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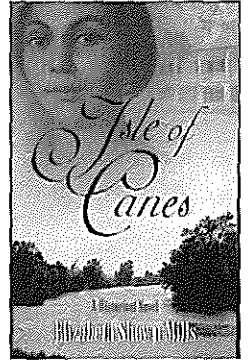


Between Two Worlds

Isle of Canes and Issues of Conscience:
Master-Slave Sexual Dynamics
and Slaveholding by Free People of Color

by
Elizabeth Shown Mills

On the cover of *Isle of Canes*,¹ we see a placid river, a beautiful woman – obviously one of wealth and privilege – and a plantation manor steeped in all the symbolism those homes represent. What we see *are* symbols: symbols we interpret through the eyes of the modern world, through our experiences, and through the convictions we have acquired. What we see in all three components is a façade, and the reality that lies behind that façade may or may not be what those symbols mean to us.



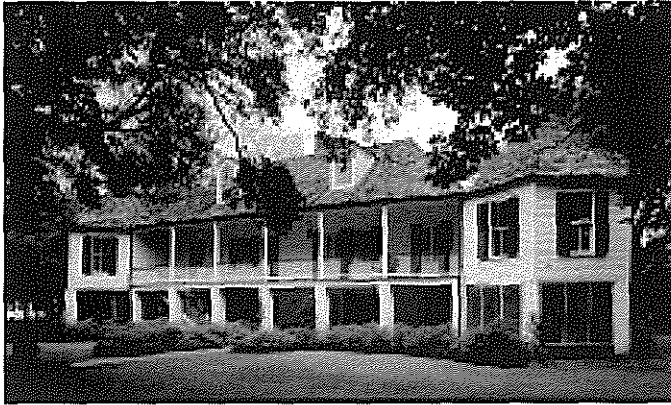
As writers, we use symbolism in many ways. At the most basic level, we can use them to advance stereotypes or to help the world pierce that façade. In *Isle of Canes*, I chose the latter course. I try to show not only the lure of the river but also the turmoil that churns beneath its gentle ripples. I try to show not just the grandeur of the homes, but also the scars and ruts of the road that linked those homes, just beyond the lush trees on the cover. I try to show that the wealth and culture some writers point to, to tout the freedom supposedly “enjoyed” by free people of color in a slave regime, was not so much freedom as it was a trickster whose “gifts” could be – and were – easily snatched away.²

On the eve of the Civil War, there existed in the South nearly a quarter million “free” people of color – a throng mostly forgotten by modern American. Contrary to the stereotypes in which this caste is sometimes cast, they were not mere toilers in the fields of others, but achievers as well. They were both field hands and slaveowners, inventors

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and doctors, teachers and ministers, tradesmen and shop keepers. Their lives, their contributions, and their struggles to survive as free in a slave regime is a story we are now just beginning to understand.

I discovered this world thirty-five years ago when, as a young mother and history student, I went to the courthouse and the churches along that Louisiana river to search for my children's roots. As my work became known there, the region's historical-preservation society asked me to do a site-documentation project on a plantation estate grounds it had been given.



Melrose Plantation. Photograph, ca. 1975. Courtesy of John C. Guillet,

Guillet Photography, Natchitoches, Louisiana.

That plantation's manor is the one you see on *Isle's* cover, in the shadows behind the portrait of a young lady from the family who built the home. That plantation, known today as Melrose, was named a National Historical Landmark at the conclusion of our project. The young lady on the cover is Marie Thérèse Carmelite Anty, wife of the Sieur Auguste Metoyer, who was not only a Cane River planter but also a commission merchant in New Orleans.

Over the decades since then, I have researched their counterparts, rich and poor, in many corners of America. Little known though they are, their lives have much to teach us about America's past, America's identity, and the roots of the racial divide we suffer today. Through *Isle of Canes*, I have hoped to take these complex issues beyond the mostly academic forums in which not only I but also my late husband explored their world – beyond the academic bubble in which most studies of this class are confined.

The historical novel, on the other hand, offers a larger venue, a different audience, another chance to help the world better understand

itself. L. P. Hartley's classic novel, *The Go-Between*, opens with the line, "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there." Of course, historians, journalists, and genealogists know that but does the rest of the world? To paraphrase Rhett Butler: Pete Public doesn't give a damn. Caught up in the television version of "reality shows," neither Pete nor his wife Paula is likely to have considered that the past was the greatest reality show of all.

Historical novels have the power to convey a truth academic history struggles to communicate: *Not only was the past the ultimate reality show, but survivors there had terrible choices to make.* The impact of that message can be seared upon a reader far more graphically in a novel than in any scholarly tome or family chronicle. Both the historian and the genealogist are constrained to dissect their subjects impersonally and unemotionally. The story teller, however, is expected to trigger the senses, to make readers feel as though they have been transported into a different reality – one in which they live inside the skin of the author's characters. Thus, even though my educational roots are in history, I chose the novel form to better convey the realities of the past that are difficult to convey within scholarly constraints.

In this paper, I chose for discussion two of those "terrible choices" that confronted free people of color in antebellum America. Both are troubling issues of conscience for modern America, for this family and their counterparts in the past, and particularly for their descendants today. The first issue is the ownership of slaves by those who once wore the chains of slavery themselves. The second is historic concubinage and its role in the sexual dynamics of the slave-master relationship.

The Stage

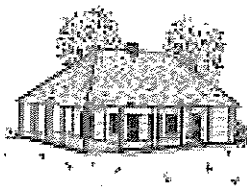
Isle of Canes is the story of a real family, one that left literally thousands of documents. They were multiracial: French and African primarily, with a seasoning of Spanish, German, and Native American. They rose from slavery in colonial Louisiana, went out into a wilderness few others wanted to settle and hacked out an empire that, at its peak, claimed 18,000 acres and nearly 500 slaves. Some branches of the family became exceedingly wealthy. They were religious leaders and held political influence along Louisiana's Cane River under the old Creole regime, before Anglo-American newcomers replaced Louisiana's traditional laws and customs with their own. The Civil War left the Islanders destitute. Post-war, Jim Crow stripped them of the last of

the civil rights they once held under the French and Spanish. In one generation, their homes – a dozen or more of Melrose’s style – became *white* homes in every sense of the word, while the free families of color were reduced to servitude on their own land.

Isle of Canes tells this story through four generations. It opens with a slave couple, both African captives and one of them from modern-day Togo, who were married in January 1736 at the will of their master, the commandant of the outpost of Natchitoches. According to one oral tradition, Françoise (called Fanny) was the daughter of an African king, stolen from her family as a child and sold into slavery by rival tribesmen. Her husband François, was said to be an artisan. They were wed for twenty-three years, produced eleven children, and died together on the same day – of yellow fever they caught while nursing their mistress through the plague.

One of their children became a Louisiana legend under the African name *Coincoin* (pronounced KoñKwñ). As a slave, she was taken into concubinage by a French merchant. Ten years into that relationship, their arrangement was bitterly challenged by the Church and Coincoin paid a horrific price. Amid that battle, the Frenchman, Pierre Metoyer, manumitted her and their relationship continued another ten years.

Coincoin was forty-five when she was cut loose, her body ravaged by fifteen childbirths. As a free woman, she struggled to buy the freedom of her children, grandchildren, nieces, and nephews – all the while living frugally in a crude little cabin. As she aged and could not physically continue that level of labor, she bought slaves to help her. By her death, she had accumulated over a thousand acres of land and sixteen slaves – again, symbols whose reality belies the stereotype. Most of the land was raw and uncleared, a government grant of piney woods in which her cattle could roam, and the sixteen slaves were mostly the offspring of the three adults whom she purchased. Despite the fanciful claims of some writers who portray her as the mistress of Melrose, her life was one of thrift and moderation, lived out in that little cabin of bousillage on the 67-acre tract on which she grew tobacco.



Coincoin’s Cabin.
Pen and ink rendering by Carrie
Stamer Mills, 2001.

Her children and grandchildren built on that foundation, eventually erecting a dozen “mansion houses” along the Melrose model. Yet, I contend that, as free people of color in a slave society, theirs was not a privileged existence but a precarious one – especially after Anglo-America

began to change the French and Spanish policies that had given them the opportunity to prosper and allowed them a measure of citizenship.

The Reality

The lifestyle of their more affluent members is a highly controversial one. Abhorring slavery now, it is not easy to understand how someone who had been a slave could then buy and own others. Yet thousands of free people of color in antebellum America did just that. On the one hand, as Carter G. Woodson reasoned when he first explored this subject in 1924, many were owners only because they had bought loved ones whom they could not free under the laws of their time and place.³ On the other hand, Larry Koger has shown in his exhaustive study *Black Slaveowners*, many bought slaves for labor. Among the latter, as often as not, the masters labored right beside their bondsmen, in the field, at the furnace, or in the tailoring shop, which was the case on Cane River's isle. That purchase of slaves for labor is a reality that Edward Jones has explored from one dimension in his Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Known World*. However, in studying slave ownership by Cane River's Creoles of color, I see a much different world from the one Jones portrays, as well as some nuances not evident in Koger's study or similar explorations by other historians.

Let us try to transport ourselves back in time, to pre-Civil War America, to put ourselves into another reality faced daily by the half-million free people of color who lived in America on the eve of the Civil War. For this mental exercise, it does not matter whether we place ourselves North or South. In both regions, the free people of color who lived among us would have lived a tenuous existence. Both North and South, state after state would try to legislate them out of existence, either to drive them from that state or to send them back into slavery under one or another pretext.

In that world, free people of color were the proverbial bridge between slavery and freedom – a bridge many apologists for slavery wanted to destroy. Who was there to defend that bridge? The stereotypical answer would be *abolitionists*, but that was not the reality on Cane River. The keepers of that bridge were the leaders of the free Creoles of color, the ones who literally built that symbolic church at the end of the bridge to instill hope as well as faith in the black community.

It took wealth, however, to defend that bridge. It took wealth to defend the very right of their class to exist, to battle proposed legislation

against them, and to defend themselves and their neighbors when charged unjustly with crimes for which they could be sent back into slavery. It took wealth to defend homes, wives, and children against predators. It took wealth to privately educate their youth so the next generation could stay abreast of proposed legislation and continue to fight the same battles. Yet the blunt reality in which they lived was this: In a plantation economy, the only road to wealth was built on land tilled by slaves. If, for want of financial resources to defend their class, this family and their counterparts had been sent back into slavery, would there have continued to be a bridge by which any slave could have legally walked out of slavery into freedom?

Tradition holds that this issue was a source of tremendous personal conflict for the slaveholding families of color along Louisiana's Cane River. Records support that tradition, with some nuances historians still need to explore. The incredible costs this family paid to fill its role as Keepers of the Bridge on Cane River can be documented in case after case. In just one of those legal suits, contemporaries tell us, the legal bills mounted to more than \$40,000⁴ (nearly a million in today's currency). They fought those battles not only to protect their own property but also to defend the rights, property, and freedom of the poor free people of color who shared their river – in case after case.

If we can step outside *our* "reality," in which we see so clearly how terrible it is for anyone to make a livelihood off the enslavement of others, long enough to step back into *their* reality, we face two difficult questions. One, who would have defended free black and slave rights along Cane River, if this family had not had the kind of resources it took to mount that defense? Two, how else might they have gotten such resources?

An Issue of Conscience: Slave Ownership

Members of this family dealt with their conscience by both rationalization and benevolence. The earliest discernible nuance to the conscience issue is one fostered by Louisiana's own cultural heritage. During this family's acquisition mode, Cane River culture was still Creole. Anglos were arriving steadily, but the dominant culture remained French and Catholic. From the beginning of this family's slave ownership, the men and women they bought for labor were imports from Africa or imports from "Anglo" Protestant America. Rarely did they buy a Creole slave, except for benevolent reasons. In this, we may see a vestige of

classic ethnic identification. As in continental Africa and among the Native American tribes, slavery might be practiced within a certain framework, so long as the slaves were not “their own people.”

Benevolence, as practiced by the Cane River Creoles, took several forms. As elites among the state’s free people of color, they not only helped with the legal defense of poorer “free people of color,” but also manumitted dozens of their own slaves by one mode or another – *Creole* slaves, that is. They also helped ambitious slaves who belonged to neighbors raise the money to buy their freedom – *Creole* slaves. When the law permitted, they did so openly, and when the laws constrained them, they devised subterfuges.

As a rule, that subterfuge called for exploiting three cultural advantages rooted in their own ethnicity and Louisiana’s social and legal heritage. First, under the state’s Supreme Court decision *Adelle v. Beauregard* (1810), “persons of color” were presumed to be free until and unless proved otherwise. Second, as *Isle of Canes* reveals, the numerous families within this one extended family were the products of miscegenation – offspring of several well-known local families. Thus, even as new generations on the Isle incorporated some darker slaves or ex-slaves into their family units, by marriage or concubinage, the very names they carried lent that presumption of freedom to the darker kin. Third, along Cane River, Catholicism lost much of its grip in the late 1700s and early 1800s. Even when priests were in residence, slaveholders were moving to plantations far distant from the town church and out from under watchful pastoral eyes. Church marriages of slaves became absolutely nonexistent in the parish, and baptisms of both slaves and free people of color became random events.⁵ In short, there ceased to be a system of vital registration by which parish officials could determine who was born in slavery and who was not.

All three circumstances created a conducive environment for Cane River’s well-to-do free Creoles of color, with their conveniently distinctive names, to circumvent prohibitions against slave manumissions. Using the surnames of that community, the slaves to whom the Metoyers granted *de facto* liberty could live under the same presumption of freedom. However, that subterfuge would work only for Creole slaves, French-speaking Catholics like themselves.

In part, this circumstance explains some of the curious anomalies in the existing records that document slave ownership on the isle. For example, the family’s half-African patriarch, Sieur Augustin Metoyer

filed an inventory of his property upon the death of his wife in 1840, to settle her share of their marital community.⁶ That inventory reported thirty-seven adult slaves, of whom sixteen were women of childbearing age. Illogically, those sixteen females had only four children – all under the age of two. A comparative study of that year's federal census reveals that among all slaveholders in the parish, for every slave woman aged sixteen to thirty-six, the average was 1.3 living children aged ten and under.⁷ Statistically, one might expect Metoyer's sixteen females of comparable age to have twenty-one children, ten and under. Yet that inventory he filed in the parish courthouse claimed only four – all babies at the breast.

Where were the children? Obviously, one cannot argue that his slave women were curiously infertile, since four infants had been born in the previous two years. Rephrasing the question to ask *Where were the children aged two to ten?*, one cannot argue a possible sale because Metoyer did not sell his slaves – adults or children. Nor is there a record of him giving young children to his offspring, although he bestowed both land and adult slaves on each of them as they married. Nor do the censuses or the property inventories of his adult offspring offer any evidence of an excessive number of slave children to compensate for those missing from Sieur Augustin's household. Also to be considered: under prevailing Louisiana law, slaveowners were not to separate children under the age of ten from their mothers. That is not to say it did not happen – ample evidence exists that it did⁸ – but it is not reasonable to accuse Metoyer of selling away children when he did not sell adult slaves. Nor is there evidence of a contemporary epidemic on the river that might have, by coincidence, wiped out all his slave children in the two-to-ten-years bracket.

The only logical explanation is *de facto* manumission. Those children were left off the legal inventory that he filed at the courthouse, so there would be no record of them as property.

This hypothesis is reinforced by another set of statistics drawn from extant records. According to that slave inventory Sieur Augustin drafted, he had twenty-two houses for his forty-one slaves: slightly less than two slaves per dwelling. Meanwhile, census statistics for the one year that the federal census tallied this item show, for Natchitoches parish at large, the average number of slaves per slave house to be 4.1 – compared to 1.9 per dwelling on Metoyer's plantation.⁹

Superficially, one might conclude that Metoyer did not crowd his

cabins or force unrelated people to share the same quarters. However, one also has to consider the issue of the missing children on this slave inventory. Those 1.9 slaves per cabin would parallel his count of adult couples and single mothers. When all points are weighed, the evidence suggests that his cabins likely held the conventional number of occupants and that the missing ones are the non-inventoried children whom he intended to be free.

Extant records can also be used to define patterns that permit other nuanced glimpses into the family's treatment of their slaves – perhaps even into the mindset as to where they drew the bounds between the power of the master and their concept of basic human rights for slaves. *Sieur Augustin's* mother was the legendary Coincoin, born into slavery in 1742 to the sacramental marriage of two African-born slaves. Her father, who was wed less than three weeks after his baptism as a “brut nègre,” appears to have been a forced convert to Christianity. Subsequently, Coincoin and all her siblings were baptized into that faith. Her children and grandchildren would become religious leaders in the parish. As an observant Catholic herself, Coincoin saw to it that newborn slave infants on her outlying farm were baptized the next time a priest came along on the river; but, as the daughter of African-born slaves, she responded differently to the new African arrivals whom she purchased.

Unlike many of her white neighbors, Coincoin did not force a “conversion” upon them. Among the sixteen slaves identified for her, the three adults were all African-born. One was baptized two years after he arrived, one was baptized twelve years after she arrived, and one never was baptized during the years Coincoin owned him.¹⁰ To me, the evidence suggests that when she purchased adults newly arrived from Africa, she respected them as people and honored their religious beliefs. When and if they wanted to convert, she arranged it, but she did not force them to give up the faith into which they had been born.

Nuances. So many are yet to be defined for this troubling issue of slave ownership by those who once were slaves themselves. The answers we have at present will assuage few modern consciences, but one reality remains: The past was the mother of all reality shows; its survivors faced cruel choices, and they adapted. In *Isle of Canes*, I have tried to convey that message – to show the family's conflict, their desperation, and their savvy, as well as the sheer weariness of the unending battle they fought to maintain the free person of color's right to own any kind of property at all.

An Issue of Conscience: Concubinage

The means by which this family first acquired its freedom is another major theme explored in *Isle of Canes* – that is, interracial concubinage. In many regards, the story of Coincoin and Pierre Metoyer echoes the better-known story of Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson. That, too, is a side of the past America struggles to understand¹¹ – not just with Sally and Thomas but with thousands of other families spawned by the dynamics of sex and power in the master-slave relationship.

Never will a historian be able to look back upon the past and truly know what went on in the private lives of anyone. Whether a writer attempts to verbally paint the story of Sally and Thomas, Coincoin and Pierre, or any other couple from the past, it is a challenge to interpret that dimension of their lives. Still, certain patterns can be defined.

First, there is the broader issue of historic concubinage. Many wealthy widowers like Thomas Jefferson did not intend to remarry. Doing so would complicate inheritances and split family fortunes. Ambitious bachelors like Pierre Metoyer did not plan to marry at all, until they had built their fortunes. Instead, both types of men favored quasi-marriages to satisfy their need for companionship – and commitment was easier to avoid when the woman was enslaved.

For bachelors who were Frenchmen like Pierre, another deeply ingrained consideration controlled their choices. French society in the eighteenth century was exceedingly class conscious, particularly in France itself. *Isle of Canes* portrays that mindset in a scene in which Pierre visits with the aged, spinster daughter of the commandant, herself of noble birth. She speaks those words therein, because she spoke those thoughts on record. In *Isle of Canes* (265), the aging Mademoiselle de Mézières explains her spinsterhood this way:

How could I marry here in Louisiana? You are a Frenchman, not a Creole. You understand that I could not mingle such a pure and noble blood line as mine with the commoners in this colony.

Pierre understood. Never mind widespread knowledge of the extent to which the lady's bachelor brothers intermingled their "pure and noble blood line" quite indiscriminately in the colony.¹² Pierre understood, even though he was not a nobleman, because that class consciousness had been instilled into him from his childhood in France. On the other

hand, he had learned something else in the colony. In Louisiana's more-egalitarian view, concubinages were rarely tolerated when the chosen woman was white. So, like many colonial French bachelors, he chose a slave woman from whom he could easily break off whenever he made his fortune and decided to marry.

Second, and perhaps ironically, in Louisiana there was greater community tolerance of concubinages with slaves. Because there was no actual marriage, interracial concubinages were less of a threat to the French social concept of class. They were also easier to ignore because, as in Anglo America, *Don't ask, don't tell* was a highly regarded custom even then. And, of course, *Don't acknowledge* was much more likely to be the state of affairs when the affair was interracial.

Third, in all the American colonies – like their mother countries – illegitimacy was a major social problem to be prevented by the harshest of measures.¹³ As a tacitly condoned alternative, concubinages with slave women ensured there would be no illegitimate children to be supported at public expense. A white male who fathered children by a slave concubine increased the wealth of the slave's owner – be it himself or someone else – while any master who could not afford to support his own slave children and keep his debtors at bay would see those children sold for their own support.

Much less is known about how slave women felt at being used. Evidence does suggest that some thought of it not in terms of *being used* but in terms of *using the system* – recognizing this to be, likely, the only opportunity they had to break the chains of slavery for themselves and their offspring. Moreover, in a regime in which they were not allowed the option of legal marriages, many women forced into a concubinage appear to have lived lives as chaste as any wife and, indeed, considered themselves to be just that. Coincoin may well have felt the same. If so, she paid a terrible price for it. Needless to say, the punishment meted out to her was not imposed upon her white lover, but that is not to say Pierre Metoyer did not pay a price as well.

Isle of Canes develops that point in a passage in which Pierre confronts his own issues of conscience. In order to grasp the full measure of his turmoil and his penance, we must also translate a very cruel set of words from this passage – words from an original document Pierre created – into the reality in which Pierre and Coincoin lived. As background for the excerpt, Pierre was one of the colonial militiamen from Louisiana who fought in the Gálvez campaigns of the American Revolution. That

experience exposed him to his own mortality and forced him to reevaluate his life and the future he had mapped out for himself. Essentially, that was to make his fortune in the colony and return to France, where his money would, literally, buy a poor nobleman's daughter as a wife. In the class stratification of eighteenth-century France, that was the path of upward mobility for wealthy men of the merchant class.

In this scene, Pierre has returned to New Orleans from Gálvez's campaign against the English at Mobile. There, he discovers his newly arrived brother, sent by the family back in France after it received a letter from the colonial priest who had been Pierre and Coincoin's nemesis. That letter had told Pierre's birth family about the illicit family he had kept from them for his fifteen years on Louisiana's frontier. There in New Orleans, Pierre's brother Franc confronts him, pleads with him, to give up his unholy union and return to the Church. They argued all night. This excerpt (203ff.) begins at the end of that argument and follows Pierre as he confronts the price he must pay:

Pierre did not finish. He could not. He slammed the door behind him as he stalked out, shaking the flimsy walls of El Gato as if to shuck off everything in life that ever had tried to box him in. Oblivious to the din, the stench, and the smoke that hung over the barroom, he stormed into the dawn, laughing uglily at himself. Now he knew how a British murderer felt on his day of retribution, already drawn and now being quartered as a beast of burden was tied to each limb and driven in opposing directions, tearing him asunder.

Race. Frustration. Remorse. Love. Those were the four beasts that ripped him, heart from soul from guts from loins, as he stormed through the early morning streets of the Vieux Carré. Muttering savagely, he sidestepped a tavern fracas that had spilled into Calle Bienville and clenched his fists as he fought down the desire to join the senseless, primitive, hate-cleansing brawl. Calle Dauphine ... Calle San Carlos ... the streets blurred one into the other until he found himself at the very edge of the Carré. The fog was lifting and childish laughter tinkled through the early morning air.

Without thinking, Pierre turned toward the sound. Fresh pain gripped him as he beheld a pair of tawny children, as beautiful as his own Susanne and T'Pierre, running hand-in-hand to meet the vendor with his basket of hot calas at the corner of Rampart Norte and Iberville. What had Franc called such children? Hybrids that belong to no race, no people? He was wrong! They are a race apart, a people all their own. Strong, beautiful, and intelligent. Sensitive and proud. But most of all a vital link to bridge the chasm of suspicion and prejudice that stood between the white man and the black.

Morbleu! Pierre cursed. I should have made Franc see that! I should at least have tried, even though I know damned well he and Jorge and Mère Susanne are too indoctrinated in the rules that govern their little world to accept the realities that exist out here.

Maybe if I took the children to La Rochelle ... gave the family a chance to know them ... With a cynical laugh, Pierre discarded that idea almost as soon as it came to him. Never would they be able to look into Augustin's eyes and see the intelligence that burned there. No, their stare would never make it past the lad's burry head before they lowered their eyes in shame. They were Pierre's children, but never would his family accept them and never would they forgive him if he flaunted them in their faces. In a sense, too, they were right. Mère Susanne had raised him in virtue, just as Franc said. He had donned an acolyte's robe almost as soon as he graduated into pants, and he had even felt holy standing there at the altar beside the priests, lighting the tapers that symbolized the flames of faith. It had been a long time, a *long* time, since he had felt holy.

It was then that he gave in to the inevitable and turned his steps back toward the heart of the Vieux Carré. Resignation steeled him as he veered again onto Calle San Carlos, but still he faltered, momentarily, as he faced the door he sought. Slowly, deliberately,

he read the sign he had seen a hundred times before:
Leonardo Mazange, Notario Publico. Resolutely, he
pushed open the door and stepped inside.

Here, I will fast-forward, as Pierre explains to the notary the purpose of his visit. The notary prepares himself, and instructs Pierre to begin.

Slowly, Pierre began to dictate the testament that would forever guarantee his children and their mother a life of freedom and a share of his estate, the solemn oath by which he made the expected public denial that would permit the family of his birth to keep their pride while he would live forever with the guilt of betraying his own conscience and his own progeny.

IN THE NAME OF GOD ALMIGHTY, I, Claude Thomas Pierre Metoyer, being of sound mind, believing in the mystery of the Holy Trinity and our Holy Mother, the Catholic and Apostolic Church, and fearing death, which is natural to all creatures, I do hereby make my will and pray that the solemn Queen of Heaven, Mother of God, will intercede for me with her precious son to pardon the gravity of my sins and place my soul on the road to salvation.

FIRST. I commend my soul to the same God and Master who gave it to me. I bequeath my body to the earth from which it was formed, requesting that I be shrouded in the most humble manner possible and that three masses be said for the repose of my soul.

SECOND. I declare that I am a bachelor and have no children.

Those were his words.¹⁴ The price Pierre paid for challenging the moral conventions of society was the denial, for posterity, of his own flesh and blood.

The past was indeed a foreign country, where people did things differently. In Pierre's world, had he acknowledged Coincoin's children as his own, he would have been forbidden to give them anything at all. Even though the colony's law was in transition from the French statutes that had prevailed throughout most of the century to the *Las Siete Partidas*

of Spain, Pierre owned property in both France and the colonies. To forestall any future challenge by his siblings back in France, he had no choice but to start his will by declaring, "I am a bachelor and have no children."¹⁵

It is clear from the rest of this document, in which clause after clause provides for Coincoin and their children, and it is clear from numerous other documents Pierre executed at Natchitoches, that this man loved his children and their mother. From that standpoint, I suggest that even though Pierre was spared the physical punishment wrought upon Coincoin, the law – via this document – inflicted upon him a different brand of pain: that of a parent, forced to deny forever his own offspring, just so he could leave to them what he and their mother had worked to accumulate.

Summation

This will was only one of several thousand documents that underpin the story in *Isle of Canes*. I have taken those documents and woven them into a drama to help the world see the human costs of some cherished ideas of class and race. Only by personalizing history, by focusing upon individual lives – especially those of the common man and woman – do we gain a window through which to see the human costs of those decisions made by politicians and generals. From this, we also gain a much sharper understanding of why our society is the way it is.

Isle of Canes is a troubling story in many dimensions, but it is an inspirational story in just as many other ways. Throughout the family's loss of everything it had labored to build, the Metoyers, free persons of color, never lost their sense of identity as a third caste, or their pride in their roots – all aspects of their roots. Throughout it all, they never lost their sense of citizenship or the belief that, being multiracial, they could and should bridge the terrible divide that has existed in America between the races.

Despite modern difficulties in reconciling past realities with today's more "enlightened" views, I hope that *Isle of Canes* can help its readers see this corner of the past through the eyes of the patriarch Augustin Metoyer and the families at the end of the bridge that crossed the river onto the Isle which, quite literally, symbolized freedom for those who lived on Cane River. Most of all, I hope that readers, regardless of their ethnicity, will close the book realizing that *skin* is only the wrapping

on a package and that, inside that package, our flesh and bones and hopes and dreams for our children are all the same color.

NOTES

¹ Elizabeth Shown Mills, *Isle of Canes* (2004).

² The scarred ruts of Cane River's earliest road and the poverty into which the community was plunged are illustrated by photography from the WPA-era work of Marion Post Wolcott at the Library of Congress, particularly LC-USF34-054625-D, LC-USF34-054534-E, and LC-USF34-054722-D.

³ Carter G. Woodson, "Free Negro Owners of Slaves in the United States in 1830," *Journal of Negro History* (1924), 42, particularly.

⁴ Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States* (1856), 634.

⁵ For the decline of Catholicism along Cane River in the late colonial period, see Elizabeth Shown Mills, "Quintanilla's Crusade, 1775-1783: 'Moral Reform' and Its Consequences on the Natchitoches Frontier," *Louisiana History* (2001), 277-302.

⁶ Succession no. 395, Agnes Metoyer, Office of the Clerk of Court, Natchitoches, Louisiana.

⁷ 1840 U.S. census, Natchitoches Parish, Louisiana, population schedule, National Archives microfilm publication M704, roll 127; statistics calculated by the author.

⁸ See, for example, the strange lip service given to the law in an 1851 transaction at Natchitoches wherein a female slave was sold apart from her five-year-old child, "who still remains the property of sd. Vendor notwithstanding any law to the contrary which gives the purchaser of a mother a right to all children under the age of ten years." See Conveyance Book 44: 435, Office of the Clerk of Court, Natchitoches.

⁹ 1860 U.S. Census, Natchitoches Parish, Louisiana, slave schedule, National Archives microfilm publication M653, roll 429; statistics calculated by the writer.

¹⁰ Coincoin's slaves are identified in Natchitoches Parish Conveyance Book 3: 524-538 and in the church registers that chronicle their baptisms; for published, translated abstracts of the latter, see the bibliography.

¹¹ The best recent evaluation of the evidence, one that weighs historical records and genetic findings against genealogy's strict standards for "proving" relationships, is Helen F. M. Leary, "Sally Heming's Children: A Genealogical Analysis of the Evidence," *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* (2001), 165-207.

¹² For the DeMézières and their multiracial offspring, see Elizabeth Shown Mills, "(de) Mézières-Trichel-Grappe: A Study of a Tri-caste Lineage in the Old South," *The Genealogist* (1985), 4-85, particularly 36-38.

¹³ For a comparative example of punitive measures inflicted upon "baseborn" children and their white parents in Anglo-American society see Jane Purcell Guild, *Black Laws of Virginia* (1936), particularly 21-30.

¹⁴ Acts of Leonardo Mazange, vol. 7, Notarial Archives, Civil Courts Building, New Orleans.

¹⁵ Pierre's statement also reflects a legal definition of "children" that prevailed at least until the mid-nineteenth century. *Bouvier's Law Dictionary* (1856) under the term "CHILDREN" states, "When legally construed, the term children is confined to *legitimate* children." Italics added.

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