

SOCIAL AND FAMILY PATTERNS ON THE COLONIAL LOUISIANA FRONTIER

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As the pendulum of historical scholarship swings toward the close of another century, momentum has propelled it toward the re-establishment of a traditional relationship severed by professional historians at the turn of the last century. History and genealogy were inseparable until early 20th-century humanists elevated the serious pursuit of history from the armchair to the university chair. In the generations since, a chasm of disdain has separated "real" history from so-called family history in which untrained amateurs dabble with abandon.

Yet the family is the heart of society. To study a people's history without understanding the family structure from which it evolved is to confront a robot and pretend that one feels a pulse. Tardily, professional history is shifting from the "subjects of broad national interest" to a study of society in microcosm, that is, the family, at the same time that academically oriented genealogists are upgrading their standards to prove that family history can be a legitimate field of scholarly inquiry.

This reunion of history and genealogy has produced outstanding re-evaluations of society; but in the United States the emphasis to date has been on Anglo-American culture. This article provides pioneer exploration of the nation's Latin heritage and finds significant differences in patterns of migration and settlement, marriage and morality. Such a study of French and Spanish borderlands in America upsets traditional, stereotyped conceptions of mobility, fertility, and family structure in colonial America.

Women's rights. Ethnic awareness. Birth control. Sexual freedom. Alternate family styles. Job mobility and rootlessness. The social revolution of 20th-century America has focused public attention on a litany of cultural and moral issues that past societies cared not to address. Since the turbulent 1960's, America has "let it all hang out," and now Americans cannot agree on

solutions to each newly visible problem. The crux of this dilemma is that 20th-century society lacks the necessary historical perspective to deal realistically with many such issues. Half of the present adult population of this nation attended school in an era when many historians believed it their sacred duty to inspire and uplift the new generations. Frank studies of illegitimacy and wife beating had no place in their rose garden sagas of humanity.

As contemporary society struggles to redefine such social foundations as the family and the roles, responsibilities, and rights of its varied members, there has emerged a new and vital field of historical inquiry: the history of the family. As an academic pursuit this differs considerably from the age-old "family history" long dominated by genealogists. Whereas the family historians seek to reconstruct their own lineage in order to discover their personal history, historians of the family reconstitute all families within a given community and time frame in order to analyze the behavioral patterns of society.

Although these two fields differ in purpose and scope, they are irrevocably linked. Historians of the family cannot pursue their studies without learning and extensively using sound genealogical techniques. By the same token, the results of their studies can be effectively used by genealogists who seek to understand their family and the social and historical factors that caused their ancestors to do—or not to do—as they did.

Most past and current studies of family and social patterns in early America have been conducted in Anglo-American colonies, among a predominantly Protestant population. By contrast, this study focuses on the Latin, Catholic frontier of colonial Louisiana. The differences that have been found in the family and social structures of these two societies are considerable. This brief paper can only address a few of them; and the discussion of each must necessarily be very superficial.

The core population of this study are the pioneers who inhabited the jurisdiction of Poste St. Jean Baptiste des Natchitoches from the arrival of the first settlers in 1717 until the Purchase of 1803, which ended the colonial era in Louisiana. The jurisdiction of this post, in the first century of Louisiana's history, roughly covered all of present northwest Louisiana. Effecting this study has entailed the reconstitution, over the

last 12 years, of the lives and families of 2631 individuals who are known to have resided (permanently or temporarily) along the colonial frontier. Reconstitution has been possible through the use of an extensive variety of colonial source material. Locally, there exist some 4000 registrations of births, marriages, and burials in the records of the colonial church. Abstracted translations of these records are available (Mills, 1977, 1980). Another core group of approximately 4000 civil records were generated locally; these are almost entirely untranslated and unpublished and are scattered among various archives. In addition, the church and civil archives of all the other Louisiana and Texas settlements (from Illinois to Mobile to San Antonio) have been combed for material that richly augments the gaps left by the Natchitoches records alone. Considerably more useful material, civil and ecclesiastical, has been found in a host of New and Old World archives from Montreal to Mexico City, and from Paris to Seville.

One limitation has been placed on the subject group. This study focuses on families of European (i.e., white) origins and on those native Americans (both "pure blood" and "mixed blood") who left their ethnic environment to live in the manner of Europeans. Black families, who were almost entirely of slave status in this period, will be analyzed in a separate study. For the purpose of the present discussion, it will suffice to state that no individual with African ancestry crossed into white Latin society in colonial Natchitoches, although a few such incidences did occur among the Anglos who migrated into the region late in the colonial era.

One fundamental factor set apart the population that settled the Louisiana frontier from that of Anglo-American frontiers. Whole-family migration played a very significant role in the settlement of the Anglo colonies, and group migration of family clusters was to continue throughout the westward expansion of Anglo-America. By contrast, whole-family migration into colonial Louisiana was comparatively rare. Of all of the British colonies, colonial Maryland was more closely akin to Louisiana in this respect. According to Lois Green Carr and Lorena S. Walsh (1978), most immigrants to that colony were also single and members of the servant class: "Family groups were never predominant in the immigration to Maryland and were a significant part for only a brief time

at mid-(17th) century" (p. 263). Of the 359 European immigrants who lived on the colonial Louisiana frontier, five out of six were males, predominantly single males, who emigrated as soldiers, deportees, or volunteer laborers. The female minority, which also included both volunteer and forced immigrants, consisted principally of prospective wives for the single male colonists. Most of the female immigrants who settled at Natchitoches (82%) arrived in the first 14 years, in the pre-1732 period when colonial Louisiana was under private control.

It has been widely believed that the female convicts sent to Louisiana were either falsely charged or else led such dissolute lives after deportation that they seldom found husbands and were more likely to have died young and without progeny. This assumption may well be due to the traditional reluctance of Louisiana families to trace their descent from an ancestress accused of prostitution, debauchery, or theft. The relative guilt or innocence of these young women has yet to be established, but the present Natchitoches study and the author's ongoing study of the *femmes de force* in Louisiana suggest that tradition errs. Typical (and often quoted) negative portrayals of the colonial life-style of the *femmes de force* are found in Marcel Giraud (1974) and Baron Marc de Villiers (1920). Yet, of the four women who arrived on the frontier branded with the *fleur-de-lis* of France, none had any hint of scandal attached to her name after arrival. One did die childless—after finding four respected citizens who were willing to marry her. Her three sisters-in-shame were equally worthy and far more fertile. At least 22% of the population residing in northwest Louisiana in 1803 descended from one or more of these female convicts. By contrast, less than 2% of the same population had any claim to "noble" ancestry.

The Creole population that developed in the Louisiana colony is generally conceived as a mixture of French and Spanish, with an African admixture in some groups. It is surprising then to discover that the immigrants who settled this frontier represented no less than 14 different European nationalities or ethnic groups. The largest representation, certainly, was from France; yet the French immigrants stemmed from a variety of provinces with widely differing cultural backgrounds.

The sex ratio among immigrants was heavily weighted in favor of males among the Creole population. Antonio Acosta Rodríguez (1979) erroneously attributes an excess of adult females (81 females to 78 males) to the 1766 population of Natchitoches. Neither draft of the census of that year supports his figures. The first draft, taken on January 27, 1766 (Tomo 91, Ramo de Historia, Provincias Internas, Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City) shows 170 males to 138 females without making distinctions between prepubescents and postpubescents in the unmarried population. The final draft of the census, dated May 6, 1766 (Legajo 2585, Papeles Procedentes de Cuba, Archivo General de Indias, Seville) tabulates 150 males past puberty to 92 females of marriageable age. Like most censuses, both drafts contain some margin of error, although the margin is much smaller in this year 1766 than in other census years. A reconstitution of the post during January-May 1766, from all known civil and ecclesiastical records, indicates that the May figures are more correct, but even these omitted 5 adult males, 3 adult females, 1 adolescent boy, 2 younger boys, and 3 younger girls who were known to reside at the post when the enumerations were made. The 63:37 adult male-female ratio in this year is somewhat high. Throughout the century it ranged from 53:47 to 66:34, with the most even distribution occurring at the very end of the colonial period.

Professor Acosta Rodríguez's statistical analysis of Spanish Louisiana has not been incorporated into this study because it is based solely on an analysis of censuses with no reconstitution being done from other sources in order to transcend the limitations inherent in all the enumerations. The margin of error found in the Natchitoches enumerations ranged from 2 to 10% of total population, with significant errors also occurring in the identification of marital status, ages, and other crucial data. Any statistical analysis based on one single type of record that contains such a degree of error cannot be considered definitive.

Because males by far exceeded females at all times, the male colonists were forced to draw spouses from outside the "white" population. Although various Anglo colonies, as well as Spanish Texas, permitted marriage with blacks, Louisiana law forbade it. It is not surprising then to discover

that the Creole population that developed on this frontier was extensively mixed with Indian. Some 51% of the native-born population of northwest Louisiana in 1803 had one or more lines of Indian ancestry. Unlike the Anglo colonies, where the native American was reputedly driven back or exterminated, the Indians of Louisiana by and large were absorbed into the dominant population.

J. Leitch Wright (1981), an authority on southeastern Indians challenges the traditional view that the native American was driven from, rather than absorbed into, Anglo society and expresses his opinion that Indian-white mixing occurred in the Anglo south "perhaps on a larger scale than in New France." If Wright is correct and if the colonial Louisiana frontier can be taken as representative of New France as a whole, then Indian-white mixing in the Anglo colonies occurred to an overwhelmingly significant extent!

An even more startling fact emerges from a study of ethnic homogenization in northwest Louisiana, and it reflects one of the most overlooked aspects of the white American cultural heritage. Fully 24% of the native-born white population in 1803 had a slave heritage bequeathed to them by one or more Indian ancestors. In the majority of cases that slave heritage was well within memory: 60% of the 250 whites with Indian-slave ancestry in 1803 was the child or the grandchild of an Indian slave.

The population that settled the Natchitoches frontier was not only homogenous, it was also extremely mobile. Almost half (49%) of the adult population prior to 1803 has been found to have lived in at least one other Louisiana post; some resided in as many as five other places—from Mobile to Illinois to east Texas. This pattern of rootlessness again differs drastically from that found in Anglo America, where the majority of first-, second-, and third-generation settlers remained permanently in the community that the family first settled. Outmigration from studied Anglo communities generally peaked in the fourth generation. By contrast, at Natchitoches, 48% of the first-generation settlers tried life in other communities; and 62.5% of the second generation left the post of their birth to reside at least temporarily elsewhere. It was not until the third and fourth generations in colonial Louisiana that

many families developed the stability or roots that are emphasized today.

Freedom to move and settle where one pleased was not a basic right in Louisiana—or in the other early American colonies. In New England, the desirability of a would-be settler often depended on the wealth that he might contribute to his new town or the financial burden that he might place on it. By contrast, the pauper class was welcomed on the Louisiana frontier throughout the century. Movement, however, was technically restricted; the permission of the post commandant was required before any family or individual could leave the frontier to reside at an interior post. The numerical strength of the frontier settlement was crucial for the protection of Louisiana against Indian hostility and against Spanish aggression in the French period. Therefore, family group outmigration from Natchitoches was strongly discouraged. Yet, the degree to which first- and second-generation colonists did move from one post to another suggests that the restrictions were not severely applied to individuals.

The differing patterns in migration noted in Louisiana and in the Anglo-American colonies are basically due to the differing structures of towns within these societies. New England towns tended to be compact communities in which limited acreage was divided among the original settlers. Dwelling sites were generally concentrated in urban clusters, with agricultural plots located around the perimeter of the towns. This system was also found in Canada and to a significant extent in Europe. It was particularly useful in the New World, because it provided those at the frontier with maximum protection against hostile Indians. Yet it created an inherent lack of room for new generations to expand. When a town's urban and farm land could no longer support its people, the younger generations moved out and created new villages. Greven (1970), Lockridge (1975), and Demos (1970) provide excellent overall discussions of town life and land settlement patterns in the Anglo colonies.

By contrast, the figuratively walled town did not exist on the Louisiana frontier. On this point evidence disagrees strongly with the interpretation offered in one classic history of Louisiana, which contends: "French settlers, unlike British

and later American settlers who preferred to establish scattered farms... generally settled in compact little villages.... Houses were built close together for protection.... If possible, they were located close to both forested and open lands, so that building material and firewood and ground for grazing and tillage would not be too far distant.... In many cases, settlements were replicas of villages in France" (Davis, 1961: 85). The first map of Natchitoches, drawn in 1732, indicates that such a community was initially planned. The houses of the settlers are clustered around the fort, with pasture and farm land along the perimeter. After 1732, however, there is no evidence that the pattern was retained. The strategic site on which the fort was located offered poor soil for farming; and Indian hostility was a relatively minor problem. According to Antoine-Simon le Page du Pratz (1972), the island on which the Natchitoches fort was erected consisted of "nothing but sand, and that so fine that the wind drives it like dust... so that the tobacco attempted to be cultivated there at first was loaded with it... no more tobacco is raised in this island, but provisions only, as maize, potatoes, pompions, etc., which cannot be damaged by the sands" (p. 150). Consequently, the initial urban cluster dispersed, and settlers moved out to their own plantations. This gradual radiation from the central post provided ample room for new generations to establish themselves within the jurisdiction of the post; but as a result urban life on this frontier was exceedingly slow in developing, and there was little sense of community cohesiveness.

Although family immigration into Louisiana and out to its frontier was comparatively rare, the family did develop into the most important social and community factor. The concept of "family" was a far broader one than that generally held today, however. The simple father-mother-and-children family unit their demographers call the "nuclear family" was not the typical unit in colonial Louisiana, nor was it so in the European communities from which the settlers came. Traditionally, in early modern western civilization, the concept of "family" included any number or combination of extended family members or relatives (such as grandparents, in-laws, and cousins) as well as such nonrelatives as servants or regular boarders who shared the household. The various censuses of Natchitoches reflect

this broader concept of family. In 1726 fewer than half the households were nuclear families. The peak year for nuclear families was 1766, and in that year simple father-mother-children households accounted for only 58% of the population. In the census year 1787, one-third of the households were shared with nonrelatives, slaves excluded.

One particularly significant housing pattern that the colonial censuses reveal reflects the growing solidarity of Creole families. In 1766, for example, 30% of householders had a married brother, sister, parent, or other close relative as their immediate neighbor. In several cases, a string of adjacent households was headed by various married children of one couple. This situation was to become increasingly evident with every census thereafter. Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, the various Creole communities that sprang up along that frontier (i.e., Campti, Black Lake, Bayou Pierre, Cloutierville, Rivière aux Cannes, Isle Brevelle, etc.) were by and large settled and inhabited by interrelated families. Veteran traveler Frederick Law Olmstead (1968) seemed to feel that such settlement patterns were peculiar to Creoles. A half-century after the end of the colonial period, Olmstead wrote: "If a Creole farmer's child marries, he will build a house for the new couple adjoining his own; and, when another marries, he builds another house—so, often his whole front on the river is at length occupied. Then he begins to build others, back of the first—and so, there gradually forms a little village, wherever there is a large Creole family, owning any considerable piece of land" (p. 649).

Historians who have made similar studies of American and European societies since the medieval age have charted a pattern of increasingly smaller families, and some suggest that the inclusion of outsiders in the family household may have artificially limited reproduction. Either the privacy of the married couple was seriously reduced or else the older relatives of the wife who shared the family home may have exerted pressure on young husbands to practice various contraceptive means in order to preserve the health of the wife and to reduce the drain on the financial resources of the family. Some historians have found direct evidence of contraception in their studied communities (Flandrin, 1976; Osterud and Fullerton, 1976; Temkin-Greener and Swedlund, 1978; VandeWalle, 1980).

No direct evidence of contraceptive practices has been found at Natchitoches, although some circumstantial evidence does exist to suggest it. Nevertheless, there is no question but that families were smaller than has been assumed, and curiously they were even smaller than those found in many other contemporary societies. The typical frontier household in Louisiana ranged from two to three children at any given time. Completed families on the Natchitoches frontier had a mean number of seven children, including those who died in childhood. (A completed family is defined in this study as one in which both husband and wife survived until the wife reached the age at which fertility most commonly was suspended, i.e., age 45.) Meanwhile, contemporary New England families most commonly ranged from 7 to 9 children, while European-French communities of that same era ranged from 9 to 11. Tempkin-Greener and Swedlund's (1978) study of Deerfield, Massachusetts, notes mean family sizes of 7.2, 7.8 and 5.6 children in successive time frames between 1721 and 1780; Osterud and Fulton (1976) have found a declining rate of 8.83 to 7.32 in Sturbridge, Massachusetts, in that same period. Demos' (1970) study of Plymouth families and Greven's (1970) study of colonial Andover note comparable ranges from 7.8 to 9.3 children born in the first three generations of these two colonies. In three studied communities in France, 1690-1790, the mean number of children ranged from 8.8 to 11.0. At Natchitoches, the stereotyped image of the woman who married as a teenager and bore a child every year or two until her mid-to-late forties (thereby producing 12, 15, or 18 children) has been very difficult to find. Indeed, less than 5% of all mothers had even 12 children, and only one woman produced 15.

Whatever family limitation practices may have been in use at Natchitoches or in other contemporary societies, be it abstinence or artificial means, was not practiced prior to marriage to the extent that has been assumed. Yet, when premarital sexual activity is used as a measure of community morality, the Louisiana frontier, which historians have described as "sans religion . . . , sans discipline, sans ordre" (Cable, 1884), compares very well with contemporary 18th-century western civilization.

Only 4% of white infants born at Natchitoches in the

colonial period were actually illegitimate, and this includes children born of permanent concubinages between white males and Indian women. A greater number (11%) were born less than 8 months after marriage, however. By contrast, in contemporary Bristol, Rhode Island, 44-49% of first births occurred within 8 months of marriage. Comparable figures for other contemporary societies are as follows: Sturbridge, Massachusetts, 1730-1799, 24-33% of children born within 7 months of marriage; Andover, Massachusetts, 1700-1730, 11.3% of children born within 9 months of marriage; nine anonymous Anglo-American towns, 1700-1760, 23.3% within 9 months; six anonymous Anglo-American towns, 1761-1800, 33.7% within 9 months; Cartmel, Lancashire, England, 1600-1675, 13.2% within 8 months; Clayworth, Nottinghamshire, England, 1650-1750, 10.2% within 8 months, Crulai, France, 1674-1742, 9.5% within 8 months (Greven, 1970; Osterud and Fulton, 1976; Smith, 1978). One out of four white females at Natchitoches displayed some irregularity in her sexual behavior: either she bore a child before marriage, too soon after marriage, or too long after the death of a husband. By comparison, one out of three of the first-generation females in Charles County, Maryland, bore illegitimate children, and the records of one New England church that required full confessions prior to marriage reveal that "almost half the couples admitted carnal knowledge of each other" (Carr and Walsh, 1978:266; see also Fleming, 1976).

One very possible reason for the lower incidence (documentable) of premarital sex among colonial white women in Louisiana may well have been the younger ages at which women married in this colony. Church law, as well as Spanish and French civil law, permitted girls to marry as young as 12, boys at 14 (Lislet and Carleton, 1820). In actual practice, male marital ages were drastically higher than the laws allowed. Immigrant males married for the first time at a mean age of 31; native-born males at 27. This is very comparable to the marital ages of Anglo-American males; but the ages at which Creole girls married were significantly lower than their Anglo counterparts. Prior to 1740, half of the native-born girls married before age 14. From 1740 onward, by far the majority of females were in their late teens, aged 15-19. By contrast, females in various Massachusetts communities that have been

studied most commonly wed between 20.5 and 23 years, whereas in contemporary France, the ages ranged more often between 25 and 29. More specifically, in Sturbridge, Massachusetts, female marital ages rose from 20.65 to 22.46 between 1730 and 1799. In Bristol, Rhode Island, the mean age rose from 20.5 (pre-1750) to 21.1 (post-1850). In 17th century Plymouth, women married at 20-22 years. Similar studies of 5 French communities in the 18th century reveals a range from 24.7 to 26.2 while a contemporary study of 10 other French communities showed an occasional low of 22-23 with a steep climb to about 28-29 in the late 18th century. (See Bideau, 1980; Demos, 1968, 1970; Greven, 1970; Henry, 1965; Osterud and Fulton, 1976; Flandrin, 1976.)

No aspect of marriage, perhaps, is so crucial to the welfare of the nuclear family or to the community as a whole as is the longevity that a marriage experiences. With 20th-century divorce and remarriage statistics rising at a rate alarming to social scientists, worries are frequently expressed over the future of the family as a unit of society and over the psychological damage that may occur in families that are disrupted. In truth the disrupted family is a cultural heritage of most societies, a heritage that has been increasingly forgotten as significant advances have been made in mortality rates. The experience of the colonial Louisiana frontier provides a good example.

The typical (mean) marriage at Natchitoches lasted just 14 years. A startling 3% of all marriages ended in death before the first anniversary was celebrated. More than a third did not survive for even 10 years. Less than half of all marriages made it 20 years. No marriages in that century lasted to the golden anniversary that has become prevalent in modern America.

Considering the high mortality rate and the dangers and the loneliness of frontier life, it is surprising to learn that most widows and widowers did not remarry. An impressive 88% of colonial wives married only once, and among the male population the reluctance to remarry was even greater. By and large the women who did remarry appear to have been those in the greatest financial need, although this was not always the case. One out of every four widows who did remarry did not wait the full year that the law required if they wanted to retain their inheritance and their reputation. Part 7, Title 6

Law 3 of Las Siete Partidas decreed: "If a woman . . . intermarry . . . before the expiration of a year after the death of her husband she will become infamous in Law." Part 6, Title 3, Article 5 took the penalty further (and hinted as well at a sex-biased view that mourning was more proper for females) when it decreed that a woman who remarried in less than a year could not inherit from the estate of her deceased husband. This article cited two reasons: first, so that confusion not exist over the paternity of a subsequently born child; and second, so that "the second husband may not entertain any suspicion against her, for wishing to marry so soon!" The two merriest widows at Natchitoches readily forfeited their share of their late husbands' estates and their reputations did not seem to be damaged too badly when the first of the pair remarried without bans 20 days after her late husband was laid in his grave or when the second waited a full month before jumping into a second marital bed, with bans being announced on three previous Sundays.

Frederick Jackson Turner's (1962) controversial frontier thesis holds that wilderness society was a "kind of primitive organization based on the family," an "anti-social" structure that "produces antipathy to control." This portion of his theory is supported by the behavioral patterns of the Creole frontier dwellers. The frontier life-styles here and elsewhere do not fit the ideals that current American society believes to be traditional. Like most frontier settlers, the colonial inhabitants of northwest Louisiana adapted law, faith, and custom to suit frontier conditions, if not their own whims. Yet a frank study of their life-style emphasizes most strongly the fact that traditional concepts are often stereotyped images that differ drastically from reality. Many of the same social problems—rootlessness, sexual laxity, ethnic identity, disrupted families—and the same conflict of individual freedom versus the welfare of society as a whole existed in the past, just as it does today. Above all, a study of the Natchitoches frontier people—who might well be typical of all colonial Louisiana communities—shows most clearly the greater understanding of past societies that is possible and the benefits to be derived by both the genealogist and the historian when these two specialists merge their skills and their resources.

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