

title: Creoles of Color in the Bayou Country
author: Brasseaux, Carl A.; Fontenot, Keith P.; Oubre, Claude F.
publisher: University Press of Mississippi
isbn10 | asin: 0878059490
print isbn13: 9780878059492
ebook isbn13: 9780585309026
language: English
subject Creoles--Louisiana--History, Creoles--Louisiana--Genealogy.
publication date: 1996
lcc: F380.C87B73 1996eb
ddc: 976.3/00444
subject: Creoles--Louisiana--History, Creoles--Louisiana--Genealogy.

Creoles of Color in the Bayou Country

Carl A. Brasseaux, Keith P. Fontenot, and Claude F. Oubre

Foreword by
Clifton Carmon

UNIVERSITY PRESS OF MISSISSIPPI JACKSON

Copyright © 1994 by the University Press of Mississippi

All rights reserved

Manufactured in the United States of America

97 96 95 94 4 3 2 1

First paperback printing 1996

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Brasseaux, Carl A.

Creoles of color in the Bayou country/Carl A. Brasseaux, Keith P. Fontenot, and Claude F. Oubre; foreword by Clifton Carmon.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p. 155) and index.

ISBN 0-87805-714-5 ISBN 0-87805-949-0

1. CreolesLouisianaHistory. 2. CreolesLouisianaGenealogy.

I. Fontenot, Keith P. II. Oubre, Claude F., 1936 III. Title.

F380.C87B73 1994

976.3'00444dc20

94-20383

CIP

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication data available

Contents

Illustrations	vii
Foreword by Clifton Carmon	ix
Preface	xi
Chapter 1 Origins and Early Development	3
Chapter 2 Roots, Trunks, and Branches	14
Chapter 3 Antebellum Economic, Social, and Legal Realities	40
Chapter 4 Class and Cultural Orientation	68
Chapter 5 Vigilantes, Jayhawkers, and Postbellum Hard Times	81
Chapter 6 Conclusion	104
Appendix A: Civil Suits Involving Creoles of Color, Clerk of Court's Office, St. Landry Parish Courthouse	127
Appendix B: Transactions Involving Creoles of Color Conveyance Books, Clerk of Court's Office, St. Landry Parish Courthouse	134
Bibliography	155
Index	163

Illustrations

Counties of the Territory of Orleans, 1805	4
Parishes of the Territory of Orleans	5
Free Black Landholdings in the Swords Area of St. Landry Parish, Early Nineteenth Century	16
Early Antebellum Free Black Landholdings in the Prairie Laurent/ Leonville Area	17
Landholdings of Free Persons of Color, Opelousas Area, Early Nineteenth Century	18
Land Claims of Free Persons of Color near Washington, Louisiana	21
Land Claim of Marie Jeanne Lemelle along Bayou Courtableau	22
Free Black Properties in the Frilot Cove Area	27
Free Person of Color/Creole of Color Properties, Opelousas, 1837- 1871, by Keith P. Fontenot	57
Principal Creole of Color Settlements in the Prairie Region, ca. 1870	96
Louisiana in 1912	111

Foreword

The history of the Creoles of Color in the prairie regions of Louisiana dates back to the early settlement of the area. Their story is deeply intertwined with the story of the growth and development of an important farming and cattle-raising area of Louisiana.

Creoles of Color in the Bayou Country is the first serious attempt to look at the history of the Creoles of Color in these regions. The authors have chronicled well a sometimes troubled but always fascinating history of a proud and calculating people. They have delved extensively into primary records and have found a people intricately involved in the economic activities of the area.

From the earliest days of settlement and establishment in the prairie regions, the Creoles of Color, it seems, were in the business of seeking prosperity. In this endeavor, certainly, they received a greater degree of help than other free blacks. They were then, as so many are today, concerned about what others in society thought of them. Consequently, they were a people driven constantly to succeed, a value that was not lost on their progeny. In a three-tier society white, free people of color, and slaves many struggled, but they demonstrated much persistence in their attempt to be an integral part of the community.

The Creoles of Color were good imitators. They were not interested in being black. They were truly a people apart they did not belong and were not accepted as members of the white race nor were they willing to be members of the Negro race. If they could not be accepted into the white race, then they would attempt to be as white as they could. By a few years before the Civil War many had developed an elitist attitude regarding their social relationships. They imitated the life-style of their white neighbors. They were members of the Catholic church,

spoke the French language, and in the antebellum years owned Negro slaves. Slave ownership by this group was not necessarily a benevolent undertaking but rather an economic enterprise.

With the end of the Civil War, the Creoles of Color had to confront the definition of their role and place in the community and in society. The three-tier status they had experienced during the antebellum years no longer existed. Almost overnight they were thrust into a group many considered their inferiors. In her recent book, *The Sweeter the Juice: A Family Memoir in Black and White*, Shirlee Taylor Haizlip concludes that it was common for light-skinned blacks to pass for white. Certainly some of the Creoles of Color not only passed but in fact *became* white. Doing so frequently required them to forsake members of their families. The larger question one that is perhaps not fully answered even today is one of motivation. Certainly racism with its concomitant proscriptions of opportunities for blacks to advance in society played a role. The question, however, whether there were other reasons still remains.

Some Creoles of Color had for many years played a significant role in the economic affairs of their respective communities. After the Civil War they were denied a separate status in these communities. To maintain some semblance of status in a community increasing in population, some of them found it necessary to relocate to have sufficient agricultural land. The enclaves they developed served two purposes for them: they had the land they sought for agricultural purposes, and these enclaves isolated them, allowing them to be with their own and to maintain their distinctive way of life. They became clannish, moving apart from society more than they had ever done before. They nevertheless continued to cherish wholesome family life and to maintain a deep respect for hard work, their religion, and their property.

CLIFTON CARMON
OPELOUSAS, LOUISIANA

Preface

Few words in American English are as misunderstood or as frequently misused as the term *Creole*. Because of the myriad misconceptions surrounding the word, it is necessary to define the term as it is presently used by students of Louisiana history and culture. For the linguist, *creole* (lowercase "c") can signify either the hybrid language formed of French and West African linguistic elements or the individuals who speak the idiom. Creole-speakers, of course, can and do come from varied ethnic and racial backgrounds. The picture is further complicated because many individuals both black and white who identify themselves as Creole speak Cajun French instead of creole. This is particularly true in the prairie region of southwestern Louisiana, where Cajun French has traditionally functioned as the lingua franca. Unlike Creole Cajun-French-speakers, who generally trace their ancestry to antebellum free persons of color, black and white creole-speakers are usually descendants respectively of slaves or slave owners who learned the language from their black domestics. Many, if not most, creole-speakers can point to ancestors who fled Saint Domingue's black revolution in the late 1790s and early 1800s.

The historian interprets the term quite differently, based on the common usage of the word in historical documents. For eighteenth-century Louisianians, "Creole" (uppercase "C") signified "of local origin." Hence black and white children born in the colony were designated Creole to distinguish them from Louisiana's European and African settlers. In the early eighteenth century, white Creoles were considered to be socially inferior to immigrants from the Continent, although once established as an economic force within the colony, white Creoles came to consider themselves a social aristocracy within Louisiana (Brasseaux, 1987:

167-76). Native-born blacks were generally regarded as more valuable than imported slaves because they were already acclimated and theoretically spoke French. There were also Creole varieties of vegetables and livestock (Oukada 1979; Tregle 193-98).

The term was indelibly imprinted upon the white Creole community by an almost uninterrupted influx of continental French, Canadian, Caribbean, and, later, pan-European French-speakers and the resulting need to distinguish native from immigrant Frenchmen. The "Creole" designation for native-born blacks fell from common usage after the Louisiana Purchase (1803) because shortly after the acquisition of the French colony from France, Congress banned the importation of slaves into Louisiana. The colonial usage of the term was revived after the Civil War, when former free blacks sought to distinguish themselves from freedmen (emancipated slaves). Recoiling in horror from the renewed usage of the term by African-Americans and the resulting confusion over the racial identity it created, white Creoles throughout Louisiana gradually abandoned their traditional ethnic identity, thereby eventually creating the false impression among outsiders that Creoles were exclusively either blacks or people of mixed racial parentage (a misconception perpetuated by popular writers of the late twentieth century) (Brasseaux and Allain).

Other historical terms may prove equally confusing to the uninitiated. The word *mulatto* is used throughout this narrative in the same sense in which it was commonly used in the nineteenth century—as a generic designation for all persons of mixed racial (i.e., Caucasian and Negroid) background. *Mulatto* consequently denoted a wide range of phenotypes, but in the southwestern Louisiana context, it generally indicated persons of *café au lait*, or lighter, skin color. In early southwestern Louisiana, mulattoes constituted an overwhelming majority of the free persons of color—blacks manumitted during the era of slavery—who were the progenitors of the region's Creole of Color community.

These free people of color, most of whom were Francophones, frequently identified themselves in civil records with the French term *gens de couleur libre* (free persons of color). Enjoying most of the legal rights of whites as well as a higher legal and social status than the enslaved population, free men and women of color jealously guarded their privileged position in antebellum African-American society. Indeed, the civil

records indicate that they continued to identify themselves as *gens de couleur libre* to distinguish themselves from former slaves long after the Emancipation Proclamation had destroyed the legal basis for such a distinction.

This desire to preserve their social position and cultural identity led directly to the creation of the Creole of Color community in the prairie parishes. Historians have only recently begun to assess the contributions of the latter-day Creoles of Color to rural Louisiana's early development (Sterkx; Mills; Baker and Kreamer). This book is the first serious attempt to chronicle and interpret the long and proud history of the previously overlooked Creoles of Color of the prairie parishes.

Charting the course of the prairie community's early development is a challenging undertaking, for traditional primary sources are virtually nonexistent. Little personal correspondence has survived, and news accounts, generally limited to diatribes by white supremacist journalists, provide little illumination. In addition, many ecclesiastical records have been closed to public scrutiny by Catholic officials concerned about potential leaks of "sensitive" information regarding miscegenation among Louisiana's prominent and influential first families.

The civil records of Louisiana's parish courthouses, however, provide a wealth of information regarding the economic development of the black Creole community. Conveyance, mortgage, and donation records not only contain bequests by white property owners to their common-law wives and natural children, thereby illuminating the often murky origins of many Creole of Color families, but also permit researchers to plot the acquisition of wealth by families over generations. Successions (probates) record the orderly transfer of property between generations and provide the best available guide to material culture in early black Creole households.

Registers of civil suits lend insight into the effective use of the local legal system by Creoles of Color. These resources indicate, for the first time, not only that prairie Creoles of Color were well aware of their legal rights but that they were very aggressive in using the legal system to protect their property and civil rights.

The wealth of economic data in the civil archives is complemented by myriad federal census schedules. Free people of color are clearly de-

lineated in federal censuses of the early and mid-nineteenth century. The surnames adopted by the *gens de couleur libre* during this period serve as accurate guideposts to data on Creoles of Color in the postbellum lists. Antebellum and postbellum census reports collectively provide considerable insight into the economic status of the Creole of Color community vis-à-vis neighboring racial and ethnic groups. In addition, the census reports, though admittedly flawed by inept record-keeping and, in 1870, popular resistance to the head count, provide the best hard data regarding black Creole demographics, slaveholdings, agricultural activities, and occupational pursuits. These data are both particularly rich and particularly valuable.

The two-dimensional images of black Creole society found in the federal census reports are given depth by eyewitness accounts of Creole of Color responses to successive local crises immediately before, during, and after the Civil War. Alexandre Barde's "official" history of the 1859 vigilante movement chronicles the rapid deterioration of race relations in the prairie country. The persistence of local factional violence during and after the Civil War is recorded in the *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion* and the reports of congressional investigative committees.

Taken together, all of the foregoing documentary resources provide a fairly complete view of a highly insular society whose written and oral traditions remain largely inaccessible to non-Creole researchers. Justifiably proud of their ancestors' notable achievements, many modern Creoles of Color are also equally ashamed of their forefathers' slaveholdings and elitismhence their great reluctance either to discuss the early history of the community with outsiders or to grant them access to historical documents and memorabilia.

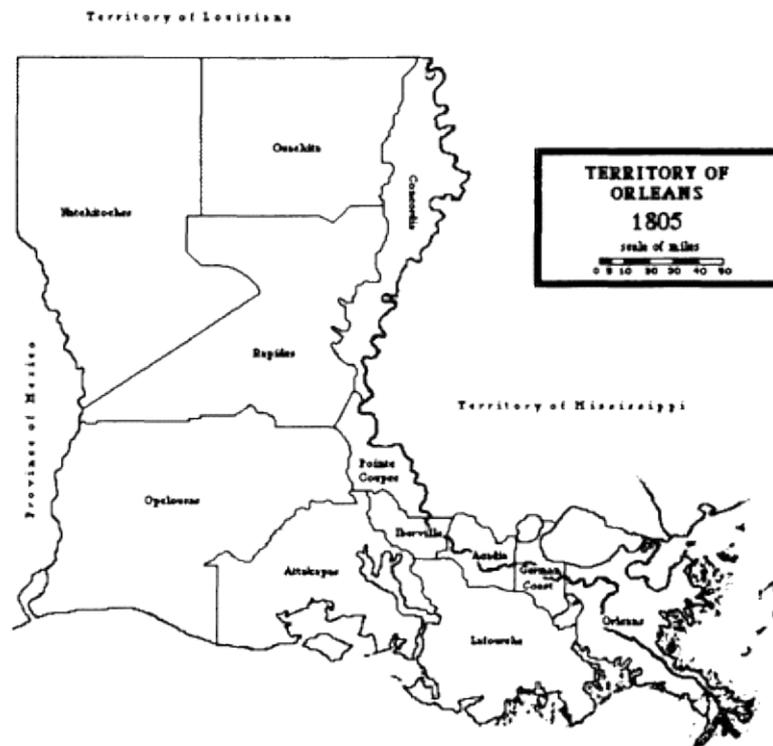
The authors have explored as many facets of the obscure and insular culture as the documentary record permits. This record shows the prairie Creoles of Color to have been a diverse people: planters, farmers, shopkeepers, ranchers, land speculators, and entrepreneurs. These varied elements of black Creole society were bound tightly together by racial, cultural, linguistic, religious, and social homogeneity. These shared attributes, coupled with a strong work ethic and a distinctive place in the region's multitiered society, created the perception, both within the Creole of Color community and among neighboring ethnic and racial groups, that the prairie country's mixed-racial denizens were truly a people apart.

Chapter One

Origins and Early Development

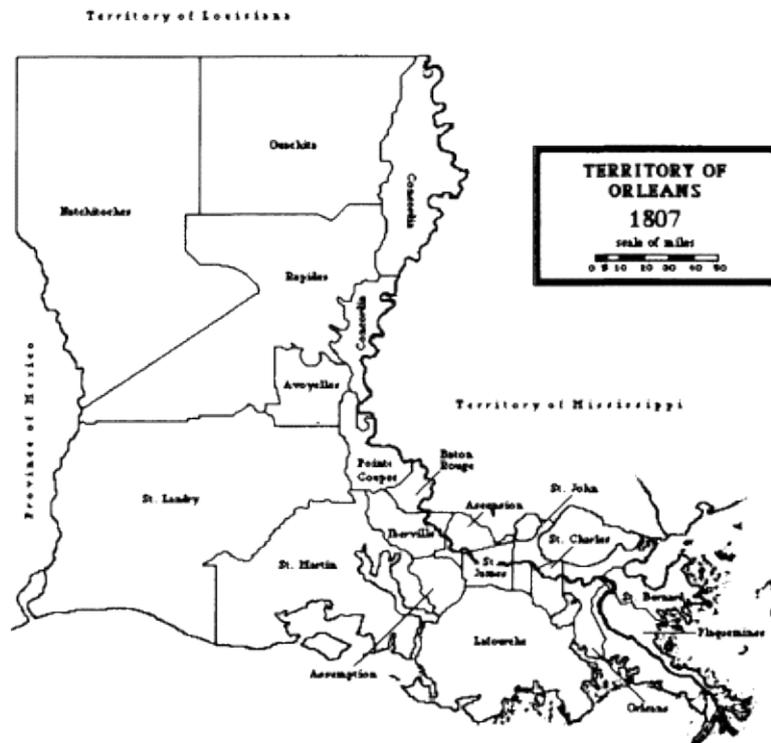
Unwilling or unable to grapple with the complexity of south Louisiana's polyglot population, many popular writers either restrict the scope of their work to only one segment of the society usually focusing on the Cajuns, who are often perceived by outsiders as the region's most "exotic" people or attempt to simplify the problem of ethnic and racial diversity by dealing in broad, often inaccurate generalizations. For example, many writers portray the region's white and black communities as monolithic groups, ignoring the class and cultural cleavages that have traditionally fragmented them. Creoles of Color are consequently often lost in the shuffle, despite their demographic importance and significant contributions to the region's development (Griffin 147-52; Dismukes 7-48).

Creoles of Color are among the "first families" of southwestern Louisiana. Most Creole of Color families trace their ancestry to African slaves imported from present-day Mali, Senegal, and, to a lesser extent, from other West African nations and later manumitted for various reasons. Some slaves earned their release through military service, particularly during the Natchez War (1729-31), or for outstanding public service. Other bondsmen were emancipated as a reward for long and faithful service to their masters (Sterkx 18-19), while still other slaves who could prove any Indian ancestry were freed by Louisiana's Spanish colonial government in compliance with a ban on Indian slavery in the Spanish empire. Some New Orleans-area slaves purchased their freedom with the proceeds of jobs performed on Sundays and holidays. This practice, however, was rare on the Attakapas and Opelousas frontier. Finally, some manumitted slaves were the mistresses or natural children of white farmers (Sterkx 18-20, 26-28, 59-67).



As the eighteenth century progressed, however, manumissions for heroic or faithful service as well as unlawful bondage grew increasingly rare, while the release of mistresses and their mulatto children became more and more commonplace, resulting in the dramatic growth of Louisiana's free black population in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The 1763 census of lower Louisiana, for example, lists only 82 free persons of color (FPCs), all of whom resided in the New Orleans area; the free black community, however, grew rapidly in subsequent years, rising to 1,701 in 1788; 3,350 in 1806; 16,710 in 1830; 17,462 in 1850; and 18,467 in 1860. Rapid population growth was matched by a corresponding rise in economic status (Sterkx 85, 95, 98).

The development of a free black society in southwestern Louisiana's prairie parishes offers a microcosmic view of these statewide economic



and demographic trends. The ethnogenesis and embryonic development of these rural Creole of Color communities occurred in the Attakapas and Opelousas posts, two civil and military districts that, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, comprised the entire south-central and southwestern quadrants of modern-day Louisiana. Attakapas encompassed the present parishes of Lafayette, Vermilion, St. Martin, Iberia, and St. Mary, while Opelousas was composed of the territory presently contained in St. Landry, Evangeline, Acadia, Jefferson Davis, Allen, Cameron, Calcasieu, and Beauregard parishes. The Attakapas and Opelousas regions retained their colonial designations long after the districts had been subdivided into civil parishes in the early decades of the nineteenth century. These regional designations were not confined to local usages. The United States Census Bureau,

for example, referred to this region as Attakapas in 1810 although the area had been renamed St. Martin Parish by the state legislature three years earlier.

Because indigenous inhabitants of the lower prairie the Attakapas Indians were reputedly cannibalistic, the Attakapas and Opelousas districts were among the last areas of lower Louisiana to be developed by the colony's French government. Indeed, the French administration made no effort to establish formal relations with the Attakapas, the area's largest indigenous group, and the Opelousas, a cultural and linguistic subgroup of the Attakapas, throughout the first four decades of Louisiana's existence, prompting the tribe to send a delegation to New Orleans in 1733 to forge commercial ties with the neighboring colony. If traders were sent into their territory, the Indian delegates maintained, the tribes would exchange deer pelts, tallow (deer fat and bear oil), and horses smuggled from Spanish Texas for French manufactured goods.

Though he received the delegation graciously, Governor Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville did nothing to promote commercial relations with the Attakapas, believing that the tribe's perceived backwardness, nomadic habits, apparent laziness, and reputed cannibalism would render any trading enterprise unprofitable. In the late 1730s, however, a small number of French entrepreneurs successfully ventured into the prairie country and traded blue beads, guns, and other manufactured items for deer pelts and tallow. Though small in scale, trade with the Indians remained sufficiently profitable and stable to justify the establishment of a trading post near present-day Port Barre in the late 1740s (De Ville 27-33).

Throughout the late 1740s and 1750s, a handful of French traders remained the only semipermanent European settlers in Attakapas and Opelousas territory. Not until the 1760s did colonial governors appoint commandants, thereby formally creating political subdivisions in those formerly marginal areas, and open the new districts to full-scale development. Small numbers of slaves accompanied the few French settlers mostly adventurers and retired military personnel who first ventured into the Attakapas and Opelousas districts with the intention of establishing ranches in those areas. These black and white pioneers were joined in subsequent years by numerous retired French enlisted

men, Acadian exiles, African slaves, and *gens de couleur libre* free blacks whose descendants now constitute the overwhelming majority of Creoles of Color in the prairie parishes (Voorhies 124-28, 280-365).

The first free black mentioned in the records of the prairie posts was one Louis, a "free mulatto" probably from the New Orleans area who, in 1766, resided with his wife, Josine, and daughter Nanette in the Opelousas district. According to the 1774 census of Opelousas (folios 106-10), as well as a Spanish land grant conveying to him title to property in the Baton Rouge area in 1787, "Louis" f.m.c. is identified as "Louis Ricar[d]." He had prospered during the intervening years. The 1774 census report indicates that he owned two slaves, fifty cattle, six horses or mules, and ten hogs at a time when only 22.79 percent of all Opelousas district households possessed slaves and only 18.38 of all freeholders possessed as many as fifty cows.

Other free blacks who subsequently made their homes along the southwestern Louisiana frontier, settling in the Attakapas district, also fared well economically, thanks largely to the beneficence of their liberators. Sometime before 1774, André Masse, the largest slaveholder (in the 1766 census, he owned twenty slaves) among the Attakapas/ Opelousas pioneers, emancipated six Negro families and endowed each with significant numbers of livestock (Census of Opelousas, folios 106-10). Three slave families freed around 1774 by Attakapas commandant Gabriel Fuselier de la Claire also received generous quantities of cows, horses, and pigs. To put their collective economic standing in proper perspective, median livestock holdings for the black ranchers were 9.7 cows, 3.7 horses (or mules), and 5.0 hogs figures exceeding comparable holdings for 20 percent of all local white households (Voorhies 280-83).

Though small, the new free black communities of Attakapas and Opelousas compared favorably with the more established but equally tiny free black communities in the New Orleans area. For example, New Orleans and the nearby settlements of Chapitoulas and English Bend boasted respectively twenty, fifteen, and sixteen free black settlers. Attakapas and Opelousas had respectively fifteen and seven free black residents a group collectively larger than its counterpart in the colonial capital (Voorhies 280-83). In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Attakapas and Opelousas free black populations grew

quickly, both in demographic and economic importance. By 1810, there were 269 *gens de couleur libre* in Attakapas and 380 in Opelousas (Voorhies 45).

This rapid growth which paralleled the explosive growth of Louisiana's other free black communities resulted in large part from the sexual imbalance in the white community. There were 1,400 white males in the Attakapas in the 1810 census but only 1,064 white females. White males twenty-six years of age or older outnumbered comparably aged white females by a margin of 727 to 583 (1810 census). A similar imbalance existed in the Opelousas district, where, in 1810, white males outnumbered white females by a substantial margin 1,746 to 1,293 (1810 census). As a consequence, white men predictably began to exploit their female slaves sexually. Some of the resulting liaisons endured for years, eventually evolving into extralegal marriages. Many such common-law wives were manumitted by their owners, particularly if they had borne children, because, under contemporary Louisiana law, natural children derived their legal status (i.e., slave or free) from their mother.

Along the southwestern Louisiana frontier, emancipated concubines usually remained a part of planters' households long after their manumission. It is thus no coincidence that the demographic profiles of early free black households in both the Opelousas and Attakapas regions generate a composite portrait of a "typical" free black household containing small numbers of white men, larger numbers of free blacks (usually the planter's black consort and several mulatto children), and still larger numbers of black slaves (Table 1).

The 1810 census of the Territory of Orleans affords abundant additional evidence of the interracial character of the early free black households in the Attakapas and Opelousas districts. According to the census of the Attakapas district, whites were the heads of forty of the sixty-seven households (59.70 percent) containing free persons of color. Twenty-four of the forty white-dominated households (60 percent) contained no white women.

This trend was far more pronounced in Attakapas than in Opelousas, where, in 1810, fifty-two of the eighty-two enumerated free black households (63 percent) were dominated by free persons of color. By 1820, the proportion of free black households headed by free blacks had

Table 1
Composite Views of Attakapas and Opelousas Area Households
Containing Free Blacks, 1810-1820

	Whites		FPC's		Slaves	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
<i>Attakapas</i>						
Attakapas, 1810	189	21.16	277	31.02	427	47.82
St. Martin, 1820	104	19.29	205	38.03	230	42.67
St. Mary, 1820	122	17.81	150	21.90	413	60.29
<i>Opelousas</i>						
Opelousas, 1810	88	13.71	380	57.23	191	29.06
St. Landry, 1820	190	12.18	729	46.73	641	41.09

Sources: 1810 census; 1820 census.

grown to 71.43 percent. The greater independence of the Opelousas free black community stemmed in part from the greater availability of cheap land, which made economic autonomy more easily attainable, and in part from a small-scale migration of economically independent free black families from the Mississippi River parishes (1810 census, Opelousas; 1820 census, St. Landry Parish).

The 1820 census of the Attakapas and Opelousas regions demonstrates this point. White heads of households with free black occupants were most numerous in St. Mary Parish, where topography militated against land usage outside the narrow natural levees bordering the local bayous and rivers. All arable land in the parish was thus claimed and exploited far more quickly than in neighboring parishes to the north, where prairie lands supplemented the natural levees. It is thus hardly surprising that, in 1820, twenty-two of the thirty-four St. Mary Parish households containing free blacks (64.7 percent) were dominated by whites, usually white men. In neighboring St. Martin Parish, where the availability of prairie land helped reduce land prices, only twenty-four of forty-four households with free blacks (54.54 percent) were headed by whites. Finally, in St. Landry Parish, which possessed vast expanses of unclaimed prairie land, whites headed only 28.57 percent (sixteen of