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**THE NEW ORLEANS**  
**OF**  
**GEORGE WASHINGTON CABLE**  
THE 1887 CENSUS OFFICE REPORT

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EDITED, WITH AN INTRODUCTION, BY  
LAWRENCE N. POWELL



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## INTRODUCTION

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### *A Novelist Turns Historian*

It isn't often novelists change their politics while writing history. Most fiction writers mine the past to reinforce their preconceptions. George Washington Cable (1844–1925) may be a rare exception. He approached history writing as seriously as he did writing romance, maybe because historical narrative afforded him greater scope for expressing his newfound reform creed. The importance that Cable assigned to studying the past comes across clearly in this “Historical Sketch” of pre–Civil War (but mainly colonial) New Orleans he wrote for a special section of the 1880 U.S. Census titled *Social Statistics of Cities*. Although subsequently revised as *Creoles of Louisiana*, the original text has never appeared in print again except as a facsimile reprint. It is published here in its entirety for the first time, including Cable's copious footnotes and other material deleted from the census publication by its editors.

Cable was already an overnight literary sensation by the time he undertook this project. By then northern critics had begun comparing him to Nathaniel Hawthorne and Bret Harte. Soon Mark Twain, whom Cable once entertained in his Garden District home, would invite him to team up on a successful lecture tour in which Cable would often emerge as the audience favorite. Cable's rise to prominence owed mainly to his short story collection, *Old Creole Days* (1879), and to two novels—*The Grandissimes* (1880), his masterpiece, and *Madame Delphine* (1881). Those books, which had been serialized in the country's best highbrow magazines, largely depicted the clash between American newcomers and a quaint but prideful French-speaking population in post–Louisiana Purchase New Orleans.

Cable wrote in the local-color style then in vogue, painting vivid word pictures of a French Quarter in luxuriant decay. His ear for Creole dialect, black and white, was almost musical. (He could

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transcribe birdsong.) His was the kind of fiction that used to be read aloud to family members in Victorian parlors or wielded as guidebooks by tourists beguiled by Cable's descriptions of darkened courtyards perfumed with night-blooming jasmine. To him belongs the credit for popularizing New Orleans's exoticism among northern audiences.<sup>1</sup> Yet Cable's early fiction comprised more than picturesque romanticism. His novels and short stories also contained a strain of politicized realism born of a deepening aversion to the racial injustices of his hometown, where a white supremacist coup d'état in 1877 had overthrown the Reconstruction government. Cable's best fiction derives its power and poignancy from that tension between romance and realism.<sup>2</sup>

Cable initially read history to find raw material for his evocative stories. But because his fiction was essentially political (he once said that *The Grandissimes*, recognized as an allegory for Reconstruction, was "as truly a political work as it has ever been called"),<sup>3</sup> he also sought guidance from the past. He studied it to make sense of the controversies swirling around him and to clarify his own values in relation to those conflicts.

Everything was then in flux, including his personal politics. The devastation of war and tumults of Reconstruction had brought to the surface a raft of social and economic problems too glaring to ignore: the feebleness of the city's civic culture; its hedonism and provincialism; the lethargy of the local economy and the medievalism of its sanitation; and, now, despite the sudden emancipation of four million slaves and amendments to the U.S. Constitution declaring them equal before the law, the stubborn persistence of the racial caste system. From this latter problem—the blight of slavery and the heritage of white supremacy—stemmed everything else. That was the lesson Cable derived from reading and reflecting on local history.

Perhaps he would have arrived at this understanding without delving into the past, but not with the same clarity and conviction. By 1885, with the publication of his article "The Freedmen's Case in Equity" in *The Century* magazine, Cable had drifted far from the racial pieties of his time and place. Appearing at a moment when it was still unclear whether federal intervention in southern affairs had truly ended, the essay was the most forthright defense of black civil and political rights ever penned by a nineteenth-century white southerner.

Cable's controversial article, which challenged the Compromise

of 1877's goal of giving white southerners sole custody of African American rights, made him a pariah throughout the region but especially in his hometown. Many of his traducers blamed his startling racial heterodoxy on his northern roots, principally his mother's New England background by way of Indiana, where her parents had moved in 1807. The argument is a glass half empty, however. His father, also named after George Washington, hailed from Virginia, where Cables had lived for generations. George senior moved to New Orleans in 1837. By the time George junior, the fifth of six children, was born, seven years later, his father had accumulated a modest fortune and several household slaves thanks to fortunate steamboat investments.

In pre-Civil War New Orleans fortunes were as quickly lost as won, and by the time of his death in 1859 from chronic diarrhea, George senior had been forced to sell off most of the family's assets and find employment in the uncompleted U.S. Customs House on Canal Street, where his namesake son now had to stamp boxes to support his financially strapped family. Despite her northern birth, Cable's mother remained loyal to the Confederacy when the war came. In 1863 she even accepted banishment to Mississippi rather than sign the oath of allegiance required by New Orleans's Union occupiers. Cable accompanied his family into exile, eventually joining a Confederate cavalry unit. In the saddle he must have resembled a jockey more than a burly cavalryman; at five feet five he weighed slightly more than a hundred pounds. "Great Heavens, Abe Lincoln told the truth—we *are* robbing the cradle and the grave," exclaimed one planter who encountered the former clerk during a cavalry raid. But Cable was intrepid in battle and suffered two nasty wounds, one through the chest and armpit, to prove it.<sup>4</sup>

His critics were on stronger ground when they underscored his religiosity, which he had absorbed from his staunchly Presbyterian mother. You don't have to read far in Cable's early fiction to realize he was a Puritan in Babylon—a sensuous Puritan, to paraphrase literary historian Louis Rubin—one of many writers who found the city's seductive charms simultaneously attractive and repellent.<sup>5</sup> Antebellum New Orleans was a great theater town, equally famed for potation and pleasure. Cable resisted its hedonism. He never drank or smoked, and until late in life, for religious reasons, he refused to attend a staged drama. It was rare for him to miss a prayer meeting, rarer still to find him working or traveling on Sunday.

Mark Twain, during their spectacularly successful lecture tour in the 1880s, confessed to liking Cable but loathing his faith. "In him and his person I have learned to hate all religions," he wrote half in jest to fellow novelist William Dean Howells. "He has taught me to abhor and detest the Sabbath-day and hunt up new and troublesome ways to dishonor it."<sup>6</sup> There was more to Cable's piety than punctiliousness, however. It also thrummed with a fierce determination to live life according to the Sermon on the Mount and make the world a better place. Even his fiction was written with uplift in mind. Cable was convinced that people, if informed and appealed to with reasonableness and logic, would ultimately abandon irrational prejudices and narrow self-interest for the broader arena of progress and fair play. That faith led him to posit the existence of a "Silent South" that he believed, almost to the end of his days, would eventually repudiate the ugly apartheid arising around him.

Cable became a reformer almost from the moment he became a writer. Before pursuing either calling he worked as a bookkeeper for a cotton firm. Accounting was a skill he picked up after his father's death forced him to leave school at age fifteen and become the family breadwinner. After the war he found work surveying rail routes in southwest Louisiana, but a bout with malaria sent him back to the counting room in 1868. Ever since boyhood he had been itching to write. The *New Orleans Picayune* gave him the opportunity in 1870, and he penned a series of occasional columns on literature and local matters.

His stint as a journalist lasted less than two years. It was alleged that the *Picayune* let him go when he refused to review a play. The real explanation is that he wasn't cut out for daily reporting. "I was naturally and emphatically unfit for the work of gathering up and throwing down heterogeneous armloads of daily news," he wrote later. "I wanted to be always writing, and they wanted me to be always reporting."<sup>7</sup> Cable's eighteen months with the *Picayune* showed that he wanted to be always reforming as well. Increasingly his "Drop Shot" columns protested political corruption, filthy streets, and public lethargy. Even after Cable returned to the cotton business, the *Picayune* called on him occasionally to write editorials scourging the privately owned Louisiana State Lottery Company, which had won its lucrative monopoly by lavishing state legislators with bribes.<sup>8</sup>

It is probably not surprising Cable's reform leanings eventually dragged him down unconventional pathways. He had a cast

of mind that wanted proof, demanded facts, expected logic. He dismissed as unworthy any argument appealing to instinct. There was an almost Euclidean elegance to his retreat from proslavery teachings. Cable had enlisted in the Confederacy convinced of the constitutional right of secession, but if his postwar reminiscences are to be believed, he was profoundly shaken by assertions in the southern press that the sword had settled the issue once and for all. How could might make right? He couldn't fathom the casual renunciation of a principle for which he had fought and hundreds of thousands of fellow Confederates had wasted their lives. He dove into constitutional history.

Studious by temperament, Cable sifted every word, weighed every sentence. He came away with an answer that seemed obvious. The war wasn't about secession at all, but about slavery; therefore, the rebellion was right only if slavery was right. So he interrogated that subject, turning to the Bible, in particular Paul's epistle to Philemon concerning the return of the latter's runaway slave, Onesimus. He had heard many sermons based on Paul's epistle, but only from the proslavery side. An article in a Scottish magazine exposed a different side, emphasizing Paul's urging Philemon to receive Onesimus no longer as a servant but as a "brother beloved." Cable studied the competing sermons, together with the epistle, wrestled with the meaning, and concluded that the biblical defense of slavery was sheer sophistry. Once the iron logic of principle had demolished that cornerstone of prewar philosophy, the edifice of Cable's inherited belief crumbled to the ground. It must have been nearly rubble when the *Picayune* asked Cable, while still on its payroll, to report on the annual examinations in the city's racially mixed public schools.

From 1870 to 1875 about one-third of the city's schools were integrated, a record unmatched anywhere else in the country, let alone the Reconstruction South. Though Cable had earlier written a snide article on an integrated meeting of the city's teachers, he was beginning to view his world through different eyes. The examination period surprised him as much as his account of it displeased his employer. His epiphany merits quoting at length: "In pursuance of this duty I saw, to my great and rapid edification, white ladies teaching Negro boys; colored women showing the graces and dignity of mental and moral refinement, ladies in everything save society's credentials; children and youth of both races standing in the same classes and giving each other peaceable, friendly, effective

competition; and black classes, with black teachers, pushing intelligently up into the intricacies of high-school mathematics.”<sup>9</sup>

It is a measure of Cable’s tough-mindedness that his ethical transformation occurred even as he fraternized with the city’s young elite, most of whom were moving down a different political path. Several of his closest associates—top physicians, rising lawyers, leading editors, clerks on the cusp of commercial prominence—would soon become activists in the Crescent City White League, the silk-stocking movement that toppled Reconstruction in the name of racial purity. Cable had gotten to know them through his clerkship in a leading cotton firm, as well as through his part-time work as secretary to the New Orleans Cotton Exchange, then the country’s major cotton spot market. Shared literary interests drew them together. After the war they formed a debating society.

There were tense moments during their nightly meetings. Cable’s anger rose at discussions of the South’s “black peasantry.” “There is no room in America for a peasantry,” he retorted. He chafed at self-complacent rhetoric about “masterly inactivity,” the euphemism regional leaders used for their boycott of Republican government. To Cable that meant, “in plain English, to withhold the co-operation of society’s best wealth, intelligence, and power from all attempts to re-establish order and safety on the basis of the amended Constitution. . . .” Even in the cotton office of his employer, William Black, whom he revered for his sagacity, sound judgment, and public virtue, Cable had to practice self-restraint. “I’ll have you understand this is a Democratic counting room, sir!” Black used to erupt when Cable reasoned him into a political cul-de-sac. The young secretary could only bite his tongue, grab his hat, and walk out of the office nursing indignation.<sup>10</sup>

But what leaps out about Cable’s odyssey toward a new politics was its grounding in history. Those nightly debating society meetings, held on the second floor of the Price-Current building, home of the business journal that took the pulse of the southern economy, were often spent reading and discussing George Bancroft’s monumental *History of the United States*. What his fellow discussants took away from Bancroft’s spread-eagle patriotism Cable never said, but he himself absorbed, by his own admission, “good political ethics; and I was fast growing ashamed of my [former] political attitude.”<sup>11</sup>

By the summer of 1872, while still employed by the *Picayune*, Cable had become fully immersed in Louisiana’s colonial past. “I

have read a great deal since last May," he wrote his mother. "I had to be posted in State & City history."<sup>12</sup> He had also taken to jotting down observations of characters and scenes encountered on the street for later use in his fiction. But he probably spent more time in the city archives and newspaper morgues poring over leather-bound volumes of musty journalism, especially during the summer, when the port slowed to a standstill. Soon he was writing fictional sketches based on his historical findings. His choice of subjects says as much about his evolving politics as his literary development.

Early on, Cable became fascinated by the liminal world of New Orleans's francophone free people of color, its near-white *gens de couleur libre*, or, in the misleading argot of that day, its quadroon caste, whose debasement at the hands of a society enthralled by one-drop notions of racial identity dramatized in Cable's mind the basic unfairness of *de jure* discrimination. And he was equally revolted at the brutalities he found codified in the early *Code Noir*, the French laws of slavery, which had been adapted for Louisiana from the slave code of its more prosperous sister colony, Saint Domingue. The code's legalized barbarism inspired Cable to fictionalize the real-life story of the African prince who was marooned for years in the back swamp of eastern New Orleans after his hand was amputated for insubordination. Beginning as an unpublished short story, the saga of Bras Coupé eventually became the centerpiece of *The Grandissimes*.<sup>13</sup>

By 1875 Cable's mining of local history had not only exposed a literary vein he would quarry for years to come; it brought into the open his fundamental dissent from local mores. That year, when it had become obvious that Reconstruction in Louisiana was hanging by a thin thread and racial hysteria had won over even so-called moderate Democrats, Cable published a letter in the New Orleans *Bulletin* criticizing the mob of high school hooligans who forcibly resegregated a racially mixed girls' school on Royal Street in the French Quarter. Edited by Page Baker, the brother of Marion Baker, one of Cable's closest confidants, the *Bulletin* was the chief propaganda organ of the Crescent City White League. Baker published the letter along with a preface condemning Cable's endorsement of "unnatural hybridity." Cable dropped the matter when neither the *Bulletin* nor the *Picayune* ran his rejoinder.

Another decade would elapse before he enunciated his new racial creed in "The Freedmen's Case in Equity," when he was on the

verge of relocating his family permanently to Northampton, Massachusetts. By then he had apparently assimilated, perhaps unwittingly, the political vocabulary of the Afro-Creoles whose tragedies he was beginning to fictionalize with great feeling and insight. His spirited defense of the “*public rights*” of American blacks evoked an artful concept introduced into the Louisiana Constitution of 1868 by the intellectual vanguard of the Afro-Creole community, itself the product of a transatlantic movement of people, commerce, and ideas connecting America’s most Caribbean society with the wider world of French revolutionary republicanism. That vanguard had fused a concept imported directly from France with a strain of northern “emancipationism” to try to skirt the bugbear of “social equality.” The concept turned up in the third plank of the 1872 National Republican platform, which pledged to defend by appropriate legislation “the enjoyment of all civil, political, and *public rights*” throughout the Union (emphasis added), which appeared again in the 1876 platform. Its insertion into Louisiana’s radical constitution of 1868, however, marked the first open accommodations law in the American South, affirming in positive law every person’s untrammelled right to enter private establishments that were public in nature. Cable accepted those premises unquestioningly. As he later explained, “the day must come when the Negro must share and enjoy in common with the white race the whole scale of *public rights* and advantages provided under the American government; that *public* society must be reconstructed on this basis; and that the Negro must come under this process. . . .”<sup>14</sup>

## II

If historical research and reflection had prompted Cable’s political change of heart, still needing explanation is why he wrote a history of pre-Civil War New Orleans. He was hardly the first nineteenth-century fiction writer to plunder local lore for stories and ambience. Nathaniel Hawthorne, Cable’s literary role model, also set his morally charged stories in a hazy past drenched in social atmosphere and mined his historical surroundings for literary ore. Yet Hawthorne never melded them into a published history. Nor did Washington Irving, unless one wishes to count his burlesqued chronicle of the New York Knickerbockers. (Irving did write subsequently about Columbus and George Washington as well as the conquest of Granada.)

Then there are the wealthy amateurs, patricians all—George Bancroft, William Prescott, and Francis Parkman—who stumbled into writing romantic history almost as a literary afterthought and never looked back.<sup>15</sup> Cable always returned to fiction, even as he stepped up his advocacy journalism and plunged into reform causes. So why did he alone among nineteenth-century novelists decide to write a book-length history of the place in which he set most of his fiction? A partial answer is he needed the money. In the early 1880s he had a growing family, and he wanted badly to quit his day jobs in the cotton firm and as secretary to the Cotton Exchange for full-time writing. Yet the income generated by his work for the Census Office never justified the time Cable devoted to this project. Nor were his northern publishers happy that he was abandoning fiction for history. Clearly, other motives drove him to write a history of pre-Civil War New Orleans.

Chief among them was a desire to show white Creoles that his fiction was more than fabrication, that he had read widely and thought deeply about their history, especially the colonial period, which to his mind held the key to understanding this distinctive people.<sup>16</sup> Cable had probably caught wind of the grumbling in the Vieux Carré provoked by *Old Creole Days*, a murmuring that grew noticeably louder after the 1880 publication of *The Granddissimes*. Knowing what he did about Creole resentment of unbidden intrusions into their private affairs, he couldn't have been too surprised by the reception his short stories and new novel were receiving in downtown quarters.<sup>17</sup> By then prominent white Creoles were beginning to charge Cable with stabbing them in the back for money and cheap notoriety. They accused him of caricaturing their broken English—their “Gumbo French”—mocking their folkways, and lampooning their get-up-and-go. Cable's barely concealed Puritan self-righteousness had a familiar ring. Anglo-American transplants to their city had been characterizing them as slothful and backward for years.

Cable's most unpardonable sin, however, was his frank treatment of the Creole community's mixed origins. Many of the light-skinned free people of color in Cable's stories were hard to distinguish from the white fathers who had often bequeathed them substantial amounts of property, usually by admitting they were their natural children.<sup>18</sup> It was another American slander—this notion that the native-born Gallic population had been “touched by the tar brush,” a phrase still heard in modern-day New Orleans—

and it rankled white Creoles as nothing else could. By 1882 Cable had become, in the words of an artist-illustrator sent to New Orleans by Cable's publisher, the "the most cordially hated little man" in the entire city.<sup>19</sup> But as yet the hatred was mostly confined to downtown areas where the francophone population tended to cluster.

The first gust of white Creole animosity blew in with an anonymous pamphlet published in December 1880, while Cable was working on his census history. It came from Adrien-Emmanuel Rouquette, a Catholic priest and nature poet whom Cable had once praised. The attack was so extreme—Rouquette in one place calling him "an unnatural southern growth, a bastard sprout"—that Cable's publishers, fearing for his safety, suggested he move North.<sup>20</sup> More blasts came in 1883 from the pen of the aging Creole playwright Placide Canonge, who used the opportunity of an obituary of chess great and New Orleans native Paul Morphy to shower abuse on the author of *The Grandissimes*. But it wasn't until the January 1885 publication of "The Freedmen's Case in Equity" that the gathering tempest broke over Cable's head. The fiercest pelt-ing came from the septuagenarian Charles Gayarré, the Creole community's foremost historian and writer. An attack from that source was just the kind of controversy Cable no doubt hoped to preempt by writing a history of the city.

Cable knew that he was swimming against powerful cultural currents. His treatment of the history and habits of New Orleans Creoles, black and white, came at a culminating moment in the development of this fascinating community. For three-quarters of a century dating back to the Louisiana Purchase, the *ancienne population*, as the white Creoles identified themselves, had been locked in bitter conflict with aggressive Anglo-American newcomers for political and economic dominance. At its zenith the fight for mastery was nothing less than "a struggle for the soul of Louisiana," to quote Joseph Tregle.<sup>21</sup> Reinforced by repeated waves of French-speaking exiles fleeing revolutionary upheavals in France and Saint Domingue, white Creoles tried to prolong their hegemony by gerrymandering the legislative districts and restricting suffrage.

They used their majorities on the city council and their hammerlock on the mayor's office to choke off street-paving and wharf-building funds above Canal Street, where the Anglophone transplants were building an American city and a world-class cotton port. Why would any sane person "improve suburbs while 'the bosom of the city' withered and decayed?" they asked incredulously.<sup>22</sup> In

1825, the American-Creole rivalry might have erupted in armed conflict between the state's ethnically divided militia but for the intervention of the Marquise de Lafayette, the vastly popular hero of the American Revolution then touring the country. Thereafter intermittent duels kept the ethnic factions constantly on edge.

An uneasy truce finally took hold after 1836 when the state legislature, then domiciled in New Orleans, divided the city into three quasi-autonomous municipalities. The arrangement gave the American faction control of its mushrooming tax base. The newcomers started building an American city and a major banking industry (the country's third largest in 1837). They erected hotels and constructed new wharves and warehouses. They dug the New Basin Canal to compete with the Creoles' Carondelet (or Old Basin) Canal for control of the lake trade. By 1852, after railroad developers succeeded in having the municipalities consolidated in order to repair the city's terrible credit rating, the assessed value of property above Canal Street was more than twice that of the two downtown municipalities combined.<sup>23</sup> City hall now moved out of the Cabildo and across Canal Street into Gallier Hall in Lafayette Square, which had been the seat of government of the now defunct uptown municipality. In 1857, the triumphant Americans asserted control over Mardi Gras by establishing the first carnival krewe, the Mystick Krewe of Comus, which paraded on Mardi Gras evening, the most sacred period of the carnival calendar. Comus's founders were neither Catholic nor francophone. They were, almost to a man, Anglo-American residents of the city's newest high-toned neighborhood, the Garden District.<sup>24</sup>

The white Creoles' response to the decline of their community ranged between acquiescence and despair. A high rate of intermarriage between Americans and Creoles smoothed the path toward assimilation in both directions. So did the pull of profit. Ambitious Creoles gravitated to where money was changing hands the fastest, which was in cotton and uptown real estate.<sup>25</sup>

There was a spirited Creole effort to resuscitate the decaying French Quarter, thanks to the generosity of Baroness Micaela Pontalba, now resident in Paris, who used her vast inheritance to refurbish the center of the Vieux Carré in the late 1840s and 1850s, restoring the cathedral and its bookend buildings, the Cabildo and Presbytere, that her father, Baron Almonester, had constructed with his own funds during Spanish rule. She also financed the flanking apartment-storehouses (so named because of the commer-

cial establishments on the ground floor) that still bear her name. The city chipped in by turning the Place d'Armes, the old parade ground that had become a campsite for drunks and derelicts, into a French formal garden, renaming it Jackson Square. It was all for naught. Business continued to move out of the Quarter into the American sector. Even among native-born French speakers English was beginning to supplant French.<sup>26</sup>

The despair became acute among Creole intellectuals who came of age in the 1830s and 1840s, just when the Americans were consolidating their hegemony—men like Gayarré, the playwright-editor-impresario Canonge, the priest-poet Rouquette, the writer John Casmir Delavigne (another Cable critic in the 1880s), and the distinguished linguist and education reformer Alexander Dimitry.<sup>27</sup> By the 1850s they were feeling like exiles twice over. First the Americans had elbowed them aside in the commercial sphere, and now multitudes of German and Irish immigrants were overtaking the Creole parts of town, including the French Quarter. Despite the anti-Catholicism of the national American party, some Creoles even joined the nativist organization because of its opposition to Irish influence in local politics.<sup>28</sup>

Several Creole intellectuals quixotically viewed the breakup of the Union as an opportunity to reverse antebellum trends. During and shortly after the war they established French language journals to return Louisiana to its original estate as a Gallic community in heart, mind, and soul. But the collapse of the Confederacy and the advent of radical Reconstruction, which prohibited the use of French in the schools and made English the official language (Americanizing pressures that the white Creole majority had been able to fend off during the early post-Louisiana Purchase period), not only further diluted Gallic identity but threatened their status as white men, blurring in law as well as fact the already fuzzy line demarcating them from their Afro-Creole relatives.

The response of men like Canonge and Gayarré, ironically, merely underscored how far they had been Americanized. To bur-nish their Caucasian credentials, they took refuge in a Gallic variant of Lost Cause romanticism, confecting a myth of Creole nobility and racial purity. Much of this reactionary project hinged on the meaning of *Creole*. It would be hard to exaggerate the energy expended on proving the term was a noun exclusive to native-born white descendants of French and Spanish settlers, but merely an adjective for all others, particularly Louisianans of African descent.

There could be creole blacks but never Creoles who happened to be black.

This was argument from anachronism. The Portuguese- and Spanish-derived term actually originated in colonial Latin America as a way of differentiating bond people imported directly from Africa from those born in the Americas. The term became politicized in antebellum Louisiana, as more and more of the Louisiana-born francophone population self-identified as Creole in order to build solidarity in the face of the Anglo-American onslaught. But the term was casually applied to all French-speaking native Louisianans regardless of race, just as it had been to Creoles of Saint Domingue and Cuba. As long as most black people remained enslaved, this lexical inclusiveness posed little threat to white status. As Virginia Dominguez, an especially close student of the subject, explains, "The term had always been used to signify local birth and foreign parentage."<sup>29</sup>

All that changed during Reconstruction, when white Creole intellectuals launched their struggle to prove the gentility of their lineage and the whiteness of their nomenclature. They were encouraged by the climate of opinion. Due to imperialistic adventures abroad, scientific racism was gaining in respectability. The high court lent sanction to hardening segregation at home with its 1896 separate-but-equal ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. By the dawn of the twentieth century white Creoles had succeeded in books, lectures, and journals in winning popular acceptance for their redefinition of Creole as something inherent in the properties of blood. Scores of encyclopedias and dictionaries attested to the completeness of this racial-linguistic achievement.<sup>30</sup>

Charles Gayarré was at the forefront of this rearguard movement. And his conflict with Cable was pivotal in the crystallization of the Creole myth. As he himself admitted, "Everyone seemed to think that I was the only one who could couch a lance against the champion of Africa and the idol of the North."<sup>31</sup> It is true he was the most obvious candidate to joust with Cable. Grandson of Étienne de Boré (former New Orleans mayor and generally considered the father of the Louisiana sugar industry) and great-grandson of an official who arrived with the first Spanish administration in 1766, Gayarré commanded more visibility than any white Creole still living. "To Louisianians, indeed, it seemed that Gayarré was not only the historian of Louisiana but the history of it as well," wrote novelist Grace King.<sup>32</sup>

His relatives encompassed the community's *crème de la crème*: the Grimas and the Marignys, the Forstalls and the Dimitrys. Baroness Pontalba was a friend. George Bancroft and the Charleston novelist and poet William Gilmore Simms praised his published writings. There was another reason besides his great stature that made Gayarré the Creole choice for answering Cable. His declining personal fortunes seem to symbolize the fate of the *ancienne population* at large. Their fall had been pretty steep. Before the war, even while his community was losing ground to pushy Americans, Gayarré had attained real distinction in politics and letters. He had gone to Philadelphia in the 1820s to study law, learn English, and groom himself to fill the vacuum in Creole leadership created by the success of better-educated American newcomers back home. In 1830, shortly after returning to New Orleans, he was elected as a Jacksonian Democrat to the Louisiana legislature by almost unanimous vote; the following year the Whig governor, a Creole like himself, named him as judge of the city court. He lost an 1834 bid for a congressional seat but was elected by the legislature to the U.S. Senate the following year.

Then began a theme in Gayarré's life that remains cloaked in mystery. An undiagnosed chronic illness contracted in childhood flared up. (One biographer speculates it may have been manic depression, which may account for the mood swings between despair and grandiosity so evident in his correspondence.) Gayarré resigned his Senate seat and moved to Paris for eight years to convalesce and consult French physicians. But he plunged back into politics upon his return to Louisiana in 1844, returning twice to the state legislature before the governor appointed him secretary of state, a position he used to build the State Library.

Throughout his long life—he lived to age ninety—Gayarré was constantly running for office or seeking some federal appointment, regarding himself more as a politician than as a man of letters. But posterity remembers Judge Gayarré mainly for his writing, which comprised seven volumes of history, two novels, a couple of dramas, and a slew of pamphlets and magazine articles. His four-volume *History of Louisiana*—constructed partly from archival material he gathered during his European convalescence but mostly drawn from material copied and collected, by other researchers, from repositories in Paris, Seville, and Madrid—was the major achievement of his life.

All these attainments began unraveling after Fort Sumter. He

and his wife, the wealthy widow of a New Orleans cotton merchant, invested heavily in Confederate bonds and were left nearly destitute. In the postwar years his law practice floundered, and his occasional contributions to local papers barely yielded pin money. His novels, whose production and printing costs he had to finance personally, were commercial failures. He frittered away more of his wife's inheritance in a feckless speculation in upriver timber property. In 1873 he ran for Congress as a Democrat and lost. Despite his contempt for "the rule of ignorant and filthy negroes," he accepted a court reporter's appointment to the Republican-dominated state supreme court.

Meanwhile, to keep the wolves from the door, Gayarré began liquidating land and personal property, including fancy parlor furniture brought back from France. Soon his library and paintings went on the auction block, along with a prized dagger. His house north of Lake Pontchartrain was sold for less than he hoped. In the late 1870s, Gayarré and his wife moved back to the city. But the relocation did little to alleviate their financial distress.<sup>33</sup>

So desperate had Gayarré's circumstance become that he turned down an invitation to stand for a seat in the 1879 constitutional convention that had been called to overturn the 1868 Radical Reconstruction-era charter, as he wrote a friend, he would be unable to act conscientiously in that body without antagonizing the monied interests. "This would not suit me," he confessed, "inasmuch as those monied men invite me to come to the Garden District and establish under my special supervision a tip top Parisian institution to teach French, and French *only*, to their girls. . . ." There was one hitch. He needed money to set up the school, and he didn't have it. By now the subject of finances was literally consuming Gayarré's life.<sup>34</sup>

It certainly colored his relationship with Cable, which ranged from complicated to duplicitous. At the start of Cable's writing career, the two men developed a cordial relationship, serving together on the board of the Louisiana Historical Association. The young American used to invite the aging Creole to his home to meet out-of-state authors and critics.<sup>35</sup> Gayarré once solicited the American's advice concerning an early installment of a work in progress titled "Blacks of Louisiana." "The subject grows and expands under my pen more than I had intended at first," he wrote, and he planned to expand it into a book-length history of the black Louisianans reaching to the present time aimed at the African

American reading public. “It might be a textbook in their schools. And why not, since it is our constitutional duty . . . to educate them?”<sup>36</sup>

That writing project never went beyond a series of pedestrian articles in the New Orleans Times-Democrat. The Boston publisher Cable had recommended declined to publish Gayarré’s novel unless he covered the production costs. The aging Creole demurred, saying he had to return to New Orleans “to ascertain if I could possibly rake up that sum from the impoverished gutters of our beggarly city.”<sup>37</sup>

Gayarré’s declining fortunes and personal disappointments darkened his mood about everything—his involvement in public affairs, his literary career, the intellectual torpor of his hometown. “Poor Louisiana! Poor New Orleans! Poor insensate population fit only for Bedlam! The curse of God is upon this benighted and rotten community.”<sup>38</sup> He considered emigrating to the North or West and writing dime-store books for money. “Well! I could write trash too.”<sup>39</sup> Professional jealousy came naturally to Gayarré. Envy was the worm in his apple. Even as he solicited Cable’s advice and assistance, he grumbled about the younger man’s national success. A rejection letter from a Baltimore publisher saying his manuscript possessed “rare merit” elicited this outburst: “What a satire on American taste and appreciation! A book said to be of ‘rare merit’ cannot be published, whilst Cable’s galimatias under the patronage of Scribner’s deluges the land, and is set above Washington Irving’s Addisonian works. Ah! Poor South!”<sup>40</sup>

Still, he confined his criticism of Cable to a few indirect swipes in newspaper articles, which included a backhanded suggestion that Cable had borrowed from his history without attribution (on which, more shortly), and a gossip column intimating an anonymous expert (probably Gayarré) had questioned Cable’s historical veracity in a conversation with a visiting northern publisher. Mainly, the aging Creole shared his festering resentments with other Creole intellectuals, who had been urging him for years to take the offensive against the uptown defamer of Creole character and customs.<sup>41</sup>

Glowing coverage in the national media of Cable’s entertaining rendition of Creole songs and dialect before crowded northern audiences in the fall and winter of 1884–85 brought the Creoles’ simmering anger to the boiling point. Still, Gayarré balked at going after the younger author until *The Century* magazine pub-

lished Cable's "The Freedmen's Case in Equity" in January 1885. Gayarré offered an anguished explanation for his decision to go public with his complaints. It concerned "private feelings of a sacred character," specifically, burning indignation at Cable's alleged assertion that he had gotten inspiration for his Creole stories from the recently deceased Alexander Dimitry. The implication that the great linguist, a Creole among Creoles, had inspired stories of Creole race-mixing, was more than Gayarré could abide. He was haunted by memories of his last meeting with the nearly blind Dimitry. From his deathbed the linguist lunged for Gayarré, asking, "Charley, is that you?" He scanned Gayarré's forehead with his forefinger, pleading, "Charley, don't forget me!" "Well, I did not forget!" Gayarré wrote Dimitry's son.<sup>42</sup> In his own mind Gayarré's public assault on Cable was a down payment on this deeply felt obligation.

The deathbed scene certainly illuminates the inner turmoil that vivified Gayarré's criticisms of Cable, but it is actually more telling of the exaggerated romanticism to which the old Creole was often prone. There is simply no evidence Cable ever claimed Alexander Dimitry had inspired his stories, only that the linguist had furnished him the "Dirge of St. Malo," a song about a slave insurrectionist that Cable later refashioned into his *Bras Coupé* character.<sup>43</sup> The more skeptical explanation for Gayarré's decision to break his silence was a hesitancy to go public as long as Cable remained popular in the American part of town.

Nothing Cable had published prior to "The Freedmen's Case in Equity" had appreciably lessened that charmed immunity. The anglophone newspapers still lavished praise on his fiction. They continued to write local-boy-makes-good articles about his reception on the national scene. Lafcadio Hearn, whom Cable befriended after the young Bohemian expatriated to New Orleans, championed him with almost missionary zeal. Once he impulsively read out loud portions of Cable's fiction to female friends who refused to open one of his books, and brought them to tears.<sup>44</sup>

As recently as May 1884 Cable had lectured to a large Crescent City hall "filled with probably the most cultivated audience ever assembled in New Orleans (few Creoles attended)," singing Creole songs and reading excerpts from *The Grandissimes* and other stories.<sup>45</sup> Attacking Cable while his stock remained so high in the American sector would likely be seen as Creole sour grapes, reinforcing the smugness Gayarré and others found so maddening.