

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

The Creole Virtues ... and Vices

Much has been brought up, grown up or arisen in New Orleans, the metropolis known as the Crescent City. The word *crescent* itself is derived from the Latin *crescere*, a form of the verb meaning "to grow, to become visible, to spring from, to come forth, to increase, to thrive or to augment." This came to apply to the "increasing" form of the waxing moon (*luna crescens*). In English, the word is now commonly used to refer to either the moon's waxing, or waning, shape. From there, it was only a matter of time before it would be used to describe other things with that shape, such as croissants or bends in the river, as in the case of New Orleans. But the crescent symbol was in use long before that, appearing on Akkadian seals as early as 2300 BC. That's Akkadian, not Acadian, *chèr*.



A crescent sail on the Mississippi, March 30, 1861, Harper's Weekly: "one can perceive the peculiar conformation from which New Orleans derives its popular appellation of 'The Crescent City.'"

The word *Créole* has "brought up" quite a bit of controversy in its "upbringing". Confusion continues to exist as to its meaning with regard to race or European heritage. The French word *créole*, from the Spanish *criollo*, meaning a person native to a locality, comes from the Portuguese *crioulo*, the diminutive of *cria*, a person raised in the house, especially a servant, from *criar*, to bring up, ultimately from the Latin verb *creare*, meaning to create or beget. *Créoles*, therefore, were the offspring born in the colonies, as well as their descendants. The commonly accepted definition of Louisiana Creoles today are those whose ancestry can be traced to Louisiana before 1803, the date of the Louisiana Purchase, who are usually of French, Spanish, African or Native American heritage. European and African American *Créoles* continue to politely argue their claims to the name.



Mark Twain and George Washington Cable Together the two were billed as "The Twins of Genius," and appeared in over 103 performances in about 80 cities between November 5, 1884, and February 28, 1885.

Largely responsible for the nation's notions of what is Creole are the writings of novelist George Washington Cable (October 12, 1844 – January 31, 1925), renowned for the realism of his portrayals of Creole life in his native New Orleans. His initial stories were first published in book form in 1879 as *Old Creole Days*. While there is much romance in his storytelling, Cable's writing digs deep into the multi-racial and multi-cultural strata of New Orleans society before the Civil War, a city of French, Spanish, Native American, African and Caribbean Creole ancestry. He also delved into the conflicts that arose following the Louisiana Purchase, when traditional New Orleans Creoles and Creoles of color had to confront their new Anglo-American neighbors, who had different ideas about a biracial society and held more conservative views as to what constituted a vice or a virtue.



New Orleans Creole woman, 1830-1835

Cable wrote in *The Creoles of Louisiana* (1884):

“One city in the United States is, without pretension or intension, picturesque and antique. A quaint Southern-European aspect is encountered in the narrow streets of its early boundaries, on its old

Place d'Armes, along its balconied façades, and about its cool, flowery inner courts.

Among the great confederation of States whose Anglo-Saxon life and inspiration swallows up all alien immigrations, there is one which a Latin civilization, sinewy, valiant, cultured, rich, and proud, holds out against extinction."

That, of course, is the Creole civilization of New Orleans. From the description above, one can glean some of its virtues:

a sinewy and valiant tenacity to survive, despite wars, hurricanes, floods and fever;

a rich and diverse culture (with great food and music);

and pride (which can be both a virtue and a vice).

John Quincy Adams even commented on the subject of Creole virtues in his personal journal dated April 24, 1844:

"John Slidell, of New Orleans, then rose, and announced the death of Pierre Evariste Bossier, a member from Louisiana, of consumption, last evening, at his lodgings in this city. Slidell pronounced a genteel eulogy upon him, larded with Latin and French proverbs, and crowned him with a chaplet of French-Creole virtues. He offered the usual sympathizing resolutions, to wear crape, to attend the funeral tomorrow at noon, and to adjourn; which were adopted without further notice."

Colonel de Charleu, a character in Cable's *Old Creole Days*, provides the reader with an idea of the Creole vices. According to James Nagel, who wrote *Race and Culture in New Orleans Stories: Kate Chopin, Grace King, Alice Dunbar-Nelson & George Washington Cable*, Colonel de Charleu "lived a dissolute life filled with the standard Creole vices:

gambling, drinking, dancing, dueling, and quarreling ..."

As Cable put it, "He had gambled in Royal Street, drunk hard in Orleans Street, run his adversary through in the dueling-ground at Slaughter-house Point*, and danced and quarreled at the St. Philippe Street theatre quadroon balls." * original name for Algiers, Louisiana.

In another passage in *Old Creole Days*, Cable wrote, "To the gossips in the gaming-clubs he was the culminating proof that smuggling was one of the sublimer virtues."

Admonitions have gone down through the ages: "You can't marry that New Orleans girl. She drinks, dances and plays cards."

Bernard de Marigny not only engaged in the Creole vices, he whimsically named the streets within his eponymous faubourg for the things Creoles held dear, whether vices or virtues. There were streets named Poets, Bagatelle (a billiards-based indoor table game), Good Children, Great Men, Music, Love and Craps (after the dice game Marigny introduced to America). Marigny never got along well with the Americans, and he eventually lost a fortune gambling.



Bernard de Marigny

There was even a Virtue Street in New Orleans, which (on November 19, 1911) was changed to North Rocheblave Street.

Saveur writer Meryl Rosofsky described New Orleans bread pudding as “the perfect embodiment of the twin Creole virtues of frugality and indulgence.” Notice she didn’t write “overindulgence.” That would perhaps be a vice in New Orleans, though not to all.

Norman Marmillion is a fourteenth generation Louisianan, who with his wife, Sand, have devoted their lives to preserving and researching the history of Louisiana Creoles. They have meticulously restored Laura, the historic Louisiana Creole Plantation on the west bank of the

Mississippi near Vacherie.

Norman once told me, "Moderation is not a Creole virtue." The Creoles used bright colors on their houses, such as Laura, which has a brightly painted (ochre, green, red and pearl) exterior. Often, Creole homes were repainted white. This was an American influence. The same was true of Creole tombs before they were whitewashed. Many were previously colorfully painted.



Laura plantation, displaying the joyful Creole palette

So temperance, or moderation, was not a popular virtue among Creoles. Indulgence, or enjoying those things in life that give pleasure, was acceptable. Overindulgence, as mentioned before, was something entirely different. Patience must have been somewhat of a Creole virtue, because Creoles believe in taking things just a little slower, allowing time to savor the sweet things in life. Some writers have called this lazy pace the Creole vice of "sloth". Anglo-puritans would at least call it a lack of dilligence or drive. Perhaps it was the intense heat that slowed things down. Or maybe there were just too many delicious distractions. Creoles performed the Lord's work in less hurried ways. Many still do.

On a recent trip to the Midwest, my Creole sensibilities were tested more than once while dining. Waiters and waitresses asked us about dessert or coffee less than midway through the entrée. We felt terribly rushed. In New Orleans, we like a meal to take longer not because we're lazy. We enjoy reestablishing relationships with our dining companions and to slowly enjoy the subtleties of the cuisine.

Many things in New Orleans give pleasure, especially the excellent food and incomparable music. The word puritan in modern usage is often used to mean "against pleasure," certainly at odds with the Creole moral barometer. Michael Pollan, best-selling author of *The Botany of Desire* (2001) and *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (2006), said this about the great love of all Creoles, a splendid cuisine:

"The other problem with cooking in Western culture is puritanism. We look down on those activities that both animals and we like to do; eating is one and sex is another. So puritanism had trouble with both those things because they were base and physical." He goes on to say, "We have five senses, not just two - not just the eye and the ear. Cooking re-employs your senses."

Most New Orleanians would agree.

One truly Creole virtue was an abiding faith in God and in the afterlife. Despite the Creole pursuit of pleasure, Creoles were a deeply religious people. In the early days of the 18th and 19th Century, the Creoles of Louisiana were predominantly Roman Catholics of French, German and Spanish descent. The whole family attended Mass, and visible in every bedroom was a *prie-dieu* (meaning literally "pray God," a small prayer desk with kneeler).

In death as in life, these families of old Louisiana practiced customs and rituals very much like those mentioned in John Quincy Adam's journal. Black crepe drapes and a wreath were used at the front doors. Pianos were closed and mirrors covered. A widow would observe rules of deep mourning for a whole year. Black garments were required at all times. Black fabric of a reflective nature could be worn, but only after the first six months. There was special mourning jewelry that was worn. Children and household servants had their special requirements for the mourning period as well.

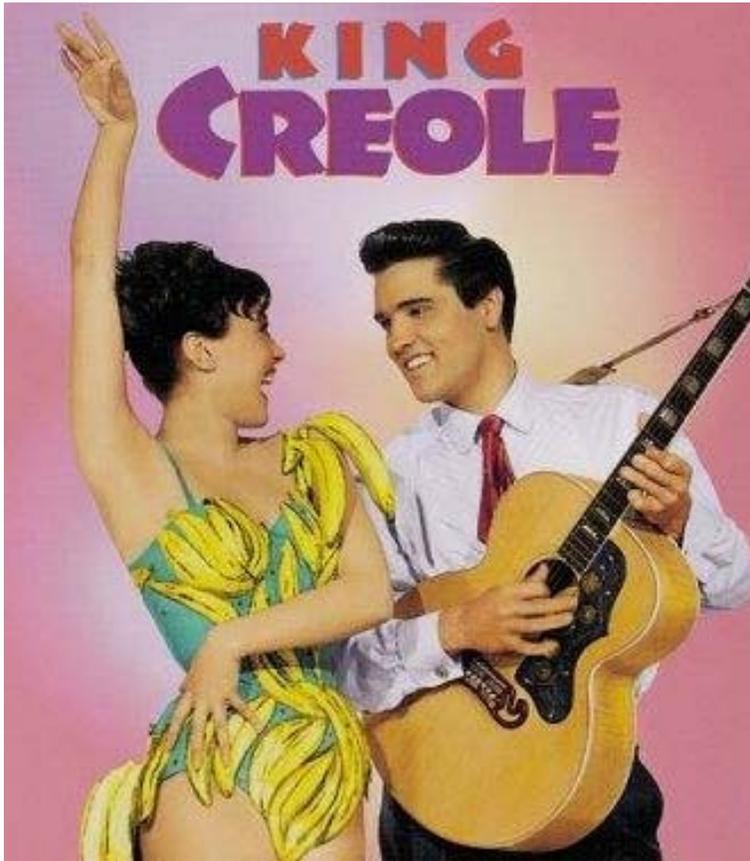
There were Holy Days of Obligation and All Saints' Day, and the days leading up to it was a special time when family tombs were cleaned, repaired and whitewashed in preparation for the first day November. In Creole New Orleans and in the surrounding parishes, these customs were devoutly followed.



John Singer Sargent's famous Madame X, the New Orleans-born Creole beauty, Virginie Amélie Avegno Gautreau

Madame Gautreau, the epitome of Creole elegance, became notorious in Parisian high society for her great beauty and rumored infidelities. But were these Creole or Parisian vices?

In 1931, Dr. John Earle Uhler, professor of English at L.S.U., was dismissed from his job at the university for having written the novel *Cane Juice*, which (according to the Catholic pastor Reverend F. L. Gassler) "was a slander on Creole virtue and a reflection on the university women students." After much brouhaha, Dr. Earle was reinstated the following year. By the 1950s, the virtue of Creole women had fewer protectors. Elvis' encounters with women in *King Creole* bore little resemblance to the virtuous protocols required by Creole fathers in the French Quarter a century or more before.



Still, even today in New Orleans, the Creole outlook on life, love and the afterlife is distinctly different from other parts of the country. Whether romantic or religious, culinary or musical, it is a way of living one's life with great passion, and savored more slowly than just about anywhere else.

And how can dancing be a vice?

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