

Chapter 7

Conclusion

The free Negro class had a variety of origins. The mulatto class owed its beginnings to the offspring produced by interracial alliances between the colonial settlers and their white descendants and Negro women, slave and free. Not only did white males have children with their slave concubines, but they also freed their "wives" and made arrangements to manumit their nonwhite children. Many of the white fathers with mixed families were single men who were legally prohibited from marrying women of their choice, rather than libidinous whites who broke marriage vows to raise illicit families. During the colonial years and at least through the early years of statehood free mulattoes and the mixed unions which produced them were tolerated. Manumissions account for only a small percentage of the total free nonwhite population. Some masters freed their slaves when they were baptized; other owners appealed to the state legislature, which manumitted or confirmed the emancipation of more than eighty slaves from the Mobile area. Only one of these was required to leave the state, suggesting the leniency of the legislature toward free Negroes. The increase of this group may be attributed to

other factors--free nonwhites who migrated to the area and slaves who purchased their freedom. Bondsmen who were allowed to live as free were a significant part of the Negro community. Local authorities were not successful in their efforts to put an end to the practice of allowing slaves to live on their own.

The legal rights of free Negroes varied. Although measures were enacted to control their activities, they did have access to the courts. Free people of color were involved in a variety of suits against whites and others of their class, and free Negroes won a number of these cases. Mobile police arrested free nonwhites for different offenses, the majority of which were minor. Few free Negroes were charged with such serious crimes as murder, rape, and insurrection. Judges and jurors took into consideration the circumstances and characteristics of each case and did not judge free people of color solely upon the facts. The Creoles of color received special consideration in the enjoyment of their rights. The federal government ensured important privileges for them through the provisions of the Louisiana Purchase Treaty and the Adams-Onis Treaty. Creoles of color were the only free nonwhites in Alabama who could legally sell liquor, attend school, and assemble with slaves.

Free nonwhites pursued a variety of economic endeavors. The Creoles of color in Mobile County, particularly the Andrys, Chastangs, and Dubrocas, built upon the resources that their white ancestors left them. Free Negroes in the rural areas generally owned land, livestock, and slaves. Raising livestock was an important activity for them, as was producing some crops for market. As in rural areas free people of color in the town of Mobile met with little opposition in the pursuit of economic success. They operated businesses and practiced a number of trades. For some leasing property, usually to whites, was another means of earning income. Those who did own land and slaves, whether they lived in rural areas or in the town of Mobile, were the privileged class among the free population.

Religion played an important part in the lives of free Negroes. Many of the nonwhite descendants of the French and Spanish adhered to the Catholic faith; they not only received the sacraments themselves, but their slaves also received similar graces. Free people of color, Catholic and Protestant, demonstrated concern and respect for one another by acting as godparents to others of their race, slave and free. Some of the Protestant denominations established separate missions for the nonwhites. Religious groups responded to the needs of the Negro community in different ways. Some Negroes demonstrated to church leaders that they were responsible members of the community, and they were selected to serve as leaders in their assemblies. Other

religious bodies evidently did not allow them to serve in this capacity. It does not appear that any one religion was more congenial to Negroes, though their involvement was greatest with the Catholic faith because they continued to follow the religious beliefs of their ancestors. And yet, the different religions afforded the same opportunities to slaves and free people of color in the sense that both groups were accepted as members of the major denominations. Clearly, the variety of religious groups of Mobile met the spiritual needs of the Negro population.

The free Creoles of color formed their own organizations that the Mobile community accepted and supported. Local and state officials authorized the formation of a fire company and a school for them. By operating them the Creoles de couleur maintained their class identity, which was especially evident in their social affairs, such as the Creole Fair, apart from other free Negroes and slaves. The Creoles of color manifested their civic-mindedness and willingness to assume social responsibilities through their Creole Fire Company. Class solidarity was important to them as a means of preserving their distinctiveness and maintaining community respect.