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Frankly, Scarlett, We Do Give a Damn: The Making of a New National Park

In this paper I will be discussing how the National Park Service (NPS) came to Natchitoches, Louisiana, and what I have learned from the experience. I will discuss how I learned that the concepts of race and culture are far more complex in Louisiana, especially in that part of Louisiana, than I ever could have imagined. I will look at more lessons in something we all know: that it is the responsibility of managers to seek out the best available scholarship, that more inclusive knowledge of history is as difficult to learn as it is difficult to interpret, and that the subtleties of history and culture are the things that make it significant.

Natchitoches, Louisiana, is in the northwestern part of the state, about a five-hour drive from both New Orleans and Dallas. Settled by the French in 1714 and known as the first permanent European settlement in Louisiana Purchase Territory, a French fort developed near the location of a large Caddo Indian village. Cane River originally was the main channel of the Red River, but natural and human-caused alterations during the 19th century changed the course of the river, so Cane River became more of an oxbow, although it remained a functional shipping route through the early 20th century. Natchitoches prehistorically and historically was a crossroads of overland and water trade routes.

In 1721 the Spanish established a presidio at Los Adaes, about 15 miles west of Natchitoches, with the intent of halting French expansion into Texas. The proximity of the French and Spanish military installations brought about a frontier interaction among the French, Spanish, and Native Americans in the area. And this is part of the cultural complexity of the Cane River area. But to understand better the complexities of race and culture, let us run through a very short course in Louisiana history.

During the time of French rule in Louisiana (1718-1763), the *Code Noir* of 1724 enforced Catholicism on all settlers. As Caryn Cosse Bell noted in her book *The Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana*, the code "recognized the moral personality of the slave ... [and] required that bondsmen be instructed in the Catholic religion and administered the sacraments of baptism, marriage, penance, and extreme unction. Other provisions forbade the separation of a married couple and their children under fourteen years of age and prohibited slaves from laboring on Sundays and other Catholic holy days. The code sought to ensure social and political stability by assimilating slaves and free blacks into the Christian community."[1] The French, in theory, believed that the enslaved were human beings with

souls.

French soldiers and adventurers had settled first at Arkansas Post in 1686 and then in Old Mobile in 1702, Natchitoches in 1714, and New Orleans in 1719. Consider how early this was on the interior of the North American continent, and consider the circumstances. In general, the early French colonists did not bring women with them, and although the *Code Noir* forbade both interracial marriages and liaisons, the secular male-dominated society of French colonists tended to ignore that. As both Bell and Gwendolyn Midlo Hall have noted, interracial liaisons were common by the middle of the 18th century in Louisiana.

Under Spanish rule (1763-1800), cultural influences evolved further. *Las Siete de Partidas* allowed for slave self-purchase (*coartacion*), and allowed slaves to sell extra labor to their masters or others. A lack of skilled white laborers had brought about the French government's policy of apprenticing slaves to white tradesmen, and this continued under Spanish rule, which allowed many slaves the opportunity to purchase their freedom. Also under Spanish rule, Bell noted that "slaves and free men of color monopolized many of the skilled trades."[2] The French had created a permanent free black military force, and the Spanish brought this group into their military. All of these were reasons that a large population of free people of color developed in Louisiana.

Following the Louisiana Purchase and the gradual influx of *les Americains* into Louisiana—despite the long period of Spanish rule, French remained the primary language and the primary cultural influences in Louisiana—the culturally and racially more fluid society began to tighten up. Free persons of color were required to identify themselves on public documents as "f.p.c." or "h.c.l." (*homme de couleur libre*). The Louisiana Code of 1828 prohibited the legitimization of children of mixed-blood liaisons that had been allowed under *Las Siete de Partidas*, which authorized such children to become legal heirs. Hiram "Pete" Gregory, an anthropologist at Northwestern State University in Natchitoches, has noted that in the 1840s "priests were writing to their bishops about how to solve the problem of it being illegal to marry mixed-race couples—it was forbidden by Anglo-American law, not Church law!"[3] Other changes, too, were apparent on Louisiana plantations.

During 2001 I perused the early slave records for one of the former cotton plantations of Cane River Creole National Historical Park. Some of the records of Bermuda Plantation, which became Oakland Plantation shortly before the Civil War, had been acquired by the Historic New Orleans Collection and held considerable information about cultural change. Just studying the names of the enslaved circa 1820 revealed the strength of the French culture despite the nearly 20 years since the Louisiana purchase. Names were, for the most part, of French origin, including "Marie," "Elise," "Josephe." By the 1830s many of the enslaved came from Virginia, North Carolina, and

Figure 1. Cotton field, Cane River. *National Park Service photo.*

Tennessee, with such names as "Sarah," "John," "Job," and "Esther."[4] According to Norman Marmillion, proprietor of Laura Plantation, another Creole plantation near Vacherie, Louisiana, the same trends appeared in the records for that plantation.[5]

What we were witnessing was one vestige of the gradual "Americanization" of Louisiana. That Americanization brought with it deep-rooted differences in the ways that enslaved people were perceived. The French and the Spanish made nominal efforts to recognize the enslaved as human beings who had souls, who should be baptized and partake of the other sacraments. The Americans tended to see the enslaved as property, equivalent to livestock. Yet in northwest Louisiana the French influences prevailed well through the nineteenth century, and even through the early twentieth-century French was the language of choice along Cane River for most people.

Now let us turn to trying to understand the term "Creole." With origins in the Portuguese and Spanish, the term has had quite a semantic evolution. Dana Lee, anthropologist and folklorist at Northwestern State University in Natchitoches, defines the word as follows:

> Creole simply indicates a new world product derived from old world stock—people, produce, livestock, architecture, whatever. It was a label applied by Spanish administrators to distinguish Old World (superior, purer) from New World (inferior, impure). Rarely did people of French extraction refer to themselves as Creole. They called themselves French for the most part. In its present use in Louisiana, it simply indicates descent from colonial Europeans, whatever the admixture. On Cane River and other Louisiana communities, Creole is cultural, not racial. It is tied to genealogy, French heritage, and Catholicism.[6]

Lee's colleague Gregory sees "Creole" as meaning "New World adaptations of French, Spanish and

African cultures both to the natural world and to each other. So all the ethnic and racial interaction that did, or did not take place, still partook of that cultural blend."[7] To me, the key point to remember about the term "Creole" is that it is a cultural term rooted in French Colonialism and Catholicism.

All of this was part of the context in which a thriving cotton economy developed during the first half of the 19th century. Laid out on Spanish and French land grants, the cotton plantations had access to Cane River for easy shipment of goods to New Orleans. The cotton plantations were very labor-intensive operations that expanded the numbers of enslaved people in the parish (in Louisiana a parish is a county). While most plantations were owned by French Creoles whose families had little or no racial mixing, Yucca Plantation, which later became Melrose Plantation, was owned by Creoles of color who also had slaves.

Marie-Therese *nee* Coin-Coin was the daughter of African parents who were the slaves of Louis Juchereau de Saint-Denis of the French fort in Natchitoches. Her liaison with an officer of the fort, Pierre Metoyer, resulted in eight children. Metoyer bought the freedom of Marie-Therese Coin-Coin and that of their children and established this family on a small property on Cane River. Coin-Coin received an additional land grant in 1794 from the Spanish colonial government and expanded her holdings. Eventually her family founded Yucca Plantation. When she died in 1816, she owned 12,000 acres and ninety-nine slaves. Betje Black Klier noted in *Pavie in the Borderlands* that "Marie-Therese Coin-Coin and her children and

Figure 2. The Oakland Plantation Store. *National Park Service photo.*

Figure 3. Overseer's House and Slave Hospital, Magnolia Plantation. *National Park Service photo.*

grandchildren were the wealthiest slave-owning free family of color in the nation in 1830."[8]

The early plantations along Cane River grew tobacco and indigo, but by the 1820s a transition into cotton was underway. This became the primary crop for the plantations in the region, although all kept some agricultural diversity—timber, grains, cattle, hogs—to support the large populations required at each plantation to bring in this labor-intensive crop. The two plantations included in the park, Oakland and Magnolia, were examples.

The Cane River area was hit hard during the Red River Campaign of the Civil War. Properties and crops were looted or burned by both sides—each not wanting the other army to gain possession. Reconstruction was difficult for all who remained, and poverty affected even those who had earlier considered themselves untouchable by that blight. Tenant farming and sharecropping were extensions of the earlier institution of slavery, and plantation commissaries that had served the enslaved evolved into plantation stores that served the tenant farmers and sharecroppers, and were also the social centers of the small village communities of each plantation.

Just across the Red River in Grant Parish is the town of Colfax. The parish was named for Ulysses S. Grant, and the town was named for Grant's vice president during his first administration, Schuyler Colfax. As historian James Loewen notes in *Lies Across America*:

> How did it come to pass that Louisianans might name a parish and

> town after these Republicans so soon after the Civil War? The answer is that black men were in on the naming. African Americans were voting during Reconstruction, and voting freely.... Based on 'one man, one vote,' Republicans were narrowly in the majority. But signs in Grant Parish indicated that Democrats were organizing to take away that privilege.[9]

When both parties declared victory in a gubernatorial race in 1873, President Grant told Congress that he would recognize the Republican candidate as governor. That governor replaced the sheriff and parish judge with Republicans. Fearing violence from the Democrats, African Americans around Colfax "raised a militia under the command of black veterans, posted pickets at the major roads, fashioned two makeshift cannons from pipes, and fortified the courthouse against attack." Other black farmers joined them, and they held the town for three weeks. On Easter Sunday, white Democrats attacked and slaughtered 150 people in what Eric Foner described as the "bloodiest single act of carnage in all of Reconstruction."[10] Loewen noted that the Colfax riot was the beginning of the end of Reconstruction. It also showed the lack of federal enforcement of Reconstruction laws, including the 14th and 15th amendments. Most likely some of those killed were from Cane River.

These are all pieces of the history of that part of Louisiana, and all necessary parts to understand in this complex equation of what makes up a sense of place. As Cane River itself changed in the late 19th century, Natchitoches became a small Louisiana community with considerable history and cultural diversity, but, lying as it did in the backwater of the Red River, it was in general left behind by 20th-century development.

Yet there were benefits to lack of "progress." What remained in Natchitoches was a cultural mélange of people, many with Creole roots, and many of whom spoke French. What remained were buildings that had architectural elements taken from French and African traditions, for the plantations continued as working corporations or leased farm properties. Deterioration set in to those buildings no longer used, but local traditions of "Waste not, want not, use it up, wear it out, make it do or do without" prevailed.[11] That continued use saved hundreds of historic buildings. Creoles of color recognized their cultural importance and in 1979 formed the St. Augustine Historical Society to preserve a property of cultural significance to them, and they initiated a Creole Heritage Day festival each January to serve as a homecoming celebration for all Cane River Creoles. Like the Cane River African Americans, many of the Creoles had left during the out-migration to jobs elsewhere when farming was mechanized, yet their roots remained strong in Cane River.

In the white community, the Association for the Preservation of Historic Natchitoches acquired Melrose Plantation and began telling the stories of Marie-Therese Coin-Coin and her family, of Cammie Henry and her small arts-and-crafts colony of the early 20th century, and of the African American painter Clementine

Hunter, whose primitive paintings of Cane River life depict her perspective on the world.

This is the rich cultural area where Cane River Creole National Historical Park came into being.

In 1994 Congress passed legislation creating both the park and Cane River National Heritage Area. The legislation authorized the park to "serve as the focus of interpretive and education programs on the history of the Cane River area and to assist in the preservation of certain historic sites along the river," to preserve Oakland and the outbuildings of Magnolia Plantation, and to use a culturally sensitive approach in the partnerships needed for addressing the preservation and education needs of the Cane River area. The legislation also called for the National Park Service to coordinate a comprehensive research program on the complex history of the Cane River region.

This was the first time that I had ever seen cultural sensitivity and research mandated in legislation creating a new park.

Most people understand the concept of national parks, but what are national heritage areas? The national heritage area program is administered through the National Park Service. NPS defines national heritage areas as follows:

> A National Heritage Area is a place designated by the United States Congress where natural, cultural, historic and recreational resources combine to form a cohesive, nationally distinctive landscape arising from patterns of human activity shaped by geography. These patterns make National Heritage Areas representative of the national experience through the physical features that remain and the traditions that have evolved in the areas. Continued use of the National Heritage Areas by people whose traditions helped to shape the landscapes enhances their significance.

Figure 4. Carpenter's Shop and Mule Barn, Oakland Plantation. *National Park Service photo.*

While the national heritage area program is administered through NPS, most heritage areas themselves are directly administered through commissions, not-for-profit agencies, and private staff. Most have a 50/50 matching requirement for any federal funds they receive. The legislation for Cane River National Heritage Area does not have that requirement.

An additional aspect of national heritage areas that appears common to all is the concept of local, grassroots preservation efforts. In heritage areas local people have strong traditions of historic preservation and, quite often, landscape conservation efforts that were underway long before federal designation. It is apparent that most heritage areas sought federal designation to increase awareness of those local or regional resources and programs, to enhance opportunities for federal funding, or to tap into other types of technical assistance that might be available through the National Park Service. Often the local people who push for designation of heritage areas seek to provide recognition of the significance of the resources in that community to other residents who either may not recognize their significance or who may not have the same level of concern for those resources. National heritage area designation brings with it a meaningful title, access to federal funding and technical assistance, and the opportunity to enhance preservation and conservation efforts within that heritage area on local, regional, and national levels.

And my park was located smack dab in the middle of one.

Now on to the development of the park. Following land acquisition, the first broad step upon which the agency embarks is the general management planning process. For Cane River we were fortunate to have considerable interdisciplinary background research on history, ethnography, architecture, and archeology in formulating the vision for the park. That, combined with the public involvement required under the National Environmental Policy Act and the strong community involvement required by common sense, gave the direction the park should take.

Although both the Oakland and Magnolia Plantation units had historic structures and a very significant cultural landscape, changes to them over time and lack of information on their exact configuration in earlier periods resulted in only one appropriate action: Both properties were to look much as they did circa 1960 when the last of the tenant farmers and sharecroppers—most of whom were descended from former slaves—left the two plantations. That is the time when mechanization replaced mules and hands, and when the large cotton-picker shed (large enough to hold a machine the size of a combine) replaced the long, low tractor shed. It was the end of an era, and an appropriate end date that offered tremendous opportunities for interpretation, for we were not limited by a set moment in time. We had continuum.

Most visitors to southern plantations have little interest in anything other than the "Big House," and so much of that is something that we as a nation have brought upon ourselves. One well-meaning Natchitoches resi-

dent who is a stalwart preservationist in the white community mailed me a flyer of another Louisiana plantation. She attached to it a note stating that she hoped the park would be up and running soon, looking like that attachment. In the photograph, a young white woman in hoopskirts and bonnet stood on the massive front porch of a Big House and cordially greeted visitors, who all happened to be white, as they walked up the front steps from garden, replete with azaleas and spring floral displays.

If you knew the park staff at Cane River, you would know that none of us do hoopskirts.

Over an extended period of time the local resident and I have had long discussions, and now she understands why the National Park Service is approaching its visitor services in a different manner. You will note that I did not say that she necessarily agreed with our approach, but she does understand the reasoning behind it.

The beauty of Oakland and Magnolia Plantations and a large aspect of their significance are the number of outbuildings that remain. Quarters occupied by enslaved people and then tenant farmers and sharecroppers, a blacksmith shop, a gin barn and a mule barn, a carpenter's shop, plantation stores, cisterns, and remnant landscapes are all manifestations of the lives of people whose families lived and worked the plantations for 200 years. Sixty-two historic structures at the park's two units not only allow but also encourage or even force visitors to understand that a plantation was more than a Big House.

At Oakland Plantation the design for our visitor parking, for a number of reasons, is in a field at the back of the property. Visitors will park there, enter through an entrance pavilion, and then walk to the historic portion of the unit from "back of the Big House." In our interpretive programs we tell the story Solomon Williams, the enslaved blacksmith from Bermuda (later Oakland) Plantation who took outside contracts during his period of enslavement and who stayed at Oakland following the Civil War. When his descendents came looking for him they told us that they would have found him sooner but all family records indicated that he came from Bermuda, and they thought it meant the island in the Atlantic instead of this small plantation community of Louisiana. We also discuss the Prud'homme family, who held the plantation for more than 200 years and who remain deeply committed to the property's preservation. We have similar approaches at Magnolia Plantation that assist us with more inclusive approaches to history and interpretation.

Constant vigilance is required in dealing with well-meaning people to promote dialogue and understanding of history, of people, of events. This may be in a one-on-one situation, as in the hoopskirt issue, or it may be in architectural and design manipulation to force visitors' attention to a different focus.

It is the responsibility of NPS to discuss slavery and Reconstruction. When two plantations included among their property lists 175 and 275 enslaved people, respectively, it would be ludicrous to think that our

Figure 5. Big House, Oakland Plantation. *National Park Service photo.*

interpretive programs would not discuss this issue. In an area just up the road and across the river, it is our responsibility to discuss the Colfax massacre that changed the way civil rights were administered in the United States.

It is our responsibility to talk openly about slavery. We have found that most people breathe a sigh of relief when they realize it's okay to discuss the subject. They visibly relax when they discover that they can ask questions about it, and when they get answers based on historical research rather than conjecture. The one difference is that we make a point of referring to "enslaved people" rather than "slaves," thus putting the emphasis on the concept of the enslaved as people rather than property.

It is imperative that we deal with the reality of the communities in which we live. As the federal agency in the community responsible for providing a culturally sensitive approach to park development and interpretation, it is our responsibility to bring all parties to the table to discuss sensitive issues. This process is underway right now in the development of a master interpretive plan for Cane River National Heritage Area. About 20 people representing an inclusive group of Cane River interests is working together on this project.

Explaining the complexities of race and culture in that area of northwestern Louisiana is not an easy task. It involves obtaining a grasp of French and Spanish colonialism and their legal systems. It involves comprehending the ways that those cultures adapted to the New World. It includes understanding how earlier cultures rationalized slavery and the oppression of people of color. But it also includes bringing those discussions

Figure 6. Brick slave quarters, later used as housing for tenant farmers, Magnolia Plantation. *National Park Service photo.*

out into the sunshine. And I have found that we have to explain these complexities to Park Service professionals from a variety of disciplines, to travel writers for newspapers and magazines, to visitors who come to the park and the heritage area, and to ourselves on the park staff. The process is an iterative one of constant refinement as the results of new research come to light.

Through the use of interdisciplinary research, some done locally and some completed by outsiders, the park has aimed to contribute to that body of knowledge of all of the resources of Cane River, and in doing so has tried to keep in the forefront a dialogue of social conscience. One cannot tell the history of two cotton plantations without discussing enslaved labor. One cannot discuss the cultural history of Louisiana without addressing the *gens de couleur libre*. One cannot understand Cane River without having broad discussions on historical and cultural perspectives.

So yes, Scarlett may remain in the South throwing her temper tantrums, but at this small park in Louisiana we are not walking away slamming the door behind us. Rather we work with everyone. We work with all of the affected communities. We work hard at developing opportunities to expand thinking, to improve citizenry, to generate more excitement in the phenomenal resources of the park and the heritage area. At Cane River we have a chance to show that the roots of American's problems with race and ethnocentrism are byproducts of colonial order, not something inherent in human biology. That is what we are striving to do.

Frankly, my dears, we do give a damn.

[Ed. note: this paper was originally presented at the Organization of American Historians / National Council on Public History annual meeting, April 2002, Washington, D.C.]

Endnotes

1. Caryn Cosse Bell, *Revolution, Romanticism and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana 1718-1868* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), p. 12.
2. Ibid., p. 16.

3. Personal correspondence, Hiram Gregory to author, August 1, 2000. Gregory is a professor of anthropology at Northwestern State University in Natchitoches.
4. Prud'homme Family Papers, Historic New Orleans Collection.
5. Multiple discussions between the author and Norman Marmillion during 2001 confirmed and reconfirmed this trend.
6. Personal correspondence with the author, April 27, 2000.
7. Personal correspondence with the author, August 1, 2000.
8. Betje Black Klier, *Pavie in the Borderlands: The Journey of Theodore Pavie to Louisiana and Texas 1829-1830* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2000).
9. James Loewen, *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong* (New York: The New Press, 1999), p. 212.
10. Ibid., 212.
11. According to Margo Haase, who lived on the Oakland Plantation property for a number of years, Alphonse Prud'homme quoted that saying frequently; and he lived by it. The eight generations of Prud'hommes who lived at Oakland used and reused items and never threw anything away. Part of the legacy of Oakland Plantation includes a huge museum collection conservatively estimated at 250,000 objects.

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