

## Chapter 6

### Cultural Affairs of the Free Colored Creoles

In the South free Negroes formed their own organizations--civic, social, and fraternal. Some of these institutions restricted membership on the basis of one's ancestry. In Charleston, perhaps the best known of these groups was the Brown Fellowship Society, which according to a recent study, was "the most prestigious mulatto organization" in that city. Another such club, the Friendly Moralist Society, further allowed free mulattoes to maintain a sense of racial identity.<sup>1</sup> Free black men also formed their own society, the Humane Brotherhood.<sup>2</sup> The free colored Creoles of Mobile created similar institutions. In the city of Mobile they operated a fire company and school, both of which were sanctioned by local and state authorities. These two endeavors helped the Creoles de couleur to preserve their own class consciousness, separate from other free Negroes and slaves.

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<sup>1</sup>Johnson and Roark, Black Masters, p. 212. See also Berlin, Slaves Without Masters, pp. 312-13.

<sup>2</sup>Johnson and Roark, Black Masters, pp. 212-14. See also Berlin, Slaves Without Masters, pp. 310-12.

There is some discrepancy as to when the Creole Fire Company was formed, but as best as can be determined, it was created in 1819. Its operation continued at least through early 1823, since the mayor's court records indicate that the captain of Fire Company Number One complained about several members of the mulatto company whom he thought were neglecting their duties.<sup>3</sup> Some time after this the company disbanded, but it was reorganized in 1830. Later reports of Mobile newspapers were not consistent in their accounts of the organization of the Creole Fire Company, offering various dates from 1819 to 1828 or 1830.<sup>4</sup>

The April 1830 ordinance which allowed the reformation of the nonwhite company identified it as "Neptune No. 1, Creole Fire Company," and authorized its existence for "one or more years, at the discretion of the Mayor and aldermen." The city allowed the Creoles de couleur some autonomy; the company could establish its own regulations as it "may deem expedient and proper to adopt, for the purpose of compelling the attendance of their members" either at fires or other company functions. The city did maintain some control and guidance over the company; members were required to "elect for their captain a white man citizen of Mobile, of moral

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<sup>3</sup>Mayor's Court Records, February 7, 1823, microfilm reel 8, RG 18, S 1, CMMA.

<sup>4</sup>Mobile Daily Tribune, April 10, 1864; Mobile Daily Register, April 27, 1858; Mobile Daily Advertiser, April 22, 1856; *ibid.*, April 25, 1852; Mobile Register and Advertiser, May 3, 1863. See also Amos, Cotton City, pp. 101, 261-62.

character," who was to "command" them. The free men of color could elect others of their caste to assist in the operation of the unit. The nonwhite officers were authorized to compel the attendance of members in accordance with any bylaws they may have adopted and to collect fines which could be used for the benefit of the company. If a member refused to pay his fine the captain could "recover the same by complaint to the mayor or any one of the aldermen" of the city. Membership was limited to those free men of color who had resided a minimum of three years in the city of Mobile. Personnel of the company were required, by the ordinance, to keep the engine in good repair and "to have it at all times ready for use." Its captain was to see that it was "worked once a month," as well as "to require and compel persons, and not members of said company, to give their assistance in suppression [of] fire[s]."<sup>5</sup>

The constitution and bylaws of Creole Fire Company No. 1, eventually adopted in 1846, provide additional information on the operation of this organization. Articles one through six, for instance, dealt with membership (which was limited to a maximum of seventy-five active members) and the duties of the officers (including a foreman, first, second, and third assistant, secretary, and a treasurer). The foreman was required to make sure that the engine was kept in good order and to call meetings, while the

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<sup>5</sup>Mobile Commercial Register, April 24, 1830.

secretary's duties included such customary functions as calling roll at meetings and keeping minutes of the proceedings. The seriousness which the Creoles de couleur attached to their company is evident from such rules as the one ordering the secretary "to report at the next monthly meeting the names of all members who shall leave the machine during fire without permission from the officer in command." (The secretary had one advantage over the rank and file: he was "excused from working on the machine.") Within ten days of collecting any money for the company, the secretary had to give it to the treasurer, who would then report on the unit's financial affairs. The treasurer also had an unusual function. Article six stipulated that "it shall be his duty in time of fires or when the company meets to transact business to provide such refreshments as he may think proper or as the commanding officer may direct."<sup>6</sup>

Several articles of the constitution contained company policy with regard to the admission and duties of its members. The minimum age for admission was set at sixteen years, and the application for membership was "to lay before the company at least one meeting previous of being acted on." Five dissenting votes meant that membership would be denied. Once selected to join, a new member was required to

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<sup>6</sup>Creole Fire Company No. 1, Constitution and Bylaws and Minutes, 1846-1853, pp. 1-3, Museum of the City of Mobile, Mobile, Alabama. The quotations are from pp. 2-3. This source will be hereinafter cited as CFC Minutes, and references to the museum will be cited as MCM.

furnish himself with a uniform on or before the day he attended the regular monthly meeting or be subject to dismissal even before he had the opportunity to participate. To insure efficiency, firemen were required to "pay strict attention" to orders from officers "in time of fire, alarms or meetings for business."<sup>7</sup> When notified of a fire, members were instructed "to repair with all speed to the engine house and if the engine is there to take it with all the materials belonging thereto and immediately proceed to the fire."<sup>8</sup> The company made few allowances for nonattendance at fires or meetings. The only valid excuses for such were "personal sickness or sickness in the family or absence from the corporate limits of the city."<sup>9</sup>

As with any organization serving the public interest, adherence to the rules was necessary. Officers of the Creole Fire Company did not tolerate behavior that would be a source of embarrassment for either the company or the other free colored Creoles which it represented, especially since the white community watched over them. Violations of regulations--such as giving an invalid excuse for not performing one's duty, coming intoxicated to meetings, using vulgar language, neglect of duty, failure to pay fines or dues within three months, leaving a meeting without

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 6.

permission, sleeping at a meeting, being absent from fires or meetings for two successive months, or being absent from the city for four months without an approved excuse--could result in expulsion by a vote of two-thirds of the members present.<sup>10</sup> In 1851 the company stiffened its constitution, providing fines or reprimands for any member who divulged any transaction of the company that was not meant to be revealed.<sup>11</sup>

Exceptions were sometimes allowed, as in most organizations. Ovid Gregory, for example, was fined several times during 1852 and early 1853. His most serious offense was disorderly conduct on the way to a fire. That behavior prompted the company to begin impeachment procedures against him. Yet, about two months after the presentation of charges against Gregory, twenty-one members gave him a vote of confidence, and apparently the officers dropped the case.<sup>12</sup> Consideration was also given to the needs of other firemen as when one member was permitted to miss the first roll call because he could not leave his business early enough to arrive on time.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 10; *ibid.*, March 7, 1847, February 8, 1848, August 7, 1848, September 2, 1850, and February 3, 1851. The minutes of the meetings are dated but not paginated.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., November 3, 1851.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., January 3, 1853, and March 7, 1853.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., March 7, 1853.

The company rewarded, as well as punished, its members. Honorary memberships could be awarded by a majority vote to those who had served the unit faithfully and with a satisfactory performance of duties for five years. Some firemen with fewer than five years of service were granted honorary status with the approval of two-thirds of the members present at the meeting, provided there was a minimum of twenty in attendance. Holders of this honor were "entitled to all the privileges of members with the exception of holding office or voting."<sup>14</sup>

When fully attired in company dress uniform, Creole firemen must have been a distinguished-looking group. They were required to wear a fireman's cap "after the New York pattern with the number of the machine on it" and their initials painted in white on the front. "Duck pantaloons" with a black belt, a brass plate with "No. 1" on it, and a green flannel shirt with a black star and the "No. 1" attached to it were additional parts of the uniform.<sup>15</sup> A later dress code specified that firemen wear white pantaloons or trousers during the summer months and black ones during the winter, along with a green flannel double-breasted jacket.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., pp. 8-9.

<sup>16</sup>Creole Fire Company No. 1, Constitution and Bylaws, 1858, p. 20, MCM.

The company attempted in 1836 and 1837 to acquire its own property. In March 1836, its captain B. Tardy, petitioned the mayor and aldermen to acquire suitable land for their engine house. Evidently Tardy had made arrangements with William Austin to purchase one of his lots on Dauphin Street, and Tardy sought the funds from the city to pay for the land.<sup>17</sup> Nine months later, Tardy again presented his case in behalf of the company concerning the building of an engine house. He suggested that property near the city hall square would be an acceptable location. "For a plan of the building," Tardy added, "it is a matter of course optional with you--but permit me to suggest that one similar to [Fire Engine Company] No. 3 would be most convenient."<sup>18</sup> The Board of Aldermen was slow in responding to Tardy's requests. Three months later he asked city fathers to purchase a lot--this time suggesting one on Dauphin near St. Joachim Street.<sup>19</sup> Within a week the committee handling this matter was discharged, and the subject was referred to a different committee.<sup>20</sup> At some point the company did acquire its own engine house, but it

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<sup>17</sup>Petition of the Creole Fire Department, Box 2, Envelope 3, Folder 3, Document 2.1, RG 2, Records of the Mayor and Board of Aldermen, 1819-1839, Series 1, General Files, CMMA.

<sup>18</sup>Proceedings of the Board of Aldermen, December 15, 1836, Box 2, Envelope 4, Folder 2, Document 4.11, RG 2, S 1, CMMA.

<sup>19</sup>Mobile Commercial Register and Patriot, March 20, 1837.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., March 25, 1837.



then relied upon public support to maintain it, at least partially. In 1845, the city appropriated \$120 for repair work.<sup>21</sup> A year later the mayor approved a request by the foreman for additional funds in order to make other "small repairs" on the house.<sup>22</sup>

Not all of the fire company's requests were for minor repairs. In 1847 it sought an appropriation of \$400 to help defray the expense of either adding on to their engine house or erecting a new building. The total cost for the renovation would be \$1,200, \$800 of which the company was willing to pay. Realizing that the company provided a valuable service to the city, the committee to whom the petition was referred concluded that the request should be approved. "It is well known to your committee," the report began, "that there are but five cities in the South that can boast of more beautiful and more efficient fire companies or a more perfect organization of the Fire Department than the city of Mobile." The report added that "these companies, and among them the Creole Fire Engine Company, have for many years rendered to the citizens of Mobile the most important services, and are entitled as your committee believe to some special consideration." The committee concluded that the

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<sup>21</sup>Proceedings of the Board of Aldermen, February 7, 1845, Box 7, Envelope 1, Folder 1, Document 31, RG 3, Records of the Mayor, Board of Aldermen, and Common Council, 1839-1879, S 1, General Files, CMMA.

<sup>22</sup>Proceedings of the Board of Aldermen, April 17, 1846, Box 7, Envelope 4, Folder 3, Document 15, RG 3, S 1, CMMA.

Creole engine house was too small to hold regular meetings.<sup>23</sup>

In September 1847, the Board of Aldermen approved the company's request and sent it to the Board of Common Council. The following day the petition was referred to the fire engine committee.<sup>24</sup> The Common Council then agreed to pass the appropriation, and the fire engine committee informed the company that it could begin with plans to expand. After the company spent its \$800, the city would finance the remaining amount.

Despite the approval of funds, the company encountered an obstacle. Its foreman, E. B. Lyman, wrote the city fathers that the fire engine committee seemed to have neglected to adopt the original resolution which the two boards had previously adopted several months before. "The resolution should be again passed to have any effect. Will you have the kindness to look into the matter at your earliest convenience?" Lyman requested. He further informed city officials that the fire company had already expended the \$800 and that the new building would be completed in about a month. The whole matter was again

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<sup>23</sup>Committee Report, September 1847, Box 7, Envelope 6, Folder 4, Document 47, RG 3, S 1, CMMMA.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

referred to the fire engine committee, but whether the problem was solved to Lyman's satisfaction is not known.<sup>25</sup>

The minutes of the Creole Fire Company suggest that the city did help to finance the new building. In August 1848, they recorded the company's request "that the secretary publish their thanks to Mobile citizens toward erecting their house." Minutes of a month later intimate that the company had not yet publicly acknowledged the financial assistance received from the city: "On motion that the secretary shall be authorized by the company to return our thank to the citizens of Mobile for subscribe toward our house."<sup>26</sup> The public support that the unit received indicates that the city recognized its significant contribution to the general safety of Mobile and its residents.

Not only did the company need additional housing, but it also needed a new engine. In May 1848, foreman Lyman addressed city officials. "It is well known to your boards," he stated, "that Creole Co.'s Engine has been useless for 4 or 5 months from the box being entirely rotten. . . . A small expenditure judiciously made now will

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<sup>25</sup>E. B. Lyman to Mayor and Boards of Aldermen and Common Council, February 1, 1848, Box 8, Envelope 1, Folder 2, Document 13, RG 3, S 1, CMMA.

<sup>26</sup>CFC Minutes, August 7, 1848, and September 4, 1848. The company also sought money in May 1851, to repair the floor of the engine house. See Proceedings of the Board of Aldermen, May 8, 1851, Box 9, Envelope 1, Folder 4, Document 16, RG 3, S 1, CMMA. See also Mobile Daily Register, May 12 and 24, 1851, and June 9, 1851.

preserve to the city one of its most efficient companies." As with its previous request, the company did not ask for the full amount of its anticipated expense. Instead, it sought about half the estimated cost of \$600, which would "enable the company to send their machine to Philadelphia for a new box."<sup>27</sup> The city's fire engine committee recommended that the "prayer of the petitioners should be granted" since their engine "in its present condition is entirely useless," and the Creole Fire Company was a "very efficient" unit. The accompanying resolution stipulated that the city appropriate a maximum of \$300. It appears, however, that the Board of Common Council did not concur with the committee's resolution.<sup>28</sup>

The company's difficulties with its engine were not over. In 1853, its officers shipped the four-wheel hose carriage to Philadelphia for repairs and instructed the Philadelphia firm to restore the wood work and iron brass plating and to paint the appropriate parts.<sup>29</sup> In November 1854, city officials evidently approved another request for \$500 from the group for a new fire engine, which arrived on Christmas Eve, 1854. The newspaper reported that "the

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<sup>27</sup>E. B. Lyman to the Mayor, Boards of Aldermen and Common Council, May 16, 1848, Box 8, Envelope 2, Folder 1, Document 57, RG 3, S 1, CMMA.

<sup>28</sup>Proceedings of the Board of Aldermen June 6, 1848, Box 8, Envelope 2, Folder 2, Document 12, RG 3, S 1, CMMA.

<sup>29</sup>T. U. Bernard to John Agnew, August 20, 1853, recorded in CFC Minutes.

members of Creole Fire Company No. 1 received their long expected machine and immediately conveyed it to their engine house." According to the press, the engine "is said to be a very handsome article."<sup>30</sup> On New Year's Day, 1855, the company satisfactorily tested its new engine with the machine throwing "a large volume of water with great power." The press approved the recent acquisition, stating "we doubt not that it will prove a most efficient addition to our Fire Department."<sup>31</sup>

The social event of the year for the Creole Fire Company occurred in April when it celebrated its anniversary with a torchlight parade, followed by a dance. The newspapers published the parade route, thus giving citizens a chance to view the spectacle from their favorite locations. The parade usually began from the engine house on Joachim Street at eight o'clock.<sup>32</sup> The Creole Band marched in the parade to entertain the onlookers.<sup>33</sup>

Activities surrounding the anniversary received excellent press coverage. The Mobile Daily Advertiser of 1855 contained perhaps the best description:

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<sup>30</sup>Mobile Daily Advertiser, November 24-25, 1854, December 27, 1854, and January 6-7, 1855. The quotation is from December 27, 1854.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., January 3, 1855.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., April 27, 1856. See also Mobile Daily Register, April 27, 1858.

<sup>33</sup>Mobile Daily Advertiser, May 1, 1856.

The new and magnificent engine of the company, beautifully decorated with floral devices, and drawn by six horses, headed the procession and was followed by the handsomely designed and mottoed banner.--Next came the stalwart firemen, fifty in number, clad in white, each one bearing a torch and bouquet. The hose truck which fancy had exhausted itself in adorning brought up the procession. Its front was surmounted by a wreath encircling a lute of flowers, in the centre of which hung a golden star. In the middle of the vehicle was a large cylinder, apparently constructed of glass, gaily painted and revolving continually. Behind this was a large star of flowers, and every part of the concern was buried in a wealth of the same beautiful ornaments. The company concluded the festivities of the occasion with a ball which was a very creditable affair.<sup>34</sup>

Coverage in other years by the Mobile Daily Advertiser was equally favorable. In 1854 the paper anticipated that "we have no reason to believe the turn out this year will be less magnificent or imposing than any of its predecessors."<sup>35</sup> Two years later, it declared that "the display was the finest they have made for many years, and attracted great attention."<sup>36</sup> Several years later, the Advertiser remarked that "the display made was even more brilliant than that of last year."<sup>37</sup> Clearly, the Creole Fire Company--and, therefore, the Creoles of color as a class--could take pride in this public praise each year when

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., April 28, 1855. See also *ibid.*, April 29, 1851, and April 29, 1854, and Alabama Planter, May 1, 1852, for other descriptions of the parade.

<sup>35</sup>Mobile Daily Advertiser, April 26, 1854.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., May 1, 1856.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., April 28, 1860.

they marched through the streets of Mobile. The community warmly supported their efforts, and the Creoles de couleur responded by making their parade a memorable evening for themselves and the rest of the city.

Through the years, it is evident that the company continued to earn the respect and support of the community. "The Creole Company is one of our worthiest fire companies," praised the Alabama Planter; "its services are highly esteemed and its members well respected by our citizens."<sup>38</sup> The following year, the same paper reiterated its high regard for the company, describing it as "an old and useful association, and composed of some of the most exemplary of our citizens."<sup>39</sup> The organization was "among the most energetic companies in the city, and those who reach a fire before the Creoles must be minute-men in fact."<sup>40</sup> During the 1854 parade, the Creoles passed before the engine house of a "white" fire company (Washington No. 8), whose members "fired a salute" to the marching Creoles, who then acknowledged the gesture with an appreciative response of "three hearty cheers."<sup>41</sup> The year before, Washington Company No. 8 had cordially loaned its hose carriage to the

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<sup>38</sup>Alabama Planter, April 30, 1849.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., May 6, 1850.

<sup>40</sup>Mobile Daily Advertiser, April 27, 1851.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., April 29, 1854.

Creoles for the anniversary parade.<sup>42</sup> The Mobile Daily Register congratulated the unit in 1858, stating "this company deserves great praise for their uniform good conduct, and may be truly called one of the institutions of our city."<sup>43</sup> The following year the newspaper praised the work of the Creoles, commenting that the company "has been one of the most efficient in the department, and well merits the confidence and respect reposed in it by the community."<sup>44</sup>

Mobile's general public also supported the efforts of the Creoles. "The interest which the public feel in this useful and reliable company," the Daily Advertiser reported after the 1855 parade, "was abundantly manifested by the large number of persons who thronged the streets and all places of observation."<sup>45</sup> Clearly, for the press and general public to have accepted and praised this company, the members themselves had to have earned the respect of the white community through hard work. The Creoles of color were civic-minded and respectful of the law, and the public acknowledged these attributes.

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<sup>42</sup>CFC Minutes, May 24?, 1853. The exact date was illegible in the record.

<sup>43</sup>Mobile Daily Register, April 28, 1858.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., April 28, 1859.

<sup>45</sup>Mobile Daily Advertiser, April 28, 1855.



Every year the chief engineer of the Mobile Fire Department issued a statement on the condition of the department. In 1852, the department as a whole consisted of the Hook and Ladder Company and eight engine companies (one of which was the Creole Engine Company); and it contained about 480 active and honorary members. There were some sixty Creole firemen, making it the fourth largest company in terms of members. According to the engineer's report that year, the Creole Company had "one Philadelphia Engine and Hose Carriage, in good order, and nine lengths [of] Hose in good condition." At that time the city owed the company an appropriation of \$300 based upon a city ordinance that entitled each of the companies, except Hook and Ladder, to receive \$300 per year. The engineer noted that "the appropriation of \$300 per annum to each of the companies is not sufficient to defray their expenses by half, but still, if it is all the city can afford, the companies must be satisfied."<sup>46</sup>

The Creole Fire Company participated in activities with the other Mobile fire organizations. The various units that comprised the Mobile Fire Department occasionally competed in a "trial of power" to determine who could shoot water the furthest from a predetermined length of hose. In 1856, for

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<sup>46</sup>Ibid., April 9, 1852. See also *ibid.*, April 11, 1856, and April 28, 1860, and Mobile Daily Tribune, April 10, 1864, for other annual reports of the Mobile Fire Department.

instance, a large crowd gathered at the St. Louis Street wharf to view the contest. Among the four first-class engines, Creole No. 1 placed last, but it "labored under considerable disadvantage throwing against the wind."<sup>47</sup> Four years later, again at the St. Louis Street wharf before "a large number of spectators," the Creoles placed first in their division and third in the overall competition.<sup>48</sup>

In one instance, however, the company met opposition within the Mobile Fire Department. In 1852 the Mobile Fire Department limited the Creole Company to one representative on the Board of Officers, whereas other companies were entitled to five or six delegates. The Creoles were upset by this arrangement and politely declined an invitation from the department to participate in the parade celebrating the anniversary of the Mobile Fire Department Association. The company resolved that it would "never accept anything from the fire department as a favor while its theirs by right of justice and honor."<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless its members "agreed to pay their portion of expenses for the fire department, except costs of the annual parade," and in the opinion of one historian, by "so doing they maintained the integrity of

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<sup>47</sup>Mobile Daily Advertiser, July 8, 1856.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., July 3, 1860.

<sup>49</sup>CFC Minutes, May 17, 1852.

their company, while they also assumed their civic obligations."<sup>50</sup>

The successful operation of the Creole Fire Company through its cycles of frustration and praise was in part probably due to the leadership of E. B. Lyman, its foreman for eight years. It was Lyman who acted as a spokesman for the group whenever it needed financial assistance from the city. In appreciation, in September 1851, members of the unit marched to Lyman's home and presented him "with a silver trumpet of elegant workmanship and large size, as a mark of their high respect for him as a man and their admiration of his skill and ability as an officer."<sup>51</sup> Upon hearing of his death in 1854, the company paid a tribute of respect to Lyman who had been a "friend and brother member." It resolved, "we sincerely and earnestly sympathise with his sorrowing relatives, and . . . we tender to them this cordial testimony of condolence with and of our respect for the deceased."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>Amos, Cotton City, p. 104.

<sup>51</sup>Mobile Daily Advertiser, September 3, 1851.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, October 3, 1854. As a further sign of respect, Creole firemen wore a "badge of mourning" and draped their meeting room in black for thirty days.

In addition to the fire company, Mobile's Creoles of color had their own school. In December 1833, the Alabama legislature noted that the colored Creoles of Mobile and Baldwin Counties "have heretofore conducted themselves with uniform propriety and good order" and were "anxious to have their offspring educated." Therefore, it empowered the mayor and aldermen of the city of Mobile to license suitable persons to teach the free colored Creole children descending from persons living in those areas that were controlled by the French at the time of the Louisiana Purchase. City officials had to approve the children who wished to attend the school and to record their names in a book.<sup>53</sup> By contrast some southern states permitted education of free people of color in spite of legislation prohibiting it. In 1834 South Carolina "outlawed schools for free Negroes," yet several schools continued to teach the free Negro elite. In Louisiana instructing persons of color to read or write "was tacitly tolerated but not publicly encouraged."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup>Acts Passed at the Annual Session of the General Assembly of the State of Alabama Begun and Held in the Town of Tuscaloosa, on the Third Monday in November, One Thousand Eight Hundred and Thirty-three (Tuscaloosa: May and Ferguson, 1834), p. 68.

<sup>54</sup>Johnson and Roark, Black Masters, p. 88; Mills, The Forgotten People, p. 183.

Details of the activities of the Creole school during its early years are sketchy. Apparently it was not formally opened until 1849, about fifteen years after the legislature had approved its formation. At an April 1845 meeting of the Board of Aldermen Henry B. Brewster, a Unitarian minister, petitioned "to withdraw the request and papers presented at your last meeting, respecting a Creole school, in this city, and respectfully request these papers may be returned to me." That request was laid on the table.<sup>55</sup> In November 1846, however, the Boards of Aldermen and Common Council authorized A. Sellier to teach free colored Creole children in the city of Mobile for one year. Sellier furnished the Boards with a list of eligible candidates.<sup>56</sup> Still the Creole school itself did not open for another two and a half years, as the newspaper did not announce until April 1849, that "we are pleased to learn that a Free School has been opened for the Creole population of this city."<sup>57</sup>

Public support was expressed for both the school and the Creole community. The press declared that "an establishment of this kind was greatly needed" and defended that caste who "had certain of the rights and privileges of

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<sup>55</sup>Proceedings of the Board of Aldermen, April 4, 1845, Box 7, Envelope 1, Folder 3, Document 3, RG 3, S 1, CMMA.

<sup>56</sup>Records of the Common Council, Minutes, 1841-1844, microfilm reel 140, November 27, 1844, p. 663, RG 3, S 5, Minutes of the Common Council, CMMA.

<sup>57</sup>Mobile Register and Journal, April 28, 1849.

American citizens secured to them by the treaty."

Throughout the antebellum years the white community realized the anomalous position that the free colored Creoles held in Mobile society, and they were recognized as "a peaceful, industrious and estimable class, and we notice with pleasure the first liberal effort towards their mental and moral culture."<sup>58</sup> A different Mobile paper shared the same sentiments, declaring "this class . . . by their uniformly quiet, temperate and industrious habits, have shown that the liberty thus conferred has never been abused." Illustrative of the assistance from the white community was a fifty dollar gift to the school from Mobile businessman Alexander Stoddart.<sup>59</sup>

The Mobile press did not oppose the opening of the Creole school, but a New Orleans paper became alarmed at the news. "What next?" the Bulletin asked. "If we are not very much mistaken there is a law in Alabama which, if put in force, would entail very unpleasant consequences upon the originators of this abolition movement."<sup>60</sup> In response, the Mobile Daily Advertiser reminded its readers that the Creoles de couleur of Mobile, like those in New Orleans, were of French and Spanish descent and were guaranteed "certain rights and privileges of citizenship." In defense

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<sup>58</sup>Ibid.

<sup>59</sup>Alabama Tribune, April 30, 1849.

<sup>60</sup>Quoted in Mobile Daily Advertiser, May 3, 1849.

of this class, the Advertiser stated, "it is true that all the descendants do not mingle upon an equality with the highest class of society, neither do they with the slave population. They are neither treated nor regarded as negroes. They are humble, unobtrusive, uniformly quiet, industrious and respectful." The Mobile paper reminded the Bulletin of the free colored Creoles in New Orleans, stating that "many of a similar cast receive greater privileges and have arrived at higher distinction in New Orleans, or we are much mistaken." The Advertiser concluded that "our cotemporary is unnecessarily alarmed."<sup>61</sup>

The Reverend Alexander McGlashan, who established the Bethel Free school in Mobile and opened the Creole academy, filed reports on the operation and condition of the latter. He credited the Creoles with the initiative for the school since they realized the value and importance of an education for their children. A committee of free colored Creoles, consisting of Faustin Collins, Joseph B. Laurant, Lawrence Broux, and John A. Collins, was to oversee the operation of the facility. They were supposed to enroll the names of eligible students at the mayor's office and to visit the school, thus ensuring that only these children actually attended. The committee was also supposed to "provide a

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<sup>61</sup>Mobile Daily Advertiser, May 3, 1849. See also Mobile Daily Register, January 17, 1850. On the New Orleans free people of color see David Connell Rankin, "The Forgotten People: Free People of Color in New Orleans, 1850-1870" (Ph.D. dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 1976).

suitable building" for classes, as well as solicit funds for maintainance. McGlashan reported that the school "opened under favorable conditions," but of the more than eighty students only five or six could read. Nevertheless, he added that "the scholars have made very commendable progress" in reading, writing, spelling, arithmetic, geography, sewing, and needlework. The children's formal education also involved instruction in the New Testament. Although attendance figures increased to 103 students (55 males and 48 females), the school operated that year at a financial deficit of nearly three hundred dollars. McGlashan pleaded with the Mobile community for assistance and stated his hope, "that Mobile will not be behind her sister city, New-Orleans, which appropriates \$1,000 annually for the support of Free Schools among her Creole population."<sup>62</sup>

In September 1850, McGlashan gave an account of the Creole school for the seven-month period ending August 10, 1850. The school had "continued to increase in interest since our last report," he wrote, praising the overall conduct and work of those at the school. "Discipline has been good, and as to the thoroughness, we have seldom attended an examination where the schools were more thoroughly drilled in the studies which they were pursuing than were the scholars of the Creole school." There had

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<sup>62</sup>Mobile Daily Register, January 17, 1850.



been a slight decrease in the number of students to a total of 90 pupils--53 boys and 35 girls. In addition to the previously noted subjects, the young Creoles also studied the Old Testament, astronomy, and philosophy. They were taught to sing "which not only confers a desirable accomplishment, but it also sweetens study." According to McGlashan, "the moral as well as the intellectual training of the children has been strictly regarded, and no pains spared to make them a blessing to themselves and the community in which they live."<sup>63</sup>

There were, however, problems associated with the school. In addition to a deficit of nearly \$300 for the first ten months or so of its operation, there was rent due for the past seven months--\$49. In spite of about \$465 netted from the Creole Fair (the school's largest source of income), it still had a deficit of about \$210 at the time of McGlashan's September report. Hoping that the city would assist the financially troubled institution, McGlashan politely reminded Mobile school commissioners that the Creoles paid their portion of the school taxes and "as yet, have received no returns." The parents also had to acquire a suitable schoolhouse since they could no longer retain the previous building.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup>Mobile Daily Advertiser, September 24, 1850.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid.

Despite some difficulties, the Creole school continued to operate. In February 1853, the Mobile School Board reported that "the school was in successful operation, though at some expense to the school fund." Still, that group recommended an appropriation of \$150.<sup>65</sup> Three months later, McGlashan filed a claim with the board "for reimbursement of his losses by the Creole school" and for other related matters, suggesting that he had used some of his own money for the maintainance of the school.<sup>66</sup> The school board did not immediately resolve this issue. In April 1854, he again asked the members to compensate him "for losses occasioned to him by his advances to the Creole Free school during his management" of it and before the Mobile School Board assumed its care. He also proposed to transfer the building and the lease of the property to that same body.<sup>67</sup> The following month it was agreed that McGlashan should receive about \$125 "on his transferring to this board the lease for the Creole school house lot and premises lately held by Alexander Stoddart," who had previously made a cash donation to the school.<sup>68</sup> Appropriately after assuming management of the Creole

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<sup>65</sup>Board of School Commissioners Minutes, vol. 3, February 2, 1853, p. 39, Barton Academy, Mobile, Alabama. The other volumes of the school board minutes used for this study are located in Barton Academy.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., May 4, 1853, pp. 51-52.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., April 19, 1854, p. 119.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., May 3, 1854, p. 125.

school, the Board of School Commissioners requested an examination of its condition. However, the assigned committee did not file its report with the board.<sup>69</sup>

In addition to its financial problems, the Creole school came under scrutiny from the Mobile School Board. In September 1855, the board considered closing the school. The executive committee of the board "was instructed to enquire into the expediency and legality of continuing the Creole school" and to ascertain that only authorized free colored Creoles were attending the school.<sup>70</sup> A month later the committee concluded that the Board should not close the school, a recommendation which that group adopted.<sup>71</sup>

Even though the Board agreed to keep the school open, it continued to discuss the future of educating the Creoles. In June 1856, a member of the executive committee recommended that the Creole school be closed for the balance of the school year.<sup>72</sup> As done the previous year, the board appointed a committee "to enquire into the propriety and legality" of continuing the school. It also decided to

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<sup>69</sup>Ibid., May 10, 1854, p. 127. The board instructed the committee to report its finding in two weeks but at that meeting on May 24, 1854, a member of the committee asked for an extension on the report which the board granted.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., September 5, 1855, p. 217.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., October 3, 1855, pp. 219, 221.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., June 4, 1856, p. 265.

postpone the election of its principal.<sup>73</sup> Three months later the committee filed its report, concluding that it was "expedient to continue the Creole school on the principles on which it has heretofore been conducted."<sup>74</sup> The board adopted that resolution and two others dealing with the operation of the school. In keeping with the 1833 act which authorized the teaching of the Creoles, the Board also required that a committee from the school take "a careful and exact enumeration . . . of all the children within the District between the ages of six and twenty-one who are descendants of the Creole inhabitants who resided in this Territory at the time of the Treaty of Cessions in 1803." Only those children whose names appeared on the list were to be taught.<sup>75</sup> The board then elected a principal for the Creole school.<sup>76</sup>

In addition to operating this school in the city of Mobile, the board soon organized other such schools in the county. A member of the board received a letter requesting "the establishment of schools for the white and creole children in the settlement at Chastang's Bluff," in north Mobile County.<sup>77</sup> Evidently that body approved the request.

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<sup>73</sup>Ibid., August 18, 1856, p. 289.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., September 3, 1856, p. 295.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., pp. 295, 297.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., September 3, 1856, p. 299.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., January 2, 1856, p. 236.

Minutes of the school board mention "local trustees" for "country districts," including the "Bluff" region. One of the representatives for the Bluff area was Zeno Chastang, grandson of Dr. John Chastang, and Zeno's apparent brother, Francis, also served as a trustee for the 1863-64 and 1864-65 terms. The selection of the Chastangs illustrates the respect and leadership that this family had among the other colored Creoles, as well as in the white community.<sup>78</sup>

There is some indication that a few of the lighter-skinned free persons of color found their way into all white schools. In 1862 some members of the community complained to the executive committee of the school board "of children having been admitted into two of the public schools who were tainted with negro blood." The exact number of children involved is not known, but "two of the pupils complained of were in the girls primary, and the other in the West Ward school." After the preliminary investigation, the committee concluded "that a question of law, touching their descent was involved." The board asked its attorney if the children "should be regarded in law, as white persons."<sup>79</sup> Alabama defined mulattoes or Negroes as any "person of mixed blood, descended, on the part of the father or mother from negro ancestors, to the third generation inclusive, though one ancestor of each generation may have been a white

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<sup>78</sup>Ibid., vol. 4, p. 300; *ibid.*, vol. 5, pp. 30, 78.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., vol. 4, May 7, 1862, p. 345.

person,"--in short, anyone of one-eighth or more Negro ancestry.<sup>80</sup> In August, nearly three and one-half months after the initial complaint, lawyers filed a report. The statement, "relative to the genealogy of certain children admitted into the public schools who were supposed to be of African descent," was accompanied "by voluminous testimony in writing." The board, after discussing the issue, tabled the matter, and the record did not indicate a further outcome. That this incident had no effect on the operation of the Creole school is evidenced by the board's reelection of that school's principal.<sup>81</sup>

One important cultural outgrowth of the education issue was the development of the annual Creole Fair. Originally, it was conceived as a much-needed financial project for the school. To attract patrons, the Creoles publicly announced in early 1850 that "no pains will be spared to make the sale and supper acceptable to all who may favor us with their presence," but they also sought the support of the community to ensure the success of the fair. "Anything in the way of fancy articles or refreshments, or donations of any kind which the good citizens of Mobile may send in to forward the above object will be thankfully received," they promised;

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<sup>80</sup>Ormond, Bagby, and Goldthwaite, The Code of Alabama, p. 58.

<sup>81</sup>Board of School Commissioners Minutes, vol. 4, August 28, 1862, p. 353; *ibid.*, September 3, 1862, p. 361. The quotation is from p. 353.

and the public responded. According to the school's Board of Managers, who were all free men of color, "a number of respectable Ladies have consented to assist the Creoles" at the fair.<sup>82</sup> In the wake of a successful fair held at the end of that year, the Creoles de couleur returned "their most hearty thanks to the good people of Mobile for the generous patronage they received."<sup>83</sup> On the occasion of still another fund raiser, one paper declared its high regard for the Creoles:

A more worthy and respectable class of citizens is not to be found than our Creole population. They are making laudable efforts for the education of their children, and are entitled to a liberal encouragement in the good work. The Fair is got up on handsome style, and an hour can be spent there very pleasantly. We hope the room will be well filled to-night.<sup>84</sup>

Both class solidarity and caste discrimination were evident in the conduct of the Creole Fair--as in their social life as well. Creole leaders warned in advance that "no slaves nor free persons of color, except the Creoles themselves, will be admitted to the Creole Fair, in order that Gentlemen and Ladies of Mobile, and strangers, who wish to aid the Creole Fair School, may not be annoyed by

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<sup>82</sup>Mobile Daily Register, February 12, 1850.

<sup>83</sup>Mobile Daily Advertiser, December 24, 1850.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., December 27, 1851. Even amid the adversities brought on by the Civil War, the Creoles continued to hold their fair. See Mobile Register and Advertiser, January 28, 1862, and February 8, 1865.

servants."<sup>85</sup> The free Creoles of color clearly considered themselves--and were considered--the elite of all free Negroes in Mobile. And they clearly excluded from their society other free nonwhites who were not Creoles.

Another annual event in Mobile, social rather than benevolent, was the May Day celebration. In keeping with Catholic tradition this holy day--the first day of May--was a day of celebration of children especially. Students from the various schools formed their own neighborhood processions and rounded out the day with songs, speeches, and plenty of food for all to enjoy.<sup>86</sup>

May Day held as much cultural significance to the colored Creoles as it did to Mobile's white population. Children from the Creole school marched from their schoolroom to Holly's Garden, described in one local paper as "one of the loveliest places in the country." Amid songs and speeches the Queen of May was crowned, "a very intelligent and pretty looking Creole girl," that same paper reported. After the formal events, "the Creole band then struck up an enlivening tune." A picnic followed. Like the Creole Fair, the May Day festivities of this caste attracted

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<sup>85</sup>Mobile Daily Advertiser, February 12, 1851.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid., May 2, 1851.



a large audience "who seemed to take a deep interest in the cause of Creole education in the city."<sup>87</sup>

Among all free nonwhites, the free Creoles of color developed a special relationship in Mobile society. The Mobile community not only accepted but also supported the Creoles and their organizations out of friendship and respect as well as legal compliance with the terms of the Adams-Onís Treaty that guaranteed their rights and privileges. By operating a separate fire company and school the free colored Creoles maintained their own class identity apart from other free Negroes and slaves.

In this cultural respect the free mulatto elite of Mobile were not unique among other free people of color in the South. Upper-class free Negroes in Charleston formed "their own social organizations, literary associations and library societies, which were as exclusive as the white social groups in Charleston." Charleston's mulatto elite had their own school and burial ground, "both of which were strictly reserved for members and their families."<sup>88</sup> Similarly in Louisiana, the Cane River's Creoles of color and their counterparts "were not [considered] black, and

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<sup>87</sup>Ibid. See also Alabama Planter, May 7, 1849, and May 6, 1850; Mobile Daily Register, May 3, 1851; Alabama Planter, May 5, 1851; and Mobile Daily Advertiser, May 2, 1855, for additional information on May Day.

<sup>88</sup>Wikramanayake, A World in Shadow, p. 81. See also Johnson and Roark, Black Masters, p. 213.

they would not deign to mingle with that class, slave or free."<sup>89</sup> Clearly class solidarity was equally important to Mobile's Creoles de couleur as a means of preserving both their distinctiveness and community respect. They eschewed association with what they considered the lower classes of free Negroes and slaves. They demonstrated their civic-mindedness and willingness to assume social responsibilities through their Creole Fire Company. Above all, they were a proud people concerned with the formal education of their children and their place in society.

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<sup>89</sup>Mills, The Forgotten People, p. 170.