



*The Decuir Family of
Pointe Coupée Parish:
A Remarkable Confluence
of Peoples, Time, and Place*

JULIE ESHELMAN-LEE

*Presented at the Louisiana Historical Society
2nd Annual Créole Family Symposium
Tulane University, New Orleans, LA
October 23, 1999
Presented by: Pete Eshelman as Leufroy Decuir
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OPENING...Video of Decuir family and descendants (1720 to present) choreographed to Dixie

INTRODUCTION...Good morning! Allow me to present myself. I am Leufroy Decuir. I am currently 205 years old. My wit is quick, but depending on the weather, my body aches, and old age past 150 is not a lot of fun. At the invitation of my great-great-great-granddaughter, Julie Eshelman-Lee, I have returned to New Orleans to speak to you about the history of our Decuir family. I am fascinated with the changes to this great city over the past 200 years, but I still sense the familiar *joie de vivre!!* What a tribute to be here addressing the distinguished Louisiana Historical Society as we celebrate the 300th anniversary of our colony. I'm so proud to see that the history of my family and other Créole families made a positive contribution to the development of this unique place and its distinctive culture embraced by the world. You'll have to excuse me—my eyes aren't as good as they used to be, and neither is my memory. So on the trip back to Planet Earth; I jotted down some notes on paper. Please indulge me as I recount our family's history.



I was born in 1794 in Pointe Coupée Parish, Louisiana.¹ During this period our family and many Créole families prospered after the founding of the colony and decades of hardship.

As a youngster on my grandfather's knee, I was taught that Iberville founded Pointe Coupée during his exploration of the Mississippi River in 1699. As he navigated the river, he and his fellow men were confronted with a twenty-two-mile-long curve in the river. Instead of navigating it, they took a shortcut through a partially carved channel approximately four miles in length. Iberville called this place *la Pointe Coupée*. Over the next few years, the Mississippi changed its course and began flowing through this channel, leaving the oxbow curve that would become known as *la Fausse Riviere*.² This is the area where my family lived for over seventy years prior to my birth. It is here in this beautiful setting that the story of our family takes place.

My parents were Joseph Decuir and Françoise Beaulieu.³ My father was a third-generation Decuir in Louisiana—the first generation of the Decuirs born in Louisiana, the Créole generation. He was a proud, very strict, influential man, and he was one of the wealthiest planters in Louisiana. My mother came from a distinguished Créole family. She was a free woman of color who taught us compassion. Our family lived on a large plantation, which my father purchased in 1783 from two "Indian" chiefs.⁴ The property was almost a mile long, fronting lower False River. My father paid the builder

¹ Diocese of Baton Rouge Sacramental Records (hereafter DBR). Certificate of baptism from Diocese of Baton Rouge certified by Una Daigre, archivist, dated 29 February 1996 which states: "Lifroi, free mulatre, child of [not named] and Francoise, free mulatresse, born [omitted], baptized 6 September 1795 at St. Francis Church, sponsors: Antoine, free and Eugenie, free mulatresse." The sponsors were his siblings—his oldest sister and brother.

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

³ Original Acts Pointe Coupée Parish (hereafter OAPC) #144, Baptismal certificate. Acknowledgment agreement, 1818.

⁴ Pintando Papers, Book III, C. No. 3, January 24, 1801–December 14, 1802: 130. Survey of Federal Archives in Louisiana, WPA, 1940.



\$300 and a two-arpent plantation at the upper end of his estate to construct our house.⁵ My parents and their families earned their living as planters. My immediate family lived along lower False River for over a century.

As a Decuir, I was born into a family that was among the original colonists of Louisiana. I grew up with a deep sense of roots in this area. My extended family was instrumental in marketing the colony, settling the first and some of the most successful concessions, working as indentures, and laboring as slaves for the concessionaires.

The Chauvins, my mother's family, were among the earliest settlers of the colony, arriving in the early 1700s. Friends of Iberville and Bienville, they were originally trappers who traveled by canoes down the Mississippi from Montreal. They settled first in Mobile in the early 1700s⁶ and then in Tchoupitoulas, just outside New Orleans, around 1719, where they had their own concession.⁷ At this time the most prosperous and heavily cultivated region in the colony was the district between New Orleans and Cannes Brulées including Tchoupitoulas. The largest establishment in the area was my Chauvin family's plantation with eighty-seven slaves.⁸

My mother's great-grandfather was Francois Orbanne Duval, who was the Treasurer of the Company of the Indies.⁹ He also wrote a column in the Paris newspaper, *Nouveau Mercure*, which was instrumental in attracting concessionaires; laborers; artisans; and German, Alsatian, and Swiss immigrants to Louisiana. Although other Louisiana settlers had published a series of articles, his was recognized as the most

⁵ The builder was Louis Meilleur. See OAPC #996. Joseph Decuir seals document 1822; Martin v. David, 3rd 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.

⁶ Jay Higginbotham. *Old Mobile: Fort Louis de la Louisiane 1702–1711*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1991.

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

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ *The Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, n.d., v. 8, p. 691.



influential! He extolled Louisiana’s resources, stating that the colony was filled with mineral wealth—gold, silver, copper, and lead mines. Unlike those who wrote propaganda, he placed heavy emphasis on the opportunities for agriculturists—both land ownership and cultivation. This was undoubtedly what interested many immigrants. He was credited for attracting over four thousand indentured concession laborers and artisans.¹⁰

My Pointe Coupée origins begin with my great-grandfather Albert deCuire. He contracted as an indentured servant for six years with the St. Catherine concession in 1719.¹¹ Jean Paul Kolly, an investor for the St. Catherine and the St. Reyne concessions who was courting his future wife during a trip to Mauberge, took the opportunity to recruit engages for his concessions.¹² It is here where Albert deCuire and others were introduced to the opportunity in Louisiana. More than likely Albert had previously seen issues of the Paris newspaper, particularly the one penned by Duval!

I was never told why my great-grandfather made the decision to contract with the St. Catherine concession. His family had been in the Macon, Hainaut region for centuries. His family and his ancestors were deeply rooted in the region and had a history of being active with the town government and the Catholic Church. I can only guess that my great-grandfather chose to move to the New World to provide greater opportunity for his family. He is the only one in his immediate family that I am aware of who moved to Louisiana from our ancestral home in Macon.¹³

¹⁰ 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’etat de la Louisiane et ce qu’on en peut esperer*, 1721. AC, C13c, 1:329; p. 36–38. Also see Glenn R. Conrad, trans. and ed. “The Germans in Louisiana in the Eighteenth Century” in *Louisiana History*, 8 (1967):73; *Memoire sur l’etat present de la Louisiane et ce qu’ on peut esperer*, 1721. AC, C13c, 1:329–31 Rena LaConte.

¹¹ Randy DeCuir. *Albert deCuire Arrives in Louisiana: 275th Anniversary*. Marksville: 1995. See also Winston De Ville. *St. Catherine Colonists*. Ville Platte: 1988. Original documents located by Andre Haussy in Lille Archives, France.

¹² Conversation with George DeCoux, DeCuir descendant and this author from his in-depth study of early colonial period of Louisiana. See also Marcel Giraud. *Histoire, Volume 4*. (Paris, 1974).

¹³ Randy DeCuir. *Albert deCuire Arrives in Louisiana*. Research by Father Lybaert of Macon, Hainaut, present-day Belgium, priest and historian.



My great-grandfather was married to Marie Catherine Domaire¹⁴ who, sadly, died just prior to their departure for Louisiana in 1720. I believe my great-grandmother may have died at the port of L'orient while they waited almost six months for a ship to take them to Louisiana.¹⁵

There was much confusion, delay, and tragedy at the port as my great-grandfather and his two daughters and sons were waiting for departure. It is not surprising that when the ships finally arrived, my family was placed on board the wrong ship. The ship they boarded was bound for the St. Reyne concession. Albert's contract was with the St. Catherine concession. This mistake later proved to be a blessing. The colonists for the St. Catherine concession settled at Natchez, and they were the victims of the terrible "Indian" massacre in 1729 that left only two survivors!¹⁶

The voyage to Louisiana took three months. They sailed on the retired war ship, *la Loire*. Built in 1684, it weighed 500 tons and was 110 feet long.¹⁷ It was armed, as were other old war ships converted to passenger ships. This was to defend against pirates during the journey. The conditions of travel were terrible. No running water, spoiled food, 238 passengers carrying all of their worldly goods in a confined, claustrophobic space. The navigation route was across the Atlantic and Caribbean, past the tip of

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ Charles Etienne Gyarre. *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.

¹⁷ Jay Higginbotham. *Old Mobile*.



Havana, to the West Coast of Florida at Pensacola, and northwesterly across the Gulf. They arrived at Ship Island offshore from the settlement at Biloxi on November 20, 1720.

I can only imagine what my family was thinking as they arrived at Biloxi after a difficult journey. At the settlement, there were other colonists, engages, native people, and slaves. Food and comforts were scarce, and many people were ill and on the brink of starvation. The workers and engages lived in the settlement for about one year before they dispersed to their respective concessions.¹⁸

My great-grandfather Albert and his family moved to their concession in Pointe Coupée. This concession was located near the present-day St. Francisville ferry landing. The St. Reyne and St. Catherine concessions grew to become among the most successful in the colony.¹⁹

To get an idea of the population of the colony just eleven years after Albert and his family arrived, the 1731 census revealed that there were 3,300 Negro slaves and children; 47 Indian slaves; 600 women and children; and 500 European engages and men capable of bearing arms. After the 1729 massacre in Natchez, Albert and his son Jean Francois, my grandfather, moved to the left bank for safer grounds. By 1738 the settlers of Pointe Coupée were growing corn, tobacco, and indigo.²⁰

Continuing the family's tradition of being active in the Catholic Church in Macon, Albert became one of the church's original godparents. In 1738 he dedicated a bell to the original St. Francis of Assisi church.²¹ Members of the deCuire family were godparents and witnesses for many blessed sacraments both for "slaves" and "free"

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ See Marcel Giraud. *A History of French Louisiana, Vols I, II, IV*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.

²⁰ 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.

²¹ 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.



people. My great-aunt's first child, Jean Francois Decoux, was the first Franco-European Créole to be baptized in the church.²² By 1745 the economy of Pointe Coupée was prospering. The slave population had outnumbered the settlers and planters. Pointe Coupée had a notable population of free persons of color, many of whom became wealthy property owners.²³

In 1731 there were five concessions at Tchoupitoulas that maintained 315 Negro adults and 126 Negro children. There were 53 white people. Within this group were my mother's African family and her Chauvin family.²⁴ My Chauvin family was well respected for its contributions to the colony. This is where my African heritage began. My grandfather Louis Chauvin Beaulieu II had five children with his freed slave Marianne, my grandmother. Sometime after the birth of their last child, he married. My mother's family was large, with five siblings and many half siblings! They all resided in the New Orleans and Tchoupitoulas areas.²⁵ My mother was the only one in her family who went to Pointe Coupée.

My great-grandfather Albert died at the age of seventy-seven in 1750.²⁶ He was the acorn that turned into an oak tree. His hard work and perseverance established our

²² 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."

²³ Bill Barron. *Census of Pointe Coupee, Louisiana 1745*. New Orleans: Polyanthos, 1978.

²⁴ Charles Maduell. *The Census Tables for the French Colony of Louisiana: 1699 through 1732*.

²⁵ *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. Soon to be published in its entirety by this author.

²⁶ 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*.



family's foothold in Louisiana. He gave all future generations of our family the opportunity to be born in the greatest country in the world.

Upon my great-grandfather's death, my grandfather Jean Francois Decuir and his sister Ann Catherine Decuir Decoux carried out the dreams the deCuire family brought from Macon. Sadly, their two siblings, Etienne and Marie Marguerite, had died earlier in Pointe Coupée.²⁷ It is from my grandfather Jean Francois that the Decuir name survived. He was the only one to have male children.

My grandfather Jean Francois married Genevieve Mayeux in 1743,²⁸ and they had twelve children together, two of whom died young.²⁹ Genevieve's parents were also among the original colonists and had arrived in Louisiana in September of 1720 aboard the ship *la Profound*.³⁰ Her father was a carter by trade. Their family first arrived at the Arkansas post, New Orleans, and Natchez before settling in Pointe Coupée.³¹ 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.³²

During this period all of the settlers were constantly threatened by Indian raids, the waxing and waning of the economy, and the uncertainties resulting from the French and Indian War. At this time the economy was reduced to dire straits: shipping was cut

²⁷ DBR Volume 1.

²⁸ 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.

²⁹ 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 Pirre Decuir 1761–1827, Antoine Decuir 1765–1829, and Jean Baptiste Decuir 1769–1815.

³⁰ Glenn R. Conrad. *The First Families of Louisiana*. Baton Rouge: Claitor's Publishing, 1970.

³¹ Research by Randy DeCuir and Steve Mayeux; Archdiocese Sacramental Records (hereafter SLC).

³² 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.



off, markets were eliminated, scarcity of supplies prevailed, and Indian raids resumed.³³ Our Decuir family survived through these trying times.

In 1763 the French transferred the colony to Spain, and inhabitants were required to sign an Oath of Allegiance. All adult men, including my father, Joseph, and my grandfather Jean Francois, signed or made their mark. While Pointe Coupée was relatively calm with respect to the changing powers from France to Spain, this was not the case in New Orleans. A member of my mother's Chauvin family was an active participant in the Revolt of 1768. Nicholas Chauvin la Freniere, 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 and immediately took control of the colony. His first official business was to seek out the French "patriots" and grant them invitations to dinner. The five revolution leaders, including La Freniere, were eventually executed—a tragedy felt by all family members.³⁴

My grandparents had a large family of ten children, two plantations on the upper end of False River, some grazing land in Opelousas, and thirty-five slaves. The family cultivated indigo, and their garden provided their own subsistence. They lived modestly and practically. The house was built on flagstone, with cypress siding from top to bottom. The plantation also had a small storehouse, a barn, a shed of all posts, and Negro cabins.³⁵

Jean Francois died at the age of sixty-four in 1771, and he was buried at St. Francis Church.³⁶ A Mississippi flood later washed away the cemetery.³⁷ Part of my grandfather's proceedings about the settlement of his estate included the emancipation of

³³ Gwendolyn Midlo Hall. *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*.

³⁴ *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.

³⁵ OAPC #391, 392, 393, courthouse records New Roads, La; succession documents Jean Francois Decuir, January 18, 1771.

³⁶ DBR, Vol. 1, p. 195.

³⁷ 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.



his mulatto slave, Louis. My grandmother and the family granted Louis his liberty based strictly on Jean Francois' promise to Louis. Louis was his son.³⁸ I've often wondered what happened to Louis and whether he had any descendants.

Sadly, my grandmother died eight years later at the age of fifty-two. She fell ill while visiting New Orleans, where she dictated her last will and testament.³⁹ Her succession was opened in Pointe Coupée, where her inventory records were scribed in both French and Spanish. Bernardo de Galvez, whom my father and his brothers served under during the Revolutionary War,⁴⁰ signed the Spanish section. My grandparents had acquired a sizable estate together, and by the time of her death there were thirty-nine slaves.⁴¹ They were well-respected in the community, and they witnessed many baptisms and marriages. My grandparents were not outwardly politically active and were not involved in any litigation. They were both very dedicated to their children. My grandparents were not formally educated; however they provided private tutoring for their children.⁴² The death of my grandmother was a trying time for our family. The children had to adjust to life without parents.

During the early 1780s my father, Joseph Decuir, met my mother, Francoise Beaulieu. My father may have met my mother on one of his many business trips to New Orleans. He was also in the Spanish militia. My mother's brother, Joseph Beaulieu, began his military service on September 20, 1769 as a member of Captain Simon Calpha's Company of Free Mulattos and Free Negroes. My uncle took the oath of allegiance to the

³⁸ OAPC #1014, notation that "Louis mulatto had received his portion of his father's estate."

³⁹ Genevieve Mayeux Decuir's last will and testament found in New Orleans at the New Orleans Notarial Archives (hereafter NONA).

⁴⁰ 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 American Revolution, dedicated by the DAR of Louisiana. See also John Walton Caughey. *Bernardo de Galvez in Louisiana 1776–1783*. Gretna: 1972.

⁴¹ OAPC #1014.

⁴² Witnesses on numerous sacramental acts DBR Vol. I; research through courthouse records show no record of party to any suits; children's evidence of some level of education as exemplified by their ability to sign documents.



Spanish Crown, swearing also to communicate to the Governor without delay any information detrimental to the King.⁴³ My parents may have also met through my father and uncle's military connections.

My mother's parents were Louis Chauvin Beaulieu II and Marianne, a free woman of color.⁴⁴ The origin of my mother's family connects the French and African cultures. Her African heritage traces back to her grandparents, who were from Senegal. They were more than likely Wolof, brought to Louisiana in the 1720s. I never had the occasion to discuss my African roots with my mother or her family. This is probably because once a slave was in this colony, especially a second generation freed person of color, the history of the African heritage faded as they assimilated into society. I do know that most Africans were young when they were kidnapped from Africa and they lost the benefit of the oral history from their elders. My great-great-great-granddaughter, Julie, recently met a young gentleman from Senegal who is Wolof and introduced her to a Wolof Griot. A Griot is a historian and genealogist—the one who passes along the oral histories and traditions from elders. They are teaching Julie about Senegal and the Wolof people—both past and present. This may open new doors to our family's African heritage.⁴⁵

The combination of French and African cultures defines my family's Créole heritage. Since we were siblings of parents with different ethnic roots, we became the first Decuir generation to be regarded as "Créoles of Color."⁴⁶ Due to many of society's

⁴³ 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.

⁴⁴ Chauvin Beaulieu research by Reeves for this author yet unpublished by author.

⁴⁵ See Hall's *Africans in Colonial Louisiana* where she has tracked the slave trade from St. Louis concession to the Louisiana colony. Françoise 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.

⁴⁶ 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.



attitudes and laws about race over the next 150 years, our blended heritage posed many challenges for our family.

My parents raised our family during a time in history when civil and church laws dictated the terms of who could legally marry based on skin color and whether a person was a "slave" or "free."⁴⁷ As kids we didn't understand the laws, our family was very close, and we were fortunate to have the love and compassion of our parents.

In 1797 my father, Joseph, donated a young slave to each of his children, one who was very close in age to each child.⁴⁸ At the time this gift was important and generous. My father shared with us a portion of what represented the bulk of his wealth, and he was preparing us to follow in his footsteps. He mentored us in all aspects of plantation affairs. His final public act of love was to officially acknowledge us as his natural children and bequeath us the full amount allowed by law as his natural heirs!⁴⁹ As he was approaching his death, he demonstrated his love and affection for his brother Antoine when he dictated a codicil granting him 100,000 piasters as a special bequest.⁵⁰ The settlement of my father's estate went very smoothly. All of the heirs cooperated well with the proceedings.⁵¹

⁴⁷ 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 [I.48] 1808.

⁴⁸ OAPC #1925 Donation 1797.

⁴⁹ 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 Brulees 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 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.

⁵⁰ OAPC #991 Codicil January 1822.

⁵¹ 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.



My father and his brother Antoine were very close. My uncle was also a very successful planter on the lower False River. He built River Lake plantation in the mid 1790s.⁵² Antoine had eight children with Sophie Deslondes, a free woman of color.⁵³ They lived one plantation from us, and as cousins we were all very close. Between my Uncle Antoine's family and mine, there was quite a large group of Decuir along lower False River.

Our generation of Decuir, on the False River along with numerous other nearby Créole families, bonded together. A large group of us resided along the Chenal well into the 1900s. Antoine's eight children with Sophie inherited their mother's property in Raccourci in 1836.⁵⁴ There was also a large group of cousins who resided in Raccourci. Uncle Antoine and Sophie's relationship had changed by 1823 when he married Louise Beauvais, the widow Tanneret.⁵⁵ During their brief marriage together they had a young child whom they named Antoinette. When Uncle Antoine died in 1829 he was one of the wealthiest men in Louisiana, and young Antoinette became the sole legitimate heir at the age of three.⁵⁶ Antoinette owned the River Lake plantation until 1892, when she sold it to P. C. Major.⁵⁷ River Lake is still owned today by his descendants.⁵⁸ Antoine and his

⁵² 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).

⁵³ 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.

⁵⁴ Series of transactions OAPC #s 918, 919, and 920, OAPC #1402 partition-1836.

⁵⁵ OAPC #1373 Marriage contract; DBR Vol 4:159 marriage record.

⁵⁶ 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.

⁵⁷ OAPC #16, 254: 1892.

⁵⁸ 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*.



daughter owned River Lake for almost one hundred years! Antoinette later married Arthur Edmund Denis, a prominent attorney in New Orleans, and their descendants today own Parlange Plantation. An example of Antoinette's extraordinary character was best described in a newspaper article after her death:

In the year 1850 she was the center of social attraction among the young ladies of New Orleans. She was an heiress and the wealthiest of Louisiana. But her wealth was second to her personal loveliness. Pretty she was incontestably, but her grace of manner, of expression, of refinement, was supreme. To her could well be applied the words of the French poet "Grace more beautiful, yet than beauty." She was surrounded by a throng of admirers and suitors. Arthur Denis carried the prize. He was a young lawyer ranking high with the bar, and a society man distinguished for his wit, superior intelligence, and elegance of manners. The fortune of his wife consisted in large plantations which demanded his personal care and attendance. He therefore abandoned his profession and devoted to the pursuit of agricultural industry the same energy and great intelligence which he had displayed at the bar, and he soon became one of our most successful planters. The war of the succession destroyed their fortune. Time, equally cruel and unsparing, destroyed her beauty be death alone could destroy her lovely disposition, her sweet temper, her good heart. Pious without bigotry, and charitable without ostentation, sprightly without pedantry, never did her lips utter an unkind word; never did her angelical smile fail to welcome, even in a long and cruel illness, those who approached her. During nearly half a century, her marriage was a blessed union. She leaves three sons, two of whom are the partners of their father in business, and two daughters, one of whom is the wife of Judge Parlange, of the district court of the United States, and the other the wife of Charles Carroll, a prominent lawyer in New Orleans.

The year 1812 was a difficult one. My father's brother fought in the battle of New Orleans, and our mother died.⁵⁹ My brother Antoine and I inherited her eleven-and-a-half-arpent plantation; and my mother carefully divided her slaves, cash, and personal effects among my sisters, Eugenie, Celeste, and Claire, my brother, Antoine, and me.⁶⁰ After my mother died, my father had a daughter, Heloise, with Claire Louise

⁵⁹ 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.

⁶⁰ Joseph Decuir sold Francoise Beaulieu the 11-½-arpent plantation on lower False River OAPC #2338, 1804. Will book 1812 OAPC.



Quevain, a free woman of color. We all had a good relationship with Claire. After my father's death, my brother, Antoine, and I partnered with her on our sugar planting operations. We were among the earliest sugar planters of lower False River in Pointe Coupée.⁶¹

When my father died in 1822, he was one of the wealthiest planters in Louisiana. He had amassed a fortune that included plantations, slaves, investments in banks, and real estate holdings in New Orleans. Upon his death his estate was valued at almost one-half million dollars, which would translate today into the lifestyle of a billionaire.

We received half of his estate, the legal limit allowed by law because we were not children of a "legitimate" marriage. Our aunts and uncles and their heirs inherited the other half. We used our inheritance to purchase the False River plantation that was home to us. At the time of my father's death there were over one hundred slaves at this plantation. Even though he had investments in New Orleans, including townhouses, land in the French Quarter, and a sugar plantation in Cannes Brulées,⁶² Pointe Coupée was where our souls belonged!

My brother, Antoine, constructed on his portion a magnificent plantation home that he named 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 my family; Antoine and his family; and our youngest sister, Heloise, her mother, "Zeline," and her stepfather.⁶³ Today only Austerlitz still stands and is owned by the Rougon family who has preserved it for over one hundred years.

After our father died we lost the privilege of his presence. We became known as the new generation of Créoles—"Créoles of Color." For quite some time the Americans had been coming to Pointe Coupée for its economic opportunities, and now that we were

⁶¹ OAPC #144 Acknowledgment 1818.

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

⁶³ 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.



an official state the migration increased. 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.⁶⁴ Our wealth gave us an economic edge of privilege, and the strength of our families gave us the spirit to endure!

My father's original estate became a compound of a large group of families: our own immediate families, extended family, and friends and their families, including a great number of slaves.⁶⁵ It was quite a place of activity. Yellow fever struck in 1831, and I lost my first wife, Julie Porche, and our daughter, Julie Eugenie.⁶⁶ After the death of my first wife I had children with my slave Françoise Antoine. In 1847 I freed my children and Françoise. We were all a family until the day I died.⁶⁷

In 1855 my nephew Antoine II, his wife Josephine Dubuclet Decuir, and I decided to sell our respective pieces of my father's original plantation on lower False River—now a sugar plantation. I was sixty-one years old and decided it was time to liquidate my estate. It was a prime time economically to make this decision. If I had waited a few years longer, I would have lost everything. I started selling assets in January 1855 by filing all the proper documents to clean up the titles from my first wife's ownership. I sold all my slaves to my children and to heirs of my first wife, Julie Porche

⁶⁴ 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 Coupee 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."

⁶⁵ U. S. Census 1850, Parish of Pointe Coupée:24.

⁶⁶ Julie Porche OAPC #4342 succession, 1832.

⁶⁷ Freedom OAPC #173 emancipation of Françoise, Roseline, Leocadie, Hermogene, Eliska, and Oneisphore-1846, DBR civil marriage record OAPC# 1735, 1871; church record DBR 1871 Immaculate Conception Church.



Decuir. I then sold my plantation separately.⁶⁸ A few months later my nephew, Antoine II, and his wife sold Austerlitz Plantation, including its land, buildings, and slaves.⁶⁹

By April 1855 my nephew, Antoine II, and I successfully divested ourselves of my father's largest lower False River holdings. It was an emotional experience but a straightforward business decision. My father's generation built wealth and acquired property and slaves based on a system that relied on slavery as its principle source of labor. My generation faced a myriad of challenges outside of our control that forced us to change this way of life. Needless to say, the political and social challenges only five years later, which erupted into this nation's only Civil War, marked the end of the plantation era as we knew it.

Mary Wolfe Stock sings "Deep River" a Capella

We moved our permanent residences to the Chenal, where my father was one of the earliest settlers in the 1780s.⁷⁰ Our family stayed here together well into the 1900s.

My family had been an integral part of the Catholic Church community since the time of my great-grandfather Albert deCuire and the original St. Francis of Assisi church in 1738. My father, Joseph Decuir, was a member of the churchwardens.⁷¹ The churchwarden was recognized as the next most important position next to the commandant of the Post. Later my son Joseph continued the tradition as Counselor of the Church at Immaculate Conception at Chenal.⁷² Because we were classified as "free people of color" we were not allowed the same privileges as the "white" population with the use of the church and cemeteries. In church we were allowed to worship together in

⁶⁸ Leufroy Decuir vs. Julie Porche, 9th 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.

⁶⁹ OAPC #3655, sale of Austerlitz, plantation and slaves, 1855.

⁷⁰ Joseph purchased property 1870s, Antoine 1780s; documents evidencing ownership of Antoine II and Leufroy in Chenal 1850s, Francoise Antoine Decuir selling in 1881; Leon's kids 1880s

⁷¹ Brian Costello. *The Catholic Church in Pointe Coupee Parish: A Faith Journey*.

⁷² As noted on his death record DBR 1876.



an area assigned to "Créoles of Color." I wanted to have a church for our community, and I donated a parcel of my land at the Chenal for a church in 1849. Since I had the financial means and the property, I donated a two-arpent tract of my land to the church. The permanent church was never finished on this site, and a chapel that I named Chapel of St. Joseph served in the interim. Eventually in 1883, after my death, the donation was rescinded because the Archdiocese had not fulfilled its promises.⁷³

The Civil War was tragic. The horror started early for us when some of our family was taken as prisoners of war. In March 1863 Father Mittlebronn had finished his church service at the Chapel of St. Joseph when Union soldiers arrived in the Chenal area. After the service the priest, two of my sons, my grandson, and family friends went to Martin Juge's nearby plantation. Father Mittlebronn had a reputation as a Confederate supporter, and the Union troops felt he was a threat. Father Mittlebronn, my sons Leon and Joseph, my grandson Gatien, and Jean Baptiste Amar were captured and taken to Winter's plantation in Baton Rouge, where they were detained and held prisoner. Thank God, they were eventually released and returned home.⁷⁴

After the war we experienced an unsettled political environment, lack of credit and currency, difficulty in securing farm hands, and flooding and crop failures in 1866 and 1867. Many prosperous Créoles of Color lost their estates.⁷⁵ I was more fortunate, as I had previously liquidated my assets. The new order was unfavorable for Créoles of Color, as we no longer enjoyed previous privileges. Despite our long-standing roots and social prominence in the area, we became a minority and were subject to the humiliation of racism. I am proud to say that certain of our members fought hard to retain our

⁷³ OAPC #s 1198, 1849 by Leufroy Decuir to Antoine Blanc Archbishop New Orleans. OAPC #9511 Francoise Antoine, spouse of Leufroy Decuir, 1872; #422, 15th JDC Francoise Leufroy [sic] vs. Archbishop of New Orleans-1883; Memoirs of Lelia Marie Decuir Lejeune 1963 "they never did finish that church."

⁷⁴ 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.

⁷⁵ 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.



position in society. Josephine Dubuclet Decuir, widow of my nephew Antoine II, was denied a first class seat on the steamship "Governor Allen" because of her color, and she sued the captain and the steamship company for discrimination. After a lengthy court battle, she won the suit, only to have it later overturned by the Louisiana Supreme Court, which 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 as the defense played heavily on issues of color and race.⁷⁶ 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 one hundred years before Mrs. Rosa Parks made a similar stand for equal treatment.

During reconstruction there was a large representation of the Decuir family along the Chenal. Reconstruction brought many challenges; however, many of our relatives became prominent members of the new order. May we take this moment to honor these gentlemen?

Prosper Darensbourg was a sugar planter and member of House of Representatives 1870–1872.

Emile Honore was a sugar planter; member of House of Representatives 1868–1870, 1870–1872, and 1874–1876; sheriff of Pointe Coupée Parish 1870–1872; and candidate for Secretary of State on the Republican ticket in 1876. (You saw his picture during the opening video.)

H. C. Tounoir: B PCP; sugar planter; Reconstruction politician and publisher; member of House of Representatives, 1868–1870 and 1870–1872; publisher of the Pointe Coupée Republican, established in 1871, the first English-language newspaper in the parish.

Gatien Decuir was a sheriff. You saw his picture during the opening video.

Leon Decuir, my son, was a teacher and a treasurer of the Public Schools in the 1870s. His sons Charles Arthur and Ortaire were teachers in the "Colored Schools" in the eighth and ninth wards, the Chenal area of Pointe Coupée in 1888. They, too, were all in the opening video.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ 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.

⁷⁷ 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.



I have taken too much of your time with this story about our family so let me conclude. Although our family origins stem from family names such as Decuir, Chauvin, Darensbourg, Porche, Tounoir, Ricard, Destrehan-Honore, Patin, Dubuclet, Mayeux, Decoux, lost surnames from Senegal and West Africa, and more lost surnames from those native people of Louisiana, 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 carved out a new life. The blending of these people and their customs is who we are today!

Our family and other Créoles are appropriately recognized for helping settle Louisiana and in contributing our culture and customs to the great melting pot culture of the United States. Diversity, not found in most other countries of the world, has been one of our country's greatest strengths.

The many questions surrounding the institution of slavery remain unresolved, and I have not reconciled in my own mind the issues surrounding slavery relative to twentieth century life. In an attempt to provide some perspective, the written words of our descendant Ulysses S. Ricard, Jr. are worth repeating:

Though some might want to condemn the Créoles for their holding members of their own race in bondage in order to advance themselves economically, we must remember the legal and social restrictions under which they lived. Neither slave nor free, they managed to successfully carve out a niche for themselves in a white man's world. In spite of the restrictions which prevented their full participation in Louisiana society, they were able to achieve financial security during a period when the majority of Louisianians, including most whites, were struggling to eke out a meager existence.⁷⁸

Despite the proclamation that all were equal, all the constructed stereotypes and classifications of people based on skin color took much more than a proclamation of freedom. In search of a better way of life, many Decuir's moved to other parts of the country away from the south. It was neither popular nor socially advantageous to reveal

⁷⁸ Ulysses S. Ricard Jr. "Pierre Belly and Rose: More Forgotten People."



their Créole heritage. In fact, our Créole heritage was a well-kept secret by many descendants and only proudly acknowledged in 1996 by family members who rediscovered our proud heritage accidentally through genealogical curiosity.⁷⁹

As I reflect on our family's history, there are Decuir traits that are found in each generation: commitment to family, commitment to educating our children, and commitment to integrity and industry. Longevity is also a family trait. Several of you here today lived with or met my granddaughters Lelia Marie Decuir Lejeune and Palmyra Decuir who lived to be 101 and 103, respectively. Most recently Charles DeCuir of California just passed away at 100! Lelia's daughter Winnie, who was born in Pointe Coupée, and now resides in California, will be celebrating her 97th birthday in May 2000!

The family's will to persevere has been remarkable. I sometimes wonder why Albert Decuir didn't return home to Europe. What was the inner strength that allowed him to persevere and establish a permanent place for his family in the New World?

A turning point for our family occurred at the DeCuir family reunion of July 1996 in Pointe Coupée. Hosted by my descendant Randy DeCuir and Father Leon Lybaert of Macon, this event brought all branches of the family together to celebrate the 275th anniversary of my great grandfather, Albert deCuire, and his arrival to Louisiana. After one hundred years of being apart, the many branches of the Decuir family gathered at St. Francis of Assisi Church in New Roads, sharing mass and communion and ringing the bell dedicated to the original church in 1728.

I am a Catholic with a devout belief that God will guide us to do what is right if we open our hearts and accept his guidance. I would like to conclude with a prayer...

Dear God, the almighty, please bless our Decuir family and we thank you for giving us the spirit to endure some of the most trying times in American history and give our current generation the strength to endure all hardships and help make the world a better place for all.

⁷⁹ Julie Eshelman-Lee. *Our Family History: A Louisiana Homecoming*. Roanoke: author, 1996.



And dear God, I have a special request, an extra blessing for Julie Eshelman-Lee. I thank you for the guardian angel that you perched on her shoulder who inspired and guided her to help resurrect our proud family history uniting all generations and descendants together through her research. Our family history and that of the Créoles is an important part of American history, and its truth must be known to understand our nation's great strengths and weaknesses in order to build a better world in the new millennium.

My descendant, Mary Wolfe Stock, will grace us with her beautiful voice in singing "Amazing Grace."

FINALE...Mary Wolfe Stock sings "Amazing Grace" a Capella



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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