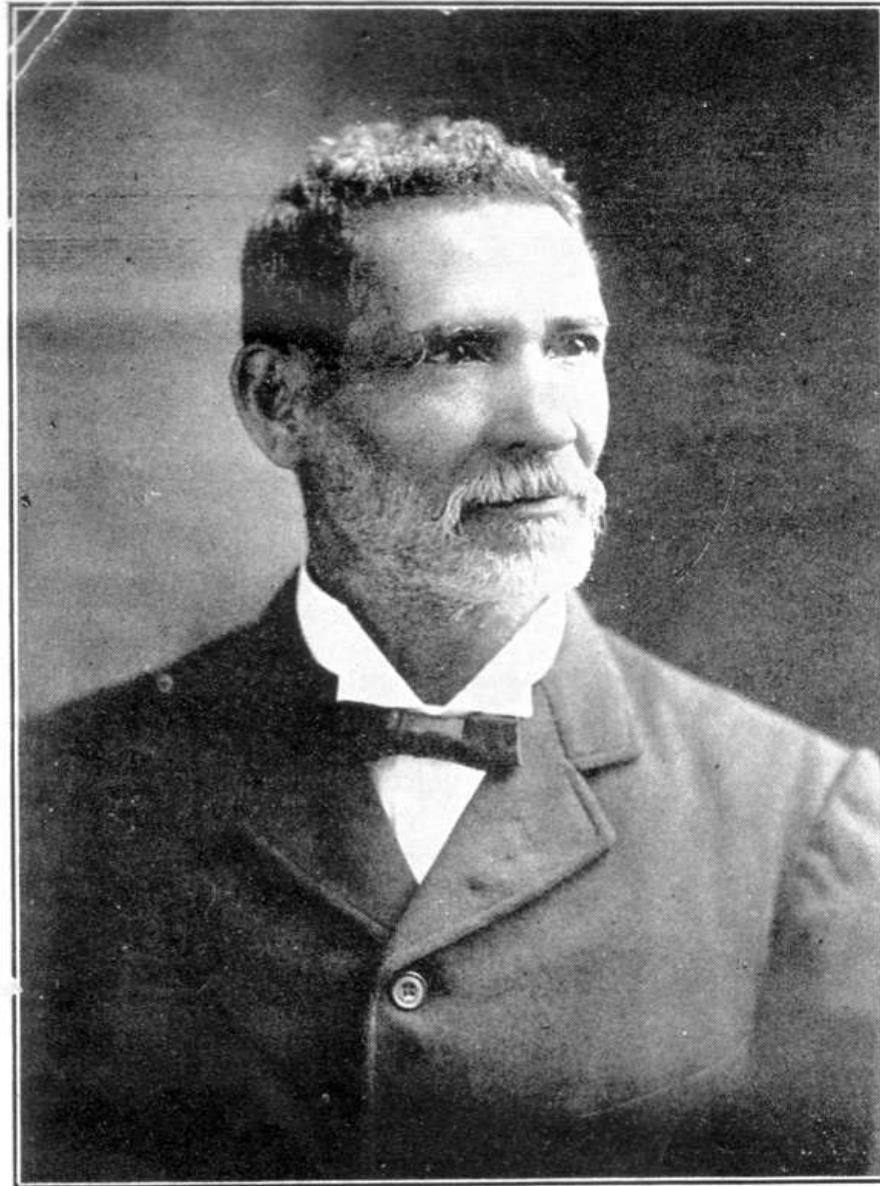


Louisiana Creoles During the Civil War and Reconstruction



*Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes (1849-1928)
Civil rights activist and Creole.*

Rob Shapiro

George Fuller, a northern portraitist, painted *The Quadroon* in 1880. The painting, which hangs today in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, is of a mixed race woman, known at the time as a Quadroon or Creole. The work was produced from memory, the subject fictional. However, art scholars believe Fuller's inspiration comes from his first trip to the South in 1849. During his travels, Fuller recorded in his journal,

“Who is this girl with eyes large and black? The blood of the white and dark races is at enmity in her veins – the former predominated. About three-fourths white says one dealer. Three-fourths blessed, a fraction accursed. She is under thy feet, white man...Is she not your sister?...She impresses me with sadness! The pensive expressions of her finely formed mouth and her drooping eyes seemed to ask for sympathy...Now she looks up, now her eyes fall before the rude gaze of those who are but calculating her charms or serviceable qualities...Oh, is beauty so cheap!”¹



*George Fuller, THE QUADROON, 1880.
Oil on canvas. Collection, The Metropolitan
Museum of Art, New York.*

This enslaved Creole woman and the memory of her sale must have remained with Fuller, perhaps even haunting him, as she became the subject of his art 30 years after their encounter. The painting evokes the same sensations of fascination and sadness that occupied Fuller in 1849. One critic writing in the *Springfield Republican* said in 1880,

¹ Sarah Burns, "Images of Slavery: George Fuller's Depictions of the Antebellum South," *American Art Journal* 15, no. 3 (Summer 1983): 36.

“The face...is like that of a hopeless Undine, whose tricksey [sic] graces and happy spirits have been clouded but not sanctioned by the love that has come to her. The woman is awakened and exalted, but the slave is lower than ever...It is the history and burden of a race that this beautiful creature bears”²

The painting and its history represent the Creoles in antebellum Louisiana and Reconstruction, as they illustrates the precarious position of the Creole somewhere between white and black. Many Creoles were free before the Civil War, and occupied a caste³ between that of the slaves’ and the white men’s. Creoles were allowed their own business pursuits and maintained agency over their private lives. In such ventures they were highly successful and practiced great business acumen, heavily emphasized education, and maintained rich cultural lives. And yet, they were still subjugated below the white race. One white visitor to a Creole party in New Orleans puzzled, “Many of them had been educated in Paris, and more than one Parisian wardrobe shimmered that evening under the...chandeliers...But they were only niggers. They might be presented to the Empress Eugénie;⁴ they might aspire to the loftiest connections in Europe; but they were not fit to appear in a white man’s house in New Orleans.”⁵ Creoles in antebellum Louisiana occupied a truly confusing position in some sort of racial limbo. Moreover, the

² Sarah Burns, "Black-Quadroon Gypsy Women in the Art of George Fuller," *The Massachusetts Review* 26, no. 2/3 (Summer-Fall 1985): 410.

³ The definition of caste used in this paper is taken from Dipankar Gupta, "Caste and Politics: Identity over System," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21 (2005): 10. Gupta defines caste as “Racial stratification...with elaborate and ritualized rules that ordain not just how distinctions should be maintained, but also prescribe sanctions should the norms be violated. It is this obsessive attention to the slightest variation in ritual ranking that marks out caste from other forms of stratification.”

⁴ Empress of France, Wife of Napoleon III, 1826-1920.

⁵ Page Smith, *Trail by Fire: A People's History of the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982), 639.

ensuing period of the Civil War and Reconstruction drastically altered the Creoles' political and racial outlook, further confusing their precarious position.

Historians have failed to capture Creoles' unique and perplexing development during the Civil War and Reconstruction. Eric Foner, for example, notes in *Reconstruction*, that Black Republicans unified behind New Orleans' Creole population, but the two races were often at odds with each other. He offers no further explanation.⁶ John W. Blassingame assumes in *Black New Orleans* that the Creoles accepted their racial duty to the ex-slaves "with a deep sense of nobleness oblige" and stepped up as political leaders, forgetting to mention that many owned slaves before the Civil War and joined the Confederate Army before switching allegiances to the North.⁷ The failure of historians to answer even the most basic questions regarding the Creoles' political views, racial outlooks, religious preferences, and social tendencies, for example, is indeed a testament to the Creoles' confusing position throughout the Civil War and Reconstruction.

The Creoles' historiography has also fallen victim to the limitations of separating history by era. For the majority of historians, the Civil War acts as a cut off between two drastically different periods in American history. The commonly used terms antebellum and post-bellum illustrate academia's commitment to segmenting and compartmentalizing American history. However, a comparison of Creoles before and after the Civil War demonstrates a clearly disjointed history. In their case, the convenient cut-off of the Civil War has masked from scholars the drastic changes that occurred somewhere between the antebellum and post-bellum periods.

⁶ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution*. New York: Harper & Row, 1988, 318.

⁷ Blassingame, *Black New Orleans*, 56.

Creoles' before the Civil War pursued a selfish, insincere policy bordering on self-hatred yet justified by pragmatism. Acting out of fear that their caste could crumble into the bottom tier of the racial hierarchy, the Creoles sought to alienate the low Negroes while merging their caste with the upper-tiered whites. An editorial published in the *Daily Picayune*, a white paper, illustrates the Creoles' political strategy of class merger:

“Our free colored population form a distinct class from those elsewhere in the United States. Far from being antipathetic to the whites, they have followed in their footsteps, and progressed with them, with a commendable spirit of emulation...As a general rule, the free colored people of Louisiana, and especially of New Orleans –the 'Creole colored people,' as they style themselves- are a sober, industrious and moral class, far advanced in education and civilization.”⁸

The Creoles' political strategy that was defined in the antebellum period by an attempt to emulate the white caste, was, however, unrecognizable after the Civil War.

By 1865, Creoles pursued with incredible sincerity and benevolence a moralistic mission of racial equality. David C. Rankin's study of political leadership in New Orleans during Reconstruction is illuminating. Of the known New Orleans black politicians, 97.1% were free before the war and even a higher percentage were of mixed race.⁹ Moreover, their ascent to political office was marked with a dignified attitude of racial loyalty and optimistic attitude. Creole and Republican Party leader John Willis Ménard published in the Creole paper the *New Orleans Tribune* that all Negroes should

⁸ James G. Hollandsworth, *The Louisiana Native Guards: The Black Military Experience During the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 5-6.

⁹ David C. Rankin, "The Origins of Black Leadership in New Orleans During Reconstruction," *Journal of Southern History* 40, no. 3 (August 1974): 421, 429.

“look at a white man as a mere common human being, and not as a ruler or superior.”¹⁰

Creole Lieutenant Governor P.B.S. Pinchback wrote in the *Black Republican*, “We owe our successes, gentlemen, under God, first to ourselves. Without abatement to the meed [sic] or dues of the true [white] men that helped us in our distress, I affirm we possessed the laments in ourselves that needed the occasion only of a great revolution to develop them.”¹¹

Why did the Creoles, who before the Civil War shunned Louisiana’s Negroes as a lower people not worthy of freedom, join their political cause and support them with such sincerity and gusto? Answering this question requires dissecting Louisiana Reconstruction to uncover moments of ideological change and political realignment. Moreover, it will be essential to avoid the pitfalls of prior historians and transcend the traditional limitations imposed by the ante and post-bellum historical cutoffs. Lastly, the story is particularly difficult because it is seemingly unnatural. Rarely does morality and benevolence result from the sanctioned killing of thousands. President Lincoln begged, though, in his Second Inaugural Address,

“if God wills that it [war] continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still It must be said ‘the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.’ With malice toward none, with charity for all.”¹²

The Creoles’ story is the realization of Lincoln’s plea.

¹⁰ John Willis Ménard, "Black and White," *New Orleans Tribune*, October 31, 1868.

¹¹ Quoted in: Rankin, "The Origins of Black Leadership in New Orleans During Reconstruction," 434.

¹² Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address

Lincoln's call for a pious political future demonstrates the intertwining of morality and politics; a common result of the Civil War. Author Harry S. Stout argues in "Upon the Altar of the Nation" that the Civil War was commonly the catalyst of a newfound coherence. He writes, "As the war descended into a killing horror, the ground of justification underwent a transformation from a just defensive war fought out of sheer necessity to preserve home and nation to a moral crusade for freedom that would involve nothing less than a national rebirth, a spiritual revival. And in that blood and transformation a national religion was born."¹³ The Creole population of Louisiana was not immune to these ideological developments, which Jean-Jacques Rousseau called "civil religion." Rousseau used this term to describe the melding of Christianity and nationalism into a new creed. Rowland Sherrill summarizes civil religion as "a form of devotion, outlook, and commitment that deeply and widely binds the citizens of the nation together with ideas they possess and express about the sacred nature, the sacred ideals, the sacred character, and sacred meanings of their country."¹⁴ It should be noted that the phrase civil religion never appeared in any writings from the Civil War or Reconstruction era. The Creoles likely never knew they were practicing such a doctrine. Rather, they might have simply called their position nationalistic or moralistic. However, civil religion practiced by the Creoles was more than a patriotic outlook: it was an unalterable belief and unshakable commitment to the founding ideas of the nation, such as liberty and equality for *all*.

¹³ Harry S. Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006), xxi.

¹⁴ Rowland A. Sherrill, ed., *Religion and the Life of the Nation: American Recoveries* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1990), 8.

The Creoles' transformation during the Civil War and Reconstruction –their unprecedented development of a commitment to racial equality- can be explained through their adoption of civil religion. Their selfish and pragmatic political position before the Civil War based on self-advancement illustrates a community with no commitment to civil religion. However, the gradual development of civil religion can be seen in the Creoles' growing interest in the improvement of the ex-slave that develops after their realignment with the Union and later the Free State Party. Their attempts to improve the ex-slaves can be interpreted as an effort to teach the Negroes the same doctrine. The unification of the two races represents a shared commitment to this enlightened patriotism. Lastly, The Creoles' genuine and sincere commitment to racial equality illustrated throughout the remainder of Reconstruction and culminating in *Plessy vs. Ferguson* is the execution of their commitment to civil religion.

According to linguists Sylvie Dubois and Megan Malnçon, the original definition of Creole includes all white descendents of French, Spanish, German, Irish, and Acadian settlers prior to the Louisiana Purchase. They surmise that due to the massive amounts of interracial breeding, any native Louisianan can claim the term Creole under the original definition. Regardless, the definition of Creole that affects Louisiana Reconstruction and the one we will use did not developed until the early 1800s. Dubois and Malnçon write,

“As the English-speaking community grew, however, the Creoles began to lose political, social, economic, and numeric dominance; and an anti-American sentiment also began to grow. Interestingly, it is at this time that one finds the most documents indentifying people in Louisiana as ‘Creoles,’ perhaps because of

the rapidly growing awareness of the danger posed to their culture by the 'outsiders.'"¹⁵

Dubois and Malnçon suggest that Creoles opted for their own unique racial position as insulation against increasing pressures of Americanization. However, Floyd D. Cheung argues there also may have been external pressures.

"During French and Spanish rule from 1718 to 1802, wealthy of color heads a large amount of prestige, but their power quickly waned in the face of an American social and legal system associated their dark skin color with inferiority and yet feared them as leaders in a potential abolitionist movement."¹⁶

The Creole caste, then, was molded in the early 1800s by conscious internal decisions to protect their culture against encroaching Americanization as well as by external forces motivated by fear and racism to subjugate Louisiana's Creole population. In 1808, the Spanish government legally recognized this unique group. The law read, "Free persons and slaves are incapable of contracting marriage together; the celebration of such marriages is forbidden, and the marriage is void; it is the same with respect to he marriages contracted by free white persons with free people of color." Virginia R. Dominguez helps readers appreciate the significance of this legal code. The law, she explains, seeks to prevent marriage across two boundaries, and therefore, demonstrates the existence of three castes.¹⁷ The three-tiered Louisiana racial hierarchy survived French occupation, the Louisiana Purchase, and American annexation.

¹⁵ Sylvie Dubois and Megan Malnçon, "Creole Is, Creole Ain't: Diachronic and Synchronic Attitudes toward Creole Identity," *Language in Society* 29, no. 2 (June 2000): 241.

¹⁶ Floyd D. Cheung, "'Les Canelles' and Quadroon Balls: 'Hidden Transcripts' of a Resistance and Domination in New Orleans, 1803-1845," *The Southern Literary Journal* 29, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 3.

¹⁷ Virginia R. Dominguez, *White by Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University, 1986), 25.

It is important to recognize the subtle yet essential distinctions between free Negroes and Creoles in Louisiana before the Civil War. This, however, is an unfortunately difficult task as the distinction is both racial and social. Racially, free people of color usually were mixed race (77% in Louisiana in 1860) and few mixed race people served as slaves (74%).¹⁸ Therefore, “Negro” was generally synonymous with slave while “Creole” meant a free man occupying the middle caste of the racial hierarchy. This is not to say, though, that all dark skinned free people can accurately be coined Creoles. Aside from the shade of skin, there were a number of less concrete differences that separated the castes. Creoles’ social, religious, and economic lives mirrored that of the white population. For example, Creoles were financially well off, maintained a decidedly European culture, usually practiced Catholicism, and received their education in private schools in New Orleans, the North, or abroad. Negroes, on the other hand, were less often skilled laborers, commonly practiced Protestantism or voodoo, and were generally less educated. Creoles light skin and white practices separated them from the Free Negroes. For example, white Virginian Elizabeth Potter wrote of a Creole eligible, “He came back [from Paris] highly educated, a wealthy gentleman, and greatly sought after for his millions and his handsome appearance...”¹⁹ Such a description could never be mistaken for a free Negro.

Despite Creoles’ white social practices that distinguished them from free Negroes, they were nonetheless repressed under the higher, white caste. Floyd D. Cheung, to illustrate their subjugation, points to the government supported elite Quadroon and

¹⁸ John W. Blassingame, *Black New Orleans: 1860-1880* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1973), 10-11.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

Octaroon balls, where Creole women were presented to white men as concubines. Creole men were not included in these events, and were forced to silently accept the subjugation of their blackness. These events were harsh reminders of their second-class positions. For Cheung, the balls illustrate the low and difficult position of Louisiana's Creoles.²⁰ Moreover, they point out the many racial inconsistencies of a class that sought to imitate those who oppressed them.

Although Creoles certainly occupied a second-class position, they also coveted their hierarchy above the slave caste. It may seem counterintuitive for a subjugated race to further repress their darker counterpart. However, Creoles' acceptance of slavery before the Civil War is likely the result of two separate mentalities both simultaneously at work. Firstly, Creoles social and economic success facilitated their subjugation of the Negro caste. John W. Blassingame provides a strong analysis of records from New Orleans in the 1850s that illustrates the Creoles' vast success over the bottom Negro caste. Blassingame derives from the 1850 Census, for example, that 90% of New Orleans' Creoles were skilled laborers. He also commends the Creoles for their success as bankers, real estate brokers, and slave owners. In 1830, 735 Creoles owned an aggregate of 2,351 slaves. Even more impressive, in 1850, New Orleans' Creoles owned a total of \$2,214,020 in property. Blassingame also points out the significance Creoles placed on education. 1,000 Creoles attended private schools in New Orleans.²¹

Newspaper articles from the *Daily Creole*, a New Orleans paper that ran in 1856, demonstrate that the Creoles' economic accomplishments facilitated a closer tie to the White community and contributed to their acceptance of Negro bondage. An article titled

²⁰ Cheung, "Les Canelles' and Quadroon Balls," 5-8.

²¹ Blassingame, *Black New Orleans*, 10-11.

“Consistency of the ‘Nigger-Worshippers’” rejects emancipation, arguing, “Abolitionism and freesoilism corrupts every man that touches it. It is a foul fungus, and we are rejoiced that in the late election its most vital part was cut off.” The Creoles’ rejection of the Negro slaves stemmed from their advanced social position in addition to their economic success. When Ohio’s black population wanted to be buried in the nicer white cemetery, the “elites” rejected the measure. The *Daily Creole* thought this “sensible.”²² Creoles indeed looked to their accomplishments as justification for their position over slaves. Since the Negroes were unable to accomplish such societal standing, Creoles believed, their natural position was in bondage. One article also published in the *Daily Creole* sighted a former slave who found free life too challenging. “He added that he had rather, to-day, to be a slave on a Southern plantation than a free Negro at the North. Some of the party of republican proclivity, found it difficult to gullup [sic] down this statement; but seriousness with which it was uttered left no doubt of its truth.”²³

The evidence also suggests that Louisiana’s Creoles were inclined to take a proslavery position as a political tactic to thin the barriers between their caste and the whites’ and insulate themselves against identification with the Negroes’ caste. An article titled “American Doctrines necessary to the Safety of the South” published in the *Daily Creole* supports the Know Nothing Party as “of the utmost importance to the peace of the country.”²⁴ The Know Nothing Party was characterized by xenophobia against German and Irish immigrants and harsh anti-Catholic sentiment. In fact, membership in

²² "Consistency Of The 'Nigger-Worshippers,'" *New Orleans Daily Creole*, November 24, 1856.

²³ "Free Negro Life At The North," *New Orleans Daily Creole*, July 1, 1856.

²⁴ "American Doctrines necessary to the Safety of the South," *New Orleans Daily Creole*, July 1, 1856.

the political faction was limited to Protestant males of British-American lineage. It seems counterintuitive that Creoles, many of whom likely would not be permitted to join the Know Nothing Party due to their Spanish, French, Caribbean, Irish and German decent and Catholic beliefs, would back the faction. However, this odd alliance demonstrates that Creoles pursued a pragmatic political strategy based on alliance with the white caste. Dubois and Melnçon point out that in the years leading up to the Civil War, racial hostility grew and whites “increasingly perceived the entire Colored population as the common enemy, regardless of their social status.”²⁵ Creoles demonstrated political allegiance to the South to highlight their white blood and play down their Negro heritage.

Pre-Civil War, the Creoles’ political position stemmed from a pragmatic attempt to insulate against the lower class and thin the line between their caste and the white caste. Unloyal to the nation and to the Negroes, whose blood and subjugated social standing they shared, the Creoles cared only about their own advancement. Their morality was corrupted by self-interest, their loyalty decayed by pecuniary goals, and their patriotism sacrificed for social advancement. This position, characterized by a lack of civil religion, continued into the Civil War when Creoles aligned with the Confederacy.

During the outbreak of the Civil War, much of Louisiana’s able Creole population immediately enlisted with the Confederacy. After Louisiana Governor Thomas O. Moore requested help from New Orleans’ Creoles, “Nearly two-thousand persons, representing the flower of the free colored population of New Orleans, met...to take into

²⁵ Dubois and Malnçon, "Creole Is, Creole Ain't," 241.

consideration...these resolutions.”²⁶ During a Creole community meeting, on April 22, 1861, they made the democratic and unanimous decision to serve.

However, their service in the black troop of the Louisiana State Militia, known as the Native Guard, was short-lived and uneventful. Confederate leadership lacked faith in the Creole regiments and busied them with drills and marches rather than real duties. When the Union Navy approached New Orleans in the Spring of 1862, Confederate forces were ordered out of the city and New Orleans was taken with only a short naval fight. The Native Guard though, refused to retreat from New Orleans and their allegiance with the Confederacy quickly came to an end. By August, the Creoles joined the Union army under General Benjamin F. Butler.²⁷

The Creoles' decision to enlist with the Confederacy is consistent with their pragmatic political position before the Civil War and should not come as a surprise. Joining the rebel army was a concrete way for Creoles to demonstrate their similarities to Louisiana's white population. There is also evidence that other factors contributed to the Creoles' decision to fight for the South. Some likely felt that opposing the Confederacy would be physically dangerous. Charles W. Gibbons, a Creole living in New Orleans before the war, noted that refusal to join could have resulted in property confiscation or death.²⁸ Nonetheless, the Creoles' decision to support the Confederacy is not surprising. Rather, it represents a continuation of their pre-war political scheme to distance themselves from the Negro caste and accentuate their whiteness.

²⁶ “Meeting of the Free Colored Population,” *New Orleans Daily Picayune*, April 21, 1861.

²⁷ Donald E. Everett, "Ben Butler and the Louisiana Native Guards, 1861-1862," *Journal of Southern History* 24, no. 2 (May 1958): 204.

²⁸ Hollandsworth, *The Louisiana Native Guards*, 16.

The Creoles' unique wartime events are also telling of their position on civil religion. If civil religion is characterized by a commitment to virtue and a rejection of immorality, the Creoles' service during the Civil War represents a rejection of this doctrine. Rather than putting the path of the nation over their own advancement, Creoles pursued selfish and practical goals. One Creole reflected on his caste's service in the Confederacy, "At this point in our history, people were most cautious in their criticisms of existing situations. The pursuit of personal satisfaction or the persistent acquisition of material things of life occupied them."²⁹ The Creoles' original commitment to the Confederacy and their decision to switch allegiances demonstrates that the Creoles' goals took precedent over national development. One Creole admitted to Union General Butler, "No matter where I fight; I only wish to spend what I have, and fight as long as I can, if only my boy may stand in the street equal to a white boy when the war is over."³⁰ This Creole made no references to equality for the Negroes. Rather, the Creoles' own agenda took precedent over the moral path.

While on one hand, the Creoles' participation on the Confederate side can be interpreted as a continuation of their pre-war ideological outlook focused on self-improvement, their decision to switch sides is telling of a drastic political change within the caste. Their transfer of allegiance represents a major departure from the pre-war political tactic of class merger. According to David C. Rankin, 59% of black or Creole Louisiana Reconstruction political leaders served in the Union military and many also

²⁹ Ibid., 4.

³⁰ Joseph T. Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 3.

served under the Confederate flag before switching allegiances.³¹ The large number of politicians that served on both sides suggests that the transfer of allegiance from Confederate to Union parallels a new socio-political outlook: dissolution with the white caste that resulted in a new racial bond with Louisiana's Negroes. This change was nothing short of extreme. Creoles' pre-Civil War socio-political aspirations, marked by a desire to join the upper caste, are vividly disjointed from their post war political position of racial equality. This developing new position first began during the Civil War, when blatant racist snubs against Creoles in the rebel military resulted in the Creole realization that the two castes would never be one under the antebellum socio-political order. Their dissolution with white Confederates resulted in an abandonment of the caste merger strategy. Instead, the Creoles chose a new political strategy of Northern alliance.

Entering the Civil War, Creoles believed only a thin line separated their caste from the white caste. Moreover, Louisiana's Creole population maintained a high degree of religious, social, and economic freedom. Their light complexion and independence caused Creoles to identify with the white caste over the bottom caste of slaves.³² For Creoles, service in the Confederacy was the ultimate demonstration of their whiteness and they expected their service would disintegrate any barriers between the Creole and white castes. Captain Henry Ray Louis of the Native Guards expressed the Creoles' expectation of caste merger at a Christmas banquet in 1861. Louis toasted the rebel cause,

³¹ Rankin, "The Origins of Black Leadership in New Orleans During Reconstruction," 434.

³² Hollandsworth, *The Louisiana Native Guards*, 5.

hoping the outcome would “give birth to the progress of man, and lead him on the way to true fraternity.”³³

However, the whites perceived a bigger gap between the castes than the Creoles desired, and the Creoles were often reminded of this discrepancy during their service. For example, the Creoles chose enthusiastically to support the South and even outfitted their company at their own expense. Several months later, the Native Guard still had not received any financial assistance. The independent paper the *Daily Picayune* noted, “Most of these companies, quite unaided by the administration, have supplied themselves with arms with no regard to cost or trouble.”³⁴ For their enthusiasm, the Native Guard was rewarded with blatant snubs. In September of 1861, Union prisoners arrived in New Orleans. One General suggested the Native Guards escort the prisoners, a great honor as the event would be highly publicized. However, the Native Guards were passed up for the job in place of a white regiment. The Creoles recognized the insult.³⁵ In February 1862, a new statute required all militia consist solely of white males, and thus the Native Guard was disbanded. The State Governor later overturned the initiative, reinstating the Louisiana Native Guard. Nonetheless, the temporary disbandment was another rebuff.³⁶

Attempts to force Creoles into service also likely contributed to a deterioration of inter-caste relations. Although it is impossible to know how real and prevalent conscription was for the Creoles, it helps explain why Creoles took the opportunity to abandon the Confederacy. Captain Sauvenet, a member of the Native Guard, explained to

³³ *New York Times*, November 5, 1862.

³⁴ *New Orleans Daily Picayune*, November 24, 1861.

³⁵ Hollandsworth, *The Louisiana Native Guards*, 7.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

Union General Benjamin Butler, "If we had not volunteered they would have forced us into the ranks, and we would have been suspected."³⁷ For Sauvenet and any other Creole forced into military service, conscription represented a breach of the pre-war White-Creole alliance. Forced service was a real reminder to Creoles of their position below the whites.

For the Creoles these factors culminated in a disunion with the upper caste. Service in the Confederacy was harsh yet undeniable evidence to the Creoles that the two castes were farther apart than they had previously realized. The realization that caste merger was hopeless caused Creoles to abandon their old strategy and pursue a new political alliance with the North. While Creole politics before the war had been driven by socio-political gain through the emphasis of a white identity, their pursuit of improvement now diverged from the political goals of Louisiana's upper caste. Their new Republican outlook, though, was still driven by pragmatism, and did not represent a newfound morality or humanistic racial outlook. Rather, it came simply from the realization that their old strategy was hopeless. Constant belittling in the Confederate army made it painfully clear that Creoles' advancement was no longer tied to the Confederate whites' political success. The Creole's dissolution with the Confederacy and Southern social hierarchy caused by second-class treatment in the rebel militia is essential in understanding the new political alliance that later between Creoles and Negroes.

While the Civil War made Creoles rethink their political strategy, Reconstruction drastically altered Louisiana's socio-political order. Now, whiteness was no longer a

³⁷ Ibid., 16.

prerequisite for a position in the upper echelons of Louisiana society. The antebellum racial hierarchy linked Creole to the tainted blood of Negro heritage, and thus, lesser ability and a lower position. During Reconstruction, however, Creoles were able to redefine their identity all together. Moreover, living day-to-day in a society governed by northern ideology of equality, inspirational reports of Union victories on the battlefield, and the idolization of President Lincoln all contributed to the Creoles' acceptance of the doctrine of civil religion. Because of this new racial order, a divorce with the white political cause (thanks to their unappreciated service in the Confederate military), and a new development of civil religion, Creoles during Reconstruction opposed any institution that sought to hinder man because of his race. These three factors culminated in a political strategy during Reconstruction centered on equality. Early in Reconstruction, however, the Creole political struggle for equality with whites remained pragmatic and excluded Negroes and ex-slaves. Mounting failures under this doctrine of racial exclusion and a continued exposure to Northern civil religion caused the Creoles to accept that their enfranchisement was unachievable without true racial equality. As Creoles accepted a shared fate with the ex-slaves, their desire for racial equality grew increasingly noble and sincere, and their political strategy shed its pragmatic foundation and took an ideological drive. In these early years of Reconstruction, Creoles first adopted a doctrine of civil religion. However, their acceptance of this doctrine developed slowly and paralleled their development of a new commitment to racial equality.

Louisiana's new racial order during Reconstruction is best illustrated by Michael Herzfeld, who writes,

“The tension between individual choice and social norm emerges as something of a false dichotomy, and might be better represented as a continual negotiation by

actors of how to interpret the norms... It allows us to see rules not merely as a set of constraints upon people, but as something that people actively manipulate to express a sense of their own position in the social world.”³⁸

Herzfeld’s unique definition successfully captures the dynamic aspect Creoles and whites exerted on the racial barrier that separated them. However, before the Civil War, whites’ superior socio-political standing allowed them to dictate the racial terms Louisiana Creoles lived by, removing any negotiation from their racial identity. For example, in February of 1857, a bill was introduced in the State Legislature that proposed classifying people with even a drop of African blood as “persons of color,” essentially destroying the Creole caste. The sponsor’s motivation was to ensure no one with “a touch of the tarbrush” could join white society through marriage.³⁹ Ultimately, the bill did not pass; however, it serves as a staunch reminder that in antebellum Louisiana, whites could destroy the Creoles’ racial identity with a simple vote. It should be noted that under such tense and dynamic conditions, it is easy to see why the Creoles pursued a selfish and pragmatic political strategy.

However, Reconstruction allowed Creoles to take their racial identity into their own hands. When New Orleans fell to Union forces on April 26, 1862 the oppressive laws passed by Southern slaveholding Whites became null and void.⁴⁰ Under the protection of the federal military, Creoles were safe to transcend their old racial identity. Moreover, drastic demographic changes that occurred during the Civil War further

³⁸ Michael Herzfeld, "When Exceptions Define the Rules: Greek Baptismal Names and the Negotiation of Identity," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 38, no. 2 (Fall 1982): 288.

³⁹ “Louisiana Legislator,” *New Orleans Daily Picayune*, February 20, 1857.

⁴⁰ Justin A. Nystrom, "Racial Identity and Reconstruction: New Orleans's Free People of Color and the Dilemma of Emancipation." In *The Great Task Remaining Before Us: Reconstruction as America's Continuing Civil War*, edited by Paul A. Cimbala and Randall M. Miller, 122-138. New York: Fordham University, 2010: 125.

challenged mixed-race individuals to determine their own identity. Blassingame points out that in the 1860s, the Black population of New Orleans grew from 12% to 25%.⁴¹ The influx of ex-slaves, who were generally uneducated and often depended on some form of government assistance, forced Creoles to carve out a new identity in this rapidly changing racial order. Interestingly, Creoles most often used their independence to transcend the antebellum castes imposed by the ruling slaveholder class.

While Creoles took advantage of their new unrestricted position in different ways, their motivation was often the same. Author Justin Nystrom points out that all Creoles shared a new sense of vulnerability. While the old caste system was certainly limiting, it also ensured a specific and familiar niche for Creoles in Louisiana's socio-political order.⁴² In creating their new identities, Creoles also shared a desire to no longer be held back because of their skin color. Racial passing serves as an excellent illustration of the confusing pressures Creoles felt to create a new identity. Some wealthy Creole parents obtained white birth certificates for their children. Others took less official routes and simply self-identified as white. Regardless, racial passing should not be interpreted as an abandonment of their fellow Creoles. Rather, it demonstrates a desire to transcend traditional racial identifications. When one such Creole was questioned in court, "Have you not stated that you are as much a white man and of white blood as any man in the community." The passing Creole responded, "I have stated so. Ai'nt I?" purposefully leaving his self-identity ambiguous.⁴³ E.C. Hart, a wealthy white man and his Creole concubine Cornelia, legally married in 1867. The couple used Reconstruction and the 14th

⁴¹ Blassingame, *Black New Orleans*, 132-136.

⁴² Nystrom, "Racial Identity and Reconstruction: New Orleans's Free People of Color and the Dilemma of Emancipation," 127.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 127-133.

Amendment to legitimize their love and ensure economic comfort for Cornelia and the couples' children.⁴⁴ Racial passing was a Creole expression of equality.

Most Creoles, however, transcended their caste by boldly challenging institutions that maintained racial hierarchy. Rather than subtly slipping into the upper caste, many fought outspokenly for their first class position. The dissolution of white politics that Creoles felt during the Civil War further influenced this new conviction of equality. Combined, the desire for racial equality and an alliance with the Northern Republican cause shaped Creole politics in the Reconstruction era.

Creoles' day-to-day existence in a society governed by the doctrines of northern civil religion had a contagious effect, further contributing to their future acceptance of political equality. While the Creoles did not instantly buy into the ideology, their newfound freedom under Union rule was an appealing introduction. As one Union Captain put it, "These bayonets are mean, such as reaches the minds and consciousness of men. The colored people are now holding schools and religious meetings coming to the conclusions that these people are after all really free and can earn something besides their mere food and clothing. I know of some very sudden conversations of that kind lately...caused by the light spoken above."⁴⁵ The Creoles' daily exposure to civil religion planted in the population, at the very least, hesitant approval of the doctrine.

However, Creoles did not instantly accept their paternal roll of guardians of Louisiana's ex-slaves. In the years between 1862 and 1864, the Creoles' political causes slowly melded with the radical faction of the Free State Party. It was not until this slow unification was complete and Creoles had truly converted to a doctrine of civil religion

⁴⁴ Dominguéz, *White by Definition*, 27.

⁴⁵ Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, 213.

and accepted the position as leaders of all Negroes. The Free State Party first materialized at the end of 1862 and the beginning months of 1863. Initially, though, 70% of New Orleans' Unionists were not native to Louisiana and six out of seven of the Party's leading officials were Northerners or immigrants.⁴⁶ Creoles did not instantly identify with the Party's members or their ideology of northern civil religion and pursued separate political causes.

The Free State Party was initially formed in opposition to the Conservative Unionist Party. Conservative Unionists sought to restore Louisiana to its prewar position favoring the white caste. Joe Gray Taylor, author of *Louisiana Reconstructed: 1863-1877*, explains, "Both factions were primarily concerned with saving the Union, but one desired to restore the Union without slavery; the other was hopeful that somehow the Negro could be eliminated from Louisiana, making the state into 'white man's country.'"⁴⁷

Creoles, meanwhile, had not committed to the betterment of the Negroes and their goals of political improvement excluded ex-slaves. *L'Union*, a weekly periodical, was founded in September 1862 by Creole Dr. Louis Charles Roudanez. Roudanez published the paper in French, an exclusionary act against the Negro population. Historian William P. Connor calls the paper "a caste journal which accepted many of the social and economic distinctions between the free-born men of color and the former slaves."⁴⁸ Even by 1863, Creoles were uncommitted to the ex-slaves' cause. In November of 1863,

⁴⁶ Ted Tunnell, *Crucible of Reconstruction: War, Radicalism, and Race in Louisiana, 1862-1877* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1984), 27.

⁴⁷ Joe Gray Taylor, *Louisiana Reconstructed: 1863-1877* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1974), 16.

⁴⁸ William P. Connor, "Reconstruction Rebels: The New Orleans Tribune in Post-War Louisiana," *Reconstruction Rebels: The New Orleans Tribune in Post-War Louisiana* 21, no. 2 (Spring 1980): 162.

Creoles adopted resolutions calling on the military government for suffrage for Creoles. They demanded, “We are men, treat us as such,” excluding the ex-slaves from such a category.⁴⁹ Although their petition was ignored, the fact that Creoles were not invested in the Free State Party demonstrates the difficulties they faced in finding a new niche in Louisiana society after the Civil War. Their hesitancy to endorse equality for freedmen is also a testament to their slow adoption of civil religion. A desire for racial equality and a political alliance with ex-slaves, which eventually came to characterize the Creole political cause in Reconstruction, developed slowly and gradually.

Meanwhile, Reconstruction was advancing rapidly in Louisiana. Nathaniel Prentice Banks replaced General Butler in 1862, and as the new leader of the interim military government his main goal was to institute a moderate civil government. President Lincoln wrote to Banks in August, 1863, “go to work, and give me a tangible nucleus which the remainder of the state may rally around as fast as it can, and which I can at once recognize and sustain... Time is important.”⁵⁰ To aid the formation of loyal governments, Lincoln announced his 10% plan on December 8, 1863. This initiative required only 10% of registered voters participation for the formation of a state government. Under executive orders, Banks called for the election of state officials and delegates for a constitutional convention in the first months of 1864.

By the time the ballots opened for elections in 1864, Creoles and the radical members of the Free State Party had united. A number of factors likely contributed to this new alliance. Firstly, Thomas J. Durant, leader of the radical faction, appealed to the Creole community. Durant was a brilliant and charismatic leader who preached a doctrine

⁴⁹ Tunnell, *Crucible of Reconstruction*, 78.

⁵⁰ Taylor, *Louisiana Reconstructed*, 24.

of equality. He staunchly believed the Civil War was fundamentally fought over principles of slavery and freedom. Conflict, Durant argued, would continue until Louisiana accepted one racial doctrine. Moreover, Durant preached his message at a number of Creole meetings. Durant's message and political style likely appealed to Creoles. Secondly, the Free State Party split in 1864. Governor Hahn and General Banks formed a moderate alliance, which Durant and the radical Free Staters opposed. The radical opposition demonstrated a commitment to their doctrine of racial equality by opposing Hahn's victory and choosing their own radical candidate Benjamin F. Flanders. Although Flanders ultimately lost the gubernatorial vote, the schism in the Free State Party demonstrated the radicals' commitment to equality. Lastly, Creoles had few options for expressing their voice in the political events of 1864. Banks had ignored their request for participation. Therefore, Creoles likely looked to Durant, Flanders, and other white radicals to further their political causes in the 1864 convention. The developing Creole commitment to the radical faction is illustrated in an article in the *New Orleans Tribune* titled "The Conservatives." The article explains, "The citizens above St. Louis or Canal street appear determined to take advantage of their strength and to run what they call an American or 'up-town' ticket. If so, they will be apt to win as against the Creole or 'down-town' ticket."⁵¹

The 1864 elections and convention were ultimately a disappointment to Creoles, who felt cheated by Banks and the moderate faction. Radical candidate Flanders had lost the election and the new State Constitution did not extend suffrage to Negroes. An editorial in the Creole paper the *New Orleans Tribune* argued,

⁵¹ "The Conservatives," *New Orleans Daily Tribune*, August 16, 1865.

“Suffice it for us to know that the Constitution was conceived in the fraudulent design of getting up a sham electoral ticket in Louisiana, carried through by military violence against the will of the people; had root in no lawful authority, being based on Executive usurpation, contrary to the expressed will of Congress and framed by men who had no higher principle of action than hatred of their fellows of African descent.”⁵²

The rigged loss served as a sign to Creoles that they would never achieve enfranchisement under a moderate government that did not propagate universal suffrage. This realization resulted in a new political position of racial equality, which was sincere for the Creoles and marked the beginning of a long and difficult political campaign for Negro enfranchisement. As an editorial in the *New Orleans Tribune* explains, “Negro suffrage will never be allowed in this State if disloyal whites be permitted to vote. If the first legislature, elected by the bayonets of Gen. Banks, could refuse to enfranchise the blacks, what hope is there of its being done when the old white population returns and resumes its place at the polls?”⁵³ After 1864, Creoles stood for the growth of all Negroes in a humanitarian and moralistic racial brotherhood, calling “for all good men to unite in the opposition.”⁵⁴

The Creoles’ newfound yet sincere commitment to racial equality was also the result of a developing civil religion. The introduction to civil religion had begun in 1862 with the imposition of a new racial order of equality. Living for some time in equality and practicing day-to-day the ideals preached under northern civil religion contributed to the Creoles’ ultimate belief in the doctrine. However, events during the final years of the Civil War and early years of Reconstruction solidified Creoles’ doctrine of civil religion.

⁵² *New Orleans Daily Tribune*, September 13, 1864.

⁵³ “The South Rebel at Heart,” *New Orleans Daily Tribune*, June 14, 1865

⁵⁴ *New Orleans Daily Tribune*, August 13, 1864.

For one, Creoles' success in the Union campaign of Port Hudson in 1863 incited their enthusiasm for civil religion. Reports of the Creole regiments' bravery circulated the nation. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* wrote, "A New Orleans Copperhead informed me that they fought like tigers," referring to the Creole regiment.⁵⁵ As JT Glatthaar explains,

"Northerners took up arms to preserve the Union. Generations later their cause appears elusive, but to the men and women of the Northern states the concept was clear. Civil liberties derived from the Constitution and the Union. The Union was eighty years old, the world's great experiment in a democratic republic. A model for other nations, the Union served as a haven for the oppressed. By preserving the Union they were merely carrying the torch for the Founding Fathers, with a sacred obligation to pass it on to the next generation. It was 'the beacon of light of liberty and freedom to the human race,' insisted an Indiana sergeant."⁵⁶

Glatthaar's description of the Union mission is a clear elusion to civil religion, and as the Creoles in Louisiana grew proud of their race's fighting, they were incited by the Union's ideological mission and "sacred obligation," perhaps even proud of the civil religion developing in the Union ranks.

President Abraham Lincoln's developing legacy –thanks to his roll as the great emancipator and his reelection in 1864 followed shortly by his assassination in April of 1865- also contributed to the Creoles' acceptance of civil religion. William Lee Miller argues that Lincoln served an essential roll as the interpreter of the nation's "moral definitions." Miller Continues, "He was the primary voice giving the American idea perceived from the founders it's necessary reinterpretation and fresh critical

⁵⁵ Hollandsworth, *The Louisiana Native Guards*, 63.

⁵⁶ JT Glatthaar, "Touched with Fire: Uncommon Soldiers of the Civil War," *OAH Magazine of History* 26, no. 2 (April 2012): 20.

application...⁵⁷ Lincoln incited among the Creole population a nationalistic mission of equality, calling emancipation in his second inaugural address “the last, best hope of the nation.”⁵⁸ For Creoles, Lincoln inspired the question: What is America’s roll in the moral history of the human race? Entrusted with the great possibility of moral advancement and inspired by Lincoln, the Creoles moved in the direction of civil religion. This newfound doctrine went hand in hand with the Creole’s genuine commitment to racial equality.

The Creoles new ideology of equality is best demonstrated by their rejection of the Smith Bill. This bill, also known as the Octoroon Act, proposed enfranchisement for the Creole caste. While the Smith Bill would have been considered a tremendous victory perhaps only a year ago, the Creoles now opposed it in favor of enfranchisement for all Negroes. The *Tribune* explained, “We have from the beginning opposed Mr. Smith’s bill, and every such limited measure. We care not for incomplete justice; we do not press any personal claims; we advocate a general right,”⁵⁹ illustrating their genuine commitment to true racial equality.

The Creoles’ political divorce with the Confederate white caste, their newfound ability to transcend the old racial hierarchy, and an introduction to northern civil religion resulted in the gradual acceptance of true racial equality. While Creoles were slow to realize that their own fight for equality was tied to enfranchisement for all Negroes, radical defeats in the political arena clarified for Creoles that their cause and the Negroes’ political advancement were codependent. Moreover, a growing prevalence of civil

⁵⁷ William Lee Miller, "Lincoln's Profound and Benign Americanism, or Nationalism without Malice," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 22, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 1.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁹ “The Era and the Right of Suffrage,” *New Orleans Daily Tribune*, November 18, 1864.

religion and the doctrine's appeal to the Creoles further contributed to an acceptance of racial equality. Thus, an unlikely alliance between Creoles and ex-slaves was born. This alliance, however, was not an easy one. Social and political differences threatened to divide Negroes and Creoles.

The Creoles' experience during the Civil War combined with their early political failures and realignment with the Radical Republican Party resulted in, by 1865, the sincere acceptance of a Creole-Negro alliance. However, differences between the educated and able Creoles and the destitute and dependent ex-slaves made the formation of this alliance particularly difficult. In order to bridge the gap and unify the races, Creoles pursued a number of improvement programs to raise the freedmen and teach the ex-slaves proper citizenship. In effect, the Creoles sought to convert the freedmen to a doctrine of civil religion.

The Creoles' task was a particularly difficult one. Slavery had left the Negro inadequately endowed for freedom. With the annexation of Louisiana came a tightening of slave codes to resemble the plantation system in other southern States. Not surprisingly, slaves were forbidden from meeting at night and traveling on their own will. Their condition resembled that of many other plantation slaves around the country. Their diet, shelter, and clothes were harsh yet sufficient. Their social life maintained greater French and Catholic influences than elsewhere, but was otherwise similar to their counterparts' throughout the nation. There were, however, several unique aspects to the Louisiana slave system that particularly contributed to their unpreparedness for freedom beyond the expected deficits from living in bondage. For one, Louisiana's slaves were in great

demand and were sold more often than slaves elsewhere. By 1860, a male field hand brought \$2,000. The high price tag on Louisiana slaves, the highest in the country in fact, often superseded a desire to maintain the slaves' familial units. The dislocation of the majority of slave families in Louisiana before emancipation contributed to their difficulty in establishing productive and fulfilling lives in freedom. Moreover, the Louisiana plantation was well suited for economies of scale, and the State housed some of the nation's largest plantations. The grand scope of Louisiana plantations further contributed to the slaves' disadvantages after emancipation. For one, Louisiana slaves had little previous contact with whites and were unprepared to live side by side with them in freedom. Furthermore, such large-scale operations encouraged slave owners to treat their human chattel as marks in a book rather than people. As a result, the Louisiana slaves' happiness and growth was often neglected and they rarely received the paternalism common in other regions. Their owners' neglect in their development made Louisiana slaves' transition to freedom even more difficult.⁶⁰

These remnants of slavery inhibited the Negroes success in their first years of freedom and their destitute outlook made political unification with the Creoles an unlikely prospect. During the Civil War, as increasing numbers of slaves found themselves behind Union lines (either through escape or Union advancement), New Orleans became inundated with ex-slaves. Almost over night, the population of Negroes in New Orleans doubled. For ex-slaves freedom was painfully harsh. Louisiana's plantation slaves knew nothing besides farming and dependence. Uprooted by the war, they converged on New Orleans to make the most of independence, searching for lost

⁶⁰ Randall M. Miller and John David Smith, eds., *Dictionary of Afro-American Slavery* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), s.v. "Louisiana, Slavery in," by Blake Touchstone.

loved ones and economic freedom afforded by the wage. However, the city the slaves descended on was in ruins compared to the glorious economic and cultural hub that New Orleans had been before the war. Depression had begun in the 1850s after the railroads abandoned Louisiana for the Mississippi Valley. The national depression of 1873, as well as bouts of yellow fever and riots contributed to the cities descent. Wartime had drastically worsened an already weak economy as farms were deserted and exports ceased.⁶¹ Ex-slaves, beginning in May 1863, appeared in the thousands, penniless and hungry, looking for jobs that did not exist. General Butler complained, “The condition of the people here is a very alarming one. They have literally come down to starvation.” By the end of 1862, Butler was already feeding 10,000 Negroes in the refugee camps of New Orleans.⁶² Aside from the already destitute conditions, the Negroes situation seemed particularly hopeless due to their general deficiency of skills and dependence upon manual labor for wages. While Creoles were educated in private institutions such as St. Baete Academy, Pension des Demoiselles des Couleur, and the Grimble Academy, slaves rarely received even rudimentary educations on the plantation. The vast majority of ex-slaves were illiterate and poorly suited for any work other than domestic care and manual labor.

With no jobs to be had and no skills to offer, it became increasingly clear by 1863 that the Negroes had to be re-employed in the countryside. The Quartermaster Corps was Banks’s solution to New Orleans' unemployment issue. In exchange for labor on the plantation or the city's levees, the ex-slaves received wages, clothing, and food. Vagrancy laws forced all unemployed Negroes into the ranks of Banks’s labor gang. To distinguish

⁶¹ Blassingame, *Black New Orleans*, 50.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 51.

the Quartermaster Corps from the old slave system, Banks guaranteed a Negro the right to choose his own employer and to educate his children. Corporal punishment was prohibited. To safeguard these rights, Banks instated Parish Provost Marshals as referees of the planter-laborer relationship.⁶³ Plantation owners doubted Banks's plan and criticized him as too radical. The *Daily Picayune* wrote, "The two great staples of the South-cotton and sugar- can only be profitably aided by the negro, and by him, *ex necessitate*, in a condition of servitude."⁶⁴ Still committed to the old plantation system, the planters sought to commit their Negro laborers to a system resembling sharecropping. Like rust on metal, the planters' hospitality and bribes quickly ate away at the Provost Marshals' morals. Before long, the freedmen's condition had drastically deteriorated in the Quartermaster Corps. Marshals and planters frequently worked together to track down runaways, flog Negroes, and coerce the ex-slaves to labor.⁶⁵

The contradictions between the Creoles and Negroes were endless. Where the Creoles were educated, the slaves were illiterate. Creoles thrived economically and valued their independence, while the ex-slaves arrived in New Orleans ragged and homeless and were forced into the countryside in the proverbial chains of the Quartermaster Corps. The Creoles were used to self-reliance, but the Negroes knew nothing but dependence. The two groups had to overcome these differences before a meaningful political alliance could be adopted.

The Creoles' desire for an alliance with the Negroes developed throughout 1864 and 1865 as they realized their own independence was tied to that of the ex-slaves.

⁶³ Ibid., 50-53.

⁶⁴ C. Peter Ripley, *Slaves and Freedmen in Civil War Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1976), 69.

⁶⁵ Blassingame, *Black New Orleans*, 53.

The growing humanitarian racial brotherhood between Creoles and Negroes, where the lighter race accepted a fairy-godmother position for the darker, and the Creoles' conversion to civil religion further contributed to the mission to develop the freedmen. However, the differences between the Creoles and ex-slaves made a political alliance unlikely at best. The difficulties of this relationship and the timing of its implementation are exemplified by a political disagreement between the Creoles and the Negroes over General Bank's Quartermaster Corps. In 1863, Banks explained in a letter to his wife the Creoles' support for the labor program. He wrote, "The better class of the colored people are doing all they can to aid me as they think it is the first chance the Negro slave has had to try his hand."⁶⁶ However, by 1865, the Creoles' tune had changed. The Creoles' experience in the Civil War and the political events from 1863 to 1865 had resulted in an alliance with the ex-slaves. Creoles now rebuked the labor program they had endorsed only two years before. The *Tribune* berated "the condition of the slave is not materially altered," calling the Quartermaster Corps a "bastard regime."⁶⁷ Yet illustrating the difficulties of this Creole-Negro alliance, the ex-slaves on the contrary praised Banks as the savior "who gave them homes when they were homeless; wages and employment when they were in want; schools and teachers, books and Bibles, when they never had them before."⁶⁸ This disagreement demonstrates how Creoles developed care for the Negroes throughout the early years of Reconstruction and the political difficulties they faced in allying with the ex-slaves.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 54.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 55.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 54.

Clearly, a Creole-Negro alliance, as the two groups existed in 1865, was precarious at best. In order to bridge the cultural, economic, and educational schisms, Creoles pursued improvement programs through a combination of political lobbying and charitable benevolence. Through a combination of these mechanisms, the Creoles sought to lessen their differences with the Negroes and essentially teach the ex-slaves a doctrine of civil religion that the two groups could successfully share. The *Tribune*, representing Creole beliefs, wrote, "They should be educated as fast as possible, and taught to act as freemen and loyal citizens,"⁶⁹ demonstrating the Creoles' intention of transforming the ex-slaves into able equal citizens. In short, the article continued, all relations between the government and the free men of color should have been based on "justice and equality."⁷⁰ Opposing Banks's Quartermaster Corps as a guise of slavery, Creoles questioned how the Negroes could receive "the benefits of a true and practical liberty."⁷¹ The *Tribune* questioned, "Who are the free laborers? They are the men who are not free to go where they choose; not free to contract for any length of time than the term prescribed by regulations; not free to lodge complaints before ordinary courts for breach of contract by their employer."⁷² Therefore, the Creoles' first task in raising the ex-slaves was to free them from this system of serfdom and elevate them to the promised position of free laborer.

Economic reform was essential for Creoles, who after living successfully independent economic lives, doubted the ex-slaves would ever achieve freedom under the planters' control. C. Peter Ripley points out the Creoles in New Orleans proposed a

⁶⁹ "The Plantation System," *New Orleans Daily Tribune*, September 24, 1864.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *New Orleans Daily Tribune*, January 28, 1865.

⁷² *New Orleans Daily Tribune*, February 18, 1865.

number of innovative solutions to reform the Quartermaster Corps, which they believed was a “complete failure.”⁷³ Land reform was discussed, but never considered a realistic option. Second to that, Creoles called for a restructuring of Banks’s plantation system that would guarantee the slaves' independence. The *Tribune* wrote, “We proposed that a few “managers,” possessed of some means, and desirous [sic] of participating in the actual elevation of the African race, should form associations and start the new system. This will bring two great results: first, it would set an example for others and stimulate them to the great social reform through which we are now passing; and next, it will give a sufficient proof of our competence.”⁷⁴ Reforms, however, were never realized. Unsuccessful in 1864 and 1865 to lobby changes to the Quartermaster Corps, a number of elite New Orleans Creoles took matters into their own hands, self-financing and founding the Freedman's Aid Association. Working with a number of white radicals, such as influential politicians Benjamin F. Flanders and Thomas J. Durant, as well as the New Orleans Third African Church, these wealthy Creoles sought to help ex-slaves create farming communes by renting and leasing plantations, offering no interest loans, furnishing supplies, and giving free education. The Association believed these activities would require \$20,000 and raised the money by charging each member a \$20 fee.⁷⁵ A number of successful previously established communes across the State encouraged the Freedman’s Aid Association to promote the communal agrarian model. While records illustrating the number of ex-slave communes and their success are incomplete, by the

⁷³ “Plantation System,” *New Orleans Daily Tribune*, September 24, 1864.

⁷⁴ “Plantation Labor,” *New Orleans Daily Tribune*, January 29, 1865.

⁷⁵ Blassingame, *Black new Orleans*, 57.

fall of 1865, no less than 19 large communes existed across only three parishes, suggesting the communal farms were common and successful.⁷⁶

The Freedman's Aid Association succeeded in supplementing an already successful network of communes across Louisiana. The Negroes' achievements farming independently of the white overseer contributed greatly to the creation of the Freedman's Bureau as a government organization committed to land redistribution. Pennsylvania Congressman John Covode saw on a trip to Louisiana these communes as an example of the ability of the ex-slaves, and wrote to Secretary of War Stanton, "The best way is for the Freedman to have a small piece of land and farm it himself." He continued on to argue that such a system would allow the Negroes to develop their own management skills, self reliance, and family stability.⁷⁷ A government document was circulated on August 10, 1865 encouraging the ex-slaves to apply for "land for their own use."⁷⁸

For Creoles, the redistribution of land to freedmen to farm by their own will was an incredible victory. Creoles had previously taken the position that the Negro could not enjoy his full independence under the hand of the white plantation owner. An article titled "No More Slaves; No More Masters" published in the *Tribune* explained, "The main obstacle [to the freedman's true emancipation] comes from the fact that the pieces of the old machinery have been permitted to remain in their places. Can a planter be expected to treat the laborers under his control in any other way to-day than he has treated them for the last twenty years?"⁷⁹ Creoles, who always operated with equality in the free market, understood the value of economic freedom. The *Tribune* wrote, "Labor is

⁷⁶ Ripley, *Slaves and Freedmen in Civil War Louisiana*, 78.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁷⁹ "No More Slaves; No More Masters," *New Orleans Daily Tribune*, July 16, 1865.

the only true element of prosperity, strength, and grandeur, in modern societies.”⁸⁰

Creoles, recognizing from experience the importance of free labor, believed land distribution would ensure true economic equality and independence for the ex-slaves.

Education was also an essential component that contributed to a Creole-Negro alliance. Creoles valued education as an essential aspect of freedom long before the Civil War. The vast number of private educational institutions and the large number of literate, and often bilingual Creoles is a testament to their emphasis on knowledge. However, the difficult task of educating the ex-slave population was accepted by the Banks and northern charitable organizations such as the American Missionary Association (A.M.A.). Banks’s explained his commitment during a speech in Boston:

“The whole of this population is in the process of education and of change by the natural course of events. The reports made by those connected with these institutions of progress [Negro schools] of both young and old, are gratifying and surprising, and it leaves no possible doubt whatever that the negro population not only can perform all that is required of the laboring population, but that they can make such rapid improvement as answers the expectations of the Government, and justify the extension of all the privileges of citizenship of this class of people.”⁸¹

Banks’s and the government’s desire to raise the Negro out of destitution and empower them with the ability to successfully labor and triumph as true citizens resulted in the successful education of many pupils. By 1865, there were 121 schools for Negroes with 216 teachers and 13,462 students.⁸² Because Banks, the Freedmen’s Bureau, and northern

⁸⁰ “Dignity of Labor,” *New Orleans Daily Tribune*, 11/26/1865.

⁸¹ Ketih Wilson, "Education as a Vehicle for Racial Control: Major General N. P. Banks in Louisiana, 1863-1864," *Journal of Negro Education* 50, no. 2 (Spring 1981): 161.

⁸² Ripley, *Slaves and Freedmen in Civil War Louisiana*, 141.

charitable associations worked successfully to educate the ex-slaves, Creoles were not taxed with this important duty. Nonetheless, the basic education the ex-slaves received was essential in the formation of a strong political alliance with Creoles. The Creoles praised Banks for his commitment to Negro education and viewed their schooling as an essential step towards their success as freemen. One article published in the *Tribune* defending Banks's education system demonstrates the importance of Negro education to the Creoles. The paper wrote, "The hatred to the colored schools is greater now than it has ever been. Strange to say, we see a civilized people making all exertions to favor the most abject ignorance and deprecate education. We believe that there is no example, in any period of modern or ancient history, second to this."⁸³ For Creoles, education was essential to modernity. The ex-slaves' education and their subsequent enlightenment from "ignorance" was essential for the development of a Creole-Negro alliance.

While Creoles sought to raise the ex-slaves economically and educationally, they put no emphasis on religious improvement. The Creoles were predominantly Catholic and practiced in mixed race congregations. The ex-slaves, however, were generally Protestant and practiced in segregated Baptist or Methodist congregations. Some Negroes bought in to voodoo, which combined Catholic beliefs with traditional African religious practices. The lack of projects aimed at religious unification despite the significant differences in their denominations is a testament to the Creoles' overarching belief in civil religion as a unifier. Robert N. Bellah in his classic work "Civil Religion in America," argues that a generalized faith differentiated from the churches exists in the

⁸³ "Killing of Teachers," *New Orleans Daily Tribune*, December 29, 1865.

form of civil religion.⁸⁴ This nationalistic denomination can supersede the traditional and celestial denominations without conflict. According to Rousseau, the four essential dogmas of civil religion are “the existence of God, the life to come, the reward of virtue and the punishment of vice, and the exclusion of religious intolerance.”⁸⁵ There is no evidence that the Creoles read Rousseau or were even familiar with the term civil religion. Regardless, though, the Creoles and ex-slaves shared the four essential dogmas of civil religion. Therefore, Catholics, Protestants and voodooists alike were all prepared for unification without any additional religious reform. In fact, Creoles’ attempt to unify with the Negroes over Christianity likely may have been a point of conflict. Instead, civil religion served as an overarching force propagating an alliance.

The successful period of Negro enhancement campaigned for vigorously by the Creole population successfully solidified a political union between the two races. Creoles, recognizing both their necessity and duty to ally with the ex-slaves, had to raise the Negro to a level of equality before such a union could proceed. As the *Tribune* explained in November 1865, after land reform successfully passed, “A revolution has been wrought in sentiment. Not only a revolution in the mind of the white man, but in the mind of the black man...the sable son of the South is now a human soul, with the rights of a man and a citizen.”⁸⁶ The new “human soul” referred to in the Creole paper was an allusion to a shared commitment to civil religion. The amazing strength of the Creole-Negro political bond, thanks to the development of the ex-slaves’ economic conditions

⁸⁴ Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96, no. 1 (Winter 1967): 40.

⁸⁵ Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," 43.

⁸⁶ “What Should Be Done With Them,” *New Orleans Daily Tribune*, November 22, 1865.

and education, are demonstrated in the events leading up to the Constitutional Convention of 1867 and the radical document produced.

In 1865, President Andrew Johnson's rise to the Executive seat and his unexpectedly conservative policies gave Southern Democrats a new found confidence not seen since their defeat. Their enthusiasm peaked with the New Orleans Race Riots. In 1866, Radical Republicans met to reconvene the Constitutional Convention of 1864. Fearful that the Republicans would successfully overturn the conservative document for one of racial equality, ex-confederates converged on the meeting in anger. Erupting into violence, the ex-Confederates attacked Negroes at random. The white Democrats trampled, beat, and even murdered every ex-slave they could get their hands on. As Taylor points out, "The New Orleans Riot...showed how easily the use of force by whites could demoralize blacks conditioned by more than two centuries of bondage."⁸⁷ While a weaker alliance may have crumbled, the Creole-Negro alliance operating under the radical banner overcame the Democrats' overt aggression by using the violent outbursts as fuel for growth on the national level and party expansion on the state level. Their unified commitment to the radical cause of racial equality despite such extreme agitation played an essential roll in shaping the political events of Louisiana Reconstruction. Thanks to their cool response, the Creole-Negro alliance was able to expand support within Louisiana and gain the sympathy of General Phillip P. Sheridan, who would in 1867 take control of Louisiana under the First Reconstruction Acts. When Sheridan called for voter registrations, 78,000 Negroes and Creoles registered, demonstrating a massive expansion of the Radical Republican base. Sheridan, meanwhile,

⁸⁷ Taylor, *Louisiana Reconstructed*, 134.

refused ineligibles the right to vote and registered only 48,000 Whites. By comparison, in 1860 there had been over 94,000 whites of voting age in the State. Sheridan's staunch commitment to refusing Confederates the right to vote was largely a product of the New Orleans Riot and the Radical Republican's will to endure.⁸⁸

The Radical's victory at the polls resulted in a new constitutional convention scheduled for November 23, 1867, at which principles of racial equality would surely dominate. The *Tribune* celebrated, "The time has come when citizens should enjoy their full rights as well as every other citizen..."⁸⁹ When the Constitution of 1868⁹⁰ passed, it contained universal suffrage for men, State citizenship for Negroes, desegregated public education, the prohibition of racial discrimination in public places, disenfranchisement of disloyal voters, and a bill of rights that made any black codes null and void. The document represented a massive victory for the Creole-Negro alliance. As Scott points out, this radical document was the result of the Creoles' work in raising and allying with the ex-slaves. He writes,

"The roots of such commitment lay in a combination of French and American revolutionary ideologies, sometimes accompanied by an acknowledgement of the Haitian struggle and the Republican creed of the 1848 Revolution in France...Some of the ideological energy behind this language came directly from the urban community of francophone free people of color. But these urbanites were also in a political dialogue with their counterparts from the rural parishes, as well as with their English-speaking neighbors..."⁹¹

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁸⁹ *New Orleans Daily Tribune*, October 3, 1867.

⁹⁰ Although the constitutional convention convened in 1867, the session lasted until March of 1868. Therefore, the ratified Constitution produced from this convention is known as the Constitution of 1868.

⁹¹ Rebecca J. Scott, *Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba After Slavery* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 45.

Radicals continued to dominate Louisiana politics through the 1870s. Their success in the passage of the Constitution of 1868 and their political success over the next decade is a testament to the Creoles' genuine interest in the improvement of the freedmen and the success of their unification policies.

The Louisiana Constitution of 1868 was also a testament to the Creoles' and Negroes' shared commitment to civil religion. The Constitution of 1868 reads, "All men are created free and equal and have certain inalienable rights: among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness...All persons, without regard to race, color, or previous condition, born or naturalized...are citizens of this State...They shall enjoy the same civil, political and public rights and privileges, and are subject to the same pains and penalties."⁹² The borrowed wording from the Nation's Constitution can only be interpreted as a subscription to civil religion. Bellah explains,

"Until the Civil War, American civil religion focused above all on the event of the revolution, which was seen as the final act of the Exodus from the old lands across the waters. The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were the sacred scriptures and Washington the divinely appointed Moses who led his people out of the hands of tyranny. The Civil War...was the second great event that involved the national self-understanding so deeply as to require expression in the civil religion."⁹³

By pushing these passages through the ratification process, the Creoles and ex-slaves were demanding the principles of civil religion be extended upon them. As Scott notes, "The commitment to public rights [in the Constitution] reflected an even deeper and more

⁹² Paul A. Kunkel, "Modifications in Louisiana Negro Legal Status Under Louisiana Constitutions 1812-1957," *Journal of Negro History* 44, no. 1 (January 1959): 11.

⁹³ Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96, no. 1 (Winter 1967): 47.

radical insistence on the moral equality of all human beings, whether as a part of the body of Christ or as a member of a secular community owing each other respect.”⁹⁴ In this sense, the Constitution of 1868 represents the sincere adoption of the principles of civil religion.

If the political domination of the Radical Republicans represented the political unification of the Creoles and Negroes, the Radicals’ political defeat in the second half of the 1870s resulted in the merger of the two castes into one known simply as colored or Negro. The Supreme Court Case *United States vs Cruikshank* (1875) threw out convictions of three white men who attacked Black Republicans in the 1873 Colfax Massacre,⁹⁵ essentially giving white Democrats legal impunity to threaten, coerce, and even assault radical activists and colored voters. Destabilizing violence escalated again two years later thanks to the Compromise of 1877, where Republican President Rutherford B. Hayes would win the Electoral College and in exchange, federal troops would be withdrawn from Louisiana, as well as Florida and South Carolina. Together, the two events resulted in terrible racial violence from White Leaguers and the return of the Democrats to power in Louisiana and throughout the South. The new State Constitution of 1879 deleted the civil rights Creoles and ex-slaves had worked so hard to install. In 1890, Democrats passed the Separate Car Act, resulting in segregation of public places, including schools.

⁹⁴ Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*, 45.

⁹⁵ In response to a contested gubernatorial election, white leagues armed with rifles stormed the Grant Parish courthouse in Colfax. The rebels were met by State Militia, who were overtaken and surrendered to the well armed mob. The ex-Confederates executed over 50 Negro members of the State Militia despite their surrender.

In many ways, the development of racial violence in Louisiana that resulted in the downfall of the Republican Party was similar to events ending Reconstruction in other southern States. Louisiana stands out though for continued Republican resistance to Democratic rule. The Creoles and Negroes continued to oppose the oppose a racial hierarchy and remained committed to egalitarianism. While Creoles had originally aligned with Negroes for political power, their descent from office was characterized by a remarkable commitment to equality and northern civil religion. By the 1880s, neither Creoles nor Negroes remained in the legislature, but egalitarian aspirations remained in Creoles' shops, Masonic lodges, and in their unions.⁹⁶ Through the Creoles' unwavering ideology of racial equality, their caste merged with the Negroes' caste. Creoles believed the freedmen equally able and white supremacists looked down on the Creoles and Negroes as equally inferior.

Creoles' acceptance of a cross-racial "Colored" caste is demonstrated by their continued commitment to egalitarian ideals even after the downfall of the Republican Party. Although the *Tribune* ceased publication, a new paper, *The Crusader*, published by Creoles Louis Martinet and Rodolph Lucien Desdunes continued to advocate for the colored population. Interracial labor organization the Knights of Labor invited all working people to join in a populist and unified expression of issues arising from the changing economic, social, and political environment. The Grand Lodge Knights of Reciprocity, a political organization committed "to meet fraternally to discuss and have explained laws or measures looking to the relief of all classes of citizens,"⁹⁷ was also

⁹⁶ Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*, 75.

⁹⁷ Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*, 89.

interracial. These multiple egalitarian interracial efforts demonstrate a flattening of the racial hierarchy.

Likewise, whites increasingly viewed Creoles and Negroes as Colored. Whereas the Creoles occupied a unique middle caste between Negro and white in the antebellum racial hierarchy, their genuine commitment to interracial equality and the improvement of the ex-slaves' condition resulted in a restructured binary racial hierarchy. Mark M. Smith's fascinating study of sensory identification of race titled "How Race Is Made" helps explain how the Creoles' realignment of political goals during the Civil War and Reconstruction resulted in the disappearance of a middle Creole caste. The Southern invention that race could be sensed without sight, was, Smith writes, "At root sheer fantasy...In truth, they could do so only by contorting and exaggerating a 'black' cultural traits and reconstructing them as 'natural.'"⁹⁸ Creoles' commitment to the ex-slaves cast them in the eyes of Louisiana's white population as Negroes themselves. Their alliance to the freedmen resulted in the conviction of Southern whites, as one put it, that while a Creole might look white, they would retain "the body odor of a Negro."⁹⁹ *The New Orleans Daily Picayune* redefined Creole and Mulatto for its readers. One article published in 1890 said, "The mulatto is sure to be forever the natural leader of the entire colored race; this is just as certain as the fact of his anthropological superiority."¹⁰⁰ Highlighting the blackness in the mixed-race population, *The Picayune* saw Creoles as a better form of Negro, but Negro nonetheless. The old term for Creole and its antebellum implications also had to be addressed. *The Picayune* designated the better part of a page

⁹⁸ Mark M. Smith, *How Race Is Made* (Chappell Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 40.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁰⁰ "Study of Human Types," *New Orleans Daily Picayune*, May 18, 1890.

to a massive four-column article, explaining that, in fact, Creoles were by definition, all white:

"Creole...was adopted by the French for the same purpose [as the Spanish] - which was to mean a white human being...It is impossible to comprehend how so many intelligent people should have completely reversed the meaning of the word Creole, when every one of the numerous dictionaries within their easy reach could have given them correct information on the subject...It has become high time to establish that the Creole of Louisiana, whose number today may be approximately estimated at 250,000 souls, have not, because of the name they bear, a particle of African blood in their veins, and this is what I believe to have successfully done."¹⁰¹

Thus, the Creole population was stripped of its title during their collapse from power and titled simply as colored.

The white perceived pollution of the Creoles and their new titles of Mulatto, Colored, or Negro obtained anthropological backing. Anthropology was a new academic discipline first emerging at the end of the 19th century. An article in the *Daily Picayune* illustrates how the "unanimous consent of anthropologists" further contributed to the reclassification of Creoles as Negroes. The article explained with scientific authority, "...the negro type occupies the lowest position, physically, mentally and morally, among the races of mankind...The offspring of a marriage between one of the white with one of the black race is generally sickly, effeminate, and is inferior in physical development and strength to the full blood of either race."¹⁰² The authoritative scientific backing that even one drop of Negro blood produced a tainted race further justified in the eyes of white Louisianans the caste merger of Creoles and Negroes. Moreover, their fear of a polluted

¹⁰¹ "The Creoles as they Appear in History," *The New Orleans Daily Picayune*, April 26, 1885.

¹⁰² "Miscegenation," *The New Orleans Daily Picayune*, October 15, 1892.

white race caused a panic over miscegenation. The *Picayune* panicked, “A general amalgamation would produce a mulatto stock, in which the negro physique and physiognomy would predominate. Whites would be absorbed by negroes, not negroes by whites, and the brain capacity of the mixed race would be little superior to that of the pure negro.”¹⁰³ Fears grew to the point where the mingling of the races was considered “a crime and the violation of the laws of God and nature.”¹⁰⁴ The will to protect the Anglo-Saxon blood line meant that any race with a drop of Negro blood was cursed as black. This point is best illustrated by the differences in Censuses of 1860 and 1890. The 1860 Census in Louisiana offered three race options: Anglo, Creole, and Negro. The 1890 Census, on the other hand, offered two categories: white and colored. Interestingly, though, the colored category had four sub-choices to record the amount of white blood. colored people could choose from Negro, Mulatto, Quadroon, or the lightest option, Octaroon.¹⁰⁵ All four choices were considered, nonetheless, colored.

Perhaps the best demonstration of race merger under the colored umbrella can be seen in *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, a Supreme Court Case in 1892 that originated in Louisiana as a challenge to the Separate Car Act. The case is today infamous for extending the federal endorsement to Jim Crow segregation laws. The ramifications of this case echoed throughout the South, casting Negroes into a seven decade spell of segregation as a means of subjugation. Regardless, *Plessy vs Ferguson* offers special insight into the Creoles’ racial position following the collapse of Radical Reconstruction in the late 1870s and early 1880s. A deconstruction of this case is particularly telling for two reasons.

¹⁰³ *The New Orleans Daily Picayune*, June 5, 1885,

¹⁰⁴ “A Race Crime,” *The New Orleans Daily Picayune*, May 22, 1893.

¹⁰⁵ “Relations of the Races in America,” *The New Orleans Daily Picayune*, July 26, 1892.

Firstly, Homer A. Plessy was a Creole and a member of the Comité Des Citoyens, or The Citizens Committee to Test the Constitutionality of Segregation. The group was made up of New Orleans' wealthiest Creoles, including Martinet and Desdunes. The events of the trial and the position of the Committee as voiced through the *Crusader* offer privileged insight into the Creoles' position in 1892.

Secondly, the case was a test trial, meaning Plessy's arrest and every detail of the trial were well conceived in both purpose and execution. The planning of Plessy's crime and his Defense as well as the position of his financial backers helps clarify important events surrounding the case.



Homer A. Plessy (1862-1925)

If *Plessy vs Ferguson* represents “the legal process of racial sorting through which purportedly natural and discrete racial groups are produced and maintained,”¹⁰⁶ the Court's reaction to Plessy's skin color is telling of whites' racial view of Creoles. Plessy was one eighth black, but appeared 100% white. In fact, if Plessy had not stated his racial makeup to the conductor, he surely would have passed as a man of the “superior” race. Yet despite his appearance, no one questioned that Plessy was in fact colored. Instead, the defense argued that because segregation required unqualified whites such as a conductor,

¹⁰⁶ Mark Golub, "Plessy as 'Passing': Judicial Responses to Ambiguously Raced Bodies in *Plessy v. Ferguson*," *Law & Society Review* 39, no. 3 (September 2005): 564.

for example, to make racial distinctions that were often impossible, separation of the races was unconstitutional. For this argument, Plessy's racially ambiguous appearance was essential. The Defense's choice to question not Plessy's race but rather others' ability to correctly place him demonstrates the staunch views whites had regarding Creoles: one drop of Negro blood made you a Negro through and through.

Correspondence between Martinet and the Defense Counselor, Albion Tourgée, also illustrate Creoles' egalitarian outlook on race. Martinet voiced in a letter to Tourgée his concern that the ex-slaves were not being represented in the case because of Plessy's light skin. While Plessy's racial ambiguity was the cornerstone of their legal argument, the Creoles were fighting for desegregation for all races regardless of skin tone. Legal scholar Mark Golub explains, "It was not an attempt to expand the roster of white privilege but rather to challenge the legitimacy of racial segregation itself."¹⁰⁷

Indeed, the Creoles insistence on challenging segregation for all Negroes represented a continuation of their fairy godmother position of benevolence and guidance for the ex-slaves. The freedmen, in the Protestant fashion, responded to Whites' persecution by forming all black congregations. A segregated religious life left the ex-slaves less prepared both practically and ideologically to take on segregation.¹⁰⁸ The Creoles, on the other hand, were predominantly Catholic and practiced in interracial congregations. Martinet wrote to Tourgée, "The Catholic Church is more of a safeguard to us in matters affecting the equality of men than any other church...Other churches do more for the colored people in matters of education and religion purely, but they do like

¹⁰⁷ Golub, "Plessy as 'Passing'," 575.

¹⁰⁸ James B. Bennett, *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow in New Orleans* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 1.

to keep up the color line...¹⁰⁹ Without a Catholic background, ex-slaves were willing to sit the fight for desegregation out. Creoles and Negroes served together on the American Citizens' Equal Rights Association (ACERA), an organization founded by Desdunes and Martinet to protest segregation. Many of the Negro members, though, found the group's policies too controversial and resigned. This left predominantly Creoles to battle *Plessy vs Ferguson*, although they did so for all colored citizens.

Other factors besides Christianity made the Creoles less prepared than the ex-slaves to accept segregation. Golub argues that Creoles maintained a greater commitment to equality than Negroes because "Americanization threatens to destroy their culture and community. For many less affluent Negroes, however, the changes primarily affected class and color privileges which they themselves had never enjoyed."¹¹⁰ More likely, though, Creoles were unwilling to accept their new political position that developed in the early years of Reconstruction had not only failed, but landed them in an even worse position than they had occupied before the Civil War. In addition, Creoles were motivated by their connection to the 1848 Revolution in France. The *Crusader* explained how Creoles, unlike the ex-slaves, "molded their lives...on those French radicals of the Revolution."¹¹¹

In addition to the motivation, Creoles also had a better understanding of the far-reaching implications of segregation. Their awareness that Jim Crow laws would hamper their liberty served as motivation to contest the Separate Car Act. Tourgée wrote to Martinet,

¹⁰⁹ "Louis A. Martinet to Albion W. Tourgée, July 5, 1892," in *The Thin Disguise*, ed. Otto H. Olsen (New York: Humanities Press, 1967), 62.

¹¹⁰ Golub, "Plessy as 'Passing'," 569.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 570.

“Now, the time has come...for the special good of your people and the general advancement of all that American liberty professes and all that Christianity proclaims as its earthly function...The appeal, and, in some senses, the initiative must come from your people. You must unite in making appeal to, and I’m demanding of the American people and of American Christians, justice. Those of us who already believe must join with you and echo this appeal so that it should be heard by all the world.”¹¹²

Martinet’s people, the Creoles, saw it their duty to challenge segregation for the good of “American liberty” and lead the way for all Negroes. As a true testament to civil religion, Creoles’ sought to lead the path for all Colored people from subjugation to equality.

The Creoles’ loss of *Plessy vs Ferguson* was the final blow that cast Colored citizens of the South into second class bondage upheld by Jim Crow. Desdunes lamented in 1895, “The Negro is assailed in his manhood and in his dignity as a citizen by men who are claiming the sweat of his brow as their own, and yet would make it appear that he is untrustworthy of citizenship and justice.”¹¹³ Yet despite the Creoles’ ultimate failure to bring equality to the ex-slaves, their benevolent and universal intentions in *Plessy vs Ferguson* demonstrates the incredible sincerity and conviction the Creoles felt in their mission to raise the Negroes.

A comparison of Louisiana before and after the Civil War is disappointing to most historians. They will point to the tightening of the racial hierarchy and the intensification of Jim Crow laws as proof that Reconstruction accomplished very little. Eric Foner even goes so far as to say that Reconstruction was a period of reform rather

¹¹² "Albion W. Tourgée to Louis A. Martinet, October 3, 1893," in *The Thin Disguise*, ed. Otto H. Olsen (New York: Humanities Press, 1967), 80.

¹¹³ Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*, 91.

than revolution, arguing that the legal and ideological changes resulting from the period were not drastic enough to warrant a true transformation.¹¹⁴ However, here we see the dangers of comparing two snapshots in time. Such an exercise ignores the momentous legal and ideological changes that drastically altered the Creoles' political and social position in Louisiana. In fact, paying due attention to the Creoles' evolution throughout the Civil War and Reconstruction demonstrates incredible maturation. The caste sacrificed their own political gain and committed to the northern doctrine of civil religion, fighting side by side with the Negroes for true equality and liberty.

The Creoles' story and their commitment to benevolence and morality is nothing short of inspirational for two reasons. Firstly, the awesome sacrifice the Creoles made for their beliefs are practically unheard of in a revisionist world dominated by rational choice theory. Believers of this theory look at past and current events alike through a cynical lens of self-advancement, arguing that actions can be fundamentally reduced to selfishness. The Creoles, however, may be proof that people can indeed recognize a cause larger than themselves. Their story can be interpreted as a testament to an inherent goodness. Secondly, the Creoles' story is particularly pleasing because their morality was birthed from an atrociously brutal war. The Creoles' history is one where deadly division sparked benevolent unification. The Creoles history in Louisiana Reconstruction alters the traditional perception of war as an evil.

These two unlikely phenomenon can be explained by civil religion. The Creoles' change throughout the Civil War and Reconstruction and their admirable development was a result of their acceptance of northern civil religion. Perhaps the belief in a national

¹¹⁴ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution*. New York: Harper & Row, 1988.

doctrine can promote the selfless pursuit of an ideology and instill believers with unlikely morality. In the case of Louisiana's Creoles, civil religion recalibrated the moral compass for the best.

However, can civil religion serve as a malevolent force? Southern Confederates also found justification for their beliefs in a doctrine of civil religion. Just as Northerners claimed a civil religion based on equality, Southerners also called the doctrine, using the Nation's founding documents to endow them with a mission of liberty, democracy, and States' rights. The duality of civil religion during the Civil War suggests that the doctrine is a self-serving justification for existing policies rather than a redirecting force of benevolence. Even in the Creoles' case, although their desire for racial equality and belief in civil religion was genuine, these doctrines only developed after they accepted the political alignment with the Negroes out of necessity. In this classic puzzle we ask: which came first, the chicken or the egg? While the Creoles' history is certainly motivating, it may be premature to take it as proof that civil religion is always benevolent. Although in the Creoles' case civil religion guided them to heroic morality, their story should serve as a cautionary tale to further pursue our understanding of civil religion and its effects on morality.

The duality of civil religion, though, should not take away from the Creoles' transformation during the Civil War and Reconstruction. Regardless of one's view on the doctrine, their maturation from selfish caste to outspoken and altruistic leader of Louisiana's colored population is truly remarkable. Lincoln warned Americans that executing the original ideals of the nation was an ongoing task. He said at Gettysburg,

“It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here

dedicated to the great task remaining before us... that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”¹¹⁵

The revolution of Creoles’ racial and civil ideology is a reminder that the country’s mission for liberty, equality, and democracy is ongoing. In the Creoles’ case, these concepts had been woven into the fabric of the nation, yet were not properly received. All too easily, history shows, these ideals can be hidden under the rug. Just as the Creoles did, the American people through their conviction in the nation must ensure their natural rights are received.

¹¹⁵ President Abraham Lincoln, “Gettysburg Address.”