# THE HOUSE ON BAYOU ROAD: ATLANTIC CREOLE NETWORKS IN THE EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURIES<sup>1</sup>

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In 1813, a free man of color living in New Orleans went to court to repossess a house on the edge of town he had sold two years before to a white man from Saint-Domingue. Despite being on opposite sides of a racial divide, both men and their families had much in common as "Atlantic creoles." Let us consider the meaning of this expression.

Ira Berlin's work on "Atlantic creoles" is a powerful intervention because it begins by telling a familiar story and proceeds with a much less familiar one. The familiar story is that of Africans forcibly taken to America, stripped of their African identities, and developing a new creole or African-American culture that was the product of their experience as slaves working in the plantations. Important as this story is, it captures "only a portion of black life in colonial North America, and that imperfectly." The story as usually told begins with an unadulterated "African" identity that was somehow erased or transformed by the experience of slavery and gave way to a creole identity that was a mix of various African, European, and Native American components. Inverting this story of origins, Berlin shows that the Africans of the charter generations were always already creole: their experiences and attitudes "were more akin to that

The following abbreviations are used for archival sources:

ADPA (Archives Départementales des Pyrénées-Atlantiques, Pau, France)

AGI (Archivo General de Indias, Seville, Spain)

ANC (Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Havana, Cuba)

ANOM (Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, France)

BnF (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, France)

CARAN (Centre d'Accueil et de Recherche des Archives Nationales, Paris, France)

NONA (Notarial Archives Research Center, New Orleans, LA)

NOPL (New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA)

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998; "From Creole to African: Atlantic Creoles and the Origin of African-American Society in Mainland North America," *William and Mary Quarterly* 53:2 (1996), 251-288. Also see Linda Heywood and John Thornton, *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles and the Foundation of the Americas*, *1585-1660*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Ira Berlin, "From Creole to African: Atlantic Creoles and the Origin of African-American Society in Mainland North America," 253.

of confident, sophisticated natives than that of vulnerable newcomers." Atlantic creoles originated in the encounters between Europeans and Africans on the western coast of Africa, starting in the fifteenth century, well before Columbus sailed to America. In a few coastal enclaves, groups of multilingual Eurafricans<sup>5</sup> acted as intermediaries between Europeans, North African Muslims, and inland Africans. The first generations of slaves brought to America came from these enclaves. Atlantic societies predating the plantation system were societies-with-slaves rather than slave societies, and there were important social and cultural similarities between the European enclaves on the western coast of Africa and the European enclaves in North America and the Caribbean. Those who circulated between these enclaves (Elmina, Saint-Louis, Cartagena, Cap-Français, New Orleans, Charleston...), whether slave or free, were likely to be multilingual and highly skilled. Manumissions were frequent, and, no matter how brutal the master-slave relations may have been, the distance between master and slave was not incommensurable. Berlin explains his choice of the term "creole" by referring to the etymology of the Portuguese term *crioulo* meaning, according to him, "a person of African descent born in the New World." Among the competing and mutually exclusive definitions of the term, he uses "creole" to mean "black people of native American birth" while "Atlantic creole" includes "those who by experience or chance, as well as by birth, became part of a new culture that emerged along the Atlantic littoral-in Africa, Europe, or the Americas-beginning in the 16<sup>th</sup> century." In fact, the word "creole" itself, without the "Atlantic" qualifier, and within the range of its contested meanings, is a good guide for understanding the complexity of the new Atlantic culture to which Berlin is referring. Even though the etymology of the words *criollo* (Spanish) and *crioulo* (Portuguese) has not been established with certainty, a few elements are clear. The word comes from the Latin *creare* (to give birth, to procreate) via the Spanish and Portuguese criar (to feed, to bring up). It passed from Spanish and Portuguese into French and English. It seems to have originated in the context of the slave trade, possibly in the Portuguese pidgin that was employed on the West African coast during the fifteenth century (in that case, the word *creole* would itself be a creole word). 8 Early uses of the term include "a slave born in his master's house" (as opposed to purchased elsewhere), "a native" (of any land), "a person born in the colony of European or African parents," (in other words, a native whose parents are not

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> George E. Brooks, Eurafricans in Western Africa. Commerce, Social Status, Gender, and Religious Observance from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century, Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003.
<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> "From Creole to African: Atlantic Creoles and the Origin of African-American Society in Mainland North America," 254.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Eva Martha Eckkrammer, "'Creole' Language and Identity in the Netherland Antilles," in *A Pepper-Pot of Cultures. Aspects of Creolization in the Caribbean*, edited by Gordon Collier and Ulreich Fleischmann, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003, 85-108.

native) and "a slave born in the colony" (as opposed to Africa). This quick overview shows how the various, sometimes incompatible meanings, were interrelated. From what seems to be the original meaning ("native-born slave"), the broader meaning of "natural-born" was derived (as the President of the United States must be a "natural-born citizen", i.e. a creole). This derivation is similar to the one observed in the Latin words *verna* (a slave born in his master's house) and *vernaculus* (vernacular, or native). Finally there was a sense that the culture into which creoles were born was new and distinctive, a fact that was alternatively perceived with shame <sup>10</sup> and pride. <sup>11</sup>

In this study, I test the meaning and explanatory power of Berlin's concept of "Atlantic creole" by telling the story of two families, one "black," and one "white," whose paths briefly crossed in New Orleans in 1811. Berlin's focus is on African-American society and his definition of creole is consistent with traditional English and American usage (creole was most often used in the expression *creole negroes*, to designate black slaves born in the colony). However, as we have just seen, the word creole was historically defined by slavery, but its other uses, while retaining the original connection, were not restricted to it, especially in Spanish, Portuguese, and French. In eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue, the word creole was used to designate any person, black or white, slave or free, born in the colony. In an 1802 proclamation, Toussaint Louverture, then leader of the island, used the word to mean every individual (black or white) born in the colony or in Africa. 12 During the debates that accompanied the accession of Louisiana to statehood in 1812, the word was sometimes used to designate natural-born free Louisianans, some of whom were of African descent. 13 I submit that "Atlantic creole" can be used to capture a very specific but hard-to-grasp way of life that was a coincidence of opposites: it was tied to slavery but not restricted to it; it was born of commerce and migration but understood itself as "native"; it was deeply local, yet displayed remarkable similarities across the Atlantic.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Dieter Woll, "Esp. *criollo* y port. *crioulo*: volviendo a la cuestión del origen y la historia de las dos palabras," *Latinitas et Romanitas. Festschrift für Hans Dieter Bork zum 65. Geburtstag*, edited by Annegret Bollée and Johannes Kramer, Bonn: Romanistischer Verlag, 1997, 517-535.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Seventeenth-century Spanish sources indicate that the word creole was used in a pejorative sense by the slaves themselves to designate those born in the colony as opposed to those born in Africa (Eckkrammer, "'Creole' Language and Identity in the Netherland Antilles," 90).

<sup>&</sup>quot;His pride in being creole was dearer to him than his being a Louisianan." Rodolphe-Lucien Desdunes, *Our People and our History*, translated and edited by Sister Dorothea Olga McGants, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973, 21 [*Nos Hommes et notre histoire*, Montréal: Arbour & Dupont, 1911].

 <sup>12 &</sup>quot;Proclamation of Toussaint Louverture, Governor of St. Domingo," *Alexandria Times*, published as *The Times* and *District of Columbia Daily Advertiser*, Alexandria, Virginia, January 8, 1802, volume VII, issue 1469, 3.
 13 National Intelligencer, published as *The National Intelligencer and Washington Advertiser*, Washington, DC, January 10, 1811, 3.

The concept of "Atlantic creole" is at work, explicitly or implicitly, in a few recent studies that focus on family histories. Rebecca Scott and Jean Hébrard have traced the "Atlantic creole itinerary" of a mixed-race family over several generations during the long nineteenth century. Hartha Hodes has told the story of a white working-class woman who married a black seafarer in New Hampshire and started a new life with him in the Cayman Islands. Daniel Schafer has reconstructed the life of Anna Madgigine Jai Kingsley, "African princess, Florida slave, plantation slave-owner." These micro-historical studies, based in part on interviews with the descendants, and supported by extensive genealogical research, are written in a quasi-novelistic mode. One might be tempted to dismiss this kind of work as pandering to the popular obsession with genealogy, and to argue that studying the history of one family will never yield any generalizable results. In contend, on the contrary, that these studies have much to tell us about the complexity of Atlantic creole culture and its survival well into the nineteenth century.

The works mentioned above owe a lot to the techniques of *microstoria* and their appropriation by members of the *Annales* school in the 1990s: <sup>17</sup> an attention to the experiential horizon of individuals and small groups, and a focus on the range of possibilities available to individuals at a particular moment and over time, along with the conviction that social systems and norms are never fully integrated nor coherent. When they move from the particular to the general, these historians do not contend that the cases they study are "representative" or "typical," and they do not predict that what is observed at the micro level (a family or a neighborhood) will necessarily resemble what is observed at the macro level (a region or a country, as is the case in Ira Berlin's work). Rather, they argue that it is both legitimate and meaningful to test the validity of broad concepts and categories on small units. For instance, Hodes, by looking at the ways in which racial categories such as white, black and mulatto were used in different contexts over the lives of two individuals, is able to draw conclusions about "the mercurial nature and enduring power of race." The micro-historical study I propose here is

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Rebecca Scott and Jean Hébrard, "Rosalie of the Poulard Nation: Freedom, Law and Dignity in the Era of the Haitian Revolution," in John D. Garrigus and Christopher Morris ed., *Assumed Identities. The Meaning of Race in the Atlantic World*, Arlington, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2010, 116-143; "Servitude, liberté et citoyenneté dans le monde atlantique des XVIIIe et XIXe siècles: Rosalie de nation Poulard," *Revue de la Société haïtienne d'histoire et de géographie* 83:237 (2008), 1-52; Rebecca Scott, "Public Rights and Private Commerce. A Nineteenth-Century Creole Itinerary," *Current Anthropology* 48:2 (2007), 237-256; "The Atlantic World and the Road to *Plessy v. Ferguson*," *Journal of American History* (2007), 726-733.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Martha Hodes, *The Sea Captain's Wife. A True Story of Love, Race, and War in the Nineteenth Century*, New York: W. W. Norton, 2006; "The Mercurial Nature and Abiding Power of Race: A Transnational Family Story," *American Historical Review*, 108:1 (2003), 84-118.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Daniel L. Schafer, *Anna Madgigine Jai Kingsley, African Princess, Florida Slave, Plantation Slaveowner*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> See Jacques Revel (ed.) *Jeux d'échelles. La micro-analyse à l'expérience*, Paris: Gallimard, 1996; Maurizio Gribaudi, *Itinéraires ouvriers: espaces et groupes sociaux à Turin au début du XXe siècle*, Paris: Editions de l'Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales, 1987.

fairly similar in its approach to the work of Scott and Hébrard. Like theirs, it focuses on individual Atlantic creole trajectories and has required painstaking archival and genealogical research in more than one location (in the case of this study, Louisiana, southwestern France, Spain, and Cuba). It goes further than theirs in being more explicitly a work of historical anthropology, focusing on matrimonial strategies as well as strategies of asset transmission, with the assumption that these strategies are the point of contact between the individual and the social: birth, marriage and death records, wills, property transaction records, records of the sale or manumission of slaves, when examined carefully and compared over several generations, give us a glimpse of how individual and group identities as well as one's positioning in the social hierarchy were constantly renegotiated. Additionally, by comparing two families, a "black" one and a "white" one, it shows that these negotiations about one's identity took place in very similar ways across what we now understand as the color lines. My story starts with an 1813 New Orleans civil case in which the defendant was white and the plaintiff a free man of color. I study and compare the family histories of both parties to the case, going back to the early eighteenth century and moving forward to the late nineteenth century.

#### A FREE MAN OF COLOR GOES TO COURT

The New Orleans Parish Court was established in 1813, shortly after Louisiana became a state. One of the first cases tried in this court was a dispute between a defendant called Charles Lamerenx, and a plaintiff called Charles Decoudreau, who represented the estate of his mother, Fanchonette Decoudreau. In the court records, Charles Decoudreau and his mother are designated respectively as a "free man of color" and a "free woman of color." Here is the origin of the dispute. On February 11, 1811, Charles Decoudreau, acting on behalf of his mother's estate, sold a house to a man called Charles Lamerenx (without a color designation, and therefore assumed to be white). This house was located on Bayou Saint John Road, on the left side of the road as one leaves the city, not far from the city limits. For the house and two arpents of land (1.69 acre), Charles Lamerenx agreed to pay \$3,660 (approximately \$47,000 in 2012 dollars). He paid \$500 in cash, and the rest in the form of two promissory notes, one with a one-year term, and the other with a two-year term. The notes were guaranteed by a mortgage on the house.

On the map of New Orleans and its suburbs made by Tanesse in 1815, <sup>19</sup> (Fig. 1 and 2) we can see that the area was sparsely populated and the houses were lined up on the edge of the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Estate of Françoise Dubrauil [sic], alias Franchonette [sic] Decoudreau, vs. Charles Lamerenx, Parish Court Records 020-187 (1813), Orleans Parish (NOPL).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Plan of the City and Suburbs of New Orleans, from an Actual Survey Made in 1815 by F. Tanesse, City Surveyor (http://memory.loc.gov).

road.<sup>20</sup> Remarkably, we do have a picture of this particular house as it looked like in 1849, thanks to the *New Orleans Plan Book* (Fig. 4), which contains watercolors of properties for sale. It does not seem to have been altered between 1811 and 1849. New Orleans architectural historians refer to this type of house as a four-bay "Creole cottage," typical of the *faubourgs* (suburbs) and suitable for two families.<sup>21</sup> This type of building was common throughout French and Spanish America in the eighteenth century: it is thought to have been brought to New Orleans by migrants from other Spanish colonies and by French refugees from Saint-Domingue who fled the Haitian Revolution.<sup>22</sup> The Decoudreaus had purchased the land just three years before from Claude Tremé,<sup>23</sup> who owned the entire area (Fig. 3) that is now referred to as "Faubourg Tremé," recently made famous by an HBO television series and an earlier television documentary, *Faubourg Tremé: The Untold Story of Black New Orleans*.<sup>24</sup>

Charles Lamerenx failed to make the promised payments. On February 9, 1813, Marc Lafitte, notary public for the parish of New Orleans, went to the Bayou Road house to notify Lamerenx of his delinquency. Lamerenx was not there. His neighbors said that he had left town and was "sailing." Lamerenx being still absent and delinquent, on July 14, 1813, the Parish Court judge ordered the seizure of the house to settle an outstanding debt of \$2,559.

#### FROM AMERICA TO AFRICA TO EUROPE: CHARLES LAMERENX

Where in the world was Charles Lamerenx? For an answer to this question, we have to turn to the Spanish and Cuban archives. On April 7, 1817, Charles Lamerenx, jailed in Cadiz and about to be transferred to the Spanish presidio of Ceuta on the northern coast of Africa, wrote a lengthy petition to the king of Spain to justify himself and ask for clemency. Lamerenx explains that he had to leave New Orleans to attend to some business in Cartagena (a city on the Atlantic coast of modern-day Colombia). Because there was no regular ship headed back to New Orleans, he reluctantly boarded a privateer schooner named *La Belona*. On the way the privateer captured a Spanish brigantine named *Cupido* with its entire crew and passengers. Lamerenx insists that he

Cuaderno de los autos contra D. Carlos Lamerens por infidencia, Legajo 15, Número 36, (ANC).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> In the 1811 New Orleans Directory, Charles Decoudreau's house is identified as the nineteenth house on Bayou Road. See *Whitney's New Orleans Directory and Louisiana & Mississippi Almanac for the Year 1811*, New Orleans: Printed for the author, 1810.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Roulhac B. Toledano, *A Pattern Book of New Orleans Architecture*, Gretna, LA: Pelican, 2010, 71; Roulhac Toledano and Marie Louise-Christovich, *New Orleans Architecture: Faubourg Tremé and the Bayou Road* (vol. 6) Gretna, LA: Pelican, 1980, 145.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> A Pattern Book of New Orleans Architecture, 68.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Sale from Claude Tremé to Françoise Dubreuil, a.k.a Fanchonette Decoudreau, July 26, 1808, Pierre Pedesclaux, Notary Public, vol. 53, p. 849 (NONA).

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Treme, created by David Simon and Eric Overmyer, run on HBO since April 11, 2010; Faubourg Tremé. The Untold Story of Black New Orleans, directed by Dawn Logsdon and Lolis Eric Elie, Serendipity Films, LLC, 2008.
 <sup>25</sup> Carlos de Lamerenx Duhart to the King of Spain, April 7, 1817, Ultramar, 155, n51, (AGI); Asuntos Políticos.

personally had nothing to do with this act of piracy, and never profited from it. He pleaded with the captain for a humane treatment of the prisoners, and he even helped them with his own money. Lamerenx disembarked in Jamaica. Still unable to make his way back to New Orleans, he found another ship that took him to Trinidad, and eventually to the city of Matanzas, Cuba, where he had relatives. In the meantime, the Spanish prisoners had been freed by their captors, and they had arrived in Cuba. They recognized Lamerenx and denounced him as a pirate. He was tried by a Spanish court and sentenced to ten years of hard labor in a penitentiary in Africa (according to a 1771 Spanish law, hard labor in Africa was the punishment for crimes committed with "a depraved and wicked mind" Lamerenx was doubly guilty in the eyes of the Spanish. It was bad enough that the privateer had captured a Spanish vessel. The aggravating circumstance was the fact that the pirates flew the insurgent flag: Cartagena was a rebel city, which had declared its independence from Spain in 1811. Lamerenx was both a pirate and a traitor.

We know that Lamerenx's earlier pleas for clemency were turned down,<sup>27</sup> and there is no record of an official reaction to his petition to the king. Maybe he was released. Maybe he escaped. The fact is that less than a year later, Lamerenx was no longer in Africa but in France, where he sued his sister to take control of his parents' estate,<sup>28</sup> and sold about half of it to support himself. In 1818, he sold a town house and two farms he owned in La Bastide Clairence, a town of approximately 2,000 inhabitants in the Basses-Pyrénées.<sup>29</sup> Lamerenx got 4,000 francs from this transaction (approximately \$10,500 in 2012 dollars), and tried to live off the rest of his estate, located near the town of Saint-Palais (also in the Basses-Pyrénées). However, the farmland produced little, and the estate was burdened with large debts. In 1828, Lamerenx, 53 years old and single, transferred the property back to his sister, and he moved in with Madeleine Biscay, a 20-year old seamstress who was the daughter of a local farmer.

Being officially without property, Lamerenx was able to seek government support. Restoration France was not exactly a welfare state, but Lamerenx did belong to a category of citizens that were eligible for help. We learn this from a letter he sent on November 20, 1829 to the French minister of Interior.<sup>30</sup> In it he declares he is a refugee from Saint-Domingue. "I was born to enjoy a good fortune," he writes, "but the fateful revolution of the island of Saint-Domingue destroyed all my hopes."<sup>31</sup> He continues: "Having survived the massacres perpetrated

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Institutes of the Civil Law of Spain, London: Strahan, 1825, 283.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Lamerenx was sentenced on December 4, 1815 by the Real Audiencia of the island of Cuba after being exonerated by a lower court (Ultramar 28, n3, fol. 52r) (AGI). An appeal was rejected on February 9, 1816 (Ultramar 97, n5, fol. 19v) (AGI).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Charles Lamerenx vs. Marguerite Laborde, née Lamerenx, 3 U 5 190, May 5, 1818 (ADPA).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Sale from Charles Lamerenx and his co-heirs to Jacob Gomès, transcribed at Bureau des hypothèques de Bayonne on June 29, 1818, Damborgez Notary (ADPA).

<sup>30</sup> Biscay (Magdeleine) veuve Lamerens Duhart, colon réfugié de Saint-Domingue, F/12/2751 (CARAN).

by the Negroes, I thought I could find support in the estate of my ancestors, but the infidelity or the incompetence of those agents who were entrusted with it was such that the debts outweighed the money I was owed and could not collect. I therefore have no choice but to humbly solicit the annual support granted by the King's munificence to those who survived the events."<sup>32</sup> Lamerenx was granted a stipend of 300 francs per year (roughly \$1,100 in 2012 dollars). Every six months, the mayor of his place of residence had to certify that he was without resources. A few years later, Lamerenx wrote again to ask for a raise. The stipend was increased to 480 francs, because of the petitioner's age.

Lamerenx's initial petition was supported by the testimony of his neighbors in Saint-Palais who swore that he was the son of Jean-Pierre Lamerenx, born in France and deceased in Cuba around 1810. Jean-Pierre Lamerenx was the owner of a coffee plantation (habitation en café) located in Le Dondon, in the northern part of Saint-Domingue. In fact, this information, and much more, had already been provided by Lamerenx himself to another branch of the French bureaucracy. Support for the former colonists came in two separate ways. On the one hand, the ministry of Interior provided a modest annual stipend to families in need. On the other hand, the ministry of Finance had set up a commission to distribute the proceeds from the large indemnity the Haitian government had agreed to pay in exchange for the formal recognition of Haitian independence by Charles X in 1825. 33 Because of a legal requirement that this distribution should be made public, the ministry printed a six-volume list of former property owners with the location of the property, its value, and the share of the value to be distributed to the living heirs.<sup>34</sup> From this document we learn that Jean-Pierre Lamerenx was indeed the owner of a coffee plantation located in the Matador neighborhood of Le Dondon parish. The property was valued at 15,275 francs (approximately \$58,000 in 2012 dollars), to be shared equally among four living heirs. Since the indemnity was intended to cover about 10% of the value of lost property (which included the value of slaves), we can calculate that the Lamerenx estate in Saint-Domingue had been worth approximately \$580,000.

Knowing more about the background of Charles Lamerenx, we can safely assume that he did not feel any culture shock when he arrived in New Orleans from Cuba sometime in 1810. He seems to have left voluntarily, unlike the thousands of Saint-Domingue refugees who were expelled from Cuba and sought refuge in New Orleans in 1809, following the invasion of Spain

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> See Christiane Demeulenaere-Douyère, "L'Etat 'réparateur' des accidents de l'Histoire: l'exemple des secours aux colons spoliés," *Revue administrative*, special issue, 2007, 74-84.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> Etat détaillé des liquidations opérées à l'époque du 1<sup>er</sup> janvier 1828-1832 et les six premiers mois de 1833, par la Commission chargée de répartir l'indemnité attribuée aux anciens colons de Saint-Domingue, en exécution de la loi du 30 avril 1826 et conformément aux dispositions de l'ordonnance du 9 mai suivant, Paris: Imprimerie royale, 1828-1833, 6 vols.

by Napoleon's troops. The "creole cottage" he purchased from Charles Decoudreau was much more modest than the plantation house he had owned in Saint-Domingue, but this type of building was familiar to anyone who had lived in Saint-Domingue or Cuba. It has been noted that eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue and colonial New Orleans had similar social structures:<sup>35</sup> a large African slave population (proportionally larger in Saint-Domingue than in New Orleans), a group of whites who owned large estates and were often noble, a group of white artisans and merchants of humbler means and extraction, and the gens de couleur libres (free people of color): a group of African and mixed-race artisans and property owners who were often quite prosperous and were slave owners themselves. This tripartite system (whites, blacks, free-coloreds) was unusual in the Atlantic world. It has been ascribed to cultural differences between Protestants who saw the world in black and white, and Catholics who were more accepting of race mixing<sup>36</sup> (incidentally, this is the explanation given by interviewees in the Faubourg Tremé documentary for the existence of free people of color in New Orleans). However, this culturalist interpretation cannot account for the case of Brazil, a Catholic country that had a two-tiered system in which mixed-race property owners were re-categorized as white, just as in Protestant, English-speaking Jamaica, 37 or in South Carolina. 38 The concept of "mulatto" was ubiquitous in the Atlantic but in Saint-Domingue (and later in New Orleans) gens de couleur were increasingly treated as a legally separate group defined by blood, while in eighteenth-century Brazil, Jamaica, or South Carolina, the definition of whiteness was mostly a social one and tied to the size of one's property holdings.<sup>39</sup>

Charles Lamerenx (1775-1854) was white and belonged to minor nobility, as many French plantation owners did. His full name was Charles Lamerenx d'Uhart-Juson. His family's presence in Saint-Domingue had started two generations before him. His great-uncle Marc-Antoine emigrated to Saint-Domingue in 1728 at the age of 18 and was one of the early settlers and first coffee growers of Le Dondon. It was in Le Dondon that the first coffee plantations were established in Saint-Domingue in the late 1730s. This was followed by spectacular growth: on the eve of the French Revolution, Saint-Domingue produced 60% of the world's coffee. As compared with sugar plantations, coffee plantations required a much smaller investment in plant

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> See Laura Foner, "The Free People of Color in Louisiana and St. Domingue: A Comparative Portrait of Two Three-Caste Slave Societies," *Journal of Social History* 3 (1970), 406-430; Stewart R. King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig. Free People of Color in Pre-Revolutionary Saint Domingue*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001; Nathalie Dessens, *From Saint-Domingue to New Orleans. Migration and Influences*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Frank Tannenbaum, Slave and Citizen. The Negro in the Americas, New York: Knopf, 1947.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> John D. Garrigus, *Before Haiti. Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue*, New York: Palgrave, 2006.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Joel Williamson, *New People. Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995, 17-20.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Joel Williamson, New People, 18.

and equipment, and could be run profitably with fewer slaves. Working conditions in coffee plantations were somewhat less dire than they were in sugar plantations. Marc-Antoine's widow Elizabeth Le Jeune ("la dame Duhart") was still the owner of the plantation when Moreau de Saint-Méry did his description of the island of Saint-Domingue in 1789.<sup>40</sup> Charles's father Jean-Pierre, born in La Bastide Clairence, sailed from Bayonne to Cap-Français (now Cap-Haïtien) on *La Marianne* in September, 1764 at the age of 22 and settled in Le Dondon where he established a coffee plantation with the help and support of his uncle Marc-Antoine.<sup>41</sup> Jean-Pierre's eldest son, Charles Lamerenx, born in Le Dondon on October 10, 1775, was set to inherit the family plantation and have a predictably comfortable life. Starting in 1791, just about every event in his life was something he could not have imagined.

#### FROM AFRICA AND EUROPE TO AMERICA: THE DECOUDREAU FAMILY

Charles Decoudreau (1772-1846), a carpenter by trade, is designated in the records of his dispute with Lamerenx as *homme de couleur libre* ("free man of color"). This French term, which had no equivalent in Spanish, became mandatory in notarial records a few years after the Louisiana Purchase, and gathered in one category all mixed-race individuals who were free<sup>42</sup>. His mother, Fanchonette Decoudreau is designated in eighteenth-century Spanish notarial records as *mulata libre* ("free mulatress"). Charles was a "quadroon" in the racial parlance of the time, meaning that his ancestry was one-quarter African and three-quarters European. He married another quadroon, Margarita Castañedo, a native of Cuba, in 1798. The position of *gens de couleur* in the social hierarchy was a complicated one. <sup>43</sup> Their emergence as an endogamous caste was a relatively late phenomenon. Eighteenth-century French and Spanish legal norms prohibited racial mixing, but these rules were routinely circumvented. Unions between white men and black women (slave or free) were frequent, and there were significant transfers of wealth from white fathers to their black partners and their mixed-race children. Why exactly a three-caste system emerged in New Orleans and Saint-Domingue is not totally clear. Garrigus, who has studied the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description de la partie française de l'île de Saint-Domingue*, Paris: Société de l'histoire des colonies françaises, 1958, vol. 1, 255 [Philadelphia: chez l'auteur, 1797]. Marc-Antoine had his nobility certified by d'Hozier, France's official genealogist, in 1770 (Nouveau d'Hozier 201-4482; Chérin 115-2381) (BnF).

<sup>41</sup> Papers of the Darrieux-Juson family, courtesy of Denis Dufourcq, La Bastide Clairence, France.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Jennifer M. Spear, *Race, Sex and Social Order in Early New Orleans*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009, 190.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> On *gens de couleur* in New Orleans, see Jennifer M. Spear, *Race, Sex and Social Order in Early New Orleans*; Elizabeth Shirley Thompson, *Exiles at Home: the Struggle to become American in Creole New Orleans*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009; *Creole. The History and Legacy of Louisiana's Free People of Color*, edited by Sybil Kein, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000; Kimberly S. Hanger, *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places. Free Black Society in Colonial New Orleans*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1997; Caryn Cossé Bell, *Revolution, Romanticism and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana 1718-1868*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997; Laura Foner, "The Free People of Color in Louisiana and St. Domingue: A Comparative Portrait of Two Three-Caste Slave Societies," *Journal of Social History* 3 (1970), 406-430.

Saint-Domingue case, interprets it as the result of an alliance between poor whites and wealthy whites to exclude free-coloreds from the ruling class. <sup>44</sup> According to Lachance, who has worked on New Orleans, the causes include a change in racial and sex ratios (more white women became available as potential spouses in the nineteenth century), the racial endogamy of Anglo-Americans who moved to New Orleans after the Louisiana Purchase, and calculations of the free-coloreds themselves, who, instead of producing illegitimate children with whites, preferred to produce legitimate children by marrying within their own group. <sup>45</sup> Spear, who has worked on New Orleans as well, interprets the phenomenon as the result of a compromise between an Anglo-American binary racial system and the more fluid system that prevailed in Spanish New Orleans. <sup>46</sup> What is clear, however, is that in Saint-Domingue as well as in New Orleans, the intermediate category of *gens de couleur* was codified in law and custom only gradually. In the case of New Orleans, endogamy within the free-colored group did not become an absolute rule until the 1840s. <sup>47</sup>

The early history of these New Orleans mixed-race families is sometimes difficult to trace, especially on the male side. Out-of-wedlock filiations were probably common knowledge among the contemporaries, and a large number of white fathers did recognize their mixed-race offspring in their wills, but fathers are not always named in the written records. There are several mentions of a French officer named Charles Renard des Coudreaux in Louisiana in the 1770s, who was most probably Charles Decoudreau's father, but there is no written record that it is the case. As On the other hand, there is written evidence of Charles Decoudreau's ancestry on his mother's side. Shortly before she died in 1810, Charles's mother Fanchonette dictated her last will to Pierre Pedescleaux, notary public of the City of New Orleans. In it she declares that she is "Françoise Dubreuil, native of the City of New Orleans, natural daughter of Nanette Dubreuil, free woman of color, and of Monsieur Dubreuil." Who are Monsieur Dubreuil and his colored partner Nanette? It turns out that this couple is known to the New Orleans historians who studied the ascendancy of Henriette Delille (1812-1862), the free creole woman of African descent who

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> Paul F. Lachance, "The Formation of a Three-Caste Society: Evidence from Wills in Antebellum New Orleans," *Social Science History* 18:2 (1994), 211-242.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> Jennifer M. Spear, Race, Sex and Social Order in Early New Orleans.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> Paul F. Lachance, "The Formation of a Three-Caste Society: Evidence from Wills in Antebellum New Orleans," 223.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> A Carlos Descoudreaux was appointed lieutenant colonel of infantry by the king of Spain (*Mercurio Historico*, 1777, 172). The same officer served as commandant of the Iberville district, 1771–1774. A full ensign at Natchez in 1758, he was characterized by Kerlérec, the French governor of Louisiana, as "enthusiastic" and "well-behaved." See "Descoudreaux, Charles" in Carl A. Brasseaux, *France's Forgotten Legion: Service Records of French Military and Administrative Personnel Stationed in the Mississippi Valley and Gulf Coast Region, 1699-1769*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> Will of Françoise Dubreuil, September 4, 1810, Pierre Pedescleaux, Notary Public, Will Book, vol. 1, pp. 322-325 (NONA).

founded the Sisters of the Holy Family, a Roman Catholic order. 50 "Monsieur Dubreuil" was Claude Joseph Dubreuil (1693-1757) a native of Dijon, France, who sailed with his wife and two children from La Rochelle to Louisiana in 1718 on Le Comte de Toulouse and settled next to Jean-Baptiste de Bienville, the founder of New Orleans.<sup>51</sup> Dubreuil was a wealthy planter and contractor who established the city's first levees and canal system. In the mid-1700s he owned more than 500 slaves, which made him the largest slave owner in New Orleans. Nanette was a slave in the Dubreuil household. According to Virginia Meacham Gould and Emily Clark, she was most likely from Senegambia and a member of the coastal Wolof ethnic group. The Wolof were accustomed to contacts with Europeans and therefore considered best suited to serve as household slaves.<sup>52</sup> French was spoken in parts of the coast of Senegal, as well as a French pidgin that may be the ancestor of all French creoles.<sup>53</sup> Nanette was probably brought to New Orleans in 1720, when she was approximately ten years old. She may have been chosen as a household slave because she already had some knowledge of the French language. She had five children with Dubreuil, including Fanchonette, who was born in 1737. Nanette was an active member of the St. Louis Catholic parish of New Orleans, and she is recorded as godmother for the baptism of several slaves.<sup>54</sup> She purchased her freedom from Claude Joseph Dubreuil's son in 1763. It is not clear when her daughter Fanchonette won her freedom, but she appears as a mulata libre in various notarial records from the 1780s and 1790s. 55 Like many free women of color in New Orleans and Saint-Domingue, Fanchonette accumulated a significant amount of wealth over the course of her life, thanks to her own industry and to the protection of her white partner (in all likelihood the French officer Charles des Coudreaux, as we have seen above). Upon her death in 1810, her estate was valued at \$6,480 (about \$88,000 in today's currency). This included a house at the corner of Dauphine and Ursulines (\$2,500), the house on Bayou Road that was later purchased by Charles Lamerenx (\$2,500), an un-built plot of land on Bayou Road (\$400), a thirty-year old slave woman of the Mandingo nation named Louise (\$400), and a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> See Emily Clark and Virginia Meacham Gould, "The Feminine Face of Afro-Catholicism in New Orleans, 1727-1852," William and Mary Quarterly 59:2 (2002), 409-448; Virginia Meecham Gould, "Afro-Creole Women, Freedom and Property-Holding in New Orleans," in Coastal Encounters. The Transformation of the Gulf South in the Eighteenth Century, edited by Richmond F. Brown, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007, 151-166. <sup>51</sup> Rôle des passagers embarqués pour la Louisiane (La Rochelle, November 15, 1718) G1 464 n°6, (ANOM);

Census of New Orleans (1724), COL G1 464 (ANOM).

52 "The Feminine Face of Afro-Catholicism in New Orleans, 1727-1852," 420.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> John H.McWhorter, *The Missing Spanish Creoles. Recovering the Birth of Plantation Contact Languages*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000, 146-191.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> See Emily Clark and Virginia Meacham Gould, "The Feminine Face of Afro-Catholicism in New Orleans, 1727-1852."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> Pedro Pedesclaux, Notary Public, Index January-April 1788 (NONA): http://www.notarialarchives.org/ppindices/ppVol33Index.pdf;

forty-year old male slave named Antoine, also a Mandingo (\$550).<sup>56</sup> In addition, a mulatto slave named François was freed upon her death as a reward for taking care of her in her illness.<sup>57</sup>

It seems hard to reconcile the trajectory of Nanette and her children with the familiar picture of plantation slaves as rootless, helpless, and destitute. Also, it is not immediately clear how Nanette's family could have moved from slavery to moderate wealth in two generations. Our image of slavery is informed by our knowledge of the large-scale plantation system of the nineteenth-century, in which manumission was rare, if not impossible, and an essential connection was assumed between servitude and race. Berlin's concept of "Atlantic creole" allows us to understand the status of Nanette and her children as more akin to the slavery of the ancient Mediterranean or early modern Africa, which did not necessarily involve less brutality than the modern regime, but did not assume an incommensurable distance between master and slave and allowed for frequent manumissions. A sense of the status of free women of color in New Orleans and Saint-Domingue may be best conveyed through Fig. 6, which gives us an idea of what Fanchonette may have looked like when she was a young woman: free-colored women were known for their distinctive hairstyle and their luxurious dress, which was a display of their economic power.

Clark and Gould observe that Nanette's relationship with Dubreuil was consistent with Wolof polygamous traditions (Dubreuil had one white and one black family). One may argue that for Nanette and her daughters, the model was not African polygamy in general but something culturally and geographically much more specific. In the French trading posts of Gorée and Saint-Louis, a group of mixed-raced women, the signares (Fig. 7) had quasimarriages (mariages à la mode du pays) with French officers and traders. <sup>58</sup> The signares were Catholic and spoke French. They sought partnerships with men who had wealth and power. The offspring of these unions often married the children of other signares in order to maximize wealth accumulation within the group. The picture of a signare (Fig. 7) dates from the 1790s while the picture of Saint-Domingue women of color (Fig. 6) dates from the 1760s. What both pictures convey, beyond the differences in fashion, is a conspicuous display of wealth and a sense of power and economic independence. More generally, there are remarkable parallels between the Senegalese signares and the New Orleans placées (or the Saint-Domingue ménagères). A placée would enter into a long-term relationship with a wealthy white man. In exchange for companionship and sexual favors, the *placée* was usually given the ownership of a house, and funding for the education of her children, who were often also recognized in their

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> Probate inventory of Françoise Dubreuil, a.k.a. Fanchonette Ducoudreau, December 26, 1810, Old Inventories, Letter "D" (NONA).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> Will of Françoise Dubreuil.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> On the *signares*, see P.-D. Boilat, *Esquisses sénégalaises*, Paris: Bertrand, 1853, 5 and 212, and Jean-Luc Angrand, *Céleste ou le temps des signares*, Paris: Editions Anne Pépin, 2006.

father's will. Charles Decoudreau's sister Françoise was the *placée* of a wealthy white man, Louis Dauquemenil de Morand. When Louis de Morand dictated his last will on his death bed in 1821, the notary recorded that he was living in a house that was the sole property of his concubine Françoise. Because Louis had one legitimate son from an early marriage, the three illegitimate daughters he had with Françoise had to share one-fifth of the estate, while the legitimate son was getting four-fifths.<sup>59</sup> When the testator was not married and had no siblings, transfers to free-colored children could be more generous. Charles Decoudreau's son-in-law, Paul Trévigne, was the illegitimate son of a wealthy white man, Joseph Trévigne, and a freecolored woman, Marguerite Meunier. Because the white man had never been married and had no immediate white relatives, Paul Trévigne was able to inherit the entire estate of his father in 1828. 60 If we take an overall look at the matrimonial strategies of Nanette and her descendants, we get a sense of individual variations within a range of available choices, and we also see how available choices changed over time. Nanette, born on the coast of Senegal, was the concubine of the wealthiest man in New Orleans, in a fashion that is reminiscent of Senegalese signares. Each one of her four daughters, including Fanchonette, had a long-term relationship with a white military officer. 61 Her son married a free woman of color. Fanchonette had two daughters and a son. The son, Charles, married a free woman of color. A daughter, Marguerite, married a free man of color. The other daughter, Françoise, was the concubine of a wealthy white man. Charles himself had seven children with his wife Marguerite: all those for whom we have records married within the free-colored group.

Thanks to notarial and census records we can situate Fanchonette in a family network of early property owners on Bayou Road. Fanchonette purchased the lot on the edge of Bayou Road in 1808.<sup>62</sup> She asked her son Charles, who was a carpenter, to build a house on the newly-acquired lot. In 1810, the house was inhabited by Fanchonette as well as her son Charles and his family.<sup>63</sup> Fanchonette's oldest daughter Marguerite (a.k.a. Pouponne) had purchased an adjacent lot in 1806.<sup>64</sup> Another daughter of Fanchonette, Françoise Decoudreau, is mentioned in the 1810 Federal census as living on the same stretch of Bayou Road. Françoise was the *placée* of Louis Dauquemenil de Morand, who was himself a son of Charles de Morand, <sup>65</sup> the original owner of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> Will of Louis Dauquemeny de Morand, March 30, 1821, Will Book, vol. 3, p. 206 (NOPL).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>60</sup> Will of Joseph Treviño, October 2, 1828, Will Book, vol. 4, p. 204 (NOPL).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> Research in progress by Virginia Meecham Gould, email communication, September 17, 2010.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>62</sup> Sale from Claude Tremé to Fanchonette Decoudreau, Pedescleaux Notary Public, vol. 57, p. 290, July 26, 1808 (NONA).

<sup>63</sup> http://www.ancestry.com: United States Federal Census, Year: 1810; Census Place: New Orleans, Orleans, Louisiana; Roll: 10; Page: 282; Image: 00244.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup> Sale from Claude Tremé to Marguerite Decoudreau, Pedescleaux Notary Public, vol. 53, p. 828, November 25, 1806 (NONA).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>65</sup> New Orleans Architecture, 9-12.

the concession that was later purchased by Claude Tremé and retained Tremé's name, even though it was in his possession for just a decade. Charles de Morand had himself purchased the land directly from the French Company of the Indies in 1731.<sup>66</sup> In other words, when Fanchonette bought the Bayou Road property, there had been only three owners before her since the original French settlement: the French Company of the Indies, Charles de Morand, and Claude Tremé.

When Charles Decoudreau married Margarita Castañedo in 1798, one of the witnesses was Louis Dauquemenil de Morand.<sup>67</sup> We can see that Fanchonette and her son Charles, both free persons of color and descendants of an African slave called Nanette, had intricate connections with the most powerful families in New Orleans. Charles was the grandson of Claude Dubreuil, one of the founders of the city, and his quasi-brother-in-law, Louis Dauquemenil de Morand, was the son of a man who had owned most of the land north of the city.<sup>68</sup> There is no doubt that the Decoudreaus saw themselves as belonging to a group of people who could trace their land ownership to the first French settlement in Louisiana.

Here too there is a parallel between New Orleans, Saint-Domingue, and the French enclaves on the coast of Senegal. According to George Brooks, "by 1749, ten of the thirteen private properties on Gorée belonged to Eurafricans, nine of whom were women." Stewart King's study of marriage contracts involving free-colored women in Saint-Domingue shows that wives brought significantly greater assets to the marriage than their husbands. In eighteenth-century New Orleans, the vast majority of free-colored property owners were women. In Gorée as in New Orleans, the children of free-colored women increasingly married within the free-colored group. As a result of this change, the balance of power between men and women shifted within the group. Before 1848, *signares* had on average five times the assets of their husbands. Yet by the end of the nineteenth century, the *métisse* communities of Senegal were entirely ruled by men. A similar evolution took place in New Orleans. When Rodolphe Desdunes published *Our People and Our History* (1911) a series of biographical sketches of prominent New Orleans free-coloreds of the nineteenth century, out of fifty biographies, only four were of women. The issue of property rights was a central one, in New Orleans as well as in the Senegal enclaves. As Brooks puts it regarding Gorée and Saint-Louis, "The Franco-Africans' support of British and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>66</sup> Ownership history recorded in property sale from Claude Tremé and his wife to the Corporation of New Orleans, Michel de Armas Notary Public, March 17, 1810 (NONA).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>67</sup> New Orleans Architecture, 94.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>68</sup> New Orleans Architecture, 9-12.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>69</sup> George E. Brooks, Eurafricans in Western Africa, 211.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>70</sup> Stewart R. King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig*, 197.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>71</sup> Kimberly Hanger, Bounded Lives, Bounded Places, 55-87.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>72</sup> Céleste ou le temps des signares, 159.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>73</sup> Our People and our History, 66-68.

French rule was further promoted by the introduction of European legal systems that secured their rights in regard to house plots and dwellings, ownership of slaves, and inheritance laws."<sup>74</sup> Property rights were especially important for Senegalese signares and for New Orleans freecoloreds, because, as intermediaries between other groups, their own status was fragile and subject to constant re-negotiation. This made ownership of land and slaves the single most important marker of their social status and identity, and their attachment to land ownership often resulted in extreme geographic stability. As noticed by an interviewee in the Faubourg Tremé documentary, New Orleans gens de couleur had deep local roots, and many families lived in the same neighborhoods or even the same houses for several generations. After Charles Decoudreau sold his mother's house on Bayou Road to Charles Lamerenx, he moved to Faubourg Marigny (corner of St. Anthony and Love), less than half a mile away, and his descendants stayed there for the better part of the nineteenth century. When the Federal census was taken in 1850, Charles Decoudreau's son Joseph lived there with his wife and four children. <sup>75</sup> Joseph Decoudreau is a listed as carpenter like his father. The carpenter featured in the Faubourg Tremé documentary, Irving Trevigne, is a descendant of Charles Decoudreau. He says that both his father and grandfather were carpenters. Atlantic history usually focuses on trade and migration. It is important to notice that for a family like the Decoudreaus there was a very strong sense of local belonging, based on land transactions that went back to the early eighteenth century. Over the two centuries covered by this study, national and racial boundaries changed several times. Nanette's descendants were French, then Spanish, then briefly French again, then American. They were called *mulatos* and *mulatas*, then *gens de couleur*, then *negroes*, or *whites*, or *creoles* (the latter being what they most consistently called themselves). What remained was a sense of local belonging that was probably much stronger than any national or racial identity. As Desdunes puts it regarding Armand Lanusse (1812-1867) the most respected member of the antebellum New Orleans free-colored community, "Lanusse never boasted of being an American. His pride in being creole was dearer to him than his being a Louisianan, or than anything else pertaining to his origin. All his preferences and aversions stemmed from this."<sup>76</sup>

### CHARLES LAMERENX AND THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION

In his letters to the French authorities, Charles Lamerenx presents himself as a survivor of the massacres perpetrated by the slaves who rose against French rule. The conventional story of the Haitian Revolution is that of a black vs. white struggle: African slaves rose against their white

<sup>76</sup> Our People and Our History, 21 (translation modified).

Eurafricans in Western Africa, 259.
 http://www.ancestry.com: United States Federal Census, Year: 1850; Census Place: New Orleans Municipality 3 Ward 1, Orleans, Louisiana; Roll: M432\_238; Page: 61A; Image: 126.

masters and established the first independent black republic. Charles could be assumed to have sided with his own race in the struggle. What actually happened is more complicated. Lamerenx states that he used to be a captain in the Légion de Saint-Domingue, the French colonial militia. Because the militia was not a part of the regular French army, Lamerenx is not entitled to a military pension, a fact he denounces as unfair in view of his loyal service to the State and the wounds he has received defending it.<sup>77</sup> The exact military title Lamerenx gives himself in the correspondence is capitaine d'état-major. This very specific and unusual title referred to someone who served on the staff of a general officer. What general did Lamerenx work for? One possible answer can be found in the memoirs of Isaac Louverture, Toussaint Louverture's son. Toussaint Louverture, the father of Haitian independence, led an army that was comprised of former slaves as well as white soldiers and officers drawn from the remnants of ancien régime regiments.<sup>78</sup> He initially sided with the Bourbon king of Spain against the regicide French republicans. His ostensible purpose, perceived at the time as similar to that of the Vendée insurrection, was to defend the Bourbon dynasty and the Catholic Church as well as to free the slaves (the Spanish had promised freedom to the slaves who fought on their side, as Lord Dunmore, the British governor of Virginia, had done during the American Revolution). In 1794, Toussaint switched sides and put himself under the command of Laveaux, the general who commanded the French republican troops in Saint-Domingue. In the meantime, the French civil commissioner Sonthonax had abolished slavery on the island. Toussaint's decision to switch sides is undoubtedly connected to this event, but the causal chain and Toussaint's "true" motives have been a matter of speculation. 79 Sonthonax's decree, issued on August 29, 1793, was ratified by the French Convention on February 4, 1794. Toussaint joined the French side in May, 1794. In Isaac's account of his father's life, first published in 1825, a "Captain Lamérens" is mentioned as being on Toussaint Louverture's staff in 1794. 80 This is corroborated by another mention of the same name in the unpublished part of Isaac's manuscript. Toussaint's decision to side with the French is narrated in the following way:

Followed by his aides-de-camp Birette, Dubuisson, Charles Belair and Lamérins, and by two officers of color, Lieutenant Colonel Dessalines and Captain Vène, who had escaped

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>77</sup> Biscay (Magdeleine) veuve Lamerens Duhart, F/12/2751 (CARAN).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>78</sup> On Toussaint Louverture's white and mulatto entourage (mostly of southwestern French origin), see Jacques de Cauna, "La face cachée de Toussaint Louverture," in *Saint-Domingue espagnol et la révolution nègre d'Haïti*, edited by Alain Yacou, Paris: Karthala, 2007, 295-321

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>79</sup> See David Geggus, "From His Most Catholic Majesty to the Godless Republic: the Volte-Face of Toussaint Louverture and the Ending of Slavery in Saint Domingue," *Revue française d'histoire d'Outre-Mer*, 65 (1978), 481-99

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>80</sup> Isaac Louverture, *Notes sur la vie de Toussaint-Louverture*, in Antoine Métral, *Histoire de l'expédition des Français à Saint-Domingue*, Paris: Fanjat ainé, 1825, 334.

from Gonaïves, he departed from Marmelade, having decided to change the course of things and to deal with General Lavaux.<sup>81</sup>

All the aides-de-camp mentioned here have been recorded by other nineteenth-century Haitian and French historians, except for "Lamérins." This testimony should therefore be considered with some caution. Isaac Louverture, who seems to have worked almost exclusively from memory and oral tradition, is not a very reliable source. It is also possible that the Lamerenx in question was not Charles but his father Jean-Pierre, who commanded the French colonial militia for the Dondon region and took refuge in the Spanish part of Hispaniola in 1792.<sup>83</sup> On the other hand, Toussaint's aides-de-camp were very young: Charles Lamerenx was only 19 in 1794, but Charles Belair, another aide-de-camp whose presence at Toussaint's side has been corroborated, was only 16.84 Isaac Louverture, who lived in Bordeaux in the 1820s, was in touch with the former colonists living in the region, and his story is based in part on their testimony. It is not impossible that Charles Lamerenx provided Isaac with an embellished version of his role in the war. Whether or not the story is true, the important point is that it seemed plausible to Isaac: Charles Lamerenx, the son of a wealthy white planter, served on the staff of Toussaint Louverture when the black general waged war against the French republicans to uphold the rights of the Bourbon dynasty, and he stayed with his general when Toussaint decided to switch to the French republican side.

Charles Lamerenx lived a quiet and uneventful life in France after 1818. He died in the small town of Arette (Basses-Pyrénées) in 1854, at the age of 79. He had remained in touch with his brothers and sisters, all of whom save one had settled in Cuba. A few months before his death, his oldest son Eugène boarded the *François et Théodore* in Bordeaux and arrived in Havana on March 14, 1854. The Lamerenx family had prospered in Cuba. Charles's father Jean-Pierre had established a coffee plantation (*cafetal San Pedro*) a few miles south of the city of Matanzas with the help of his youngest son François. Another son, along with a small group of Saint-Domingue refugees, had introduced the cultivation of coffee to the Sierra del Rosario on the western part of the island (thanks in large part to migrants from Saint-Domingue, Cuba

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>81</sup> Toussaint Louverture. Notes intéressantes sur Banica, Etc. Etc. L'entrée de Toussaint Louverture à Santo Domingo. Vallée de Constance, ms NAF 12409, fol. 57 (BnF).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>82</sup> Jacques de Cauna does mention Lamerenx as an aide-de-camp to Toussaint. His source is the 1825 biography of Toussaint Louverture by his son Isaac. See *Toussaint Louverture et l'indépendance d'Haïti*, edited by Jacques de Cauna, Paris: Karthala, 2004, 200.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>83</sup> See Carlos Esteban Deive, *Los Refugiados franceses en Santo Domingo*, Santo Domingo: Universidad Nacional Pedro Henríquez Ureña, 1984, 196.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>84</sup> General Charles Belair was only 24 years old when he was executed in 1802.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>85</sup> Autos. Don Carlos Lamerens contra Don Mateo Grout sobre pesos (1807) Legajo 685, Número 5; Protocoles Notariales, Matanzas. Santiago López Villavicencio Notary, vol. 2, 1840, p. 589 and p. 849 (ANC).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>86</sup> See E. Tabío and R. Payarés, *Sobre los cafetales coloniales de la Sierra del Rosario*, Serie Pinar del Río No. 17, Havana: Academia de Ciencias de Cuba, 1968.

became the leading coffee producer in the world in the 1830s). Eugène fell in love with his first cousin Rosa de Lamerens Pérez, married her, and settled in Cuba.

Charles Lamerenx, born in colonial Saint-Domingue in 1775, set foot in France for the first time in his life in 1818, at the age of 43, and sold the house where his father was born. He was only 16 when the Haitian Revolution broke out. Between 1791 and 1818, he was constantly on the move, fighting wars, trying to do business, or trying to secure his own freedom. In her recent book, Atlantic Creoles in the Age of Revolutions, Jane Landers studies the trajectories of black sailors who crisscrossed the Atlantic in the early nineteenth century, repeatedly reinventing themselves amidst fast-changing political and social circumstances. As Landers puts it, "the Atlantic creoles...fought variously for the King of Kongo, the King of England, the King of France, the French Jacobins, Muskogee and Seminole chiefs, the King of Spain, and sometimes for themselves. Each shift of allegiance required a reevaluation of political platforms and programs, with the possibilities of freedom that each offered."87 A white man, Charles Lamerenx fits this definition of the Atlantic creole. Buffeted by wars and revolutions, he pledged allegiance to Louis XVI of France, then to Charles IV of Spain, then to the French Republic, then to Ferdinand VII of Spain, then to Charles X of France, then to Louis Philippe of France. The only stable reference point in Lamerenx's movements was his family: his mother, then residing in Matanzas, Cuba, sent money to pay the courts fees when he was tried and incarcerated by the Spanish. When he was released, he went to France, a country he had never seen before, because he and his siblings owned property there. After taking control of the estate of his ancestors, he tried to live the life he thought he should have had in Saint-Domingue: he was the owner of a large rural estate that accommodated himself, his sister Marguerite, his brother-in-law, and his nephews. He even took a concubine Saint-Domingue-style: not a slave woman, but a woman considerably below his station (the illiterate daughter of a local farmer). Such an arrangement would have been easily tolerated in eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue or New Orleans, but it was not acceptable in nineteenth-century France. The other obvious difference was the fact that a rural estate in southwestern France was not nearly as profitable as a coffee plantation based on slave labor. Charles does not seem to have been successful as a rural estate owner. In 1828, the Lamerenx siblings wrote from Cuba to remove their brother Charles as administrator of the family property and to put their sister Marguerite in his stead. Shortly thereafter, Charles moved out of the family estate, applied for government support as a Saint-Domingue refugee, married his companion, Madeleine Biscay, and recognized the two sons he had with her.

Charles Tilly has proposed the concept of "interpersonal trust networks" to describe migrant remittances between the United States, the Caribbean, and Latin America today,

 $<sup>^{87}</sup>$  Jane G. Landers, *Atlantic Creoles in the Age of Revolutions*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010, 7.

observing that the flow of people, goods, and money goes both ways, and showing that money from Latin America and the Caribbean is used to help buy real property in United States and vice versa. What makes this kind of cross-ownership possible is the existence of "trust networks" largely based on family ties, with an inverse relation between the geographical distance and the closeness of the kinship. You would not do business across the ocean with someone you do not know, but if your partner is a sibling or a cousin, the closeness of the family connection makes up for the physical distance, and you can effectively maintain business interests very far from your current place of residence.

The concept of "trust network" seems very apt to describe the activities of the Lamerenx family across the Atlantic. After Charles arrived in France in 1818, he did remain in touch with his siblings in Cuba, and the connection remained active for a long time, since his son sailed to Havana nearly forty years later and married his Cuban first cousin. During three generations in the nineteenth century, the Lamerenx functioned as one large family network with property holdings and business interests on both sides of the Atlantic. The siblings in Cuba were coowners of the property in France. <sup>89</sup> Charles and Marguerite, based in France, were co-owners of the coffee plantation in Matanzas until Charles sold his share to Marguerite. <sup>90</sup> One could say that for Charles Lamerenx and his siblings the family horizon was co-extensive with the Atlantic horizon.

# FROM SLAVE OWNERS TO CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVISTS: FANCHONETTE DECOUDREAU'S DESCENDANTS

Charles Decoudreau and Marguerite Castañedo had seven children. One of them, Joséphine (1802-1846), married Francisco de Paula de Trebiño, a.k.a. Paul Trévigne Sr. (1793-1851) in 1824. Their oldest son, Paul Trévigne Jr. (1825-1907) is listed the *African American National Biography* published by Henry Louis Gates in 2008. Surprisingly, the entry states that we know nothing of Paul Trévigne's mother, "a woman known only as Découdreau." It turns out that Trévigne's mother Joséphine Decoudreau, his grandmother Marguerite, and his greatgrandmother Fanchonette, had all owned property in New Orleans and the ownership record is available in the Notarial Archives. Paul Trévigne Jr.'s grandfather, José Antonio de Paula de Trebiño (c. 1765-1828), came to New Orleans from Plencia (a coastal town in the Spanish Basque province of Biscay) in the mid-1780s. He is listed as a "mariner" in the 1810 New

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>88</sup> Charles Tilly, "Trust Networks in Transnational Migration," Sociological Forum 22:1 (2007), 3-24.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>89</sup> Bienes de difuntos, Matanzas (1838), Legajo 15, Número 319 (ANC).

<sup>90 3</sup> E 8760, Pierre Dilor Notary, Saint-Palais January 17, 1834 (ADPA).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>91</sup> African American National Biography, edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, "Trévigne (Paul)" entry.

Orleans directory, and had been involved in the slave trade. 92 Paul Trévigne Jr. was a teacher, author, journalist and activist who taught at the Institution Catholique des Orphelins Indigents, a private school for free blacks, endowed with money from the estate of Madame Couvent, née Marie Justine Cirnaire, a former slave who, according to local tradition, had been born in Guinea and had been brought to New Orleans via Saint-Domingue. Paul Trévigne was the editor of L'Union, a French-language newspaper that became an organ of the Louisiana Republican Party in 1863 and advocated citizenship as well as universal suffrage for gens de couleurs and for the thousands of slaves who had been freed following the capture of New Orleans by Union forces in 1862. During Reconstruction, Trévigne advocated the same policies in *La Tribune*. 93 In his history of Black Reconstruction, W.E.B. Du Bois called L'Union "the first Negro daily in America." In the late 1870s, as the "separate but equal" doctrine was beginning to take shape, the new Democratic governor Francis T. Nicholls began to segregate New Orleans's previously integrated schools. Trévigne made an unsuccessful attempt to fight this move by appealing to the Louisiana Supreme Court. His name does not appear among the members of the Comité des citoyens, the group that organized Homère Plessy's ill-fated challenge against Louisiana's "Separate Car" law, 95 but he was very close to the group, and he remained involved in the fight as editor of the French section of *The Daily Crusader* from 1892 to 1896. 96

#### CONCLUSION: SELF-REINVENTION AND LOCAL BELONGING

When he purchased the Bayou Road house in 1811, Charles Lamerenx was a former slave owner who had lost all his possessions in the Haitian Revolution and had to borrow money to complete the transaction. The seller, Charles Decoudreau, a free man of color, was relatively well off, and he owned two slaves. New Orleans was in a period of explosive growth, following the massive arrival of refugees from Saint-Domingue, which doubled the population of the city in just a few months. Peal estate prices were high. The newly-built house that Lamerenx bought from Decoudreau in 1811 was worth four times as much as the Lamerenx ancestral home in France.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>92</sup> José Antonio de Trebiño is listed as the owner of record in several sales of slaves just arrived from Africa. See for instance the sale of seven slaves recorded by Javier Perdomo, Notary Public, on April 16, 1787 (Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Louisiana Slave Records*, 1719-1820: http://www.ibiblio.org/laslave/).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>93</sup> On the *Tribune*'s editorial line and its political context, see Eric Foner, *Reconstruction. America's Unfinished Revolution*, 1863-1877, 62-65.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>94</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880*, New York: The Free Press, 1998, 456 [New York, 1935].

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>95</sup> See Rebecca Scott, "Public Rights, Social Equality, and the Conceptual Roots of the Plessy Challenge," *Michigan Law Review* 106 (2007) 777-804; "The Atlantic World and the Road to Plessy v. Ferguson" *Journal of American History* 94 (2007) 726-733.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>96</sup> See Rodolphe-Lucien Desdunes, Our People and our History, 66-68.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>97</sup> See Carl A. Brasseaux, *French, Cajun, Creole, Houma. A Primer on Francophone Louisiana*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005, 24.

As a person of color, Decoudreau did not have the right to vote, but when he took his white adversary to court, he won the case. If one takes a cursory look at the judgment, one may infer that the two Charles had very little in common: one was white and the other was black (this is at least how they would be categorized today); one was a newcomer to New Orleans and the other was a native of the city. Yet as Atlantic creoles both men had much in common. First of all, they spoke the same language: not only French, but also the same type of French creole. Louisiana creole and Haitian creole are closely related languages, possibly descended from a French pidgin with a Wolof and Mandigo substrate spoken in Saint-Louis, Senegal, in the seventeenth century. 98 Second, Lamerenx's choice of neighborhood was no accident. His immediate neighbors on Bayou Road included Charles Decoudreau's sisters, free women of color, Louis de Morand, a wealthy white man who lived with Decoudreau's sister, and other wealthy whites such as Joseph Chalon and Alexander Milne. 99 Whites and free-coloreds, living side by side, had close kinship and business ties. Third, creole is the name the two Charles probably called themselves: in colonial French America, the word creole was used to designate any person born in the colony. Finally, there were similarities in the two men's ancestry: Lamerenx belonged to minor French nobility; if one looks at Decoudreau's grandparents, one was a slave from Senegambia who became the concubine of the wealthiest man in New Orleans and later purchased her freedom from her French owner; the other three belonged to minor French nobility. According to the three-tiered system that became gradually more rigid during the first decades of the nineteenth century, Charles Lamerenx and Charles Decoudreaux would have belonged to separate, racially-defined castes. However, when they briefly met in 1811, these boundaries were only beginning to solidify and were no nearly as tight as they had become in the 1850s.

One striking difference between the Lamerenx and Decoudreau family histories is how much one moved across the Atlantic, and how little the other moved away from New Orleans. One might say at first sight that the white family could afford to move while this possibility was not available to the free-colored family. This distinction doesn't hold, however. The Tinchant family, whose Atlantic peregrinations have been studied by Scott and Hébrard, was a family of free persons of color like the Decoudreaus, and what we have observed about the Lamerenx family (that there was a coincidence between the family horizon and the Atlantic horizon) can be said of the Tinchant family as well. There are many more documented cases of emigration to Europe by New Orleans free blacks in the nineteenth century, including Edmond Dédé (1827-1903), a classical composer who moved to Belgium in the 1850s and settled in Bordeaux in

<sup>98</sup> John H. McWhorter, *The Missing Spanish Creoles*, 172-176.

<sup>99</sup> New Orleans Architecture, 145.

1864, 100 or Norbert Rillieux (1806-1894), who studied engineering in Paris, was the author of a key patent for sugar refining, and moved back to France in the late 1850s. Of the fifty free-coloreds whose lives are narrated in Desdunes's book, more than a dozen studied in Europe or settled there permanently. In 1840, the Tinchants purchased a farm near Pau, France, about fifty miles away from the Lamerenx estate. The Tinchant sons were students in the *lycée* of Pau in the 1840s and early 1850s. Charles Lamerenx lived in Pau with his wife and sons in the late 1840s. 101 His sons almost certainly had the Tinchant sons as classmates in the *lycée*. In his study of social networks and the French Atlantic community, R. Darrell Meadows has shown that French migrants were surprised to come across familiar faces they had known on the other side of the Atlantic, and they experienced these encounters as amazing coincidences. 102 If they met in the *lycée* of Pau, the Tinchant children and the Lamerenx children were able to share family stories from Saint-Domingue, Cuba, and New Orleans. They were not alone in doing this: the prize roster for the *lycée* during those years features several students from Cuba and New Orleans (almost certainly families of refugees from Saint-Domingue). 103

These family histories support a strong but narrow concept of Atlantic creole history. One should recall here that Atlantic commerce and migration, however large a phenomenon, always concerned specific towns and regions across the ocean. Even such a huge phenomenon as the slave trade, as Gwendolyn Hall has shown, went through a small number of coastal points and concerned a surprisingly small number of ethnicities. <sup>104</sup> Jacques de Cauna has shown that the French colonization of Saint Domingue was in many ways a regional story, and he has studied the disproportionate role of migrants from Gascony, Béarn and the Basque Country in the history of the colony. The Lamerenx travels took place between Saint-Domingue, Cuba, New Orleans, Spain, North Africa, and the southwest of France (the ports being Bayonne or Bordeaux). They never included Paris or any other region of France. <sup>105</sup> The migrants whose stories are told here did belong to a coherent Atlantic world, but one would miss the distinctiveness of this world if one tried to understand it too broadly. It was a world of coastal enclaves that had several

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>100</sup> See Lester Sullivan, "Composers of Color of Nineteenth-Century New Orleans: The History behind the Music" *Black Music Research Journal* 8:1 (1988), 51-82.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>101</sup> The Lamerenx family lived at 35 rue Gassies (now rue Carnot) in Pau from 1847 to 1851 (Dossier BISCAY (Magdeleine) veuve LAMERENS DUHART, Archives nationales de France, Paris, F/12/2751).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>102</sup> R. Darrell Meadows, "Engineering Exile: Social Networks and the French Atlantic Community, 1789-1809," *French Historical Studies* 23:1 (2000) 67-102.

<sup>103</sup> J. Delfour, *Histoire du lycée de Pau*, Pau: Garet, 1890.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>104</sup> Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas: Restoring the Links*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005.

<sup>105</sup> See Jacques de Cauna, L'Eldorado des Aquitains. Gascons, Basques et Béarnais aux Iles d'Amérique (XVIIe-XVIIIe siècles), Biarritz: Atlantica, 1998; "Amérique avant l'Amérique: les Béarnais à Saint-Domingue et dans la Caraïbe (XVIIe – XVIIIe siècles)" in L'Emigration basco-béarnaise aux Amériques au XIXe siècle, edited by Adrian Blazquez, Pau: Editions Gascogne, 2000, 239-287.

distinguishing characteristics: multilingual, based on interpersonal trust networks, focused on international trade (including the slave trade), with a practice of slavery that was different from large-scale plantation slavery.

As we have seen before, the free-coloreds in New Orleans gradually became a distinctive endogamous group. Traditionally, they had had quasi-familial relations with their household slaves, and manumissions had been frequent. With the hardening of racial categories and increasing legal obstacles to manumission, there was a tendency among gens de couleur to identify with their European ancestry and to look down upon their African slaves. <sup>106</sup> The opposite effect occurred as well. As discrimination against them increased in nineteenth-century America (both in law and custom), some gens de couleur chose to identify with their African ancestry, even when this ancestry was a very small part of their family tree. Homère Plessy, who made an act of civil disobedience in 1892 by sitting in a railroad car reserved for whites, was an "octoroon": his ancestry was seven-eighth European and one-eighth African, and his apparent whiteness was meant to show the absurdity of the very notion of racial category. 107 Paul Trévigne Jr. had African ancestors, including Nanette Dubreuil, a slave from Senegambia who had purchased her freedom in 1763, but most of his ancestors were European, including one of the French founders of New Orleans, and a mariner from Spain who was involved in the slave trade. Jean-Charles Houzeau, who took over from Trévigne as editor of the New Orleans Tribune in 1864, described his predecessor as "a gay spirit with literary tastes" who had "descended from a Spanish father" and had "a little of the pride (the good kind) of a Castilian character." <sup>108</sup> Trévigne's adamantly affirmed black identity was a deliberate choice. It is interesting to notice that in the Faubourg Tremé documentary, Paul Trévigne is impersonated by a dark-skinned African American. This choice makes sense, given Trévigne's own affirmation of an African identity, and also given the fact that Trévigne's descendants suffered the exact same legal discrimination as the rest of the Southern black population in the twentieth century (as explained by Irving Trevigne in the documentary). What the documentary does not clearly convey, however, is the fact that New Orleans gens de couleur experienced the abolition of slavery with mixed emotions. On the one hand, they welcomed it, and they allied themselves with the former slaves in order to claim equal rights for all (a stance from which the New Orleans Tribune never departed). On the other hand, not everyone in the free-colored group had initially sided with the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>106</sup> Free-coloreds "regard the slave with more disdain and antagonism than the white man." *New Orleans Daily Delta*, 17 July 1852, quoted by Laura Foner, "The Free People of Color in Louisiana and St. Domingue: A Comparative Portrait of Two Three-Caste Slave Societies," 429.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>107</sup> See Mark Elliott, "Race, Color Blindness, and the Democratic Public: Albion W. Tourgée's Radical Principles in *Plessy v. Ferguson," Journal of Southern History* 67:2 (2001) 287-330.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>108</sup> Jean-Charles Houzeau, *My Passage at the New Orleans Tribune*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984, 71n6.

Union. Armand Lanusse, the director of the private school for free blacks where Paul Trévigne taught, had been a captain in the Confederate army, and he refused to follow General Butler's order to fly the Union flag over the school in 1862. <sup>109</sup> After Emancipation, there was no longer a legal basis for the distinctiveness of *gens de couleur*, and it became increasingly difficult for them to hold on to a separate identity. For many, the strategy was chain migration to northern cities and California, with continued endogamy and the preservation of small groups of interlocked families who defined themselves as neither white nor black but "creole"—a term that was contested in Louisiana (whites had appropriated it to designate Louisianans of "pure" French or Spanish ancestry) and carried little meaning elsewhere. <sup>110</sup> These groups continued to hold property in New Orleans, thus forming "continental" family networks similar to the Atlantic family networks we have seen above.

The documentary presents Tremé as "arguably the oldest black neighborhood in America." The continuity affirmed in this statement has great symbolic power, and its truth lies in the alliance between *gens de couleur* and freedmen advocated by Paul Trévigne during Reconstruction. From a micro-historical point of view there was much less continuity. By the end of nineteenth century, most *gens de couleur* had moved out of Tremé and had been replaced by Italian immigrants; by the 1940s many *gens de couleur* had left Louisiana altogether and moved to California. Tremé became a black neighborhood again in the 1960s with an influx of "Anglo" blacks (descendants of English-speaking freed slaves) who, according to Carl Brasseaux, are now "the most visible standard bearers of south Louisiana's ongoing Creole revival."

In his study of Anna Madgigine Jai Kinsley, an African princess who became a slave and eventually a plantation slave-owner in Florida, Daniel Schafer mentions the ideas of Anna Madgigine's owner, who "advocated humane treatment and encouraged slaves to live in family units and perpetuate their African customs" and "called for liberal manumission laws and policies" so that "once united, whites and free blacks would be able to control the much larger group of enslaved black whose labor created the riches that justified the overall system." When set against the norms of the plantation system of the Southern United Sates, these ideas seem strange and idiosyncratic. When compared with the family stories told in this study, they appear as a belated manifestation of an Atlantic creole model that was once the norm in New

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>109</sup> Our People and our History, 13-24.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>110</sup> See Carl A. Brasseaux, *French, Cajun, Creole, Houma. A Primer on Francophone Louisiana*; James H. Dormon "Louisiana's 'Creoles of Color': Ethnicity, Marginality and Identity," *Social Science Quarterly* 73:3 (1992), 615-626; Frances Jerome Woods, *Marginality and Identity. A Colored Creole Family through Ten Generations*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>111</sup> Carl A. Brasseaux, French, Cajun, Creole, Houma. A Primer on Francophone Louisiana, 112.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>112</sup> Daniel Schafer, Anna Madgigine Jai Kinsley. African Princess, Florida Slave, Plantation Slaveowner, 32.

Orleans and gradually disappeared during the first decades of the nineteenth century. The traditional controversies regarding the role of African culture and customs in the emergence of a distinctive African-American culture pit those who argue for the importance of African models against those who tend to see Africa as a residual presence or an imagined past. The Atlantic creoles whose stories are told here suggest something entirely different: a major African presence, not because African models were "imported" (or not) via the slave trade but because there were many social and cultural similarities between the coastal enclaves (including the African enclaves) involved in transatlantic commerce.

We can see two diametrically opposite tendencies in the behavior of Atlantic creoles: on the one hand, extreme mobility, with an ability to reinvent oneself after moving to a new place across the ocean; on the other hand, a strong sense of local belonging, focused on land ownership. In other words, being creole meant being a native, a frequent traveler, and a new settler, all at the same time. This coincidence of opposites can be explained by the origins of creole culture (and probably of creole languages themselves) in coastal enclaves, in Africa first, then in the Americas. On the one hand, coastal enclaves were small, "face-to-face" communities: everybody knew everybody's family history, allegiances were strictly local, the way of life was urban, and profoundly different from the rural life of the hinterland. Being a native of an enclave meant being born into a culture that was experienced as both small and unique. On the other hand, as Ira Berlin puts it, Atlantic creoles had a "genius for intercultural negotiations" that "was central to a way of life that transcended particular venues."113 A woman born in Gorée, Marie Adélaïde Rossignol, daughter of a signare, could thrive in Cap-Français, where she married Guillaume Dumont, a surgeon from Gascony, in 1786, because the language, the customs, and the social structures were broadly similar<sup>114</sup> (the couple settled in Charleston, another Atlantic creole enclave, after the Haitian Revolution). 115 Similarly, a young Frenchman born in Bordeaux in 1789, Justin Devès, could travel to New Orleans and Philadelphia, and eventually build a commercial fortune after marrying a signare, Magdeleine Philipp, in Saint-Louis, Senegal. 116 According to Desdunes, who wrote in 1911 with an indigenous knowledge of creole tradition (and an aristocratic tendency to idealize the past), migration into Louisiana took a different turn after 1840, as "newcomers to New Orleans from faraway shores...were not of the same mentality as the earlier people, who came from chivalric origins and who preserved the ideals of their class."117 These newcomers "utilized slavery as their main source of revenue. Every

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>113</sup> Ira Berlin, Many Thousands Gone, 23.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>114</sup> Marriage celebrated in Cap-Français, September 12, 1786, 1DPPC2325 (ANOM).

William Dumont, physician, 170, King Street, *Nelson's Charleston Directory, and Strangers Guide, for the year of our Lord, 1801*, Charleston, S.C.: John Dixon Nelson, 1801.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>116</sup> Céleste ou le temps des signares, 162.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>117</sup> Our People and Our History, 111.

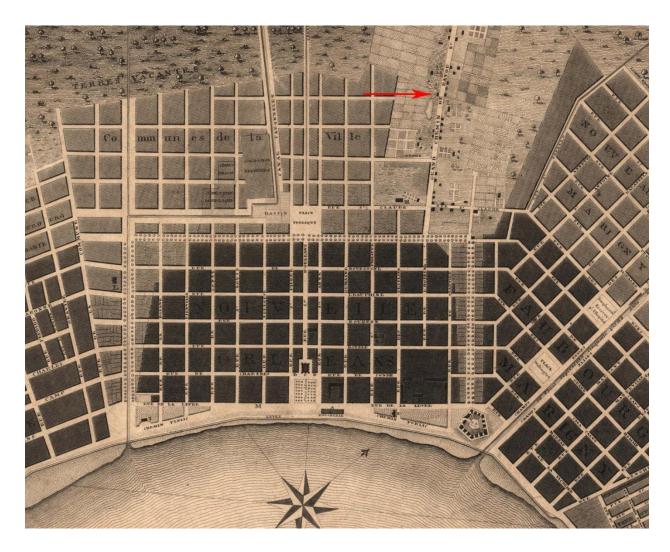
enterprise, every transaction revolved around slavery: business, politics, and even religion." Once a society-with-slaves, New Orleans had become a slave society. The circulation of creoles across the Atlantic became a thing of the past, and Desdunes felt the need to justify a behavior that was no longer seen as natural: "The man of color can, without appearing ridiculous, entertain ideas of exchanging residence to relieve his circumstances just as other human beings do. The love of self, the love of one's family, and of one's peers, should be as strong as the love of one's country." 119

Pierre Force
Columbia University

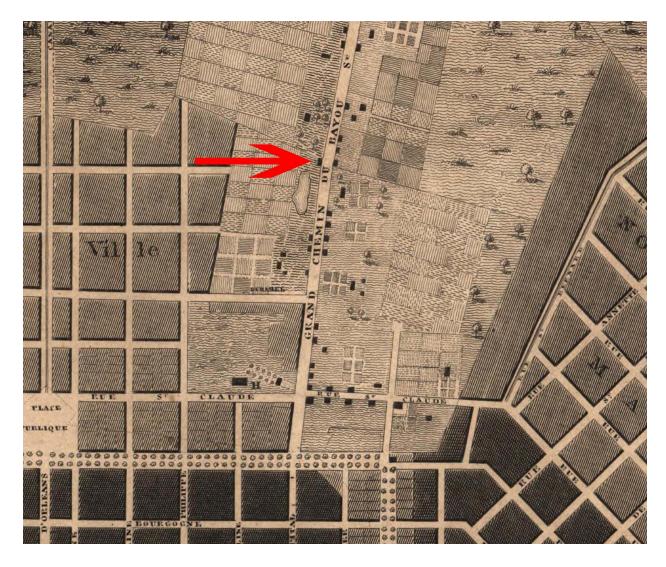
<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>119</sup> Our People and Our History, 114 (translation modified).

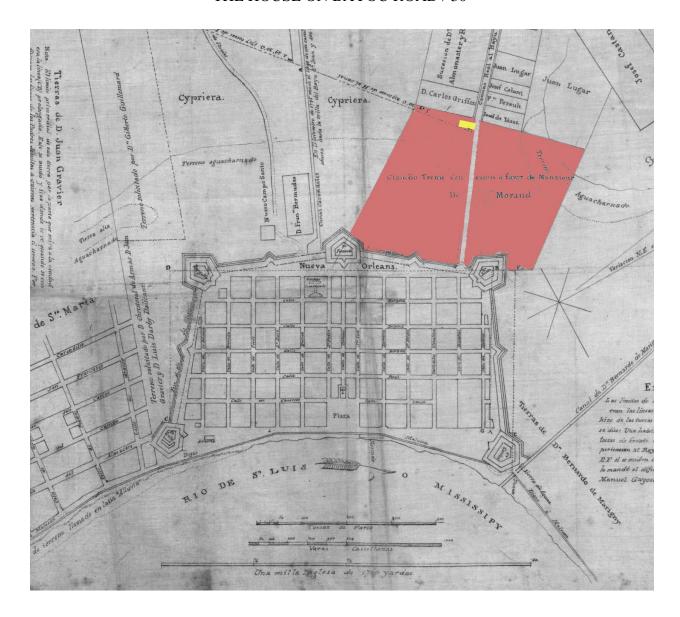
## **ILLUSTRATIONS**



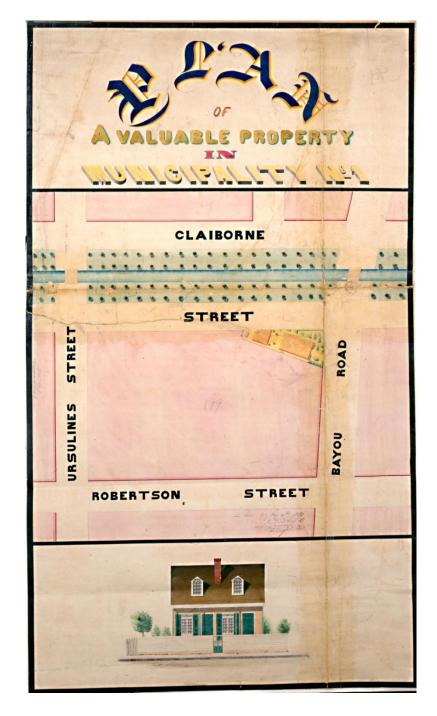
1. Plan of the City and Suburbs of New Orleans, from an Actual Survey Made in 1815 by F. Tanesse, City Surveyor, Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division. The red arrow indicates the Decoudreau house on Bayou Road.



2. Plan of the City and Suburbs of New Orleans, from an Actual Survey Made in 1815 by F. Tanesse, City Surveyor, Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division. Close-up on Bayou Road. The red arrow indicates the Decoudreau house.



3. New Orleans in 1804, Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division. This map reflects information compiled by Vincente Sebastian Pintado in 1795-96 and set down by Carlos Trudeau, Surveyor General, in official records in 1804. The Tremé concession (highlighted in pink) is indicated as having been previously owned by Charles de Morand. The location of the Decoudreau house is highlighted in yellow.



4. *Plan of a valuable property in Municipality No. 1. New Orleans Plan Book* 36, folio 5, courtesy of the New Orleans Notarial Archives. Watercolor by Eugène Surgi (Paris, 1826-?). This plan was drawn for a sale that took place in 1849. The house pictured at the bottom is the house that Charles Decoudreau, free man of color, built for his mother Fanchonette Decoudreau between 1808 and 1810.



5. *New Orleans Plan Book* 36, folio 5, courtesy of the New Orleans Notarial Archives. Close-up on the Decoudreau house, purchased by Lamerenx in 1811.



6. Free women of color in Saint-Domingue. From an original print by Agostino Brunias (1730-1796) in Pierre de Vaissière, *Saint-Domingue. La société et la vie créoles sous l'ancien régime* (1629-1789), Paris: Perrin, 1909. Brunias worked as an artist depicting colonial life in the Caribbean from 1765-1768. The woman on the right is buying flowers from a street peddler.



7. A distinguished Negress from the island of St. Louis in Senegal, accompanied by her slave (1796). Etching by Jacques Grasset Saint Sauveur (1757-1810). Signares owned household slaves as a symbol of status.