

INTRODUCTION

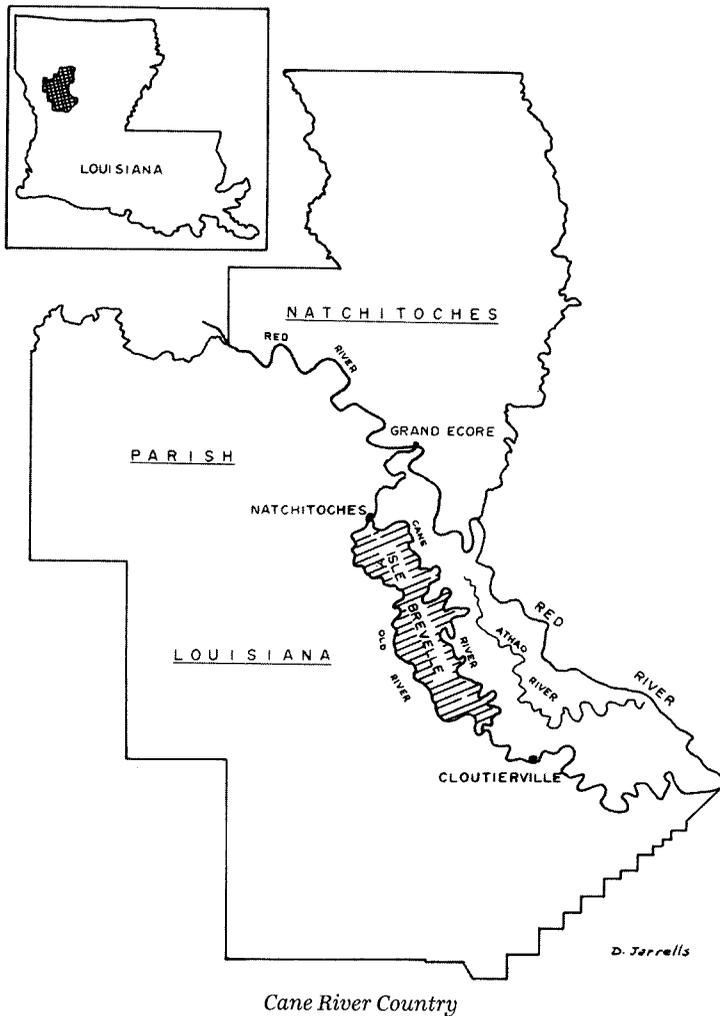
To comprehend the spirit and condition of the South today, we must have constantly in mind both its recent and remote history.

Albion W. Tourgee, *The Invisible Empire* (1880)

In 1867 Congress enfranchised black men in the former Confederacy with the dual purpose of rendering justice to the freedpeople and making the Union victory secure. By creating a new black electorate and by disfranchising numerous ex-Confederates, the Republican Party came to control the state governments of the South. Over time, Republicans lost control of most, and eventually all, of the southern states. Democratic electoral victories, however, did not result from the normal swing of the electoral pendulum but from campaigns based upon threats, intimidation, and violence.

Congressional Reconstruction, often misnamed “Radical Reconstruction,” ended decisively in 1877, when two Republican presidents, outgoing president Grant and incoming president Hayes, allowed the Democratic Party to forcibly seize power in Florida, South Carolina, and Louisiana. Although the Democrats did not immediately disfranchise black voters—they had pledged not to do so—they used fraud and violence to lock the Republican Party out of state government. Democracy, in any meaningful sense of that word, ended. Any semblance of justice and security for the black population had to wait until the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

The Louisiana parish of Natchitoches (pronounced “Nack-a-tish”) is an attractive setting for a study of Reconstruction. For one thing, it provides a microcosm of Republican politics and government at the local level. Between 1868 and 1878 a coalition of ex-slaves, freeborn blacks, and former



Map 1. Natchitoches Parish. Reproduced by permission of Louisiana State University Press.

Confederate soldiers governed the parish (county) in the name of the Republican Party. Sustained by black voters and intermittently protected by the U.S. Army, the Republican Party of Natchitoches Parish was the strongest in the Red River valley. Republican control of the state depended upon Natchitoches.

In the second place, the Natchitoches Republican Party was a homegrown political organization. Its most influential leader was a Baptist minister and former slave. The white Republicans were nearly all native Louisianans or

residents of long standing: their southern credentials were impeccable. The only “carpetbaggers” in the party were a Freedmen’s Bureau agent, who died in 1870, and a black immigrant from Canada. Republicans might have governed Natchitoches Parish indefinitely had they been allowed to vote freely. Time and again black voters spurned Democratic appeals to desert the party; in the face of threats and intimidation, they turned out to cast Republican ballots.

Third, the whites who did their level best to oust the Republicans from power refrained from violence. Throughout this study, Natchitoches Parish appears as an oasis of law and order surrounded by the most violent region of Louisiana. The Colfax massacre, the bloodiest incident of Reconstruction, took place in neighboring Grant Parish. In the adjacent parish of Red River, six white Republicans were murdered in cold blood. The Texas of John Wesley Hardin and his ilk lay close by. But for reasons to do with its peculiar history and culture, Natchitoches suffered relatively little political or racial violence. This is not another Reconstruction “horror story” that focuses upon bloodshed.

The following narrative combines a fine-grain community study with the “big picture” of Reconstruction. The story shifts between Natchitoches Parish, New Orleans (then the state capital), and Washington because the story makes no sense without local, state, and national perspectives. Running throughout is a question that is basic to an understanding of post-Civil War America: Why did Reconstruction fail, and why did it fail so badly?

The setting is the oldest European settlement in Louisiana. Natchitoches began life as French military post in 1714. By 1804, when France ceded control to the United States, it had grown into a community of about nine hundred free people, a slightly larger number of slaves, and a dozen or so *gens de couleur libre* (free blacks). Before it became part of the United States, virtually everyone in Natchitoches spoke French. The few non-French-speakers who settled in Natchitoches quickly learned the language. A relatively even gender balance enabled French-speaking whites to find marriage partners among other French speakers. This fact, and the frequency of second and third marriages, meant that most whites were closely related to each other, adding to the linguistic and cultural unity of the place.¹

Between the Louisiana Purchase and the Civil War, the population of

Louisiana increased tenfold. Immigrants flocked to the state. New Orleans grew into the largest city in the South. The cultivation of sugar and cotton spread up and down the Mississippi River and its several tributaries. Natchitoches, previously the only European settlement in northern Louisiana with a vast hinterland, lost its isolation when white Americans and black slaves settled the rest of the Red River valley and the surrounding hill country. So vast was its original extent that Natchitoches gave birth to a dozen new parishes, including Winn, De Soto, Sabine, Bienville, Bossier, Claiborne, Webster, and Jackson. Even so, the population of the much-reduced Natchitoches had climbed to 16,699 by 1860, an increase of almost 14,000 over fifty years. After Rapides Parish, Natchitoches was the most populous in the Red River valley.²

The introduction of cotton cultivation transformed the local economy. In the eighteenth century Natchitoches had functioned as a fort, a trading post for neighboring Indians, and a center of tobacco production. It had served as the northern terminus of *el camino real*, the road linking Louisiana and Texas that ended in San Antonio. It had possessed strategic significance, marking the military frontier between French Louisiana and Spanish Mexico. By the early nineteenth century the Indian trade had ended, tobacco production had stopped, and Natchitoches had lost its military importance. However, as cotton culture spread westward as far as Texas, Natchitoches Parish quickly became a major center of production and transportation.

The town might have grown much larger but for an act of engineering and an act of nature. In 1838 Captain Henry Shreve, using specially designed steamboats, completed the task of clearing the "Great Raft," a massive logjam of ancient origin that had made the Red River unnavigable for about 160 miles. Natchitoches, north of which boats could not go, had served as the transfer point for all the cotton that came overland from Texas and was then shipped south to New Orleans. Now it lost most of that trade to the new town of Shreveport. Shortly afterward, in 1840, the Red River changed course, leaving Natchitoches with an oxbow lake that was picturesque but useless. The town's access to Red River was now a landing stage, Grand Ecore, four miles away. Natchitoches became, literally, a backwater. The railroad main line passed it by. Natchitoches prospered as a town that served the local cotton planters, but it could never compete with Shreveport, which by 1860 had surpassed it in population. Whereas Shreveport has grown into a substantial city, Natchitoches remains to this day a small town.

Cotton changed the population of Natchitoches. The bountiful economy attracted migrants and immigrants. Most of the Americans came from Louisiana and elsewhere in the South, but some came from points north. The immigrants came from England, Ireland, France, Belgium, Austria, and the German states. The non-white population also changed. While slaves continued to outnumber whites, the number of free blacks increased exponentially. In 1793, Pierre Metoyer, a Frenchman, freed his slave-concubine Marie-Thérèse Coincoin and several of their offspring. The descendants of Metoyer and Coincoin grew into a tightly knit “colony” of closely related families that farmed the flat, fertile area south of Natchitoches town, known as Isle Brevelle, that lay between Cane River and Old River. In 1860 these Creoles of color numbered 411 people and owned 379 slaves among them. Other acts of manumission swelled the total free black population to about a thousand, representing 5 percent of the parish’s population. Natchitoches Parish was home to the largest group of free blacks in northern Louisiana by far. Along with St. Landry Parish, it had the largest free black population in the state outside New Orleans.³

Although denied the right to vote and hold public office, Louisiana’s *gens de couleur libre* had considerably more freedom than free blacks in other slave states. They were also wealthier. The *gens de couleur libre* in Natchitoches Parish were not only exceptionally wealthy compared to free blacks elsewhere in the rural South; they were also better off, on average, than *whites* in Natchitoches Parish.

The *gens de couleur*, especially the inhabitants of Isle Brevelle, did not regard themselves as “black.” The term *free black*, a modern construction, is a misnomer that reflects the current habit of applying the word *black* or *African American* to all Americans with some African ancestry. It reflects, too, modern distaste for such terms as *mulatto*, *quadroon*, and *octoroon*, words that once registered important distinctions not only of color but also of status. In legal terms, the *gens de couleur* constituted a third racial category. Socially, they regarded themselves as distinct from and superior to the “American” blacks. They called themselves “French” or “Creole.” They owned slaves. Very light-complexioned, they generally married within their own group. They had good relations and extensive business dealings with the white Creoles.⁴

The large free black population testified to concubinage between masters and slaves. The practice had been relatively uncommon during the colonial era, because the small gender gap enabled white men to find white

women as marriage partners. But in the nineteenth century several of the wealthiest cotton planters in Natchitoches Parish lived openly with slave women or free women of color. Marco Givanovich, an immigrant from Austria, formed a lifelong relationship with a slave with whom he fathered a large family. David H. Boullt, originally from Maryland, lived with a free woman of color, reputedly an octoroon, who bore him many racially mixed children. Neither man suffered any loss of social standing in the white community. The New Orleans practice of *plaçage*, whereby wealthy whites kept octoroon mistresses, reflected Louisiana's tolerance of interracial sex. Planters, governors, and businessmen fathered colored children and sometimes acknowledged them. "The mulattoes," wrote Marshall H. Twitchell, a native of Vermont who became the Republican leader of Red River Parish, "did not owe their existence to the white men nearest the social equal of the colored but, on the contrary, to the very highest in social and official life."⁵

The arrival of so many migrants and immigrants after 1804 challenged the French character of Louisiana. So did the influx of English-speaking slaves imported from Florida and other states. By 1860 English-speakers comprised 70 percent of the state's free population. Even in Natchitoches Parish, many newcomers never got beyond rudimentary French. The local newspapers began to print in English as well as French. As Louisiana's non-French-speaking population grew, anglophones sought to make English the official language of the state courts, a first step in supplanting French as the dominant language. The fact that most lawyers were English-speaking Americans added to the pressure to abandon French. The *Natchitoches Union*, edited by an immigrant from France, condemned such pressure, insisting that "no one has the right of suppressing the use of the French language in Louisiana."⁶

Although gradually eroded, French showed remarkable staying power. It remained the first language of the older white families even after they learned English. The free blacks of Isle Brevelle spoke French almost exclusively. A small but steady flow of immigrants from France augmented the French-speaking population. Upon the outbreak of the Civil War, franco-phone whites formed the Chasseurs à Pied, or Natchitoches Guards. Presenting a flag to the men of the unit, J. C. Janin extolled their identification with France: "All of us, whether the children of Louisiana by birth, or born on the soil of France, have the same blood running in our veins, the French blood. It was the civilizing genius of France which patiently conquered from barbarism the soil which now bears us."⁷