

WHO OR WHAT IS A LOUISIANA CRÉOLE?

An Explanation of this Controversial Term

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Notes by Sheldon L. Roy, August 2011 (Revised April 2013)

Créole is a controversial term with several different meanings, the most common of which follow.

Creoles are:

- 1) Wealthy second-generation French nobility in Colonial Louisiana, including New Orleans and environs, and along the Mississippi River northward. *
- 2) Second-generation children born in Colonial Louisiana, as distinct from their parents, who were first-generation colonists born in France, Québec, Spain, or Germany and not necessarily of noble lineage. *
- 3) Colonial inhabitants who are of mixed heritage, e.g., French and Spanish or German. *
- 4) Colonial inhabitants who are of mixed races, e.g., a combination of two or more of these:
 - a. White (French, Canadian, Spanish, German)
 - b. Black (African, Haitian, Dominican, West Indies)
 - c. Native American Indian
- 5) *Gens de Couleur Libres* (Free People of Color): Blacks and mulattos who were set free by their French Colonial owners (often cohabitants), who owned their own property and who owned slave themselves. The most amazing example today of a community of the descendants of the Free People of Color is found in Cane River, Louisiana, just south of Natchitoches. They are traditionally French speaking, Catholic and a beautiful mixture of African and French races. They have managed to be homogeneous in preserving their culture and community. In earlier years, they were very guarded about marrying outsiders – they would not marry blacks, nor would they marry whites. Today, like in most other cultures, these barriers are falling and they are beginning to become more heterogeneous, which has both fortunate and unfortunate consequences.
- 6) Descendants of any of the above, even after statehood, until this day. The distinct French three-tier social structure in Colonial Louisiana—the whites (French/Spanish/German), the Creoles (in this sense mixed race or mulattos), and the blacks (slaves)—gradually disappeared with the influx of American settlers from the northeast outside Louisiana.

See note of Acadians/Cajuns next page.

A NOTE ABOUT CAJUNS/ACADIANS

Although they share common French heritage, Créoles are not to be confused with Acadians (Cajuns), natives of Acadie (present-day Nova Scotia) and their descendants. When the British exiled the Acadians from their homeland, they migrated to Louisiana from 1765-1768. Créoles (Colonial French) and Acadians had their respective and unique enclaves in Louisiana with distinct dialects and customs. From the beginning, the two cultures intersected in certain areas, as well as intermarried, which overtime became more and more common. Still today, there are communities in Louisiana that are characteristically either Créole (Colonial French) or Acadian. For example, Avoyelles Parish is characteristically Colonial French, while St. Martin Parish is characteristically Acadian. In another sense, the Cane River community in Natchitoches Parish is characteristically Créole (in the sense of mixed race), while the Natchitoches proper is characteristically Colonial French. Hence, one can see the confusion associated with the term Créole.

This is why one must be careful when using the term "Creole," even if it's used with great pride among these different groups.

** Numbers 1, 2, & 3 were often recipients of large land grants from France or, later, Spain, and/or engaged in commerce in Louisiana, the Caribbean, France and Canada.*

A NOTE ABOUT THE NON-FRENCH IN LOUISIANA

Oddly, to this day, old timers in Avoyelles, when speaking French, still refer to non-Francophiles as "les Américains" (the Americans), which is really amusing, as Avoylleans themselves are certainly American. However, their meaning is entirely cultural, not political.

For example, if a newcomer from the north settles in Avoyelles and, after having encountered local culture and somewhat confused by it, he might be jokingly referred to as an American: "Ça ç'est un Américain" ("that's an American for you"), i.e., for not understanding the ways of French colonial culture, such as knocking decorated eggs on Easter Sunday on the courthouse square, or not understanding how to cook a crawfish étouffée, etc. We are all American now, since 1803, but strangely enough, this expression is a vestige of Colonial Louisiana even today.