



*The Decuir Family of  
Pointe Coupée Parish:  
As Told by Antoine Decuir*

**JULIE ESHELMAN-LEE**

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*Presented at the Louisiana Créole Heritage Center  
9<sup>th</sup> Annual Créole Heritage Day  
Natchitoches, LA  
January 18–19, 2002  
Presented by: Winston DeCuir as Antoine Decuir  
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(dressed in period clothing)***

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***INTRODUCTION***...Good evening! Allow me to present myself. I am Antoine Decuir (day KWEE). I am currently 214 years old and have returned to Louisiana to speak to you about the history of our Decuir family. I am honored to be here today as this state celebrates its Ninth Annual Créole Heritage Day. We gather today to celebrate our common ground: **our place, our people, and our culture.**

I was born in 1788 in Pointe Coupée parish.<sup>1</sup> However, the story of this place and its people predates my birth. The beginning of the place known today as Pointe Coupée (point coo PAY) begins closer to the end of the seventeenth century.

As a youngster on my grandfather's knee, I was taught that Iberville founded Pointe Coupée. This happened during his exploration of the Mississippi River in 1699. In March of 1699, Iberville and explorers made their first expedition up the river. They were confronted with a twenty-two-mile long curve. Instead of navigating the river, they took a shortcut suggested by one of the Bayougoula guides. Iberville named this shortcut *Pointe Coupée* (coo PAY). Over the next few years, the Mississippi changed its course. It began to flow

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<sup>1</sup> Diocese of Baton Rouge Sacramental Records (hereafter DBR), Certificate of baptism certified by Una Daigre, archivist. Original Acts of Pointe Coupée Parish (hereafter OAPC) #144, Acknowledgement agreement 1818.



through this channel, leaving the oxbow curve that would become known as *la Fausse Riviere*.<sup>2,3</sup>

As a Decuir, I was born into a family that was among the original colonists of Louisiana and Pointe Coupée (coo PAY). My extended family was instrumental in marketing the colony. They settled the first and some of the most successful concessions. Here, they worked as indentures and labored as slaves.<sup>4</sup>

My parents were Joseph Decuir and Francoise (fran SWAZ) Beaulieu (bow LYOO).<sup>5</sup> My father was a third generation Decuir in Louisiana. This was the first-generation of the Decuirs born in Louisiana—the Créole generation. My father was born in Pointe Coupée in 1752. By the time of his passing in 1822 he was one of the wealthiest planters in Louisiana. My mother, “a free woman of color,” came from a distinguished Créole family. They were from Mobile and later outside New Orleans. Her paternal grandfather was Louis Chauvin de Beaulieu (show VAN day bow LYOO). Louis was one of the Chauvin brothers who came to the colony with Iberville and Bienville from Montreal. Her maternal great-grandfather was Francois Orbanne (or BAN) Duval, treasurer of the Company of the Indies.<sup>6</sup> Around 1719, her grandparents, Louis Chauvin de Beaulieu and Charlotte Duval de Beaulieu, moved to Tchoupitoulas (chop i TOO lis). This was just outside New Orleans, where the family had their own concession and eighty-seven slaves.<sup>7,8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Judy Riffel, ed., *A History of Pointe Coupee Parish and its Families*. Baton Rouge: Le Comité des Archives de la Louisiana, 1980, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Iberville’s journal.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Maduell. *The Census Tables for the French Colony of Louisiana: 1699 through 1732*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1972. Michael Berkman, trans. “Articles on Louisiana on the Nouveau Mercure” (Unpublished manuscript submitted for publication in the U.S.L. History Series), 9 Memoire sur l’estat de la Louisiane et ce qu’on en peut esperer, 1721. AC, C13c, 1:329; p. 36–38.

<sup>5</sup> Baptismal certificate; Acknowledgment agreement 1818 OAPC #144.

<sup>6</sup> *The Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, n.d., v. 8, p. 691.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Maduell. *The Census Tables for the French Colony of Louisiana: 1699 through 1732*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1972.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.



My African heritage began with my mother's family.<sup>9</sup> My grandfather Louis Chauvin Beaulieu II (show VAN bow LYOO) had five children with his freed slave Marianne, my grandmother. Sometime after the birth of their last child, he married and had more children. They all resided in the New Orleans and Tchoupitoulas (chop i TWO lis) areas.<sup>10</sup> My mother was the only one in her family who went to Pointe Coupée (coo PAY).<sup>11</sup> Her African heritage traces back to her grandparents, who were from Senegal. They were more than likely Wolof, brought to Louisiana in the 1720s.<sup>12</sup>

My Pointe Coupée origins begin with my great grandfather, Albert deCuire. (al BEAR day KWEE). In 1719 he contracted as an indentured servant for six years with the St. Catherine concession in Louisiana.<sup>13</sup> This Decuir family was from Macon (may KON) in the Hainaut (eh NO) region—current-day Belgium. His family had a long history of being active with the town government and the Catholic Church.<sup>14</sup> Albert's wife, my great-grandmother, died just prior to their departure for the colony. Upon departure, Albert and his children were boarded on the wrong ship, The *LaLoire*. Aboard this retired war ship in August 1720, they headed for the Louisiana colony from the port of L'Orient.<sup>15</sup> This ship was carrying engages

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<sup>9</sup> Charles Maduell. *The Census Tables for the French Colony of Louisiana: 1699 through 1732*.

<sup>10</sup> *The Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, n.d. v. 9, p. 291; *ibid* v 9. p. 308–310. From diligent and meticulous research in the church and civil records by William D. Reeves for this author on the Chauvin Beaulieu family. Last noted by Gary B. Mills in "The Chauvin Brothers: Early Colonists of Louisiana" (Louisiana History): 129 as the branch of the Chauvin family which "faded into obscurity," this research brings for the first time a complete picture of Louis Chauvin Beaulieu's descendants, both Créoles and Créoles of Color. To be published in its entirety by this author.

<sup>11</sup> Chauvin Beaulieu research by Reeves for this author yet unpublished by author.

<sup>12</sup> See Hall's *Africans in Colonial Louisiana* where she has tracked the slave trade from St. Louis concession to the Louisiana colony. Francoise was noted as a free mulatresse on sacramental records of her children, so noted when Joseph Decuir described the children's mother, and in her own will; therefore her mother Marianne was African. From the evidence gathered by Hall it is highly likely Marianne was Senegalese of the Wolof tribe. The Wolofs were and still are the largest tribe in Senegal per conversation with Mbaye Niang and Talla, Griot, with this author September 1999.

<sup>13</sup> Randy DeCuir. *Albert deCuire Arrives in Louisiana: 275<sup>th</sup> Anniversary*. Marksville, La.: 1995. See also Winston De Ville. *St. Catherine Colonists*. Ville Platte: 1988. Original documents located by Andre Haussy in Lille Archives, France.

<sup>14</sup> Randy DeCuir. *Albert deCuire Arrives in Louisiana*. Research by Father Lybaert of Macon, Hainaut, present-day Belgium, priest and historian.

<sup>15</sup> Jay Higginbotham. *Old Mobile*.



and settlers for the St. Reine concession instead of the St. Catherine.<sup>16,17</sup> This mistake later proved to be a blessing. The colonists for the St. Catherine concession settled at Natchez. They were the victims of the terrible "Indian" massacre in 1729 that left only two survivors!<sup>18</sup>

They arrived at Ship Island, offshore from the settlement at Biloxi, on November 20, 1720. Immediately upon their arrival in Biloxi, they were faced with a frontier, sub-tropical environment. They were also challenged with the other colonists, engages, and slaves who were ill and on the brink of starvation. As colonists, we would never have survived if it weren't for the native people.<sup>19</sup> Albert and his family moved to their concession in Pointe Coupée about one year later. This Pointe Coupée settlement was born from a Tunica Indian village. Again, relying on the expertise of the native people, the settlers persevered. In fact, there is a carving in the current St. Francis Chapel said to be carved by a Tunica. By 1722 there were 22 settlers—men, women, and children on two concessions.<sup>20</sup> The concessions

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Concluded from series of events from moment of signing contract in October 1719 to departure at Lorient in August 1720. Catherine Domaire deCuire was included as part of family in original contract October 1719, and addendum January 1720, but not listed on ship manifest of *la Loire* August 1720. In addition, later information from census and church records reveals Albert, Etienne, Jean Francois, Ann Catherine, and Marguerite were in the colony by 1726. Maduell, *The Census Tables for the French Colony of Louisiana: 1699 through 1732*. No mention of any other members of this deCuire family is noted in the records of the colony. There is no subsequent record of Catherine in the colony and no subsequent records of this deCuire family in Macon after 1716, according to Father Lybaert of Macon, Hainaut. For further information regarding the high mortality rate at the port, see Marcel Giraud. *Histoire*, Volume 4. Paris, 1974. p. 154–67.

<sup>18</sup> Charles Etienne Gayarre. *History of Louisiana*. 4 Volumes. New Orleans: 1903. Leufroy's great grandfather Pierre Mayeux was one of only two adult Frenchmen who were captured and survived. Sieur Mayeux was spared because the Natchez needed his talent as a carter to haul the goods of the massacred victims back to the "Indians" to redistribute.

<sup>19</sup> Research by George DeCoux, descendant of Albert deCuire and Jacques Decoux, and research by Andre Haussy, descendant of Haussy and historian from Mauberge. See Andre Haussy. *Au Hainaut du Louisiane*. Mauberge, France: author, 1995.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Maduell. *The Census Tables for the French Colony of Louisiana from 1699 through 1732*. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall. *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century*. Baton Rouge, La.: The Louisiana State University Press, 1992.



closed in Pointe Coupée. Albert and the other settlers stayed and continued their dream.<sup>21</sup> By 1731 slaves were recorded in the census.<sup>22</sup> The first known baptism was in our family in 1728. The family welcomed to Pointe Coupée infant Jean Francois DeCoux, grandson of Albert.<sup>23</sup> This baptism was recorded in the Natchitoches register.<sup>24</sup>

After the 1729 massacre in Natchez, my family relocated to safer grounds on the left bank. By 1738 the settlers of Pointe Coupée were growing corn, tobacco, and indigo.<sup>25</sup> When the first church was established it was located near the fort near the St. Francisville landing.<sup>26</sup> Albert was one of the church's original godparents. He dedicated a bell to the original St. Francis of Assisi church in 1738.<sup>27</sup> Today you can ring this bell inside the present-day chapel.<sup>28</sup>

My great grandfather Albert died at the age of seventy-seven in 1750.<sup>29</sup> The family legacy continued with my grandfather Jean Francois Decuir and his sister Ann Catherine Decuir Decoux.<sup>30</sup> It is from my grandfather Jean Francois that the Decuir name survived. He was the only one to have male children.

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<sup>21</sup> See Marcel Giraud, *Histoire de Louisiane*, for further detail about the St. Reine and St. Catherine concessions in the Louisiana colony.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Maduell. *The Census Tables for the French Colony of Louisiana from 1699 through 1732*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1972.

<sup>23</sup> DBR Sacramental Records, Volume 1.

<sup>24</sup> Brian Costello. *The Catholic Church in Pointe Coupée*. Baton Rouge: Franklin Press, 1996. p. 4.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Maduell. *The Census Tables for the French Colony of Louisiana from 1699 through 1732*.

Gwendolyn Midlo Hall. *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century*. Baton Rouge: The Louisiana State University Press, 1992: p. 249–250.

<sup>26</sup> Captain Philip Pittman account 1763; Pierre L'Hermite surveys 1823 PCP courthouse collection.

<sup>27</sup> Research by Glenn Morgan. See Decuir, *Albert deCuire Arrives In Louisiana*, and Brian J. Costello, *The Catholic Church in Pointe Coupee: A Faith Journey*. Avoyelles: Author, 1996.

<sup>28</sup> Roger Baudier. *The Catholic Church in Louisiana*. New Orleans, 1939: 133. See also Randy DeCuir, *Albert deCuire Arrives in Louisiana* and Brian Costello, *The Catholic Church in Pointe Coupee: A Faith Journey*. For early entries of Pointe Coupée Parish church records, see Winston DeVille, *First Settlers of Pointe Coupee: A Study based on Early Louisiana Church Records, 1737 – 1750*. New Orleans: Polyanthos, 1974. The Diocese of Baton Rouge is currently re-doing Volume One of the Pointe Coupée church records to include all baptisms—"free" and "slave."

<sup>29</sup> DBR, Volume 1. His death certificate incorrectly states he was eighty-eight years old, age confirmed by research by Father Lybaert of Macon, Hainaut. Also see Randy DeCuir, *Albert deCuire Comes to Louisiana*.

<sup>30</sup> DBR, Volume 1.



My grandfather Jean Francois married Genevieve Mayeux (my OH) in 1743.<sup>31</sup> They had twelve children together, two of whom died young.<sup>32</sup> Genevieve's parents arrived in Louisiana in September 1720.<sup>33</sup> Genevieve's father, Pierre Mayeux, was one of the only two adults who survived the Natchez massacre in 1729. He was spared because the Natchez needed his skill as carter to haul the goods of the massacred victims for the Natchez.<sup>34</sup> My grandparents became successful indigo planters and prominent citizens of Pointe Coupée. They lived along the coast in the region known as the "Pointe Coupée Coast." This was the Mississippi River region of the parish. They also had some grazing land in Opelousas (op o LEW sus), and owned thirty-five slaves.<sup>35</sup>

In 1763 France transferred the colony to Spain. During the change of power from France to Spain, Pointe Coupée was relatively calm. This was not the case in New Orleans. A member of my mother's Chauvin (show VAN) family was an active participant in the Revolt of 1768. Nicholas Chauvin la Freniere (la fron YAIR), Louisiana's attorney general, was one of the leaders seeking to have the colony adopted by France. When the new Spanish governor O'Reilly arrived, he put an end to the revolt. He immediately took control of the colony. His first official business was to seek out the French "patriots." The five revolution leaders, including La Freniere (la fron YAIR) were soon executed by a firing squad.<sup>36</sup> All colonists were required to sign an Oath of Allegiance in 1769 or leave the colony.

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<sup>31</sup> Marriage contract dated October 28, 1743, translated from the Records of the Superior Council, Louisiana Historical Quarterly Volume 12, No. 2: 319; DBR Volume 1: 195.

<sup>32</sup> DBR various volumes; the children were: Marguerite Decuir 1743–before 1822, Pierre Decuir 1744–1788, Genevieve Decuir 1746–1757, Francois Decuir 1747–1808, Jeanne Decuir Sep 1751– Oct 1751, Joseph Decuir 1752–1822, Madeleine Decuir 1755 – ?, Jean Paul Decuir 1757–1794, Marie Anne Decuir 1758–1805, Jean Pierre Decuir 1761–1827, Antoine Decuir 1765–1829, and Jean Baptiste Decuir 1769–1815.

<sup>33</sup> Glenn R. Conrad. *The First Families of Louisiana*. Baton Rouge: Claitor's Publishing, 1970.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid; Charles Etienne Gayarre. *History of Louisiana*. Four Volumes. New Orleans: 1903; SLC Vol. I for Mayeux family; Research by Randy DeCuir and Randy Mayeux on the Mayeux family.

<sup>35</sup> OAPC #391, 392, 393; succession documents Jean Francois Decuir, January 18, 1771.

<sup>36</sup> LHQ, Vol IV, No 2., April 1921, p. 208–215. Henry P. Dart, "The Oath of Allegiance to Spain: From Cabildo Records," New Orleans. David Ker Texada. *O'Reilly and the New Orleans Rebels*. Lafayette: USL, 1970; John P. Moore. *Revolt in Louisiana: The Spanish Occupation 1766–1770*. Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1976.



My grandparents, Jean Francois and Genevieve died in 1771<sup>37</sup> and 1779,<sup>38</sup> respectively. They were buried in St. Francis cemetery. In the 1890s this cemetery was washed away by a Mississippi flood.<sup>39</sup> One of my grandfather's bequests was to free his slave, Louis, a mulatto. Our family immediately granted Louis his liberty. Louis was his son and our uncle.<sup>40</sup>

During the early 1780s my father, Joseph Decuir, met my mother, Francoise Beaulieu. He brought her to Pointe Coupée. By 1783 he had purchased a property almost a mile long fronting lower False River.<sup>41</sup> He purchased this from two "Indian" chiefs.<sup>42</sup> My father met my mother on one of his many business trips to New Orleans or through her brother, Joseph Beaulieu,<sup>43</sup> while in the Spanish militia.<sup>44</sup> My father's service record noted that he was married. However, at the time it was illegal to be married to a "free woman of color."<sup>45</sup> In the 1780s, American colonists were faced with war against Britain. My father and his brothers served under Bernardo de Galvez during the Revolutionary War.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> DBR, Vol. 1, p. 195.

<sup>38</sup> Genevieve Mayeux Decuir's last will and testament found in New Orleans at the New Orleans Notarial Archives (hereafter NONA).

<sup>39</sup> In the 1880s a crevasse in the Waterloo section of Pointe Coupée caused the series of floods; as noted in series of Old Banner articles of the 1880s; oral histories of numerous Decuir members; memoirs of Lelia Marie Decuir Lejeune 1963.

<sup>40</sup> OAPC #1014, notation that "Louis mulatto had received his portion of his father's estate."

<sup>41</sup> The builder was Louis Meilleur. See OAPC #996. Joseph Decuir seals document 1822; Martin v. David, 3<sup>rd</sup> Superior Court, #31 judgment dated 13 October 1810, contract between Joseph Decuir and builder Louis Meilleur for the construction of a creole country house raised eight to ten feet aboveground with galleries all around; Act 3398, April 6, 1811, Clerk of Court, Pointe Coupée Parish. Also noted in Joseph Decuir's inventory OAPC #1030 in 1822 were two houses, one on sills and a two-story house. See American State Papers, Volume 8:920, Sale Indian Chiefs (named Champagne and Nicholas) to Joseph Decuir, 10 February 1783.

<sup>42</sup> Pintando Papers, Book III, C. No. 3, January 24, 1801—December 14, 1802: 130. Survey of Federal Archives in Louisiana, WPA, 1940.

<sup>43</sup> French and Spanish Records of the Louisiana State Museum, Historical Records Center, the old United States Mint. N.d. Microfilm of Spanish Records under date September 20, 1769.

<sup>44</sup> French and Spanish Records of the Louisiana State Museum, Historical Records Center, the old United States Mint. N.d. Microfilm of Spanish Records under date September 20, 1769.

<sup>45</sup> See Civil Codes for further detail.

<sup>46</sup> Jack D. L. Holmes. *Honor & Fidelity: The Louisiana Infantry Regiment and the Louisiana Militia Companies, 1776–1821*. Birmingham: Author, 1965. Plaque located in New Roads courthouse commemorating the service of Pointe Coupée participants with General Bernardo de Galvez in the



Because our parents had different ethnic roots, we became the first Decuir generation to be regarded as "Créoles of Color."<sup>47</sup> Due to the civil and church laws about race over the next 150 years, our blended heritage posed many challenges for our family.<sup>48</sup> As kids we didn't understand the laws. We were fortunate to have the love and compassion of our parents.

My uncle Antoine built River Lake Plantation in the mid 1790s.<sup>49</sup> More than likely my father named me after his brother. River Lake Plantation was immediately downriver from our plantation. Uncle Antoine had eight children with Sophie Deslondes (day LAWN), a "free woman of color."<sup>50</sup> Aunt Sophie's family was from outside New Orleans. Antoine's eight children with Sophie inherited their mother's property. Antoine had given her the property in Raccourci in 1836.<sup>51</sup> Uncle Antoine and Sophie's relationship had changed by 1823. In that year he married Louise Beauvais (bo VAY), the widow Tanneret (tan er AY).<sup>52</sup> During their brief marriage together they had a young child they named Antoinette. When Uncle Antoine died in 1829 he was one of the wealthiest men in Louisiana. Young

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American Revolution, dedicated by the DAR of Louisiana. See also John Walton Caughey. *Bernardo de Galvez in Louisiana 1776–1783*. Gretna: 1972.

<sup>47</sup> Children of Joseph Decuir and Françoise Beaulieu, free woman of color: Eugénie Decuir 1786–1839, Antoine Decuir 1788–1843, Marie Celeste Decuir 1790–1842, Leufroy Decuir 1794–1876, and Claire Decuir 1798–1860.

<sup>48</sup> See further Virginia Dominguez. *White by Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986. Paul F. LaChance. "The Formation of a Three-Caste Society: Evidence from Wills in Antebellum New Orleans" *Social Science History* 18:2 (Summer 1994): 213–214. Compiled edition of the Civil Codes of Louisiana. Baton Rouge: State of Louisiana Printing Office, 1940. Civil Code [L.48] 1808.

<sup>49</sup> Survey 75, 11 January 1822, by Pierre Louis L'Hermite, with process verbal done for Antoine Decuir. Clerk of Court Pointe Coupée Parish, "Early Surveys & Plats of Pointe Coupee Parish 1818–1822." Certification of land surveyed by the Royal and Prive Surveyor of Province of La., Don Carlos Trudeau, 15 April 1790. Francis Plough Collection Historic New Orleans Collection (hereafter HNOC).

<sup>50</sup> DBR. The children of Antoine Decuir and Sophie Deslondes, free woman of color: Therence Decuir 1790–1837, Leandre Decuir 1799–c. 1840, Adeline Decuir 1800–1859, Remy Decuir c. 1802–1859, Lestima (also known as Sosthene) c. 1805–1837, Dorsan Decuir 1806–1874, Delphine Decuir 1811–1869, and Arnaud Decuir c. 1816–1865. Also see OAPC #707 Acknowledgment 1821 where Antoine acknowledges his eight natural children and mentions his co-habitation with their mother Sophie Deslondes, free woman of color.

<sup>51</sup> Series of transactions OAPC #s 918, 919, and 920, OAPC #1402 partition-1836.

<sup>52</sup> OAPC #1373 Marriage contract; DBR Vol 4:159 marriage record.



Antoinette became the sole legitimate heir at the age of three.<sup>53</sup> Antoinette, then married to Arthur Denis, owned the River Lake Plantation until 1892 when she sold it to P. C. Major.<sup>54</sup> River Lake is still owned by descendants of P. C. Major.<sup>55</sup> Our entire Decuir family was quite large. Many family members began to migrate around Louisiana to places like Marksville, Opelousas, New Iberia, Baton Rouge, and southern Louisiana. My immediate family lived along lower False River for over a century. Parlange Plantation is still owned by Decuir descendants.

In 1812 our mother died.<sup>56</sup> My brother Leufroy (lew FRAH) and I inherited her eleven-and-one-half-arpent plantation frontage on False River near River Lake. Years earlier, my father had given it to her. My sisters inherited slaves and personal property.<sup>57</sup> After my mother died my father had a daughter, Heloise, with Claire Louise Quevain (kwa VAN), a “free woman of color.”<sup>58</sup>

During his lifetime our father was very generous to us. He gave each of us a slave as young children. He also recognized us as his natural children.<sup>59,60</sup> He taught us about planting

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<sup>53</sup> Date of death known from tutorship record of Antoinette Decuir, folio 1, page 2 OAPC, OAPC #79 inventory–1829; Antoinette’s full name “Louise Antoinette Decuir” as noted on signed tutorship record.

<sup>54</sup> OAPC #16, 254: 1892.

<sup>55</sup> Noted novelist Ernest Gaines grew up at River Lake plantation whose family sharecropped for the Major family. The setting and inspiration for his touching novels are from his life in Pointe Coupée and the Cherie Quarters at River Lake. River Lake plantation was featured on the “Oprah Winfrey Show” in fall of 1997 when she interviewed and showcased his most recent award winning novel, *A Lesson Before Dying*.

<sup>56</sup> LaVerne Thomas III. *LeDoux: A Pioneer Franco-American Family with Detailed Sketches of Allied Families*. New Orleans: Polyanthos, 1982. Jean Baptiste “Dorsin” DeCuir fought in LeDoux’s cavalry. Francoise Beaulieu’s death year known from will dated April 1812 and inventory dated December found in Will book 1812 OAPC Dec 1812.

<sup>57</sup> Joseph Decuir sold Francoise Beaulieu the 11-½-arpent plantation on lower False River OAPC#2338, 1804. Will book 1812 OAPC.

<sup>58</sup> OAPC #144 Acknowledgment 1818.

<sup>59</sup> OAPC #1925 Donation 1797.

<sup>60</sup> OAPC #144 Acknowledgment 1818. Will and Testament OAPC # 145. These documents were dictated in accordance with the Civil Code of 1808, which allows a portion of an estate to be bequeathed to acknowledged natural children—half of the estate when there are no other ascendant heirs or legitimate children. Of special note: OAPC #145 Will. Joseph also directed that liberty be given to Alphonse, a griff, aged about eight years, son of the negress Henriette, his slave. Henriette was inventoried at his Cannes Brulées plantation at his death. Notably Alphonse was not inventoried at either plantation. His son Antoine followed these wishes when Alphonse was of majority. Alphonse lived near the Decuir family in the Chenal



operations. We all lived together in the False River master house. My father was the patriarch of our family. Upon his death in 1822, we received half of his estate. This was the legal limit allowed by law for “natural” children.<sup>61</sup> Our aunts and uncles and their heirs inherited the other half. We used our inheritance to purchase the False River Plantation and its 100 slaves. My father had amassed a fortune including plantations, slaves, investments, real estate holdings in the French Quarter, and a sugar plantation in Cannes Brulées (brew LAY). He had purchased the sugar plantation from Bernard Marigny.<sup>62</sup> Despite my father’s investments elsewhere, Pointe Coupée (coo PAY) was where our souls belonged. My siblings and I sold many of the other investments but kept the Pointe Coupée properties. The settlement of my father’s estate went very smoothly. All the heirs cooperated well during the proceedings.<sup>63</sup> The estate was valued at almost a half million dollars. Today, this would translate to the lifestyle of a billionaire.

My wife, Pouponne DeCoux (day COO), and I constructed on our portion a magnificent plantation home. I named it Austerlitz after Napoleon's great battle. By 1825, there were three master houses on my father’s plantation. They were owned and occupied by me and two of my siblings.<sup>64</sup> Today only my plantation, Austerlitz, still stands. It is the home of the Rougon (RUE gone) family. This family has preserved it for over one hundred twenty years. After my father’s death, my brother Leufroy (lew FRAH) and I partnered with our youngest sister. We were among the earliest sugar planters of lower False River in Pointe Coupée (coo PAY).<sup>65</sup> Sugar cultivation continued on this plantation until it was sold in 1855.

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until his death. Due to the familial relationship exemplified between Alphonse and the other siblings of Joseph’s in later years, this author concludes Alphonse was more than likely Joseph’s son.

<sup>61</sup> See Civil Code of 1808 for further detail.

<sup>62</sup> Succession documents OAPC Joseph Decuir 1822. OAPC #1030 inventory; Orleans Parish inventory #V. 8 #1135, p. 666, Notary Hughes Lavergne.

<sup>63</sup> OAPC# 1078 petition requesting half of estate be delivered to natural children – 1822; remarkably, since French families were noted for fighting over inheritances, this Decuir family acted with the utmost respect and integrity, no argument filed, and the judge immediately complied and issued the order.

<sup>64</sup> Survey OAPC #961, 1822, shows Leufroy at lower end, with bayou at boundary, and bridge, Claire Louise Quevain in center, and Antoine at upper end, with Bayou Languedoc just inside the boundary line.

<sup>65</sup> OAPC #144 Acknowledgment 1818.



After our father died we lost the privilege of his presence. We became known as the new generation of Créoles: “Créoles of Color.” The cultural clash between the Créoles and the Americans was unpleasant and unfortunate. The Americans looked down upon many of our Créole customs, our Catholic religion, and our mixed families.<sup>66</sup> Our wealth gave us privilege; the strength of our families gave us the spirit to endure!

My father’s original estate became a compound of Créoles. It included our own immediate families, extended family, and friends and their families. It also included a great number of slaves.<sup>67</sup> My wife Pouponne, our children, and her family continued to live and work on our plantation. My son Antoine II stepped into my footsteps after my death in 1843.<sup>68,69</sup> He partnered with my brother Leufroy (lew FRAH) until they each sold their interests in 1855. In light of the climate regarding slavery in our country, my brother Leufroy (lew FRAH) and my son Antoine II decided it was time to sell this plantation.<sup>70,71</sup> By April 1855 my son Antoine II, his wife, Josephine Dubuclet Decuir, and my brother Leufroy (lew FRAH) had sold my father’s largest lower False River holdings. It was an emotional experience but also a business decision. They moved their permanent residences to the

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<sup>66</sup> See Arnold .P. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon, ed. *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*. Baton Rouge: State University Press, 1992. Numerous examples in depositions of Southern Claims records from Pointe Coupée residents’ testimonies depicting clash between Créoles and Americans. See suit Louisiana Supreme Court Docket #1587 University of New Orleans, Jean Baptiste Leduff fmc vs. Widow A. Porche and L. Carmouche, 1850, notes mistrust of Americans to do work correctly. See undated letter, Graff Collection #279, Louisiana State Museum expressed by Frederick Graff, an American doctor who arrived in Pointe Coupée in 1852 referring to the “lazy Creole French” and with more Americans “we will have a much better population”...who must leave “like the savages.”

<sup>67</sup> U. S. Census 1850, Parish of Pointe Coupée:24.

<sup>68</sup> DBR, Vol. 6, PCP 11, 9 – death “9PM 15 April, 1843.”

<sup>69</sup> DBR, Vol. 6, PCP 11, 9.

<sup>70</sup> Leufroy Decuir vs. Julie Porche, 9<sup>th</sup> JDC #1204, Clerk of Court, Parish of Pointe Coupée. OAPC #s 3363–3404, 3408–3414, 3418, 3420, and 3421 sale of slaves, 1885. OAPC #3601 plantation sale to McKneely and Carter, 1855.

<sup>70</sup> OAPC #3655, sale of Austerlitz, plantation and slaves, 1855.

<sup>71</sup> OAPC #3655, sale of Austerlitz, plantation and slaves, 1855.



Chenal. My father was one of its earliest settlers in the 1780s.<sup>72</sup> It is here where our family stayed together into the 1900s.

My family had been an integral part of the Catholic Church community in Pointe Coupée since the original St. Francis of Assisi church in 1738. My father, Joseph, was a member of the churchwardens.<sup>73,74</sup> Later my nephew Joseph continued the tradition as counselor of Immaculate Conception church at Chenal.<sup>75</sup> My brother Leufroy donated a parcel of his land at the Chenal for a church in 1849.<sup>76</sup> The Chapel of St. Joseph was erected and named after our father.<sup>77</sup>

On the eve of the Civil War our family was one of the most prosperous family groups of “free people of color” in the United States. The money, land, and slaves we inherited from our elders grew because of our determination and business sense. In 1860 my son Antoine II and his holdings were listed in the U. S. census as one of the largest slaveholders in the south. Other extended family members were also noted. These holdings would have vastly increased if they had been combined with those of our other family members.<sup>78</sup>

The Civil War was tragic. The horror started early for us when some members of our family were taken as prisoners of war in March 1863. A parish priest and members of our family were arrested at Martin Juge's (zhuge's) nearby plantation. They had just attended service at the Chapel of St. Joseph. They were taken to Winter's Plantation in Baton Rouge.

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<sup>72</sup> Joseph purchased property 1780s, Antoine 1780s; documents evidencing ownership of Antoine II and Leufroy in Chenal; Francoise Antoine Decuir selling in 1881; Leon's children 1880s.

<sup>73</sup> Churchwardens were considered very prominent positions, next to that of the Commandant, in the post.

<sup>74</sup> Brian Costello. *The Catholic Church in Pointe Coupee Parish: A Faith Journey*.

<sup>75</sup> As noted on his death record, DBR 1876.

<sup>76</sup> Brian Costello and Glenn Morgan have determined this approximate location to be near Rougon School.

<sup>77</sup> OAPC #s 1198, 1849 by Leufroy Decuir to Antoine Blanc Archbishop New Orleans. OAPC #9511 Francoise Antoine, spouse of Leufroy Decuir, 1872; #422, 15<sup>th</sup> JDC Francoise Leufroy [sic] vs. Archbishop of New Orleans-1883; Memoirs of Lelia Marie Decuir Lejeune 1963 “they never did finish that church.”

<sup>78</sup> Federal Census of 1860 (Iberville, Pointe Coupée, and West Baton Rouge parishes).



They were detained and held prisoner there. Thank God that they were eventually released and returned home.<sup>79</sup>

After the war, the political environment was unsettled. There was lack of credit and currency. It was difficult to secure farmhands. People suffered flooding and crop failures in 1866 and 1867. Properties were devalued. Many prosperous Créoles of Color lost their estates.<sup>80</sup> My son Antoine II had a great deal of credit extended to family and friends. He and his wife, Josephine, had spent the Civil War years in France. They didn't return until the war was over. The new order was unfavorable for Créoles of Color. We no longer enjoyed the same privileges.

Reconstruction brought many challenges. However, many of our relatives became important members of the new order. Over the years, our family had allied with many of the prominent Créole of Color families in Pointe Coupée and throughout the Mississippi River parishes of south Louisiana. These men dedicated themselves to public service. They held positions as educators, sheriff, members of the House of Representatives, Louisiana Secretary of State, Louisiana State Treasurer, delegates of the Louisiana Constitutional Convention. They were also in private service as newspaper publishers and businessmen. Some of the men who dedicated themselves during Reconstruction were Prosper Darenbourg, Pierre G. Deslondes (day LAWN), Gatien Decuir, Leon Decuir, Antoine Dubuclet, Emile Honore (a MEAL ah nuh RAY), and H. C. Tounoir (too NWAH).<sup>81</sup>

In 1872 Josephine Dubuclet Decuir, widow of my nephew Antoine II, had the challenge of continuing the strength and courage of our family. Josephine was denied a first

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<sup>79</sup> French and American Claims commission Francois Mittlebronn vs. The United States, Claim #17, Record Group 76, National Archives, College Park, MD – depositions of Numa Decuir, Gatien Decuir, Jean Baptiste Amar, Martin Juge, and Hypolite Didier among others.

<sup>80</sup> Loren Schweninger. *Black Property Owners in the South 1790–1915* (1990) essay “Socioeconomic Dynamics Among the Gulf Creole Populations: The Antebellum and Civil War Years.” Also see Dormon, *Creoles of Color of the Gulf South*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996.

<sup>81</sup> Ulysses S. Ricard, Jr. “Pierre Belly and Rose: More Forgotten People” *The Chicory Review* Volume 1. No. 1, Chicory Society of Afro-Louisiana History and Culture. New Orleans, Fall, 1988, research by this author.



class seat on the steamship *Governor Allen* because of her color. She sued the captain and the steamship company for discrimination. After a lengthy court battle, she won the suit. It was later overturned by the United States Supreme Court. The court ruled that "separate but equal" was permissible within the common law of common carriers in America. Josephine endured the humiliation of questioning during the trial. The defense played heavily on issues of "color" and "race."<sup>82</sup> Josephine was a prominent Louisiana woman. Her family included her brother Antoine Dubuclet, who was treasurer for the state of Louisiana for three terms.<sup>83</sup> Her cousin Pierre G. Deslondes, secretary of state, was called to testify in her case. Sieur Deslondes was a prominent Louisiana citizen. He was a publisher and politician. He served as Louisiana secretary of state from 1872-1876.<sup>84</sup> I have nothing but admiration for her courage to fight for her rights and those of others. Most people don't realize that our family fought this battle almost 100 years before Mrs. Rosa Parks made a similar stand for equal treatment. Today Winston DeCuir and Julie Eshelman-Lee, family descendants, are working on a formal recognition for Josephine's courageous efforts. They will be submitting a nomination in her honor to the Women's Hall of Fame in Seneca Falls, New York.

**CLOSING**...Firstly, this nomination represents respect and appreciation for Josephine's unselfish courage. It also represents a token of our family's appreciation for all that our ancestors have done for us through the centuries. Their strength, courage, determination, and dedication to family continues through us all today!

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<sup>82</sup> Fifth District Court for the Parish of Orleans. *Madame Josephine Decuir vs. John G. Benson*, No. 4829, original copy Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection Acc. 106, Department of Archives and Manuscripts, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, 1874.

<sup>83</sup> Charles Vincent. *Black Legislators in Louisiana During Reconstruction*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976. p. 52, 226, and 228.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*



Our family history is much like that of other Créole families of Louisiana. Our European ancestors came to this colony of their own accord and carved out a new life. Our West African ancestors came to this colony against their will and also created a new life. The native people helped us all form these lives. My family today represents the blending of all these people and their customs!



## *ABOUT THE AUTHOR*

Julie Eshelman-Lee is Director of Creole West Productions and an independent historian, specializing in Louisiana and Pointe Coupée Parish history. A descendant of early founders of Louisiana and Pointe Coupée Parish, with deep cultural roots in Louisiana, Julie continues the family tradition of the importance of education. Mirroring the model of her Pointe Coupée ancestors, including those who were private instructors and dedicated to the Pointe Coupée public school system in the late 19th century, she is currently devoted to developing Web interactive local history curricula for middle school students in Louisiana and nationwide, bringing our histories and communities together as we embrace our common thread—"our place." Julie is dedicated to implementing the model program in Pointe Coupée where historically the first public school in Louisiana was established in 1808—one of the early priorities of the Orleans Territory legislation.

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