistics reveal this dismal population growth in colonial New Orleans in particular, notably that the median age at death for white women was only 18.1 years. This paucity of white women led the predominantly male population of soldiers, adventurers, vagabonds, and uncompromising personnel—particularly troublesome neighbors of ill-character, criminals, miscreants, “incorrigible sons,” or French prisoners sent to work in the Louisiana frontier as part of their commuted sentence agreement—to establish extramarital liaisons with Native American and African slave women. These interracial relationships challenged Western racial ideology that conserved dogmatic notions of racial and social constructs in Anglo American colonial cities along the eastern seaboard. Louisiana’s colonial inhabitants fostered the emergence of a “middle space” and social caste for people of color.

Many scholars have favored an orthodox historiography of an Old South, one that Usner describes as “a false sense of time, in which class and race relations seem frozen in images of


docile slaves, deferential yeomen, and gentrified planters.” Conversely, Hall confirms that a well-integrated, self-conscious, and self-confident African slave culture in the Louisiana Territory remained firmly in place by 1803. She elaborates further that Native Americans and Africans not only built and sustained the colony through labor, they also shaped the formation of an Afro-Latin Catholic cultural milieu. Hall confirms that “Louisiana was probably the only slave colony in the Americas in which revolting Indians and Africans, aided by rebellious Africans on the continent and at sea, crippled a slave plantation society during its early stage of development.”

Slave families lived together and remained intact, and they continued to develop an already formed Bambara culture from a single region of Africa, the Senegal River basin. These families surrounded and infiltrated the French settlements with a vast network extending through New Orleans and the countryside, a happenstance that historians Arnold Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon affirm is “unique in the annals of New World slavery.” This culture developed within an open and interracial frontier society in Louisiana that cut across all classes, colors, and nations. Historian Ned Sublette also highlights this distinct culture in describing the African imprint on Louisiana’s frontier society. In fact, Sublette proposes that from a cultural point of view, it might be appropriate to refer to the French period alternatively as the “Senegambian period.” The Senegambians came from a culture of artisanship, which included goldsmiths

---

and silversmiths, ironworkers, and farmers. Hall further elaborates on this unique culture by suggesting:

Its creativity, intelligence, biting wit, joyfulness, musicality, poetic strain, and reverence for beauty make this culture inherently attractive. But what is most important is its powerful universalist trend. Senegambia had long been a crossroads of the world where peoples and cultures were amalgamated in the crucible of warfare and the rise and fall of far-flung trading empires. An essential feature of the cultural materials brought from Senegambia as well as from other parts of Africa was a willingness to add and incorporate useful aspects of new cultures encountered. This attitude was highly functional in a dangerous and chaotic world. New Orleans became another crossroads . . . where various nations ruled but the folk continued to reign. They turned inhospitable swamplands into a refuge for the independent, the defiant, and the creative “unimportant” people who tore down barriers of language and culture among peoples throughout the world and continue to sing to them of joy and triumph of the human spirit . . ."  

These accounts run counter to previous lines of scholarship that suggest African passivity and conformity to a colonial plantation society resembled a monolithic culture for slaves. Historians have argued that the harshness of American slavery stripped slaves of culture, initiative, and purpose, which reinforced the image of the slave as helpless and passive. Yet, as Hall explains, this is “a manifestation of false consciousness that has been systematically created and enforced from above to facilitate political domination and economic exploitation.”

French colonial officials in New Orleans remained open and pragmatic when it came to racial matters. According to Hall, the original Saint Domingue Le Code Noir, decreed in 1685 to regulate slavery in the French Caribbean, proved more fluid and liberal in its design and scope. In particular, “Article IX” mandated that if a slave gave birth to her master’s child, the man must marry her and “who by this means will be manumitted and the children rendered free

---

249 Hall, “Historical Memory, Consciousness and Conscience in the New Millennium,” 306.
and legitimate.”\textsuperscript{251} And if the master did not comply with this provision, he would be “condemned to a fine of two thousand pounds of sugar,”\textsuperscript{252} and the slave mistress and their children would be confiscated and could never be freed. The French Code Noir also granted citizenship rights to all slaves freed in the French colonies and proclaimed their “children will be held and regarded as manumitted”\textsuperscript{253} and assimilated into the Christian community. Remarkably, it also provided for the automatic emancipation of a slave serving as a tutor to his master’s children.\textsuperscript{254}

The inflow of African slaves augmented this fledgling colonial population when they arrived over a twelve-year period after New Orleans’s founding from 1719 to 1731, discussed earlier.\textsuperscript{255} During the French and Spanish regimes, New Orleans suffered a shortage of European domestic laborers and tradesmen, whereupon owners outsourced their slave labor to various city inhabitants. Slaves monopolized many of the skilled trades, first through apprenticeships and then in roles as masons, locksmiths, carpenters, blacksmiths, woodcutters, and metalworkers. Since skilled slave labor became a significant factor in the growth of colonial cities,\textsuperscript{256} particularly in Louisiana many of these black laborers advanced to positions of authority and prestige, which allowed them to purchase their freedom.

Liberal colonial policies during the Spanish period after 1769 further accelerated this upward mobility and freedom through emancipation. For example, slaves could purchase their freedom with money earned by “extra work” for his master or someone else. If the master unwillingly set a price for this freedom or set an unfair price, the slave could then petition the

\textsuperscript{251} Le Code Noir ou recueil des reglements rendus jusqu’a present (1685).
\textsuperscript{252} Le Code Noir ou recueil des reglements rendus jusqu’a present.
\textsuperscript{253} Le Code Noir ou recueil des reglements rendus jusqu’a present.
\textsuperscript{255} Hall, “The Formation of Afro-Creole Culture,” 66.
court to appoint a disinterested party to determine a fair value. According to historian Laura Foner, one such example involved a slave, Miguel, who petitioned the court when his mistress refused to set a fair price for his manumission. The court ruled in the slave’s favor, ruling that the mistress had to draw up the emancipation documentation, setting the slaves purchase price at 500 pesos.

Another example of emancipation and manumission of slaves included service in Louisiana’s colonial militia. Throughout the eighteenth century, the militia suffered high rates of desertion and death, which forced French and Spanish authorities to strengthen their forces with enslaved black soldiers and laborers. In particular, an important event that increased the number of free people of color in the colony was the emancipation of “volunteer” slave soldiers who fought against the Natchez in 1729-1730. French governor Périer in New Orleans freed the black volunteer soldiers in May 1730 and suggested that a “military company organized among the like elect negroes” be organized for “instant call against the Indians on occasion.”

A free black militia was subsequently formed and service became an important means of manumission and advancement, representing distinction and an elite membership in colonial society. As a result of manumission through self-purchase or service, the free people of color population grew from 165 in 1769 to 1,175 by 1785.

---

259 Bell, Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana, 16
260 In the winter of 1729, the Natchez Indians launched a deadly, surprise assault on the colony’s “most advanced settlement” in Natchez, in which they killed the colonists and captured women and children as slaves. Setting of a wave of fear in New Orleans, in a response to this assault on January 27, 1730, a force of colonial soldiers, black volunteers, and 500 Choctow Indians attacked the Natchez and recovered 54 women and children. See Usner Jr., “From Captivity to American Slavery,” 44-45; and Dawdy, Building the Devil’s Empire, 179.
261 “Records,” LHQ, IV (1921), 524; MPA, I, 70, quoted in Daniel H. Usner Jr., “From Captivity to American Slavery,” 45
In the early eighteenth century, slave artisans participated in a variety of occupations in the city which contributed to a greater degree of personal contact between whites and blacks.²⁶³ Race mixture remained quite common and widely accepted in the Louisiana colony, a divergence from the English customs and racial prejudice that existed in much of the upper South. Despite the 1724 Louisiana Code Noir, a revision of the original 1685 Code Noir, and strictures of the Catholic Church that forbade marital and non-marital sexual relations between Europeans and Africans (whether slave or free), many colonists ignored such stipulations and lived openly with women of color as their common-law wives and mistresses.²⁶⁴ By the mid-eighteenth century these interracial liaisons were commonplace and parish registers indicated the church’s acceptance of these social patterns within the city.²⁶⁵ They often recognized their mixed race offspring as their own, providing them with an education, land, and financial assistance. According to Sylvie Dubois and Megan Melançon, the children of these multiracial unions, previously referred to as “mullatos,” were never recognized as white, but, in many cases, they were often manumitted. In fact, the number of free people of color in New Orleans was so high, and the link between free-colored status and mixed ancestry was so strong, that in 1810 the Louisiana Supreme Court presumed all “people of mixed race” to remain free.²⁶⁶

These liaisons with white men continued through the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries and assumed a more controversial and contentious arrangement known as plaçage.²⁶⁷ Derived from placer (to place), plaçage often presented flamboyant and much-romanticized spectacles of illicit sex and forbidden love. However, in practice women of color entered into

²⁶³ Dawdy, Building the Devil’s Empire: French Colonial New Orleans, 179.
²⁶⁷ Thompson, Exiles at Home, 11.
long-standing, formalized relationships with white European men, which yielded a relatively prosperous, property-owning class of women. Yet historian Joan Martin posits that *plaçage* served as a survival skill in a society where the presence of African blood circumscribed their marital options among free men. Thompson shares this sentiment, suggesting *plaçage* remained a “crucial strategy” of Creole existence:

Creating a middle ground between legitimate marriage and mere concubinage, *plaçage* allowed a femme de couleur to stake a material, social, and psychic claim to belonging that could reverberate generations into the future. Forgoing the minimal but very real legal protections bestowed on women by legitimate marriages, *plaçage* was also a danger zone that exposed women of color and their children to the harsh consequences of arbitrary affections and loose commitment.

Since *plaçage* was not a legitimate marriage, the man could maintain his “colored” family on one side of town while at the same time continuing his life in white society in every respect, including marriage with a white woman. He could also leave the relationship at any time, essentially cutting ties with the woman and their children and denying the familial closeness of the paternal relations. In some cases, white men celebrated *plaçage* and lived monogamously with their *placée* (“placed” woman). They produced natural children who were his heirs and automatically free. During the decade between 1830 and 1840, in particular, many free people of color amassed significant wealth and status as a result of these unions, which further developed a well-educated, cultured, and powerful population in New Orleans.

---

270 Thompson, *Exiles at Home*, 12.
272 Martin, “*Plaçage* and the Louisiana *Gens de Couleur Libre*,” 69.
273 Martin, “*Plaçage* and the Louisiana *Gens de Couleur Libre*,” 69.
274 Children of *plaçage* unions were referred as “natural” children because they were legally recognized by their fathers and received portions of their estates and legal title. See Joan M. Martin, “*Plaçage* and the Louisiana *Gens de Couleur Libre*, 68-70.
All along the Catholic Church welcomed children of interracial liaisons into its midst. Catholic priests baptized, confirmed, married, and buried persons of mixed parentage, reflecting a more racially liberal Catholicism of the colonists and clergy of New Orleans. Accordingly, throughout the colonial era French and Spanish Capuchins (members of the Franciscan order) devoted considerable attention to Louisiana’s slave and free black populations. In particular, the colonial French *Code Noir* of 1724 specifically required that slaveholders provide religious instruction and baptism of their slaves under penalty of fine. The code also mandated that slaves could not work on Sundays and during other religious observances, reflecting the “moral personality of the slave.” This culture persisted and contributed to a racially diverse congregation. On a visit to New Orleans in 1845, Thomas Low Nichols, of Connecticut, was struck by the St. Louis Cathedral (see Figure 3.1) congregations’ mixed race composition, noting:

Never did I see such a curious mixture of persons and colours. A radiant creole beauty, with coal-black eyes, long silken lashes, a complexion of the lily, scarcely tinged with a rose, and a form of matchless elegance . . . On the other side was a venerable descendent of Africa, with devotion marked on every feature. White children and black, with every shade in between, knelt side by side. . . In the house of prayer they recognised [sic] no distinction of rank or colour. The maddest abolitionist could not wish for an exhibition of greater equality or a more perfect amalgamation, than is to be found in New Orleans, where . . . the negro is treated more like “a man and a brother” than in the North.


By mid-nineteenth century, Afro-Creoles formed the majority of church attendees and financial supporters in New Orleans until the shifting racial balance in the late-nineteenth century created racially segregated churches. Yet throughout New Orleans’s racial configuration, the link between religion and racial identity remained crucial for Afro-Creoles, particularly in this climate of imposed binary racial order during Americanization. Religious historian James Bennett suggests that religion remained, as it had been, central to Afro-Creole identity. He suggests, “even in the face of widespread social, legal, and religious restrictions, the city’s Creole community found ways to preserve and strengthen their identity. The segregated racial order that pervaded New Orleans proved insufficient to destroy the Creole sense of self that remained grounded in an equally powerful Catholic identity.”

Prominent Afro-Creoles, including Louis Charles Roudanez, Jean-Baptiste Roudanez, and Paul Trévigne promoted popular models of Catholic charity and Christian universalism in their bi-weekly newspaper, *L’Union*. In particular, in one of its earliest editions, *L’Union*

offered a treatment on St. Vincent de Paul—a former slave himself and an ardent supporter of fraternal charity—who sought to alleviate the misery and win the freedom of those still in slavery in seventeenth century France.\textsuperscript{281} According to Bell, this Vincentian ideal of a new-model Catholic leader “animated by selfless service in humanitarian works”\textsuperscript{282} carried an irresistible force with Afro-Creoles. It promoted an ethic of understanding, equality, and egalitarian spirituality that transcended the political and social borderlines of race, class, and culture.

While religion remained central to Afro-Creole identity in nineteenth century Louisiana, the widening flux of “revolutionary idealism” that emanated from the Saint Domingue refuge movement symbolized another important identity marker and reinforced their spirit of democracy and dissent. Located in the western part of Hispaniola, Saint-Domingue remained the wealthiest and most populated French colony in the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{283} The Haitian Revolution from 1791 to 1804, led by Toussaint L’Ouverture, a free person of color, and slaves and their Creole masters, poured into New Orleans in the years following the Purchase in 1803.\textsuperscript{284} A stream of Caribbean émigrés expanded the black and mixed race population in Louisiana by the end of the eighteenth century through statehood in 1812.

But how did the blending of these peoples and mentalities produce a coherent vision of democracy in Louisiana? Historian Caryn Cossé Bell proposes that this strong Caribbean influence on Afro-Creoles remained prominent and uncontested, and contributed to a legacy of dissent. For example, Bell describes myriad sociopolitical constructs of racial identity and pluralism in \textit{Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana}. Like

\textsuperscript{281} Bell, “French Religious Culture in Afro-Creole New Orleans,” 5.
\textsuperscript{282} Bell, “French Religious Culture in Afro-Creole New Orleans,” 5.
\textsuperscript{284} Mary Gehman, \textit{The Free People of Color: An Introduction} (Donaldsonville, LA: Margaret Media, Inc.), 49.
Usner, Bell promotes an ideological vision of a multiethnic society in New Orleans, but through a francophone Afro-Creole lens which largely extends from the colonial era through Reconstruction. It is within this framework that she persuasively argues that Afro-Creoles were the “driving force” and the major actors behind the 1868 Louisiana constitution’s racial egalitarianism and a republican idealism that envisioned “far-reaching change.”

Paul LaChance also highlights the wave of immigration from Haiti after the American purchase in 1803 as having a distinct impression on Afro-Creoles in New Orleans. LaChance offers insight into the demographic profile and impact of these émigrés on Afro-Creoles, noting the considerable intermarriage within racial boundaries and economic and social standing. Yet although LaChance situates the important role of a racially and socially heterogeneous French-speaking community—the “foreign French” as LaChance refers to them, a literal translation of français étrangers, or immigrants whose first language was French—he does not attribute the role of protest and revolution in shaping their democratic character. While LaChance’s treatment of the “foreign French” is undoubtedly important, nonetheless it presents a rather incomplete portrait of Afro-Creoles in the nineteenth century: it fails to confront the essence of their revolutionary ethos and their demands for racial equality, enfranchisement, and education.

If the Haitian Revolution, which abolished slavery and declared universal citizenship for the first time in the Americans, constitutes the “principal success of Enlightenment discourse,” then according to Bell, Louisiana claimed considerable credit for the democratic ethos that the Caribbean liberators promoted. The revolution began as a challenge to French imperial

---

285 Bell, Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana, 2.
authority and soon morphed into a battle over racial inequality and slavery itself. Historian Laurent Dubois confirms that the slave insurrection of Saint-Domingue led to the “expansion of citizenship beyond racial barriers despite the massive political and economic investment in the slave system at the time.” Dubois further explains, “If we live in a world in which democracy is meant to exclude no one, it is in no small part because of the actions of those slaves in Saint-Domingue who insisted that human rights were theirs too.”

Incorporating this context, then, Bell echoes the import of this struggle for freedom and equality, which decidedly transcends throughout her treatment on Afro-Creoles in New Orleans during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For Bell, the revolutionary ethos and spirit of the Haitian Revolution represented the most radical transformation of a sociopolitical process in the Age of Revolutions that spanned from the 1770s to the 1840s. In particular, this “revolutionary tide” had a profound effect on future generations of Afro-Creoles, the descendants of Haitian liberators, who steadfastly supported Louisiana’s oppressed African American masses in a quest for freedom, equal citizenship, and universal male suffrage.

Other scholars have begun to address this Caribbean influence on Afro-Creoles in Louisiana, alluding to a coherent and sophisticated revolutionary spirit that emanated from the ashes of a slave society. Nathalie Dessens, for example, in describing Afro-Creoles and their democratic character and agency, suggests their “high degree of education, their strong commitment, unfailing courage, and unusual radicalism” was a direct result of the settlement of thousands of Saint-Domingue refugees in New Orleans at the turn of the nineteenth century.

---

288 Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 3.
289 Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 3.
According to Dessens, the education level of the Saint-Domingue refugees was high compared to Louisianans:

While education had been very little developed in Louisiana at the time of their arrival, the Saint-Domingans had always been schooled, and even often had a higher education. In the upper classes of society, the children were generally sent to metropolitan France for education, and this included racially mixed children and even daughters. This spread to Louisiana after their arrival, the refugees being extremely active in the field of education. In Louisiana, this tradition of education was passed on to the second and third generations, the descendants of the refugees proving to be extremely well educated far into the nineteenth century, be they white refugees or Creoles of color.292

Afro-Creoles Paul Trévigne, Camille Thierry, Daniel Desdunes, Jean-Baptiste Roudanez, and Louis Charles Roudanez, for example, were among the “best educated” men in Louisiana and represented a core group of intellectuals and revolutionaries behind the 1868 Louisiana state constitution.293 This Saint-Domingue “ferment” thus helped to shape the Afro-Creole activism and protest tradition, as well as education, that Bells admits “assured the survival of its intellectual, social, and revolutionary heritage.”294

According LaChance, between May 1809 and January 1810, over six thousand Saint-Dominguans of African descent, both free and slave, entered the city in a “multiethnic refugee movement” that nearly doubled the size of New Orleans. Bell incorporates the role of revolution in influencing the ideology and actions of Afro-Creoles in the antebellum and Civil War periods, something previous scholarship tends to ignore. Much of this earlier scholarship tends to treat Afro-Creoles as a monolithic group, “as race-conscious extremists” or “aristocrats of color who identified with the state’s slaveholding elite.”295 For example, in revealing this standpoint, Alice Moore Dunbar-Nelson intimates, “the gens de couleur, colored people, were always a class

294 Bell, Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana, 40.
apart, separated from and superior to the Negroes, ennobled were it only for one drop of white blood in their veins.“296 Afro-Creoles remained “in a middle stratum between whites and slaves.”297

While perhaps a more accurate reflection of the sociopolitical climate in the antebellum era, evident in free people of color slave purchases in increasing numbers by the 1830s and from the vulnerability of their anomalous in-between status, this philosophy changed as the widening current of Americanization in the 1850s imposed its customary racial duality in all facets of daily life. As historian Kimberly Hanger explains, “Without the protection of a paternalistic Spanish government, as race-conscious as it was, libres in New Orleans encountered continuing attacks on their status as a distinct group; as the nineteenth century unfolded, local whites stepped up efforts to define and treat all persons of African descent as slaves.”298 It was not until the Civil War that a more unified vision developed, one that sought to erase the cultural and status divisions between Afro-Creoles and the formerly enslaved.299 This resembled a more coherent intellectual and racial division between all people of color (both slave and free) and whites. For example, according to the New Orleans Tribune, a radical newspaper Roudanez and Trévigne launched after L’Union disbanded in 1865, the editors asserted their refusal to be used as a “buffer population” between whites and the formerly enslaved, instead opting to identify themselves in binary racial terms. They reinforced the position that the Tribune “fully represents the colored population in spite of all the efforts that some white men have made to divide them.”300 These Afro-Creoles underscored their African heritage, and instead of pursuing

298 Hanger, Bounded Lives, Bounded Places, 162.
299 Thompson, Exiles at Home, 225.
300 Thompson, Exiles at Home, 225.
limited personal gain by situating themselves in between the “color line”—as in W. E. B. Du Bois’s pronouncement and formulation—they chose to pass as black.³⁰¹

Other scholarship tends to highlight Afro-Creoles’ “place” in purely social and economic terms in Louisiana—that is, manumission, social status, labor, military service, and civil rights in the context of racial discrimination and separation. For instance, Laura Foner offers a useful overview of the three-caste society, occupying this middle stratum that developed and operated in antebellum Louisiana, but stays clear of any revolutionary leanings. Incorporating demographic data from early census reports, as well as operational details of occupations and status, Foner compares the three-caste system which existed within the context of North American slavery with the rest of the United States and the three-caste system in the French colony of Saint-Domingue.³⁰² Accordingly, Loren Schweninger attempts to define the historical tracings of free people of color in Louisiana, but does so from a purely economic perspective. Schweninger examines the economic ascent of Louisiana’s free people of color and addresses property ownership as a key variable to understanding their relative economic condition.³⁰³ While Schweninger does reveal the hostile racial climate in New Orleans prior to the Civil War, it is seemingly only treated as a backdrop to expand a discussion on fluctuating sugar and cotton prices, as well as property accumulation and losses of “prosperous blacks.”³⁰⁴

By 1830 the free black population represented 25 percent of the city’s total population, and through inheritance, real estate holdings, and entrepreneurial endeavors, many attained

---

³⁰⁴ Schweninger, “Prosperous Blacks in the South, 1790-1880,” 33.
middle class status and even the upper echelons of wealth during this period. Many Afro-Creoles purchased small plots of land in and around the Vieux Carré, including real estate in Faubourg Marigny and Faubourg Tremé, and became an integral part of the social fabric of the city (see Figure 3.2). It is within these neighborhoods (most notably Tremé) that our epistemological assumptions about space emerge. Moreover, this place/space nexus in New Orleans—that is, these neighborhoods within the city itself—encompasses race, identity, and class, and is defined by a marginalized people. Thus residing in the outskirts of the city, Afro-Creoles developed self-definition and social identities that remained linked to a “politics of resistance.”

![Figure 3.2 Map of New Orleans: Vieux Carré, Faubourg Marigny and Tremé](image)

Figure 3.2 Map of New Orleans: Vieux Carré, Faubourg Marigny and Tremé

Although Afro-Creoles were allowed the “right to life, to happiness, to possession, to succession,” they could not vote or hold office. The Louisiana Civil Code of 1808 reinforced

---

the 1724 *Code Noir* legal provisions and prohibited marriages and concubinage between people of color (slave and free) and whites. Tellingly, freedom did not equate to equality, and as Afro-Creole activist and writer Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes points out, “[b]ecause of his state of dependence, the Creole of color could not command the respect of his fellow man. He was, on the contrary, the object of hatred, contempt and scorn. His so-called rights, revocable and tenuous, were subject to withdrawal at the pleasure of the governing class.”

**Summary Review**

Despite these degrading restrictions for free people of color, Afro-Creoles constituted an influential urban minority and represented the largest, most literate black population in the South. For example, the number of free blacks in New Orleans outnumbered the combined free black populations in Georgia, Texas, Florida, Mississippi, and Alabama, representing a population of over 25,000 by 1840. By 1860 there were 18,647 free people of color in Louisiana, 9,914 in South Carolina, 3,500 in Georgia, 2,690 in Alabama, and 773 in Mississippi.  They had access to advanced literacy development through formal schooling and international travel, and maintained a Universalist religious ethic—incorporating the central tenets of morality and humanity that Louisiana’s Catholic Church embodied and promoted for whites, free blacks, and slaves—that demanded freedom and equality.

Afro-Creoles “shared neither the privileges of the master class nor the degradation of the slave,” and their identity signaled a struggle against the limits the United States imposed on

---

308 Desdunes, *Our People and Our History*, 4.
309 Desdunes, *Our People and Our History*, 4.
311 Porche-Frilot, “Propelled by Faith,” 55; and Bell, “French Religious Culture in Afro-Creole New Orleans, 1.
individuals and groups who were not white. In New Orleans, Afro-Creoles constituted a “new people,” separated from the slave by their legal status and set apart from whites by the color of their skin; they remained profoundly distinct from the indigenous people of their birthplace and “separate from the political culture and social affectations of their country of heritage.” This position of in-between-ness shaped their identity, cultural understanding, and physical and conceptual place in nineteenth-century New Orleans. Moreover, since the city was thought to have maintained the same rigid, two-tiered racial structure that symbolized an unyielding color line between whites and nonwhites, the role of Afro-Creoles as a people, culture, and racial individuality further complicates the traditional historical narrative on race relations in the South. Hence, it is within this problematized understanding of race that enabled Afro-Creoles to assert their ideas and protest tradition to create meaningful change in society, manifest in their political, social, and educational opportunities.

In my attempt to establish an historical understanding of Afro-Creoles within fluid boundaries of race, identity, culture, and class, it is important to turn to the foundational aspects of education and the democratic ethos Afro-Creoles sought and realized in Reconstruction New Orleans.

---

[A] society which not only changes but which has the ideal of such change will improve it, will have different standards and methods of education from one which aims at the perpetuation of its own customs. To make the general ideas set forth applicable to our own educational practice, it is, therefore, necessary to come to closer quarters with the nature of present social life. – John Dewey

No longer did our people find it necessary to seek education in Europe or elsewhere. The program of studies at the [Catholic] Institute provided a solid education for all our people. Orphans and children of poor parents no longer had to dread the disadvantages of ignorance. – Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes

In re-envisioning how moral and democratic education emerged at Straight University in Reconstruction New Orleans, extending opportunities for all students, irrespective of race, gender, and ethnicity, it is important to understand the foundation upon which it emerged and developed. We must look back to the city’s founding in the early-eighteenth century; for the first iteration of inclusive education in the city began over a century and a half earlier in colonial Louisiana, manifest through the contributions of the Ursuline nuns order in providing education to all girls and women. Historian Petra Hendry suggests this, in essence, embodied the first public, free education in the North American colonies. In transplanting France’s distinctive female religious tradition to New Orleans, female education remained the exclusive focus of the Ursuline project. As historian Emily Clark intimates further, the nuns established themselves as a “focal point” for female community, offering free women of color in the city instruction in

---


316 Desdunes refers to the Société Catholique pour l’Instruction des Orphelins dans l’Indigence, also known as the Catholic Institute for Indigent Orphans or the Couvent School. See Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes, *Our People and Our History*, 22.

literacy and numeracy. Yet, they also sponsored “a laywomen’s confraternity that mounted a sweeping program of catechesis among the enslaved.”

This ideal of democratic education extended through the antebellum period through a pair of significant endeavors in black education. At a time when Afro-Creoles in New Orleans increased in population, wealth, and urbanity, within the hardened sociocultural and political conditions through the Americanization period—to what historian Albert Fossier described as an “infiltration of Anglo-Saxon Americans”—they were legally barred from the educational enterprise. Despite the mandate for public education in Louisiana in January 1845, many wealthy Afro-Creoles sent their children to France for an education or employed private tutors at home. Less fortunate children were systematically excluded from the education enterprise. However, as Desdunes suggests above, opportunities for educating free people of color in New Orleans developed in earnest and seemingly without consequence; and Afro-Creole women in the community assumed the lead in developing these initiatives, establishing the first black Catholic-run schools for children of color.

Two pious women of color figure prominently—Henriette Delille, the “foundress” of the Catholic order of the Sisters of the Holy Family, and Madame Marie Justine Firvin Couvent (Madame Bernard Couvent) whose will bequeathed the lot and buildings for the Société Catholique pour l’Instruction des Orphelins dans l’Indigence, also known as the Catholic Institute for Indigent Orphans or the Couvent School. These institutions represented the foundation for democratic education at Straight University through its ideal of access and

---

318 Clark, Masterless Mistresses, 3.
321 I will use the Catholic Institute designation for the remainder of this study. See Petra Munro Hendry, “A Shield Against the Calumnious Arrows Shot Against Us: Franco-Afro-Creole-Catholic Education in New Orleans, 1810-1860,” Paper Presentation, LHA (March, 2012); Thompson, Exiles at Home: The Struggle to Become American in Creole New Orleans, 169; and Porche-Frilot and Hendry, “‘Whatever Diversity of Shade May Appear,’ 45.
attainment for people of color, but also in its curriculum and literacy instruction. This chapter explores the notion of democratic education within these institutions to provide a framework for the egalitarian and moral fabric that emanated at Straight during Reconstruction.

“Creole” Education in New Orleans

Just before the formal transfer of the Louisiana Purchase to the United States in November 1803, President Thomas Jefferson described “learning” and education in the territory in rather unfavorable terms, offering a direct and dismal appraisal:

There are no colleges, and but one public school, which is in New Orleans. The masters of this are paid by the King. They teach the Spanish language only. There are a few private schools for children. Not more than half the inhabitants are supposed to be able to read and write: of whom not more than two hundred, perhaps, are able to do it well.

Despite this bleak assessment on the educational enterprise in Louisiana (or lack thereof), Jefferson did go on to say that “[i]n general, the learning of the inhabitants does not extend beyond these two arts, though they seem endowed with a natural genius, and an uncommon facility of learning whatever they undertake.”

It is not clear what Jefferson meant by natural genius, but their facility of learning did indicate a more accurate portrayal of the territory’s inhabitants. As historian Shannon Lee Dawdy suggests, the anti-intellectualism of colonial New Orleans is “one of the stratigraphic myths of the city, built layer by layer over the years.”

From its outset, education emerged from the margins, since a purported lack of interest in education went hand and hand with “a perception of moral disorder” in New Orleans.

Bienville himself remained interested in education and made repeated efforts to induce the

---

324 Dawdy, *Building the Devil’s Empire*, 57.
325 Dawdy highlights the binary discourse of “order/disorder” in Louisiana historiography, suggesting instead that the city and its inhabitants remained ordered *and* disorderly. Since “New Orleans was in constant flux, simultaneously succeeding and failing on various fronts, being pulled between forces constructing structures of power and those trying to undermine them,” Dawdy contends that this was not an either/or binary distinction. Rather, the discourse actually moves beyond this flat duality. See Dawdy, *Building the Devil’s Empire*, 61.
French government to give schools to the colony under the patronage of the Crown;\textsuperscript{326} however, it was the church that ultimately provided funding and organization for the educational enterprise in the territory. Father Raphael de Luxembourg, a Capuchin and pastor of the parish church of St. Louis, recognized the need for a school to educate young boys in the colony to correct “the ignorance and bad conduct.”\textsuperscript{327} Yet the colony’s chief engineer, Adrien de Pauger, made no specific provisions for a school in his initial design of the city: a simple grid with four rows of square blocks extending on either side of a central plaza.\textsuperscript{328} As soon as he was able, Raphael sought the help of Capuchin leaders to develop a small school for boys in 1725.

The institution was situated in a house on St. Ann Street in the French Quarter (on the corner of present-day Chartres and Royal Streets) and immediately outgrew its space.\textsuperscript{329} According to historian Adam Hebert, although Raphael was eager to enlarge the school with visions of receiving twelve to fifteen boarders, including Native American students to be admitted free of charge, his efforts suffered from inadequate funding.\textsuperscript{330} Since Raphael relied on contributions from private citizens in the colony, indeed a precarious position by 1730, the school ultimately faltered. Bienville, in his final term as governor, ultimately sought to bolster the Capuchin efforts in education. Bienville understood that in order to establish permanent homes and a sense of belonging in the colony, educating colonist children remained an important initiative. For instance, in a letter to the French government in 1742, Bienville appealed to their good nature and the religious (and moral) needs of the colony and requested financial support for schools:

\textsuperscript{328} Dawdy, \textit{Building the Devil’s Empire}, 64.
\textsuperscript{329} Hebert Jr., “History of Education in Colonial Louisiana,” 11.
For a long time the inhabitants of Louisiana have made a case for the need to establish a college for the education of their children . . . It is essential that there be one, at least for the study of the classics, geometry, geography, pilotage. There the youths of the colony would be taught the knowledge of religion, which is the basis of morality. Parents cannot help but see how the young people raised in idleness and luxury are found later to be useless and how those inhabitants who are in a position to send their children to France to get an education go through their funds quickly. It is even to be feared that those young people thus educated abroad will form a dislike of the country [Louisiana], and will come back to it only to cash in what property their parents left them. Many persons . . . would rejoice at having a college here, and would send their children to it.  

Bienville sought to improve the quality of Louisiana’s youth through education, and in so doing, redefine the colonial character of New Orleans and make it a cultural center for the Mississippi-Caribbean sphere. Like the earlier Capuchin efforts, this vision only included “sons of New Orleans,” however, leaving girls and people of color with little to no options—disenfranchised communities seemingly devoid of the morality that Bienville described to correct Louisiana’s colonial character. 

Ironically, education for girls fared much better in colonial New Orleans. It was better organized and supported in large part due to the female piety and ambitious educational apostolate of the Ursuline nuns. After a long and treacherous journey from France, the twelve Ursuline nuns who arrived in New Orleans in 1727 quickly established a school in the former residence of Governor Bienville, a two-story brick house located on the square formed by Bienville, Chartres, Customhouse, and Old Levee Streets. While they awaited the Company of the Indies to finish construction of their permanent convent, the nuns became specialists in

---

331 As quoted in Dawdy, Building the Devil’s Empire, 57
332 Dawdy, Building the Devil’s Empire, 57
333 Clark, Masterless Mistresses, 1-6; and Emily Clark, Voices From an Early American Convent: Marie Madeleine Hachard and the New Orleans Ursulines, 1727-1760 (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2007).
335 According to Charles E. Nolan, “[t]he Company of the Indies was organized in 1717 as the Company of the West with broad powers to expand and govern the colony and to monopolize local trade; the company was obligated to build churches and subsidize the missionaries at Louisiana settlements.” See Charles E. Nolan, A Southern Catholic Heritage, Vol. 1, Colonial Period, 1704-1813 (New Orleans, LA: Archives of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, 1976), 198. For a more operational understanding of the Company of the Indies, see Daniel H. Usner, Indians,
female education. As Clark confirms, they were bent on “extending the spirit of the French Counter-Reformation to Louisiana and transforming every woman there into an agent for the propagation of the faith.”

After all, the Ursuline Order had been instituted not only for the salvation and perfection of its members,

. . . but also in the order that they may help and serve their neighbor by the instruction of young girls, whom they must labor to bring up in the fear of God, leading them in the way of salvation, teaching them every social and Christian virtue, and preparing them to be source of edification to others by the practice of these virtues.

In this evangelizing process, Charles Nolan suggests that “Christians evangelize. . . by establishing, building, educating, and strengthening communities of believers, but also by serving the poor and needy, by mutually supporting one another, by jointly, liturgically celebrating God’s presence.” Nolan further posits that education, in this frame, is the “handing down” of faith by example, love, support, and instruction. According to historian Lawrence Powell, what drew the Ursulines to New Orleans was less the reformatory project to bring order and civilization to the colony than the chance to evangelize Indians and prepare young women for “lives of active piety and Catholic motherhood.”

In incorporating mission and instructional methods, and unlike the Capuchin efforts under Father Raphael, the Ursuline project embraced a universalism that transcended social boundaries: it extended opportunities to all girls and women, admitting French, Native

---


Emily Clark, Masterless Mistresses, 60.


American, and free black and enslaved African girls.\textsuperscript{341} The Counter-Reformation project in Louisiana allowed the nuns to ignore race and social status in their admission policies and instruction, and instead used a “revived religious imperative and long-established rules of rank and order to support a program of radical protest” and universal female education.\textsuperscript{342} In less than a year of operation, twenty young boarders resided at the convent, as well as several slave and orphans who represented day students.\textsuperscript{343} One of the nuns confirmed that they had “seven slave boarders to instruct for baptism and first communion, and a large number of day students and Negresses and Indian girls who come two hours each day for instruction.”\textsuperscript{344}

It should be emphasized that the Ursulines owned slaves themselves through the late-eighteenth century. According to Clark, for a time the nuns assumed the role of colonial planter, seeking a return on investment on their lands and slaves; however, perhaps through distaste for the business of slavery, or for financial challenges in running a plantation economy, the nuns moved to reject slavery as a financial strategy by the late-eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{345} Yet all along they educated their slaves and orphans, particularly in providing them “a suitable education which puts them in a position to work to earn their living.”\textsuperscript{346} As Tolley and Beadie confirm,

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Porche-Frilot and Hendry, “’Whatever Diversity of Shade May Appear,’ 37; and Emily Clark and Virginia Meacham Gould, “The Feminine Face of Afro-Catholicism in New Orleans, 1727-1852,” in \textit{William and Mary Quarterly} 59, 3\textsuperscript{rd} Series, no. 2 (April 2002): 417.
\item Clark, \textit{Masterless Mistresses}, 61.
\item Porche-Frilot and Hendry, “’Whatever Diversity of Shade May Appear,’ 38; and Hebert Jr., “History of Education in Colonial Louisiana,” 21.
\item Clark, “Patrimony without Pater,” 100.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
through the establishment of their boarding school in the View Carré, the Ursulines developed the first convent school and female academy in Colonial America (see Figure 4.1). 347

![Figure 4.1 New Ursuline Convent Engraving (undated)](image)

Figure 4.1 New Ursuline Convent Engraving (undated) 348

At the end of the Spanish period in 1800 one hundred and seventy boarders resided at the convent, and the Ursuline project prospered. 349 They continued to educate young girls and women irrespective of race and social strata through the American period. Historians Donna Porche-Frilot and Petra Munro Hendry affirm that despite popular notions that the South lagged behind the North in education, the Ursuline project raised the literacy rate of women in New Orleans to become one of the highest in early America. In fact, by 1760 the literacy for women was 72 percent, slightly higher than the literacy rate for men, and significantly higher compared

---


to the thirteen colonies along the eastern seaboard. \textsuperscript{350} Teaching and literacy instruction remained lasting achievements, yet as Clark suggests:

[t]he real legacy of the Ursulines of colonial New Orleans—their patrimony—was not material. It was their transformation of themselves from dependent daughters into independent mothers of a new kind of sun. They demonstrated that woman had the capacity to make their way in the world, and not simply by emulating male strategies of ruthless investment, but by their own labor. That this labor was itself directed toward education of women is one of the sweeter ironies of their story. \textsuperscript{351}

While the Ursuline legacy solidified their approach to teaching and democratic education, the shift to delivering public education followed a somewhat different course in New Orleans. An ideal of universal education continued during Americanization, in which then-Governor William Charles Cole Claiborne sought to deliver public education as a safeguard to democracy. \textsuperscript{352} He conceived an elaborate system based on New York and French models of education: incorporating a college at the top of the system with a network of local academies, libraries, and primary schools below, governed by a board of regents. \textsuperscript{353} However, as Claiborne soon discovered, implementing this elaborate system of public education on Louisiana’s foreign culture proved exceedingly difficult in the Territory of New Orleans. \textsuperscript{354} In a January 1804 letter to James Madison, then-secretary of state of the United States, Claiborne admittedly relayed his frustrations about the provincial mindset of the planter elite:

The merchants as well as the planters in this country appear to be wealthy, their habits of living are luxurious and expensive, but by far the greater part of the people are deplorably uniformed. The wretched policy of the late Government having discouraged education of the youth, the attainments of some of the first people consist only of a few exterior accomplishments. Frivolous diversions seem to be among their primary pleasures, and

\textsuperscript{350} Porche-Frilot and Hendry, ““Whatever Diversity of Shade May Appear,”” 36; and Emily Clark, “A New World Community: The New Orleans Ursulines and Colonial Society, 1727-1803” (PhD diss., Tulane University, 1998).
\textsuperscript{351} Clark, “Patrimony without Pater,” 107.
\textsuperscript{354} DeVore and Logsdon, \textit{Crescent City Schools}, 7.
the display of wealth and the parade of power constitute their highest objects of admiration.\textsuperscript{355}

Despite establishing the Collège d’Orléans (College of Orleans) and a network of academies in 1805, this comprehensive system of public education ultimately failed to develop and materialize. As will be explained in greater detail in Chapter 6, this endeavor largely faltered due to the rivalry and complex social milieu during the Americanization period, as well as the conflict and widening gulf between the Americans and the white, French-speaking Creole natives—the \textit{ancienne population}.\textsuperscript{356} After the failure of the College of Orleans, the Creole and American rivals sought to develop two primary schools at opposite ends of the city: the Upper School in the American-controlled uptown neighborhood, and the Lower School, situated in the downtown white Creole sector.\textsuperscript{357} According to historians Donald DeVore and Joseph Logsdon, both schools suffered from small enrollments, but more significantly, the two rival groups continued to wrangle over the future of secondary education in the city. This led to a change in city governance which had significant consequences for public education in New Orleans.\textsuperscript{358}

American leaders in New Orleans engineered legislative approval to restructure the city’s government into three municipalities in 1836. The first municipality covered the area between Esplanade Avenue and Canal Street, encompassing the View Carré, and included the first, second, third, and fourth city wards. The second municipality, also known as the “American sector,” included the uptown neighborhoods above Canal Street, and included city wards six and


\textsuperscript{356} The \textit{ancienne population}, the native (American-born) French of Louisiana, or as Joseph Tregle Jr. describes as “the masters of their native soil,” felt they possessed a legitimate claim to the territory and challenged all aspects of assimilation through the Americanization period. See Joseph Tregle Jr., “Creoles and Americans,” in Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon (Eds.), \textit{Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization} (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 131-185.

\textsuperscript{357} DeVore and Logsdon, \textit{Crescent City Schools}, 9.

\textsuperscript{358} Sarah Lipscomb Hyde, “Teach Us Incessantly: Lessons and Learning in the Antebellum Gulf South,” (PhD diss., Louisiana State University, 2010), 125-127.
seven. Finally, the third municipality included the fifth ward and extended below Esplanade Avenue and included Faubourgs Marigny and Tremé. This division allowed each of the three municipalities within the city to govern autonomously, which created varying and independent directions in delivering public education (see Figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2 Map of New Orleans, Three Municipalities and City Wards

Recognizing the need for public education in the New Orleans, the legislature and the city council in the American sector, referred to as the “Council of the Second Municipality,” sought to emulate “the rules and regulations of the system of public schools, as it exists in the Northern States of the Union.” In 1840, one of the section’s residents, Samuel J. Peters,

---

359 DeVore and Logsdon, Crescent City Schools, 10-11.
360 Accordingly, each municipality maintained its own city council, as well as a “powerful executive” and judicial officer called a recorder. This unique agreement allowed the Americans to adopt and implement their own vision of public education in the city. See Donald E. DeVore and Joseph Logsdon, Crescent City Schools, 10-11; and Alma H. Peterson, “A Historical Survey of the Administration of Education in New Orleans, 1718-1851,” (PhD diss., Louisiana State University, 1962), 193.
361 “Norman’s plan of New Orleans & environs, 1845,” Courtesy of the Library of Congress Geography and Map Division, Washington, D.C.
visited Horace Mann in Boston to acquire his assistance in establishing a public school in the
Crescent City. ³⁶⁴  Incorporating Mann’s normal school movement in the antebellum South,
known as the “architect” and champion of modern public education in the United States—the
council went further to describe him as “the great apostle of universal education in the United
States”—the official mandate for compulsory public education arrived on February 16, 1841.  At
that time, the city council of the second municipality developed a small system of free public
schools for children of the planter class and wealthy elite. ³⁶⁵  At Mann’s urging, the council
sought the leadership of John Angier Shaw, of Bridgewater, Massachusetts to help implement a
functioning school system. The “indomitable resolution with which he met, and the fidelity with
which he . . . discharged the duties of his important trust,” the council appointed Shaw as the
city’s first superintendent of schools.³⁶⁶

Initially, Superintendent Shaw and the city council established one school of twenty-six
students of both sexes; however, in less than a year, the student population grew to over one
thousand.³⁶⁷  The council mandated specific admission criteria for white boys and girls only:

An ordinance passed on the 23d [sic] of March, provides for the establishment of one
public school for the gratuitous education of children, of either sex, in each of the wards
of the Municipality.  To these schools, all children of proper age, of white resident
parents, are to be admitted.  The male and female pupils are taught in separate
apartments, and the grounds appropriated for their amusement during the hours of
recreation are also separate.  The only requisites for admission into the schools and for
continuance therein, are good behavior, regular attendance, and a proper regard to
personal cleanliness and neatness.³⁶⁸

With the success of the Second Municipality schools, the other two municipalities of New
Orleans began their efforts to emulate the system. The Third Municipality, in particular, opened

of Southern History 30, no. 2 (May, 1964):183; and Donald E. DeVore and Joseph Logsdon, Crescent City Schools.
³⁶⁶  McCaleb, An address delivered at the request of the director of the public schools.
³⁶⁷  McCaleb, An address delivered at the request of the director of the public schools.
³⁶⁸  McCaleb, An address delivered at the request of the director of the public schools.
a school within the year despite low student enrollments. The First Municipality, conversely, extended two existing schools established in 1825 from the closure of the College of Orleans.\(^{369}\) Despite these initiatives in public education, shifting boundaries of class distinctions slowed its development. According to historian Raleigh Suarez, many city inhabitants resisted the idea of sending their children to public schools, where, if they were educated and free, “they would bear the label of pauper.”\(^{370}\) It was not until the 1845 Louisiana state constitution that a mandate for public education arrived. Incorporating a more democratic tone from its previous iteration in 1812, the constitution created an office of the superintendent of public education and provided for “free public schools throughout the State” by “taxation on property or otherwise.”\(^{371}\)

All along Afro-Creole property taxes funded this public school system since 1841, despite white officials prohibiting free children of color from attending any of the newly established institutions.\(^{372}\) Hence the system of public education in New Orleans was neither free nor universal: it did not embody the democratic character that the Horace Mann normal school model seemingly advocated for and inscribed. Wealthy Afro-Creoles continued to send their children to tutors in the city or private schools in New England or Europe, but poor children remained deprived of any educational access or opportunity. Accordingly, Afro-Creole leaders


\(^{371}\) In the 1812 state constitution, the legislature focused heavily on “prominent elements of an aristocratic mindset” that favored the elite in New Orleans. The revised constitution in 1845 favored greater legislative representation among the rural parishes and focused more on Jacksonian ideals of “equal ability of all.” See Judith K. Schafer, “Reform or Experiment? The Louisiana Constitution of 1845,” \textit{Antebellum Louisiana, 1830-1860, Part B: Politics}, ed. Carolyn E. DeLatte (Lafayette, LA: Center for Louisiana Studies of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette Press, 2004), 26-39. See also Title VII, “Public Education,” of the 1845 state constitution (articles 133 and 134). \textit{Constitution of the State of Louisiana} (State of Louisiana, 1845).  

assumed concrete measures to promote learning and to assure that all free black children had opportunities for an education.\(^{373}\)

**An Ideal of Moral and Democratic Education: Black Women Religious**

In her 1832 will and last testament, Marie Justin Firvin Couvent,\(^{374}\) a former Guinea slave and New Orleans resident, bequeathed funds for the creation of a school for indigent orphans in Faubourg Marigny. Although Madame Couvent did not receive a formal education herself, her “one dream,” as she grew older, was to create a school for orphans of the free people of color, “many of whom had white fathers.”\(^{375}\) According to Desdunes, Couvent “had a deep compassion for little children condemned to live without the advantages of education in the midst of so much indifference and even hostility toward a class of people sorely tried.”\(^{376}\)

Through an inheritance from her husband, Gabriel Bernard Couvent, Couvent provided money and the two-story structure for the Catholic Institute. Because of the serious and degrading restrictions against free people of color in the years preceding the Civil War, particularly in the realm of education and public rights— one of the most serious abuses of the city’s education system\(^{377}\) —the Catholic Institute played an important role in creating a haven for the Afro-Creole educated elite.\(^{378}\)

---

\(^{373}\) Bell, *Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana*.

\(^{374}\) In much of the secondary literature, Couvent is listed as “Madame Bernard Couvent,” her married name. However, for the purposes of this study, I chose instead to use the name listed in the St. Louis Cathedral church records: Madame Marie Justin Firvin Couvent. See “History of the Catholic Indigent Orphan Institute, Dauphine and Touro Street” (New Orleans, LA: Published by the Board of Directors, 1915), *Charles Rousseve Collection*, Box 1, Folder 20, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA; Lawrence Young, “History and Origin of the Marie Couvent School at 2021 Pauger,” *Lucile L. Hutton Papers, 1580-1988*, Box 17, Folder 2, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA; and Lucile L. Hutton, “Couvent Marie,” *Lucile L. Hutton Papers, 1850-1988*, Box 17, Folder 1, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

\(^{375}\) Desdunes, *Our People and Our History*, 103.

\(^{376}\) Desdunes, *Our People and Our History*, 103.


Couvent remained a devout Catholic throughout her life, attending daily services at the St. Louis Cathedral. In fact Couvent’s funeral mass was held at the Cathedral and her body was interned in the St. Louis Cemetery on North Claiborne Avenue in New Orleans. Upon her death on June 29, 1837, she appointed a family friend, a carpenter and free man of color Henry Fletcher, as her executor of the will and last testament. Fletcher assumed authority over the state, whereupon Madame Couvent stipulated that the school be supervised by the Catholic clergy:

It is my wish that my lot of grounds at the corner of Grands Hommes and Union streets be in perpetuity devoted to the maintenance of a free school for the colored orphans of the Faubourg Marigny. This school is to be established under the supervision of Reverend Father Manehault or in the case of his death or absence under the supervision of his successors in office. Also, I declare that said lands and buildings shall never be sold under any pretext whatsoever. Improvements or additions to the school according to needs of the times or number of students may be made through subscriptions or otherwise.

However, Bell contends that municipality officials opposed expanded educational opportunities for free people of color and discouraged the institution’s establishment. Consequently, Fletcher failed to act on Madame Couvent’s bequest and the provisions of the will remained inactive for nearly twelve years until Reverend Father Manehault, Couvent’s spiritual advisor, managed her bequest. Manehault ultimately sought the help of Francois LaCroix, “an eccentric man, but a person of admirable generosity” who obtained financial support from “the help of his friends.”

LaCroix led Armand Lanusse and others in the task of executing Couvent’s trust. Lanusse, for his part, remained actively involved in this process from the very beginning and

---

379 Lawrence Young, “History and Origin of the Marie Couvent School at 2021 Pauger.”
directed efforts to carry out her request. Desdunes confirms that Lanusse’s “energy, together with his intelligence, gave to the movement an irresistible force that contributed much to the results it obtained.”

From the outset the school embraced a democratic character. According to Steven Ochs:

The board of directors of the Institute established policy, hired the principal and teachers, and ruled on the admission of students. The co-institutional school had separate floors for boys and girls and conducted classes in both English and French. The course of instruction lasted six years and included mathematics (arithmetic, algebra, and geometry), rhetoric, French and English grammar, and composition, geography, history, logic, basic accounting and basic hygiene. Each class was supposed to begin and end with a prayer. The Institute’s approximately 200 students, who sat at long tables on crude benches, included not only orphans who attended for free, but also children of Afro-Creoles who paid tuition according to their means. In 1859, 138 paid 50 cents per month; 86 paid 20 cents.

As editor of Les Cenelles in 1845, Lanusse assembled seventeen poets, all free men of color, and published eighty-four of their works. The collection became, and remains, one of the most important pieces of antebellum black literature ever written. From a philosophical standpoint, as Desdunes explains, Les Cenelles “represents the triumph of the human spirit over the forces of obscurantism in Louisiana that denied the education and intellectual advancement of the colored masses.” Lanusse remained intimately aware of the struggle for people of color (slave and free) in Louisiana particularly as it related to education, as Desdunes suggests: “[t]hese men of talent wished to emphasize that the sweet pleasure of any satisfaction realized by them could never be lasting in a land where the liberty of some was not equal to that of others, where the individual born of a despised race and forced to conform to a set status would know only fleeting joys before succumbing to deep sorrow at the thought of his fate.”

---

383 Desdunes, Our People and Our History, 21-22.
385 Ochs, A Black Patriot and a White Priest, 10-12.
386 Ochs, A Black Patriot and a White Priest, 10.
Even the title of the volume, *Les Cenelles*, subtly intimates the dangerous challenges posed to people of color in their daily lives in Antebellum Louisiana:

The authors and editor of *Les Cenelles*, all free men of color in antebellum New Orleans, in calling their pieces *May haws*, and presenting them to the "Fair Sex of Louisiana," subtly and poetically evoked the image of small, uniquely flavored, and rare local delicacies that struggled for life in surroundings so hostile as to make the very gathering of them a dangerous travail, but one worth the risk because of the richness of the reward.\(^{388}\)

The list of teachers, benefactors, and directors of the school throughout its history included Lanusse, editor of *Les Cenelles*; Paul Trévigne, co-editor of *l’Union* and the *Tribune*; François LaCroix, real estate broker and tailor; and Thomy Lafon and Aristide Mary, wealthy philanthropists. Lafon and Mary, in particular, proved instrumental to financing the continued operation and support of the school. Lafon, known as a “gentleman of exemplary habits,” ultimately bequeathed over five thousand dollars in cash and several “pieces of real estate” for the benefit of the Catholic Institute (see Figure 4.3)\(^{389}\) Mary, “patriotic and generous, a scholar of the old school,” also left a generous bequest to the Catholic Institute to assist with the buildings’ expansion. Both Lafon and Mary contributed to erecting the main building that lasted until 1915, when a hurricane destroyed the campus.\(^{390}\)

Initially the faculty consisted of five teachers, including Trévigne and Lanusse, as well as a free woman of color, Felicie Coulon Cailoux. Cailoux initially served as a teacher and the principal of the school while it operated in its temporary quarters in several small houses in Faubourg Marigny. Desdunes described Cailoux as “exceedingly intelligent, highly respected, a devout Catholic.”\(^{391}\) She was later replaced by Lanusse in 1852. The school, later known as “the


\(^{389}\) “History of the Catholic Indigent Orphan Institute, Dauphine and Touro Street.”

\(^{390}\) “History of the Catholic Indigent Orphan Institute, Dauphine and Touro Street.”

\(^{391}\) Desdunes, *Our People and Our History*, 104.
nursery of revolution,” remained well-funded by LaCroix, Mary, and Lafon. It promoted an ideal of democratic education and contributed to the intellectual, spiritual, and moral education of each student. Lanusse emphasized the value of education as “a shield against the spiteful and calumnious arrows shot at us,” which suggested protecting young women and men from the malicious discourses of racial discrimination.

Figure 4.3 Photo of Thomy Lafon (undated)

The Catholic Institute developed in what Hendry describes as a “radical pedagogy” that empowered its students to “envision their lives as active agents despite the harsh realities of racial oppression.” This was evident in the classroom and through the curriculum. For example, in their English composition classes students wrote imaginary letters as a way to develop their own understanding of race, identity, and citizenship. The Institute teachers tasked their students (only boys) with considering the possibilities of finding liberty and equality

---

392 Desdunes, Our People and Our History, 105.
394 Undated photo of Thomy Lafon. Courtesy of the “History of the Catholic Indigent Orphan Institute, Dauphine and Touro Street.”
395 Petra Munro Hendry, “A Shield Against the Calumnious Arrows Shot Against Us,” 5.
abroad, encouraging an awareness of economics and trade, as well as discovering the people and places around the Atlantic Ocean.\textsuperscript{396} These letters, addressed to imagined people in destinations like Mexico and Haiti, illustrate the practical and political education free children of color received.\textsuperscript{397} And it represented a hopefulness and optimism that transcended the oppression and social, political, and geographical limitations in their personal lives.

Similarly, the Sisters of the Holy Family, founded by Henriette Delille (see Figure 4.4), also shared a commitment to democratic education in New Orleans. Designed to attain legal recognition for a newly founded order of Catholic sisters, Delille developed a religious congregation and an educational ministry for free women of color and the city’s enslaved. The congregation also maintained a hospice and provided medical care for the poor and indigent. Influenced by the Ursulines through heritage and tradition, the Sisters of the Holy Family represented a more activist and Universalist religious order founded in post-revolutionary France.\textsuperscript{398} They sought to meet the needs of others of African descent that they saw around them, particularly through their ministry to enslaved and free people of color, the provision of food and clothing to the destitute and nursing care for the sick and elderly.\textsuperscript{399} As Clark and Gould attest, “the institution they built conferred on them authority and power to shape the city’s common welfare and denied whites a monopoly on the institutional life of New Orleans.”\textsuperscript{400}

\textsuperscript{397} Mitchell, “A Good and Delicious Country 124; and Hendry, “A Shield Against the Calumnious Arrows Shot Against Us.”
\textsuperscript{399} Clark and Gould, “The Feminine Face of Afro-Catholicism in New Orleans,” 444.
\textsuperscript{400} Clark and Gould, “The Feminine Face of Afro-Catholicism in New Orleans,” 446.
Figure 4.4 Photo of Henriette Delille

Born to a relatively wealthy Afro-Creole family in 1813, Henriette Delille’s matrilineal roots over four generations remained entangled in the custom of *plaçage*. As Porche-Frilot posits, “she was, after all, multiracial; she was the product of miscegenation and a *natural* daughter, that is, the product of an illicit union.” By 1824 Delille’s family groomed Henriette and her sister, Cecile, for such a liaison, whereupon Cecile Delille entered into a relationship with a wealthy Austrian émigré. However, the young Henriette evaded her family’s and community’s expectations to become *placée* and instead took “instructions in faith and morals” with the French nun Jean D’Aliquot and Sister Marthe Fortiére. According to Bell, Delille’s rebellious behavior “threatened” the social and financial status of her family; and although the

---

403 Porche-Frilot, “Propelled by Faith,” 78.
1830 New Orleans Census listed the Delille family as “white,” Henriette Delille refused to deny her African ancestry (see Figure 4.4).⁴⁰⁶

Instead of seeking a sanction in a favorable alliance with a wealthy white man, Delille sought a life and religious calling in the Church. Between 1837 and 1842, and at a time when New Orleans remained deeply entrenched in an antebellum slave society, Delille sought to establish a Catholic sisterhood for Afro-Creole women, implementing the notion of a female Catholic religious order whereby women of African descent could become agents of faith and literacy.⁴⁰⁷ Through the Sisters of the Holy Family, Delille and her apostolate endeavored to teach the catechism to poor slave children, since it constituted the only means of permissible instruction for Catholic missionaries.⁴⁰⁸ Yet they also shared a commitment with the Catholic Institute in educating poor children of color and made literacy a central tenet of their mission. Through a lay association, the Society of the Holy Family, Delille enlisted the help of wealthy Afro-Creoles, such as Cecile and François LaCroix. LaCroix, who was similarly involved in the development of the Catholic Institute, helped to raise money and construct a nursing home for the elderly and orphan children.⁴⁰⁹ In 1850 Delille maintained a free school and an orphanage for indigent girls and women of color at St. Augustine’s, at the corner of North Liberty Street and Bayou Road in the Faubourg Tremé (see Figure 4.5).⁴¹⁰ With the significant contributions of other Afro-Creole leaders, including LaCroix, Trévigne, Roudanez, and Lafon, the nuns

---

⁴⁰⁶ She did this despite members of her family passing for white during the hardening economic and social climate during Americanization. See Bell, *Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition, 1718-1868*, 129; and
⁴⁰⁷ Porche-Frilot and Hendry, “‘Whatever Diversity of Shade May Appear,’” 48.
⁴⁰⁸ They also continued the church’s commitment to the humane treatment of slaves. The Sisters of the Holy Family insisted that the slaves receive the Catholic sacraments, including the sacrament of marriage. See Bell, *Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 131-134; and M. Shawn Copeland, *The Subversive Power of Love*.
⁴⁰⁹ The funds were also used to employ a doctor, medical staff, and medicine. See the *Constitution of the Association of the Holy Family*, Sisters of the Holy Family Collection.
⁴¹⁰ In contemporary New Orleans, North Liberty Street is Tremé Street and Bayou Road is Governor Nicholls Street.
expanded their facilities and operations. Delille and the association later established the Bayou Road School for Colored Girls in the Vieux Carré, the first black-run convent school for girls.\(^{411}\)

After Delille’s death in November 1862, the convent school moved to the 700 block of Orleans Street in a building donated by Lafon, and continued its focus on religious instruction and literacy. The Sisters of the Holy Family represented another movement for democratic education within the French-speaking free people of color community in New Orleans and ultimately resembled the largest, most significant Black Catholic order in American history.\(^{412}\)

Figure 4.5 Classroom at St. Augustine’s (undated)\(^{413}\)

**Summary Review**

The dominant discourse on antebellum education in New Orleans—inevitably the structured re-telling of the common school movement that emerged by 1845—is incomplete and insistently misleading: it only summarizes the efforts of white Americans and stubbornly resistant white Creoles in developing educational opportunities for themselves. It does not describe the efforts of education that emerged at the margins. Moreover, with the Ursuline

---

\(^{411}\) Donna Porche-Frilot, “Propelled by Faith,” 10.  
\(^{413}\) Undated photo of a classroom at St. Augustine’s, courtesy of Sisters of Mount Carmel Archives, New Orleans, LA.
project in colonial New Orleans, followed by the Catholic Institute and Henriette Delille and the Sisters of the Holy Family, opportunities for people of color (free and enslaved) developed within a democratic space, free of racial exclusion and discrimination. It fostered a social identity and inclusiveness that subverted the very racial hierarchy the Americans and white Creole elite refashioned for their particular suitability.

In many ways, the Afro-Creole tradition of the Catholic Institute and the Sisters of the Holy Family served as a foundation for the tenets of moral and democratic education at Straight University: they offered educational opportunities for people of color at a time when they remained systematically excluded from the enterprise. Straight represented the same ideal of racial inclusiveness that could only develop in the aftermath of the Civil War and within the Radical Republican framework that Afro-Creoles promoted and pursued. It was in the disruption of Civil War, that Afro-Creoles embarked on a forthright campaign for racial equality and social justice in all facets of their lives. As will be discussed, using the federal occupation of the city in 1862 as a way to mobilize and advance their revolutionary agenda, Afro-Creoles set in motion a blueprint for sweeping radical change for people of color in Louisiana.\footnote{Bell, \textit{Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana}, 1.}
On campuses across the South, in every kind of institution, advocates could be found for antebellum-style classicism, for Christian piety, for narrow practicality, and for modern research. The South’s colleges and universities, while not on the cutting edge of innovation, felt the deep intellectual, moral, and political struggles that appeared on campuses across America.\footnote{Ayers, \textit{The Promise of the New South}, 421-422.}

In order to apprehend the patterns of higher education in New Orleans, and the specific context and conditions from which they developed, exploring its history requires further examination. As historian Edward Ayers suggests above, a sweeping progressivism appealed to the South’s colleges, universities, and technical schools, which played an increasingly important role in the region’s life and reemergence after the Civil War.\footnote{Ayers, \textit{The Promise of the New South}, 420.} In New Orleans, as the South’s largest city during Reconstruction, this forward-thinking and bourgeoning intellectualism seemed to fit the growing needs of industrialization and economic development, where young intellectuals saw educational enlightenment as a catalyst for hope and prosperity in the New South. Yet this idea of a “New South” proved more than just an economic concept, and as historian Marsha Wedell suggests, “it combined northern humanitarianism with southern paternalism in a move toward social reform.”\footnote{Marsha Wedell, “Founding Newcomb College,” \textit{Newcomb College, 1886-2006}, ed. Susan Tucker and Beth Willinger (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University, 2012), 1.} Despite these advances, however, higher education attainment and delivery remained fixed along race and gender lines in the city: a hallmark of dogmatic Southern conservatism and a pervasive outlook that shaped and maintained higher education in the city through the twentieth century.

Higher education generally emerged within three phases in New Orleans: the antebellum period, Reconstruction, and the early-twentieth century and public higher education during state mandated segregation. It is during Reconstruction that this chapter will explore the development
of historically black colleges and universities in New Orleans, as well as the attendant social, political, and philosophical considerations. Themes of exclusion and separateness will be presented, for Straight University developed within this framework and ultimately advanced a democratic space and community all its own.

Despite the common myth that pervasive anti-intellectualism and illiteracy existed for generations in New Orleans, and that the city’s supposed lack of interest in the mind was only natural for a place “so engaged in the pleasures of the body,” the College of Orleans emerged as the first higher education institution in 1805. Cognizant of the desperate need to educate and Americanize a largely foreign and partly hostile population, the territorial governor, William C. C. Claiborne, ardently advocated for state-supported education in New Orleans and the surrounding counties. Claiborne, an eloquent exponent of improving the “minds and morals of the rising generation,” proposed establishing a school in every neighborhood and supporting it by a general tax on society. The legislature eventually allocated $15,000 of surplus funding to finance college operations at its eventual opening in 1811, which included an annual appropriation of $3,000 from the state treasury. The college promoted a liberal education framed around English, French, Greek, Latin, geography, and arithmetic and maintained an enrollment of 79 male students by 1823. Complicating matters further involved the controversial hiring of Joseph Lakanal as the college president in 1823. As a Jacobin apostate

---

418 Dawdy, *Building the Devil’s Empire*, 56.
priest, Lakanal’s name had appeared on the order to execute Louis XVI during the French Revolution. Using his alleged deism and radicalism as a pretext, and since “New Orleans residents did not approve of having their sons educated by a regicide,” the legislature cut off all appropriations to the institution, ultimately leading to its closure.

Despite their best efforts, the college eked out a precarious existence until it closed its doors in 1826. Largely due to a growing antagonism between White Creoles (ancienne population) and Anglo-Americans, and from a disagreement about its organization and funding, all appropriations were withdrawn and the college died. In a forthright report to the state legislature in January 1826, then-Governor Henry Johnson suggested that the College of Orleans:

Does not according to the reports of the Administrators, appear to have attained the end to which it was erected. The number of students does not exceed twenty, nor has it been greater for some time past. The advantage of education so small a number can hardly compensate the expense which the institution cost the State. Instead of such a college, which the present prospect and many years experience, we cannot expect to rise much above the rank of a grammar school would it not be better to establish within the City of New Orleans a university where the science of law and medicine and other branches of learning might be taught to those who have already completed their scholastic studies?

According to historian Albert Fossier, the enduring conflict of nationalities, language, politics, and religion that eventually caused New Orleans to be divided into three municipalities, was the base factor in the abolishment of the College of Orleans.

Perhaps to Governor Johnson’s jubilation, the Medical College of Louisiana followed as the next iteration in higher education in New Orleans, representing the first medical school in the South in 1835. The New Orleans Bee on September 29, 1834 rejoiced in the development of a medical college in New Orleans, suggesting:

The establishment of this school in the City of New Orleans, it is sufficiently obvious, must prove of the greatest benefit to the States of the Southwest generally. It will tend to excite professional emulation, to diffuse knowledge, to expose ignorance and to eradicate or arrest under scientific treatment, the disease of which thousands are now victims. Nor will its effects end here. By removing the danger to death and the apprehension of disease, it will cause population to increase, agriculture to yield additional profits, trade and commerce to flourish and the arts and sciences to advance rapidly among us.\textsuperscript{428}

Developed by seven doctors who sought to raise medical standards in the city, the institution was incorporated by an act of the legislature on April 2, 1835.\textsuperscript{429} Initially the college did not have the means to construct a building, leaving some members of the faculty to deliver lectures in their homes in Uptown New Orleans or the French Quarter instead.\textsuperscript{430} The faculty also offered its services to the state Charity Hospital without compensation, although they had access to the hospital facilities, an incredibly rich laboratory for medical study.\textsuperscript{431} Despite limited funding, it offered a sound clinical facility and a pragmatic approach to medical instruction. Charity Hospital, located at 147 Canal Street, in between Baronne Street and University Place, remained open to students each day of the week and instructors lectured twice a week in the hospital wards.\textsuperscript{432} Instructors also agreed to educate “one indigent boy from each parish” in return for a building, equipment, and a library.\textsuperscript{433}

The Medical College sought to provide a facility in which “competent physicians could be trained,” particularly at a time when cholera and yellow fever were both endemic and epidemic in the city.\textsuperscript{434} Incorporating a blend of apprenticeship and college training, by 1848 the number of graduates in medicine reached twenty-two. At the time, the college began to

\textsuperscript{428} New Orleans Bee (New Orleans, LA), Sept. 29, 1834.  
\textsuperscript{429} Dyer, Tulane: The Biography of a University, 19.  
\textsuperscript{430} Fossier, New Orleans: The Glamour Period, 214.  
\textsuperscript{433} Dyer, Tulane, 19.  
\textsuperscript{434} Dyer, Tulane, 19; and Thompson, Exiles at Home, 24-25.
represent a regional, even national and international medical training center in New Orleans, and it would continue to flourish as a medical department when it eventually merged with the state-funded University of Louisiana in 1847 (see Figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1 A Sketch of Charity Hospital (c. 1832)

The University of Louisiana emerged from a growing interest in public education in antebellum New Orleans, an ideal that Governor Claiborne envisaged half a century earlier, whereupon a state-supported system of education rested on a college or university. The meeting of the state constitutional convention in 1844 provided a chance to implement this vision. Chief Justice of Louisiana, George Eustis, and other esteemed academic and political leaders prepared and presented a plan to establish a University of Louisiana in New Orleans. As proposed to the legislature, the institution would consist of four faculties: medicine, law, letters, and natural

---

435 Dyer, Tulane, 20.
438 Dyer, Tulane, 21; and Edwin Whitfield Fay, The History of Education in Louisiana, 76.
After four days of legislative bickering and infighting, notably between city and country legislators, on May 14, 1845 Eustis and his colleagues proved more eloquent and persuasive: the convention adopted the new constitution with an article authorizing the legislature to make provision for the University of Louisiana.\textsuperscript{439} Despite this legislative victory, however, it took months to actually pass the legislation following the convention and another full year to eventually pass it.

It should be emphasized that the convention in 1845 had no intention of creating a leading university in New Orleans. In fact, at the same time the legislature approved the University of Louisiana, they authorized the establishment of the Louisiana State Seminary of Learning and Military Academy in Rapides Parish near Alexandria, a provision for what would later become Louisiana State University.\textsuperscript{440} According to historian John Dyer, it was generally understood that the seminary would be favored by the country legislators in the matter of appropriations. Yet due to the inability to appropriate funding to the Seminary in a timely manner, monies necessary for the construction of buildings, the Seminary did not open until 1860 in Pineville, Louisiana.\textsuperscript{441}

Despite an inconsistent stream of appropriations, the University of Louisiana was formally established on February 16, 1847 at the State Square along Common Street. The legislature appropriated $25,000 to construct a building and another $25,000 for the purchase of

\textsuperscript{439} Dyer, \textit{Tulane}, 21-22.
equipment for the medical department; however, little, if any other funds were appropriated to the institution. Although a preparatory and college department emerged by December 1847, the University of Louisiana remained an institution for professional training in medicine and law upon its founding (see Figure 5.2). Within the first years the collegiate department enjoyed moderate growth, expanding its faculty to seven men and offering a liberal education in classical languages, literature, chemistry, mineralogy, and natural philosophy among other disciplines. The college even promoted a civil engineering program by 1851, which required students to complete a robust and varied curriculum in foundation and concrete work, masonry, bridges, roads, architecture, topographical engineering, and linear drawing. Although the faculty never implemented this ambitious program, it demonstrates the strength and caliber of the faculty and the curricula by mid-nineteenth-century.

Figure 5.2 A Sketch of the University of Louisiana, New Orleans (undated)

---

443 At that time, baccalaureate degrees in these respective disciplines served as licenses to practice in the state of Louisiana. See Edwin Whitfield Fay, *The History of Education in Louisiana*, 76.
446 Sketch of the University of Louisiana, Courtesy of Edward King, *The Great South: A Record of Journeys* (Hartford, CT: American Publishing Company, 1875).
In the summer of 1853, the preparatory and collegiate departments almost closed altogether. That summer witnessed the worst yellow fever outbreak in the history of New Orleans. “Yellow Jack,” as it was commonly known, “showed his face plainly” and the epidemic ravaged long-time New Orleanians, rich and poor, regardless of race. The fever outbreak forced the University of Louisiana faculty to reorganize the collegiate department in order to survive. Official reports counted 7,849 yellow fever deaths, roughly 10 percent of the population, over 5,000 in the month of August alone. In fact, if not for the tireless efforts of its intrepid dean, Claudius W. Sears, a graduate of West Point, the academic department might have sustained a fatal blow. Even after the yellow fever epidemic, as a professor of mathematics and natural philosophy, Sears remained committed to expanding the department’s scientific offerings in an attempt to rectify Louisiana’s “technical inferiority in agriculture and industry.” His efforts fell short, however, since a continued lack of state support and private donations, as well as a shortage of students and tuition dollars, failed to sustain the department through the late 1850s and up to the beginning of the Civil War.

As the Civil War had an epochal impact on the nation, simultaneously as a war for northern unity, southern home rule, and a war for African-American freedom, it also affected the University of Louisiana. By late-April 1862, Union forces had captured the Confederacy’s largest city and laid siege to the nearly 170,000 residents of New Orleans. The university lay dormant for almost four years. As the war raged on, university alumni, students, and faculty members fought and died for the Confederate cause across the South, leaving deserted buildings,

empty classrooms, and halls that often amplified the sound of scampering rats in the attic.\textsuperscript{452} Many colleges and universities across the South had abandoned instruction by 1865, and as historian John Thelin confirms, many campuses suffered physical damage from battles and shelling.\textsuperscript{453} Although the University of Louisiana did not sustain any direct attack, it reopened on November 14, 1865 as a much leaner institution. The medical department was the first to reopen and resumed its instruction in the central campus building and Charity Hospital. The law department reopened shortly thereafter, but the academic department remained closed, despite Dean Sears’s quest for the “progress of civilization” through letters and science a decade earlier.\textsuperscript{454}

Although historian Dan Frost suggests the University of Louisiana represented a “failed attempt to establish a preeminent Southern university”\textsuperscript{455} in New Orleans, undeniably the institution promoted a first-rate medical department and the first legitimate law school in Louisiana, despite its financial struggles. The University of Louisiana would later become the foundation for Tulane University in 1884, an institution for elite male students in New Orleans as opposed to higher education for the masses, and it developed schools of architecture, business, and social work.\textsuperscript{456} It ultimately extended opportunities to women students by 1886, with the founding of a separate collegiate department, Sophie Newcomb College.

Sophie Newcomb College played a significant role in women’s higher education in New Orleans. Established as a memorial for her daughter, Harriott Sophie, Josephine Louise Le Monnier Newcomb expressed a strong desire to “advance the cause of female education in

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{452} Dyer, \textit{Tulane}, 28. \\
\textsuperscript{453} Thelin, \textit{A History of American Higher Education}, 74. \\
\textsuperscript{454} Dyer, Tulane, 29; and Dan R. Frost, \textit{Thinking Confederates}, 20-21. \\
\textsuperscript{455} Frost, \textit{Thinking Confederates}, 20-21. \\
\textsuperscript{456} Mohr and Gordon, \textit{Tulane}, xxii.
\end{flushright}
Louisiana.” In a letter addressed to the Tulane Board of Administrators on October 11, 1886, Newcomb declared:

In pursuance of a long cherished design to establish an appropriate memorial of my beloved daughter, H. Sophie Newcomb, deceased, I have determined, at the instance of my friend, Col. William Preston Johnston, to intrust [sic] to your Board the execution of my design. Feeling a deep personal sympathy with the people of New Orleans and a strong desire to advance the cause of female education in Louisiana, and believing also that I shall find in the board selected by the benevolent Paul Tulane the wisest and safest custodian of the fund I propose to give, I hereby donate to your board the sum of $100,000, to be used in establishing the H. Sophie Newcomb Memorial College, in the Tulane University of Louisiana.457

According to historian Marsha Wedell, however, Mrs. Newcomb’s initial gift of $100,000 was not large enough to build an independent women’s college. Even with inadequate funding, it proved a more pioneering venture, since the college required additional faculty and administrators, as well as “policies” for women’s education and a physical plant.458 Since coeducation at Tulane was considered socially inappropriate, university leaders planned to educate young men and women under one institution, but divided into departments or colleges on the same campus. As such, Newcomb College did not enjoy the majestic buildings on sprawling, picturesque grounds that Matthew Vassar built in Poughkeepsie, New York in 1861; nor did Newcomb students reap the benefits of a small, quaint independent college campus on a country estate outside of Boston for the founding of Wellesley College in 1875.459 Rather, Newcomb College remained a separate department of Tulane University, and for the first time in New Orleans, the college provided an opportunity for young women to pursue a higher

457 Josephine Louise Newcomb to the Administrators of the Tulane University Educational Fund. McConnell Family Papers, 1723-1962, Louisiana Research Collection, Special Collections of the Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University.
458 While it remains unclear how these policies were developed and implemented, it demonstrates how women’s education developed in a subsidiary formulation to that of the men’s education at Tulane University. See Marsha Wedell, “Founding Newcomb College;” and John P. Dyer, Tulane, 56.
However, Like Vassar College, Newcomb College revealed the neglect that long characterized the higher education of women, and it became the first degree-granting women’s college that was a “coordinate division” of a men’s university. Despite this advancement for women’s education in New Orleans after the Civil War, as Josephine Newcomb mandated in her donation for the college, this education was only for “white girls and young women” only. Thus opportunities for people of color remained limited in New Orleans, restricting enrollment to historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) that emerged after the Civil War.

A Changing Landscape: Reconstruction and Black Higher Education

Education in New Orleans held a distinct advantage over most other Southern states by the end of the Civil War. The capture of New Orleans by federal troops in 1862 created an opportunity for the Union to “restore order” and expedite the Reconstruction policies across the South during the war. President Abraham Lincoln gave commanding generals significant latitude in managing local affairs in Louisiana during the initial occupation of the state, which was met with frustration and angst by many white city inhabitants. As one Southern woman bemoaned:

Alas, how is it now polluted, this is the day appointed by the infamous Banks for his election for Governor and other State officers of Louisiana, a mere farce. . . [o]h that we could free ourselves from this bondage, from this disgraceful, this heavy yoke, when will the time come when we shall be rid of this impudent invader, if I were only sure of our

---

460 This model was later adopted by several colleges, including Barnard College of Columbia University and Pembroke College of Brown University. See Georgen Coyle and Susan Tucker, H. Sophie Newcomb Memorial College: A Research Guide (New Orleans, LA: Newcomb College Center for Research on Women, 1991).
462 Josephine Louise Newcomb to the Administrators of the Tulane University Educational Fund. McConnell Family Papers, 1723-1962, Louisiana Research Collection, Special Collections of the Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University.
final victory it would not be so hard, yet resignation is our duty, however great the trial.\textsuperscript{464}

The expansive Union Army powers did little to sway local opinions in New Orleans, and violence toward people of color remained commonplace. As historian James Houge confirms, in 1868 alone, 1,880 people had been killed or seriously wounded in terror tactics aimed at preventing Louisiana’s freedmen from using their numerical majority to win the state’s electoral votes for the Republicans.\textsuperscript{465} In the context of the heightened political turmoil in New Orleans after the Civil War, then, it is remarkable that higher education institutions developed for people of color in the city when they did, or even at all, since much civil rights legislation remained on tenuous ground.\textsuperscript{466} The federal government pushed forward in Louisiana, and under General Benjamin F. Butler and subsequently under General Nathaniel P. Banks, the Union Command began the process of establishing academic recruitment and enrollment, as well as a Board of Education to promote public education among freed blacks.\textsuperscript{467} In essence, this became a publicly funded system of education organized by the military in the city, with the principal aim of coexisting with Louisiana’s regular amalgamation of schools.\textsuperscript{468} These efforts culminated in the creation of the Freedmen’s Bureau, as described earlier, which further developed black secondary schools and colleges across the South.

\textsuperscript{464} Sarah Lois Wadley, \textit{Diary}, Feb. 22, 1864. Courtesy of the Manuscripts Department, Southern Historical Collection, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Call No. 1258.  
\textsuperscript{465} This figure included people of color, Union army veterans, and native white New Orleans residents. See James K. Houge, \textit{Uncivil War: Five New Orleans Street Battles and the Rise and Fall of Radical Reconstruction} (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 2.  
\textsuperscript{466} Bell, \textit{Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana}, 276.  
\textsuperscript{467} Oliver W. Holmes, \textit{The Evolution of the Negro College} (Concord, NH: Rumford Press, 1969).  
From a national standpoint, American higher education virtually excluded students of color until after the Civil War.\footnote{James D. Anderson, “Historical Perspectives,” The Racial Crisis in American Higher Education: Continuing Challenges for the Twenty-First Century, ed. William A. Smith, Philip G. Altbach, and Kofi Lomotey (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002), 4.} Although a few institutions emerged during the antebellum period, such as Lincoln and Cheney universities in Pennsylvania and Wilberforce in Ohio, from the Reconstruction era through the early-twentieth century, black higher education in the United States largely developed within a system of private liberal arts colleges.\footnote{Anderson, The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935 (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 238.} It should also be noted that Oberlin College in Ohio began accepting students of color in 1835, and by the 1840s and 1850s, African American students comprised from 4 to 5 percent of Oberlin’s total enrollment.\footnote{Anderson, “Historical Perspectives,”4.} Yet, these first students of color did not escape the controversy and hostility embraced by many of their white classmates. At an address delivered at Oberlin College in 1891, then secretary of the American Missionary Association, Reverend M. E. Strieby, recalled some of the initial resentment:

> When Father Shipherd . . . wrote to the Trustees of Oberlin urging them to pass a vote to admit students \textit{irrespective of color}, what a commotion it created! Some of the young ladies, who were students from New England, said that if colored people were admitted they would go home at once, if they had to wade Lake Erie to get there. But the vote was passed. . . for after all discussions, moral and political, and all the bloodshed of the war, this word \textit{irrespective of color} is still the pivotal point in one of the live questions of the day. Oberlin soon swung fully in line.\footnote{Father Shipherd was an abolitionist and eloquent exponent of the anti-slavery movement in antebellum New England. See Michael Epaphras Strieby, Address, Oberlin and the American Missionary Association, Oct. 21, 1891. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Washington D. C.}

Having been prohibited from acquiring even the most basic education throughout their enslavement, many freed men and women expressed a strong desire to learn, develop, and attain new opportunities.\footnote{M. Christopher Brown, Ronyelle Bertrand Ricard, and Saran Donahoo, “The Changing Role of Historically Black Colleges and Universities: Vistas on Dual Missions, Desegregation, and Diversity,” Black Colleges: New}
denominational groups and local communities thus faced the daunting task of providing education to over four million formerly enslaved people and began establishing black colleges as early as 1865. Northern missionaries, such as the American Baptist Home Missionary Society and the American Missionary Association—which founded Straight University in 1869—also helped in this effort. Guided by a sense of democratic idealism, these “Yankee” missionaries suggested the freedpeople had the right to public education and to political and civic equality. Their benevolence, to an extent, was also framed around self-interest and racism, manifest in their goals in establishing black higher education as a way to convert formerly enslaved people to their brand of Christianity.

Black denominations also founded colleges in Georgia, Texas, and South Carolina during Reconstruction. They were established by African Americans for African Americans and relied less on white support, which created opportunities to design their own curricula. As a result, these groups helped to establish and charter more than two hundred Black colleges between 1865 and 1890, over two centuries after the founding of Harvard College. The federal 1890 Land Grant legislation further promoted state higher education across much of the South through the twentieth century. Much like their white college and university counterparts at their founding (Harvard University included), these black colleges and universities were in name only and their


Gasman and Tudico (Eds.), Historically Black Colleges and Universities, 2.


overall composition and survival depended on corporate philanthropic foundations and wealthy individuals. As historian James Anderson suggests:

Northern white industrialists, beginning with the establishment of the Peabody Education Fund in 1867, saw universal schooling in much the same way as did southern white industrialists—as a means to make Black southerners an efficient laboring force of the South and to prepare them for a fairly definite caste system. It was mainly through their differences with the southern white planters that northern white industrialists gained their reputations as liberal reformers and were perceived as promoting in the South more just race relations.

These various contending sources sought to repress and shape black higher education in ways that contradicted African American’s overall interests in intellectual development. Hence, a distinctly different form of higher education emerged to ensure separate and unequal conditions and opportunities for African Americans. This pattern led to a dual system of higher education across much of the South, which solidified the status and place of HBCUs.

During Reconstruction in New Orleans, black higher education developed in much the same way. Straight University, Leland University, New Orleans University, and Southern University emanated as HBCUs after the Civil War and through post-Reconstruction and provided access and opportunities for students of color in the city. Although these institutions promoted democratic education and never discriminated based on race, ethnicity, age, or gender, black higher education paralleled the triumph of white supremacy in the South, which perpetuated a less-than identity. Yet, while these institutions were designed and developed to provide a higher education for students of color, they should not be treated, in essence, as one collective; for each university had different missions, purposes, and operations. For example, Southern University emerged as the first public HBCU in Louisiana, amid much political

---

contestation and controversy, and Straight, Leland, and New Orleans universities were founded as private denominational colleges.

But what about the founding of Straight University? Did this institution not develop along the lines of its private university counterparts in New Orleans? Although Straight was founded in 1869, aided by significant financing and coordination from the American Missionary Association and the Freedman’s Bureau, the institution enjoyed overwhelming support from African-Americans and the Afro-Creole community in New Orleans. Aristide Mary, in particular, served on the Board of Trustees, followed by then-Lieutenant Governor Oscar Dunn, George H. Fayerweather, John R. Clay, Fabious Dunn, and P. B. S. Pinchback. People of color maintained a voice in the direction of the institution, from leadership and faculty to instruction and financing.  

Although Straight will be chronicled in more detail in the chapters to follow, it is important to discuss the development and trajectory of historically Black colleges and universities in New Orleans to demonstrate the specific context in which they emerged. Situating these institutions in the context of democracy and education in New Orleans during Reconstruction is important to establishing a coherent narrative on black higher education.

Leland University was incorporated after Straight University in 1870 in the basement of the Tulane Avenue Baptist Church (see Figure 5.3). Founded by Holbrook Chamberlain, a retired New York shoe merchant and Baptist Church deacon, and in conjunction with the American Baptist Home Mission Society and the Consolidated American Baptist Missionary Convention, the institution opened its doors in 1874 and carried on its purpose of “promoting Christian education among the people of Louisiana and the surrounding states.” The university was located on St. Charles Avenue, at the corner of Chestnut Street and “opposite the exposition

---

park.” Along with Chamberlain’s generous gift of $65,000, the Freedman’s Bureau appropriated $17,500 for the school, and the American Baptist Home Missionary provided $12,500.\textsuperscript{483}

Leland University endeavored to “prepare ministers for the work of preaching the Gospel, to fit teachers for their important field of usefulness, and to qualify men for business, thus seeking to advance religion, sound morality, intelligence, and prosperity among the classes."\textsuperscript{485} Like Straight University, Leland specifically confronted race in the provisions of its university charter, declaring “no person is ever to be excluded from its privileges on account of race, color or previous condition."\textsuperscript{486} Notably the charter did not highlight any restrictions on sex or gender, yet women attended the institution, albeit in small numbers. For example, Emma

\textsuperscript{483} Blassingame, \textit{Black New Orleans}, 124.
\textsuperscript{484} Leland Hall, Leland University, Courtesy of William Hicks, \textit{History of Louisiana Negro Baptists from 1804 to 1914} (Nashville, TN: National Baptist Publishing Board, 1915), 177.
\textsuperscript{485} \textit{Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Leland University} (New Orleans, LA, 1884-1885), 13.
\textsuperscript{486} Gender was not specifically mentioned in Leland University’s charter. Although the institution enrolled women students in its intermediate, normal, and industrial departments, only race and ethnicity is listed as a physical marker. See \textit{Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Leland University}. 

E. Merritt, from New Orleans, was the only female student in a class of six students in the Collegiate Department by 1883.

Leland University also provided preparatory instruction for boys and girls. After ten years in operation, of the total 261 students enrolled at Leland in 1884, 133 students matriculated in the Intermediate Course (preparatory level). The majority of women students remained at the preparatory level as well, which included such courses as Reading and Language, Arithmetic, Grammar, and Geometry. Other students, such as Lucinda Mitchell and Lucy Cornelius of New Orleans, and N. J. Stallings of Magnolia, Mississippi, attended the Normal Training department at Leland University. Aimed at teacher preparation, this department stressed coursework in rhetoric and composition, as well as Physics, Chemistry and “methods of teaching” in math and science. Other students pursued coursework in the Industrial Department, aimed at preparing students “to enter life as a self-respecting citizen, able to help himself and others.” The industrial training at Leland incorporated carpentry, agriculture, and horticulture. In fact, the campus grounds comprised ten acres and furnished opportunities for horticultural training “under the supervision of the College farmer.” The department also offered instruction for “young ladies” in such fields as “the arts of housekeeping, sewing, dress-making, millinery, etc.”

Unlike Straight’s leadership, the entire campus leadership and denominational board of trustees remained determinedly white from 1870 to 1915. By the 1890s, administrators had much difficulty in maintaining the institution in an increasingly hostile racial climate in New Orleans, and many of the trustees in New York, having no direct experience with the institution, grew disinterested in providing continued financing for the university. Further, with its location

---

487 Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Leland University, 16.
488 Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Leland University, 13.
489 Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Leland University, 22.
in an increasingly upper class, largely white, uptown neighborhood along St. Charles Avenue, ultimately Leland became an unwelcome neighbor. By 1913, administrators sought to relocate the university to another location in Louisiana; however, a hurricane destroyed much of the campus, forcing the institution to close in 1915. As education historian Janice Johnson affirms, the legacy of Leland continued with its reestablishment as Leland College, in Baker, Louisiana in 1923; and for the first time, the institution acquired its first black administrators. Yet, despite a reinvented campus, low student enrollments, declining private financial support, and mismanaged fiscal operations forced the university to officially close its doors in 1960.

New Orleans University emerged as another institution of democratic higher education in New Orleans in 1873, “open to young men and women of all races and religions,” and it maintained a similar campus and student composition as Leland University. Ultimately an extension of Union Normal School, Thomson’s Biblical Institute, and a small preparatory academy in Bayou Têche, New Orleans University occupied a four-acre campus on St. Charles Avenue, “immediately fronting the Coliseum Square, a large and beautiful park.” The university, supported by the Freedman’s Aid Society and the Methodist Episcopal Church, had a total of 335 students after 1873 and it incorporated with provisions for law and medical departments (see Figure 5.4).

493 Yearbook of the New Orleans University, 1900-1901 (New Orleans, LA: New Orleans University Print, 1901), 29. Courtesy of the University Library, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Urbana-Champaign, Illinois.
494 The campus was situated near the present-day present location of Tulane University and Audubon Park. See Catalogue of the New Orleans University, 1877-1878 (New Orleans, LA: Southwestern Advocate Print, 1878), 17. Courtesy of the University Library, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Urbana-Champaign, Illinois; Blassingame, Black New Orleans, 124-125.
Initially, student expenses were minimal and they were not assessed any tuition. Rather, students were required to pay an incidental fee of one dollar a month and provide for their own accommodations:

Twenty-five young men can be accommodated in the buildings, and they will be boarded for ten dollars a month of four weeks, including room rent and washing. Boarding in private families, near by the University, can be secured at about the same rates. Young-ladies can find boarding in good private families at ten dollars a month of four weeks.496

Yet by the early-twentieth century, New Orleans University succumbed to the financial pressures that some of its fledgling college counterparts experienced, and it suffered from inadequate financing, scientific equipment, and, at the time only had a “meager library.”497 By 1916 the

495 Undated photo of New Orleans University, Box 91, Folder 24. Courtesy of the Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.
496 It is interesting that although the university did not discriminate based on race or sex, it did not have equal accommodations for women on campus. Women students had to find room and board with “good private families” near the university. See Catalogue of the New Orleans University, 1877-1878, 17.
497 Blassingame, Black New Orleans, 125.
institution assessed more fees per student and required boarding students to “do an hour’s work daily in addition to the cash payment of twelve dollars.”

One of New Orleans University’s pioneering achievements arrived in 1889 when the university administration opened the medical department. The medical department had an earlier iteration in 1878. Dr. James T. Newman, former medical department dean at Straight University, as well as Afro-Creole professor Dr. Louis Charles Roudanez, taught eight students at the university, but due to financial woes it disbanded quickly thereafter. The new and reinvigorated department in 1889 remained open to all qualified students, regardless of sex, race, or ethnicity, and it would later become Flint Medical College in 1916. Although the university authorized a medical department in their charter of 1873, inadequate financing and organization stalled its development for sixteen years. John D. Flint, a wealthy cotton manufacturer from Massachusetts, donated funds to purchase land for the college and gave a generous sum of ten thousand dollars for the medical department. Yet, despite this funding, the medical department only witnessed limited growth and development in its initial years of operation, and by 1901, the department only matriculated ten students. According to historian Wilbur Watson, the absence of clinical teaching facilities and meager laboratory equipment diminished the quality of the program until the late-1890s.

Southern University followed in 1880, amid much contention and political controversy in the emergent Jim Crow social and political order. Afro-Creoles, including Aristide Mary and Rodolphe Desdunes, condemned the creation of the university from the outset, suggesting it

499 Thomas J. Ward, Black Physicians in the Jim Crow South (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 2003), 11.
501 Ward, Black Physicians in the Jim Crow South, 11.
represented the tacit acceptance of a rigid color line by local black leaders that would become a “black stain” in the “Constitution of the State.”\textsuperscript{503} Desdunes, in particular, felt Southern’s founding proved a contradiction “of what had previously been done to obliterate in this state all discrimination by race before law.”\textsuperscript{504} Yet, despite their protestations, the university was founded in 1880 as a public black higher education institution, after the post-Reconstruction Louisiana constitution eliminated the phrase “public rights” from its preamble,\textsuperscript{505} which only further infuriated Afro-Creole leaders, including Charles Louis Roudanez.

P. B. S. Pinchback is a central figure in the formation of Southern University. Pinchback, a Straight University alumnus, and other prominent African American leaders in the legislature, such as T. T. Allain, Henry Demas, and T. B. Stamps, secured state support for “a University for the education of persons of color”\textsuperscript{506} through the state constitution of 1879. After considerable lobbying and compromise—perhaps even a “political bargain,” as historian Charles Vincent suggests—with then-Governor Francis T. Nicholls and conservative Democrat state legislators, Article 231 of the general assembly was adopted on April 10, 1880. The article of the constitution provided for the establishment of the first state-supported school for the higher education of African Americans in Louisiana:

The General Assembly shall also establish in the city of New Orleans a university for the education of persons of color, provide for its proper government, and shall make an annual appropriation of not less than five thousand dollars nor more than ten thousand dollars for its maintenance and support.\textsuperscript{507}

The constitution also provided for state financing of the University of Louisiana in New Orleans, firmly recognizing the medical and law departments “to be governed and controlled by the

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\item Desdunes, Hommage rendu à la mémoire de Alexandre Aristide Mary décédé à la Nouvelle-Orleans (New Orleans, 1893). Quoted in Joseph Logsdon with Lawrence Powell, “Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes,” 66.
\item Desdunes, Our People and Our History, 137; and Keith Weldon Medley, We as Freemen, 118.
\item Rebecca J. Scott, Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba After Slavery (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 88.
\item Constitution of the State of Louisiana, Article 231, 1879.
\item Constitution of the State of Louisiana, Article 231, 1879.
\end{thebibliography}
appropriate faculties.” It also officially recognized the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, “established and located in Baton Rouge.” The general assembly confirmed that “from time to time” it would make appropriations for the maintenance and support of these institutions.⁵⁰⁸

In defending the necessity for another state-supported institution in Southern University, T. T. Allain alluded to the need for harmony and balance between the races, declaring “all that the colored people demand is pure and simple justice, with a fair chance for education.”⁵⁰⁹

Allain presented a vision for his future for education throughout Louisiana when he spoke eloquently at the ceremony to lay the first cornerstone at Southern University: “I look forward to a period not far distant, when Louisiana will be able to have a white and colored schoolhouse dotting every nook and corner of the state.” Allain went on to say, “then sir, and not till then will the grand old Pelican, wrapped up in the American flag, and standing upon the ashes of fallen illiteracy—then will the pure gospel of Peace and good will to man be preached in every church and practiced in every family.”⁵¹⁰

Southern University (see Figure 5.5) emerged as a viable option for educational opportunity for students of color in the backdrop of state mandated racism and segregation. The university’s intended design was to supplement the public schools in New Orleans by offering college instruction and industrial and normal training to stimulate the desire for classical and practical education among people of color.⁵¹¹ Situated on Magazine Street, between Soniat and Dufossat streets, the university’s central building was described as "an imposing three-story

⁵⁰⁸ Constitution of the State of Louisiana, Article 230, 1879.
⁵⁰⁹ As quoted in Charles Vincent, “Laying the Cornerstone at Southern University,” Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association 17, no. 3 (Summer 1976): 340.
⁵¹⁰ New Orleans Times-Democrat, May 9, 1886.
⁵¹¹ Betty Porter, “The History of Negro Education in Louisiana,” The Louisiana Historical Quarterly 25, no. 3 (1942).
brick structure, whose handsome Doric pillars stood out in bold relief and whose windows were in the Gothic style of Architecture (see Figure 5.5).”

Figure 5.5 Photo of Southern University’s Central Building

Southern offered a concentration on vocational and industrial education, as well as a wide range classical curriculum that included Philosophy, Science, and Literature. The institution enrolled four hundred students by October 1, 1883 and “doubled the number of teachers.” Although then-university president Reverend J. H. Harrison confirmed “every room set apart for class work is full,” in his 1884 “Report of the President of the Faculty,” he enthusiastically

512 Catalogue of Southern University, 1889-1890 (New Orleans, LA, 1890), University Library, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Urbana-Champaign, IL; Southern University Minutes, May 15, 1886; and New Orleans Times-Democrat (Mar. 15, 1887).
513 Southern University Central Building, Courtesy of Catalogue of Southern University, 1889-1890 (New Orleans, LA, 1890), University Library, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Urbana-Champaign, IL.
515 Harrison, “Report of the President of the Faculty,” v.
described the character of the institution, though in his estimation it still did not resemble a
college or university at the time:

The University at present is doing a lower grade of work than is desired. When it was
opened to the public it did not receive the grade of students consistent with the College or
University work. It was necessary and wise in the University to begin with the class of
students that first offered themselves, and adjust its instruction to their character. It by no
means defines its polity in so doing further than to do the greatest good; nor is it
inconsistent with the policy of the University to thus begin with preparatory students.
This institution proposes to devote itself to College and University work.\textsuperscript{516}

Harrison had hoped that following sessions “will afford opportunities for the practical operation
of its policy,”\textsuperscript{517}—that is, to enhance the Academic Department and deliver a collegiate-level
curriculum.

Southern University did not enjoy the same initial funding and support as its private peer
institutions, much to the contrary. From an operational perspective, although the state legislature
provided an annual operating expense of not less than $5,000 and no more than $10,000 for the
University,\textsuperscript{518} the legislature did not provision for the purchase or construction of a building in
New Orleans. In January 1881, much of the funds allocated toward faculty salaries were instead
used to acquire a building to house faculty, staff, and students of the institution.\textsuperscript{519} Future faculty
salaries were then used as collateral for a loan to buy the building, and by 1902, these funds were
still being used to offset further mortgage debt.\textsuperscript{520} The legislature did not provide any financial
support for construction, for a library, and for future development or expansion. The

\textsuperscript{516} Harrison, “Report of the President of the Faculty,” v.
\textsuperscript{517} Harrison, “Report of the President of the Faculty,” v.
\textsuperscript{518} Harrison, “Report of the President of the Faculty,” v.
\textsuperscript{519} William Ivy Hair, \textit{Bourbonism and Agrarian Protest: Louisiana Politics, 1877-1900} (Baton Rouge, LA:
\textsuperscript{520} Hair, \textit{Bourbonism and Agrarian Protest}. 136
constitutional amendment to allocate a fixed amount of $10,000 annually to Southern was upheld by the legislature during the period 1880 to 1913, which clearly foretold trouble ahead.  

Southern University maintained its operations in New Orleans until the institution reorganized and moved to its present location in Scotlandville, Louisiana in 1914. Under the federal land grant acts of 1890 the university became “New Southern” or Southern University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, and offered training in agricultural and mechanical education. Southern’s redefined mission sought “to prepare young colored men and women to fit definitely and intelligently in their sphere of service to the State.” The curriculum incorporated trades and occupations, but also emphasized and required literary training.

When the removal of Southern University from New Orleans in 1914 called for the auction of the property and buildings that spring, Mother Katharine Drexel saw this as an opportunity to establish a Catholic institution of higher education in New Orleans. As a result, Xavier University, the first privately funded, Catholic liberal arts college for African Americans was founded in 1915, and today retains its status as the only historically black Catholic institution in the United States. The College of Pharmacy is one of only two pharmacy schools in Louisiana and is among the nation’s top three producers of African American Doctor of Pharmacy degree recipients (Lynch, 2001).

The state legislature approved the removal of Southern from New Orleans to Scotlandville under Act 118, and mandated two important provisions associated with the university’s reorganization. The first provision provided that all teachers and employees “shall

522 Vincent, A Centennial History of Southern University and A& M College.
be of the colored race” and the second provision provided that all members of the Board of Trustees “shall be of the white race.” While the removal of Southern to Scotlandville offered the institution a step forward with opportunities for further development and expansion, the provision for governance represented a decisive step backwards. The specter of racism presented itself again in this iteration of Southern University Baton Rouge: the state, in essence, helped to perpetuate a separate and unequal system of higher education delivery for African American students.

The separate-but-equal ethos continued unfettered in New Orleans and across much of the South until 1954 when the Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision confirmed, “the doctrine of separate-but-equal has no place”, mandating that separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. Despite this legislation, Louisiana instituted another dual system of public higher education in New Orleans in 1956, with the founding of the Louisiana State University of New Orleans (LSUNO) and Southern University New Orleans (SUNO). Governor Earl K. Long at the time sought to implement baccalaureate-granting institutions of public higher education, suggesting the need for four-year institutions in the city. The governor did not advocate higher education integration, despite the legal mandate to comply “with all deliberate speed” in the Brown ruling only two years earlier. Thus, at only a few miles away from LSUNO, SUNO developed as another public HBCU in New Orleans with duplicate academic programs, and it represented a deliberate attempt to maintain segregated higher education in the city.

Summary Review

This historical tracing of higher education reveals how societal forces shaped and developed colleges and universities in New Orleans, with a particular emphasis on racial

---

525 Francis, “Pride and Paradox.”
exclusion and marginalization. Although a forward-thinking ethos and bourgeoning intellectualism developed across the South during Reconstruction, which coincided with increasing industrialization and economic development throughout the country, the broader social, political, and philosophical considerations in New Orleans during this period remained situated within perceptible binary racial distinctions. For example, although the Civil War emerged as an opportunity for people of color to realize their freedom and educational attainment, manifest in the four black higher education institutions that emerged after 1870, as the Reconstruction experiment faded by 1877, a return to sanctioned racial discrimination in the public sphere hardened the edges of growth opportunities for people of color. This created a stark separateness and marginalization in education that persisted for almost a century, well beyond the Brown legislation in 1954 and the ideal that suggested segregation “has no place.” However, for a moment in time during Reconstruction, ephemeral by all accounts, higher education emerged in New Orleans for people of color. The city became a democratic space that helped to redefine educational opportunity and access for all students irrespective of race, gender, or ethnicity; and Straight embodied this ideal as an integrated university.

How did New Orleans find itself in this short-lived democratic experiment? How were institutions like Straight University, Leland University, New Orleans University, and Southern University possible? Ultimately, it was through the social, political, and racial turmoil after the Civil War that people of color acquired civil rights and equality, and the Afro-Creole ideals of liberté, égalité, and fraternité moved to the forefront. It was at this point that integrated education moved beyond an idea or distinct possibility to a reality with a mandate for implementation and delivery.
CHAPTER SIX: AFRO-CREOLES: POLITICS, PROTEST, AND INTEGRATED EDUCATION IN POSTWAR NEW ORLEANS

You, men of the assembly, are legislating about canals and drainage and railroads and such things. We say to you, Give us canals to drain off ignorance, and to convey throughout all the districts the healthful waters of truth. Enforce the educational provisions of the Constitution. We fought hard for that. Let it not be a dead letter. Let its inspiration pervade your action. This would be legislating to some purpose. Take hold of this work of ours, perform it manfully, and generations to come will bless you. Neglect it and their outrage will fall upon your names.—*New Orleans Tribune*, 1868

In the late-morning of July 30, 1866, a group of men marched down Dauphine Street in the French Quarter. Sounds of drums echoed as they determinedly paraded toward the intersection at Canal Street. Onlookers saw a man with a fife and a man holding a tattered American flag as they marched in line with the focused and persistent drummers. Despite the late-July heat, sweltering and humid by some accounts, a procession of Afro-Creoles and people of color dressed in military attire remained defiant and proud. The men were mostly former Union army veterans from such battles as Port Hudson, Mansura, and Fort Blakely, and they marched from the outskirts of Faubourg Marigny to the Mechanics’ Institute, one mile away on Dryades Street. As they marched toward the Institute, to show support for the constitutional convention aimed at black male suffrage, they gained recruits along the way, mostly black men who simply left their jobs that morning to join the demonstration. The procession of seventy to one hundred men continued to grow until it filled the street.

At the Mechanics’ Institute the atmosphere was festive. A small gathering of demonstrators and curious onlookers already outside the building shouted in support of suffrage

---

527 “Our Great Need,” *New Orleans Tribune* (New Orleans, LA), 1868.
528 *New Orleans Daily Crescent* (New Orleans, LA), Aug. 1, 1866.
and equal rights. Supporters of the constitutional convention at the Institute made plans to present a set of resolutions to sponsor black male suffrage. Only two years earlier, the 1864 state constitution abolished slavery but failed to give black males the vote; however, members of the convention who favored black suffrage refused to give up and gathered to reconvene and amend the constitution.  

Inside the meeting hall the mood was celebratory and comprised black and white radicals including former Louisiana governor Michael Hahn and Dr. A. P. Dostie, a dentist and abolitionist from New York. Outside the building, however, a growing mob of angry white conservatives gathered, “auxiliaries organized from secret proslavery societies” in the city, and planned to forcefully disrupt the festivities. In fact, from different points in the city they followed the procession of black marchers in the French Quarter and traded insults and even fired their pistols. Many of the white men in the mob, including members of the city police, volunteer firemen, ex-Confederates, and “unemployed . . . and low-life types who were naturally attracted to trouble,” were armed with revolvers, knives, bricks, clubs, and large stones. When they arrived at the Mechanics’ Institute, the white men rushed toward the supporters firing their pistols as they came; the black activists retaliated with shots of their own, and the two sides clashed in a violent melee that lasted two hours (see Figure 6.1 and Figure 6.2). One observer noted:

From the front door I watched for a moment this odious massacre, a sort of ambush into which unarmed victims continually fell. Those wounded who still had some strength dragged themselves under the columns whose drenched tiles had become a large pool of blood. I shall always remember a Negro of Herculean size who was still able to stand

---

533 Hollandsworth, Jr., “Damned Sons of Bitches” 34.
534 Houzeau, My Passage at the New Orleans Tribune, 128-130.
erect. His face and hands were covered with blood, and he was still holding an enormous stone that he had grabbed apparently in order to defend himself. The expression of indignation that appeared on his face was frightening, and no artist could have reproduced it. I asked him one or two questions, but he heard nothing but the gunshots that were destroying his innocent and defenseless people.535

Figure 6.1 Engraving of Mechanics’ Institute536

When the rioters burst into the building, several men attempted to surrender, including Victor Lacroix, the son of François Lacroix, who helped to develop the Catholic Institute. The mob killed him outright and proceeded to take his gold watch chain and a large sum of money.537 According to Rufus Waples, who viewed the body after the massacre, described how Lacroix had been “cut from head to foot” and “butchered and mutilated in the most shocking and barbarous manner.”538 Waples, a white radical jurist and member of the Central Executive Committee of the Republican Party of Louisiana, remained a steadfast supporter of Afro-Creoles and civil rights, as well as integrated education. He later became a professor of the law

535 Houzeau, My Passage at the New Orleans Tribune, 130.
537 Bell, Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana, 261-262.
department at Straight University and fashioned his classes in a civil and legal egalitarian frame. According to a member of the convention inside the meeting hall, “[i]t was not a battle, but a frightful massacre (see Figure 6.2).”

Figure 6.2 Engraving of the Riot Aftermath

In the context of this violence and political turmoil in New Orleans after the Civil War, it is remarkable that Straight University developed in the city when it did, or even at all, since much civil rights legislation remained on tenuous ground. Although federal occupation of the city commenced in May 1862 under General Benjamin Butler—affectionately known as “the Beast” in local Southern circles—people of color, both slave and free, remained locked in a desperate struggle for emancipation and citizenship. Abraham Lincoln’s fervent desire to restore an occupied Louisiana to the Union under a conservative 1864 state constitution that “effectively...

---

539 Houzeau, My Passage at the New Orleans Tribune, 128.
did little for blacks except put an end to slavery” proved shortsighted. Former Confederates
had gained control of the state legislature and city government by 1865 which spawned an
interracial progressive movement to advocate for black suffrage. In the months that followed, as
referenced above, these efforts instigated one of the bloodiest riots of the era; and for Afro-
Creoles, who led a large procession in support of universal suffrage, they suffered numerous
casualties at the hands of a police force made up of former Rebel soldiers. The New Orleans
Riot of 1866, also known as the New Orleans Massacre, directly precipitated congressional
passage of the Reconstruction Acts of 1867 and paved the way for black political participation as
voters and political leadership. It remained one of the principal reasons why the Radical
Republicans were able to seize control of the country’s reconstruction efforts from then-
President Andrew Johnson.

Education also became a prominent feature for democracy and citizenship in postwar
New Orleans. In particular, Afro-Creoles “advocated education as a means to counteract the
damaging effects of an increasing oppressive social and political order.” Accordingly, the
1868 constitution required that the Louisiana General Assembly establish “at least one free
public school in every parish throughout the State, and shall provide for its support by taxation or

541 Thompson, Exiles at Home, 213.
542 Thompson, Exiles at Home, 213.
543 Although President Johnson initially sought to try ex-Confederates as traitors under penalty of treason in federal
courts, instead he soon offered pardons and recognized the governments they led. This alienated factions within the
Republican Party, particularly when Johnson vetoed an extension of the Freedmen’s Bureau and civil rights
legislation in 1866. Johnson also encouraged former Confederates not to ratify the proposed Fourteenth
Amendment that guaranteed citizenship rights against state encroachment. See William E. Montgomery, Under
Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The African-American Church in the South, 1865-1900 (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana
544 See Lawrence N. Powell, The New Orleans of George Washington Cable: The 1887 Census Office Report (Baton
Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), 154; and Bell, Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole
Protest Tradition in Louisiana.
545 Bell, Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana, 4, 133.
otherwise. The constitution also required that all children in the state be admitted to schools without any distinction of race, gender, or ethnicity and it provided for the funding of a university in New Orleans. Higher education for people of color in New Orleans emerged as a pathway to educate and develop teachers, physicians, lawyers, and ministers and it contributed greatly to the black community and the need for uplift and equal participation as American citizens.

This chapter explores this Afro-Creole protest tradition in creating opportunities for political and civil rights and educational reform. After General Butler’s arrival in April 1862, and then subsequently under General Nathaniel P. Banks’s purview later that year in December, Louisiana served as a theater for an early “experiment” for the development of wartime, presidential, and congressional Reconstruction policy. It was in this tense and hostile climate before Reconstruction that opportunity structures for black higher education developed. As will be demonstrated, the linkages between the social egalitarianism inherent in the 1868 state constitution and educational opportunities for people of color remained a prominent feature of Straight University’s foundation and early development. However, in order to understand how integrated higher education developed in New Orleans after the 1868 state constitution mandate, it is important to examine the social and political milieu in the city, and the intense racial hostility that emanated after Union forces occupied New Orleans. As Senator Henry Wilson of Massachusetts said of New Orleans after he toured the South, “[b]ecause of the class of free people of color,” Congressional Reconstruction, he continued “would have the greatest hope for

547 Constitution of the State of Louisiana, Title VII Public Education, 1868.
548 Thompson, Exiles at Home, 213.
success there.” The enduring efforts, hard-fought battles, and steadfast political activism of Afro-Creoles remained central to this formation. It was at this point, that the Reconstruction experiment had its roots and development in the city and the Afro-Creoles’ revolutionary agenda and dissent became discernibly manifest.

**For the Cause of Democracy: Afro-Creole Protest, Civil Rights, and Public Education**

Newspapers emerged as a powerful medium for the expression of black intellectualism and racial justice during the Civil War. The first iteration was founded in New Orleans in 1862 by three Afro-Creoles, Dr. Louis Charles Roudanez, his older brother Jean-Baptiste Roudanez, and Paul Trévigne. *L’Union (L’Union de la Nouvelle Orleans)* published editorials, essays, and literary works on a bi-weekly basis that set the Civil War and the Reconstruction struggle within a context of democratic revolution. Attenuating the anxieties and concerns of Afro-Creoles, the newspaper sought to make the precarious group more visible to Union occupiers who may not have fully understood the history, structure, and varied demographic profile of New Orleans society. The newspaper’s radical and revolutionary spirit was front-and-center in promoting equality and universal suffrage to the extent that Trévigne boldly declared in October 1862, “We inaugurate today a new era in the South. We proclaim the Declaration of Independence as the basis of our platform . . . You who aspire to establish true republicanism, democracy without shackles, gather around us.”

Using the publication as a national and international text aimed at “friends and foes,” Roudanez and Trévigne linked ideals of the Haitian Revolution in 1804 and the French

---

550 Thompson, *Exiles at Home*, 216.
552 “Dr. Louis Charles Roudanez,” *The Crusader* (New Orleans, LA), July 1890.
Revolutions in 1789 and 1848 in abolishing slavery and extending suffrage to free men of color and former slaves.\textsuperscript{553} Louis Charles Roudanez himself, an exponent of the radical ideals and ethos of the social revolution of 1848 in France—who personally “had been before the barricades in Paris . . . with his fellow students”\textsuperscript{554} from medical school—learned a great deal about public protest from his fellow radical doctors.\textsuperscript{555} Roudanez also maintained a family lineage from Haiti in which his aristocratic grandparents, Pierre Roudanez and Anne-Elisabeth Henry, were coffee planters in the Dondon Parish in Saint-Domingue’s North Province. As historian Caryn Cossé Bell confirms, the August 22, 1791 slave rebellion that determined the outcome of the Haitian Revolution began only twelve miles from the Roudanez family plantation.\textsuperscript{556}

Trévigne, a French history and literature teacher at the Catholic Institute, had carefully noted that when France emancipated its remaining slaves in 1848, authorities granted universal male suffrage. This led Trévigne and Roudanez to exclaim: “Ah, la France, in proclaiming liberty for blacks, did not try to expatriate them or colonize them in Chiriqui: she wanted to make them men and honored citizens . . . Nations of America! . . . model your fundamental principles on those of France, and like her, reach the heights of civilization.”\textsuperscript{557} Yet, over the course of the war, \textit{L’Union}’s radicalism deepened, its political advocacy became more extensive, and death threats to Trévigne forced the newspaper to reorganize by 1864.\textsuperscript{558}

\textsuperscript{554} “Dr. Louis Charles Roudanez,” \textit{Crusader} (New Orleans, LA), Mar. 22, 1890.
\textsuperscript{555} Thompson, \textit{Exiles at Home}, 216.
\textsuperscript{556} It is likely that Pierre Roudanez and his family fled to Louisiana soon after the hostilities erupted in Saint-Domingue; however, it is not known if the Roudanez patriarch survived at all. See Gabriel Debien, “The Saint-Domingue Refugees in Louisiana, 1792-1804,” \textit{The Road to Louisiana: the Saint-Domingue Refugees, 1792-1809} ed. Carl A. Brasseaux and Glenn R. Conrad (Lafayette, LA: University of Louisiana Press, 1992), 162; and Bell, “The Common Wind’s Creole Visionary,” 12-13.
\textsuperscript{557} \textit{L’Union} (New Orleans, LA), Sept. 27, Oct. 18, 1862, as quoted in Logsdon and Bell, “The Americanization of Black New Orleans, 222.
\textsuperscript{558} Logsdon and Bell, “The Americanization of Black New Orleans, 222.
A week after the paper disbanded, Roudanez and Trévigne developed a new newspaper, the *New Orleans Tribune* (*la Tribune de la Nouvelle-Orleans*), which represented a more politically coherent effort that drew more consciously on the French Romantic protest tradition.\(^{559}\) The *Tribune* would become a remarkable newspaper published in New Orleans from 1864 to 1870, and captured Afro-Creole intellectual thought and radical spirit as an “organ of an oppressed class.”\(^{560}\) Although the Roudanez brothers and Trévigne launched *L’Union* as an effective medium for intellectual, romantic, and revolutionary expression, it was through the *Tribune* that Afro-Creoles advanced their Reconstruction agenda for racial equality and social justice. They chronicled their democratic cause and protest in the *Tribune* as these important events unfolded around them. Thus, it was within the *Tribune* that Roudanez and Trévigne—and later, the newspaper’s co-editor, Jean-Charles Houzeau, a Belgian aristocrat, astronomer, and natural scientist—advocated for universal male suffrage and a vision of public, integrated education.\(^{561}\)

With the addition of Houzeau, the *Tribune* had greater access and readership, even beyond the Crescent City. For its part, the *Tribune* emerged not only as an organ of an oppressed class but as the “official organ” of the Republican Party.\(^{562}\) While residing in Philadelphia, Houzeau contributed articles under the pseudonym “Cham,” as *L’Union*’s northern correspondent\(^{563}\) and identified as an advocate for people of color. His advocacy proved unique in attacking an entire white supremacist society, noting that “[p]eople noticed that I used the

\(^{559}\) Logsdon and Bell, “The Americanization of Black New Orleans,” 222.

\(^{560}\) *Tribune* (New Orleans, LA), Jul. 21, 1864.


\(^{563}\) Thompson, *Exiles at Home*, 217.
pronoun *we* in speaking of the oppressed race. Did I not have the right, like a lawyer at the bar, to identify myself with those whose rights I was defending?"\(^{564}\)

For Afro-Creoles, the Civil War was more than about preserving the Union; it symbolized a revolution to restore hope and prosperity for people of color and to transform the symbolic ideals of *liberté, égalité, and fraternité* into a campaign for meaningful change.\(^{565}\) This change would emanate after the war, manifest in the Louisiana state constitution of 1868, the first cross-racially written constitution in the history of Louisiana. Through the state constitutional convention, people of color argued against all discrimination on the basis of color, but also against disfranchising former Confederates. Afro-Creole Edouard Tinchant believed that “to look upon the men of my race as fully equal to the white men, and able to fight their way through without the help of any partial proscriptive measures directed against their opponents” remained essential to creating a new postbellum society in the South.\(^{566}\)

New state constitutions became instruments of Radical Republicans to reshape Southern society by creating universal republican citizenship and by “breaking the hold of the planters” over the political economy.\(^{567}\) The 1868 Louisiana state constitution, if for only a fleeting moment in time—a “constitutional moment” between two periods of white supremacy under slavery and a tightening racial caste system\(^{568}\)—represented a unique vision of republican equality and enabled people of color to join society as equal participants, unlike other state constitutions during Reconstruction. The constitution explicitly required equal treatment for all public accommodation and it forbade segregation in schools, an embodiment that emanated a

---

\(^{564}\) Houzeau, *My Passage at the New Orleans Tribune*, 83.


century before its time. Roudanez, Trévigne, and Houzeau advocated for this organic political process for public rights in the pages of the *Tribune*. They remained convinced that through the political process of engaged and meaningful debate to bring about a redefined Louisiana, a pathway to an equal citizenry would follow. For example, in an 1865 editorial, Houzeau confirmed:

[T]hose who are waiting for the prejudice of color to disappear before the teachings of education, the sentiments inculcated by Christian religion, and the lights thrown by our advanced civilization, are not conversant with the history of human customs and manners. Should they wait one or two centuries longer, it would still be in vain. Prejudices never die; they have to be killed... the opinion against which we are contending is not founded in reason, and therefore is not reasonable. Legislation alone can bring a remedy to the madness.

By 1864 the Louisiana Constitutional Convention abolished slavery and disposed of Louisiana’s old order of rule by planters and merchants, yet it did not extend universal suffrage to people of color in New Orleans. Rather, the Lincoln administration had set general guidelines for Reconstruction that excluded all black voters, which presented severe setbacks for an Afro-Creole vision of civil rights and social and economic reform. Accordingly, the convention stated: “[t]he Legislature shall have the power to pass laws extending suffrage to such other persons, citizens of the United States, as by military service, by taxation to support the Government, or by intellectual fitness, may be deemed entitled thereto.”

---

569 Bell, “French Religious Culture in Afro-Creole New Orleans,” 15
570 *Tribune* (New Orleans, LA), May 30, 1865.
571 The constitution mandated that “every white male who has been a resident of the State... who shall be a citizen of the United States and able to read and write, shall have the right of voting.” See Louisiana. *Constitution of the State of Louisiana*, 1864. Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Special Collections, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.
572 New Orleans *Times* (New Orleans, LA), Nov. 6, 1863; and Logsdon and Bell, “The Americanization of Black New Orleans,” 224.
573 Alfred P. Bennett, *Debates in the Convention for the Revision and Amendment of the Constitution of the State of Louisiana* (New Orleans, LA: W. R. Fish, Printer to the Convention, 1864), 146. Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Special Collections, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.
affirmation of their political and civil rights lacked an enforcement mechanism and the “virulent racism of a legislature that sought to banish free blacks from the state.”

Earlier that year, Jean Baptiste Roudanez and E. Arnold Bertonneau, a wine merchant and former captain of black Union troops, travelled to Washington, D.C. to deliver a petition to President Lincoln and members of Congress. The petition, signed by one thousand free black property owners, twenty-seven black veterans of the War of 1812, and twenty-two white radicals, sought to bolster their case for universal black suffrage. Impressed by their demands and demeanor, Lincoln wrote to the newly elected Louisiana governor, Michael Hahn, and urged him to make voters of “some of the colored people . . . as, for instance, the very intelligent, and especially those who have fought gallantly in our ranks.” Despite these efforts, the state convention of 1864, white conservative Unionists under the sanction of General Nathaniel P. Banks—the successor Union general to General Butler in New Orleans—steadfastly refused to grant suffrage to any people of color in Louisiana, free or slave.

Afro-Creoles and white radicals in Louisiana developed strategies to achieve universal manhood suffrage and desegregation. They viewed citizenship fundamentally as a public right as part of a pluralistic tradition of anti-caste activism that included a more holistic and communal understanding of the “colored race.” According to legal historian Rebecca Scott, the language of “public rights” nourished individual dignity through a formal respect in public space and public culture, and consequently the success of the formal guarantee of these rights for all citizens

574 Thompson, *Exiles at Home*, 227.
demonstrated the conceptual flexibility of Louisiana radicals in this constitutional moment.\textsuperscript{580} However, despite creating a postbellum society of wider black inclusion, Afro-Creoles were often categorically criticized as race-conscious elitists, only interested in promoting their own self-interests at any cost. Roudanez, in particular, was viewed as a monarchist who preferred France to the United States.\textsuperscript{581} Tellingly, opponents of radical politics viewed Afro-Creoles as a buffer between their group and freedmen,\textsuperscript{582} and emphasized the \textit{Tribune} in particular in highlighting Afro-Creole self-serving opportunism: “The \textit{Tribune}, a journal ostensibly devoted to the interests of the colored race, controlled by white men, who seemed to have failed in the struggle for leadership in the work of Reconstruction, says . . . the true course is to vote against Constitution.”\textsuperscript{583}

Roudanez and Trévigne asserted their refusal to serve as a wedge between whites and freedmen, and instead chose to identify themselves in racial terms. Arguing forcefully for a unified citizenry that included \textit{all} men, white and black, Trevigné affirmed:

\begin{quote}
It is argued against a bill for the protection of one Civil Rights that its benefits would practically extend to but a very small part of the colored population of the State, and that it is and evil act to stir up popular excitement for the sake of a handful of people. That is not the logic of \textit{true} Democracy. A solitary citizen, though he be also the humblest, will be cared for by a just Government equally with a multitude. In a true commonwealth of interests of one are the interests for all . . . When one or a few colored men are excluded from certain public rights enjoyed by all white men, not the few alone but the entire colored population are wronged.\textsuperscript{584}
\end{quote}

Although they articulated an altruistic and hopeful tone in the pages of the \textit{Tribune} in 1868, only a year earlier, Roudanez asserted a different standpoint, remarking that “[a]lthough we are of the same race as the unfortunate sons of Africa who have groaned here under the yoke of a cruel and

\begin{itemize}
\item Scott, “Public Rights and Private Commerce,” 246.
\item Thompson, \textit{Exiles at Home}, 224.
\item \textit{Tribune} (New Orleans, LA), Sep. 6, 1864; \textit{Tribune} Dec. 6, 7, 1864; and Thompson, \textit{Exiles at Home}, 224-225.
\item “Not a Few But All,” \textit{New Orleans Tribune} (New Orleans, LA), 1868.
\end{itemize}
brutal slavery, one could not fairly confuse the newly liberated with our intelligent population whose industry and education has been as useful to society and the country as any other class of citizens. Still other Afro-Creoles viewed this solidarity with a determined inevitability. One man rather suggested frankly, “by now we see that our future is indissolubly bound up with that of the negro race in this country; and we have resolved to make common cause, and rise or fall with them. We have no rights which we can reckon safe while the same are denied to the field-hands on the sugar plantation.”

Undeniably, Afro-Creoles articulated an “us” and “them” framework by 1868 that sought to erase the cultural and class divisions between themselves and the formerly enslaved and to replace it with a racial division between blacks (us) and whites (them), including like-minded white supporters. The prejudice directed against all people of color, regardless of their social status or “fairness of their complexion,” fostered a greater sense of unity among them in the city. This fermented an atmosphere of protest in which Afro-Creoles aligned themselves with the “sons of Africa” and staked out a radical position in favor of equality. Among the myriad issues the Tribune covered, then, full political participation, social equality, and meaningful economic prosperity for people of color proved to be the most important. For these Afro-Creoles, their quest for freedom was unfinished if it did not include suffrage, office-holding, and the civil and political rights associated with universal citizenship.

Many historians have documented how the Louisiana state election in 1868 revealed increasing distrust and a widening ideological gulf between two factions within the Republican

586 Reid, After the War, 244.
587 Thompson, Exiles at Home, 225.
One group, the Compromisers, represented carpetbaggers, mostly former Union officers newly settled in Louisiana. They were unwavering in their support of the Union, but also remained conservative and less militant in deciding the fate of freedmen in post-emancipation society. The other group, comprised a radical element, or Radical Republicans, led by Roudanez and other prominent free people of color. These two factions worked in tandem in the early summer of 1865 to create the Friends of Universal Suffrage, an association that promoted universal suffrage to free people of color and freedmen, but more generally opposed any discrimination “founded upon origin or birth” and advocated that “all be given a fair chance in the world, with the same rights before the law.” The organization also developed strategies to assure equality before the law for all black Louisianans, including the right to serve on juries and to run for all political offices. Afro-Creoles formed effective partnerships with white radicals, such as Rufus Waples and Thomas Jefferson Durant, a white radical carpetbagger who served as the organization’s president. For their part as well, Aristide Mary and Armand Lanusse headed up the membership roster for the state nominating convention on September 25, 1865.

Houzeau praised Durant for his intellectual prowess and spirit and portrayed him as “one of New Orleans’ leading lawyers. He knew no superior for purity of character and for sincerity

---


592 As historian Ted Tunnell suggests, the term “carpetbagger” typically invokes an image of an “office-seeking adventurer, hastening South after the Civil War to profiteer on a defeated people’s misery, with the sum of his worldly goods stuffed in a carpetbag.” The carpetbagger represented a synthesis of two stereotypes: a zealous abolitionist and zealous Yankee (a fusion of race and greed). See Ted Tunnell, Crucible of Reconstruction: War, Radicalism, and Race in Louisiana, 1862-1877 (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 138.


594 Houzeau, My Passage at the New Orleans Tribune, 111.

595 Bell, Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana, 257.

596 Bell, Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana, 268.
of opinions . . . His convictions were guided by a clear notion of scientific principles and ideas. Strengthened by the public esteem that he had acquired, he could strike more boldly through the barriers of prejudice than any other.”

Yet, Houzeau remained critical of some of his fellow supporters in the Friends of Universal Suffrage. He suggested that many well-meaning whites “would like to play the role of protector and always distinguish themselves as whites. They wound in rendering service.” Perhaps this standpoint emanated from Houzeau’s own activist role at the Tribune as an advocate for people of color. His generally dark complexion made possible the rumor that Houzeau himself was a person of color. As Thompson suggests, Houzeau’s act of racial passing rendered him “socially dead” but ultimately more useful to the cause of justice:

[B]ecause I alone, all alone at first, among the white population took up the pen in behalf of the blacks, forfeited my ‘Caucasian character’ . . . I was dead, more than dead even, vilified in the eyes of my race. The defiant stance that I took was so exorbitant, that the only way to explain it was to imagine that I might be of African blood myself.

Despite the radical political framework that the Friends of Universal Suffrage advanced for all people of color, white voters reelected reactionary southern Democrats in the official statewide elections of November 1865. Months later, in early-1866 New Orleans residents expelled the remaining Unionists from the mayoralty and other city offices. Removed from power and desperate, conservative pro-Union forces joined with Republicans and proposed to fight the former Confederates with a new state constitution, with the aim of enfranchising black Louisianans while disfranchising former Rebels. As predicted, this attempt to extend suffrage and civil rights without federal support brought whites and blacks into open conflict, as

---

597 Houzeau, My Passage at the New Orleans Tribune, 111.
598 Houzeau, My Passage at the New Orleans Tribune, 116n.
599 Houzeau, My Passage at the New Orleans Tribune, 83; and Thompson, Exiles at Home, 217.
600 Bell, Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana, 260.
evidenced by the violence and hysteria of the New Orleans Riot in July 1866. General Ulysses S. Grant, then a four star general in charge of all Reconstruction troops, suggested the riot was “an absolute massacre by the police, which was not excelled in murderous cruelty by that of Fort Pillow.”

The riot in New Orleans and its vigilante hostility created a growing unease and awareness in the North which inevitably discredited Andrew Johnson’s reconstruction policies. This simultaneously created a legislative void and an opportunity for a radical biracial Republicans coalition to pass a series of bills that gave the United States Congress control of Reconstruction and out of the hands of President Johnson. To that end, in the fall elections of 1866, the congressional Radicals won a majority in both houses of Congress, and by early-1867 they began to implement their vision of reconstruction through the Congressional Reconstruction Act of 1867. They presented a more radical solution to the “southern problem,” and for the first time Radical Republicans demanded a constitutional basis for reconstituting the country and readmitting the former Confederate states, which included a state convention’s support for civil rights and universal education.

In particular, they turned to Article IV of the U.S. Constitution and the provision that Congress must guarantee a “republican form of government” throughout the nation, dramatically reconfiguring the political landscape in which the former Confederate states would elect delegates to these new state constitutional conventions.

In New Orleans this process unfolded quickly. General Philip H. Sheridan, commanding officer of U.S. troops in Louisiana, removed the pro-Confederate mayor and other city officials

implicated in the riot, which paved the way for convening the state convention, reorganizing the state government, and ultimately readmitting Louisiana into the Union. General Sheridan ordered the voter registration of all adult males, black and white, excluding those ex-Confederates disqualified by the Fourteenth Amendment. People of color comprised the majority of registered voters, representing 82,907 out of a total of 127,639, and they commenced voting for delegates to attend the state constitutional convention in November 1867. The convention adopted the state constitution on March 7, 1868, and within the document it embodied principles of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth amendments with regard to slavery and citizenship to the state.

Afro-Creoles, such as E. Arnold Bertonneau, Antoine Dubuclet, Caesar Antoine, and Edouard Tinchant, among others, helped to draft the most radical state constitution the South had ever seen. In one of the first sessions, Tinchant successfully introduced a motion to fly the U.S. flag over the conclave every day from sunrise to sunset, displaying the “emblem of national citizenship and Union victory in the former Confederate city.” For these men, as “people of Louisiana,” the constitution sought “to promote the general welfare and secure the blessings of liberties to ourselves and our posterity.” This ideal was evident in the debate over the state’s historically unprecedented bill of rights, for example, which promoted public rights and guaranteed all citizens “equal rights and privileges upon any conveyance of a public character”

---

606 Bell, Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana, 264.
607 The 1868 state constitution ultimately conferred voting rights on every “male person, of the age of twenty-one or upwards, born or naturalized in the United States . . . and a resident of the State one year next preceding an election.” Interestingly, the framers excluded “those who held office, civil or military, for one year or more, under the organization styled ‘the Confederate States of America.’” No ex-Confederate could vote until “he shall relieved himself by voluntarily writing and signing a certificate setting forth that he acknowledges the late rebellion to have been morally and politically wrong, and that he regrets any aid and comfort he may have given it.” See Constitution of the State of Louisiana, Title VI, Art. 99, General Provisions, 14.
611 Constitution of the State of Louisiana, Title I, Bill of Rights, 3.
and confirmed that “and all places of business, or of public resort . . . shall be opened to the accommodation and patronage of all persons, without distinction or discrimination on account of race or color.”

The state constitution of 1868 also extended public rights to all people within the educational enterprise. In Title VII of the constitution, “Public Education,” the convention outlined nine articles of far-reaching appeal from prohibiting segregation in public schools and designating land for constructing schools, to creating an office of a superintendent of education and a provision for educating students with special needs. For example, under Article 143 the framers mandated that “[i]nstitutions for the support of the insane, the education and support of the blind and the deaf and the dumb shall always be fostered by the State, and be subject to such regulations as may be prescribed by the General Assembly.” The constitution even established a state lottery whereby “all revenues derived . . . shall be used solely for education and charitable purposes, under control of the State.” But of particular importance is that the constitution demanded something no previous law or constitution had ever required before: developing public schooling for all children, irrespective of race, gender, or ethnicity. Under Article 135, the constitution states:

The General Assembly shall establish at least one free public school in every parish throughout the State, and shall provide for its support by taxation or otherwise. All children of this State between the ages of six (6) and twenty-one (21) shall be admitted to the public schools or other institutions of learning sustained or established by the State in common without distinction of race, color, or previous condition. There shall be no separate schools or institutions of learning established exclusively for any race by the State of Louisiana.

---

612 Constitution of the State of Louisiana, Title I, Bill of Rights, 3.
613 Constitution of the State of Louisiana, Title VII, Public Education, Article 143, 18.
615 Tunnell, Crucible of Reconstruction: War, Radicalism, and Race in Louisiana, 1862-1877, 119.
The constitution reinforced this provision in Article 136, suggesting “[n]o municipal corporation shall make any rules or regulations contrary to the spirit and intention of article one hundred and thirty-five (135).”

For Afro-Creoles, demanding public, integrated education remained “an essential part of the campaign for racial equality after the Civil War.” Writing in January 1866, the Tribune argued for an education for all children, suggesting:

We hold that the question of the schools will only be settled when all children, without discrimination on account of race or color, will be admitted to sit together on the same benches and receive from the same teachers the light of knowledge. At that time there will only be one set of schools and all the energies of the State, all the talent of the teachers, will be directed to only end and one aim—the promotion of public education for the greatest good of all. Being one nation, we want to see the young generation raised as one people, and we want the State to take care of education all her children.

The mantra for universal education became a corner piece of a national narrative for many northern radicals as well, including Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts. Echoing the sentiments of the Tribune in 1866, Sumner told a group of his fellow senators in early-1867: “In a republic education is indispensable. A republic without education is like the creature of imagination, a human being without a soul, living and moving blindly, with no sense of the present or the future. It is a monster.”

Sumner had met privately with Afro-Creoles Jean Baptiste Roudanez and E. Arnold Bretonneau in Boston after their meeting with President Lincoln in 1864. Attuned to their appeals for black suffrage, Sumner also remained steadfast in his support of universal education through a Congressional mandate. Consequently, Sumner and his allies sought to create free

---

617 Constitution of the State of Louisiana, Title VII, Public Education, Article 135, 17.
619 Tribune (New Orleans, LA), Jan. 30, 1866.
public schools as a precondition for statehood and acceptance into the Union. In March 1867 Sumner and his allies put an amendment to a vote, arguing that if Congress had the power to demand universal (manhood) suffrage, it had the duty as well to ordain universal education.\footnote{Tyack and Lowe, “The Constitutional Moment,” 244.} Although unsuccessful in passing the amendment, Radical Republicans demonstrated their commitment to equal opportunity in state systems of public education, which translated quite effectively to the constitutional conventions in the South: southern states must provide free schools or Congress would reject their constitutions.\footnote{Tyack and Lowe, “The Constitutional Moment,” 244.}

Undeniably, the radical elements of the Republican Party advocated for universal access to public education as a basic civil right for all citizens; however, the effort to actually implement these systems occurred at the state and local level. Although government sponsorship through the Freedmen’s Bureau played a role in assisting former slaves’ transition to citizenship and building schools, providing teachers, and shaping southern educational objectives, these efforts proved shortsighted and decidedly conservative.\footnote{Richard Paul Fuke, “Land, Lumber, and Learning: The Freedmen’s Bureau, and the Black Community in Post-Emancipation Maryland,” The Freedmen’s Bureau and Reconstruction: Reconsiderations, ed. Paul A. Cimbala and Randall M. Miller (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 1999), 288.} As historian Paul Cimbala states, “[t]he Bureau accepted the belief that education could influence all the freedpeople’s habits, including industry and economy, and considered its own encouragement of hard work and the acquisition of education to be complementary.”\footnote{Paul A. Cimbala, Under the Guardianship of the Nation: The Freedmen’s Bureau and the Reconstruction of Georgia, 1865-1870 (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1997), 12-13.} As a result, although Louisiana inaugurated the only education system in the South that made any meaningful attempt toward racially integrated schools, it remained within the confines of New Orleans; whites continued to boycott rural public schools in Louisiana.\footnote{Ward M. McAfee, Religion, Race, and Reconstruction: The Public School in the Politics of the 1870s (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), 17.} All along the \textit{Tribune} continued to debate the urgency of
implementing integrated education, particularly in its affront to the state’s Committee on Education. Writing in 1868, the newspaper exclaimed: “[i]s there or is there not such a Committee in our General Assembly? If there is, what are they doing? Have they no report to make, no actions to recommend? Gentlemen, the people are in earnest. Do report progress. Show signs of life.”

Recognizing the importance of higher education in New Orleans as well, the constitutional convention sought to establish a university in the city. Under Article 142, the constitution confirmed that a “[u]niversity shall be established and maintained in the city of New Orleans. It shall be composed of a law, medical, and a collegiate department, each with appropriate facilities.” It is unclear whether the convention envisaged a university similar in scope to the University of Louisiana in New Orleans or a new holistic and communal space that developed at Straight University. The state legislature ultimately founded the Louisiana Agricultural & Mechanical College (A & M) in New Orleans, ostensibly to retain federal financing through the Morrill Act of 1862. The legislature opted to develop a new institution in New Orleans in lieu of distributing funding the existing Louisiana State University (LSU) in Baton Rouge. Using federal funds for initial operating costs, the college was open to both races and enrolled fifty student of color by 1874. Yet, predictably many whites in New Orleans enthusiastically denounced the practice of “mixed” enrollment at the A & M institution. The New Orleans Bulletin in 1874 later affirmed:

The [A & M] College itself under its present auspices is a mistake and cannot but be made a miserable failure. Its mixed feature will kill it and ought to kill it, and we are surprised that intelligent and respectable white gentlemen in New Orleans should be

626 Tribune (New Orleans, LA), 1868.
627 McAfee, Religion, Race, and Reconstruction, 18.
lending themselves to the furthering of a project that is calculated to lead to the most lamentable and baleful results. Mixed schools in this community cannot but prove an unmixed evil and we are quite sure no white parent in New Orleans would degrade his children by sending them to schools where the associations would be calculated to lower rather than elevate them. The best and most enlightened colored men among us desire separate schools for their children.629

LSU maintained a tradition of firmly denying educational opportunities to black students.630 As a result of their adamant refusal to admit students of color, the school lost all financial support from Radical Republican legislators in 1873. LSU’s practice of discrimination and exclusion led to a political and economic divide within the state, with the Radical Republicans on one side and the conservative Democrats and on the other. The Republican, a radical publication in New Orleans, went as far as describing LSU as a “Democratic pet institution . . . that would have been entirely abolished or greatly modified since the war but for the watchful intriguing and bribery of Democrats and their party.”631 LSU lost requisite funds from the legislature which, consequently, was reallocated to Straight University in New Orleans by 1873.632 This reallocation of funding emphasized the power and authority of black leaders and biracial coalitions within the Republican faction of the state legislature.

Despite these dramatic changes in political and civil rights for people of color in Louisiana, cooperation between the Compromisers and Radicals soonwaned and succumbed to distrust on the part of the Afro-Creoles and white radicals: they felt the carpetbaggers used the suffrage movement merely as a device to propel them into political power.633 Roudanez, Trévigne, and the white radicals had become so embittered by the white conservatism within the

631 As quoted in Fleming, Louisiana State University, 1860-1896, 198.
632 Blassingame, Black New Orleans, 125.
Republican Party, and the alleged neglect of the principles of their protest tradition, that they formed an opposition ticket with Aristide Mary as their candidate to defeat the leading Republican, Henry Clay Warmoth—a young, Illinois-born, political opportunist who had come to New Orleans as a lieutenant colonel with the Union Army—whom they originally supported. 634 These Afro-Creoles continued to use the Tribune to vocalize themes of justice and equality and declared in June 1868, “that the union of this party with half-republicans, will not strengthen it, but on the contrary weaken it.” 635

Warmoth won the gubernatorial election in April 1868 and defeated Afro-Creole radical candidate Francis E. Dumas. As historian Michael Ross confirms, Warmoth advocated a cautious approach to civil rights legislation so as to avoid alienating potential white converts to the Republican Party. 636 In his inaugural address in July 1868, for example, Warmoth affirmed, “the contest from which we are emerging has not been for social equality, but for civil and political equality. This last you now have and it will be my duty to see that you are protected in it.” 637 However, within three months of his inauguration Warmoth vetoed a bill designed to enforce the mandate of equal access to public accommodations and the desegregation of public schools. 638 Further, when the legislature passed a bill in 1870 providing for criminal prosecution of civil rights violations, Warmoth vetoed that bill as well. 639 Through these measures, Warmoth assured his dominance by aligning with white Democratic conservatives that resulted in a deepening divide within the Republican party, leading Oscar J. Dunn, then-lieutenant governor

635 New Orleans Tribune, June 11, 1867.
638 Bell, Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana, 276.
639 Bell, Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana, 276.
to call Warmoth the “first Ku Klux Klan Governor” of the Republican Party.\footnote{Oscar J. Dunn to Horace Greely in Ted Tunnell, Crucible of Reconstruction, 165; and Binning, “Carpetbaggers’ Triumph,” 259.} Warmoth’s more conservative effort to harden the edges of racial dualism motivated the Afro-Creoles and black leaders to continue their radical agenda and biracial coalitions to pass measures in the legislature to enforce integration.

**Summary Review**

The vision of public, integrated education that Afro-Creoles embraced remained in stark contrast to the economic and industrial concerns of the Freedmen’s Bureau and northern philanthropy. Roudanez, Trévigne, and others emerged front-and-center in forthrightly advocating for integrated education as a public right, notably through the pages of the *Tribune*. They recognized that integration was the *only* way to ensure equality of opportunity, suggesting “[w]e want to see our children seated on the same benches with the white girls and boys, so that every prejudice of color may disappear from childhood, and the next generation be aroused to a sentiment of fraternity.”\footnote{Tribune (New Orleans, LA), Mar. 5, 1865.} The *Tribune*’s insistence on enforcement and the mounting assertiveness of black New Orleanians compelled Warmoth and Superintendent of Education Thomas W. Conway to desegregate the city’s public schools in 1870.\footnote{Bell, *Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana*, 277; and Louis A. Harlan, “Desegregation in New Orleans Public Schools during Reconstruction,” *The American Historical Review* 67, no. 3 (Apr. 1962): 666.}

Yet, realizing the opportunity for integrated education, and ultimately the democratic ethos that emanated at Straight University, followed a long, complex, and dizzying trajectory, which faced racial hostility and political backlash until 1874, when hundreds of black and white children attended approximately twenty-one racially mixed schools in New Orleans.\footnote{Bell, *Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana*, 277; and Louis A. Harlan, “Desegregation in New Orleans Public Schools during Reconstruction,” *The American Historical Review* 67, no. 3 (Apr. 1962): 666.} This inclusion and democratic space remained the logical place to eliminate racial discrimination and
disdain that remained an obstacle to building one nation and creating one people in pursuit of republican ideals.\textsuperscript{644} Commenting on the integrated learning environment, then-state superintendent Conway surmised:

I had fully concluded to put the system of mixed schools to a through, practical test, and I did. The white pupils all left . . . and the school-house was virtually in the hands of the colored pupils. This was the picture one day. What will you think when I tell you that before I reached my office that day, the children of both races who, on the school question, seemed like deadly enemies were, many of them, joined in a circle, playing on the green, under the shade of the wide-spreading live oak. In a few days I went back to see how the school was progress-ing [sic] and, to my surprise, found nearly all the former pupils returned to their places; and that the school, like all the schools in the city, reported at the close of the year a larger attendance than at any time since the close of the war. The children were simply kind to eachother in the school-room as in the streets and elsewhere! A year ago I visited the same school and saw there in about as many colored children as whites, with not a single indication of any ill-feeling whatever.\textsuperscript{645} Although the 1868 state constitution mandated public education for all children of the state “without distinction of race, color, or previous condition,”\textsuperscript{646} implementing integrated education proved another matter. Afro-Creoles in New Orleans, led by Roudanez, Trévigne, and others, contributed to real progress and promoted ideals of democracy and equality ultimately manifest in the 1868 state constitution. As Rodolphe Desdunes later remarked, “the Constitution exists to the praise of the black delegates to the Assembly. The delegates did their duty as they saw it,” he admitted, “voting for universal suffrage, for marriage between races, for civil and political rights of citizens without distinction of color or former status. In other words they expanded the structure of civil privileges for all races instead of placing restraints upon it.\textsuperscript{647}

These Afro-Creole leaders would promote these ideals further through higher education at Straight University, where Roudanez served on the executive committee and Aristide Mary

\textsuperscript{644} Melancon and Hendry, “We Now Think for Ourselves, and We Shall Act for Ourselves.”
\textsuperscript{645} Thomas W. Conway to Editor, Washington \textit{National Republican} (Washington, DC), June 4, 1874.
\textsuperscript{646} \textit{Constitution of the State of Louisiana, Title VII}, 1868.
\textsuperscript{647} Desdunes, \textit{Our People and Our History}, 126.
served on the board of trustees. These Afro-Creoles assisted in developing Straight in what the *Louisianan* affectionately declared in 1871 as “the Harvard of the South.” Though Straight ultimately would not attain this ideal, it emerged as the first integrated higher education institution in New Orleans and embodied a spirit of democracy in education, a testament to Afro-Creole radicalism, protest tradition, and intellectual spirit.

---


CHAPTER SEVEN: STRAIGHT UNIVERSITY IN NEW ORLEANS

And for dear old Straight, our alma mater, within whose walls so many from youth to middle-age have sought and found knowledge, may she live, prosper and still continue to send forth her armies into the world. May she be a paver in the land and as each year brings forth its class, may be adding fresh laurels to her crown until it becomes a bright diadem whose radiance will be reflected back upon the world. – Fannie Gossett, valedictorian address, 1890

The valedictorian address likely aroused praise and applause. As she read from her small, hand-written pieces of note paper, Fannie Gossett looked back on her years at Straight University with a sense of pride and nostalgic remembrance. She spoke fondly of her classmates, her teachers, and even the university president, Reverend R. C. Hitchcock, as she commended him on his service and wished him well in his new leadership role in the American Missionary Association (AMA) in New York City. Gossett’s speech followed a “beautiful class song” composed by Miss Mary D. Coghill, and it was “in every way, worthy of the occasion.” For Gossett, Straight became a place for her to grow and mature as a young woman. She participated in the choir and worked hard in her classes as she diligently prepared to become a teacher. Fannie Gossett also immersed herself in her Christian faith, taking part in bible study and regular prayer meetings. Bible instruction was offered in all departments of the university, and through teaching and “religious meetings,” the students and faculty contributed greatly to the “spiritual life of the church.”

Although particularly warm that late-spring evening and without a seat to spare, the university church was filled with family, friends, and Straight faculty and leadership. As the

---

650 Fannie Gossett valedictorian address, Straight University, 1890, In Lucile L. Hutton Papers, 1850-1988, Box 4, Folder 12, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA (hereinafter referred as AMA Archives).
651 Gossett valedictorian address.
652 American Missionary 45, no. 1, 266.
653 George W. Henderson, “Straight University, Law Department,” pamphlet on Straight University, in George Longe Papers, 1849-1971, Box 3, Folder 6, AMA Archives.
“sanctuary” and “conscience of the school,” the church proved a fitting, if not ideal environment to hold the 1890 commencement exercises. As one observer noted, “the spacious audience-room and gallery were filled to overflowing by an intelligent, orderly, and refined assembly,” the sight of which “would have gladdened the heart of every friend of the race.” In many ways the church remained central to campus life at Straight University. Its influence radiated “in all departments, sweetening it social life and subordinating its intellectual activity to the principles of righteousness and Christian service.” All in attendance on that evening appreciated Gossett’s eloquence and charm; for the “armies” to which she referred—the students, faculty, and alumni—held much affection for the institution. Undeniably, they each understood how Straight provided the foundation, knowledge, and “fresh laurels” that many sought and appreciated at the university.

By the time of Fannie Gossett’s valedictorian address in 1890, Straight University had been in existence for over twenty-one years. Straight initially emerged as space for all students to gather in the heart of Faubourg Tremé, spanning across and within boundaries of race, gender, class, and culture. The neighborhood was particularly important. Seymour Straight, the university’s namesake, wanted the campus location “easy of access to the most dense [sic] population of colored people” and favored a plan of adapting the institution “to the many necessities of those deprived by prejudice of the privileges of improvement enjoyed by people of lighter complexions.” Within this space the university became an integrated higher education institution and promoted education and training for young men and women, irrespective of race,
sex, religion, or ethnicity, and maintained an enrollment of over one thousand students during its first year, three quarters of whom were Afro-Creoles. The charter incorporated under the laws of Louisiana on June 12, 1869, and reasserted in the renewed charter of 1894, expressed:

The corporate name of this institution shall be Straight University. The purpose and objects of the corporation are the education and training upon Christian principles of young men and women—and to receive gifts, devise, bequest, lease, purchase or otherwise, property real or personal or the use and possession thereof and apply, administer or dispense of the same for the promotion of such education and training.

Straight University witnessed crowning achievements in only two decades time that contributed to its growth, popularity, and institutional culture. It developed programs in medicine, law, and theology, as well as created a normal school and commercial and collegiate departments. The university maintained high ideals of college-level instruction and stringent admission requirements. Accordingly, a fundamental aim of the collegiate department sought to enhance “such disciplinary training as is necessary to prepare students to enter upon the more advanced studies of the learned professions.” Yet, Straight University also experienced hardship, notably a fire in 1877 that destroyed the main campus building and library. This caused many discouraged faculty to resign, and despite a temporary location in the Central Congregational church on Liberty Street in the uptown neighborhood of New Orleans, student enrollment declined.

From its inception, it maintained wide support and appeal from the Afro-Creole population, evident in the university’s campus in the Faubourg Tremé. With prominent people of color on the board of trustees, such as Aristide Mary, Oscar Dunn, and Louis Charles

---

658 Ochs, A Black Patriot and a White Priest, 253.
659 Seymour Straight to Rev. George Whipple, March 12, 1869, AMA Archives; and Straight University, Act of Incorporation, June 25, 1869, AMA Archives.
660 Straight University Catalogue, 1870-1871, Dillard Archives.
Roudanez, and Afro-Creoles among the student population, the institution showed much promise in transforming the higher education landscape in New Orleans: it sought to provide opportunities for students who could not attend colleges and universities before the Civil War. At a time when the assertion of emancipation and civil rights redefined how people lived together in reconstructing a New South, it also illuminated the distinct challenge and struggle to link citizenship with democracy and education for the formerly enslaved and disenfranchised. In this frame, then, education at Straight University became a pathway to democratic citizenship and an archetype to shape the future direction of southern society.

In a span of twenty-one years, Straight University had changed in many ways. The university relocated to Canal Street a year after the fire in 1877; and with this new location between South Tonti and South Rocheblave streets brought a supposedly reinvigorated university with it, despite the backdrop of an increasing white supremacist identity that shaped social and political relations in the city. Yet, as the institution entered the twentieth century, the democratic experiment it embraced seemed to fade away. Like other black colleges and universities after Reconstruction, it confronted the hostile racial realities of the emergent Jim Crow South, and it subordinated liberal ideals for an inexorable push toward industrial education. Straight continually faced significant financial hardship and ultimately closed its doors; and by 1930, it had merged with New Orleans University to form modern-day Dillard University on Gentilly Boulevard in New Orleans.

This chapter explores the history of Straight University during Reconstruction and the democratic ethos, institutional culture, and characteristic identity it sustained. A particular focus is on the social aspects of its foundation and development, including Afro-Creoles and the
American Missionary Association, as well as the quest to develop a higher education institution that promoted and delivered a classical liberal education.

**A New Vision: Building a Campus**

As he sat in the parlor of his Cincinnati home, Seymour Straight reflected upon his life and his ardent desire to help those who he thought could not help themselves in spite of the reimagined political and social landscape after the Civil War. Writing in a *Tribune* editorial in December 1867, Straight commented on what he could do to advance the cause of democracy, civil rights, and economic reform:

> As I have frequently remarked in substance during the last 25 years, I see not how we can eat, in justice to the colored man or with safety to the nation, stop short of giving him all the civil and political rights that we claim for ourselves. There is no intermediate point upon which we can rest, no firm foundation upon which society can be securely established short of this.  

Roudanez and Trévigne of the *Tribune* supported Seymour Straight as well. As a champion of civil rights for people of color in New Orleans, they declared, “no man in the nation has a clearer record of unswerving friendship for the oppressed race than Mr. Straight, as we could prove even by the most intelligent merchants of the city, as well as by the records of his liberal donations and persecutions he has suffered for the colored people.” The *Tribune* went on to say, “Mr. Straight believes, and correctly too, that all the citizens of Louisiana, and many more are needed to develope [sic] her great resources, and that any man who seeks to create hostility between the freedmen and their employers is the criminal enemy of both.”

---

662 *Tribune* (New Orleans, LA), Dec. 3, 1867.
663 *Tribune* (New Orleans, LA), Mar. 12, 1868.
664 *Tribune* (New Orleans, LA), Mar. 12, 1868.
Earlier that year, Straight founded S. Straight & Company, a cheese and butter manufacturing company in Hudson, Ohio. The company, a partnership with Straight and his son, W. B. Straight, produced and sold cheese throughout the United States. The Straight men operated two factories and bought over a dozen more in the Hudson area until 1892, when the elder Straight retired from business. It had been a remarkable career, and one that transcended the grocery business: he also dedicated his life to helping others and advancing the cause of democracy and social justice. For example, although he did not serve in the Union Army during the Civil War, he supported poor men’s families during their tours of duty, paid for substitutes for the disabled, and fed and clothed the destitute sick and wounded. Straight also served as an administrator of the Hathaway House of New Orleans, an institution designed as a home for indigent people of color, founded and endowed by Elisha Hathaway, a New England philanthropist. This dispensary would ultimately become the Straight University medical department in 1873.

Seymour Straight was born in Charlotte, Vermont in 1816, a small rural community in the northwest part of the state, and spent most of his childhood in western New York. He later moved with his family to northeastern Ohio, and by 1845, after working for a few years as a clerk in a local grocery store, Seymour Straight borrowed money to start a produce commission business in Cincinnati. This enterprise eventually led to a partnership with Judge William S.

665 “History of S. Straight & Company,” S. Straight & Co. Records, Box 1, Folder 1, Hudson Library & Historical Society, Hudson, OH.
666 W. B. Straight served in the Civil War as a Union army lieutenant and was wounded at the Battle of Cheat Mountain in West Virginia. See The Biographical Encyclopedia of Ohio of the Nineteenth Century (Cincinnati and Philadelphia: Galaxy Publishing Press, 1876), 81-82.
667 Straight’s wife Caroline also assisted in this effort, offering her nursing experience and services in Nashville, Tennessee and Huntsville, Alabama. See The Biographical Encyclopedia of Ohio of the Nineteenth Century (Cincinnati and Philadelphia: Galaxy Publishing Press, 1876), 81-82.
668 The Biographical Encyclopedia of Ohio of the Nineteenth Century, 81-82.
669 The Biographical Encyclopedia of Ohio of the Nineteenth Century, 81.
Deming, a cheese dealer in Ashtabula County. Deming and Straight founded Straight, Deming & Company, one of Straight's first forays into the cheese and butter commission business (see Figure 7.1). Listed officially as “Grocers and Commission Merchants,” the enterprise included offices in Cincinnati and New Orleans.

Figure 7.1 A Portrait of Seymour Straight (undated)

Although Seymour Straight co-owned and operated Straight, Deming and Company, as well as four cheese factories, he lived in New Orleans during the spring and winter months.

Straight also gave generously his time, energy, and money to the American Missionary

---

670 The Biographical Encyclopedia of Ohio of the Nineteenth Century, 81.
671 The office in New Orleans was located on 12 Fulton Street in the present-day “Warehouse District.” This enterprise was listed as the “Commission House of McFarlan, Straight & Co.” See Seymour Straight official correspondence and letter head, AMA Archives.
672 Undated Portrait of Seymour Straight, Courtesy of The American Missionary, Aug. 1870, AMA Archives; and The Biographical Encyclopedia of Ohio of the Nineteenth Century (Cincinnati and Philadelphia: Galaxy Publishing Press, 1876), 81.
673 Richardson, “The American Missionary Association and Black Education in Louisiana, 1862-1878,” 205.
Association on behalf of freed people of color, where he served as an AMA vice president from 1864 to 1883.\textsuperscript{674} Yet, even as he oversaw his expansive business enterprise, Straight expressed concern over the AMA’s role in assisting freedmen in Louisiana, suggesting to the AMA corresponding secretary, Reverend George Whipple, in 1863:

\begin{quote}
I thought you intended to send missionaries to labor here (New Orleans) and Baton Rouge but I hear of none from your society as yet . . . I could write much of the necessity of missionary labor and especially of the great and pressing need of efficient school teachers but I am very busy otherwise and presume you are well informed in regard to these matters.\textsuperscript{675}
\end{quote}

Contrary to Seymour Straight’s concerns, however, the AMA provided elementary instruction in New Orleans as early as January 1864, where they remained dedicated to teaching people of color and promoting equality of opportunity. Organized on September 3, 1846 as “an organized resistance, religious and political, to the supreme domination of slavery,” the American Missionary Association attempted to convince and educate Northerners and Southerners of the evils of the institution.\textsuperscript{676} In much the same way that Afro-Creoles devoted their lives to ending slavery and promoting enfranchisement and access to education, the AMA became leaders in providing systematic relief and education to newly freed slaves. By 1866 they employed more than 350 teachers in schools and churches for people of color in the South.\textsuperscript{677} However, with racial violence and hostility unrelentingly manifest in the city, as mentioned earlier in the preceding chapter, the AMA scaled back their efforts in spiritual and educational support; and by 1867, the association “had done comparatively little in Louisiana.”\textsuperscript{678}

\textsuperscript{674} History of the American Missionary Association (New York, NY: American Missionary Association, 1891), 89; and Seymour Straight to Rev. George Whipple, April 5, 1870, AMA Archives.
\textsuperscript{675} Seymour Straight to Rev. George Whipple, Nov. 23, 1863, AMA Archives.
\textsuperscript{676} History of the American Missionary Association, 3; and Richardson, “The American Missionary Association and Black Education in Louisiana,” 210.
\textsuperscript{677} Richardson, “The American Missionary Association and Black Education in Louisiana,” 205.
\textsuperscript{678} Twenty-Fourth Annual Report of the American Missionary Association, 1870, AMA Archives, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA; and Donald E. Reynolds, “The New Orleans Riot of 1866,
Despite significant setbacks in delivering education in New Orleans after the Civil War, the AMA persistently continued its efforts on behalf of people of color in the city. According to the *Twentieth Annual Report* of 1866, the AMA confirmed and reiterated this fervent support of education and civil rights:

In Louisiana, the education of the blacks has been in a precarious and unsettled condition since General Banks’ plans for public tax support of Negro schools were laid aside. But schools have been maintained in various ways, and a normal school has been kept up in New Orleans . . . Two wealthy and benevolent gentlemen in Illinois, Messrs. Emerson and Talcott, have generously proposed to expend $2500 per annum in support of this or some other normal school there, provided this association will devote a like sum to the same object. We shall accept the proposal, and thus add another, and perhaps two, to the list of these advanced schools.  

As historian David Coughlin Marshall confirms, these plans did not materialize despite having support from northern philanthropy. On the contrary, the racial tension and political climate in New Orleans proved too difficult for the AMA and northern philanthropists to ardently develop opportunities for education. For example, the AMA referenced some of these stalled efforts in a subsequent annual report of 1867, reporting, “[a] great work remains undone . . . a work not only educational but evangelical. The masses of people, white and black, are papists, and entrance among them is the more necessary, as it is more difficult.”

To help alleviate these challenges, in 1868, the Reverend Joseph W. Healy relocated from Chicago to New Orleans to serve as an agent of the AMA for the Southwest region and as a pastor of the First Congregational Church of New Orleans. Healy sought to redefine and revitalize the AMA’s efforts after 1866 in providing educational opportunities for people of color in New Orleans, but initially experienced some challenges. For instance, he attempted to

---


680 For a discussion of some of the initial attempts of the AMA to implement and deliver education in New Orleans without success, see Marshall, “A History of the Higher Education of Negroes in the State of Louisiana.”


organize a congregation in association with an AMA normal school, but he was unable to find anyone to assume the pastorate.\(^{683}\) Healy ultimately recruited Reverend John Turner, a popular pastor of St. James Church and a member of the U.S. Board of Education, who possessed “large and pure influence among the colored people in the city and state.”\(^{684}\) Eventually Reverend Healy proved so vital and effective in cultivating relationships with the local black communities and the newly formed Freedman’s Bureau that the AMA lent its support to him in establishing a college for African Americans.\(^{685}\)

All along higher education remained a deep interest to Healey and he worked tirelessly to help develop Straight University. Healy wanted to focus on education’s liberal culture of and not the increasingly prioritized industrial education model that developed through corporate philanthropy in other segments of the South.\(^{686}\) Remarking to AMA leadership in 1872, Healy confirmed, “[n]o system of education devised for the uplifting of a people is complete unless it provides colleges and professional schools.” He further suggested, “[e]specially is this true of any system designed for a race forming part of a nation possessed of such institutions. The American Missionary Association was called of God to lead in the great educational movement on behalf of Freedmen. It found them ignorant and helpless, being still excluded from the schools in the States in which they were living.\(^{687}\) As historian James Anderson contends, the AMA’s mission demanded permanent institutions of higher education that “could educate exceptional black youth to become leaders of their people.” Hence, missionary philanthropists

---

\(^{683}\) Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree*, 81.

\(^{684}\) J. W. Healy to “Dear Brethren,” Mar. 26, 1869, AMA Archives; and Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree*, 81.

\(^{685}\) Savitt, “Straight University Medical Department,” 179.


\(^{687}\) *Twenty-Sixth Annual Report of the American Missionary Association, 1872*, AMA Archives, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.
within this paradigm valued the higher education of black leaders over all forms of educational work and as a means to attain racial equality in civil and political life.  

Perhaps these social and educational changes were radical within the social order of the New South. Yet, in New Orleans, a city that had recently witnessed democracy-in-action through the 1868 state constitution, extending universal citizenship, black male suffrage, and integrated education, the proposition of developing a university for black and white students appeared as a natural and inevitable social consequence. Moreover, New Orleans as a democratic space represented the conditions of possibility to cultivate human culture and understanding. The myriad social and cultural dimensions within the city created a place/space that remained a uniquely Southern, cosmopolitan city—an intersection of human interaction and global influences. It was through this democratic possibility, then, that black higher education developed in this redefined social and political landscape of New Orleans. For Healy, the ability to develop higher education in New Orleans remained his top priority, and he recognized that he needed assistance beyond just the AMA organization. But who could Healy recruit to assist in developing a higher education institution?  

Seymour Straight appeared a logical choice to serve as the university’s benefactor. Healy met with Straight directly to discuss the need to further develop educational opportunities for the formerly enslaved and articulated his desire to have the AMA involved in this endeavor. Healy began a campaign to secure funding and support for a university in New Orleans, and he urged Seymour Straight to lend his time, advice, and money to advance the cause of education.  

Recognizing his philanthropy and generosity, and “acknowledgments of his liberal gifts and wise counsel”—notably financial donations and consistent support as vice president of the

---

689 J. W. Healy to Dear Brethren, Mar. 23, 1868, AMA Archives.
organization—AMA officials ultimately agreed with Healy’s suggestion to name the university after Seymour Straight.\textsuperscript{690} Reverend Healey also urged Seymour Straight to help develop strategic and valuable partnerships with local people of color, especially through his relationship with the \textit{Tribune}. Straight described his fundraising efforts to the AMA, suggesting “I am now circulating a subscription among the wealthy colored and Creole people asking aid in this generous undertaking to furnish the building instead of the materials for it.” Straight further elaborated, “I believe in their aid in paying for the work, and also their influence in favor of the institution which a liberal subscription would create, or secure.”\textsuperscript{691} Healy had also developed relationships with Afro-Creoles in the city, including Aristide Mary and Louis Charles Roudanez, but also with then-lieutenant governor Oscar Dunn. “I have talked with leading colored men in the city and among them Lieut. Gov. Dunn,” Healy said, “and they are ready to cooperate with us.”\textsuperscript{692}

Naming the institution proved much easier than actually building and developing the institution’s buildings and campus. Despite finding an “ideal location” for the campus in Faubourg Tremé, the correspondence between Mr. Straight, Reverend Healy, and AMA leadership depict a rather challenging and contentious process. Healy urged the AMA to consider his appeal to secure land and begin the campus-building process, particularly since he feared another denominational group would take advantage of the Freedmen’s Bureau donation of $12,000 for a building.\textsuperscript{693} Healy expressed this urgency to AMA leadership in a December 1868 letter, wherein he stated, “I am anxiously awaiting your reply. We have found an eligible lot of land that can be secured. It has a front of 100 ft and extends between two streets 150 ft.”

\textsuperscript{690} \textit{Straight University Catalogue}, 1881-1882, Dillard Archives; and \textit{History of the American Missionary Association}, 33; and Todd L. Savitt, “Straight University Medical Department,” 180.

\textsuperscript{691} Seymour Straight to Rev. George Whipple, Mar. 29, 1869, AMA Archives.

\textsuperscript{692} J. W. Healy to “Brethren,” Oct. 23, 1869, AMA Archives.

\textsuperscript{693} J. W. Healy to “Dear Brethren,” Dec. 14, 1868. AMA Archives.
Healy indicated that the entire lot cost $3,000 and that “Mr. Straight is my advisor, and he regards it ‘a complete bargain.’ It has a common front, is easily accessible, and is in the center of the Negro population.” Healy received no response. Not understanding the shared enthusiasm for building the university, Healy wrote to the AMA again in January 1869 to convey his frustration:

Your silence in regard to what I wrote you is to me inexplicable, unless my letters have failed to reach you. In your first letter, you gave me assurances that you would furnish teachers and an agreement that you would aid in the purchase of land on which to erect a building... This was a great consideration with me in leaving Chicago for New Orleans.

Without a response, by March 26, 1869 Healy unrelentingly appealed to the AMA, suggesting “[t]he Freedmen’s Bureau have buildings in some 25 active points in this state, which they would turn over to you, on condition that you would carry forward the educational work.” “This chance to secure buildings,” Healy said, “will soon have passed. Other denominations are at work.”

Both Straight and Healy felt New Orleans represented the logical space to develop a higher education institution for students of color, since “nothing had been done” to that point. At Healy’s urging, Straight also contacted AMA’s corresponding secretary, Reverend George Whipple, about the financing proposal for the institution’s campus and building, and reiterated that the Freedmen’s Bureau would furnish a building, a “Sabbath school,” and a church worth $12,000 if the AMA could raise additional funds to purchase the land. However, since the AMA had already funded a school in nearly every southern and border state, including Louisiana, with over 400 teachers and 30,000 students, the organization proceeded cautiously and responded slowly to both Healy and Straight’s numerous requests.

695 J. W. Healy to “Brethren,” Jan. 15, 1869, AMA Archives.
697 J. W. Healy to “Brethren,” Jan. 15, 1869, AMA Archives.
698 Seymour Straight to George Whipple, Dec 7, 1868, AMA Archives.
It is likely that the AMA’s hesitation was also a result of recently launching Talladega College in 1866 and later Fisk University in 1867. Since developing colleges and universities for people of color remained a long-term goal for the AMA, they recognized that capital, students with sufficient training, and an “able and sacrificing faculty,” would be required, as was the case at Talladega and Fisk respectively. The AMA argued that “[t]he right position of a college is sometimes, like that of an army corps, an assurance of victory. The institutions of the AMA in the South are finely placed, for although the locations were sometimes decided by apparently accidental circumstances, they are now seen to have been providential.” With the development of Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee and the rural-based Talladega College, situated among “groves of noble oaks” in Alabama, the AMA indeed understood the importance of New Orleans as the South’s largest city to “plant” a college, particularly given the prosperous Afro-Creole community.

The AMA eventually heeded Healy’s requests, and by mid-1869, they officially accepted the Freedmen’s Bureau donation of $12,000 to erect buildings and purchase furniture. The property value totaled $25,000. By June 1869 Healy secured the support of prominent Afro-Creoles, including Roudanez and Mary to serve on the executive committee and board of trustees. These men had filed the appropriate papers with the State of Louisiana incorporating a university for “the education and training of young men and women, irrespective of color or race.” Aristide Mary, who had been a faithful supporter of the Catholic Institute decades earlier, proved an able and passionate advocate for Straight as well. Thomy Lafon also donated

---

701 J. W. Healy to “Dear Brethren,” Mar. 26, 1869, AMA Archives; *American Missionary* 50, no. 4, 221; and Joe M. Richardson, *Christian Reconstruction*, 132.
702 J. W. Healy to “My Dear Brethren,” June 25, 1869, AMA Archives.
703 Savitt, “Straight University Medical Department,” 179.
money to the institution. Upon his death, he bequeathed approximately $6,000 to Straight, “the first considerable gift to any such institution.”

Reverend Healy drafted the Act of Incorporation in an egalitarian tone, for “the purposes of education and learning.” Unprecedented for a university in New Orleans at the time and reminiscent of the language in the 1868 state constitution, which established admission standards “without distinction of race, color, or previous condition,” Healy confirmed:

> the purposes of the Corporation are the education and training of young men and women, irrespective of color or race, and to that end, the Trustees shall have the rights to prescribe a course or courses of study and the power to confer all such degrees and honors, as are conferred by universities in the United States of America.

This mandate encapsulated the democratic ideal at Straight University in that it created a space “to meet an imperative necessity and furnish all who would enjoy its advantages (emphasis added).” The first university catalog in 1870 asserted that “the aims of the university must meet the approval, and its needs must enlist the co-operation of the liberal minded everywhere.” The university also remained open to all students irrespective of religious denomination, particularly relevant since the majority of the student population comprised Catholic Afro-Creoles. Thus although a Congregationalist organization, the AMA incorporated an inclusive education and curriculum that did not disparage students of the Catholic faith, which was common in other parts of the country in the late-nineteenth century.

---

704 American Missionary 50, no. 4, 1896, 220.
708 Ochs, Black Patriot and a White Priest, 252-253.
709 There is no evidence to suggest that students of the Jewish faith were not granted admission to Straight; however, the university did maintain requirement that students must “present testimonials of his Christian character” to be admitted to the Theological Department. See Straight University Catalogue, 1870-1871, Dillard Archives. Also, for a discussion on admission discrimination, exclusion, and the Protestant ethos at elite institutions (with generalizable findings for other parts of the United States), see Jerome Karabel, The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005).
The incorporation also devised the focus and intent of the board of trustees “to acquire and enjoy the rights, privileges, and powers of a body corporate . . . by virtue of the provisions of the Statute of the State of Louisiana.”710 Seymour Straight served as the institution’s first president of the board, with G. H. Fayerweather as secretary and Charles Clinton as treasurer.711 Unlike the boards at Leland University, New Orleans University, and ultimately Southern University, Straight University extended leadership opportunities to people of color, which included Lieutenant Governor Oscar J. Dunn, Reverend John Turner, and John Clay, as well as Afro-Creoles Fabious Dunn, Aristide Mary, and Francis Dumas. Subcommittee leadership roles were given to Louis Charles Roudanez and L. T. Delassize, a prominent Afro-Creole and city auditor.712

The campus itself was located on the corner of Esplanade Avenue and North Derbigny Street in Faubourg Tremé, “in a pleasant and healthful part of the city.” One observer remarked, “the university buildings . . . are retired from the din of business, and at the same time are easily accessible from all parts of the city by means of the different lines of street railway.”713 Seymour Straight later described the campus setting to Reverend George Whipple, noting that “[o]ur lot is on Esplanade which is an old double street car route under two rows of large shade trees on the neutral ground, a carriage way on each side, corner Derbigny Street and only one square (nearly enough) from Claiborne Street which is still wider, having four rows of large shade trees.” Straight went on to say that “[t]he State Fair Grounds are about a square or more away beyond or further out toward the lake. Our location is some 12 squares below Canal Street.”714

711 J. W. Healy, “Act of Incorporation.”
713 Straight University Catalogue, 1870-1871, 44, Dillard Archives.
714 Seymour Straight to Rev. George Whipple, Mar. 29, 1869, AMA Archives.
American Missionary elaborated further that “[t]his institution is located in a quiet and beautiful part of the city, fronting on a shady street, which resembles the boulevards of Paris (see Figure 7.2).”

The main campus building was completed in 1870; and although the Normal Department held classes in the Central Congregational Church on Liberty Street in the interim, the university officially opened its doors after construction that February. One observer noted that the building was large and “well adapted to the educational purposes for which it was erected.” The American Missionary further remarked, “[t]here is a basement story, about ten feet high, which is used for the primary department, and for other purposes. The main entrance is attained by a

---

715 American Missionary, 1870, AMA Archives.
717 American Missionary, 1870, AMA Archives.
flight of broad stairs, leading to a vestibule, on each side of which are rooms appropriated to the directory of the institution, and at the further end, opposite the main door, is the entrance to the chapel.” 718 As the central focus of the university campus:

The chapel, which we estimate will hold about twelve hundred people, is admirably arranged for the accommodation of the congregation which crowds it on Sunday, while all its belongings and ornaments are in excellent taste. It contains a fine-toned melodeon of the largest size. The galleries, ranging on both sides of the room, are well adapted for sight and hearing; and the tout ensemble of the chapel will, for good taste and perfect adaptedness [sic], compare with any structure for similar size and purposes in the city. 719

The building’s upper story contained several “large and airy class-rooms, completely and appropriately fitted up with proper school furniture.” The library, “which already contain[ed] a goodly number of volumes... is receiving constant additions.” 720

Before classes officially began at the Esplanade Avenue campus, the AMA, the Freedmen’s Bureau, and the free people of color community held a ceremony to celebrate the new university. On behalf of Major O. O. Howard, Commissioner of the Freedmen’s Bureau, Colonel E. W. Mason spoke admirably of Straight University and articulated the need for higher education for all students, suggesting, “New Orleans, the commercial metropolis of the South-west [sic], seemed especially to demand a school of higher learning.” Mason further explained, “for one-half of its population is of African descent, thousands of whom, free born, are persons of wealth and culture. To meet this necessity, in the spring of 1869 a few gentlemen conceived the plan of planting this University.” Mason officially transferred the building ownership from the federal government to the AMA, and added, “I... transfer to you, for the American Missionary Association, this beautiful and well arranged University, and may its present prosperity be put a prophecy of its future, and may you long be spared to see, respecting it, your

718 American Missionary, 1870, AMA Archives.
719 American Missionary, 1870, AMA Archives.
720 American Missionary, 1870, AMA Archives.
most sanguine hopes realized.”⁷²¹ Reverend Healy, who became the president of the university, humbly accepted the ownership transfer of the building, signifying, “I accept it with the sincere and profound conviction that the educational design of the Government, in the erection and transfer, will be faithfully and sacredly carried out.” Healy further claimed, “[w]hat we have done the past year is a pledge of what we purpose to do in yet greater measure.”⁷²² It was at that point on that cool February morning in 1870 that Straight University officially began its life as an integrated higher education institution in Reconstruction New Orleans.

During the 1870-1871 academic year, Straight maintained an enrollment of 1,054 students, of which 656 were males and 398 were females.⁷²³ Students attended Straight University from various towns and parishes in Louisiana, from Shreveport, Alexandria, Lafayette, Terrebonne, and Houma; others arrived from much greater distances: Joseph Gistain, a student in elementary department, recently arrived from Havana, Cuba; Joseph Mangin travelled from Brooklyn, New York to attend the law department; and Theodore Wild Lott attended the normal department, a recent arrival from Cleveland, Ohio.⁷²⁴ Students from Chicago, Philadelphia, and Louisville, Kentucky made their way to Straight University in 1870 as well.⁷²⁵ However, the majority of students—approximately three quarters of the student population—hailed from the various networks of people, neighborhoods, and close-knit communities within Faubourg Tremé and Faubourg Marigny, as well as other New Orleans neighborhoods downriver, including the Bywater and New Marigny, close to Lake Pontchartrain.⁷²⁶ In describing the student population at Straight, one observer noted:

⁷²¹ American Missionary, 1870, AMA Archives.
⁷²² American Missionary, 1870, AMA Archives.
⁷²³ Straight University Catalogue, 1870-1871, Dillard Archives.
⁷²⁴ Straight University Catalogue, 1870-1871, Dillard Archives.
⁷²⁵ Straight University Catalogue, 1870-1871, Dillard Archives.
⁷²⁶ Thompson, Exiles at Home, 131-132.
It includes the genuine African, the mulatto, the quadroon, the octaroon, and yet other shades and grades; and in this mingling of races we see, also, the diffusion of intelligence, and a corresponding increase in the capacity of culture and development. It would require the quick eye of an “expert” to detect, in the fair complexion and delicate features of many who throng our churches and schools, the faintest trace of African descent. Without speculating upon the cause, certain it is that we find among the colored people of the Crescent City a quickness of intelligence, and a capacity for the best culture and the noblest development, and withal a thirst for knowledge, which is worthy of our best sympathy and most generous benevolence. 727

In order to attract these students, particularly those who travelled great distances to attend the institution, Dr. Healey sought funding from the Freedman’s Bureau to secure dormitory space. He soon discovered, however, that the Bureau “preferred to give for scholarships” which left Healey with limited options, one of which required him to seek funding directly from the AMA in New York. To “make the institution accessible to some of the most worthy,” Healey even considered renting a house on Esplanade Avenue that could be adapted for dormitory purposes, noting, “[a] great want of the institution has been a boarding-house to accommodate students from places remote from the city.” 728 According to Healy, parents were reluctant to send their daughters from the country without some “provision for their board where they could have supervision from a teacher, when not in the school-room.” Male students who could not find suitable room and board at rates “they could afford to pay,” found rooms in various locations in Tremé and the View Carré.

The lack of student housing remained a significant concern for President Healy, since “the efficiency of the school and particularly its moral and religious influence have [sic] been impaired by the dissipating or distracting associations [of student housing] out of school-hours.” 729 The university eventually constructed a dormitory at the Esplanade Avenue campus and developed additional living space when the institution relocated to Canal Street after 1877.

727 Thirtieth Annual Report of the American Missionary Association, 1876, AMA Archives.
728 Twenty-Sixth Annual Report of the American Missionary Association, 1872, AMA Archives.
729 Twenty-Sixth Annual Report of the American Missionary Association, 1872, AMA Archives.
In particular, two dormitories flanked the main administration building at the new campus. Stone Hall housed girls and women teachers at Straight and represented “a fine monument to the considerate generosity of Mrs. Valeria G. Stone,” of Malden, Massachusetts. Stone donated $25,000 in 1880 to erect the girls’ dormitory, and according to the AMA, “by precept and example, [it] is an impressive object lesson to the student of what constitutes the ideal Christian home.”\textsuperscript{730} Whiten Hall was a home for boys and several of the male teachers at the university. Seymour Straight and John C. Whitten of Massachusetts paid for the construction of the building and its furnishings.\textsuperscript{731}

Despite this generosity, throughout Straight University’s existence, financial needs remained a pressing concern, even for such things as bedding, tableware, and clothing for disadvantaged students. Accordingly, the university continued to fundraise through bequests and donations, since tuition alone did not adequately finance the enterprise. One Straight leader remarked: “The charges for board and tuition do not cover one-half of the actual cost of running the institution. The aim of Straight University is to make it possible for students of small means to secure a good education.”\textsuperscript{732} By 1894, students paid $1.75 per month in tuition and another $11 per month in boarding fees, which included “room, fuel, electric lights and plain washing.”\textsuperscript{733} To alleviate some of the costs, the university required all boarding students to work one hour each day in various capacities. Students who could not pay the full tuition and fees could arrange with the university president to reduce their expenses by doing “extra work . . . faithfully done and at such times and places as the person in charge may direct.”\textsuperscript{734}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{730} Straight University Catalogue, 1917-1918, 14-15, Dillard Archives. \\
\textsuperscript{731} Straight University Catalogue, 1917-1918, 16, Dillard Archives. \\
\textsuperscript{732} Straight University Catalogue, 1894-1895, 47, Dillard Archives. \\
\textsuperscript{733} Straight University Catalogue, 1917-1918, 14-15, Dillard Archives. \\
\textsuperscript{734} Straight University Catalogue, 1917-1918, 14-15, Dillard Archives.
\end{flushright}
The university administration also articulated other pressing needs, such as money for scholarships and professorships:

The people have reached a stage in their intellectual development when they need and demand higher education. But there are two serious obstacles with which just now we have to contend, the poverty of the students, and lack of means to secure the requisite number of professors. We trust that kind friends, who have the means, will come to our aid in these respects. In most cases, fifty dollars will carry a student through the year with what he can do himself, and surely there can be no better investment than putting this amount into the education of promising boys or girls.\textsuperscript{735}

These university leaders also appealed to donors to furnish books for the university library and newspapers and periodicals for the reading room. One official noted, “The importance of a good library in a school like ours, in creating a taste for good literature and in thus furnishing a safeguard against temptation, cannot be too strongly emphasized.”\textsuperscript{736} This immediate need reinforced the university’s commitment to education whereby “students may pass through the prescribed course of study without acquiring a love of reading unless they have access to good books and are directed properly in their selection.”\textsuperscript{737}

\textbf{Furnishing an Education: Academics at Straight University}

Although Straight University promoted a democratic ideal of education and proposed a campaign for integrated education, it developed as an institution of higher education at a reasonable and responsible pace.\textsuperscript{738} As Reverend Healy suggested in the Straight University “Act of Incorporation,” “the purposes of the Corporation are the education and training of young men and women, irrespective of color or race, and to that end the Trustees shall have the right to prescribe a course of study, and the power to confer all such degrees and honors, as are conferred

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{735} Straight University Catalogue, 1883-1884, 49, Dillard Archives.
\bibitem{736} Straight University Catalogue, 1880-1881, 49, Dillard Archives.
\bibitem{737} Straight University Catalogue, 1883-1884, 49, Dillard Archives.
\bibitem{738} Richardson, \textit{Christian Reconstruction}, 123-124.
\end{thebibliography}
by Universities in the United States of America.”739 The university established a collegiate department in 1870, designed to “furnish such disciplinary training as necessary to prepare the student to enter upon the more advanced studies of the learned Professions [sic];” however, the first college-level students did not arrive until 1873.

The proposed curriculum and the admission process proved competitive from the outset. Candidates for admission “will be examined in Geography (ancient and modern); Arithmetic; English, Latin, and Greek, Grammar; Caesar’s Commentaries; Cicero’s Select Orations; Homer’s Iliad; or other authors equivalent in quantity.”740 As one observer noted in describing the instruction, “Two classes in Latin . . . recited, a class of beginners and a class advanced. Rarely have we witnessed more promptness of proficiency,” he said, “considering the ages and opportunities enjoyed.”741 The examinations in the higher studies that have been pursued in this institution abundantly vindicate the ability of the colored people to become scholars.”742

One of five professors in the collegiate department, Claude Paschal Maistre held a professorship in modern languages and literature. The white, French-born Maistre became increasingly involved with Afro-Creoles during the Civil War and embraced their protest tradition, particularly in celebrating the Catholic faith without the politically contrived racism of pro-Confederate clergy.743 As historian Stephen Ochs claims, with Maistre as part of the Straight faculty, the university represented a “haven” for refugees from Catholic authoritarianism and racial neglect. Despite the university’s Congregationalist persuasion, the AMA did foster opportunities for students to practice their Catholic faith:

---

739 According to Rev. Healy’s correspondence, he drafted the language and details of the Act of Incorporation. For more, see the Straight University, Act of Incorporation, June 25, 1869, AMA Archives.
740 Straight University Catalogue, 1870-1871, Dillard Archives.
741 Twenty-Sixth Annual Report of the American Missionary Association, 1872, AMA Archives.
742 American Missionary, 1870, AMA Archives.
743 Ochs, Black Patriot and a White Priest, 252-253.
The fact that the majority of the pupils have hitherto belonged to the Roman Catholic families gives it peculiar importance in a missionary view. In connection with the Central Church, the basement of which may be used, when necessary, for the theological department, the institution offers to the colored youth of the south-west the advantages of a liberal education, under right moral and religious influences. 744

The collegiate curriculum included Greek, Latin, French, Rhetoric, Mental Philosophy, Political Economy, Logic, Physics, Chemistry, and Zoology, among others.745

Straight University had high ideals of intellectual character and development through its other collegiate education offerings, notably law, medicine, and theology. In maintaining its integrated focus, by 1878 eight of the ten law school graduates were white, and the first graduate of the medical school was a white alumnus of Queens College in Dublin.746 According to the AMA’s Thirty-Second Annual Report in 1878:

The law department of the University presents such excellent advantages, that many of our young men, not colored, have availed themselves of the opportunity and privilege of attending its lectures, and eight young men graduated from the law class at the last term, and have been admitted to practice at the bar of the State courts.747

The law department will be chronicled in more detail in Chapter 8 to elucidate the role of legal education in Afro-Creole protest, yet it is worth nothing that by 1882, of the fifty total graduates from the law department over a nine-year period, thirty five were white students and fifteen were students of color. One observer noted “[s]ide by side the two races have been gathered in the lecture rooms of the professors, and have met in the crucial test of the final examination.”748

Similar to law, the medical department held high hopes for success during Straight University’s initial founding. It followed a rather circuitous and contentious path, though, that stalled its implementation and ultimately contributed to its demise. Despite incorporating the

744 Twenty-Sixth Annual Report of the American Missionary Association, 1872, AMA Archives.  
745 Twenty-Sixth Annual Report of the American Missionary Association, 1872, AMA Archives.  
746 Blassingame, Black New Orleans, 125-126.  
748 History of the American Missionary Association, 34, AMA Archives.
department in 1870, acquiring requisite facilities and equipment proved a major issue in making the department a reality. The 1870-1871 university catalog officially listed the department, however it indicated that “[l]ectures will commence as soon as buildings and cabinets have been secured.” Establishing a sound medical school required more capital funding that Seymour Straight and the AMA could raise at the time. The university founders need to prioritize financing for other pressing concerns, such as classrooms, dormitories, and faculty salaries. Even by 1870, Mr. Straight expressed doubts in physically situating a medical school on Straight University’s campus: “I see not how we could use 50 feet wide in a block (as I believe that is) for a medical college. 80 [feet] being needed to give room light, and ventilation. A corner lot 60 feet wide would do well.”

Despite these obstacles, Healy remained interested in opening a medical department and urged the university board of trustees to apply to the state legislature for financial assistance during the 1870 legislative session. According to historian Todd Savitt, sympathetic legislators cooperated and proposed an act with several sections relating to establishing a medical school in New Orleans. Afro-Creole state legislators Caesar Antoine and Robert Isabelle guided the legislation which ultimately supported a one-time $35,000 appropriation to establish a medical college. Ultimately introduced as Bill 226 (“An Act to aid the Medical Department at Straight University),” Governor Henry Clay Warmouth vetoed the measure and Healy, Straight, and the AMA had to rely on private funds instead. Fortunately, by 1871 the AMA acquired land in New Orleans valued at $20,000 specifically earmarked for the care of

749 Seymour Straight to Rev. George Whipple, June 2, 1870, AMA Archives.
750 Savitt, “Straight University Medical Department,” 183.
751 Savitt, “Straight University Medical Department,” 183.
indigent freedpeople. Essentially an outpatient clinic, this dispensary became the Hathaway House of New Orleans, mentioned earlier, and provided a facility in which to develop the medical department and provide services to the community.

Healy and the board of trustees hired James T. Newman, a twenty-six year old African American physician from New Orleans, practicing medicine in Chicago at the time, to staff the dispensary at a salary of $1,000 per year. Described as a “bold and skillful surgeon, a sound practitioner and a polished gentleman,” Newman appeared able and ready to lead the medical department at Straight. In his official capacity, Newman served as a professor and dean of the medical department, and he had a total of ten students enrolled, all were male and some were white. Classroom exercises commenced in October 1873 and the department represented “a new college devoted to the interests of medicine and surgery.” Yet, sustaining student enrollment and hiring faculty proved another matter: financial woes contributed to the slow start, which consequently affected the ability to attract and retain faculty and student talent. In fact, Dr. Newman received little to no salary during this time which prevented him from purchasing books and supplies for which he admitted “are absolutely necessary in the prosecution of the work on which I am engaged.”

Unlike other academic programs at Straight University that needed only a classroom, books, and an instructor, for example, the medical department required significant investment capital to fund laboratories and medical equipment. Despite the countless requests, for which

---

753 After Governor Warmoth’s veto, Straight University’s board of trustees filed suit for the funds through the state court system. The Louisiana Supreme Court ruled in 1873 that since the university was a private corporation, the medical department was ineligible for state funding. See Todd L. Savitt, “Straight University Medical Department,” 185-192; Blassingame, Black New Orleans, 1860-1880, 125; and Fleming, Louisiana State University, 192-200.
754 Fleming, Louisiana State University, 192-200.
Newman proved an eager and persistent fundraiser, the money never materialized. Newman’s unrelenting campaign to raise money also coincided with a distressed economy in New Orleans, a consequence of the national financial crisis in 1873 that sent Wall Street and global markets into a panic, and the country into a long economic depression. The crisis affected the university’s ability to pay for the medical department as well as its other operational and academic responsibilities. In the end, the medical department only graduated two students in 1873, James Patrick Hays, a white master of pharmacy graduate, and Leon Dewitt Stocking, who received a bachelor of medicine degree. Despite Dean Newman’s best efforts, the medical department closed soon thereafter in 1875. Newman remained an active supporter of medical education in the city. Along with Dr. Louis Charles Roudanez, Newman later became a professor at the New Orleans University in 1878. Yet, similarly, the medical department at New Orleans University closed due to financial reasons and did not reopen until 1889 as a new organization under new leadership.

The theology department fared somewhat better than the medical department at Straight University (see Figure 7.5). The department aimed to “train men to be ministers of the Gospel . . . and to cultivate earnest piety, sound scholarship, and right habits of thought and expression.” President Healy served as a professor and recruited Reverend Charles H. Thompson, a black minister and Oberlin College graduate, to help in the teaching duties and lead the department. Unlike the two-year curriculum through the law department, the theology degree program required three years of consistent study which led to a bachelor of divinity degree. The Holy

---

760 American Missionary 17, 1873, AMA Archives; Cominey, “A History of Straight College,” 117; and Savitt, “Straight University Medical Department,” 191.
761 Ward, Black Physicians in the Jim Crow South, 11.
762 Straight University Catalogue, 1870-1871, Dillard Archives.
Scriptures remained the principle focus of the curriculum. Students also studied rhetoric, biblical and systematic theology, church history, and homiletics and pastoral theology during their matriculation. To be admitted, a student had to present “testimonials of his Christian character,” regardless of denomination, and demonstrate his personal piety and “their object in pursuing theological studies.”

The department enrolled thirteen theology students during the 1870-1871 academic year and eventually graduated six students between 1870 and 1890. Many students had already become pastors and pursued the baccalaureate in divinity to enhance their spiritual understanding and ability to write and speak effectively; others, “owing to limitations of poverty” pursued their studies in theology in conjunction with their normal or college courses. The variability in enrollment patterns extended the matriculation period for most students; furthermore, since the

---

763 Straight University Catalogue, 1870-1871, Dillard Archives.
764 Straight University Catalogue, 1870-1871, Dillard Archives.
765 “Theological Department Students,” Photograph (undated), Courtesy of Dillard Archives.
766 Henderson, “Straight University, Theology Department,” pamphlet on Straight University, in George Longe Papers, 1849-1971, Box 3, Folder 6, AMA Archives.
department mandated that “no charges will be made for instruction,” Thompson and Healy had difficulty in funding its operations. The theological department mainly relied on private donations and AMA funding throughout its existence, and even what little capital the AMA extended to the department, the normal and college departments received more attention (see Figure 7.5).

Much like medical training at Straight University, waning financial support for the theology department proved its undoing, whereupon it closed its doors in 1905. Despite its short existence at the university, one observer noted, “[i]t is safe to say that no other equal number of young men in any other profession or with any other training has accomplished so much good as these young men you received their education for the ministry in our department of theology.”

The department’s legacy held equal admiration. Reverend Healy envisioned educating ministers as one of the fundamental aims of Straight University, and during a thirty-five year period, the department’s influence was felt throughout Louisiana:

The influence of this department upon the Congregational churches in this State has been marked and salutary. Nearly all the present ministers received their training in this and the other departments of the University. The churches of which they are pastors are like cities set on a hill. They have become centers of life, around which the moral and social elements have organized themselves into order and beauty.

Notwithstanding the important focus on collegiate-level instruction as Straight University, to be sure, the institution mainly provided opportunities for students to learn basic arithmetic and acquire a “thorough English education” during its initial years of operation.

The majority of students enrolled in the university during its first few years matriculate in the

---

767 Straight University Catalogue, 1870-1871, Dillard Archives.
769 Henderson, “Straight University, Theology Department,” pamphlet on Straight University, in George Longe Papers, 1849-1971, Box 3, Folder 6, AMA Archives.
770 Henderson, “Straight University, Theology Department.”
771 Straight University Catalogue, 1870-1871, Dillard Archives.
elementary and “academical” (secondary grades) departments. The elementary department sought to “furnish instruction to that large class who have but little knowledge of the rudiments of English education.” Straight University served a vital need for elementary instruction in New Orleans, particularly at a time when Louisiana did not have the infrastructure necessary for a viable black public school system.\(^7\)\(^7\)\(^2\) The elementary department thus maintained a large cross-section of students, as one observer noted, “[m]any of these are adults, and some have a fair education in their native languages. This class is instructed in Day and Night Schools, and is an interesting feature of the University.”\(^7\)\(^7\)\(^3\)

The “academical” department, on the other hand, was fundamentally designed to “prepare students for college” during a three-year matriculation period.\(^7\)\(^7\)\(^4\) During the first two years, students studied varied disciplines, including English, Latin, Geography and Map-Drawing, and Mental and Written Arithmetic; other courses included Physiology and Botany, as well as Composition, Grammar, and Vocal Music. The final year focused on an enhanced understanding of English and Latin, with a particular focus on Virgil, Cicero, and Homer’s Iliad.\(^7\)\(^7\)\(^5\) In order to be admitted, students had to demonstrate an understanding of fractions and arithmetic, for example, as well as other “branches of common school education.”

While the elementary and academical departments offered a rigorous education for younger and less experienced students, the university also offered a robust curriculum through its normal department, devised to educate future teachers (see Figure 7.6). Since the establishment of a public school system in the South represented a pressing need after the beginning of Reconstruction, and educating the formerly enslaved remained a primary goal of the AMA,

\(^7\)\(^7\)\(^2\) Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South*, 110.
\(^7\)\(^7\)\(^3\) Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South*, 110.
\(^7\)\(^7\)\(^4\) Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South*, 110.
\(^7\)\(^7\)\(^5\) *Straight University Catalogue, 1875-1876*, Dillard Archives.
accordingly, preparing future teachers remained an important initiative for Straight University upon its founding. The curriculum mirrored much of the academical department, but also included Philosophy and School Laws during the three-year matriculation period. However, unlike the other departments at Straight, it provided a teacher training methodology to help prepare students to teach in public and private schools in Louisiana and throughout the country. This included a practicum approach in which Straight student teachers assisted other teachers at the university as well as in schools throughout the city.\textsuperscript{776}

![Faculty and Students of Straight University, 1896.](image)

Figure 7.4 Faculty and Students of Straight University, 1896.\textsuperscript{777}

The Peabody Education Fund provided financial support during the 1870-1871 academic year, which witnessed a total enrollment of sixty-nine students that year.\textsuperscript{778} The fund, named after its namesake George Peabody, a white, northern philanthropist, provided financial capital for black education in the South to reconcile the perceived shortage of black teachers. As

\begin{flushright}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{776} Oliver B. Loud, “Straight University of New Orleans: It’s Influence in Louisiana,” Dillard Archives.
\item \textsuperscript{777} Photograph of Straight University faculty and students. Courtesy of the Will W. Alexander Library, Special Collections, Dillard University, New Orleans, LA.
\item \textsuperscript{778} Straight University Catalogue, 1870-1871, Dillard Archives
\end{itemize}
\end{flushright}
Anderson contends, northern philanthropy coincided with the normal school movement in a struggle to shape “the ideological content of schooling for black masses.”

Straight University remained front-and-center in this struggle, particularly since it received $500 from the Peabody Fund during the department’s initial development, but also when it later redefined its curriculum to represent an industrial educational model that shaped black higher education in the early-twentieth century. Students attended the normal department from across the state, with most students from New Orleans. By 1875 Straight graduated its first normal class, which included four women in its ranks. Upon successful completion, students received a “teachers diploma,” for which they could enter the profession or continue to the collegiate department in the university.

The university also offered night classes in business, bookkeeping, and accounting “to furnish opportunities for a thorough business education, to students who look forward to some business employment.” For a time, the university also operated a free infirmary for the “poor and friendless” in conjunction with the medical department and the Hathaway House of New Orleans, and it held public services in the chapel every Sunday morning and evening where “no distinction of race or condition is made.” Prominent black leaders in New Orleans, such as P.B.S. Pinchback and J. Stella Martin, also gave lectures at the university between 1871 and 1872. The *Louisianan* described these lectures as “intelligent preaching and interesting

---

780 J. W. Healy, Statement of Donations to Straight University, 1870-1871, AMA Archives.
782 *Straight University Catalogue*, 1870-1871, Dillard Archives.
783 *Weekly Louisiana*, Mar. 16, 1871. Mrs. Seymour Straight became a passionate exponent of this cause.
784 *Weekly Louisiana*, Jan 12, 1871; and Richardson, “The American Missionary Association and Black Education in Louisiana,” 211.
“discussion” which helped to promote the university as “a center of influence and reflector of intelligence among us.”

The first seven years of the university’s operation showed much promise in redefining the educational landscape for people of color in Reconstruction New Orleans. For the first time in New Orleans, students gained access to the higher education enterprise and could pursue courses without fear or consequence. Students learned together, side by side, in the elementary, “academical,” and normal departments, while others pursued a collegiate-level curriculum in law, medicine, and theology. Yet, despite these triumphs and a demonstrative effort to educate all students regardless of race, gender, or ethnicity, the university navigated the unsettling environment of racial disdain and hatred in the New South. For example, although the university officially opened its doors in February 1870 and held a grand commemoration with many eloquent exponents praising its virtue and democratic ethos, many in the city never realized that Straight even existed. According to an article in the rigidly conservative *Morning Star and Catholic Messenger* proclaimed:

Straight Missionary University, at New Orleans, shows by its catalogue [sic] a total of 874 students, ‘five-sixths of whom are from Catholic families of the creole population.’ Here’s news! There are thousands in this city who never heard of Straight University, and as to the ‘five-sixths from Catholic families of the creole population,’ we can only say, he must mean those of the African persuasion.

Despite representing the official journal of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, and the first Catholic English newspaper in New Orleans, the editors of the *Morning Star and Catholic Messenger*

---

785 J. Stella Martin also offered free “Christmas Day” lectures and Pinchback offered a lecture series on “legislative corruption” in the Louisiana legislature. See *Weekly Louisianan*, May 28, 1871, October 26, 1872.
Messenger refused to endorse what they called “Northern Policy” and vehemently opposed racial integration.\textsuperscript{787}

That the university began at a time of continued racial hostility is without question, despite its commitment to moral and democratic education. Within the city, and across much of the South, a white supremacist countermovement existed during Reconstruction that attempted to undermine efforts of black male suffrage, citizenship, and integrated education through irrational acts of contempt and violence. The Republican-led state government and white-Democratic opposition had divided the state into two sullen, bitter camps of racial and political hatred.\textsuperscript{788} As historian Eric Foner further contemplates, the very pervasiveness of violence during Reconstruction is an indication of the high stakes involved in fighting for democracy and equality.\textsuperscript{789} Straight University’s incorporation as an integrated institution and its dedication to delivering a sound education for all students, black and white, male and female, and old and young, illustrates clearly these “high stakes” in New Orleans. Indeed the educational process at the university itself sought to redefine the character and future direction of postbellum New Orleans by 1870, high stakes that were worth fighting for.

A New Campus Emerges

By 1877 the biracial experiment of Reconstruction in Louisiana waned and white supremacy and conservative Democrats redefined the social and political landscape in New Orleans. Unable to “transform and unrepentant and hostile South,” the North turned its attention to national reconciliation and economic expansion, and the plight of southern blacks remained a

\textsuperscript{787} “About the New Orleans Morning Star and Catholic Messenger,” Hill Memorial Library, Special Collections, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA, undated.
Reconstruction ended and the white-rulled South fortified a new political and social system based upon disenfranchisement and racial segregation; and it seems Straight’s fortunes remained inextricably linked to this demise when a fire destroyed the main campus building and library on February 16, 1877. One professor noted, “the flames were kindled, and in one brief hour,” he said, “the doomed building fell in hopeless ruins.” Straight University President James Adams, in much despair, remarked on the good work of the institution and need to rebuild:

I was never so satisfied with the school as on the morning before the fire. A couple of teachers from Tougaloo were present, and naturally our thoughts turned to the condition of the school . . . it grieves me that none of you saw the school as it was that day. It grieves me, too, that you did not see the change made upon the buildings, the beautiful chapel made out of formerly useless galleries, and the room for 50 boys, where before there was little more than empty space. But it is gone now.

The fire department and campus leaders could not conclusively determine the cause of the fire, but one observer suggested, “[t]he room where the fire started was unoccupied for school purposes, so that there was no possibility of the fire originating there from natural causes.” Given the increasing racial hostility by 1877 in New Orleans Despite the grim spectacle, according to some reports, the university only lost “but one day and then went right on with the work,” quickly establishing a temporary location in the Central Congregational Church on Liberty Street in the uptown neighborhood of New Orleans.

---

790 Bell, Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana, 279.
791 Bell, Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana, 279.
795 Thirty-First Annual Report of the American Missionary Association, 69, AMA Archives. There is no evidence to confirm the fire’s origin, either accidental or intentional. Much of the research on this issue, though extant and hard to locate, suggests that arson was a likely result.
The AMA expressed its steadfast support to continue the enterprise, suggesting that “the general feeling in this city, among the friends of the institution, and especially representative of colored men, is that Straight University must be speedily rebuilt.” One observer noted that the demand for such an institution “was never more urgent and intelligent than now,” further suggesting that, “I shall be greatly disappointed if the colored people of New Orleans and the State at large do not respond to the appeal for a new building, generously and heartily, and to the extent of their ability.” Perhaps President Adams summarized the general feeling after the fire when he confirmed: “[a]ll that was built in mind, heart and conscience still remains. All the prestige and the fame, all the old love and all the new hopes still live to bring back the students to the new building which I feel must rise before another winter.”

The AMA found additional dorm space for their students immediately after the fire. According to President Adams, “[m]ost of the boys are comfortably quartered in a large two-story building, which I rented for about $35 a month.” Despite holding insurance for campus buildings in the amount of $20,000, at the end of 1877 the university retained 223 students taught by a handful of teachers, with only fourteen students in theology, eight students in the law department, and only two hundred or so books available for instruction. But by mid-1877, the AMA purchased a new site on Canal Street, “the most beautiful avenue in New Orleans.” The lot was larger than the Esplanade Avenue campus, and with it brought a new beginning for the university. Using the insurance funds from the destroyed building to purchase the land, the

797 The support extended beyond New Orleans as well. For example, noted author and scholar, William Cullen Bryant, wrote to a friend at the university to convey his grief and support: “I was very sorry to hear of what happened to your institution, and rejoice to hear that those who are engaged in carrying on are not discourage, but mean to preserve in their good work. May the blessing of God be on your benevolent undertaking.” See American Missionary 21, Oct. 1877, AMA Archives; and Thirty-First Annual Report of the American Missionary Association, 69, AMA Archives.
798 American Missionary 21 Oct. 1877, AMA Archives.
800 History of the American Missionary Association, 33, AMA Archives.
AMA erected a new two-story campus building (see Figure 7.7). Private donations helped fund the construction of the boys and girls dormitory buildings, as described earlier.

Figure 7.5 Straight University, Canal Street Campus, 1892

In the End, A Merger

By 1915, at a regular meeting of the board of trustees, Straight University changed its name to Straight College at the request of the American Missionary Association. The institution had developed along the lines of a normal and secondary school during the first two decades of the twentieth century, with college enrollment dropping to less than 10 students. Unable to raise a consistent level of financial support to maintain and further develop the institution also foretold trouble ahead. This emerged as part of a growing trend for black higher education in the South: missionary societies and local black communities could not generate the large capital expenditures required to effectively support these enterprises, which forced Straight University to rely on financial and operational support from industrial philanthropists.

801 History of the American Missionary Association, 33, AMA Archives.
802 Photo of Straight University. Courtesy of Dillard Archives.
803 Straight College Catalogue, 1917-1918, Dillard Archives.
These industrial philanthropic foundations cooperated on behalf of the Hampton-Tuskegee program of black industrial training and redefined the particular scope and intent of black education. Such organizations as the General Education Board, Anna T. Jeanes Foundation, Phelps-Stokes Fund, the Slater Fund, and the Julius Rosenwald Fund, used their wealth, prestige, and influence to renegotiate the ideological foundations of black education in a regional southern political economy.\footnote{See Anderson, \textit{Education of Blacks in the South}, 247-248; Watkins, \textit{The White Architects of Black Education: Ideology and Power in America, 1865-1954} (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2001); Adam Fairclough, \textit{Teaching Equality: Black Schools in the age of Jim Crow} (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 32-35; and Judith Sealander, \textit{Private Wealth and Public Life: Foundation Philanthropy and the Reshaping of American Social Policy from the Progressive Era to the New Deal} (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).} Tellingly, the AMA and black educators in New Orleans met this forced financial relationship with worry, since the increasing focus on industrial education countered the university’s original mission for a classical liberal education. Anderson confirms this tension between financial solvency the long-standing ideal for a liberal culture in black higher education from a national vantage point:

This mission was contradicted by the wonderful material improvements in endowments, physical plants, and faculty salaries because the industrial philanthropists who provided these gifts pressed continuously for the spontaneous loyalty of the college-bred Negro. As black colleges became increasingly dependent on donations from northern industrial philanthropists, the missionaries and black educators found it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to accept philanthropic gifts and assert simultaneously that many of the political and economic aims of the philanthropists were at variance with the fundamental interests of the black masses.\footnote{Anderson, \textit{The Education of Blacks in the South}, 276.}

Commenting on the state of black higher education in New Orleans in 1913, W. T. B. Williams, a field director of the Slater Fund, condemned the “unfortunate amount of duplication in negro educational efforts.” Williams suggested that one institution alone could better incorporate the mission and delivery of higher education, suggesting that “[i]t is highly desirable . . . to reduce the number of schools offering college courses.”\footnote{W. T. B. Williams, \textit{Report on Negro Universities in the South} (New York, NY: Trustees of the John P. Slater Fund, Occasional Papers, No. 13, 1913).} A subsequent report by Arthur
Klein in 1928 concluded that Straight University could “meet the ordinary standard four-year college” requirement if it expanded its library, hired additional faculty to teach in the collegiate department, and secured laboratory space and equipment.\(^{807}\) However, Klein also proposed that “in view of the rapid development of the business section of the city in the direction of the college, plans be laid to secure a more adequate site for the relocation of the college.”\(^{808}\) This encouraging survey of the university prompted the Executive Committee of the American Missionary Association to purchase ten acres of land fronting Gentilly Road, ten miles away from its present Canal Street location, as a possible site for relocation.\(^{809}\)

Yet all along the mantra for consolidating black higher education in New Orleans intensified. Well aware of these expectations and consequences, by June 1928 the AMA Executive Committee began to explore possibilities of a merger with another college or university.\(^{810}\) In December of the same year, the executive committee confirmed:

[T]he American Missionary Association looks with favor upon the possible merger of Straight College and New Orleans University in the interest of securing a single, high grade, standard university for Negroes of New Orleans and vicinity which shall be governed by a representative, self-perpetuating Board of Trustees who are entirely free from sectarian and ecclesiastical control.\(^{811}\)

New Orleans University faced similar financial challenges throughout its existence and seemed a strong fit with Straight University, particularly since the Flint-Goodridge Hospital would become part of the new institution.\(^{812}\) The General Education Board and the Rosenwald Fund emerged as active supporters in this process as well, collectively promising a total of $750,000 toward the new enterprise. The AMA also agreed to make an annual appropriation of $35,000 over a ten

---


\(^{808}\) Klein, *Survey of Negro Colleges and Universities*.


\(^{810}\) Executive Committee Records, American Missionary Association Minutes, June 1919-Jan. 1930, AMA Archives.


\(^{812}\) Cominey, “A History of Straight College,” 222.
year period for the current expenses of the new entity, and final details of the merger were finalized in December 1929.\textsuperscript{813}

Straight University officially merged with New Orleans University in early 1930 to form what is present-day Dillard University in the Gentilly neighborhood of New Orleans (see Figure 7.8). The institution was named in honor of James Hardy Dillard. A former Tulane University dean and an advocate for black higher education, Dillard remained a “southern white man who grew up and established himself in this city as a cultivated gentleman.”\textsuperscript{814} Although perhaps a romanticized rendering, as a former president of the Anna T. Jeanes Fund, Dillard remained inextricably tied to industrial philanthropic foundations throughout his life and to shaping a redefined notion of black education in the New South. Supporters of the merger, felt the new university represented a more “solid, supporting educational structure,”\textsuperscript{815} including then Howard University president, Mordecai Johnson. Delivering an address at a cornerstone laying ceremony for the new library building in 1934, Mordecai commented on the new higher education institution in 1934:

\begin{quote}
Years ago, our devoted friends from the North came down with the announcement that they were going to build universities. Nobody knows better than they what a long struggle it was to lay the foundation of those structures. Many of them until this day have not been able to realize their dream. But we are here about to lay the foundation of a university enterprise on the basis of a sound undergirding structure of elementary and secondary education—a structure inspired in large part by the very people who have developed Straight College and New Orleans University, but built slowly and securely by the deliberate cooperation of the people of the municipality of New Orleans and the State of Louisiana. There is some chance, therefore, that this university may put its feel solidly on the ground and make substantial progress from the moment you open its doors.\textsuperscript{816}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{813} Cominey, “A History of Straight College,” 222.
In the end, despite the enthusiasm and support from the Straight “armies” in New Orleans and throughout Louisiana, the university closed its doors and merged with New Orleans University to form Dillard University (see Figure 7.8). Dillard University officially opened its doors on September 24, 1935 and remains to this day a top-tier institution grounded in the values of a liberal arts tradition developed and cultivated at Straight University over one hundred years earlier.

Summary Review

Despite the institution’s inexorable demise, Straight emerged as an integrated higher education institution in New Orleans and mirrored the ideals of morality, democracy, participation, and equality that defined the Radical Reconstruction era in Louisiana. Previously known as the “Queen of the great southwest” by the AMA, the institution embodied a revolutionary platform Afro-Creoles advocated during the colonial and antebellum period by

---

817 Dillard University (c. 1930s). Photograph. Courtesy of the State Library of Louisiana.
promoting higher education for men and women, regardless of race, ethnicity, or religion.\textsuperscript{818} With the aim of furnishing a liberal culture and education, students matriculated in a college-level curriculum in medicine, law, and theology. However, Straight University mainly provided opportunities for elementary, secondary, and normal school instruction, and by the early-twentieth century, the inexorable push for industrial education inevitably reshaped the institution’s identity and culture. For example, a bequest from the estate of Afro-Creole Thomy Lafon in 1908 provided funding for an industrial building which housed cooking, sewing, laundry, printing, and carpentry facilities.\textsuperscript{819} One observer noted that Straight “never loses sight of the home as the center of social life, as the sanctuary of purity and virtue.”\textsuperscript{820} This promoted and reinforced an industrial education for young women as “makers of the home,” and “saviors of the race” in good measure through “good breeding and cleanliness.”\textsuperscript{821} A commitment to industrial education defined Straight University until its closure.

Financial support seemed to doom the institution even from the start. Although the university acquired financial support through the Freedmen’s Bureau, the AMA, Seymour Straight, and others, the inability to secure operational funding for its collegiate programs coincided with an economic depression in New Orleans and beyond, which foretold trouble ahead by the end of the nineteenth century. The university suffered other hardship as well. A tragic fire in 1877 destroyed the campus building on Esplanade Avenue and forced university leadership to purchase a new site and relocate to Canal Street, which ultimately allowed for larger buildings and more accessible campus. However, by this time, the hardened racial lines in

\textsuperscript{818} History of the American Missionary Association, 26, AMA Archives.  
\textsuperscript{819} Straight College Catalogue, 1917-1918, Dillard Archives.  
\textsuperscript{820} Henderson, “Straight University, Industrial Department,” pamphlet on Straight University, in George Longe Papers, 1849-1971, Box 3, Folder 6, AMA Archives.  
\textsuperscript{821} Henderson, “Straight University, Industrial Department,” AMA Archives.
the city reestablished the practice of separateness and exclusion in the public sphere which diminished the very efforts of moral and democratic education at the university.

All along Afro-Creoles demonstrated their commitment to democracy, equality, and integrated education. Although the Reconstruction experiment effectively ended after 1877, with the end of federal military intervention into the southern states and a changing political order that returned conservative white democrats to reshape social, economic, and race relations, Afro-Creoles continued their protest tradition. Straight University again emerged as a foundation for this determined effort, particularly in the realm of law, in which Afro-Creoles returned to the political process, through the courts and the legislature, to promote public rights and equality of opportunity. The law department at Straight University represented a platform for such men as Louis A. Martinet, Rodolphe Desdunes, Paul Bonseigneur, among others, to launch their historic legal challenge of the Separate Car Act. This challenge propelled a rather obscure Afro-Creole activist named Homer Plessy into the national debate of race relations and public accommodation, and sought to eradicate the separate-but-equal ethos that permeated the South for almost a century.
CHAPTER EIGHT: THE PLESSY CHALLENGE AND THE STRAIGHT UNIVERSITY LAW DEPARTMENT

The *Times-Democrat* has a perfect right to be happy over the decision of Judge Ferguson. But when it says that decision will put a quietus to the efforts of most Negro agitators it is entirely in the dark. – Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes

Good lawyers of color are quite as necessary to the maintenance of the civil and political rights of the race as good physicians are to the preservation of its health, or good ministers and teachers to the development of its moral and intellectual life.—Straight University Law Department

In the late afternoon on June 7, 1892, Homer Adolphe Plessy traveled from his double shotgun home in Faubourg Tremé to the nearby East Louisiana Railroad Company train station, two miles away at the edges of the Faubourg Marigny in New Orleans. Dressed in a neatly pressed suit, Plessy walked along the brick-paved North Claiborne Avenue, past townhouses, Creole cottages, and former slave quarters that were since converted into backyard apartments. The city’s bustling activity operated with its normal commercial flair. Horses pulled passenger carriages; local artisans sold their goods and shopkeepers unpacked fresh boxes of fruit and supplies for their corner stores. The customary sounds of steamboat horns trumpeted in the background as boats cruised along the Mississippi River.

As the day’s lingering heat began to subside, Plessy arrived at the Press Street train depot, only a short distance from the river’s levee. Although he could sit in the waiting room of the station ticket office upon his arrival, the freshly posted copies of the Separate Car Act made the office less than hospitable. With the one-way ticket in hand, Homer Plessy boarded the intrastate train from New Orleans to the nearby town of Covington, Louisiana. The train had

---

823 Henderson, “Straight University, Law Department,” pamphlet on Straight University, in George Longe Papers, 1849-1971, Box 3, Folder 6, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA; and Thirty-Second Annual Report of the American Missionary Association, 1878, AMA Archives, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.
824 Medley, *We as Freemen*, 141.
825 Medley, *We as Freemen*, 141.
barely left the Marigny terminal when the conductor collecting tickets paused and asked Plessy a question, “Are you a colored man?” After Plessy informed the conductor that he was in fact “colored,” he remained in his first-class seat in a car reserved for white passengers. As other passengers in the car began to stir, the conductor replied, “Then you will have to retire to the colored car.” Plessy, who appeared “as white as the average white Southerner,” remained strident in his seat, proclaiming he would rather “go to jail first before relinquishing his right” to ride in the car. As Plessy sat in the whites-only passenger car, he intended to reach his destination in Covington. And in so doing, passing for both white and black, Homer Adolph Plessy confronted the reinforced logic of racial classification in the Jim Crow South, a racial ambiguity in what historian Shirley Thompson describes as “losing (and finding)” racial boundaries.\(^\text{827}\)

Yet, as history tells us, Plessy did not arrive in Covington that day. In fact, only twenty minutes after the train’s departure, the conductor signaled the engineer, and the train, which was moving quite slowly, came to a standstill at the intersection of Rampart Street.\(^\text{828}\) A detective, with the aid of some passengers, “forcibly dragged” Plessy from the whites-only coach and executed his arrest.\(^\text{829}\) The official charge was “Violating Section 111 of the Separate Car Act” which mandated that “no person or persons shall be permitted to occupy seats in coaches, other than the ones assigned to them on account of the race they belong to.”\(^\text{830}\) Little did Homer

\(^{826}\) Editorial, *Crusader* (New Orleans, LA), June 8, 1892.


\(^{828}\) *Crusader*, June 1892.

\(^{829}\) Medley, *We as Freemen*, 142.

\(^{830}\) The Louisiana state legislature passed the Separate Car Act two years earlier in 1890, which imposed forced segregation on all railway travel in the state. Other southern states followed this example, with Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, and Tennessee passing similar legislation in 1891. The law required “equal, but separate” accommodations on all passenger railways.” See General Assembly of the State of Louisiana, *Act, 1890, No. 111; New Orleans Police Department arrest books, AB-11*, Louisiana Division, New Orleans Public Library; and Scott, “Public Rights, Social
Plessy knew at the time, but his protest on the train that day would lead to the famous *Plessy v. Ferguson* court case in 1896, which offered one last opportunity for Afro-Creole activists to express their philosophy of equal rights for private persons in public spaces.  

Plessy’s attorney, James C. Walker, Esq. posted a $500 bond after his arraignment and secured Plessy’s temporary release. Everything had gone according to plan. Members of the Citizens Committee (*Comité des Citoyens*) converged at the Fifth Precinct station that evening. The Committee, a group of eighteen prominent Afro-Creoles, including Rodolphe Desdunes, Eugene Luscy, Paul Bonseigneur, and Louis A. Martinet—all alumni of Straight University’s Law Department—mobilized to resist and rally against state-imposed segregation. They were pleased, perhaps even delighted over the success of Plessy’s planned ticket purchase, train boarding, and arrest, for they could now test and scrutinize the constitutionality of the Separate Car Act with the Fourteenth Amendment.  

The Fourteenth Amendment mandated that:

> [A]ll persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the state wherein they reside. No states shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.”

For members of this committee, the Separate Car Act held far-reaching implications of caste legislation and public rights, beyond any issues of their own personal travel on intrastate railway. Martinet and others thus sought to organize against this act to dismantle state-sponsored segregation, for they felt in all likelihood, each segregationist initiative would trigger another.

---

*XIV Amendment, U. S. Constitution*, Sec. 1; and Keith Weldon Medley, *We as Freemen*, 142-143.  
Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*, 89.
Attuned to the revolutionary ethos of an earlier generation of militant Afro-Creoles in New Orleans, this act of protest began well before the train departed the Press Street station on that fateful Tuesday afternoon. As the Citizens’ Committee explained to Plessy, and in no uncertain terms, “Get the ticket. Get on the train. Get arrested. Get booked.”

Martinet and Desdunes intentionally sought Plessy for this activist role, particularly because of his “nearly white” complexion. Famously, Plessy was “seven-eighths Caucasian and one-eighth African blood” (an “octaroon” in nineteenth century parlance) and emerged as a plausible test subject to challenge the absurdity of the law.

Homer Plessy remained close to Desdunes, one of his Masonic friends from the lodge Friendship 27 on Basin Street. Plessy had been well known as a neighborhood shoemaker and artisan, but also as an Afro-Creole community activist for more than a decade. Specifically, he served as the vice president of the Masonic friendship society, “New Amis Sincéres,” aimed at “the protection of the colored Creole population against wrong and injustice, the promotion of public education, the establishment of a library and the erection of a hall.”

But it was Louis A. Martinet who proved an unequivocal force in shaping this activism and dissent. As a steadfast champion of freedom and equality for people of color through his weekly newspaper The Crusader, “a journal devoted to the best interests of the people,” along with his fellow members of the Citizens’ Committee, Martinet developed an assertive civil rights agenda.

But why highlight Louis A. Martinet, the Citizens’ Committee, and the Plessy challenge in a study on higher education? What is their particular significance to Straight University?

---

834 Medley, We as Freemen, 140.
835 Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537 (1896).
837 Weekly Pelican (New Orleans, LA), Jan. 8, 1887, as quoted in Scott, Degrees of Freedom, 77.
Since several members of the Committee were alumni of Straight’s law department, understanding the scope of the curriculum and experience is important in apprehending the legal foundation of the *Plessy* challenge. In particular, Martinet is often overlooked for his role in the Afro-Creole quest for equality, with much of the treatment reserved for the former judge and jurist, Albion Winegar Tourgée, the principal litigator of the *Plessy* case. However, it was during Martinet’s time at Straight University that he developed his legal training and expertise to formulate a challenge to the Separate Car Act. In the context of the *Plessy* challenge, then, this chapter rediscovers Martinet, Desdunes, and other members of the Citizens’ Committee and their affiliation with Straight University as law students and in embracing the democratic ethos the university embodied to launch this historic and important legal protest.

**The Law Department at Straight University**

As southern colleges and universities felt the deep moral, political, and philosophical struggles that appeared on campuses across the United States during Reconstruction, evident in ideals of democracy and emerging intellectualism, Straight University’s Law Department opened in 1873. Although a popular profession at the time, law had only an incidental connection with academic studies offered by colleges and universities in the early-nineteenth century. It remained a field in which lawyers acquired a practical foundation by serving as clerks and apprentices for a law office or judge. In antebellum Louisiana, in particular, few rules existed to control admission to the bar, and what constituted adequate training, skills, and experience was

---

838 Martinet retained Albion Tourgée as senior counsel in the *Plessy* challenge. Martinet wrote to Tourgée to request his assistance, noting “the revival of interest in the Jim Crow matter is owing to you more than anyone else.” See L. A. Martinet to A. Tourgée, Oct. 5, 1891, Item 5763, Albion W. Tourgée Papers, Chautauqua County Historical Society, McClurg Museum, Westfield, NY (hereinafter cited as “Tourgée Papers”).

839 Historian Edward Ayers presents a vivid portrait of a dawning progressivism on southern colleges, universities and technical schools after the Civil War, a clash with conservatism that emerged throughout much of America at the time. He describes an era of profound and rapid change, with a focus on innovation, politics, race relations, and educational enlightenment. To understand a richer context from which postbellum academic and professional programs developed, see Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, 420-422.

left open to question. By 1840 a growing concern over lawyer qualifications in the state led to stricter rules and requirements for admission to the bar, including examinations by a committee based on prescribed books and recitations. Consequently, the old apprenticeship system began to shrink and ultimately disappear. Careers in law thus required a professional degree both as evidence of expertise and as a “device for gatekeeping.” At the University of Louisiana in New Orleans—soon to become Tulane University—the first law department emerged in December 1847. Yet although it boasted a “comprehensive curriculum” and a faculty of “competent, even brilliant men,” it maintained low student enrollments. It was only after the Civil War and through the early twentieth century that law programs began to develop in greater numbers and in a more conceived purpose.

The law department at Straight represented the strongest and most productive professional school at the institution. Although the medical school showed much promise upon its official opening in 1873, it foundered a year later amid organizational and financial problems as mentioned earlier. The law department, on the other hand, remained a productive unit from the start. Louis A. Bell, a twenty-nine year old Howard University Law School alumnus and person of color from New Bedford, Massachusetts, became a professor after his full admission to the New Orleans Bar Association in 1871 and led the law department at Straight University. Howard University became the first institution to attract people of color to the legal profession when it opened its doors in January 1869; and it represented the first law school in the nation to

844 Dyer, Tulane, 25.
establish an admission policy that did not discriminate on the basis of race, gender, or religion. Straight’s law department followed in this democratic frame. Accordingly, Bell devised, structured, and implemented the law program at the university by incorporating a two-year curriculum and a “well-sustained examination” that culminated in a Bachelor of Law degree, entitling students to full admission to the bar and “authority to practice in all the courts of Louisiana.” The department also embraced the religious character of the university, in which Bell himself enjoyed the prospect of training Christian lawyers. Then-President Samuel S. Ashley suggested that Bell “ardently desires and faithfully endeavors, to make his Department a moral and religious agency.”

The program maintained a five dollar monthly tuition fee and students had to furnish their own books and materials. From its outset, it remained a self-sustaining program, with the monthly tuition fees supporting professor salaries. However, some faculty, “[j]urists of reputation and successful practice,” had “kindly offered their services, with little hope of adequate compensation” in an effort to help sustain the department. Still students of limited means matriculated at the school, for which the monthly tuition proved impossible, were forced to drop out: “they found the effort to maintain themselves [sic] and acquire an education greater than they could afford.” Other students worked during their matriculation. Martinet, for example, paid for his legal education at Straight by “moonlighting” as a part-time French

848 Samuel S. Ashley to Erastus Cravath, Apr. 16, 1874, AMA Archives.
Despite consistent appeals to the AMA for further funding and support, the faculty in the law department continued to teach with little or no compensation.\textsuperscript{852}

The lecture-based law program commenced on the first Monday in November and ended in March, “ensuing, or as soon as practicable thereafter.”\textsuperscript{853} The first graduating class consisted of eight students, both white and black, of which Louis A. Martinet was a part. According to the AMA:

I wish some of the New York officials could have been present during the [graduation] week, especially at Central Church, Friday evening, June 9\textsuperscript{th}, to witness the graduation of the first college and law classes. That eight young men pass fine examinations and are admitted to the bar of Louisiana, is an event of no small importance.\textsuperscript{854}

The students in the 1876 graduating law class studied and learned together, side by side in one classroom, irrespective of race, an indication of the democratic space Straight promoted, practiced, and sustained. Bell and the law faculty incorporated a theoretical and practical legal curriculum, “according to the usage of the courts of the United States and the State of Louisiana.”\textsuperscript{855} Although little documentation exists to support the pedagogical approach in the department, the legal education upheld a varied and rigorous approach to the law, including lectures on common law, equity, and “kindred subjects.”

Students pursued courses such as Story on the Constitution, the Louisiana Civil Code and Code of Practice, Revised Statutes of Louisiana and the United States Statutes, and the decisions of the Supreme Court of Louisiana generally, among others.\textsuperscript{856} Each student in the Law Department was required to recite legal statutes and engage in scholarship on Vattel’s Law of

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{851} J. Clay Smith, Jr., \textit{Emancipation}, 283.
\bibitem{852} Thirty-Second Annual Report of the American Missionary Association, 1878, AMA Archives.
\bibitem{853} Straight University Catalogue, 1880-1881, 29, Dillard Archives.
\bibitem{854} Thirtieth Annual Report of the American Missionary Association, 1876, AMA Archives.
\bibitem{855} Thirtieth Annual Report of the American Missionary Association, 1876, AMA Archives.
\bibitem{856} Straight University Catalogue, 1870-1871, 10. Dillard Archives.
\end{thebibliography}
Nations, Wheaton’s Elements of International Law, and Pothier’s Treatise on Obligations. Though recitations remained a “deadening routine of memorization,” it allowed students to demonstrate their mastery (or expose their deficiency) in front of the professor. In addition to exams each term, Bell and the faculty required students to complete written essays on various legal doctrines, with full “reference to authorities.”

The department postponed all classes and activities after Bell’s untimely death in 1874 at the age of thirty-two, but reopened in 1875. After classes resumed, then-university president J. A. Adams promised to fulfill Bell’s legacy of quality instruction and student engagement, suggesting “with careful management and by securing lecturers who will attend promptly and faithfully to their duties, in time [the department] can be made on of the best law schools in the South.” Prominent Afro-Creole Robert Isabelle succeeded Bell as the next dean of the law department and quickly began to recruit faculty and build the law program. The white radical, Afro-Creole ally, and esteemed constitutional lawyer, Rufus Waples—who participated in the convention at the Mechanics’ Institute in July 1866, as well as the subsequent violent melee that erupted in the streets of New Orleans—became a professor in the department. By 1878, the law department faculty expanded further to include former state judge Henry C. Dibble and former state attorney general A. T. Belden. Plessy’s local attorney, James C. Walker, also taught criminal law in the department. Described as “Southern men,” the AMA argued that the law department faculty’s “devotion and faithfulness could not have been surpassed.”

---

857 Straight University Catalogue, 1870-1871, 10, Dillard Archives.
858 Andrew Delbanco, College, 70.
859 Straight University Catalogue, 1880-1881, 29, Dillard Archives.
860 J. A. Adams to E. M. Cravath, Oct. 31, 1874, AMA Archives.
861 R. W. Isabelle to E. M. Cravath, Feb. 18, 1875. AMA Archives.
862 Joe M. Richardson, “The American Missionary Association and Black Education in Louisiana,” 212.
863 Thirtieth Annual Report of the American Missionary Association, 1876, AMA Archives.
Straight University leadership refused to tolerate caste distinctions in its classrooms and did not hire teachers and faculty who “yielded to prejudice.” At a time when racial prejudice constrained educational opportunities for people of color, the law department continually “breeched racial barriers” and maintained an integrated racial learning environment. Commenting on the law department during a visit in New Orleans, AMA Reverend W. S. Alexander further confirmed:

. . . the school-year closed happily and successfully. The examinations, which are the best test of scholarship and progress, gave great satisfaction to our friends, and teachers were glad and grateful to feel that the year’s work had been a good one. We graduated ten young men from the Law Department, of whom eight were white, showing the appreciation of the manner in which the department is conducted . . . Next year we anticipate a class of twenty-five.865

After ten years in operation, the law department closed in 1886, and for more than half a century—until 1947, when Southern University Law School opened—no institution in Louisiana provided an opportunity for students of color to pursue a legal education.866 Many students, including Alexander Pierre Tureaud, the last person of color admitted to the bar between 1927 and 1941, attended Howard University instead. Yet, throughout the law department’s operation, it graduated prominent legal scholars and attorneys, including members of the Citizen Committee. The training these men received, Martinet, Desdunes, and others would prove instrumental in developing the legal framework for the Plessy challenge. In order to understand this foundation and legal expertise, it is important to highlight the role that these Afro-Creole men played in formulating this important legal challenge.

865 Alexander, “From New Orleans to New York.”
**Martinet and Signs of Protest**

Each morning, dressed in his customary black suit and matching black string bow tie, Martinet walked almost two miles from his home on Burgundy Street in Tremé to his notary and *Crusader* office on 117 Exchange Alley near St. Louis Cathedral, between Royal and Chartres Streets (see Figure 8.1). He held office hours for his notarial services each morning, beginning in the early morning and ending in the late evening, typically around 9PM. Over time, Martinet steadily built a business on certifying property transactions and facilitating small-scale legal initiatives by his neighbors.\(^{867}\)

![Figure 8.1 Photo of Exchange Alley (undated)](image)

Martinet helped several volunteer organizations draft their bylaws, including volunteer groups such as the Ladies of Determination Benevolent Mutual Aid Association and the Afro-

\(^{867}\) Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*, 75.

Occasionally donning his favorite black felt wide-brim hat on his walks to his office, Martinet was often described as intrepid and “brainy,” but also “a nervous man, intelligent but excitable.” Desdunes was more impressed with Martinet’s honor and judgment, describing him as “conscientious, energetic, and talented,” noting that he commanded respect “through his courage and his fidelity to Republican principles.”

Martinet was much younger than the Afro-Creole champions who came before him during the Civil War, such as Jean-Baptiste Roudanez and Arnold Bertonneau, who thirty years earlier had met with Abraham Lincoln in Washington D.C. to deliver a petition requesting that “all citizens of Louisiana of African descent, born free before the rebellion, may be . . . directed to the rights and privileges of electors.” However, Martinet proved an able protégé and reinvigorated the same radical spirit of the L’Union and Tribune in his weekly newspaper The Crusader, which he founded in 1889. It represented an aggressive vehicle for racial and political protest and served as an organ for Afro-Creoles and people of color, following in the radical footsteps of its predecessors. And this was not accidental, for Paul Trévigne, “by then an old man,” mentored Martinet and together they reminded readers how an earlier generation had originally won the rights that the Crusader now sought to regain three decades later.
Dr. Louis André Martinet was born a free person of color in St. Martin’s Parish, Louisiana on December 28, 1849, only one month younger than Rodolphe Desdunes. The oldest of five children born to a Belgium carpenter, Hippolite Martinet, and Louisiana-born free person of color Marie Benoit, the Martinets resided in St. Martinville. Although little documentation exists on Martinet’s life, particularly his early family life, his siblings, or when he moved to Faubourg Tremé, he remained in St. Martin’s Parish as a state representative to the Louisiana legislature in 1872 until he was unseated in April of 1875. As a student at Straight University’s law department, Martinet kept abreast of local and national politics with a keen interest, serving as a state legislator during part of his matriculation. He became one of the first people of color to graduate from Straight’s law department when he received his law degree in 1876. Martinet later attained a Doctor of Medicine degree in 1892 from the Flint Medical College of New Orleans University.

Education played a prominent role in Martinet’s life. Although he initially developed a public notary business upon graduating from Straight, he later assumed a leadership role on the Orleans Parish School Board in 1877. Despite his passion, energy, and focus to strike down racial barriers, Martinet unsuccessfully opposed efforts to resegregate public schools. He also served as legal counsel to the Board of Directors of the Catholic Institute, and subsequently became a full member of the board leadership where he remained “interested in the welfare of the institution.” Martinet was later appointed to the Board of Trustees at the newly instituted Southern University in New Orleans from 1889-1897. He articulated an activist tone while on

---

877 Yearbook of the New Orleans University, 1900-1901 (New Orleans, LA: New Orleans University Print, 1901), 50. Courtesy of the University Library, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Urbana-Champaign, Illinois.
878 History of the Catholic Indigent Orphan Institute (New Orleans, LA: Board of Directors, 1915), Amistad Research Center, Tulane University.
the board, particularly in denouncing Congressional funding through the 1890 Morrill Act, wherein only 40 percent of the funding would be appropriated to Southern, while 60 percent went to Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. Although some of his fellow Afro-Creoles excoriated Southern University as unmistakably accommodating segregation in the public sphere, Martinet remained on the board, perhaps since his wife Lenora also served as a teacher, and later as principal of the normal school at the institution.879

From an early age, Martinet’s parents instilled in him a devotion to the Catholic Church. Catholicism remained central in recognizing and advocating the rights of free people of color.880 Yet the escalating tension and pervasive racism in the Catholic Church during the 1880s and 1890s shifted Martinet’s religious devotion and worldview. The hardening color line in the city and the growing desire of white parishioners to create separate churches by race forced Martinet to rethink his relationship to the Church. He stopped attending services altogether, not even to “witness a wedding.”881 In fact, by that time Martinet would not allow his only daughter Leslie Louise to “make her first communion if she has to undergo any humiliation” of separate church services based on race.882 In a Crusader editorial in 1891, Desdunes and Martinet publicly criticized the Catholic Church in New Orleans in their quest to develop separate churches for people of color:

If the Catholic authorities desire to lose their communicants among the colored population of their city, the surest and most direct way to it is the organization of separate church offices . . . There is already too much prejudice in the church, and we do not think

879 It is not clear why Martinet did not maintain the same misgivings about the institution that some of his fellow Afro-Creole activists developed, particularly Desdunes. Perhaps it allowed Martinet the ability to express his activist agenda in shaping the institution, or it might be due to Lenora Martinet’s prominence at the university. Mrs. Martinet received an annual salary of $880 “second only to that of the president, H. A. Hill, who received $1,500.” See Catalogue of Southern University, 1889-1890 (New Orleans, LA, 1890). Courtesy of the University Library, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Urbana-Champaign, IL. See also Nils R. Douglas, “Who Was Louis A. Martinet.”
882 “What We Meant to Say,” Editorial, The Crusader, 1891.
we risk much in saying that the self-respecting colored Catholics will not have any more. There can be no such thing as a separate Catholic Church, if the Church authorities are mindful of the Master’s words.\textsuperscript{883}

The Citizens’ Committee made this challenge against “Jim Crow Churches” a prominent feature of their platform, demanding “there is no reason for the dedication of a separate Catholic church on race lines.”\textsuperscript{884} They admonished all “outrages against law, decency and humanity”\textsuperscript{885} throughout Louisiana and condemned the failure of the press and the pulpit to denounce crimes against people of color.

Before the Citizens’ Committee formed in 1891, Martinet and Desdunes formed the American Citizens’ Equal Rights Association (ACERA), aimed at defending the “constitutional rights against the encroachments and attacks of prejudice.”\textsuperscript{886} Martinet and Desdunes insisted on a name that would open the group to all sympathizers irrespective of race, “setting it at odds with all those—black or white—who were then touting racial exclusivity.”\textsuperscript{887} Desdunes, for his part, skillfully organized and publicized the committee’s protest in response to the Louisiana legislature’s recently passed laws forbidding interracial marriage and mandated segregation of people of color on all railroads operating within the state. In an editorial piece in the Crusader, entitled, “To Be or Not to Be,” Desdunes castigated the legislature for passing such an unconstitutional, unjust, and dangerous law:

Among the many schemes devised by the Southern statesmen to divide the races, none is so audacious and so insulting as the one which provides separate cars for black and white people on the railroads running through the State. It is like a slap in the face of every member of the black race, whether he has full measure or only one-eighth of that blood. Therefore, this iniquitous legislation cannot remain on the state books without strenuous

\textsuperscript{883} “A Separate Church,” Editorial, \textit{The Crusader}, 1891.
\textsuperscript{885} Louis A. Martinet, “The Violation of a Constitutional Right,” Published by Authority of the Citizens Committee (New Orleans, LA: The Crusader Print, Aug. 1893), 3. Amistad Research Center, Tulane University.
\textsuperscript{886} “To Be or Not to Be,” Editorial, \textit{The Crusader} (New Orleans, LA), July 4, 1891.
\textsuperscript{887} Logsdon with Powell, “Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes,” 53.
opposition being directed against it by the loyal elements of the country in general and of this State in particular.\textsuperscript{888}

In incorporating this strain of dissent, Martinet, Desdunes, and Trévigne sought to galvanize their ACERA membership and protest against these Jim Crow measures. However, they soon discovered that they maintained the burden of the struggle.\textsuperscript{889} Martinet specifically called for local leaders to raise funds to bring a test case before the federal courts, but funding did not materialize.\textsuperscript{890} Ultimately, quarrelling and ethnic divisions developed within their multi-racial group membership, which included local white leaders and black Protestant ministers, and the ACERA collapsed. By early 1891, a year after the legislature passed the Separate Car Act, no one stepped forward to mount a legal challenge to the Jim Crow law.\textsuperscript{891}

Without proper funding and a coordinated effort to launch their legal challenge, Desdunes sought advice and financial support from Aristide Mary. Mary assessed the passage of the car act as “a test of the waters” to return to a caste system that existed before the Civil War.\textsuperscript{892} According to historians Joseph Logsdon and Lawrence Powell, Desdunes’s personal plea, bolstered by his well-earned reputation as “a true protégé of Mary’s convictions as a free thinker and spiritualist,” had their desired effect.\textsuperscript{893} Through Mary’s assistance—his “last political act” before his suicide at age seventy\textsuperscript{894}—along with local donations totaling $3,000, Desdunes and Martinet established the Citizens’ Committee on September, 1, 1891 “to offer legal resistance to the separate car law of Louisiana enacted by the Legislature of 1890.”\textsuperscript{895} The

\begin{footnotes}
\item[888] “To Be or Not to Be,” Editorial, The Crusader (New Orleans, LA), July 4, 1891.
\item[889] Joseph Logsdon with Lawrence Powell, “Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes,” 54.
\item[890] The Crusader (New Orleans, LA), July 18, 1890.
\item[891] Joseph Logsdon with Lawrence Powell, “Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes,” 54.
\item[892] Medley, We as Freemen, 118.
\item[893] Medley, We as Freemen, 55-56.
\item[894] Desdunes, Our People and Our History, 141; Scott, Degrees of Freedom; and Thompson, Exiles at Home, 267.
\item[895] The Citizens’ Committee openly thanked “hundreds” of men and women for their funding and support, for which “[t]his fund to constitute not only and indispensable agency to defray judicial expenses, but also a proof of public sentiment and determination.” See Louis A. Martinet, “Statement of the Citizens’ Committee” in Report
\end{footnotes}
Committee represented a smaller, cohesive group, tighter in organization and more formulated in purpose than its predecessor the ACERA. Its members returned to their French and Creole heritage for a racial ideology and more militant, protest tradition, proven methods of Trévigne, Roudanez (see Figure 8.2), and Bertonneau and others during Reconstruction. Within its ranks included eighteen Afro-Creole activists, including Haitian-born Arthur Esteves, president of the board of the Catholic Institute for Indigent Orphans, who served as the committee president (see Figure 8.3).896

Figure 8.2 Photo of Arthur Esteves897

Despite helping to found the organization with Aristide Mary, Martinet and Desdunes chose not to assume leadership roles of the Citizens’ Committee, preferring instead to support its

---


overall organization, publicity, and legal operations. The Committee made itself publicly known, holding open meetings in social aid and benevolent societies, such as Economy Hall—a dance hall in Tremé, bordering on Storyville and the French Quarter—and at the Friends of Hope Hall, between Dumaine and St. Philip streets. Martinet and Desdunes published the committees’ activities in the _Crusader_ to ensure that “all in accord with the object and purpose of the meeting” remained attuned to their unified protest. And at a time when a return to exaggerated fanaticism about caste or segregation, “once again alarmed the black people,” this group of learned and “eminent men” put forth an earnest effort “to vindicate the cause of equal rights and American manhood” though a legal challenge to the Separate Car Act. Martinet and Desdunes became convinced that the courts offered them the best opportunity to reverse their declining status, suggesting:

> We are American citizens and it is our duty to defend our constitutional rights against the encroachments and attacks of prejudice. The courts are open for that purpose, and it is our fault if we do not seek the redress they alone can afford in cases of injustice done or of wrongdoings endured.

Like Martinet, many members of the committee, including Desdunes, Luscy, and Bonseigneur, hailed from Straight University’s law department. Since the Citizens’ Committee formulated a reasoned legal challenge to the “Jim Crow Car,”—a strategy that favored more hope than the state legislative process—an understanding of state and constitutional law was not only a requirement but an imperative to test and scrutinize the separate but equal provision of the law. It is within the law department at Straight that we must turn and explore the curriculum and instruction that provided the foundation for the legal framework of the _Plessy_ Challenge in 1892.

---

898 Martinet and Desdunes were listed as founding members on the committee’s original masthead. See Louis A. Martinet, “The Violation of a Constitutional Right,” 24.


900 “To Be or Not to Be,” _The Crusader_ (New Orleans, LA), July 4, 1891.
“To Vindicate the Cause of Equal Rights”: The Plessy Challenge Reconsidered

Martinet remained a practicing attorney in New Orleans and a designated member of the Citizens’ Committee legal team. Although he was admitted to the practice in the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana, Martinet sought the legal services of fifty-three year old, Ohio-born Albion Tourgée. Since Martinet himself was not admitted to practice before the United States Supreme Court, he understood the need to retain an experienced appellate attorney to take the case to the United States Supreme Court after the Louisiana Supreme Court denied Plessy’s writ of prohibition in 1892. Tourgée, a former Union Army veteran and carpetbagger North Carolina judge—as well as one of the few remaining eloquent exponents of equal rights for blacks in the United States—offered his legal services “free of charge” to help shape the legal challenge.\footnote{After his service as a Union officer, Tourgée lived in North Carolina from 1865 to 1879 and was an active politician, judge, attorney, journalist, and novelist. His extensive writings reveal a passionate and idealistic standpoint from which he advocated for people of color, the free and formerly enslaved. Throughout his career, Tourgée remained a Radical Republican and excoriated the Southern “regime” in the New South. See Tourgée, \textit{A Fool’s Errand} and \textit{The Invisible Empire}. See also Joseph Logsdon with Lawrence Powell, “Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes,” 55; Shirley Thompson, \textit{Exiles at Home}, 268; and Otto H. Olsen, \textit{Carpetbagger’s Crusade: The Life of Albion Winegar Tourgée} (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965).}

Martinet wrote to Tourgée on October 5, 1891 and offered him a total of $1,412.70 to serve as lead counsel,\footnote{Martinet and the Citizens’ Committee received contributions from individuals and community groups (benevolent and mutual aid societies, trade unions, etc.). Martinet was able to request donations through the number of these groups for whom he offered notarial services. See Louis A. Martinet to Albion W. Tourgée, Oct. 10, 1891, Tourgée Papers; Scott, \textit{Degrees of Freedom}, 89; and Joseph Logsdon with Lawrence Powell, “Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes,” 68.} but Tourgée declined to accept the fee, preferring instead to work in a pro-bono capacity. At the urging of the Citizens’ Committee, Martinet instead used the funds to hire a local Republican judge and attorney, James C. Walker, “one of the leading lawyers of our criminal bar”\footnote{Martinet, “The Violation of a Constitutional Right,” 1.} who Martinet suggested will “do good work.”\footnote{Louis A. Martinet to Albion W. Tourgée, 1891 (undated).} Walker’s esteem and standing also garnered him a place on the Straight University law department faculty as a criminal law
professor. It is unclear if he taught Martinet or Desdunes during their respective matriculation periods or if they had developed a relationship with Walker as an instructor, thus securing his services for the *Plessy* case.

Figure 8.3 Photo of Albion W. Tourgée (c. 1902)  

Tourgée (see Figure 8.4) oversaw the case from his residence in Maryville, New York, and developed every detail of strategy and argument through a long-distance correspondence with Martinet and Walker. The correspondence between Martinet and Tourgée in particular reflected the mutual admiration and respect they had for one another. In most letters, Martinet referred to Tourgée as “Honored Sir and Dear Friend.” Further, the ever-humble Martinet would continually resist any compliments from Tourgée, particularly about him personally and his service for the cause. On one occasion, Martinet penned: “I thank you sincerely for the kind

---

905 Photo of Albion W. Tourgée, 1902. This photograph was taken just before Tourgée’s death in 1905. Courtesy of Albion Winegar Tourgée Collection, Chautauqua County Historical Society, McClurg Museum.

things you say of me . . . but do not call me a hero. I am a plain, ordinary man. I prefer that. In that way I’ll not disappoint you.\footnote{See Louis A. Martinet to Albion W. Tourgée, Oct. 5, 1891, Tourgée Papers.} Along with Walker, Martinet represented the legal strategy at the local level, offering advice and guidance to Tourgée around local politics and nuances of Louisiana law. However, Martinet ceded all final authority to Tourgée from a legal brief and decision making standpoint, suggesting:

You will be the leading counsel and select your own associate. We know we have a friend in you and we know your ability is beyond question. We know you will give more time and attention to the preparation of the case than any other, + [\textit{sic}] you shall have control from beginning to end.\footnote{Louis A. Martinet to Albion W. Tourgée, Oct. 10, 1891, Tourgée Papers.}

With the legal team assembled, then, Martinet and Desdunes coordinated their first test case against the Separate Car Act on February 24, 1892. Desdunes enlisted the help of his son, Daniel, a thirty-three year old musician and member of the “Creole Onward Brass Band,” and purchased a first-class ticket for him.\footnote{Daniel “Dan” Desdunes would later become a famous “big dance” and jazz band leader in Omaha, Nebraska. He was referred to as “one of the greatest Band Masters ever living” and the “father of negro musicians of Omaha.” See \textit{The Kansas City Sun}, “Grand Colored Musical Concert” (Nov. 21, 1914); and “Dan Desdunes: New Orleans Civil Rights Activist and Jesse J. Otto, “The Father of Negro Musicians of Omaha,”” \textit{Nebraska History}, 92 (Fall 2011): 106–117.} The younger Desdunes walked to the Louisville and Nashville (L & N) Depot on Canal Street and boarded the 8:00AM train to Mobile, Alabama. As instructed, Daniel Desdunes took a seat in the whites-only car on the interstate train. After noticing Desdunes, a train employee informed the aspiring musician that he would need to vacate the whites-only car and take a seat in the coach reserved for “colored people.” Desdunes refused to comply, and only after traveling two miles, the conductor stopped the train at the corner of Elysian Fields and North Claiborne Avenues.\footnote{James C. Walker to Albion W. Tourgée, Feb. 25, 1892 and Mar. 14, 1892, Tourgée Papers; see also Louis A. Martinet, “An Appeal” in Report Proceedings for the Annulment of Act 111 of 1890 (New Orleans, LA, Sept. 1891).} Daniel Desdunes (see Figure 8.4) was arrested.
and charged under the penal clause of the Separate Car Act, but ultimately released on a $500 bond.

![Figure 8.4 Photo of Daniel Desdunes](image)

According to Martinet, after passing through the “preliminary stages” of the magistrate’s court, the case was sent to the Criminal District Court for the Parish of Orleans. Subsequently, the case was brought before Judge John H. Ferguson’s court in Orleans Parish. Following a recent Louisiana Supreme Court ruling in a separate case brought by the railway companies, Judge Ferguson dismissed the charges against Daniel Desdunes. The Louisiana Separate Car Act remained in transparent violation of the United States Constitution with regard to its imposed restrictions on interstate journeys, particularly in invoking federal supremacy over the states in the regulation of interstate commerce. Since Daniel Desdunes intended to travel to Mobile, Alabama, the Louisiana law did not apply. And with his son’s legal victory in hand, the older Desdunes confidently expressed in a *Crusader* editorial that the court decision meant that Jim

---

911 Photo of Daniel Desdunes, Courtesy of Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes, *Our People and Our History.*
912 Martinet, “The Violation of a Constitutional Right,” 1; and Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*, 88.
Crow was “as dead as a door nail!” The jubilation was fleeting, however, for Martinet, Tourgée and other members of the Citizens’ Committee agreed that the legal assault must continue.

With the success of the interstate legal challenge, Martinet and Tourgée sought to push ahead as intended and challenge the law on an *intras*ate journey, using Homer Plessy as the test subject. As in Daniel Desdunes’s case, Plessy was brought before Judge Ferguson’s court in Orleans Parish. After the Louisiana Supreme Court denied Plessy’s writ of prohibition in 1892, the legal team appealed the decision to the United States Supreme Court. Martinet, Tourgée and Walker led the coordinated legal challenge, a tactical and philosophical approach to what would become a historic and consequential legal battle. Tourgée officially filed the legal brief, and as legal historian Rebecca Scott suggests, he made a variety of “ingenious arguments” about the indeterminacy of race and the "property value of a reputation of whiteness,” as evident in the Thirteenth and the Fourteenth Amendments. In the brief, Tourgée simply stated, “Our contention is that this provision is a plain denial of the right to sue in the courts of the state for an injury received and as such is a clear legislative violation of the restrictive provisions of the XIX Amendment.”

Even before the high court’s final decision, however, Martinet, Desdunes and other activists soon felt great despair. The increased racial oppression and angst from the shifting political landscape in the 1890s, perceptibly manifest in increased lynchings, the subordination of black laborers, and the suppression of black voters in Mississippi and Louisiana, also gave way to an increasingly indifferent Republican Party. Martinet’s confidence had broken down

---

914 *The Crusader* (New Orleans, LA), 1892.
916 *Plessy v. Ferguson*, Legal Brief, Argument of A. W. Tourgée (undated), Tourgée Papers.
917 Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*, 90.
to the point that he sought exile to Mexico, stating, [l]et us get out of this hell of the United States.\textsuperscript{918} Even the optimistic Tourgée began to lose heart, confiding his concerns to Martinet that the increasing number of conservative appointees to the Supreme Court foretold trouble ahead with their appeal.\textsuperscript{919}

In the end, Tourgée was right and the majority of the justices on the Supreme Court sided with the State of Louisiana, determining that the Separate Car Act remained an exercise of the state’s legitimate police power.\textsuperscript{920} With that historical decision, white supremacy continued unfettered in formally establishing separate but equal in the public sphere. Consequently, the Citizens’ Committee disbanded and the \textit{Crusader} ceased publication. The democratic ethos and egalitarian tone of the provocative 1868 state constitution gave way to a much more hardened and absolute tone of the 1896 constitution, one in which Louisiana’s Democrats could claim that racial distinctions were “consensual social arrangements,” and that forced segregation had no relationship to the rights guaranteed in the Fourteenth Amendment.\textsuperscript{921}

\textbf{Summary Review}

The Supreme Court’s historic decision in \textit{Plessy v. Ferguson} established constitutional legitimacy to Jim Crow segregation laws in the public sphere. The judicial response is most often viewed through a legal lens, which demonstrates the law’s role in constructing and maintaining racial categories in a white supremacist formulation.\textsuperscript{922} Yet, what is often overlooked is considering the network of people and activist supporters who launched and sustained this legal challenge. Thus it was at Straight University’s law department that Martinet

\textsuperscript{918} \textit{The Crusader}, Editorial, 1893.
\textsuperscript{919} Logsdon with Powell, “Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes,” 58.
\textsuperscript{920} Scott, “Public Rights, Social Equality, and the Conceptual Roots of the \textit{Plessy} Challenge,” 800.
\textsuperscript{921} Scott, \textit{Degrees of Freedom}, 92-93.
and his fellow Citizens’ Committee members developed their legal expertise. The law curriculum emphasized Louisiana civil codes and statutes, as well as Supreme Court rulings and Louisiana state constitutions. Notably, it was the 1868 Louisiana state constitution that guaranteed all citizens civil, political, and public rights, regardless of race or caste-distinction, and it provided the legal framework for the Committee to launch their legal challenge.

It was the goal of this chapter to illuminate the ideal of democratic education at Straight University’s law department through the lens of the *Plessy* challenge. It was at Straight that Martinet, Luscy, Desdunes, and others developed a legal framework from which to launch their dissent. Particularly the emphasis on Louisiana civil codes and statues, as well as Supreme Court rulings and state constitutions, notably the 1868 state constitution, members of the committee received a thorough and rigorous legal education. Although Desdunes makes no reference to his legal studies in his memoir, *Our People and Our History*, his expertise in helping to devise the *Plessy* challenge is unquestioned.

With integrated classrooms and black and white faculty, students learned from one another, side by side in a diverse learning environment, and developed a legal expertise in a truly democratic space. Although Louis A. Martinet and others ultimately failed to test and scrutinize the constitutionality of the Separate Car Act with the Fourteenth Amendment, the basis of the *Plessy v. Ferguson* landmark case, this study sought to reveal this legal challenge from a cultural and social-curricular standpoint. For even in the specter of defeat, as Citizens’ Committee member Rodolphe Desdunes asserted, “It is well for a people to know their rights even if denied them, and we will add that it is proper and wise for people to exercise those rights as intelligently as possible, even if robbed of their benefits.”

---

CHAPTER NINE: CONCLUSION

Silent now the ghostly classrooms where proud Wisdom once held sway; vanished now the halls and corridors once with Time and Yesterday. In those halls the souls of youth were fashioned into lives sublime; now the ghost of Straight goes wandering down the thoroughfares of Time. . . But old memories still linger, voices of dead students still call—Pinchback, Vance, Moore and Metoyer wander through Straight’s ghostly hall. Long dead prexies [sic] and instructors hold commencement at its door; in the magic realm of memory through, Straight College is no more. 924

The men understood the task in front of them and their roles and responsibilities that early-October morning in 1944—after all, it was just a three-day job to demolish a row of aging and unused structures along a Canal Street college campus. The engineers surveyed the area to determine how best to rend the buildings and the laborers had erected signs along the busy city thoroughfare to denote the construction site. Working in demolition, these men had become quite accustomed to dealing with wood, brick, and mortar, and removing debris and hauling it away in large pick-up trucks. What they most likely did not recognize was the true import of the occasion: that the campus had once been “one of the historic spots of interest in the educational and social life” of students, white and black, male and female, and old and young. 925

Straight University had occupied the Canal Street campus since 1878, moving from its former campus in Tremé after a devastating fire a year earlier. President Adams at the time knew the fire could not stop the enduring spirit of the university; rather, he exclaimed, “the destruction of the building[s] cannot mean the destruction of its faith and purpose, these will abide and must be fulfilled. Its loss can and must mean only the loss of wood, bricks, and mortar; these must be replaced.” 926 But on that fateful day, October 7, 1944, Straight University had officially died: “[w]hen it died no bugles sounded; when it passed no church bells tolled.

925 “Citizens, Alumni Sad-Eyed as Men Rend Buildings.”
926 “To the Friends and Patrons of Straight University,” The Donaldsonville Chief (Donaldsonville, LA), Apr. 21, 1877.
There was naught but beat of hammers while the voices of workers called. To each other in the late summer they worked with might and main; turning that which had a soul back into brick and wood again."927 The university had actually ceased to exist years earlier in 1933, but the final dismantling of the dormitories, the classrooms, and the administration building rendered its demise. One observer noted, “[s]oon the vacant sight will teem with other hives of activity, and Straight College as a city landmark, will be no more. Hail and farewell!”928

This study told the story of Straight University from its foundation and development in Reconstruction New Orleans. The institution emerged within the social and political milieu after the Civil War: the Union occupation in April 1862; the complexity and uncertainty of presidential and congressional Reconstruction; the chaos and bloodshed during the New Orleans Massacre in 1866; the unprecedented democratic political process through the 1867 constitutional convention; and ultimately the spirit of brotherhood and equality manifest in the 1868 state constitution. The linkages between the social egalitarianism inherent in the 1868 state constitution and educational opportunities for people of color remained a prominent feature of Straight University’s foundation and early development. Yet, this study also extended beyond the Reconstruction experiment after 1877 and continued through the *Plessy v. Ferguson* legal challenge in the 1896. Straight University emerged as a foundation for the legal framework for the coordinated Supreme Court challenge and represented the final act of Afro-Creole protest during the nineteenth century.

From a methodological standpoint, to help guide the analysis, this dissertation incorporated qualitative historical research methods to elucidate how this Afro-Creole protest tradition created conditions and opportunities for democratic education. The goal was to provide

927 “Citizens, Alumni Sad-Eyed as Men Rend Buildings.”
928 “Citizens, Alumni Sad-Eyed as Men Rend Buildings.”
a framework to better understand fundamental questions about the past and to reimagine our historical understanding of the formation of democratic higher education at Straight during Reconstruction New Orleans. Through this process, I deconstructed dominant narratives that people in New Orleans struggled to form the same linkages between democratic society and popular education that emerged elsewhere throughout colonial, antebellum, and modern-day America.\textsuperscript{929}

Using an ethnographic historical lens—a convergence of anthropology and historical traditions, and includes subfields of social history, cultural history, and microhistory—I sought to reveal the symbolic meanings of everyday interaction. We could eavesdrop on Martinet and Desdunes at a Citizens’ Committee, catch a glimpse of the integrated classrooms at Straight, watch the protest unfold in the streets of New Orleans, and witness the changing patterns of race relations from the colonial period through the nineteenth century. Hence, for the purposes of this study, ethnographic history illuminated how Afro-Creoles in New Orleans and their allies and advocates created conditions for equality of access and opportunity in higher education, and it remained central to conceptually framing and understanding this topic.

**Summary and Conclusions**

Straight University emerged from the racial tension and upheaval that punctuated attempts at reform and suffrage for free people of color and the formerly enslaved. Efforts to transform racial dualism and dismantle slavery and segregation that Afro-Creoles Roudanez, Trévigne, Mary, Martinet, Desdunes, and others fought so hard to promote, were realized in developing the university. Without this revolution and reform, the egalitarian ethos and platform at Straight University during Reconstruction would not have been possible. For the university

\textsuperscript{929} Dawdy, *Building the Devil’s Empire*, 9; and Hendry, “A Shield Against the Calumnius Arrows Shot Against Us.”
did not discriminate based on race, ethnicity, gender, or religion; on the contrary, it represented a
democratic ideal of higher education for all students.

Indeed, Straight University developed at a time when people of color were free and
maintained manhood suffrage; however, they also remained under a constant specter of racism
and separateness that promoted a climate of racial discrimination, marginality, and suspicion. In
spite of this environment, the university promoted opportunities for democratic participation
through access to the educational enterprise. It offered an egalitarian space, free of racial
standardization and disdain, in which students could attain an education to become an educated,
free, and equal citizenry. The egalitarian frame from which the university developed is also a
testament to the networks of people and close-knit communities within and around New Orleans
itself, particularly evident in social spaces of Faubourg Tremé, Faubourg Marigny, and the Vieux
Carré. Afro-Creoles predominantly lived in these neighborhoods and it is no coincidence that
they remained so active at the university and comprised nearly three-quarters of the student
population.

As a way to better frame and situate the interplay of social, political, and economic forces
in developing democratic education at Straight University, this study was guided by a
fundamental research question: how did an Afro-Creole protest tradition help to create
educational opportunities for people of color in Reconstruction New Orleans at Straight
University? To answer this question and to develop a coherent and plausible argument,
ultimately this dissertation presented an alternative narrative on higher education in New
Orleans. It became a study that explored the different people and constituencies involved from
below—that is, the people that are overwhelmingly disadvantaged, exploited, and marginalized,
who articulate ideas and concerns against existing power dynamics.
In that frame, then, exploring Straight University from its initial foundation and development through the end of the nineteenth century engages the changing landscape of power, race, and class, as well as the communities and social dynamics that shaped the direction of education. The different networks of people and communities in New Orleans, and the distinct social and political environment that permeated throughout the city emerged as a viable foundation from which to build and develop a coherent history. Thus, this dissertation sought to present a historical narrative, as historian Gary Nash suggests, of what transpired within these black communities in the city (Faubourg Tremé) and not what happened to them in developing opportunities for education.\(^9\) It demonstrates that northern philanthropy did not instantly emerge after the Civil War, ready to save the four million formerly enslaved. Rather, the local black communities worked in concert with these organizations to make moral and democratic education a distinct possibility. Accordingly, Afro-Creoles proved indispensable in developing opportunities for equality, citizenship, and integrated education at Straight University during Reconstruction. They represented the city’s predominantly Catholic and French-speaking free black community and maintained a philosophy of political radicalism, revolution, and social and political protest.\(^1\)

It was important to explore and understand Afro-Creoles in New Orleans before and after the Civil War to address the guiding research question for this study, as well as a set of secondary research questions, first of which addressed how a racial consciousness in New Orleans played a role in the formation of Creole culture and identity and how this transcended to the development of Straight University. Though Chapter 2 examines Afro-Creole culture and identity in great detail, it was important for this study to lay a foundation for the complexity of

\(^1\) Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 1.
culture and blurred boundaries of race and class in New Orleans as a way to present an authentic analysis of Straight University. Therefore, the tangible racial consciousness in New Orleans throughout its history had a lasting legacy on the attendant political and economic consequences that determined how people lived their everyday lives together in social spaces in the city. These spaces are communal and holistic, for as historian Thomas Bender reminds us, “[t]he city is not bounded; its function is to be a nodal connection or peoples, things, and ideas, and that demands open borders.”

Given the implication of these spaces within the city itself, this leads the discussion to the second subsidiary research question: what social, political, and economic forces and specific conditions emanated during this period and how did this enhance moral and democratic education? It is impossible to examine higher education foundations in New Orleans during Reconstruction without exploring the education opportunities during the colonial and antebellum periods during the city’s history. In particular, the Ursuline attempts to deliver education were important since the determined (if not isolated) efforts of educating women—black, white, and Native American—illustrated a moral and democratic approach to intellectual curiosity and development. At a time when educating slaves remained illegal, the Ursuline nuns made a commitment to inclusive education irrespective of race, class, ethnicity, or status (free or enslaved) and laid a foundation for the first public, free education in the United States. This ideal extended through antebellum New Orleans with Afro-Creole initiatives in further developing moral and democratic education. The Catholic Institute and the Sisters of the Holy Family delivered education to people of color, notably at a time when the hardened racial barriers and distinctions remained perceptibly manifest in all aspects of daily life. Public

---

932 Bender, “Theory, Experience, and the Motion of History,” 499.
933 Hendry, “Creating a New Eden.”
education by mid-nineteenth century restricted access to white students, even though all along Afro-Creoles paid their share of taxation to fund the enterprise.

The Civil War represented an epochal event that redefined the social, political, and economic fabric of the country, leaving direct and transformational consequences for the New South. Education and democracy went hand-in-hand with freedom and liberty for all, important byproducts of the political trials and triumphs for people of color in individual state legislatures, as mentioned earlier. As demonstrated in Chapter 6, the social and political milieu in New Orleans remained determinedly resistant to change. Afro-Creoles continually fought for civil rights and integrated education; they directly appealed to President Lincoln; and they fought in the streets and represented voices of resistance in the press and in the conventions and legislature. Their unrelenting protest tradition helped to redefine the political, social, and economic composition in Louisiana, which, consequently, helped laid the foundation for higher education. It was at this point that integrated education moved beyond an idea or distinct possibility to a reality, incorporating an actual mandate for implementation and delivery.

This extends the discussion to the third subsidiary research question for the present study: what role does democracy play in higher education and how did Straight University attempt to embody this ideal in New Orleans as part of a broader segment of higher education in the United States? This research question helps to establish and situate the history of higher education in New Orleans and Straight University and illuminated how Afro-Creoles did not work alone in this effort. As demonstrated in greater detail in Chapter 7, the American Missionary Association and northern philanthropists helped make Straight University a reality. Afro-Creoles maintained significant influence at the institution, serving on boards, as faculty, and as donors. The university offered a space for Afro-Creole students and the formerly enslaved to learn without
fear or repudiation. They studied law, medicine, but mainly pursued a primary and secondary education. Straight University promoted teacher training through its normal department, an important initiative of the AMA’s want to develop an adequate supply of teachers in the South.

Despite the institution’s vast achievements in delivering moral and democratic education, the story of Straight is one of hardship and financial struggle. At a time when the research university movement proliferated throughout the United States in Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York, among other cities, Straight University struggled to stay in business. The emergent Jim Crow South dominated all facets of public accommodation in New Orleans, and the university inexorably shifted to an industrial educational offering and retained financial support from the Peabody Education Fund and the Slater Fund. These northern philanthropic entities ultimately determined Straight University’s fate when it indirectly forced the institution to merge with New Orleans University in 1933. The university closed its doors in 1935 and the campus ceased to exist by 1944.

**Possibilities and Limitations for Further Research**

A distinct limitation of this study is the paucity of available archival documents with which to present a comprehensive history of the social and institutional dynamics of Straight University. Although the extant source materials—notably from the Amistad Research Center at Tulane University and the Special Collections of the Will W. Alexander Library at Dillard University, in particular—offered direct opportunities to examine the university and Afro-Creole culture, identity, and intellectualism in promoting democratic education, they remained incessantly limited in scope. These archival documents present a portrait of the people who made this university a reality, but the information also conveys only a partial understanding. To be sure, it is often a daunting task and certain challenge to study a “dead” college or university,
particularly because of the limited data available. A researcher, accordingly, must be committed to tracing disparate archival documentation and to try and weave together a coherent narrative. Since much of Straight University’s institutional data from the Reconstruction period no longer exists, a palpable reminder of the damaging campus fire in 1877, letters, school catalogs, and newspapers emerge as important sources of information. It would have been helpful to glean other archival documents, institutional data such as financial reports, attendance records, and instructor profiles, in an effort to better understand the university’s finances, curriculum, student composition, and faculty.

Another limitation involves my own language barrier in accessing and analyzing archival source materials. An array of documentation does exist on Afro-Creoles, particularly Aristide Mary, Rodolphe Desdunes, Charles Louis Roudanez, and Paul Trévigne, but much of this documentation is written in French, for which I admittedly have a rather limited (if nonexistent) understanding. To promote a more thorough understanding of Afro-Creole culture and identity, then, particularly within the realm of politics and education, it is important to have a more nuanced understanding of the written French language. This is certainly not a requirement, but it can add much clarity in developing a more personal account of the people under review.

Despite these limitations, possibilities to expand this research are evident. Such possibilities might include a study on the merger of Straight University from a student and campus life standpoint. The university newspaper articulated a disappointed and often resentful tone before the merger, but it would be interesting to explore what transpired after the university closed and became Dillard University in the 1930s. How did students respond to this institutional change and did the campus relocation to Gentilly affect the student enrollment and composition or did it continue to represent a home for Afro-Creole students? Were the rich
traditions at Straight and its students, “Straight-ites,” forever lost or abandoned? Did Straight alumni no longer have an institution to call home? These questions can lead to a robust study on institutional closure and survival, as well as a coherent student development analysis that might add further clarity to understanding how one university ends and another begins.

To that end, another possibility for further research might include student collegiate athletics at Straight University in Jim Crow New Orleans. Baseball and football represented “manly sports” at the institution, in which students played against other student athletes from such schools as Leland University, New Orleans University, and Xavier University, among others (see Figure 9.1). But what did these games entail? Described as “social and communal events” in the Crescent City, often where over a thousand people attended to cheer on their team and show their school spirit, how did this summarize (if it did) extracurricular activities in the early-twentieth century? It is possible that student athletics in this context might add a more developed interpretation of the active student life at Straight University—that is, an opportunity to depict everyday life of students, replete with the attendant challenges and triumphs during their matriculation.

Figure 9.1 Photo of the Straight University Baseball Team, 1919

---

935 “Straight University Baseball Team.” Photograph. Courtesy of the Dillard Archives.
Another area for expanded research on Straight University might address the institution’s finances and endowment. Despite initial capital for buildings and the college campus, as well as continual fundraising campaigns, Straight University did not maintain even a satisfactory level of financial support from which to grow and sustain the enterprise. Thus, understanding how funding patterns and depleted revenue sources over time resulted in the inevitable partnerships with industrial philanthropy affected the institution’s identity and future growth warrants further examination. For example, if the university secured financial support and developed a solvent and expanding endowment on its own—not to mention a sophisticated institutional advancement program—would it have continued its fundamental mission of delivering a liberal education and culture in lieu of the inexorable push to industrial education? It would be important to understand how racism in the context of Jim Crow contributed to these efforts, as well as to develop a more in-depth understanding of the national and global economic implications during the 1870s.

Despite its important legacy, Straight University is now only a memory. There is no monument or any indication that it even existed other than the brief history of the college that Dillard University promotes on its website. Its original location on Esplanade Avenue has since been occupied by the Joseph S. Clark Preparatory High School, a public high school for students of color established in 1947. Its Canal Street location houses various commercial enterprises, and at first glance, the idea that a university once occupied this space seems incomprehensible to the modern-day observer. It is fitting, then, that one observer noted in October 1944, “[n]ow the ghost of Straight goes wandering down the thoroughfares of time.”

Finally, there is always a tempting allure for the historian to ponder “what if” when examining the historical past. What if racial discrimination and exclusion did not dominate the
patterns of educational development in New Orleans? What if separate and poorly funded institutions with redundant curriculums did not exist? What if access was available to all, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender or religion? How the course of higher education might have changed had racial discrimination, legal segregation, and bifurcated institutions not been in place. The city of New Orleans could have embraced their heritage and customs in meaningful ways to develop a coherent system of education based on intellectualism and democracy. A more developed sense of inclusion might have created opportunity structures for all students in the city as a way to transcend and redefine the mission and purposes of higher education. It very well might have positioned New Orleans as an epicenter for higher education and growth and development in more significant ways than it has today.

While New Orleans maintains a quality higher education system from a contemporary perspective, this process and this landscape, in a reimagined way, could be exciting and breathtaking to behold if only binary distinctions of race and class had not been a troubling and demeaning obstacle. We will never know or realize how the course of higher education might have developed had race not been a factor. The dual systems of public universities in Louisiana are constant reminders of this lineage. It is plausible, however, that a system free of hate and exclusion might very well have been one to envy and emulate and it might have ultimately readjusted how historians view colleges and universities in southern cities. Thus they would not be an educational backwater that resisted reform, as some suggest, but an inspiration in promoting moral and intellectual development.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Source Material


Ashley, Rev. Samuel. S.  Letter to Rev. Erastus M. Cravath, Apr. 17, 1873. American Missionary Association Archives, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

_____. Letter to Rev. Erastus M. Cravath, Apr. 16, 1874. American Missionary Association Archives, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

Bennett, Alfred P., Debates in the Convention for the Revision and Amendment of the Constitution of the State of Louisiana (New Orleans, LA: W. R. Fish, Printer to the Convention, 1864), Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Special Collections, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

C. McEwen Papers, 1930-1985, Box 14, Folder 6, AMA Archives.


Conway, Thomas W.  Letter to Editor, Washington National Republican (Washington, DC), June 4, 1874.


Diboll, Collins C., Vieux Carré Digital Survey, the Historic New Orleans Collection (Image ID: N-787).


Fannie Gossett valedictorian address, Straight University, 1890, Lucile L. Hutton Papers, 1850-1988, Box 4, Folder 12, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

Fenner, Erasmus Darwin An Account of the Yellow Fever at New Orleans, in the Year 1848 (New Orleans, LA, 1849).

Harrison, J. H., “Report of the President of the Faculty,” in Reports of Board of Trustees and President of the Faculty (New Orleans, LA: Southern University, 1884), v. In the James Birney Collections of Anti-Slavery Pamphlets, The Johns Hopkins University Sheridan Libraries.


____. Letter to “Brethren,” Jan. 15, 1869. Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

____. Letter to “Brethren,” Mar. 23, 1869. Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

____. Letter to “My Dear Brethren,” Mar. 26, 1869. Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

____. Letter to “My Dear Brethren,” June 25, 1869. Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

____. Letter to “My Dear Brethren,” Oct. 25, 1869. Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.
_____. Letter to “My Dear Brethren,” May 4, 1870. Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

_____. Donations to Straight University, 1870-1871. Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

_____. Personal Correspondence. Straight University Act of Incorporation (undated). Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

Henderson, George W., “Straight University,” pamphlet on Straight University, in George Longe Papers, 1849-1971, Box 3, Folder 6, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.


History of the Catholic Indigent Orphan Institute, Dauphine and Touro Street (New Orleans, LA: Published by the Board of Directors, 1915), Charles Rousseve Collection, Box 1, Folder 20, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

History of the Yellow Fever in New Orleans During the Summer of 1853 (Philadelphia and St. Louis: C. W. Kenworthy Publishers, 1854).


Isabelle, Robert. Letter to Rev. Erastus M. Cravath, Feb. 18, 1875. American Missionary Association Archives, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.


Loud, Oliver B, “Straight University of New Orleans: Its Influence in Louisiana,” in Will W. Alexander Library, Special Collections, Dillard University, New Orleans, LA.


_____. “The Violation of a Constitutional Right,” Published by Authority of the Citizens Committee (New Orleans, LA: The Crusader Print, Aug. 1893), 1-24. Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

_____. Letter to Albion W. Tourgée, Undated. Albion Winegar Tourgée Collection, Chautauqua County Historical Society, McClurg Museum.


McCaleb, Theodore Howard An address delivered at the request of the director of the public schools, of the Second Municipality, New Orleans (Feb. 22, 1843). Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

“New Orleans University.” Photograph (undated). Courtesy of the Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.


Plan of a Valuable Property/2d District, Clerk of Civil District Court, Notarial Archives Division, New Orleans LA (Dec. 21, 1865).

Reid, Whitelaw, After the War: A Southern Tour, May 1, 1865 to May 1, 1866 (New York, NY: Moore, Wilstach & Baldwin Publishers, 1866).


“Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes.” Lithograph. Courtesy of the Charles B. Rousseve papers, 1842-1994, Box 1, Folder 28, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.


“Southern University Central Building.” Photograph. Courtesy of Catalogue of Southern University, 1889-1890 (New Orleans, LA, 1890), University Library, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Urbana-Champaign, IL.

“St. Augustine Classroom.” Photograph (undated). Courtesy of Sisters of Mount Carmel Archives, New Orleans, LA.


____. Letter to Rev. George Whipple, AMA, Mar. 9, 1869. Box 32, Folder 24, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

____. Letter to Rev. George Whipple, AMA, Mar. 12, 1869. Box 32, Folder 24, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

____. Letter to Rev. George Whipple, AMA, Mar. 29, 1869. Box 32, Folder 24, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

____. Letter to Rev. George Whipple, AMA, Dec. 31, 1869. Box 32, Folder 24, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

____. Letter to Rev. George Whipple, AMA, Jan. 14, 1870. Box 32, Folder 24, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

____. Letter to Rev. George Whipple, AMA, June 2, 1870. Box 32, Folder 24, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

“Straight University.” Sketching (undated). Courtesy *Straight University Catalogue, 1870-1871*, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

“Straight University,” 1892. Photograph. Courtesy of the Will W. Alexander Library, Special Collections, Dillard University, New Orleans, LA.

“Straight University Baseball Team,” 1919. Photograph. Courtesy of the Will W. Alexander Library, Special Collections, Dillard University, New Orleans, LA.

“Straight University Faculty and Students.” Photograph (undated). Courtesy of the Will W. Alexander Library, Special Collections, Dillard University, New Orleans, LA.

“Straight University Female Students.” Photograph (undated). Courtesy of the Will W. Alexander Library, Special Collections, Dillard University, New Orleans, LA.

“Straight University Male Student.” Photograph (undated). Courtesy of the Will W. Alexander Library, Special Collections, Dillard University, New Orleans, LA.

“Theological Department Students,” Photograph. Courtesy of the Will W. Alexander Library, Special Collections, Dillard University, New Orleans, LA.

“Thomy Lafon.” Photograph. Reproduced from the “History of the Catholic Indigent Orphan Institute, Dauphine and Touro Street” (New Orleans, LA: Published by the Board of Directors, 1915), Charles Rousseve Collection, Box 1, Folder 20, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.


Wadley, Sarah Lois, Diary, Feb. 22, 1864. Southern Historical Collection, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Call No. 1258.


Institutional Records, Government Documents, and Court Cases

Alumni Catalogue of the Medical Department of the Tulane University of Louisiana, 1847-1901. Tulane University Medical Department. Special Collections, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana & Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA.


Biennial Report, Southern University, Sessions 1889-1900 (New Orleans, LA, 1900). University Library, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Urbana-Champaign, IL.

Biennial Report, Southern University, Sessions 1903-1904 (New Orleans, LA, 1904). University Library, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Urbana-Champaign, IL.

Biennial Report, Southern University, Sessions 1906-1907 and 1907-1908 (New Orleans, LA, 1908). University Library, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Urbana-Champaign, IL.

Catalogue of the New Orleans University, 1877-1878 (New Orleans, LA: Southwestern Advocate Print, 1878), 17. University Library, University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Urbana-Champaign, IL.

Catalogue of the New Orleans University, 1916-1917 (New Orleans, LA: Southwestern Advocate Print, 1878), 17. University Library, University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Urbana-Champaign, IL.

Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Leland University (New Orleans, LA, 1884-1885). Courtesy of The Sheridan Libraries, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD.

Catalogues of Southern University, 1882-1900 (New Orleans, LA, 1890). University Library, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Urbana-Champaign, IL.

Constitution of the State of Louisiana, 1845. Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Special Collections, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

Constitution of the State of Louisiana, 1864. Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Special Collections, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.


Constitution of the State of Louisiana, 1879. Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Special Collections, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

Executive Committee Records, American Missionary Association Minutes, June 1919-January 1930. Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

General Assembly of the State of Louisiana, Act. 1890, No. 111. New Orleans Police Department Arrest books, AB-11, Louisiana Division, New Orleans Public Library.


Straight University, Act of Incorporation, June 25, 1869. Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

Straight University Catalogues, 1870-1901 (New Orleans, LA). Will W. Alexander Library, Special Collections, Dillard University, New Orleans, LA.

Thirtieth Annual Report of the American Missionary Association, 1876, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.
Thirty-First Annual Report of the American Missionary Association, 1877, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

Thirty-Second Annual Report of the American Missionary Association, 1878, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

Twentieth Annual Report of the American Missionary Association, 1866, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

Twenty-Fifth Annual Report of the American Missionary Association, 1871, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

Twenty-First Annual Report of the American Missionary Association, 1867, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

Twenty-Fourth Annual Report of the American Missionary Association, 1870, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

Twenty-Sixth Annual Report of the American Missionary Association, 1872, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.


XIV Amendment, U. S. Constitution

Yearbook of the New Orleans University, 1900-1901 (New Orleans, LA: New Orleans University Print, 1901), 29. Courtesy of the University Library, University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Urbana-Champaign, Illinois.

Newspapers and Periodicals

“A Separate Church,” The Crusader (New Orleans, LA), 1891.


“Dr. Louis Charles Roudanez,” *The Crusader* (New Orleans, LA), July 1890.

“Grand Colored Musical Concert,” *The Kansas City Sun* (Kansas City, MO), Nov. 21, 1914.


“To the Friends and Patrons of Straight University,” *The Donaldsonville Chief* (Donaldsonville, LA), Apr. 21, 1877.


“What We Meant to Say,” *The Crusader* (New Orleans, LA), 1891.

**Secondary Source Material**

**Unpublished Theses, Dissertations, and Papers**


Hyde, Sarah Lipscomb, “Teach Us Incessantly: Lessons and Learning in the Antebellum Gulf South” (PhD diss., Louisiana State University, 2010).


Articles, Books, and Book Chapters


_____. “French Religious Culture in Afro-Creole New Orleans, 1718-1877,” in *U.S. Catholic Historian* 17, no. 2 (Spring 1999), 1-16.

_____. “The Common Wind’s Creole Visionary: Dr. Louis Charles Roudanéz,” in *South Atlantic Review* 73, no. 2 (Spring 2008), 10-25.


Brown, M. Christopher, *The Quest to Define Collegiate Segregation: Black Colleges, Title VI Compliance, and Post-Adams Litigation* (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1999).


Burke, Peter, New Perspectives on Historical Writing (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 2001).

_____. What is Cultural History (What is History?), (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2004).

_____. History and Social Theory (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2005).

Casey, Edward, “How to Get From Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time: Phenomenological Prolegomena,” in Steven Field and Keith H. Basso, Senses of Place (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1999).


Finlay, Robert “The Refashioning of Martin Guerre” in *American Historical Review*, v. 93, No. 3 (June, 1988), 553-571.


Gurevich, Aaron, Historical Anthropology of the Middle Ages (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).


Hutton, Lucile L., “Couvent Marie,” Lucile L. Hutton Papers, 1850-1988, Box 17, Folder 1, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.


Otto, Jesse J. “The Father of Negro Musicians of Omaha,”” *Nebraska History*, 92 (Fall 2011), 106–117.


Vincent, Charles, “Laying the Cornerstone at Southern University,” in Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association 17, no. 3 (Summer, 1976): 335-342.


Wedell, Marsha, “Founding Newcomb College,” in Susan Tucker and Beth Willinger (Eds.), Newcomb College, 1886-2006 (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University, 2012).


Young, Lawrence “History and Origin of the Marie Couvent School at 2021 Pauger,” Lucile L. Hutton Papers, 1580-1988, Box 17, Folder 2, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.
VITA

Dana Charles Hart, a native of Newburyport Massachusetts, received his Bachelor of Arts degree in history at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst in 1998. He earned his Master of Arts degree in higher education administration at Boston College in 2002.

Dana has 14 years of higher education experience and served in various roles including student advising, student affairs and student development, admissions, career development, financial aid, and enrollment management. This experience encompasses a wide range of institutional settings, including Newbury College, Harvard University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Louisiana State University.