

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF
FREE BLACKS
AND
PEOPLE OF COLOR
IN THE AMERICAS

VOLUME II

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MOBILE, ALABAMA

Blacks appeared in the Mobile area of present-day ALABAMA as early as 1707, when a priest baptized Jean-Baptiste, a Negro slave of Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville. After the Spanish took control of LOUISIANA in 1769, the Code Noir (*see* CODE NOIR IN FRENCH LAW) was adopted in Spanish Louisiana, including the Mobile area. Between 1785 and 1805, the number of free nonwhite inhabitants increased from 61 to 250, free whites from 446 to 673, but the number of slaves decreased slightly from 642 to 612. During the colonial period, free blacks in the Mobile area played an important role in the economy with several involved in cattle raising (*see* RANCHING). Free people of color also participated in the defense of the area, such as Charles Lalande, who commanded a MILITIA of others of his race. The French and Spanish provided the first non-native inhabitants of the Mobile area, in contrast to the rest of Alabama, whose residents migrated from American states east and north of it.

The total population of Mobile County increased from 2,672 in 1820 to 41,131 in 1860. According to federal census figures, 183 free people of color resided in the county in 1820, or about 7 percent of the county's total population. In 1860, the number of free blacks in the county rose to 1,195, which at that time constituted only 3 percent of Mobile's total population. Mobile's free black community, however, represented 44 percent of the total number of free nonwhites in Alabama. Most of Mobile's 1860 free nonwhites were born in Alabama, but others were from such states as VIRGINIA AND WEST VIRGINIA, MARYLAND, and Louisiana, and at least one person reported that she was born in Africa.

The free black community in antebellum Mobile owes its origin to several factors. The most important of these

were the offspring produced by relationships between the French and Spanish settlers and their white descendants and African-American women, slave and free. Many times French and Spanish men openly acknowledged their interracial families, but in some cases they did not. However, the records show that they were the parents of the MULATTO children, and usually their relationships were long-term, showing strong family ties and a genuine concern for the well-being of their children.

White fathers generally provided the economic means by which their families could survive, and during the antebellum years, some of these free families of color successfully built upon the resources that were left to them. The French and Spanish had acquired large quantities of land, which they worked with slave labor, and the free people of color frequently inherited both land and slaves. These were important assets for the free people of color, especially for those who had begun their lives in bondage.

One of the more prominent and numerous free families of color in Mobile, the Chastangs, were in Mobile as early as 1760, when two members of the white Chastang family, John, a physician, and his brother Joseph, settled in the Mobile area. They purchased lands in northern Mobile County and present-day Washington County. The Chastangs, as did other Southerners, purchased slaves to work for them. Louison, in 1780, purchased her freedom and that of her four children from Joseph Chastang. Within five years of her MANUMISSION, she began cohabiting with John Chastang. Their relationship produced 10 children and lasted for at least 20 years. Descendants of Joseph's children developed relationships with free women of color.

The origin of other free families of color in Mobile in some respects parallels that of the Chastangs. For instance, Simon Andry, a white inhabitant of the Mobile area, who also purchased land and slaves, maintained a relationship with one of his slaves, named Jane, which began as early as 1782. They had at least seven children who, as did many other free CREOLES of color, were all baptized in the ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH. Andry had his children emancipated at their baptismal services inasmuch as the priest recorded that they were "free mulattoes." Another major family of North Mobile County that had ties to the Chastangs and Andrys was the Dubroca family, consisting of three brothers, Maximilian, Hugh, and Hilaire. Each of these white Dubrocas, as did Dr. John Chastang and Simon Andry, had long-term relationships with nonwhite women, two of whom were free women of color. Other families included, for example, the Collinses, Lalandes, and Laurendines.

The legislative bodies governing the territory and later the state of Alabama after the territory became part of the United States determined the method by which slaves

could be freed. Mobile itself did not become part of the United States until 1812, though the northern counties were organized into the Mississippi Territory in 1802. The Adams-Onís Treaty, signed by the United States and Spain in 1819, confirmed American control of the region and guaranteed that residents, including people of color, would enjoy the benefits of American citizenship. Alabama became a state in 1819. In 1805, the Legislative Council and House of Representatives of the Mississippi Territory had passed a law governing emancipations, which theoretically was to apply in Mobile once it became part of the territory. It was no longer legal to manumit slaves unless they performed a meritorious act for the benefit of either the owner or the territory. The Alabama legislature in 1834 passed an act authorizing the judges of the county courts to manumit slaves. The legislature stipulated that the newly freed slave was required to leave the state within 12 months after the emancipation and not return.

The growth of the black community in Mobile owes its origins to those SLAVE OWNERS who sought the approval of the Alabama legislature after manumission laws became more restrictive as well as to rapid natural growth of this population. Between 1819 and 1845, the Alabama legislature manumitted or confirmed the emancipations of 84 slaves from the Mobile area, of whom only one, Willis Pope, was required to leave the state upon reaching the age of 21. However, he remained in Mobile. The Alabama legislature specifically stated in 13 of the 84 cases that the manumitted slave was not required to leave the state. Although the Alabama Supreme Court ruled in 1830 that owners could not emancipate slaves by wills, many in the state—including some white and nonwhite slave owners in Mobile County—included such provisions in their wills. Some slaves earned enough money to purchase themselves. Another form of manumission was through popular subscription, as in the case of Pierre Chastang, also known as Major Pierre, who does not appear to have been part of the Chastangs of color who were manumitted for familial reasons. For his civic contributions during the War of 1812, some Mobilians took up a subscription for the emancipation of Chastang, who had amassed through hard work real estate worth more than \$1,700 when he died.

The rights of some free people of color in the Mobile area were protected by the federal government, and the state confirmed them. The Louisiana Purchase Treaty of 1803 and the Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819 guaranteed to free residents of Louisiana and FLORIDA and their descendants the rights of citizenship. The Alabama legislature sometimes made special provisions for free nonwhites. Prior to 1819, for example, it was illegal for any free black to sell liquor; in 1822, however, the state legislature allowed free people of color who, by the treaty, became

citizens of the United States, or their descendants, to sell liquor. The creoles *de couleur* were also allowed to establish a school.

This relative liberality in the Mobile area, thanks to the French and Spanish influence on the culture and to the legal protections in the treaties of annexation, meant that Mobile's free black community was more accepted by its white neighbors than elsewhere in the state.

Nonetheless, as did other cities in the South, Mobile enacted ordinances to regulate its population. City officials were authorized to pass measures to prohibit nightly meetings or disorderly assemblies of slaves, free blacks, and mulattoes. In 1830, Mobile amended a 10-year-old ordinance concerning free people of color. It was necessary for every free black who resided in the city to register with the mayor's office within 10 days after the passage of the measure. This ordinance did not apply to free people of color born in the city. At least once a year, the names and personal data of free blacks were to be published in the local press. Only one such instance has been found, and that 1830 list contained but 48 names, such as William West, described as black, aged 45, born in PENNSYLVANIA, and a Mobile resident for 14 years. The 1830 census reported 1,532 free people of color living in the state, and on the basis of the estimate that about 45 percent of these people lived in Mobile County, the report understates by a factor of about 15 the actual free population of color in the city. Presumably, only those free blacks who had given the authorities some reason to doubt their bona fides would be listed in the newspaper.

In the wake of the Nat Turner rebellion in 1831, the Alabama legislature, as did some others in the South, enacted restrictive measures regarding nonwhites. Alabama made it unlawful for any free person of color to settle within the state after January 1, 1833. Free blacks who moved to the state after this date were given 30 days to leave or receive 39 lashes. As in other parts of Alabama, this law was disregarded in Mobile, as is documented in federal census records. Matilda Benton, for example, who appears in local records as early as 1853, was born in Virginia in 1835 and thus entered Alabama in violation of the law. Mobile authorities allowed her to reside in the county.

Free people of color in Mobile pursued a variety of economic activities. Some free people of color, particularly the descendants of the French and Spanish, owned land, livestock, and slaves, which allowed them to make a comfortable living (*see also* PLANTERS AND PLANTER AGENTS). The average farm owned by a free person of color contained about 180 acres, but this figure is misleading since the three largest farms (owned by Zeno Chastang, Sr.; Maximilian Dubroca; and Maximilian Collins) contained about 3,300 acres, or about 80 percent of the total acreage owned by free black farmers.

All other farms owned by free blacks had less than 150 acres. In 1860, the average number of acres per farm operated by free blacks rose to nearly 360 acres, ranging in size from three acres to 2,010 acres. Several members of the Andry family, including Romain, Sylvester, and Jerome, each owned a number of slaves. In 1860, Louise Andry, the largest slave owner of the Andry family, owned 13 slaves. Zeno Chastang, Sr., owned more slaves and land than any other member of the Chastang family—white or nonwhite. According to the 1850 and 1860 federal censuses, he owned 27 and 29 slaves, respectively. This was a quite substantial slave workforce by local standards, qualifying him as a large planter. On the other hand, Zeno Chastang, Jr., in 1860 owned only three slaves. In 1850, Maximilian Dubroca owned 41 slaves and, 10 years later, 40.

Most free nonwhites in Mobile County lived and worked in the city because there were more economic opportunities for them there. During the late 1830s, free African Americans supported themselves in a variety of ways, such as the barber Elam Page, who advertised his services in the Mobile city directory. Polite Collins offered for sale coffee and chocolate at her house, and she and her mother maintained two coffee stands in the public market. One of the free black grocers in Mobile was Clement Joseph, whose success as a businessman is reflected in his urban real estate holdings. Between 1844 and 1861, he and his wife purchased at least 10 lots of land. Carpentry was a popular trade among free people of color, especially members of the Collins family (see also ARTISANS).

In the antebellum South, religion played an important role in the lives of African Americans, both slave and free. Free nonwhites in Mobile were accepted by most major denominations, including Roman Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Episcopalian. For instance, the State Street Colored Church in Mobile chose Jacob Anderson and Cassius Swanson as leaders and stewards. Armstead Saxon, a prominent free person of color in the Good Shepherd Church, acted as baptismal sponsor to numerous slaves owned by whites, indicating that he developed friendships and earned the respect within the white community. BAPTISTS AND PIETISTS had churches in Mobile that also contributed to the religious development of nonwhites. Several Catholic churches served free people of color, who worshipped at St. Vincent de Paul and St. Joseph's Church. But their involvement was greatest in the Church of the Immaculate Conception in Mobile. Many of the free creoles of color were Roman Catholic, and many of their slaves were also baptized. For instance, many of the children and grandchildren of Maximilian Collins were baptized in the Catholic faith. Free people of color served as godparents for others of their race, and in turn some whites did the same for nonwhites, both slave and free.

Free creoles of color operated a fire company and a school, both of which were sanctioned by local and state authorities. These two endeavors helped the creoles *de couleur* to preserve their own class-consciousness, separate from other free blacks and slaves. Membership was limited to those free men of color who had resided a minimum of three years in the city of Mobile. The social event of the year for the fire company occurred in April when it celebrated its anniversary with a torchlight parade, followed by a dance. The Creole Band marched in the parade to entertain the onlookers.

In addition to the fire company, Mobile's creoles of color had their own school. In December 1833, the Alabama legislature empowered the mayor and aldermen of the city of Mobile to license suitable persons to teach the free creole children of color descending from persons living in those areas that were controlled by the French at the time of the Louisiana Purchase. In addition to the creole school in the city, the Mobile School Board organized other such schools in the county. Members of the nonwhite Chastang family served as local trustees.

Christopher A. Nordmann

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MONROE, JAMES (1758–1831) *fifth president of the United States (1817–1825)*

Unlike the three Virginians who preceded him in the presidency, GEORGE WASHINGTON, THOMAS JEFFERSON, and JAMES MADISON, James Monroe was not a great planter. He was a middle-class professional, a lawyer, who started with very little; ultimately owned a farm, beside Jefferson's much larger plantation, and a couple of dozen slaves; and eventually had to sell the land and his slaves to pay his debts after leaving the presidency in 1825. He made his career in public service and owed very