

Early Success of the Metoyer *Gens de Couleur Libre*

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Propagation of "Moonlight and Magnolias"
Southern Romanticism Transmitted by the Regional Poetry of Northwest Louisiana

"Cane River"

There's a stream of subtle beauty
And it wears a sparkling crown,
As It weaves a silvery pathway
Thru a quaint old southern town:
It is smiling in the sunlight,
Or It's dimpling in the rain
Or it's waiting in the darkness
For the moon to shine again.

I have seen Its tranquil magic
On dark quiescent nights
Mirror all the iridescence
Of the twinkling, bright street lights;
I have dreamed beneath the cottonwoods
That thread its verdant banks,
I have envied weeping willows
Bending low to give it thanks.

Little orphan of Red river,
Miles and miles it flows along
With the freedom of a swallow.
With the rhythm of a song;
Haven of perch and trout and bream,
Anglers know its shady nooks
And they love this winding river
With the charm of woodland brooks.

Through the cotton fields it drowns
In its gentle, silent way,
Or It gleams behind sonic cabins
Where the pickannies play;
And It makes a lovely picture
For each passerby to see

While It sponsors variant visions
Of Nature's artistry.

--Grace Tarleton Aaron

And as the Slipperies and Slopperies rested in their happy old age, there came upon the scene the wisest and finest ducks that had ever lived . . . the Qwan Qwan families. . . . It came about that, after time had wandered in and out of the Cane River country many times, Marie One, a Qwan Qwan, began to teach her brood of ducklings the hows and whys of learning all about life. <1>

In *Slaves Without Masters: A Free Negro in the Antebellum South*, Ira Berlin makes the defining statement, "History, in some measure, is the study of exceptions." <2> The story of Marie Therese dit CoinCoin and her Franco-African children fits this view of history well, because the success achieved by this community of *gens de couleur libre* is exceptional. <3> The history of this community began on August 24, 1742, in the fort of Natchitoches, the oldest settlement of the royal French colony Louisiana. On this day occurred the baptism of a newborn slave who was christened Marie Therese and given the African name CoinCoin. <4> During her romantic alliance with the French settler Claude Thomas Pierre Metoyer, this slave woman bore ten children of mixed heritage. Eventually, she became the matriarch of a free Franco-African community that reached a degree of prominence and wealth. The history of Marie Therese exists within the context of a close-knit family community; "The legend of this femme extraordinaire is but part of the story of a famille extraordinaire, a distinct culture, founded upon the principles of toil as a requirement of success, love as the essence of existence, and mutual assistance as a defense against all adversities." <5> Indeed, the achievement of financial stability and the creation of a distinct culture make the Metoyer gens de couleur libre an extraordinary success story within a Southern history where those of African heritage lived in pain, oppression, and subjugation.

The Franco-African community begun by Marie Therese owes its success in part to the unique colonial history of Louisiana. The French and Spanish regimes that ruled during various periods of the family's history generally tolerated the social and economic advancement of these free Creoles of color. Frontier trends of the Louisiana back country also assisted in their advancement. In other ways, however, the history of Marie Therese and family reflects a broader Southern history in which Louisiana, despite its atypical colonization, remained a part. The toleration of the French and Spanish regimes "never [guaranteed] prosperity, only the right to pursue it. It [was] the responsibility of the individual to use his rights to make his own degree of success." <6> Marie Therese dit CoinCoin and her children advanced the overarching Southern dream held by most whites: the acquisition of land, slaves, and money. Throughout the South, many free blacks worked toward the realization of this dream. The story of William Ellison and family related in *Black Master. A Free Family of Color in the Old South* exemplifies a success story in South Carolina similar to the Metoyers' in Louisiana.

The history of Marie Therese dit CoinCoin and her family exists in two forms that often overlap but at times disagree: oral tradition and documentation. When one visits Melrose plantation, the tour guides relate the history of the plantation and the Metoyers according to the oral tradition. The legend chiefly centers on Marie Therese and the founding of Melrose. It also focuses upon such things as the character of Augustin Metoyer and the Metoyers' treatment of their slaves. In Melrose, Gary Mills attributes the legend surrounding the Metoyers to the African tradition of preserving the past through oral history. <7> Given the color consciousness of the Metoyers, the connection between this particular oral tradition and African tradition remains conjectural. Mills himself notes that as the society moved away from its African matriarch, it professed the most pride in its French heritage. <8> This was "a colony perpetually [disdainful of] that element of society which lived in servitude." <9> The color consciousness held by the Franco-African Metoyers caused them to distance themselves from their African heritage. It even caused them to exclude blacks systematically from marital alliances with its mulatto members." <10> The community's rejection of its African heritage suggests that a relationship between its oral history and its African heritage did not exist. In an effort to distance themselves from the oppression and enslavement, the Metoyers would quite naturally abandon the conscious propagation of African traditions.

Although oral tradition is a defining aspect of African tradition, It often transcends cultural lines. In many cultures, It coexists with written history. The legend surrounding Marie Therese and family compares to the Southern myth of "moonlight and magnolias," the American myth of George Washington and the cherry tree, and even the English legend of King Arthur. All of these legends possess a certain degree of romanticism. The regional poetry of Cane River Country, the area in which the Metoyers settled, demonstrates this Romanticism: "[The Cane River] gleams behind some cabins / Where the pickanninies play." <11> Romantic embellishments of the Metoyer legend originate in the descendants' vested interest in the portrayal of the community.

Some historians, recognizing an embellished legend, have sought to discredit much of the history of the Metoyer gens de couleur libre. In his article "'Legends' about Marie Therese Disputed," Louis Nardini, Sr., claims that writers of the past such as Lyle Saxon... have often helped create part of the 'legends' about this woman." <12> One of Nardini's major claims is that Pierre Metoyer never had a relationship with Marie Therese, and therefore cannot be the father of her ten Franco-African children. <13> Nardini's claim remains a possibility, because Pierre Metoyer never publicly confirmed his union with Marie Therese or the paternity of his Franco-African slaves. In his will of 1783, Metoyer refuses to admit either: "I declare to be a bachelor and not have any children." <14> His lack of public admittance points more towards the social conditions and racial dynamics rather than Nardini's claim that no relationship existed. In a Southern society where interracial alliances produced numerous difficulties, Pierre Metoyer's public disclaimer was an act of self protection.

The union between Pierre Metoyer and Marie Therese began soon after the Frenchman arrived in Natchitoches in 1767. Shortly after his arrival, Pierre Metoyer began leasing Marie Therese from her mistress Marie des Neiges Juchereau de St. Denis de Soto. <15>

After only one year; Marie Therese bore the first two of her ten Franco-African children, the twins Nicolas Augustin and Marie Suzanne. <16> Marie Therese and Pierre Metoyer lived in open concubinage, a situation often attributed to French attitudes on race. *In The Forgotten People*, Gary Mills notes that "Prejudice against the African races did not reach any degree of intensity in French society until the late eighteenth century, and even then it was short-lived African members of French society were considered more or less 'exotic,' and even the illustrious King Louis XIV reportedly once had a Negro mistress." <17> Cases of open concubinage existed not just in Louisiana, but in other areas of the South as well. In *The Slave Community*, John W. Blassingame notes, "A number of white men sought more than fleeting relationships with black women. Frequently, they purchased comely black women for their concubines. In many cases the master loved his black concubines and treated her as his wife." <18> After this statement, Blassingame proceeds to give examples of open concubinage in such states as Virginia. The existence of open concubinage throughout the South suggests that the toleration of Marie Therese and Pierre's relationship was not the product of a French racial attitude relatively progressive for the eighteenth century. Rather the toleration shows that the Creoles practiced, along with the majority of white Southerners, the fine art of looking the other way.

In 1778, Metoyer bought Marie Therese and their infant son Joseph from Mme. de St. Denis de Soto. Shortly after, he granted freedom to mother and child. <19> Metoyer's manumission of the two originated in legal concerns. Article X of the Code Noir demanded that many master who fathered children by his own slave should suffer the loss of the slave and child, both who would be sold for the benefit of the hospital. <20> Metoyer's manumission guaranteed that Marie Therese and Joseph could remain with him forever. Marie Therese, however did not remain with Pierre Metoyer forever. Around 1786, Marie Therese and Pierre ended their relationship, and in October of 1788, Pierre married a woman of his own race and social background who happened to share the same name of his black concubine, Marie Therese Buard. If a progressive racial attitude characterized Creole society, then it ceased to exist when the time for marriage and legitimate heirs arrived. Marriage was the line separating amor from serious business.

Although Metoyer chose to marry a white woman, his sense of obligation to his Franco-African family continued. His will of 1801 alludes to a prenuptial agreement signed before his marriage to Marie Therese Buard. <21> This agreement protected his mulatto slaves, because it gave him the right "to give liberty when it should please [him], to six mulatto slaves, independent of the community with [his] wife." <22> At times white women who were infuriated by their husband's infidelities took revenge on the black woman involved or her mixed children. <23> Apparently, Metoyer's wife was this jealous type. However, his premarital contract recognizes the realistic threat of such behavior. His measures of protection against such a threat indicate Metoyer's sense of obligation to his mulatto children.

Even after his relationship with Marie Therese ended in 1786, Metoyer continued to manumit their Franco-African children. He first granted freedom to their son Pierre on October 10, 1788. <24> Augustin, the patriarch of the Isle Brevelle community, received

his freedom on August 1, 1792. <25> Louis, the eventual owner of Melrose Plantation, became a free man on May 28, 1802. <26> Metoyer's manumission of his Franco-African slaves signifies his sense of paternal duty. His manumissions reflect the trend of manumission in the Lower South. Berlin notes the difference between the Upper South and Lower South manumissions, "Whereas Upper South slaveholders often displayed their belief in the principles of liberty by indiscriminately freeing their slaves at once, Lower South masters tended to pick and choose, generally liberating only their illicit offspring, special favorites, or least productive slaves." <27>

After their manumissions, Marie Therese and her children remained dedicated to the task of freeing members of their family still in slavery. This was no easy task, because "few freed slaves could afford to purchase an enslaved family member." <28> Although Pierre Metoyer eventually freed his mulatto children, Marie Therese shouldered the responsibility of freeing her black children before her relationship with Pierre Metoyer. In the year 1795 she granted freedom to Marie Louise, her black daughter whom she had purchased from Pierre Dolet. <29> Marie Therese also manumitted grandchildren. On August 30, 1794, she freed the little girl Catiche whom she had purchased from Dame Marguerite le Roy only three days earlier. <30> Catiche was the natural daughter of her son Louis. <31> Marie Therese's children also bought mulatto family members with the purpose of freeing them. On November 3, 1813, Augustin Metoyer manumitted his Franco-African slave Marguerite. <32> Marguerite was Augustin's niece. <33> The manumissions made by Marie Therese and her children exemplify a prevalent practice in free black communities. Many free blacks "themselves fresh from bondage, often helped loved ones purchase their liberty. Since most free Negroes were poor, buying the freedom of a friend or relative took years of austere living.... In spite of such obstacles, some free blacks dedicated much of their lives and fortunes to helping others escape bondage." <34>

Once manumitted in 1792, Marie Therese's eldest boy Augustin began his pursuit of the Southern dream by focusing on the land of the lower Isle Brevelle. The Isle is a narrow and elongated piece of land some thirty miles long and three to four miles wide, bordered on the west by the Old River, formerly the Red River, and on the east by the Cane River. <35> Augustin was the first in his family to notice the fertile bottomland of the Isle Brevelle. On May 6, 1795, the Spanish colonial government authorized Augustin to settle a 395 acre plot of land and to have it surveyed in his name. <36> His acquisition of land in the lower Isle began the migration of the Metoyers of color into this region. This family community became a distinct society within the greater Natchitoches community, and in time "developed ... into one of the unique societies in American history, a culture so distinct, so close-knit, that they have always termed themselves "The People." <37>

The insular and tight-knit family community that developed in the lower Isle follows the pattern of settlement followed by most Natchitoches settlers. Elizabeth Shown Mills discusses the emergence of small pockets of community in her essay "Social and Family Patterns on the Colonial Louisiana Frontier." On the Louisiana frontier, the figuratively walled town typical of the backcountry did not exist. The lack of Indian aggression and the poor soil surrounding the fort rendered a central fortified community unnecessary and

agriculturally unproductive. As a result, "the initial urban cluster dispersed, and settlers moved out to their own plantations. This gradual radiation from the central post provided ample room for new generations to establish themselves within the jurisdiction of the post; but as a result, urban life on the frontier was exceedingly slow in developing, and there was little sense of community cohesiveness." <38> This lack of centralized urban community caused the boundaries of Natchitoches to be very extensive. Some small communities developed over eighty-four miles from the parish seat. <39> The Isle Brevelle community was between ten to thirty miles away from the fort of Natchitoches. <40> Though no centralized cohesiveness emerged on the Louisiana frontier, the settlers who clustered around their plantations often formed cohesive packets. These micro-societies often consisted of one extended family. This tendency prompts Elizabeth Mills to maintain, "The family is the hear of society. To study a people's history without understanding the family structure from which it evolved is to confront a robot and pretend that one feels a pulse." <41>

The structure of the community at Isle Brevelle is analogous to the structure of many free black communities throughout the South. The family remained the foundation for community, because it provided a haven for its members to escape from the prejudices of a white society. The free mulattos of Charleston, South Carolina, formed a community similar to the one at Isle Brevelle. The Charleston society kept the family central, and "the fellowship of extended families and a broad network of friends ... provided Charleston's free people of color an experience unequalled elsewhere in the state or even in the Deep South outside of New Orleans." <42>

The Isle Brevelle community differed from the Charleston free black community and others in New Orleans, because it developed within a rural society. Free blacks most often sought urban communities, because cities provided a degree of anonymity. The free black preference for urban anonymity caused many municipal officials throughout the South "[to join] the mayor of Petersburg in lamenting that 'large numbers of free blacks flock from the community to the towns.'" <43> The measured liberty provided by anonymity allowed Charleston's free leaders of African descent to "build a small world that was part of, yet separate from, the larger society of whites and blacks." <44> The community of Isle Brevelle did not have the advantage of anonymity provided by an urban society. Yet, the Metoyers of color still created the small, removed world desired by most free blacks in the South. The Isle Brevelle community achieved the same goal because of the lack of centralized cohesiveness on the Louisiana frontier. The Metoyer residents utilized the dispersion of community rather than urban anonymity to create this removed world.

The Isle Brevelle community first expanded when Louis Metoyer secured a tract of land next to the property of his older brother Augustin. According to legend, Louis Metoyer in December of 1795 petitioned Commandant Louis De Blanc for the title of the 912-acre Melrose tract, and he received the order to survey and settle the land four months later. <45> The lack of documentation for the 1796 land grant renders it impossible to determine the identity of the founder of Melrose. The Melrose concession "was not surveyed in the colonial era and a final title was not recorded in the colonial land records

at New Orleans." <46> The idea that Louis founded Melrose remains problematic, because in 1796 Louis was still the slave of Pierre Metoyer. According to Article XXII of the Code Noir, a slave "can have no right to any kind of property." <47> Louis Metoyer did not receive a verbal granting of freedom until January 1, 1801, and he was not given a written manumission until May 28, 1802. <48>

Oral tradition maintains that Marie Therese CoinCoin, and not Louis, established Melrose. Lyle Saxon records as fact this oral tradition in his brief written history "The Story of Melrose":

Marie Therese CoinCoin was born in the Congo and at tender age, was brought to America and sold into the household of St. Denis, Commandant of the first post of France established in Louisiana. at Natchitoches. Following the death of the Commandant, his widow set Marie Therese free and the French Crown bestowed a huge grant of land on her, centering around Melrose, in those days a day's journey from Natchitoches. <49>

Certain aspects of this legend are false. The widow de St. Denis clearly did not grant Marie Therese her freedom after the Commandant's death in 1744. because Pierre Metoyer admits in his will of 1801 that he freed "Marie Therese, called CoinCoin." <50> The question as to whether or not Marie Therese received the Melrose tract remains unanswered. The date of the plantation's establishment set at 1796 is probable, because an architectural authority has dated the erection of the plantation house Yucca around this year. <51> In 1796, the only free Metoyers of color were Marie Therese, Augustin, and Dominique. Augustin already received his own land grant one year earlier, and therefore remained ineligible for additional lands. Dominique received his own concession of land on the Isle on the same day that the Melrose concession was granted. Therefore, the only free member of the family eligible to receive the Melrose grant was Marie Therese CoinCoin. <52>

The architecture of the original buildings supports the tradition that Marie Therese founded Melrose. One of the primary buildings now called the African House derives its name from its unusual architecture. The building is two stories tall with one room on each floor, and is made of brick and wood. Its most distinctive feature is its gigantic roof that makes the building look like a mushroom. The massive overhangs of the roof are not supported by columns. Instead, horizontal beams that reach from the wall to the underside of the roof support its weight. The lack of columns makes the roof look as if it is levitating over the building. The architectural style found nowhere else on the American continent "is usually likened to that found in subtropical Africa or the West Indies." <53>

The African architecture points to the strong connection between the founder of Melrose and African tradition. This connection was weak among the Franco-African Metoyers because of mulatto color consciousness. Often times, this color consciousness began in the first generation. James Hugo Johnston explains the degree to which white fathers encouraged this color consciousness, "When relations of affection existed between the white father and his mulatto children, such fathers were often inclined to consider their

offspring riot as Negroes but as persons of their blood, and there is evidence that such parents taught their children to consider themselves as better or superior to the members of the servile race." <54> The first generation of Metoyers demonstrated their own color consciousness by only marrying those of mixed racial heritage. Louis, the only other Metoyer linked with the founding of Melrose, married an Indian woman Marie Therese LeComte who possessed little if any African blood. <55>

Though her children and grandchildren consciously distanced themselves from their African heritage, Marie Therese CoinCoin retained at least one very close connection with African tradition: her name. The nickname CoinCoin is the "phonetic equivalent to Ko Kwe ... the name reserved for second-born daughters by the Glidzi dialect of the Ewe linguistic group which occupied the coastal region of Togo." <56> Marie Therese CoinCoin, who was the second born daughter of two African slaves Francois and Francoise, had siblings who also possessed African names; her sister Marie Gertrude was called Dgimby, and her brother Francois, Jr., Kiokera or Choera. <57> It is highly probable that Marie Therese CoinCoin, only one generation removed from Africa, would incorporate African architectural style into the buildings at Melrose. It is less likely that her color conscious son Louis would knowingly imitate African tradition.

If Louis did receive the Melrose grant in 1796, then the Spanish colonial government disregarded Article XXII of the Code Noir. This remains a possibility, especially given the influence of Louis' prominent father. In one recorded instance, the French colonial government did disregard Article XXII and allowed Louis to purchase property before he was legally free. On March 8, 1802, just two months before his legal manumission. Louis purchased a "negro named George, aged about thirty five years." <51> The Commandant of the settlement Felix Trudeau supervised the judicial sale of property. Though not yet legally free at the time of this purchase of property. Louis had received verbal emancipation by Metoyer in 1801. <59> From the time of this verbal emancipation to the 1802 legal manumission, Louis retained the peculiar status of the quasi-free slave.

Throughout the South, quasi-free slaves sometimes received the treatment of the free Negro, because their slavery was more of a legal technicality than a fact. <60> Often their verbal manumission was a prelude to legal manumission. A quasi-free slave from Virginia in 1811 "petitioned for his emancipation, claiming his master had promised him his freedom and 'with an eye to that end allowed him to purchase real property and enjoy the benefits of it...'" <61> Louis, like this Virginia quasi-free slave, purchased the Negro named George with an eye to his eventual freedom. Either Commandant Trudeau, who in the document referred to Louis as a free mulatto, did not know of Louis' legal status as a slave, or he accepted Louis as a man free in the spirit of verbal manumission rather than the letter of the law. Considering the Commandant of the post would know colonial law, the latter is more likely. With his legal manumission only two months away, Louis with his father's help persuaded Commandant Trudeau to ignore the legal technicalities.

This possible relaxation of the law gives credibility to the argument that Louis founded Melrose In 1796. Though Louis had not been given his verbal manumission in this year, he still enjoyed many privileges of freedom during this time. Many of Metoyer's Franco-

African slaves "had not only received special treatment from their father but were actually recognized as free within the community." <62> An example of their status is a 1792 trip to New Orleans in which Augustin and Louis manned their mother's barge. <63> This example of privileges in 1792 coupled with the relaxation of Article XXII in 1802 renders a 1796 relaxation of Article XXII plausible. Regardless of whether he founded Melrose, Louis Metoyer did eventually become the owner of the tract of land and the plantation. On March 15, 1813, Joseph Irwin resurveyed the Melrose tract. He acknowledges in the land resurvey that Louis Metoyer claimed the tract of land containing 912 acres, and that "the Title [had] been confirmed by [illegible word] certificate B No. 1953." <64>

Louis' mother, with or without the Melrose tract, remained a landed lady. The land that Marie Therese received from a donation in 1786, a grant in 1794, and a purchase in 1807 provided her with the means to comfortable life. In November of 1786, Pierre Metoyer donated to Marie Therese the land that he bequeathed to her children in the will of 1783. <65> On May 14, 1794, Marie Therese expanded her holdings with a grant of twenty arpents in length by forty in depth located on the west bank of the Old River branch of the Red River. <66> In her efforts to utilize the land granted in 1794, Marie Therese enlisted the help of a Spaniard named Jose Mare around the year 1797. For ten years, Mare kept a "vochere" of Marie Therese's cattle and cultivated and other vegetables on the land. <67> Through her use of the land, Marie Therese achieved a respectable financial position. In 1796 Pierre Metoyer promised Marie Therese a lifetime annuity of one hundred twenty piastres, because he foresaw "that she would have difficulty supporting herself." <68> By September 14, 1814, Marie Therese achieved economic stability and could afford to relieve Pierre Metoyer of the obligation to pay her lifetime annuity of one hundred and twenty piastres. Even as early as 1803, Marie Therese was in the financial position to show benevolence to her friends. In his will of 1801, Metoyer alludes to a "few" turkeys that Marie Therese had provided him. <70>

Other Metoyer property-holders also achieved the financial success that allowed them to live the planter lifestyle. Augustin like many planters lent money to his neighbors. The succession of Pierre Derbanne shows Augustin Metoyer as the heir of the \$8.60 owed to him. <71> Augustin Metoyer bought black slaves in the same manner as most white planters. Records show that he went to judicial sales in order to purchase slaves and necessities for his plantation. On the same day that Louis, while still legally a slave, purchased the "negro named George," Augustin purchased an "old ox-cart" for eight dollars, and a black slave named Jeanne and her two month old baby for eight hundred and fifty-one dollars. <72> These purchases of slaves and equipment are typical transactions made by planters on a trip to town. Augustin also bought slaves from fellow residents of the Isle. On March 29, 1813, he purchased a "negro name Francois, aged about twenty-five years" from a free Negro named Pacalay who resided on the Isle. <73> The fact that two men of color participated in the purchase of a slave is striking. The transaction itself, however, is demonstrative of typical planter behavior.

One of the most important institutions in the Isle Brevelle community was the Catholic Church. Augustin Metoyer's founding of St. Augustine's Catholic Church stemmed from

the colony's emphasis on religion. <74> Established as a mission in 1829, St. Augustine's supposedly functioned as a church since 1803. <75> Oral legend maintains that on a trip abroad with his father, Augustin admired by the community churches in France and as a result established St. Augustine's in 1803. Throughout the South, many free blacks founded churches for community worship. Most often, these churches originated from prejudice within the white community: "As free Negroes found themselves barred from white churches and discriminated against in mixed churches, they attempted to form and control their own religious institutions." <76> The founding of St. Augustine's differed from those of other free black churches, because the motivation for its establishment was religious need among all Creole settlers rather than the alienation of a racial group. Louisiana during its colonial period was "sans religion, sans justice, sans discipline, sans ordre, et sans police." <77> Lack of religious institutions characterized the Louisiana backcountry well after the colonial period. The establishment of St. Augustine's mission in 1829 marked the second mission founded on Isle Brevelle. After the abandonment of the first mission, St. Jean Baptiste, St. Augustine's solely addressed the religious needs of a great amount of settlers. <78> Establishing of St. Augustine's fulfilled religious needs that resulted from a lack of institutions rather than alienation from institutions.

Though the church primarily served the religious needs of the Metoyer family, Augustin recognized the same need within the general Creole population. This recognition prompted him to open the church to other residents within the community. His last will and testament states his wish to meet the religious needs of others outside his family: "I desire ... that outsiders professing our holy, Catholic, apostolic, and Roman religion will have the right to assist at the divine office in the said chapel and shall enjoy, moreover, all the rights and privileges which I and my family are able to have there." <79> These "outsiders" were the white population of Isle Brevelle and the surrounding area, and they regularly accepted the invitation to worship. <80> Oral tradition maintains that Augustin reserved eight pews for whites behind his own, and that for two generations these whites sat behind this man of color. <81> If this tradition is true, then an unusual reversal of norms occurred in St. Augustine's. Christian equalitarianism normally bent the color line, but did not break it; "in most churches, membership did not assure blacks of equal participation. Indeed, free Negroes, like slaves were usually seated in a distant corner or gallery." <82> The legend of Augustin holding the pew of honor breaks the color line held by Southerners. Even if the legend proved false, Augustin's invitation to outsiders subverts a societal trend. In Louisiana, whites built the churches and allowed non-whites to attend. On the Isle, however, "the Creoles of color who organized the church, and when they extended an invitation to the wealthy white planters of the Isle who had no church of their own, the invitation was accepted." <83>

During the mid-nineteenth century the Isle Brevelle community continued its economic and social advancement. The community reached an economic peak in the years between 1830 and 1840. <84> In 1830, the colony contained 174 people and owned 276 slaves. The combined land holdings of the Isle Brevelle residents fluctuated between 13,000 and 15,000 acres. <85> The members of the community succeeded in the fulfillment of the Southern dream of land, slaves, and money. This Southern dream, like the Old South, did not continue after the Civil War. After Reconstruction, the Isle Brevelle residents found

that "their ruin was complete, since the reactionary political climate of the Redeemer period throttled their economic opportunities. The 'liberation of all men' shackled the people of Isle Brevelle with anonymity; the equality proclaimed by the Union lost for them their special prestige." <86>

Today, many of the Metoyers of color still reside in Cane River Country. Though their affluence is gone, they still possess the closeness of family that marked the early community. One can see a descendent of Marie Therese assume the role of the African-American matriarch and give a tour "her home Yucca." A visit to St. Augustine's church exposes one to members of the community, who freely give visitors their opinions about their ancestors' unusual experience. The colorful history of the Isle Brevelle community remains rooted in unique French and African experience in colonial Louisiana. At the same time, the success of the early Metoyer gens de couleur libre remains part of a broader Southern history, because members of this early community utilized land and slaves to achieve financial affluence.

Notes

1 James Register, *The Joyous Coast--A Fable--Cane River, Louisiana* (Shreveport, LA: Mid-South Press, 1971).

2 Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: A Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), p xvii.

3 gens de couleur libre-(French) literally translated "free people of color."

4 CoinCoin-(Ewe linguistic group) name used to denote second born daughter. From Gary B. Mills, *The Forgotten People* (Baton Rouge, LA.: Louisiana State University Press, 1977) p 3.

5 Gary B. Mills and Elizabeth Mills, "Melrose" (Natchitoches, Louisiana: The Association of Natchitoches Women for the Preservation of Historic Natchitoches, 1973), p 8.

6 Mills, *The Forgotten People*. p 143.

7 Mills, "Melrose," p 7.

8 Mills, *The Forgotten People*, p 1

9 Mills, *The Forgotten People*, p 2.

10 Mills, *The Forgotten People*, p 78.

11 Grace Tarleton Aaron, "Cane River," *Natchitoches* (Natchitoches, Louisiana: The Association of Natchitoches Women for the Preservation of Historic Natchitoches, 1968). vv. 28.

12 Nardini, Louis R. Sr., "'Legends' About Marie Therese Disputed." *Natchitoches Times* (October 22, 1972), p 8-A.

13 Nardini, p 9-A.

14 Mills, *The Forgotten People*, p 25.

15 Mills, *The Forgotten People*, p 11.

16 The ten Franco-African Metoyer children: Nicolas and Marie Suzanne b. 1-22-1768, Louis b. ca 1770, Pierre b. ca 1772, Dominique b. 1776, Eulalie b. 1-14-1776, Antoine Joseph b. 1-26-1778, Marie Françoise Roselle b. 12-9-1780, Pierre Toussaint b. 10-10-1782, François b. 9-26-1784. From Mills, *The Forgotten People*, pp 74-76.

17 Mills, *The Forgotten People*, p 16-17.

18 John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, Revised and Enlarged Edition (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p 155.

19 Mills, *The Forgotten People*, p 21-22. From Testament of Claude Thomas Pierre Metoyer, February 26, 1783.

20 Mills, *The Forgotten People*, p 22. From the Code Noir. French (ed.), Historical Collections of Louisiana III, p 91.

21 Mills, *The Forgotten People*, p 26-27.

22 Last Will and Testament of Claude Thomas Pierre Metoyer, 1801. Northwestern State University of Louisiana, Watson Memorial Library, Cammie G. Henry Research Center, Joe Henry Collection, Folder 8.

23 Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, p 156.

24 Manumission of Pierre Metoyer. Miscellaneous Book #2, p 209. Northwestern State University of Louisiana, Watson Memorial Library, Cammie G. Henry Research Center, Joe Henry Collection, Folder 8.

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