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LOSS OF IDENTITY ON PENSACOLA'S PAST: A CREOLE FOOTNOTE

by DONALD H. BRAGAW*

Research into the status of Pensacola's blacks during the progressive era uncovers an interesting sidelight into the history of the city's Creole population. It is a glimpse into the decline of a once-proud tradition. It is also indicative of the Creole's ambivalent posture as they were forced by increasing turn-of-the-century racist pressures to declare their allegiance to, or to throw in their lot with, the black or white race. In being forced to "declare" meant for many of the Creoles a loss of their separate identity.

The Creole population factor in Pensacola's history was small, but it was relatively significant. Many of these residents were of uncertain lineage, both as to origin and status. Successive Spanish, French, and English occupations of the Pensacola area had led to several strains of inter-mixture over the span of Florida's colonial period. Aside from the colonial shifting and inter-marriage of these Europeans, there was also from the beginning, miscegenation with native Indians, and imported Negro servants and worker classes especially from Cuba.¹ This resultant mulatto strain continued into the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries under the inaccurate but useful umbrella term "Creole." It would appear from the records that the Negro-Spanish (French or English) did adopt the Creole designation to distinguish themselves from the increasing "pure" Negro population which entered Pensacola before and especially after the Civil War. The Creoles established themselves in the central area of the city around Seville Square which was also the colonial center of the

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1. The term Creole traditionally indicates French-Spanish lineage with no native mixture, but this is not the way it is used by Pensacola "Creoles" or by the Pensacola city directories. They define a Creole as a mulatto, the mixture of Spanish and French with the Negro population. "Creole" as used in this article adopts this broader definition.

community. Later they expanded into the waterfront areas, east and west of Seville Square—providing the first major urban expansion.²

The identity crisis for the Creoles reveals itself in the designation of such families in the city directory listings which vary from year to year: editions prior to 1900 included them with the white population; those of the post-1900 period, listed many in the “colored” sections.³ However designated, most of these Creoles had established themselves by 1900 in relatively secure professional, proprietorial, artisan, and service positions. While the presence of Creoles may well have aided in accommodating the presence of blacks in the city at first, the eventual abolition of the term “Creole” from the directory by 1910 is one major indicator of the intensity of racial feelings at this point in Pensacola’s history.

The 1896 edition of the directory, for example, has an integrated alphabetical listing of the city’s total residential and occupational Negro, white, and Creole population. The Creole citizens are clearly designated by the term Creole, while the Negro population is labelled with the abbreviation “(col.)” In 1898, for the first time among available directories, white and black population segments are segregated into two distinct alphabetical sections. Under this arrangement, the Creoles retained their designation but were listed in the white population section of the directory. Yet a year earlier one of Pensacola’s leading commercial and social booster magazines makes no such distinction for Creoles. In a section of the magazine devoted to “Pensacola’s Colored People,” it includes John Sunday, one of the city’s leading Creole citizens. All others included in the article were recognized Negroes.⁴ The fact that the magazine used the euphemistic term “colored” indicates the ambivalence of reference to which certain of the Creoles were subject. This is also shown in

2. The 1970 demise of St. Michael’s Creole Benevolent Society, located but a few houses from Seville Square, marked the end of any remaining “Creole” tradition. The records of the society are not available.

3. *Webb’s Pensacola Directory*, 1885-1886 (New York, 1885); *Wiggin’s Pensacola City Directory* (Columbus, 1896, 1898, 1903); *R. L. Polk & Co.’s Pensacola City Directory* (Jacksonville, Richmond, 1905 to date). This title changed to *Polk’s Pensacola City Directory* in 1921. See also Peter R. Knight, “City Directories as Aids to Ante-Bellum Urban Studies: A Research Note,” *Historical Methods Newsletter*, II (September 1969), 1-10.

4. F. E. Washington, “Pensacola’s Colored People,” *Bliss Quarterly* (January 1897), 137-41. Miss Washington was a Negro.

the Negro press itself as late as 1906, when *The Florida Sentinel* stated: "Pensacola's population may fairly be estimated at 27,000, four tenths of this number are colored, if the Creole citizens are included. Pensacola population is equally divided between the colored and white races."⁵

The separate directory sections for white and colored citizens continued in the city directories through the first decade of the twentieth century. Increasingly, however, several one-time Creole listings in the white section of the directory begin to appear in the colored section, and, as was the case of all colored listings, an asterisk appeared before their names. Several instances of double listings in both the white and colored sections may be attributed to error on the part of the canvassers for the directory, the directory compilers, or the citizens themselves. This occurred most often with persons pursuing so called "middle class" occupations. It is possible that in some cases, such as with barbers, the dual listings may have been requested by the listee so as to accommodate the patronage of both races. Whatever, the evidence is strong that at least where the city directories were concerned the Creoles were being pressed into making a decision as to their racial status. The skin color factor was now clearly to determine whether they wanted to or could cross the line into the white community, or by the nature of their skin hue to go "black." It is to be assumed that the decision had really already been made for the darker-skinned Creoles, or for those with the lighter-skin coloration but whose facial features were dominantly Negroid. Such must have been the case with the family of John Sunday (whose picture in the *Bliss Quarterly*, incidentally, seems to reflect an oriental trace), since in 1897 several of his children were attending Negro schools like Fisk University and Meharry Medical College. This was also evidence of acceptance of Negro status by some Creoles.

The cut-off date for Creole listings was the Pensacola directory for 1910. That year the directory marked a return to an integrated listing with "colored" designated by an asterisk; the once distinctive Creole designation disappeared. Creole family listings were henceforth designated as either white or colored, with the majority listed as colored. The same condition appeared

5. Pensacola *The Florida Sentinel* (June 1906), 9.

in the separate business listings, a major feature at the end of each directory. No longer were Creole grocers or barbers so designated; after 1910, with but one noted exception, they were designated as Negro. Few Creoles were able "to pass" physically or racially into the white society.

Several case studies of families affected by this directory designation reveals the distinction. In one family the shift from Creole to colored began as early as 1905; of the four individuals involved three of them, a harnessmaker and two seamstresses, resided at the same address. The fourth person was also a harnessmaker. Because that occupation was somewhat unusual, it is possible that he was either immediately related, and/or worked in the same shop. In the 1910 directory the entire family was listed as colored. The occupational analysis of this family spans the artisan to menial categories with an emphasis on the former category: foremen, contractors, barbers, and bayman (a loader of ships.) This proportion tended to be true of Pensacola Creoles— at least into the 1920s. If they did not retain their quasi-position in the white society's business directories, they did retain their occupational status. Particularly was this true of the barbers, traditionally a "Creole occupation." In the case of this family, one member remains a prominent and respected barber (1972), owning his own shop.

In the case of another Creole family, one who was a barber, he was able at the beginning of the first decade of the twentieth century to establish his own "shaving shop," but like many other black entrepreneurs it lasted only a short time, for by 1905 it was no longer in operation. In 1924, "Victor," however, was still a barber, but working for another former Creole. In the 1924 directory for the first time, Agnes, a Creole, is listed as a "domestic," a position which until then had been associated exclusively with blacks.

There is an example of a reverse racial designation which appeared in the 1910 directory. Edward, a bartender, had been listed in the Creole-white section from 1896 to 1904. He was designated colored in 1905, but by 1910 he was listed as white, and he continued in this category in succeeding directories. A reverse pattern existed for Edmund, a grocer whose final designation of "colored" was a change from his previously consistent Creole-white designation. "J. M." follows the pattern from

“Creole” into a white designation. His occupation as bookkeeper may have been the factor which allowed him to pass into a white category. His address was in the Creole section of town, near those of his relatives who by 1910 were designated as “colored.” George, another member of this family, was listed as white beginning in 1910, and he also resided in close proximity to his relatives who were designated as “colored.”

While this study is not concerned essentially with the future of the Creole families, it is a matter of note that one of the families was not listed by the directory in 1934. While two families retain their identification with barbering, an increasing number were listed as gardeners, laborers, and roofers by the late 1920s and the early 1930s.

What is suggested by this directory data is reflective of the progressive era's general disregard of non-white populations in Florida and elsewhere. In the passing of the once-acceptable Creole society, there is evidence of the growing intolerance of “colored” regardless of their past position or status. This decline in Creole fortunes, moreover, is directly related to the general economic decline of Pensacola as a major gulf port. This economic reversal was accompanied by the reduced occupational status of the colored population in the community. These racial and economic factors unite in just one more particularistic instance of southern progressive “benign neglect,” and social, economic, and political inequity.