

Confluence And Divergence: Nineteenth Century Plantation Lifestyles in the Red River Region

With the very definition of “Creole” finally dissected and laid to rest,¹ with numerous ethnographic,² historical,³ and cultural landscape studies⁴ completed since the establishment of Cane River Creole National Historical Park in 1994, it would seem perhaps the subject of Creoles—white and of color—must surely be exhausted. Yet extensively documented details remain which demonstrate how the lifestyles of the Creole planter class, particularly, resembled and yet differed from that of the later-established, similarly situated “Americans” in Louisiana. The present much-condensed overview will focus on what such documents reveal about healthcare, the position of women in that society, and language, and primarily within the period from 1830 to 1870.

To say the persistent Creole population in Louisiana, outnumbered though it was by the mid-nineteenth century, was linked—by culture, by the waterways along which it had largely established itself initially, by blood—would be an understatement. When Amélie Baillio, daughter of settlers Pierre Baillio and Magdelaine Lacour, was baptized in Rapides Parish in 1800, her godparents were Emmanuel Prudhomme and Catherine Lambre of Bermuda Plantation, on Red River in Natchitoches Parish. When an Irish governess, Honoria Griffin, kept a journal in 1853 in Rapides, she was living in the home of Mary Rose Emma (Villain) Prescott,

¹ Susan Dollar, “Black, White, or Indifferent: Identity and Americanization in Creole Louisiana” (Ph.D. diss., University of Arkansas, 2004), 2-4; Carolyn Breedlove, “Oakland/Bermuda Plantation, 1830-1880” (master’s thesis, Northwestern State University of Louisiana, 1999), 2.

² Hiram Gregory and Joseph Moran, *We Know Who We Are: An Ethnographic Overview of the Creole Traditions and Community of Isle Brevelle and Cane River, Louisiana*, (Denver, Colorado: National Park Service, 1996).

³ Thomas, Thomas A., “The Oakland Plantation Overview” (Denver: National Park Service, 1997).

⁴ Ian Firth and Suzanne Turner, *Cane River Creole National Historical Park: Oakland Plantation: Cultural Landscape Report, Part One* (Atlanta, Georgia: National Park Service, Southeast Regional Office, 2003).

Pierre Baillio's granddaughter whose aunt, Amélie, had largely raised her, and in whose home she had wed. When in 1857 Phanor Prudhomme's stepdaughter, Désirée Archinard (whose biological father had been from Rapides), married Emile Locoul of the St. James Parish plantation that later would be called "Laura" for her daughter, she was marrying Phanor's first cousin once removed.

Within this tight web, though, patterns were beginning subtly to diverge. Both Amélie Baillio and, later, Mary Rose Emma Villain had married Anglo-Americans from South Carolina. Intermarriage seems to have begun occurring more quickly and frequently in the area surrounding the former *Poste des Rapides* than in the Creole community of the *Côte Joyeuse* and *Ile Brevelle* in Natchitoches Parish. Whether this was due to a somewhat less numerous Creole population overall from the start, to a still more rapid influx of "Americans," to the reinforced Creole anchor on *Ile Brevelle* of one of the largest free populations of color in the state—also French-speaking and Catholic—or to other factors is still open to speculation. The juxtaposition of these two significant cultural strains nonetheless offers a ready lens through which more closely to examine daily life, and note both similarities and some distinctions.

Perhaps the greatest leveler of all was the state of healthcare and medicine—primitive, in a nutshell. Due to the greater distances between its scattered members, the Western Board for licensing physicians was far less effective from 1817 to 1852 than its "Eastern" (*i.e.*, largely New Orleans) counterpart.⁵ Unlicensed doctors abounded. Treatments themselves were quite often at least as lethal as the diseases. Bloodletting, purging, opium, and calomel (mercury chloride, which accumulates and eventually kills the patient along with any bacteria) were common. A Dr. Warren Stone of New Orleans, an early advocate of using quinine to treat yellow

⁵ *The John Randolph Matas History of Medicine in Louisiana*, John Duffy, ed., (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1958), 105-6.

fever, remarked that he had “followed the patients of the Calomelites to the dead house in plenty.”⁶ Any newspaper of the time carried lists of such medications, offered for sale by local merchants. Phanor Prudhomme’s plantation records frequently included purchases of jalap, antimony, ether, paregoric, morphine, asafetida, and opium,⁷ or quinine, cod liver oil, and ague pills, or saltpeter, chloroform, rhubarb, ipecac, smelling salts, vesicatories (for blistering)—and toothbrushes.⁸ It is worth noting that, in general, Creole physicians tended to be less invasive in their treatments, while the Americans believed strongly in “heroic” methods and had great scorn for the gentler French approach. To their annoyance, the Creole population favored the milder treatments, and in time the excesses of the heroic school turned public opinion against its followers.⁹

Bermuda had an apparently purpose-built sick house or slave hospital (when not being commandeered as storage for a bumper harvest),¹⁰ as did Ambroise Lecomte’s Magnolia Grove, also on Red River, and Aaron Prescott’s Cedar Grove on Bayou Robert.¹¹ Bermuda also usually had, not so typically, a physician living on the plantation. To this day his residence there, in the National Historical Park, is referred to as the “Doctor’s House.” The hospital, which no longer stands, was located between the plantation’s two *pigeonniers* and this house, according to Alphonse and Lucile Keator Prudhomme of Oakland (formerly Bermuda) Plantation.¹² Cedar Grove, a shorter distance from town (Alexandria), regularly called upon various local doctors for treatment.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁷ Prudhomme Family Papers, Series 2, Subseries 2.1: Plantation Records and Other Volumes, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, folder 913 (hereinafter cited as Southern Historical Collection, for both documents and microfilm).

⁸ Southern Historical Collection, folder 15, microfilm.

⁹ *John Randolph Matas History of Medicine*, 270-272.

¹⁰ Journalier, 1839, folder 25, Southern Historical Collection, reel 15, microfilm.

¹¹ *A Glorious Day: The Journal of a Central Louisiana Governess, 1853-1854*, Carolyn Breedlove, ed. (Alexandria, Louisiana: Red River X-Press, 2006), 18.

¹² Fred Gianforte and others, *A Gateway to Yesterday* (Natchitoches, Louisiana: Mayfield Printing, 1979).

Illness of all kinds was frequent. Perhaps the most common complaint of all was toothache, and both journals¹³ and Phanor Prudhomme's plantation records record these complaints and visits to and by dentists. Beyond toothaches, though, the population both slave and free fell prey to every imaginable injury—as when a young slave's finger was crushed at Prescott's gin¹⁴—and illness. Whether Phanor was writing to his brother-in-law in Nantes, in February, 1849, that fifty to sixty slaves were constantly in the hospital with scarlet fever, two of whom had died;¹⁵ or Lestan's sisters and father were down with break-bone fever (dengue); whether Bermuda's overseer was noting slaves ill with typhoid fever; or Mrs. Griffin or Mrs. Leach, the governess at the Lestan Prudhomme plantation, was too ill to teach, disease stalked young and old, of whatever race.

Both of Phanor Prudhomme's wives, sisters, died young, plus one of his daughters at fourteen. Honoria Griffin was a widow. The Prescotts had lost one son as a small child, and their only daughter would die of typhoid fever at eighteen. They themselves would not survive the 1860s. Phanor commented at various times on his own ill health, and beginning a treatment prescribed by a Dr. Hulin involving celandine,¹⁶ a very old poppy-based drug, a narcotic, believed to improve vision, but also used as a diuretic and purgative. In late 1865 he, too, would die, at fifty-eight.

Then, there were the true epidemics. Céphalide (Metoyer) Archinard's first husband (before Phanor Prudhomme) had died in New Orleans of cholera in 1845.¹⁷ From Honoria Griffin's first ominous mention of mosquitoes August 1, 1853, and six slaves' illness by the

¹³ *A Glorious Day*, 37; Lestan Prudhomme diary, 1850-1852, Irma Sompayrac Willard Collection, Cammie Henry Research Center (hereinafter cited as Lestan Prudhomme diary). (Original in Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University, New Orleans).

¹⁴ *A Glorious Day*, 71.

¹⁵ Southern Historical Collection, folder 142.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, folder 30, microfilm.

¹⁷ Laura Locoul Gore, *Memories of the Old Plantation Home* (Vacherie, Louisiana: The Zoë Company, Inc., 2001), 23.

sixth, until November 23, when she notes yet another burial, the great yellow fever epidemic of 1853, that killed at least 8,000 in New Orleans alone,¹⁸ raged. It spread up the waterways with those fleeing it, killing in Washington (where it claimed at least 100 victims), in Alexandria, and in Natchitoches. Mary Rose Emma Prescott's uncle on the next plantation, Sosthène Baillio, was dead within forty-eight hours. At least one Prescott slave died, as did several friends. Honoria Griffin actually survived the fever. In Natchitoches Dr. Thomas Flanner, the son-in-law of François Roubieu, a Prudhomme neighbor, stayed in town to treat the sick, and died.

Women were uniquely susceptible to other untimely deaths, of course. Phanor's sister Adèle died in childbirth at fifteen, when he was eight. Mary Rose Emma's sister-in-law, Félonise Baillio Villain, also died in childbirth, delivering her eleventh. Céphalide attended her daughter Désirée's small, private wedding in a wheelchair, having suffered a stroke after giving birth to a daughter at forty. She died a week later; the baby lived only six months.¹⁹

Of course, in that pre-Margaret Sanger, pre-suffragette era, they had few options. It was not without reason that the works of Sir Walter Scott were found in so many planters' homes, Phanor's included.²⁰ Mark Twain loathed the author and his cult of gentility in the South: “the maudlin Middle-Age romanticism . . . made every gentleman . . . a Major or a Colonel . . . [,] created rank and caste down there”²¹ (as Phanor's future son-in-law, Winter Breazeale, listed his occupation in the 1850 census as “gentleman”²²). Even as women elsewhere began to press for change, in the South “gender roles became even more rigid,” and any respite that may have come “came too little and too late” for many plantation mistresses. As Catherine Clinton, quoted here,

¹⁸ *John Randolph Matas History of Medicine*, 130.

¹⁹ *Memories of the Old Plantation Home*, 27-8.

²⁰ *Journalier*, 1837, Southern Historical Collection, folder 24, microfilm.

²¹ Mark Perry, *Grant and Twain: The Story of an American Friendship* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2004), 91, 102.

²² *Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Population Schedule: Louisiana* (Natchitoches Parish), (Washington, D.C.: National Archives Microfilm Publications, 1963).

remarked, “her real incarnation had a more vital impact on ante-bellum life than her legend.”

Harriet Martineau had written in 1837 that she “had met no more hard-working nor industrious women than those on southern plantations”—as well as observing there a higher rate of invalidism, partly as a result.²³

Phanor’s accounts make little mention of the work his two wives would have been doing. Céphalide moved from her mother’s home into Phanor’s after her sister Lise’s death to supervise the children, and likely also would have assumed some of the other duties that fell to a plantation mistress. By the Civil War he was again widowed, and had to make note himself of carding and spinning work undertaken on the plantation to compensate for the Union blockade. Completely occupied as he clearly was as a large planter, father of two soldiers, and state legislator in such demanding times, *someone* must have been in charge of running the household—“household,” in that culture and time, far exceeding the four walls of the main house, encompassing the (detached) kitchen, the work yard, the sick house, the kitchen garden, the smokehouse, and even the slave quarters.²⁴ The task of supervising house slaves normally fell entirely to a mistress.

The most detailed account of women’s work in the pre-Civil War period on Red River to date is that of—a woman, Honoria Griffin. Though not the mistress of a plantation herself, she was the intimate friend of one, and partially assumed her role whenever Mary Rose Emma Prescott was away. That meant holding the keys, that hugely significant role: the keys to every storeroom, pantry, medicine chest, and often, smokehouse.²⁵ It meant supervising the house “servants,” which despite a usually civil and kindly relationship (slave children came to play in Honoria’s room in the evening) led her to exclaim “Not for the wealth of this earth would I own

²³ Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman’s World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 46, 150, xv.

²⁴ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1988) 91, 97, 116; *The Plantation Mistress*, 18-28.

²⁵ *Within the Plantation Household*, 119.

a Negro, they are calculated to make devils of saints And I know it from experience . . . the housekeeper who has them to manage is a person whom I would pity.”²⁶

Though it is true that much of the mistress’s work was supervisory, it was not only on small farms that it was also hands-on. The “Ironing stove” delivered “for Mrs. P.” was probably not literally for her personal use, nor the chest “made for the ironing room,” also nominally hers, except in the sense of being hers to oversee and delegate.²⁷ “Mrs. Prescott making brandy peaches all day long,” “Mrs. Prescott was all day making fig preserves, and brandy peaches,” “Mrs. Prescott making watermelon preserves today,” or “Mrs. Prescott very busy attending to sausages” conceivably could be construed to mean “supervising.” “Mrs. P. very busy cutting out negro clothing; and making fig preserves this evening,” “Mrs. P. cutting out all day long,” “Mrs. P. was cutting out and sewing on Negro clothes,” and certainly “Mrs. Prescott sat in my room until 10 o’Clock cutting out and fitting for Celeste” appear stronger indications that the work was indeed her own, at least in part. “Mrs. Prescott on the brick walk making mattresses” is pretty conclusive, particularly when the previous week the distinction had been made, “Mrs. Prescott sewing on her mattress, the women preparing wool and moss on the front gallery.”²⁸

Every female sewed, much of the time. Honoria herself often records sewing, whole days sometimes, including on a mattress tick, making clothes for herself, and for Mary Rose Emma at the times she was busiest. Phanor, by contrast, in 1859 was purchasing not only “60 prs Mens Oak Russet Brogs” (brogans) and “6 Dozen mens Campeachy Hats” from New Orleans, but jeans coats, jeans pants, linsey vests, “log cabin” pants, and Hickory shirts, ready-made.²⁹ This was a far cry from even 1853, when surely the evidence that Céphalide was supervising domestic work is bolstered by purchases of more than 500 yards each of denim and of linsey (more

²⁶ *A Glorious Day*, 16.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 48, 115.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 30, 53, 55-60, 104-7, 152.

²⁹ Southern Historical Collection, folder 12, microfilm.

commonly, linsey-woolsey), and almost a thousand yards of “cotton écru”³⁰—a vast sewing project for many hands, with need of an organizer.

After the yellow fever, though, the Prescott family may have hired a seamstress to make the necessary mourning clothes, as she was fitting their friends the Brents, who had lost a daughter, for theirs while at Cedar Grove.³¹ Honoria herself was still in mourning, perhaps for her husband, for she writes of receiving specially-ordered mourning letter paper from New Orleans, and making second mourning skirts and dresses. Mourning was an elaborate and precisely defined process in the Victorian era, whether Creole, American, or European. Those with the means could have special jewelry and *memento mori* wreaths and other ornaments made, often of the deceased’s hair, as when Phanor’s records show payments to a New Orleans jeweler in 1853 for “Earrings of Hair, Rings with Hair,” a breast pin with a “plain braid of Hair,” and one large breast pin simply of black enamel. In May of 1852 (Lise died May 19 of that year), purchases from Creswell & Sompayrac in Natchitoches begin showing up for “Blk French merino[,] Blk Bombazet[,] Blk Cashmere[,] Blk Silk Gloves[,] Blk Barege[,] Blk Alpaca[,] and Blk Calico”—as they do again with Henry & Metoyer in early 1855, after daughter Emma’s death the previous fall, including in addition “Blk Italian cloth[,] Blk Sewing Silk[,] Blk muslin[,] Blk Riband[,] Blk Jaconet[,] and Blk velvet cuffs.”³²

In stark contrast to Honoria Griffin, the younger Lestan Prudhomme, in his early twenties, apparently saw nothing of women’s labor, or found it not worthy of recording. In his journal he minutely describes his pastimes, his meals, the cry of the peacock, and in sentimental, almost fanciful, fashion, his encounters with women—“ladies.” His near-obsession with never, ever leaving a lady to travel alone or be alone overnight seems almost affected (“offering my

³⁰ *Ibid.*, reel 15, microfilm.

³¹ *A Glorious Day*, 90.

³² Southern Historical Collection, reel 15, microfilm.

services as protector for the night”), were it not that it clearly really was expected of him. Everyone in their society, it must be said, whether in Rapides, Natchitoches, Avoyelles, or St. Landry Parish, visited incessantly and thought nothing of spending a night or several. Still, it was more a duty that his “Mother represented to me the position of my aunt alone with her husband sick, and telling me that I ought to go and spend the night with them.” If one of his sisters so much as walked to Phanor’s neighboring house for lunch, in broad daylight, he accompanied her.³³ This is, again, in keeping with the antebellum South’s continued adherence generally to older, patriarchal, and far more structured and repressive ideas of honor, courtship, and obligation.³⁴

Yet less than fifty miles away, in households similar in all regards but the husbands’ origins, the rules were evidently more relaxed. Young Celeste Prescott certainly never ventured anywhere completely alone, but the company of her mother, Honoria, or Sosthène Baillio’s wife was sufficient. Any of the adult women mentioned in Honoria’s journal thought nothing of going to town, to church, or visiting alone, accompanied only by a coachman. Mary Rose Emma, traveling alone, escorted Celeste to school at the Academy of the Sacred Heart in Grand Coteau, a two-day trip each way (they apparently would spend the night with John and Amélie Compton on the way). It was common for these women even to walk to neighbors’ to visit. If night fell, Sosthène might come to Cedar Grove to escort his wife home, or Aaron Prescott to Thomas Overton Moore’s to escort Honoria home, but these instances seem more courtesy and common sense than any rigidly prescribed behavior. On the same evening as the latter occasion, Mary Rose Emma and Celeste walked home from Sosthène’s at dusk.³⁵ When Aaron, Mary Rose Emma, and Celeste were away on an extended trip, sixteen-year-old John Prescott was at home with Honoria, but didn’t hesitate to be

³³ Lestan Prudhomme diary.

³⁴ Steven M. Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South: Ritual in the Lives of the Planters* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 79, 89; *The Plantation Mistress*, 53, 56-7.

³⁵ *A Glorious Day*, 52-3.

away overnight with a friend. She traveled unaccompanied both to Plaisance, upriver, and to New Orleans to visit friends,³⁶ and this in the same decade in which Lestan Prudhomme was keeping his diary.

One form of control many plantation mistresses of the time actually wished to see, the diarist Mary Chesnut perhaps most famously expressed: “Like the patriarchs of old, our men live all in one house with their wives and their concubines; and the mulattoes one sees in every family partly resemble the white children.”³⁷ The behavior that had begun the Creole of color community did not suddenly cease with the end of the eighteenth century.³⁸ It did not, however, follow any broad cultural pattern as to indulgence or abstinence, but seemed to break more along family, or even individual, lines. According to the 1850 Census, Phanor’s slaves included four “mulattoes,” all of them middle-aged or older. Lestan, Neuville, Jean Baptiste, and Narcisse Prudhomme, Ambroise Lecomte, and Mary Breazeale (Winter’s mother) listed none. The estate of François Roubieu had thirteen of ten years and under. Céphalide Archinard’s seven slaves included two, a ten-year-old girl and a four-year-old boy. It is impossible from this remove of years to point definitive fingers—especially in isolated cases, when the possibility of overseers and other contacts becomes a factor—but not to point out that her husband had been dead for five years, during which time she had lived back on the Metoyer plantation in Natchitoches Parish with her mother and brother—a plantation that itself listed 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old mulattoes, in addition to two young teenagers.³⁹ In Rapides Parish, among Aaron Prescott’s slaves that year were two boys, both ten years old.⁴⁰

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 34, 39.

³⁷ *Mary Chesnut’s Civil War*, C. Vann Woodward, ed. (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1981), 29, 31.

³⁸ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Honor and Violence in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 97.

³⁹ *Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Slave Schedules* (Natchitoches Parish), (Washington, D.C.: National Archives Microfilm Publications, 1963).

⁴⁰ *Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Slave Schedules* (Rapides Parish), (Washington, D.C.: National Archives Microfilm Publications, 1963).

Perhaps the most visible (and audible), pronounced, and lasting factor that distinguished Creoles from their neighbors and counterparts was language. Religion set them apart, too, but encompassed other national origins: the Irish, for example (as in the case of Honoria Griffin), Italians, or those of Spanish descent. The French language in Louisiana, however, including in the Red River region, came early and stayed late, in both pure and creolized forms. In 1806 a George McTier's name still appeared as the official interpreter for the Natchitoches Parish court.⁴¹ Although English had become the official state language in 1804, it was not until 1855 that parish records ceased to be kept in French.⁴² The local *Red River Chronicle* and *Red River Herald* published in both French and English through the 1830s, and for much longer, personal notices of various kinds appeared in both languages.

To this extent only had the Creoles yielded, that they became bilingual, while the Anglos, by and large, did not. Right up through early 1864, Phanor Prudhomme kept his personal plantation journal in French. His correspondence with other Creoles was almost invariably in French, yet he was perfectly capable of writing in fluent English for business, or in the case of declining, to a David Creswell in Mansfield, a Congressional candidacy. Bills appear in the records in both French and English from New Orleans and Natchitoches merchants, as well as from the Sisters of the Sacred Heart convent school in Natchitoches. There is even a bill in French from the Delmonico in New York City in 1853, Phanor clearly having found French-speaking accommodations there.⁴³ In the aftermath of the Civil War, though, Phanor's University of North Carolina-educated son Alphonse began keeping his accounts almost exclusively in English.⁴⁴

⁴¹ *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Northwest Louisiana* (1890; reprint, Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Claitor's Publishing Division, 1975), 294.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 302.

⁴³ Southern Historical Collection, reel 15, microfilm.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, folder 37, microfilm.

Words that, much later, would occasion a great deal of discussion and examination were recognized and understood clearly by those who lived their circumstances. In 1845, for instance, a Natchitoches Parish deposition routinely recorded, in French, the following:

At the request of the Dolet heirs, living in this parish, . . . Mr. Antoine Prudhomme, creole, born in this place, aged seventy-seven years, planter, and Mr. Ambroise Sompayrac, born in Castres, Département of Tarn, in France, aged sixty-seven years, also planter, resident here since the year 1808 . . . ”⁴⁵

There was no need of explanation. All parties present understood who a Creole was, regardless of language—and who was not, though it was reiterated. And that was that.

Perhaps, indeed, it is the story of a word that best finally captures the sometimes elusive nature of what it was, is, to be a Creole. In the *Musée de l'Émigration Française au Canada* in Normandy, dedicated to hundreds of local people who left to colonize the New World, one whole wall bears the names of entirely new animals, plant life, and weather conditions those settlers would have had to learn—and quickly, for their survival depended upon it. *Giraumon*, a word once common in Louisiana, mentioned by Phanor Prudhomme in harvest records, is the French derivation of *jirumum*, a Tupi Indian word for pumpkin or other large squash—the Tupi being a now almost extinct coastal Brazilian tribe. *Giraumon* is not a word used in France for these imported fruits; in the mother country a pumpkin is *une citrouille*, and a winter squash *un potiron* (though the two are sometimes used interchangeably). In Louisiana, however, the occasional Louisiana-French speaker still remembers. *Un giraumon* is a uniquely New World word for a New World product, adapted and assimilated by transplanted Europeans in a strange land, until it became, for them and all their descendants, uniquely theirs.

⁴⁵ Miscellaneous Record Book 29, page 189, Natchitoches Parish Courthouse.

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