

Confluence And Divergence: Nineteenth Century Plantation Lifestyles Along Red River

by Carolyn Breedlove

There remain extensively documented details of how the lifestyles of the Creole planter class, particularly, resembled and yet differed from that of the later-established, similarly situated “Americans” in Louisiana. This is a much-condensed overview of some of those specifics, touching only upon healthcare, the position of women in that society, and language. As with the master’s thesis, “Bermuda/Oakland Plantation, 1830-1880,” of which this is in part a continuation, the main focus is upon that fifty-year period.

To say the persistent Creole population in Louisiana, outnumbered though it was by the mid-nineteenth century, was linked—by culture, by the waterways along which it had largely settled initially, by blood—would be an understatement. When Amélie Baillio, daughter of Pierre Baillio and Magdelaine Lacour, was baptized in Rapides Parish in 1800, her godparents were Emmanuel Prudhomme and Catherine Lambre of Bermuda Plantation in Natchitoches Parish. When an Irish governess, Honoria Griffin, kept a journal in 1853, she was living in the home of Mary Rose Emma Villain, Pierre Baillio’s granddaughter whose aunt, Amélie, had largely raised her, and in whose home she had wed. When in 1857 Phanor Prudhomme’s stepdaughter, Désirée Archinard (whose biological father had been from Rapides), married Emile Locoul of the

St. James Parish plantation that would later be called “Laura” for her daughter, she was marrying Phanor’s first cousin once removed.

Within this tight web, though, patterns were beginning subtly to diverge. Both Amélie Baillio and, later, Mary Rose Emma Villain had married Anglo-Americans from South Carolina. Inter-marriage seems to have begun occurring more quickly and frequently in the area surrounding the former Poste des Rapides than in the Creole community of the Côte Joyeuse and Ile Brevelle in Natchitoches Parish. Whether this was due to a somewhat less numerous Creole population overall from the start, to the reinforced Creole anchor on Ile Brevelle of one of the largest free populations of color in the state, to a still more rapid influx of “Americans,” or to other factors is not clear. The juxtaposition of these two significant cultural strains nonetheless offers a ready lens through which more closely to examine daily life.

Perhaps the greatest leveler of all was the state of healthcare and medicine—primitive, in a nutshell. Due to the greater distances between its scattered members, the Western Board for licensing physicians was far less effective from 1817 to 1852 than its “Eastern” (i.e., largely New Orleans) counterpart.¹ Unlicensed doctors abounded. Treatments in themselves were quite often at

least as lethal as the diseases. Bloodletting, purging, opium, and calomel (mercury chloride, which accumulates and eventually kills the patient along with any bacteria) were common. A Dr. Warren Stone of New Orleans, an early advocate of using quinine to treat yellow fever, remarked that he had “followed the patients of the Calomelites to the dead house in plenty.”² Any newspaper of the time carried lists of such medications, offered for sale by local merchants. Phanor Prudhomme’s plantation records frequently included purchases of jalap, antimony, ether, paregoric, morphine, asafetida, and opium,³ or quinine, cod liver oil, and ague pills, or saltpeter, chloroform, rhubarb, ipecac, smelling salts, vesicatories (for blistering)—and toothbrushes.⁴ It is worth noting that, in general, Creole physicians tended to be less invasive in their treatments, while the Americans believed strongly in “heroic” methods and had great scorn for the gentler French approach. To their annoyance, the Creole population favored the milder treatments, and in time the excesses of the heroic school turned public opinion against its followers.⁵

Bermuda had an apparently purpose-built sick house or slave hospital (when not being commandeered as storage for a bumper harvest),⁶ as did Ambroise Lecomte’s Magnolia Grove and Aaron Prescott’s Cedar Grove on Bayou Robert.⁷ It also usually had, not so typically, a physician living on the plantation. To this day his residence there is referred to as the “Doctor’s House.” The hospital, which no longer stands, was located between the plantation’s two pigeonniers and this house,

according to Alphonse and Lucile Keator Prudhomme.⁸ Cedar Grove, not as far from town, regularly called upon various local doctors for treatment.

Illness of all kinds was frequent. Perhaps the most common complaint of all was toothache, and both in journals⁹ and Phanor Prudhomme’s plantation records these and visits to and by dentists are recorded. The population both slave and free fell prey to every imaginable injury—as when a young slave’s finger was crushed at Prescott’s gin¹⁰—and illness. Whether Phanor was writing to his brother-in-law in Nantes, in February, 1849, that fifty to sixty slaves were constantly in the hospital with scarlet fever, two of whom had died,¹¹ or Lestan’s sisters and father were down with break-bone fever (dengue), whether Bermuda’s overseer was noting slaves ill with typhoid fever, or Mrs. Griffin or Mrs. Leach, the governess at the Lestan Prudhomme plantation, were too ill to teach, disease stalked young and old, of whatever race.

Both of Phanor Prudhomme’s wives, sisters, died young, plus one of his daughters at fourteen. Honoria Griffin was a widow. The Prescotts had lost one son as a small child, and their only daughter would die of typhoid fever at eighteen. They themselves would not survive the 1860s. Phanor commented at various times on his own ill health, and beginning a treatment prescribed by a Dr. Hulin involving celandine.¹² In late 1865 he, too, would die, at fifty-eight.

And then, there were the true epidemics. Céphalide Archinard’s first husband had died in New Orleans of cholera

in 1845.¹³ From Honoria Griffin's first ominous mention of mosquitoes August 1, 1853, and six slaves' illness by the sixth, until November 23, when she notes yet another burial, the great yellow fever epidemic of 1853, that killed at least 8,000 in New Orleans alone,¹⁴ raged. It spread up the waterways with those fleeing it, killing in Washington (where it claimed at least 100 victims), in Alexandria, and in Natchitoches. Mary Rose Emma Prescott's uncle on the next plantation, Sosthène Baillio, was dead within forty-eight hours. At least one Prescott slave died, as did several friends. Honoria Griffin actually survived the fever. In Natchitoches Dr. Thomas Flanner, the son-in-law of François Roubieu, a Prudhomme neighbor, stayed in town and died.

Women were uniquely susceptible to other untimely deaths, of course. Phanor's sister Adèle, a twin, died in childbirth at fifteen when he was eight. Mary Rose Emma's sister-in-law, Félonise Baillio Villain, also died in childbirth, delivering her eleventh. Céphalide attended her daughter Désirée's small, private wedding in a wheelchair, having suffered a stroke after giving birth to a daughter at forty. She died a week later; the baby lived only six months.¹⁵

Of course, in that pre-Margaret Sanger, pre-suffragette era, they had few options. It was not without reason that the works of Sir Walter Scott were found in so many planters' homes, Phanor's included.¹⁶ Mark Twain loathed the author and his cult of gentility in the South: "the maudlin Middle-Age romanticism . . . made every

gentleman . . . a Major or a Colonel . . . [.] created rank and caste down there"¹⁷ (as Phanor's future son-in-law Winter Breazeale listed his occupation in the 1850 census as "gentleman"¹⁸). Even as women elsewhere began to press for change, in the South "gender roles became even more rigid," and any respite that may have come "came too little and too late" for many plantation mistresses. As Catherine Clinton, whom I've quoted here, remarked, "her real incarnation had a more vital impact on ante-bellum life than her legend." Harriet Martineau had written in 1837 that she "had met no more hard-working nor industrious women than those on southern plantations"—as well as observing there a higher rate of invalidism, partly as a result.¹⁹

Phanor's accounts make little mention of the work his two wives would have been doing. Céphalide moved from her mother's home into Phanor's after her sister Lise's death to supervise the children, and likely also would have assumed some of the other duties that fell to a plantation mistress. By the Civil War he was again widowed, and had to make note himself of carding and spinning work undertaken on the plantation to compensate for the Union blockade. Completely occupied as he clearly was as a large planter, father of two soldiers, and state legislator in such demanding times, someone must have been in charge of running the household—"household," in that culture, far exceeding the four walls of the main house, encompassing the (detached) kitchen, the work yard, the sick house, the kitchen

garden, the smokehouse, and even the slave quarters.²⁰ The task of supervising house slaves normally fell entirely to a mistress. It is clear in Phanor's records that he assumed some of this load, that his overseer perhaps bore some pertaining to the slaves, but the bulk remains unaccounted for.

The most detailed account of women's work in the pre-Civil War period on Red River to date is that of—a woman, Honoria Griffin. Though not the mistress of a plantation herself, she was the intimate friend of one, and partially assumed her role whenever Mary Rose Emma Prescott was away. That meant holding the keys, that hugely significant role: the keys to every storeroom, pantry, medicine chest, and often, smokehouse.²¹ It meant supervising the house "servants," which despite a usually civil and kindly relationship (slave children came to play in Honoria's room in the evening) led her to exclaim "Not for the wealth of this earth would I own a Negro, they are calculated to make devils of saints And I know it from experience . . . the housekeeper who has them to manage is a person whom I would pity."²²

Though it is true that much of the mistress's work was supervisory, it was not only on small farms that it was also hands-on. The "Ironing stove" delivered "for Mrs. P." was probably not literally for her personal use, nor the chest "made for the ironing room," also nominally hers, except in the sense of being hers to oversee and delegate.²³ "Mrs. Prescott making brandy peaches all day long," "Mrs. Prescott was all day making fig preserves, and brandy

peaches," "Mrs. Prescott making watermelon preserves today," or "Mrs. Prescott very busy attending to sausages" conceivably could be construed to mean "supervising." "Mrs. P. very busy cutting out negro clothing; and making fig preserves this evening," "Mrs. P. cutting out all day long," "Mrs. P. was cutting out and sewing on Negro clothes," and certainly "Mrs. Prescott sat in my room until 10 o'clock cutting out and fitting for Celeste" appear stronger indications that the work was indeed her own, at least in part. "Mrs. Prescott on the brick walk making mattresses" is pretty conclusive, particularly when the previous week the distinction had been made, "Mrs. Prescott sewing on her mattress, the women preparing wool and moss on the front gallery."²⁴

Every female sewed, much of the time. Honoria herself often records sewing, whole days sometimes, including on a mattress tick, making clothes for herself, and for Mary Rose Emma at the times she was busiest. Phanor, by contrast, in 1859 was purchasing not only "60 prs Mens Oak Russet Brogs" (brogans) and "6 Dozen mens Campeachy Hats" from New Orleans, but jeans coats, jeans pants, linsey vests, "log cabin" pants, and Hickory shirts, ready-made.²⁵ This was a far cry from even 1853, when surely the evidence that Céphalide was supervising is bolstered by purchases of more than 500 yards each of denim and of linsey (more commonly, linsey-woolsey), and almost a thousand yards of "cotton écru"²⁶—a vast sewing project for many hands, with need of an organizer.

After the yellow fever, though, the Prescott family may have hired a seamstress to make the necessary mourning clothes, as she was fitting their friends the Brents, who had lost a daughter, for theirs while at Cedar Grove.²⁷ Honoria herself was still in mourning, perhaps for her husband, for she writes of receiving specially-ordered mourning letter paper from New Orleans, and making second mourning skirts and dresses. Mourning was an elaborate and precisely defined process in the Victorian era, whether Creole, American, or European. Those with the means could have special jewelry and memento mori wreaths and other ornaments made, often of the deceased's hair, as when Phanor's records show payments to a New Orleans jeweler in 1853 for "Earrings of Hair, Rings with Hair," a breast pin with a "plain braid of Hair," and one large breast pin simply of black enamel. In May of 1852 (Lise died May 19 of that year), purchases from Creswell & Sompayrac in Natchitoches begin showing up for "Blk French merino[,] Blk Bombazet[,] Blk Cashmere[,] Blk Silk Gloves[,] Blk Barege[,] Blk Alpaca[,] and Blk Calico"—as they do again with Henry & Metoyer in early 1855, after Emma's death the previous fall, including in addition "Blk Italian cloth[,] Blk Sewing Silk[,] Blk muslin[,] Blk Riband[,] Blk Jaconet[,] and Blk velvet cuffs."²⁸

In stark contrast, Lestan Prudhomme, in his early twenties, apparently saw nothing of women's labor, or found it not worthy of recording. He minutely describes his pastimes, his meals, the cry of the peacock, and in sentimental, almost fanciful, fashion,

his encounters with women—"ladies." His near-obsession with never, ever leaving a lady to travel alone or be alone overnight seems almost affected ("offering my services as protector for the night"), were it not that it clearly really was expected of him. Everyone in their society, it must be said, whether in Rapides or Natchitoches Parish, visited incessantly and thought nothing of spending a night or several. Still, it was more a duty that his "Mother represented to me the position of my aunt alone with her husband sick, and telling me that I ought to go and spend the night with them." If one of his sisters so much as walked to Phanor's neighboring house for lunch, in broad daylight, he accompanied her.²⁹ This is in fact in keeping with the South's continued adherence, in general, to older, extremely patriarchal, and far more structured and repressive ideas of honor, courtship, and obligation.³⁰

Yet less than fifty miles away, in households similar in all regards but the husbands' origins, the rules were evidently more relaxed. Young Celeste certainly never ventured anywhere completely alone, but the company of her mother, Honoria, or Sosthène Baillio's wife was sufficient. Any of the adult women mentioned in Honoria's journal thought nothing of going to town, to church, or visiting alone, accompanied only by a coachman. Mary Rose Emma, traveling alone, escorted Celeste to school at the Academy of the Sacred Heart in Grand Coteau, a two-day trip each way (they apparently would spend the night with John and Amélie Compton on the way). It was common for these women even to walk to

neighbors' to visit. If night fell, Sosthène might come to Cedar Grove to escort his wife home, or Aaron Prescott to Thomas Overton Moore's to escort Honoria home, but these instances seemed more courtesy and common sense than any rigidly prescribed behavior. On the same evening as the latter occasion, Mary Rose Emma and Celeste walked home from Sosthène's at dusk.³¹ When Aaron, Mary Rose Emma, and Celeste were away on an extended trip, sixteen-year-old John Prescott was at home with Honoria, but didn't hesitate to be away overnight with a friend. She traveled unaccompanied both to Plaisance, upriver, and to New Orleans to visit friends,³² and this in the same decade in which Lestan was keeping his diary.

One form of control many plantation mistresses of the time actually wished to see, Mary Chesnut perhaps most famously expressed: "Like the patriarchs of old, our men live all in one house with their wives and their concubines; and the mulattoes one sees in every family partly resemble the white children."³³ The behavior that had begun the Creole of color community did not suddenly cease with the end of the eighteenth century.³⁴ It did not, however, follow any broad cultural pattern as to indulgence or abstinence, but seemed to break more along family, or even individual, lines. According to the 1850 Census, Phanor's slaves included four "mulattoes," all of them middle-aged or older. Lestan, Neuville, Jean Baptiste, and Narcisse Prudhomme, Ambroise Lecomte, and Mary Breazeale (Winter's mother) listed none. The estate of François Roubieu had thirteen

of ten years and under. Céphalide Archinard's seven slaves included two, a ten-year-old girl and a four-year-old boy. It is impossible from this remove of years to point definitive fingers—especially in isolated cases, when the possibility of overseers and other contacts becomes a factor—but not to point out that her husband had been dead for five years, during which time she had lived back on the Metoyer plantation with her mother and brother—a plantation that itself listed 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old mulattoes, in addition to two young teenagers.³⁵ In Rapides Parish, among Aaron Prescott's slaves that year were two boys, both ten years old.³⁶

Perhaps the most visible, pronounced, and lasting factor that distinguished Creoles from their neighbors and counterparts was language. Their religion also set them apart, but not from the Spanish or the Irish (as in the case of Honoria Griffin). French, however, came early and stayed late. In 1806 a George McTier's name still appeared as the official interpreter for the Natchitoches Parish court.³⁷ Although English had become the official state language in 1804, it was not until 1855 that parish records ceased to be kept in French.³⁸ The local *Red River Chronicle* and *Red River Herald* published in both French and English through the 1830s, and for much longer, personal notices of various kinds appeared in both languages.

To this extent only had the Creoles yielded, that they became bilingual, while the Anglos, by and large, did not. Right up through early 1864, Phanor Prudhomme kept his personal plantation journal in

French. His correspondence with other Creoles was almost invariably in French, yet he was perfectly capable of writing in fluent English for business, or in the case of declining, to a David Creswell in Mansfield, a Congressional candidacy. Bills appear in the records in both French and English from New Orleans and Natchitoches merchants, as well as from the Sisters of the Sacred Heart convent school in Natchitoches. There is even a bill in French from the Delmonico in New York City in 1853, Phanor clearly having found French-speaking accommodations.³⁹In the aftermath of the Civil War, Phanor's son Alphonse began keeping his accounts in English.⁴⁰

What perhaps best captures the sometimes elusive nature of what it was, is, to be a Creole is a word like *giraumon*. This is the French derivation of *jirumum*, a Tupi Indian word for pumpkin or other large squash, the Tupi being a now almost extinct coastal Brazilian tribe. It is not a French word; in the mother country a pumpkin is *une citrouille*, and a winter squash *un potiron*, though the two are sometimes used interchangeably. *Un giraumon* is a uniquely New World word for a New World product, adapted and assimilated by transplanted Europeans in a strange land, until it became, for them and their descendants, uniquely theirs.

Notes

¹*The John Randolph Matas History of Medicine in Louisiana*, John Duffy, ed., (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1958), 105-6.

²*Ibid.*, 12.

³Prudhomme Family Papers, Series 2, Subseries 2.1: Plantation Records and Other Volumes, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, folder 913 (hereinafter cited as Southern Historical Collection, for both documents and microfilm).

⁴Southern Historical Collection, folder 15, microfilm.

⁵*John Randolph Matas History of Medicine*, 270-272.

⁶Journalier, 1839, folder 25, Southern Historical Collection, reel 15, microfilm.

⁷*A Glorious Day: The Journal of a Central Louisiana Governess, 1853-1854*, Carolyn Breedlove, ed. (Alexandria, Louisiana: Red River X-Press, 2006), 18.

⁸Fred Gianforte and others, *A Gateway to Yesterday* (Natchitoches, Louisiana: Mayfield Printing, 1979).

⁹*A Glorious Day*, 37; Lestan Prudhomme diary, 1850-1852, Irma Sompayrac Willard Collection, Cammie Henry Research Center (hereinafter cited as Lestan Prudhomme diary). (Original in Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University, New Orleans).

10A *Glorious Day*, 71.

¹¹Southern Historical Collection, folder 142.

¹²*Ibid.*, folder 30, microfilm.

¹³Laura Locoul Gore, *Memories of the Old Plantation Home* (Vacherie, Louisiana: The Zoë Company, Inc., 2001), 23.

¹⁴*John Randolph Matas History of Medicine*, 130.

¹⁵*Memories of the Old Plantation Home*, 27-8.

¹⁶Journalier, 1837, Southern Historical Collection, folder 24, microfilm.

¹⁷Mark Perry, *Grant and Twain: The Story of an American Friendship* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2004), 91, 102.

¹⁸*Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Population Schedule: Louisiana* (Natchitoches Parish), (Washington, D.C.: National Archives Microfilm Publications, 1963).

¹⁹Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 46, 150, xv.

²⁰Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1988) 91, 97, 116; *The Plantation Mistress*, 18-28.

²¹*Within the Plantation Household*, 119.

²²*A Glorious Day*, 16.

²³*Ibid.*, 48, 115.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 30, 53, 55-60, 104-7, 152.

²⁵Southern Historical Collection, folder 12, microfilm.

²⁶*Ibid.*, reel 15, microfilm.

²⁷*A Glorious Day*, 90.

²⁸Southern Historical Collection, reel 15, microfilm.

²⁹Lestan Prudhomme diary.

³⁰Steven M. Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South: Ritual in the Lives of the Planters* (Baltimore: The Johns

Hopkins University Press, 1987), 79, 89; *The Plantation Mistress*, 53, 56-7.

³¹*A Glorious Day*, 52-3.

³²*Ibid.*, 34, 39.

³³*Mary Chesnut's Civil War*, C. Vann Woodward, ed. (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1981), 29, 31.

³⁴Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Honor and Violence in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 97.

³⁵*Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Slave Schedules* (Natchitoches Parish), (Washington, D.C.: National Archives Microfilm Publications, 1963).

³⁶*Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Slave Schedules* (Rapides Parish), (Washington, D.C.: National Archives Microfilm Publications, 1963).

³⁷*Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Northwest Louisiana* (1890; reprint, Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Claitor's Publishing Division, 1975), 294.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 302.

³⁹Southern Historical Collection, reel 15, microfilm.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, folder 37, microfilm.

Bibliography

Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Northwest Louisiana. Nashville: The Southern Publishing Company, 1890. Reprint, Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Claitor's Publishing Division, 1975.

Breedlove, Carolyn. "Oakland/Bermuda Plantation, 1830-1880." Master's thesis, Northwestern State University of Louisiana, 1999.

_____, ed. *A Glorious Day: The Journal of a Central Louisiana Governess, 1853-1854*. Alexandria, Louisiana: Red River X-Press, 2006.

Clinton, Catherine. *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1982.

Dollar, Susan. "Black, White, or Indifferent: Identity and Americanization in Creole Louisiana." Ph.D. diss., University of Arkansas, 2004

Duffy, John, ed. *The John Randolph Matas History of Medicine in Louisiana*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1958.

Firth, Ian and Suzanne Turner. *Cane River Creole National Historical Park: Oakland Plantation: Cultural Landscape Report, Part One*. Atlanta, Georgia: National Park Service, Southeast Regional Office, 2003.

Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth. *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1988.

Gianforte, Fred and others. *A Gateway to Yesterday*. Natchitoches, Louisiana: Mayfield Printing, 1979.

Gore, Laura Locoul. *Memories of the Old Plantation Home*. With commentary by

Norman and Sand Marmillion. Vacherie, Louisiana: The Zoë Company, Inc., 2001.

Gregory, H.F. and Joseph Moran. "'We Know Who We Are': An Ethnographic Overview of the Creole Community and Traditions of Isle Brevelle and Cane River, Louisiana." New Orleans: Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve, National Park Service, and St. Augustine Historical Society, 1996.

Irma Sompayrac Willard Collection. Lestan Prudhomme diary. Cammie Henry Research Center, Eugene P. Watson Memorial Library, Northwestern State University of Louisiana. Original in Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University, New Orleans.

Mary Chesnut's Civil War. Edited by C. Vann Woodward. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1981.

Perry, Mark. *Grant and Twain: The Story of an American Friendship*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2004.

Prudhomme Family Papers, Series 2, Subseries 2.1, Plantation Records and Other Volumes, Southern Historical Collection. Manuscripts Department, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Seventh Census of the United States, 1850. Slave Schedules (Natchitoches Parish). Washington, D.C.: National Archives Microfilm Publications, 1963.

Seventh Census of the United States, 1850. Slave Schedules (Rapides Parish). Washington, D.C.: National Archives Microfilm Publications, 1963.

Stowe, Steven M. *Intimacy and Power in the Old South: Ritual in the Lives of the Planters.* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987.

Thomas, ThomasA. "The Oakland Plantation Overview." Denver, Colorado: National Park Service, 1997.

Wyatt-Brown, Bertram. *Honor and Violence in the Old South.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.