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CREOLE DEFINED IN AN ETHNOHISTORICAL CONTEXT

Jean Lafitte National Historical Park

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The Mississippi Delta story is one of cultures in contact--cultures in contact with the river and its attendant water and land forms, and cultures in contact with one another. To Louisiana and the Mississippi Delta came colonists, soldiers, slaves, entrepreneurs, and political refugees of European, African, Asian, and American origins. A regional culture developed with distinct emphasis on French, Spanish, and African elements under an American "ethno-umbrella" or overall culture. Component diversity was found in language practices, music, folk festivals, and other forms of expressive culture as well as in the material cultural forms of crafts and architecture.

If any one word stands out as a symbol of Delta regional culture, it is *Creole*. Often used in a cultural sense, Creole has not one meaning, but three: cultural, linguistic, and biological. Culturally, *Creoles* are offspring of foreign colonizers born in the new colony as opposed to the mother country. The connotation is European ancestry for people born in the New World. In Louisiana Creoles are those born as offspring of the Colonial French and Spanish. Creole culture refers to that of the Colonial French and Spanish as developed in Louisiana.

Linguistically, a *creole* language is one that develops from different languages in contact with one another, often a European language and a non-European one. The new language contains elements and forms of both languages with all sorts of modifications and amalgamations. The additional feature of a creole language is that it becomes the native language of a given group when the original native language is lost to subsequent generations as a result of the contact situation. Creole languages are common in the Caribbean but not in Louisiana.

Louisiana has been the scene of groups losing their own language with a shift to the language of another group as well as borrowing between languages, and dialectal divergence within languages.

Biologically, *Creole* may refer to individuals whose parents or ancestors are from different genetic or breeding populations, i.e. from different racial groups. Thus, biologically the term Creole denotes racial admixture, which readily and regularly occurred in Louisiana despite cultural boundaries between racial groups.

In light of the widespread use of the term Creole, or creole when referring to a type of language, one must not forget that the Delta region is represented by many diverse ethnic groups. The Colonial French set foot in the Delta area in the late seventeenth Century, making contact with the Chitimacha and Houma Indians. The eighteenth Century was the time of arrival of more

French, Colonial Spanish, Islenos (Spanish-speakers from the Canary Islands), Africans, Filipinos, Jews, Germans, Swiss, and Cajuns or Acadians (French refugees from Canada).

The nineteenth Century saw an influx of Americans and the arrival of Chinese, Greeks, Gypsies, Irish, Italians, Yugoslavs, Syrians, Lebanese, and more Africans and Germans. The twentieth Century has seen the coming of Spanish-speakers from Latin America as well as the recent arrival of Vietnamese as refugees.

To name only a few of the distinctive cultural characteristics of some of the above mentioned groups, the Islenos speak and sing in an eighteenth Century dialect of Spanish that they are trying to preserve. The Cajuns enjoy their own style of violin and accordion music, frequently heard at Saturday night dances, and one of their distinctive crafts is quilting. Groups that sponsor folk festivals include Islenos, Cajuns, Greeks, Italians, Syrians, Lebanese, and Vietnamese. These are events that feature ethnic foods, dances, theatrical productions, and so forth. Many ethnic groups participate in the New Orleans Mardi Gras, a carnival-like regional festival that evolved from an Old World custom of parading and feasting on the day before Lent.

Needless to say, New Orleans is the home of jazz, an African-American contribution. Equally well known are the distinctive architectural styles of the French Quarter that are largely legacies of the Colonial French and Spanish. What may not be as well known is the artisan yeomanry of Black Americans who as slaves and free persons contributed significantly to the material culture of everyday life in the region. Historically, a notable feature of the Houma Indians is that their settlements served as a refuge for escaped slaves. A distinctive occupation is that of the Filipinos as dried shrimp fishermen, operating until recently from stilt villages. They initiated the drying of shrimp as an industry in Louisiana.

Almost any group in this area of diverse ethnic backgrounds will have some distinguishing traits in the expressive material cultural realms. The National Park Service, in planning for Jean Lafitte National Historical Park, has an important opportunity to help interpret and preserve local cultures. That goal can be accomplished by working with interested ethnic and other groups who seek affiliation with the National Park Service through cooperative agreements.

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