

*Note: Kate Chopin's The Awakening takes place on Grand Isle and in New Orleans, Louisiana, during the 1870s. The following essay by Jerry James describes the history and social structures of this time and place.*

### *Crème de la Crème*

The Creole Upper Class in New Orleans in the 1870s

By Jerry James

*Every Creole was "sorti de la cuisse de Jupiter," a piece from the thigh of Jupiter... They were "crème de la crème..."*

—Robert Tallant & Lyle Saxon, *Gumbo Ya-Ya: Folk Tales of Louisiana*



*This engraving—a gigantic lie—shows Frenchmen and Native Peoples trading, c. 1720*

“Creole” is a chameleon word: it changes color over time. The term derives from the Spanish *criar*, “to raise,” as in, “to raise a child.” And for perhaps 150 years, Creole meant anyone born in Louisiana. But in the 1870s, the decade during which Kate Chopin lived in New Orleans, its meaning was purposely narrowed by a cadre of White aristocrats to exclude any person of color. A Creole was now White, of pure French or Spanish descent.

These Creoles, their status threatened by a diversifying society, would use every weapon they possessed to maintain their privileged position at the top. The wisest of them knew they had only gotten there through a series of accidents.

## The Colonial Era



Étienne Jaurat, "Transport of Prostitutes," (1755)

New Orleans would never have been built, except that it had to be. The French laid claim to all the lands drained by the Mississippi in 1682, but in order to control the river, there needed to be a city established above its delta, guarding its mouth. Half of the least-worst location was below sea level, most of it was marsh and all of it was open to disease and hurricanes. But in 1718, that was where the French placed the city of Nouvelle-Orléans.

Who would populate this city? France did not furnish enough willing fools, so the bulk of the emigrants was provided by a sweep of the country's prisons—thieves and whores. Of course, not all the Correction Girls were prostitutes. Some were Protestants.

Also emigrating were the Casket Girls, carefully chosen for their middle-class virtues, each bearing her allotment of clothing in a small chest (*casquette*). There is little solid evidence that any of these girls reached New Orleans, but as Herbert Asbury noted, so fertile were the Casket Girls that every Creole family claimed descent from one, while the Correction Girls bore no children whatsoever!

Indigo, a little tobacco, and sugar (with the sugar-growing season too short to produce anything but molasses) weren't much in the way of cash crops, but still, some few planters and merchants—the first Creoles—got rich.



In 1763, Louis XV gave Louisiana to his cousin, Carlos III of Spain. The Spanish thought so little of their new colony that they didn't even bother to show up until 1766. By the early 1790s, Louisiana was a colonial failure. Spain had quit buying tobacco, and India was undercutting the indigo market.

Then, in 1793, Eli Whitney patented the cotton gin. In 1795, a process for granulating sugar was perfected. In addition, the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) cut off sugar and cotton exports from that French colony. Almost by accident, Louisiana was poised on the brink of success.

But before Spain could finally cash in on its long investment, Napoleon took the colony back in 1802. Needing money for his wars, he promptly sold it to the US in 1803.

### The Americans



*The Louisiana Purchase (1803)*

The Creoles greeted the Americans with contempt and loathing. The Americans returned the favor. They shared neither language nor religion and settled in mutual animosity (always somewhat exaggerated) on opposite sides of Canal St. But on one thing they were agreed—making money. Louisiana became a state in 1812. By 1840, New Orleans was the largest city in the South and the fourth-busiest port in the world.



*Edgar Degas, "A Cotton Office in New Orleans" (1873)*

For the Creole aristocracy, the Golden Age was arriving, an age based on cotton. The plantations needed agents in New Orleans, the cotton factors. By 1870, the factors had become the Cotton Exchange, the behemoth that extended credit, sold the crop and tended to every detail in between, for a modest fee.

But before we examine the Golden Age, it is necessary to examine its foundation: the enslaved.

### Slavery



*A Slave Auction in New Orleans (1842)*



The first African slaves arrived in New Orleans in 1719, a century after Jamestown. The first children born of French-African parentage arrived soon after. Their number would inevitably grow, becoming part of the property against which a planter could borrow money. That they were the planter's children, brothers or sisters was of no matter.

Yet the French (and the Spanish) had a system of manumission, through which a slave might purchase his freedom. Over the years, this produced a third class virtually unknown in American slavery, Free People of Color, many of whom were mixed-race. Forbidden any role in government, they went into the trades considered beneath a White Creole. And at these, they might prosper. Some grew so wealthy they owned slaves themselves. Tallent & Saxon report:

Creole gentlemen... were planters, bankers, brokers in rice, sugar or cotton... They were barred from entering trade or working in a store or shop... No Creole could do anything that would cause him to work with his hands or to remove his coat.

Above all, no Creole would ever do any work if it were possible to buy a slave to do it for him.

Because of the Louisiana Purchase, the US had suddenly doubled in size. Some of the new American land was ideal for growing cotton. This demanded more and more slaves. At the same time, the sugar plantations ate slaves alive. A worker there might live only ten years at best. And American law had only a limited system of manumission, if that. A slave was a slave was a slave.

Because of all these accidents, New Orleans became the premiere slave market of the western world—the rotten foundation of the Creole Golden Age, an age in which all the power belonged to one race, and all the vulnerabilities to the other.

### **A Mansion on Esplanade**



*Creole Mansion, Esplanade Ave., New Orleans*

For the Creole *crème de la crème*, there were balls, opera, theatre and the racetrack during the winter season, when the planters came to their mansions on Esplanade Ave. In the summers, Creole women would escape the heat, the mosquitoes and the yellow fever at resorts like Grand Isle.

The young Creole woman had two choices: marriage or the church. At sixteen, her family would arrange to have her appear in their box at the opera. If a young man showed interest, he and the young woman were never allowed to be alone.

After the marriage, the bride and groom repaired to a bedroom in her family's house, from which they would not emerge for five days. The bride would not appear in public for two weeks. The new husband might then take a position in her father's firm.

Success in that profession might lead a Creole to the much-desired mansion on Esplanade. There, his wife would be kept continuously pregnant, until she either died or reached menopause. She would be expected to take her place in the established rituals of Creole society, and woe unto her if she did not.

For her husband—although much modern scholarship disputes this—there were the Quadroon Balls and the *plaçage* system. A Creole would attend a ball, choose a young Quarter-Black woman as his mistress and then barter for her with her mulatto (Half-Black) mother. Afterwards, he would place her in a house of her own, there to raise their octoroon (Eighth-Black) children as a shadow family. It was a wonderful life, until 1860.

When the Civil War broke out, the Creoles were delighted. They saw the war as a chance to oust the Americans and restore French Louisiana. It didn't work out that way. New Orleans fell quickly, early in the war, sparing it the fate of cities like Savannah. The Creoles treated the occupying Federal troops with the disdain their ancestors had perfected, but when the war ended, Reconstruction turned Creole society on its head with astonishing swiftness.

In 1864, slavery was abolished. Soon after, Black males gained the right to vote. All at once, the Louisiana statehouse was filled not only with Republicans but with the White Creoles' cousins, the Creoles of Color. One was elected lieutenant governor, and, for a few weeks, even served as governor.

For the Creoles, the question was existential: If the Creoles of Color were allowed to succeed, then they, the *White* Creoles, would inevitably find themselves treated as if they were as Black as their cousins. There was only one way to fight this assault. They would swallow their pride and join with the Americans against the Reconstruction government.

### **Redemption**

The 1872 gubernatorial election was won by a Republican. The next year, Creoles and Americans founded the Crescent City White League. On September 14, 1874, 5,000 of its members marched down Canal St. to the Louisiana State House, where they demanded the resignation of the governor in favor of his Democratic challenger. After routing 3,500 police and

state militia, they took over the State House and held it for three days, until they withdrew in the face of the arrival of Federal troops.



*Battle of Liberty Place Monument (1912)*

In 1891, an obelisk was erected to commemorate the uprising. An inscription added in 1932 honored, “White Supremacy in the South.” In 2006, the monument was moved to a less prominent place, but it was not taken down until April 24, 2017.

Among the victors in the Battle of Liberty Place was Kate Chopin’s husband Oscar, who had been denied his chance to fight in the Civil War by his father, who spirited him out of New Orleans in 1860, when Oscar was sixteen.

Two years after Liberty Place, in 1876, the presidential election between Samuel J. Tilden (F) and Rutherford B. Hayes (R) came down to three disputed Southern states, Louisiana among them. All three voted for Hayes, in exchange for a secret pledge to remove all Federal troops from the South. Reconstruction was over.

The Republicans departed, the Creoles and Americans of the White League were dubbed “Redeemers” and Jim Crow reigned supreme for most of the next century. The Creoles had maintained their privileges, but they could not stop the gradual slide of their class into oblivion. And today, if one Googles, “Meaning of Creole,” the first definition that appears is, “A person of mixed European and Black descent.”

*Sic transit crème de la crème.*

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