Ethnography of Magnolia Plantation

Magnolia's own resources form a named landscape, best known by its owners' name, "the Hertzogs'." The section now under National Park Service management includes the farm operational center with the quarters, first built to house enslaved workers and later serving the tenant laborers; the former slave hospital and later overseer's house; the store; cotton gin and other farm structures. Beyond park boundaries is the standing Big House and cultivated fields. They, along with the former church and sharecropper area along Highway 119, mirror the earlier plantation community. Many of these still-meaningful places have become mostly "shadows" or ephemeral memory places and nearly invisible reminders of formerly standing structures. Still, in the conceptual landscapes of traditional residents, the barely visible remains mark the places and call to mind the people, events and structures that gave meaning and shape to local life and geography.

Local people tended to classify themselves and others as members of one of three principal ethnic categories. Combining views about ancestral birthplace with views about ethnicity and race led people to categorize themselves and others as: (1) Creoles of color or Creole who descended from the cultural and biological meeting of African, French, Spanish and perhaps American Indian peoples; (2) whites, including French Creole (different from Yankees, Anglos or Americans); or (3) blacks, a term people preferred for

themselves over African American. Differences were attributed partly to ethnic heritage, including religion. For example, black people, along with Yankees, Americans and Anglo whites were mostly Protestant, but whites of French ancestry and the Creoles of color tended to be Catholic. Ethnicity and class tended to overlap so that “black” usually equated with agricultural laborers who, in the 19th and 20th centuries, occupied the quarters. Some might become sharecroppers but, generally, they struggled against enormous economic and political odds. Changes since desegregation have tempered past inequities so that many black people became successful businessmen and professionals. Still, change has not fully erased inequities and the accompanying pain. Creoles of color enjoyed slightly higher status as sharecroppers in Magnolia and successful landowners and businessmen elsewhere in the area. The social hierarchy peaked at the white Hertzog family. They are the French Creole descendants of French Europeans, the centuries-long stewards of Magnolia Plantation and the occupants of the architecturally important Creole-style Big House, the plantation command and control center.

Until mechanization fully transformed “the Hertzogs’” into a modern agribusiness, organizationally, Magnolia reflected historic European manors in its power relationships and dependence on tenant laborers and tenant farmers, such as sharecroppers, whose compensation came partly in residence sites and only partly in cash. These arrangements, in addition to the practice of delayed cash compensation,

mitigated management’s problem of scarce funds until harvest. Limited cash troubled everyone, but none felt it more acutely than tenant laborers and sharecroppers. Their survival rested on foods from gardens and barnyard animals, on fishing, hunting, neighborly cooperation, and on credit at the plantation store.

Status in the community reflected people’s ethnic/class identity and relationships to land and coincided with their distribution across the landscape. People of French Creole descent, the Hertzog family of planters who enjoyed the highest status, occupied the Big House. Other whites, geographically and socially distant from the Hertzogs, lived in the overseer’s house. The tenant farmers were mostly Creoles of color whose temporary use of plantation fields increased their earning potential. Landless black people, rural proletarians, lived primarily in the quarters. Although the most economically vulnerable of Magnolia’s residents, stable kinship, friendship, and church ties knit blacks into a support system and community with a sense of their own worth.

Black residents and Creoles of color lived among kin and friends whose activities, interests and special places created the “community” of place. Health care, work, recreation, and social gatherings brought people together, sometimes at ethnically mixed public events such as baseball games and horse races, and sometimes in ethnic-specific or private settings such as house parties and church suppers.

Churches of all denominations were social linchpins that held people together through shared beliefs, ties to particular places, and joyful events such as Christmas and June 19th celebrations.

Plantation-supported holidays periodically and symbolically bridged the social divisions. At Christmas, "Juneteenth" or June 19th, and July 4th, Mr. Matt Hertzog, Magnolia's family manager, gave residents food gifts and brought a popular local band to play at the plantation store, a social, communication and commercial center. Juneteenth celebrated the day black people say they learned of their emancipation, a day holding special but different meanings for blacks and whites. Although marking slavery's end and new bases for relationships between previously enslaved people and their former owners, lingering noblesse oblige found plantation owners giving resident workers food gifts and a holiday. Magnolia celebrated this day until farm mechanization and reduced labor needs drove workers from the countryside. June 19th celebrations continue today, now in urban areas, where, revived and modified, they continue to signal change in black/white relationships.

The new park and its resources intrigued most blacks, whites, and Creoles of color. Perspectives on the past reflected their different experiences at Magnolia, but agreements existed too. White people and blacks independently agreed that three principal features characterized the plantation's importance: (1) continuity as

a successful agricultural enterprise, (2) organization as a self-supporting family enterprise, and (3) a long-term community and workplace, or rural company town. Former tenant workers still recognize “the Hertzogs’” as their birthplace and the quarters as their community and venue of life-shaping experiences. They take pride in their labor as the lifeline of plantation production until the mid-century. Blacks and whites both viewed the Hertzog family line and its commitments to Magnolia as essential in keeping Magnolia’s natural resource base intact and productive and in protecting its historic integrity. In addition, the weak name recognition interviewees gave to “Magnolia” but the high recognition given to “the Hertzogs’” suggested that local people viewed the plantation as a place and the Hertzogs as a family as inseparable. Indeed, Magnolia has no identity without the Hertzogs, nor an existence without the black community.

Speaking about slavery proved difficult for whites and blacks and less so for Creoles of color from the Heritage Area. This topic, like discussions of who constitutes Creoles of color, seriously challenges park interpretation to fully treat the ramifications of this multi-faceted and controversial theme. Blacks and whites treated slavery as a delicate, nearly taboo subject for public discussion. Some blacks expressed anger at the inhumanity of slavery and some perhaps a victim’s shame at being stigmatized by a system that prevailed through no fault of their own. Embarrassment about participating in a system that is vilified by some

others or discomfort about defending what some still see simply as a pragmatic labor system may have troubled white interviewees. There was concern about how outsiders, such as visitors who represented other regions and views, would perceive local peoples and cultures if slavery was interpreted. Initial black and white reluctance about public discussion of slavery gave way to agreement that slavery could be considered but not as an exclusive theme. Both favored attention to the recent times they recalled and, for black people, the times since desegregation. Both would find the topic more acceptable if presented as one dimension of their multifaceted past, one phase in a sequence of adaptations to changing morality, and economic, political and social conditions. Blacks thought slavery might be shown in contrast to their present accomplishments as a way to educate youth to the continuing struggles towards equity. From slavery to contemporary times was an acceptable thrust if it offered a morality lesson about the dignity and humanity of African Americans and the capacity for change in all people. Agreement among different peoples about interpreting slavery implied permission for the National Park Service to assume responsibility for bringing a painful, complex topic to the public on behalf of the diverse Magnolia community. In effect, the community is transferring its trust to the agency by making it a partner in conveying the thrust of a contentious past and its lingering repercussions.

Strategies for projecting Magnolia’s many voices might

include developing mini life histories of selected families of black laborers and sharecroppers and Creoles of color whose identities and histories were as essential to the plantation system as the landowning Hertzogs. Calling up stories of selected workers will offer gateways to the culture of the tenant and farming community, the community-centered roles of the Baptist and Catholic Churches, and the related ethnic and class complexities of plantation society.

Interpretive discussions of “creole” as an architectural, food and music type and “Creole” as peoples and cultures are needed to clarify meanings and dispel stereotyping. The National Park Service concern with inclusiveness also makes it imperative to show how the story of Cane River Creole National Historical Park incorporates the black community, although “Creole,” as used in the park name, is not a term they ordinarily used for themselves, or others would use for them. The park is also challenged to discuss Creoles of color, blacks, and French Creoles who share many Louisiana ways but necessarily have dealt with the effects of occupying quite different positions in the local hierarchy. This requires an interpretive approach that does not violate the local spoken and unspoken implications of “Creole,” yet acknowledges the different Magnolia peoples. A related task is to interpret the park in ways that make present-day members of all traditionally associated groups proud of their special contributions to the development and survival of Magnolia.[1]

1. A Brief Ethnography of Magnolia Plantation by Muriel Crespi p. Summary