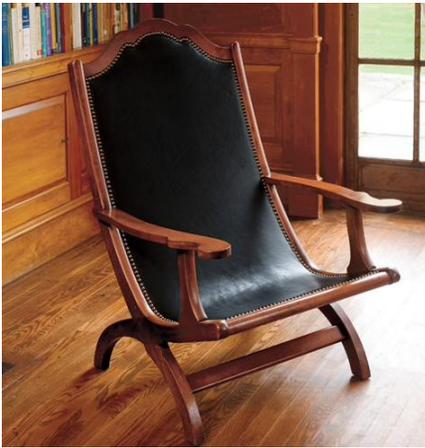


Creolizing

Back in 2010, this author explored the history of a piece of furniture that was all the rage back in the early nineteenth century: the Campeachy chair (anglicized from the town of Campeche, Mexico, in the Yucatán). In fact, Thomas Jefferson desired and eventually owned at least a couple of these sling back plantation chairs described by him as “commonly to be had in New Orleans.” Too weak from rheumatism to sit up straight the whole day (and not wanting to waste away his hours lying down), Jefferson said, “I long for a Siesta chair which would have admitted the medium position.”



Campeachy chair replica on display at Monticello



Long-armed cane seat Campeachy chair

Popular in Latin America, the West Indies and the American South, these chairs in Louisiana were for generations known as *boutaque* chairs, the French patois version of the Spanish word *butaca* meaning armchair. Cargo manifest records reveal that shipments of these “Spanish chairs” and “boutaque” chairs went out not only from Campeche, but also from other coastal towns of the Yucatán (such as Veracruz, Sisal and Tabasco) to the port of New Orleans from about 1800 to 1825.

Campeachy chairs often have long attached arms, while others are occasionally made into rocking chairs. James Madison (not the only president to love this type of lounge chair) owned a Mexican-made Campeche armchair at his plantation home Montpelier, which was described as his “favorite seat.”

Currently, I find myself fortunate to possess a pair of these curious yet comfortable "Siesta" chairs. The seating area of Campeachy chairs is usually made of leather, such as goatskin, or caned (which mine are). The long arms of my chairs are also pivoted, and swivel out into the extended mode. The explanation for this, I was once informed, was to facilitate the easy removal of boots by a servant in bygone days. But this, I was to learn this August at the Historic New Orleans Collection's *Antiques Forum*, is what could be characterized as a most unlikely provenance.

The real reason for these extended arms was not for boot removal but to assist one in "Creolizing," a term seemingly familiar, but not quite the same as the word "Creole", with which most New Orleanians are familiar. "Creolizing" it must be noted is *NOT* the same as "Creolization", which is the process in which creole cultures emerge and are assimilated in the New World. Lafcadio Hearn, who lived and worked in New Orleans for nearly a decade, referred to himself as "Your Creolized Friend" in an 1883 letter to an acquaintance in New York. And one could even say that having red beans and rice offered as a menu item at *Popeyes* is a type of "Creolization", but that's not even remotely what is meant by "Creolizing" (a most interesting topic at the Antiques Forum).

Celebrated New Orleans historian and columnist Charles L. "Pie" Dufour, who once owned his own replica of a Campeachy rocking chair, first introduced the Crescent City to the term "Creolizing" in his "A La Mode" column in the *Times-Picayune/New Orleans States* back on June 3, 1951.

PIE DUFOUR'S A La Mode

Now's the Time for Creolizing

"Creolizing," he wrote, "is the present participle of the verb to 'creolize' which, perhaps, raises quite naturally the next question: What's that?"

Dufour continued his narrative, mentioning a quote from a book published in 1818 by John McLeod, entitled *Voyage of the Alceste*, concerning life in the West Indies:

"The ladies ... generally creolized the whole day in a delectable state of apathy ... creolizing is an easy and elegant mode of lounging in a warm climate."



*Segar Smokers, men and women alike, Creolize in Jamaica
(notice all the legs propped up on the table and chairs)*

Our informed and entertaining HNOG Forum lecturer Louis P. Nelson, Professor of Architectural History at the University of Virginia and author of *Architecture and Empire in Jamaica* (2016), expanded on the definition by John McLeod, stating that "Creolizing is ... reclining back in one arm chair, with their feet upon another, and sometimes upon the table." He told us that large numbers of Campeche chairs of Jamaican manufacture appear to date from the early nineteenth century, and easily accommodated the Jamaicans' "penchant for elevating one's feet in a posture of repose." This activity first originated on the covered porches of West Indies homes, known as piazzas, where elevating one's feet high upon the piazza's Ionic

columns while seated in armchairs became an accepted custom among Creoles born of European parentage. The "Campeche chair" he told us was "a form well suited to their penchant for indolence." Edward Long in the 1770s wrote of their "indolence" and the "agreeable indulgence" of sitting "in an elbow chair" with the planter's feet propped up "against one of the piazza-columns" where "he converses, smokes his pipe, or quaffs his tea." He might even enjoy a glass of "Sangaree", the Jamaican Sangria.



Author's caned Campeachy chair with long pivoting arms, ideal for West Indies style Creolizing

Anglo-Creoles in the West Indies used the Italian term "piazza" for their covered porches probably because of the series of columns designed by architect Inigo Jones at London's Covent Garden Piazza, its central square. George Washington even used the term "piazza" at Mount Vernon, probably after having visited Barbados as a young man. The two-story piazza is perhaps Mount Vernon's most distinctive architectural feature and has the practical purpose of catching the Potomac River's breezes on a hot and humid Virginia day.

Professor Nelson further informed us that the term "creolizing" had first come into popular usage with a satirical print of a character named Johnny New-come (newly come to Jamaica), published in 1800.



Johnny New-come "Creolizes and puffs sickness away."

So, originating on the piazzas of the Caribbean, "Creolizing" was the custom of lounging with legs and feet elevated in a seemingly bizarre fashion, often aided by Campeachy chairs with extended arms, but to "indolent" white Creole planters of the West Indies (and their ladies) it was all perfectly normal.

And, as "Pie" Dufour reflected back in 1951, "with the sun beating down these days like he really means it and the streets sizzling back at him, I have a feeling that now is the appropriate time to do a little creolizing."

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"Creolizing"
Ned Hémard
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