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# The Parish Identities of Free Creoles of Color in Pensacola and Mobile, 1698-1860

Virginia Meacham Gould

The Catholic Church, as locally represented by the parish, played an important political and social role in the Gulf ports of Mobile and Pensacola. Indeed, the role of the Church was viewed as central to the region's settlement from its earliest days. Spanish explorers who traveled to the region in the early sixteenth century were accompanied by missionaries whose duty it was to bring the mandate of Christ to the Native Americans. The clergy was also present at the subsequent settling of the ports. Pensacola was settled at Santa Rosa Island by the Spanish in 1559; however, it was deserted in 1561. It was resettled on the mainland in 1698. Its parish was established on November 21, 1698. Mobile was settled just a few years later, in 1702. Its parish was established July 20, 1703.<sup>1</sup>

After settlement, officials of French Louisiana and Spanish Florida were obligated by their respective crowns to establish the Church for the salvation of the settlers. Secular officials were also responsible for the upkeep of the churches and for the support of the proper number of clergy. Parish priests were also expected to establish and maintain the social order. That role was essential in a social system that was based on the hierarchy of race such as those in Louisiana and Florida. It was in the parish church that traditional human relations were recognized, sanctified, and legalized.<sup>2</sup>

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1. John Gilmary Shea, *The Catholic Church in Colonial Days* Vol. I (New York: John G. Shea, 1886); Roger Baudier, *The Catholic Church in Louisiana* (New Orleans, 1939). David J. Weber, *The Spanish Frontier in North America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992). James Thomas McGowan, "Creation of a Slave Society: Louisiana Plantations in the Eighteenth Century," (Ph.D. Diss., The University of Rochester, 1976).

2. There is no single treatise on the history of the region. For some of the general works on each port, colony, or state, see Peter J. Hamilton, *Colonial Mobile: An Historical Study Largely From Original Sources, of the Alabama-Tombigbee Basin and the Old South West From the Discovery of the Spiritu Santo in 1519 until the Demolition of Fort Charlotte in 1812* (Mobile: First National Bank of Mobile, 1952); Daniel Usner, *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley Before 1783* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992); David J. Weber, *The Spanish Frontier in North America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Thomas Marc Fiehrer, "The African Presence in Colonial Louisiana," in *Louisiana's Black Heritage* ed. by Robert R.

Church law and tradition in both early colonial French Louisiana and Spanish Florida recognized the basic obligations, as spelled out in legal codes, that masters and slaves had to one another. The Church did not openly oppose slavery; however, it did insist that the fundamental relations between slaves and masters should be based in mutual respect for humanity. That respect, according to the Church, would begin when masters introduced their slaves to Christianity. Masters were also obligated to have their slaves baptized, married, and buried in the Church. In the Church's view, a slave's baptism signaled his or her entrance into the Christian community, and even though some slaves did not receive the sacraments, many did.

The parish community was especially important for the slaves and free people of color in the ports. It was only in the parish that their equality as humankind before God was recognized. That equality was recognized by several visitors to the churches of the Gulf ports. Describing what he saw in the St. Louis Cathedral in New Orleans, Frederick Law Olmsted wrote that "dark shadows, and dusky light, and deep, subdued, low organ strains pervade the interior; and, on the bare floor, here are the kneeling women- 'good' and 'bad' women-and, ah! yes, white and black women, bowed in equality before their common Father." The semblance of equality that slaves and free people of color welcomed in their worship was not equally welcomed by the white communicants. One of the more obvious examples of resentment by whites in the region occurred at St. Martinsville, Louisiana. In a series of resolutions passed on June 29, 1843, the church wardens there informed their Bishop, Antoine Blanc, that "the pastor . . . [is] invited to establish the distinction that exists, even in the church, between whites and persons of color, or slaves, when they approach the holy table or the veneration of the cross."<sup>3</sup>

The role of the Church became even more important for the free people of color in Mobile and Pensacola during the final decades of the colonial period. Changes during that period began with the rapid shift in governance that occurred with the Treaty of Paris of 1763. With that treaty, France lost the region west of the Mississippi River to the Spanish. The same treaty ceded the French territory east of the river and that of the Spanish in Florida to the

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McDonald, John R. Kemp, and Edward F. Hass, (New Orleans: The Louisiana State Museum, 1979; Hans Baade, "The Law of Slavery in Spanish Luisiana, 1769-1803," ed by Louisiana's Legal Heritage (New Orleans: Louisiana State Museum, 1983); William S. Coker and Thomas D. Watson, *Indian Traders of the Southeastern Spanish Borderlands: Panton, Leslie & Company and John Forbes & Company, 1783-1847* (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1986). Herbert S. Klein, *Slavery in the Americas: A Comparative Study of Virginia and Cuba* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1967).

3. Cyprian Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), p. 71-74. A. Dumartrait to Bishop Blanc, July 10, 1843, St. Martinsville, La., Records of the Archdiocese of New Orleans. Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom* (New York: The Modern Library, reprinted 1969), 228.

British. The British governed Mobile and Pensacola for only a short time. In 1780 and 1781, a Spanish fleet from New Orleans captured these ports. That daring act guaranteed that the Spanish would govern the region until it was ceded to the United States: 1804 in New Orleans, 1811 in Mobile, and 1821 in Pensacola.

When Spain's secular and religious officials arrived in Mobile and Pensacola, they were greeted with hostility by the mostly French and British settlers. Worried about the possibility of a large-scale rebellion — there had been a small scale rebellion by white French and Creole settlers in New Orleans — the Spanish began to foster the support of the free people of color by implementing laws favorable to them. According to Spanish law, slaveholders could manumit their slaves by a simple act of the notary. No official approval was necessary. Furthermore, under the Spanish law of *coartación* slaves had the right to be manumitted. If a master resisted, the slave could go to court and ask for an appraisal of his or her worth. Slaveholders under that system could not prevent slaves from purchasing their own freedom, even if their self-purchases were made by installment. There is evidence in other parishes of the “New World” that it was often the priest who held the money for slaves seeking their freedom. And finally, under the Spanish Church, infant slaves could be freed at the baptismal font.<sup>4</sup>

Whenever possible, slaves purchased their freedom and the freedom of their relatives. They fostered ties with their white neighbors with whom they were frequently linked by blood. They obtained property. Finally, they formed an increasingly important alliance with the Church as local priests encouraged them to fill the pews that had been deserted by their white neighbors. Commentators wrote that the pews were disproportionately filled with free people of color, especially women. Sacramental registers reveal large numbers of free people of color who brought their children to the priests to be baptized, whether legitimate or not.<sup>5</sup>

The political and economic conditions that had been advantageous to the free people of color during the colonial era disappeared soon after the nineteenth century commenced. Two significant events occurred that threatened the free people of color. The initial threat came from the success of plantation agriculture. Planters around New Orleans found a successful manner in which to

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4. Christopher Nordmann, “Free Negroes in Mobile County, Alabama,” (Ph.D. Diss., University of Alabama, 1990) Klein, *Slavery in the Americas*, 97.

5. *Le Code noir or Edit du Roi*, Versailles, 1724; *Le Code noir, or loi municipal . . . entrepris par Deliberation du Cabildo en vertu des Ordres du Roi...consignés dans sa Lettre Faite à Aranjuez le 14 de Mai 1777* (1778). Copy in Parsons Collection, Humanities Research Center Library, University of Texas at Austin. Paul LaChance, “The Formation of a Three Caste Society,” *Social Science History* 18:2 (Summer 1994). Kimberly S. Hanger, “Personas de Varias Clases y Colores: Free Persons of Color in the Spanish New Orleans, 1769-1803, (Ph.D. Diss., University of Florida, 1991.)

cultivate sugar cane. Those around Mobile and Pensacola took advantage of the invention of the cotton gin in order to efficiently produce cotton. Plantations around the two ports prospered. The booming economy soon attracted an increasing number of Anglo-Americans to the region.<sup>6</sup>

The attitudes that the settlers from the American South brought with them were based on presumptions about race, color, and conditions that were different from those in the Gulf ports. Settlers in both regions believed that in the ideal world whites were to be free while blacks were to be slaves. That ideal, however, was adhered to more literally in the American South than it was in the Gulf Coast region. Whereas it was not impossible for slaves in the Gulf region to find their freedom, it was difficult and rare for those in the Anglo-South. Furthermore, attitudes about racial mixing also differed. In the South, racial mixing was considered taboo. Racially-mixed slave children were almost always denied by their white fathers who knew that their reputations would be ruined if the truth were known. Few of those children were recognized or freed. Racial mixing in the Gulf region, however, was not only not taboo, it was common and even acceptable. White fathers in the Gulf ports frequently recognized their racially-mixed offspring and freed them whenever possible. The three-caste system that had evolved as a consequence of liberal attitudes towards racial mixing during the eighteenth century was confronted by an increasing insistence on a two-caste system in the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup>

The prosperity of plantation agriculture, reinforced by the increasingly rigid attitudes of the inhabitants of the region, induced the respective territorial councils of Alabama, Florida, and Louisiana to enact more stringent slave codes. First, legislators of each respective territory — which later became states — turned their attention to the slaves by passing restrictive laws against them. After passing rigid slave codes, the legislators focused their attention on containing the growth of the free people of color and on restricting their maneuverability. The laws were extensive; but in general, they prohibited masters from manumitting their slaves without official permission from either the court or the legislature. Age limits were soon added to the restrictions on manumission and then freed slaves were ordered to leave their respective states. By 1860, lawmakers had enacted laws that completely prohibited manumission. Free people of color were forbidden to carry firearms, to be found with slaves, and even to buy and sell property without a guardian. By the late antebellum period it is clear that state legislators viewed free people of color as a threat to

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6. Virginia Meacham Gould, "In Defense of their Creole Culture: The Free Creoles of Color of New Orleans, Mobile, and Pensacola, in *Creoles of the Gulf South*, ed. by James Dorman (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1996).

7. Michael P. Johnson and James L. Roark, *Black Masters* (New York: W.W. Norton Press, 1984); Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

the institution of slavery and sought to restrict their freedom, or even eliminate them.<sup>8</sup>

In response to the increasing discriminatory tactics leveled against them by their new neighbors and their politicians, the free people of color of the ports began to identify themselves as a distinct group — as creoles of color. The term *Creole* was an old term brought to the region by the earliest settlers. During the eighteenth century, the term *Creole* was meant to describe a person who was born in the colonies, as opposed to someone from Europe. The term *Creole*, in fact, was interchangeable with native of the region.<sup>9</sup>

During the first years of the nineteenth century, however, the term Creole came to symbolize the *ancienne population*, or those persons born in the colonies, who belonged to a specific culture, a creole culture. Joseph Tregle, a well-known Louisiana historian, has outlined the process that led to the recognition of the specific Creole identity. For several decades at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Tregle writes, “white Americans and Creoles engaged in a battle for control over society with each group struggling to mold the whole to its particular design.” Issues dividing the factions ran so deep, he argues, that “those involved in the contest not unreasonably thought of themselves as engaged in a struggle for the very soul of the community.” The Duke of Saxe-Wiemar-Eisenach commented on the antagonism between the Creoles and the Americans. “The aversion of the French Creoles to the Americans,” he wrote, “is notable.” Indeed, Creoles and Americans had little in common. They preferred different foods, different architecture, and different neighborhoods. Harriett Martineau noted that the language was a key factor in separating the two groups. In her commentary on the region, she wrote that the division between the Americans and the Creoles was “visible even in the drawing room.” The French complained, she wrote, that the “Americans will not speak French, will not meet their neighbors even halfway in accommodation of speech.”<sup>10</sup>

Certainly, the division in the society was notable in the churches where the *Creole*, or *ancienne population* clung to their Catholicism; the Americans to their Protestantism. The Protestant Major General George McCall, an officer with the United States Army stationed at Pensacola soon after the old Spanish colony was transferred to the United States, wrote home of his observations

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8. Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters*. Also for a comparison of the acts passed by the colonial, territorial and then state governments, see Virginia Meacham Gould, “In Full Enjoyment of Their Freedom,” (Ph.D. Diss., Emory University, 1991.)

9. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: L.S.U. Press, 1993).

10. Joseph Tregle, “Creoles and Americans,” in Arnold Hirsch and Joseph Logsden’s *Creoles of New Orleans: Race and Americanization* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1992). Bernard Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach, *Travels through America during the Years 1825-1826* (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea, and Carey, 1827); Harriett Martineau, *Retrospect of Western Travel* Vol II (London: Saunders and Co., 1838).

about the general characteristics of the “Creoles.” One of their characteristics, he wrote, was that their creed was still Catholic, and the “sole edifice consecrated to the worship of the Deity is a chapel of antique stamp and rusty exterior, on the south side of the ‘Plaza,’ as the public square here is called.”<sup>11</sup>

The population that had come to recognize itself as Creole was in no way homogeneous. In fact, McCall was especially struck by the diverse population that came together to worship in the old Catholic Church of the town. And indeed, threatened with being overwhelmed by Americans and American ways, the diverse *ancienne population* recognized the similarity of their interests and culture in response to the other, American culture. The diversity of the population that met and worshipped together was no where more obvious than in the description that McCall gives of the people attending Mass.

“It was interesting,” he wrote:

to watch the motley multitude of grave and gay, aged and young, wending their way towards the house of worship. There is the elderly Spanish lady, whose thick veil descends in ample folds about her person, followed at a respectful distance by the neatly-dressed slave, carrying her chair and cushion; the first of these articles being inverted in such a way that the bottom rests on the gay cotton handkerchief with which the girl’s head is decorated, and the back descending behind, leaves one hand free for salutation, while the other clasps the cushion. Then comes a group of young men, loitering indolently along; these are followed by an old Frenchman, all complaisance, bowing to all he meets. Last of all appears the feminine, black-eyed, naive young Creole, whose air and carriage are as striking and attractive as her dress is simple and modest.<sup>12</sup>

Yet even while the population knew itself to be diverse, it had become increasingly homogeneous over the decades of colonial rule. White, black, and racially-mixed Creoles identified with one another across race and class. McCall wrote in a subsequent letter home that he had ample opportunity to “see daily, and study hourly, the strange commixture of manners and habits of these descendants of the Spaniard, the Frenchman, and the Englishman, who make up the population of the town. There was “consequently a great diversity, and at the same time a strange similarity in the appearance of individuals, and in their habits and manners.”<sup>13</sup>

McCall also noted that much of the acculturation, or similarity in the population, was due to “the natural result of a mingling of races. . . .” Black, white and racially-mixed Creoles recognized that they shared a unique culture that

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11. Major General George A. McCall, *Letters from the Frontiers* (Gainesville, The University of Florida Press, reprinted 1974), 15-16.

12. McCall, *Letters from the Frontiers*, p. 16.

13. McCall, *Letters from the Frontiers*, 13-14.

had evolved over generations of mutual experience. They realized that their identities were knit together by kinship, common interest, and culture. The death notice of John Rigo that appeared in a Pensacola newspaper in 1857 demonstrates the relations between the white Creoles and the free Creoles of Color. The notice read: "The deceased being a native of Pensacola, being a quadroon (a person who was racially classified as one-quarter African or Black) and a descendant of one of the earliest settlers. John Rigo enjoyed the respect and confidence of all who knew him and the confidence was made manifest on more than one occasion by his elevation to places of public trust."<sup>14</sup>

Free Creoles of Color took pride in the heritage they shared with the white Creoles and fostered relations with them. Relations between differing elements of the population were encouraged by the Church. Sacramental records for both parishes demonstrate that it was not unusual for Creoles of Color to choose whites to serve as the godparents to their children. For instance, the *mulata* Maria Ruby had four of her children confirmed in Pensacola in 1798 and in every case a white *Creole* served as sponsor or godparent. Francisco Navarro served as the *padrino* of her son Pedro. Don Ygnacio Courville served as the *padrino* for her sons Francisco Benigno and Luis Zeferino and Dona Adelaida Dutillet was the *madrina* of Maria Ruby's daughter, Maria de la Encarnación. It is also clear from the records that whites who served as godparents were often related to their racially-mixed godchildren. In Mobile, for instance, the white Hilare Dubroca served as the godfather to Josephine Dubroca. Josephine Dubroca was the racially-mixed daughter of Hilare Dubroca's brother, Maximillian, and his free Creole of Color cohabitant, Euphrosine Andry. Sometimes a white neighbor would be asked to serve as a godparent.<sup>15</sup>

While the distinction or identity of Creole was important to all of the *ancienne population*, it took on an especially significant meaning to the Creoles of color. The identity of Creole was important because the Louisiana Purchase Treaty of 1803 and the Adams-Onís Treaty of 1821 guaranteed them the rights of citizenship. But while the language of the treaty was meant to protect the entire population that Spain left behind, it was only the free Creoles of Color who were forced to rely upon its guarantees. In just one example of many, a law was enacted in Alabama in 1822 that prohibited "any free negro or mulatto, either directly or indirectly, to retain any kind of spirituous liquors within this state." The same act provided, however, that the prohibition should not affect those "free negro, mulatto, or other persons, who, by the treaty between

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14. McCall, *Letters from the Frontiers*, 14; *The Pensacola Gazette*, April 4, 1857.

15. Baptisma Nigrorum, January 15, 1804; Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception; Confirmations conferred in the plaza of Pensacola, The seventh day of May, to the following by the Most Reverend Señor Don Luis Peñalver y Cardenas, First Worthy Bishop of this Diocese, in the present year of 1798.

the United States and Spain, became citizens of the United States, or the descendants of any such person." In 1828, a law was enacted by the territorial council in Florida that prohibited free people of color from owning weapons without first obtaining a license from the justice of the peace. The law specifically exempted the free Creoles of Color of Pensacola from the restrictions.<sup>16</sup>

It was their necessity to protect their identities as Creoles with rights guaranteed by the Louisiana Purchase Treaty and the Adams-Onís Treaty that bound the free Creoles of color to the Catholic Church in unexpected ways. The Church, of course, reinforced endogamy by mandating that Catholics marry other Catholics, but free Creoles of color in the ports had their own reasons for marrying within the Church. For it was in the registers of the Catholic Churches that the descendancy, and thus, the identity of the Creoles was recorded. The marriages, births, and deaths of the free Creoles of color were meticulously recorded in the Church registers. For instance, the marriage records of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception demonstrate that almost all of the marriages of the free people of color were between established members of the Creole of color community. For instance, one record shows that Maximillian Dubrocard married Annette Bernody in May 1831. Another demonstrates that in June 1831 Louise Chastang married Brazile Dubrocard. Then, in April 1834, Nesin Dubrocard married Britanie Bernody.<sup>17</sup>

Various records in the ports suggest that even when free Creoles of Color eschewed marriage, they cohabited with other Creoles. In one example of many, Jean Chastang of Mobile, cohabited with and then freed a family slave, Louison, with whom he later fathered ten children. Chastang acknowledged his children in the baptism records of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception. He also acknowledged his liaison with Louison in his will when he bequeathed to his "beloved friend and companion, Louison, a free negro woman, who has resided with me for twenty years past and has been my sole attendant in health and particularly in sickness," my entire estate and dwellings, which were considerable. There is little evidence in any of the ports, however, that free Creoles of Color cohabited with those outside their religion, or parish community. Those illegal relations between white men and slave and

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16. See the American State Papers for the Louisiana Purchase Treaty and the Adams-Onís Treaty. The acts of the General Assembly for Baton Rouge are housed at the State Museum in Baton Rouge. Those for Florida are in the office of the Secretary of State, Tallahassee. The acts for Alabama are housed at the Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery. Gwendolyn Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*.

17. Marriage records, May 1831, June 1831, April 1834, Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, Mobile. For an analysis of the sacramental records of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, see Oscar H. Lipscomb, "The Administration of Michael Portier, Vicar Apostolic of Alabama and the Floridas, 1825-1829, and the First Bishop of Mobile 1829-1859," (Ph.D. Diss., Catholic University of America, 1963), 385-386.

free women of color were sanctified, either through marriage or through the baptism and recognition of the children.<sup>18</sup>

Free Creoles of Color also protected their identities and status through the formation of exclusive organizations and those organizations were loosely linked to the parish churches. The only extant records for these organizations are those for Mobile, but the records in Mobile mention associated organizations in New Orleans and Pensacola. The free Creole of Color associations in Mobile included the Creole Fire Department, the Creole Social Club, and the ladies auxiliary of the Creole Social Club. The Creole Fire Department was officially founded in the 1820s as one of the fire companies in Mobile. It was an exclusive, by invitation only, association that held regular weekly meetings which were often attended by the local priest. The Creole firemen participated in local parades, organized balls, picnics, and other social functions to raise money for their company and their equipment. The Creole Social Club, and its ladies auxiliary, also held weekly meetings. Their main purpose was to provide insurance for their members. Each organizations remained active throughout the nineteenth century and each included a local priest at its meetings.<sup>19</sup>

Education also served to protect the identities of the free Creoles of Color of the ports and separated them from slaves and other free people of color. The Church educated free people of color from the earliest days of settlement. But as the political climate changed in the region, the legislative councils of Alabama and Florida instituted laws that prohibited anyone from teaching free people of color to read or write. Consequently, most free people of color of Alabama and Florida were illiterate. But in 1833, the legislature of the state of Alabama officially recognized the unique status of the Creoles of Color when it passed an act that directed the mayor and aldermen of the city of Mobile to authorize and license teachers to educate the children of the free Creoles of Color (Clay 1843). Alabama's lawmakers clearly intended for only those children who were the "descendants of those persons who were residents of the said city and counties, at the time the treaty was made between the French republic and the United States of America, in April 1803" to be educated. The act stipulated that children of other free people of color were not to be educated by the city. In order to assure that only Creole children were educated, the law further stated that "none of the colored children shall be so taught or

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18. Probate Court Record, Jean Chastang, Loose Files, Mobile County Courthouse. Baptismal records, May 1812 and June 1812, Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception.

19. The records of the Creole Fire Department and the Creole Social Club and its auxiliary are housed at the Mobile Museum. Jay Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History of Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1985), 159. Dolan makes the point that mutual-aid groups were often an official part of parish life. Yet while the Creole Fire Department, the Creole Social Club, and the Ladies Auxiliary of the Creole Social Club were sponsored by the parish priest, there is no evidence that they were officially sponsored by the Church.

instructed, until they shall first have the permission of the said mayor and alderman of the city of Mobile and they shall have recorded the names of such children in a book to be kept by them for that purpose.” It was to the records of the Church or a statement by a priest that any question about identity could be settled.<sup>20</sup>

The churches that were scattered across the Gulf, then, served not only as religious institutions, but also as the guardians of the identities and the political rights of many of its members. The priests, who carefully and thoroughly recorded the identities of the population, recognized the seriousness of their tasks. Their role as protector that had emerged during the colonial period became increasingly important during the antebellum period as state laws and racist attitudes threatened the free Creoles of color. Free Creoles of color, recognizing their precarious status, were careful to register the births of their children in the baptismal records of the church and to involve the priests in their communities' organizations.

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20. Harry Toulmin, *A Digest of the Laws of the State of Alabama containing the Statutes and Resolutions in Force at the End of the General Assembly in January, 1823* (New York: Cahawba, Ginn, and Co., 1823), 68-69.