

WHAT IF YOUR ANCESTOR LIED?

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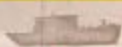
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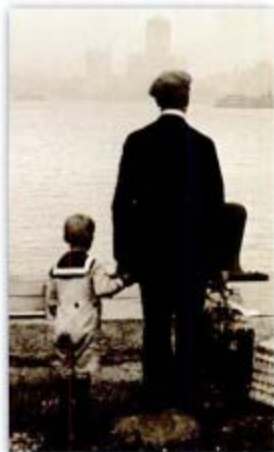
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Forgotten People of America

A World War II soldier, home on furlough, wrote the editor of the *Chicago Tribune* in 1943:

Can someone tell me about a place called Cane River...Louisiana? While [we were] on maneuvers [there] the people were so nice to us. They gave us coffee and hot biscuits, creole gumbo filet, and rice. They were a bit shy and they spoke French and broken English, and one old lady read eighteenth-century French for us in her prayer book and gave us her blessings....They live in an old world, off to themselves, and have their own church, school, and places of amusement. When asked who they were, one lady answered in French, "We are the forgotten people of America."¹

by Elizabeth Shown Mills, CG, CGL, FASG

The world that Private James Holloway encountered is a fabled Isle deep in the heart of Louisiana, some fifty square miles of rich alluvial land meandering between Cane River and one of its ancient branches.² The Creoles who settled it are indeed a “forgotten” people, a culture like none of the stereotypes Americans learn from the classroom and the media.

Louisiana’s Creoles of color were not just free men in a slave society. They were families of diverse ethnic blends who rose from slavery to become masters. Under France and Spain, they were a respected third caste; but Anglo officials who wrested control of Louisiana after the Purchase of 1803 recognized neither their caste nor their citizenship. The Islanders of Cane River, being French, Spanish, German, African, and Indian—and proud of all their forebears, noble and peasant—refused to accept the idea that one had to be either white or black. And so, they preserved their identity by retreating into their world.

When Cane River’s multi-hued freedmen settled the Isle in the 1790s, it was their Canaan. From pestilential canebreaks they hacked out a plantation empire whose mansions were the envy of new arrivals from Anglo-America. Amid the destruction of Civil War and the poverty and persecution of Jim Crow, the Isle was their refuge. For more than a century since then, the memory of the world their forebears created—and the role their ancestors once played as a cultural bridge between divided races—has been a source of strength, pride, and inspiration for generations of their offspring.

A Puzzling Legacy

Cane River stole my heart in 1970. Not just the Isle but the forty-mile valley that winds out of Red River and up to the ancient village of the Natchitoches Indians where, in 1714, France set up Louisiana’s westernmost outpost. As a young wife and mother, I went there to find my children’s roots, never suspecting that a bout of curiosity would become a lifelong love affair. Like Private Holloway, I found its people puzzling. They came in every shade, even though they shared the same family names. They worshipped in the same churches but, curiously, in different wings: one for whites, one for blacks, and one for those considered to be neither.

More perplexing, they shared the same records, challenging modern researchers to sort them out: Rachal from Rachal, Le Court from Le Cour from La Cour, this Jean



Nicolas Augustin Metoyer, oldest son of Coincoin and Piene, and his wife Marie Agnes Poissot, ca. 1836.

Baptiste from that Jean Baptiste. Among them all, like a thread stitching them together, were the Metoyers, f.m.c. (free men of color), a family that intrigued me even though I could find no place for them on our family charts.

Unexpectedly, in 1972, fate made the Island families mine in a different way. Natchitoches’ preservation society was gifted with the estate grounds of a plantation on the Isle—a mansion and outbuildings steeped in lore and wracked with controversy. If legends could be believed, they were built in the colonial era by a freed slave variously called Marie Thérèse and Coincoin. I was asked to document its past for an application to the National Register. My husband, Gary, a doctoral candidate in history, joined me in the project when his studies allowed.

As usual, the legends strayed here and there from the facts of history, like partners in a waltz who touch and twirl together, then swing away to flirt with others before coming back into each other’s arms. Yet the story that emerged from thousands of records scattered across six nations (the United States, Canada, Mexico, Cuba, Spain, and France) was even more incredible.

At the project’s end, the fabled plantation—actually founded by Coincoin’s son Louis Metoyer and known now as Melrose—was declared a National Historic Landmark, the same designation accorded to the homes of George Washington and Robert E. Lee.

A Legend’s Roots

The enigmatic Marie Thérèse dite Coincoin³ was born at the Natchitoches outpost in August 1742, the fourth child

of a union forced upon her enslaved parents. Her father, an African artisan, was a new arrival when he was baptized as François in December 1735. Three weeks later he was wedded to Françoise, called Fanny. Coincoin's mother, according to tradition, was the daughter of an African king, captured as a child by warriors of a rival tribe and sold into slavery.

As personal servants to the post commandant and his wife, François and Fanny enjoyed privileged status among the frontier's slaves. Ironically, that status also wrought their deaths when yellow fever struck the commandant's household, when François and Fanny nursed, then buried, their mistress. Weakened by the fever themselves, they both succumbed within hours of each other. Over their dead bodies, legend holds, the sixteen-year-old Coincoin swore an oath to earn her family back its birthright. One day they would be free—and they would be the masters.

She kept her oath, paying a painful, troubling price. When freedom came, she was forty-five years old and the mother of fifteen children. Five were borne of a slave marriage to a Plains Indian who, tradition says, left her when she would not abandon their children and flee with him to freedom among his people. Ten more children were borne of a French merchant, Pierre Metoyer, with whom she struck a bargain and then stayed years longer than their bargain required.

Cut loose from a twenty-year concubinage violently opposed by her church, Coincoin began life anew. Trained by her mother in healing arts, she doctored the ill, harvested herbs for medicine, trapped bear and turkey for resale, and helped her teenaged sons clear the sixty-seven acres their father gave for their support. With cash from her labors, she paid down on the freedom of her half-Indian children and siblings, at least those whose masters agreed to sell them. By her death in 1816, at the age of seventy-four, she was the mistress of more than a thousand acres and some sixteen slaves. At least seventy-four grandchildren would mourn her passing.

The Forgotten Empire

In 1792, Coincoin's oldest half-French son, Augustin Metoyer, petitioned the Spanish Crown for a grant of land downriver on the Isle—395 acres studded in canebrakes and bristling with yucca. His brothers followed, obtaining their own grants from a Crown that encouraged all citizens

regardless of color. They cleared and planted, bought the freedom of their brides, then sacrificed to free other kinsmen who joined them on the Isle. Tract by tract they bought surrounding lands, as well as slaves to help them work it—that being what planters did in a plantation economy. With time, more than 18,000 acres bore the name Metoyer, f.m.c., on parish maps. Nearly 500 slaves called them master. Scores of those, they freed.

For the Islanders, the goal was not mere prosperity but survival in a radically changing world. Amid the cultural battle waged between the old, white Creole regime and the new Anglo arrivals, the Islanders occasionally tilted the balance of economic and political power. Wealthy, pious, and cultured, they built schools for their youth, importing tutors to instill the French and Creole values that the Anglo newcomers decried. When the parish (county) lost its Catholic church, they built one on the Isle and invited white Creole neighbors to join them. Those neighbors came—sitting respectfully behind the families of color who had provided the house of worship.

As insulation against Anglo Louisiana's growing distrust of free people of color, they made the Isle a self-sufficient economy. Their young people diversified, opening stores

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and learning crafts and trades. Censuses taken on the eve of the Civil War rank them among the wealthiest families in one of the wealthiest parishes of the state. Passersby on the ships that steamed up from New Orleans—including the famed traveler, Frederic Law Olmsted—were shocked to learn that the pillared mansions dotting the Isle were those of a family born in slavery.¹

Then came war. Both armies plundered and burned, leaving the Islanders destitute. Amid the destruction of Reconstruction, the people of the Isle saved their refuge from the auction block by moving into the cabins of their former slaves, tearing down their Big Houses, and selling the brick for cash to pay their taxes. As area whites regained prosperity and began to refurbish their own war-torn homes,

the Isle was plundered once again. A sack of groceries could be exchanged for a buffet or a chaise or an oil painting from an impoverished Isle family with many children to feed.

Political leaders who once had hunted and gamed with the Islanders passed on; a new generation of white Creoles, struggling to preserve their own way of life against the Anglo takeover, turned their backs on the Creoles of color. Too impoverished to continue their own schools, a new generation of Islanders grew up uneducated—unwelcome in white schools and unwanted, even in the black schools that only went through grade six. The whites who ruled the parish during Jim Crow looked at the Islanders and saw black, not café au lait. But the cultural divide between freed slaves, who were principally Anglo and Baptist, and the Isle's French-speaking Catholic Creoles was much too great to blend into each other.

For a century thereafter, sheer pride sustained the Islanders. Eventually, amid the reawakening of America's social conscience in the mid-1900s, their culture became a curiosity. Melrose, the one plantation they lost to whites for debt, became a literary Mecca. Writers of the ilk of

Harnett Kane, Lyle Saxon, François Mignon, and William Faulkner came, dwelled, and spun their tales.

For the genealogist and the historian, that created the greatest problem of all: how to peel away the layers of modern fancy to find the reality of Creole life upon the Isle of Canes? Indeed, how does a researcher do that anywhere?

History's Challenge

Separating fact from fancy requires at least three things. First is the need to trace every oral and printed story back to its roots so each can be judged, not on how often it is repeated but on the reliability of the original informant. Second, the tradition must be weighed against the surviving evidence, separating out the statements that have documentary support, those that conflict with the records and those at least compatible with proved circumstances. Third, research must be exhaustive; unless every potential source is tapped, one cannot say that any tale is true or false.

Coincoin's very name is a case in point. Those writers-in-residence at Melrose, knowing nothing of African customs and caring even less, decided that her unusual

nickname must have come from a habit of quacking like a duck—*coin*, they explained, was French for "quack." These writers, apparently, saw no problem in portraying a spectacularly successful woman as a village idiot.

On the other hand, a critical examination of the records Coincoin created, and the identification and study of her siblings, would have led those writers to two important facts. Contemporary clerks, as well as her son, wrote her name in a variety of ways that had no French counterpart—KuenKouen and QoinQuoen, for example—spellings also indicating that the first and second syllables (unlike "coin coin") were inflected differently. Moreover, two sisters and a brother also bore unconventional alternate names that had no French equivalent at all.

Suspecting those names to be African, my husband and I contacted a linguist at the University of Wisconsin. Dr. Jan Vansina specialized in African dialects. We gave him all spelling variants found for each name but gave no detail about the individuals. Vansina's studied response: The family's roots lie among the Ewe people who occupied the coastal region of modern

Togo on the West Coast of

Africa. The most telling name, ironically, was Coincoin, KuenKouen, or QoinQuoen. The phonetic equivalent KoñKwñ, in the Glidzi dialect of the Ewe, was the name traditionally given to second-born daughters. What Dr. Vansina did not know was that local baptismal records place Coincoin as her parents' second-born daughter.

History's Choice of Stages

Intrigued by our discovery of a wealthy, insular community that went far beyond the bounds of Melrose, Gary expanded our study for his doctoral dissertation. Cane River continued to be our other home, and the Metoyers who carved a civilization out of the canebrakes became our adopted family. Ultimately, Gary's career took him elsewhere, but my research stayed rooted along that fascinating river.

Gary's dissertation, published by Louisiana State University Press in 1976 as *The Forgotten People: Cane River's Creoles of Color*, reconstructs the Isle's socioeconomic history from the bones of the documentary record. My own thesis of 1981, probing all Natchitoches families, added

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Above: Melrose, Louis Metoyer's Big House, was declared a National Historic Landmark in July 1975. Left: Auguste Metoyer, grandson of Coincein, and wife Marie Carmelite Anty, painted ca. 1836 by Feuille.



considerable historical depth to our expanding view of Cane River life.⁵ In 1982, we offered a genealogy of François and Fanny's offspring to the *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*, where it became the first slave genealogy published in a major American journal.⁶

Yet, as every genealogist knows, beyond the framework of begats and the special themes of history, families can have a heart throbbing with stories that don't fit scholarship's narrow focus. How else, then, can a family historian ensure that a family's historical soul—the spirit that fueled it generation after generation—is preserved?

The obvious answer is an approach many family historians dream of taking and yet fear to take: the historical novel. Every serious genealogist agrees that "roots" should not be fertilized with fiction, lest the fruit of the family tree be poisoned. A novel is fiction by definition. Surviving documents yield only so much dialogue, and the historical record cannot provide all the substance needed to mold full-fleshed characters. What's more, each

scene must be stripped of the trivia that make genealogy thorough; and the cast of players has to be culled to those who truly personify the family, because typical kinship webs are more than a novel's readers can embrace.

Still, fiction teaches. There is no more memorable way to see human lives than through a storyteller's lens. Nor is there a better way to make "forgotten" societies known to all those who find traditional history boring but relish a good read. And so, once a family's history has been carefully written and documented, once its genealogy has been published with each begat footnoted to an original source, both Clio and St. Genie, I think, will indulge a storyteller's probe into a family's heart.

Whether Private Holloway still lives, I do not know. Past efforts to locate him have failed. If he survives, however, he soon will have the story the Islanders would have told him had they not already learned the folly of letting strangers see into their hearts and souls.



Metoyer descendants gather for a family reunion in Natchitoches, Louisiana, outside the St. Augustine Catholic Church in 2000.

In a four-generation epic, *Isle of Canes*, I'm now venturing to do just that.⁷ I am fleshing out the historical skeleton of Holloway's "forgotten people" with the traditions by which they define themselves. Here, François and Fanny, Coincoin, Augustin and Louis, and Tante Perine, the family's memorykeeper, live their lives once more on a stage created by all the Cane River families with whom the Islanders lived, worked, loved, and feuded for two centuries.

Telling the story of the Islanders through a storyteller's eyes, I hope, will help not just Private Holloway but all of us to better understand another of the "forgotten" cultures that has shaped our current world. ☞

Elizabeth Shown Mills, CG, CGL, FASG, is a generational historian who edited the National Genealogical Society Quarterly from 1987 to 2002, served as president of the Board for Certification of Genealogists and the American Society of Genealogists, and developed (and still directs) the long-running Advanced Research Methodology Track of the Samford University Institute of Genealogy and Historical Research.

Notes

1. Pvt. James Holloway to the editor, *Chicago Tribune*, 1 August 1943.
2. Over the past two and a half centuries, the Isle has been called by various names. Today it is known as Isle Brevelle, commemorating its first settler, Jean Baptiste Brevelle, aka Jean de Cadeaux, the son of a French soldier and the Caddo Indian slave he eventually married.
3. A *dî* (masc.) or *dite* (fem.) was a French colonial "nickname" that usually replaced a surname.
4. Frederick Law Olmsted, *Journey in the Seaboard Slave States in the Years 1853-1854* (1956; reprint, New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968).
5. Elizabeth Shown Mills, *Family and Social Patterns of the Colonial Louisiana Frontier: A Quantitative Analysis, 1714-1803* (University of Alabama, 1981), 231 pp.
6. Elizabeth Shown Mills and Gary B. Mills, "Slaves and Masters: The Louisiana Metoyers," *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 70 (September 1982): 163-89.
7. Published by Ancestry in May 2004; hardback, 587 pp. For the curious who recall Lalita Todemy's heart-wrenching story of three generations of enslaved women, *Cane River* (Time-Warner, 2000): Todemy's family lived just below the Isle. Some of our characters, of course, overlap.

Announcing the new historical novel from Ancestry

Isle of Canes

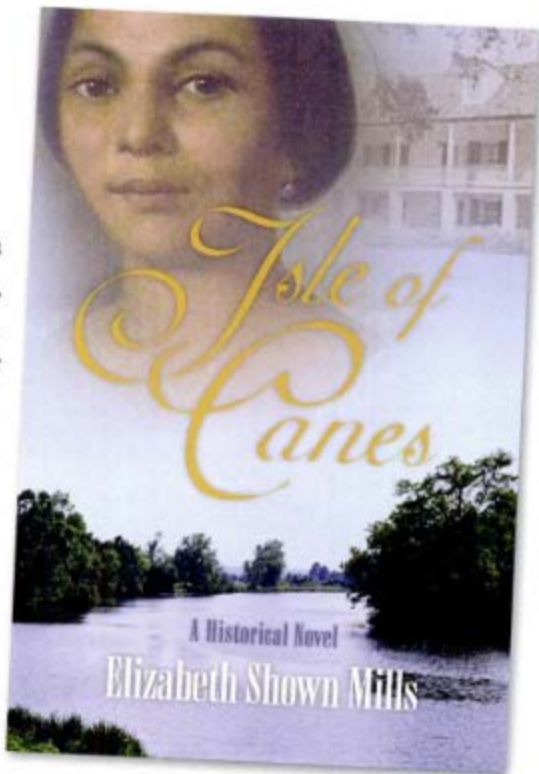
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