

“*Rappelez-vous concitoyens*”: The Poetry of Pierre-Aristide  
Desdunes, Civil War Soldier, Romantic Literary Artist, and Civil Rights  
Activist

By Caryn Cossé Bell  
University of Massachusetts Lowell

In his seminal 1937 study, *The Negro in Louisiana: Aspects of His History and His Literature*, New Orleans historian Charles Barthelemy Roussève acknowledged his debt to Louise Mathilde Desdunes, Pierre-Aristide Desdunes's wife, and Attorney A.P. Tureaud. During the 1930s, as Roussève researched his book, both Louise Mathilde and Tureaud opened their personal historical collections to the aspiring young scholar. Their collaboration proved to be enormously productive.

In *The Negro in Louisiana*, Roussève pioneered the first English-language history of African American Louisianians. Together with Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes's *Nos Hommes et Notre Histoire* (Our People and Our History) published in Canada in 1911, Roussève's book remains an indispensable resource for African American studies in Louisiana. The collaborative process also proved critical to the preservation of a vital component of Creole history. It was at this time that Tureaud visited the Desdunes home and learned of the two ledgers that Pierre-Aristide Desdunes had filled with poetry and commentary between 1866 and 1894. Most of the works were unpublished and Tureaud immediately recognized the ledgers' historical importance.

Like Tureaud, Louise Mathilde also understood the significance of the documents. She concluded, it appears, that she could best safeguard her husband's handwritten manuscripts by entrusting them to the young attorney. Her confidence was well-placed. Tureaud collected and conserved historical documents up to the time of his death on January 22, 1972. The Alexander Pierre Tureaud Collection at the Amistad Research Center is among Louisiana's most valuable African American archival collections.<sup>1</sup>

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Louise Mathilde Desdunes had likely crossed paths with Tureaud soon after he returned to New Orleans in 1927 with his newly minted Howard University law degree. At that time, he was one of only five African American attorneys in the entire state. Louise Mathilde, having married into a family of civil rights activists, would surely have perceived in Tureaud an heir to the equal rights mantle of their Creole community's illustrious nineteenth century forebears. She was right again. Beginning in 1922, Tureaud waged a fifty year, twentieth century battle against racial discrimination.<sup>2</sup>

Louise Mathilde also understood how much her husband and Attorney Tureaud shared in common. Both men traced the ancestral roots of their Creole identity to Africa, Haiti, France, and Louisiana; both were descended from refugees of the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804); and both fought to achieve an interracial democracy of freedom and equal citizenship. But whereas Tureaud engaged in a well documented series of legal challenges that produced landmark civil rights victories, Pierre-Aristide faded into obscurity after he and his fellow activists suffered a devastating defeat in the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision.

Pierre-Aristide emerged briefly from the shadows after Tureaud introduced the Desdunes manuscripts to historian Edward Maceo

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Archives, and Lester Sullivan at Xavier University of Louisiana for their assistance.

<sup>1</sup> Charles Barthelemy Roussève, *The Negro in Louisiana: Aspects of His History and His Literature* (New Orleans: Xavier University Press, 1937), vii, ix, 6. Although the wives of Pierre-Aristide and Rodolphe Desdunes were both named “Mathilde,” the evidence indicates that Roussève was referring to Pierre-Aristide's wife when he mentions “Mrs. Mathilde Desdunes” on 117; A.P. Tureaud Jr., “Lost Ledgers Found,” and Dana Kress, “Pierre-Aristide Desdunes, *Les Cenelles*, and the Challenge of Nineteenth-Century Creole Literature,” *Southern Quarterly*, v. 44, no. 3 (Spring, 2007), 151 & 44, respectively; Edward Maceo Coleman, ed. *Creole Voices: Poems in French by Free Men of Color First Published in 1845* (Washington, D.C., The Associated Publishers, 1945), xxxviii; Barbara Ann Worthy, “The Travail and Triumph of a Southern Black Civil Rights Lawyer: The Legal Career of Alexander Pierre Tureaud, 1899-1972” (Ph.D. dissertation, Tulane University, 1984), 197.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, the term “Creole” is used in this article to apply to persons of mixed West African and Latin European ancestry; Worthy, “The Travail and Triumph of a Southern Black Civil Rights Lawyer,” 16-20, 196; Adam Fairclough, *Race & Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1995), xii.

Coleman. At the time, Coleman was preparing a centennial tribute to Armand Lanusse's *Les Cenelles* and he immediately recognized the importance of the unpublished works. In his 1945 reproduction of Lanusse's anthology entitled *Creole Voices: Poems in French by Free Men of Color, First Published in 1845*, Coleman included eight of Pierre-Aristide's approximately fifty unpublished poems together with seven authored by Victor Ernest Rillieux. The poetry appeared in the book's concluding pages under the subject heading "The Next Generation," a fitting designation for two lifelong friends who had pressed their activist community's legacy of protest literature forward. With the misplacement of the ledgers after the book's publication, Pierre-Aristide faded into obscurity once again. Happily, the 2001 recovery of the ledgers by A.P. Tureaud, Jr., Elise Tureaud Nicholls, and their family has rescued Desdunes from the shadows.<sup>3</sup>

Pierre-Aristide was born in New Orleans on June 3, 1844. Both his mother, Henriette Angélique Guillard, and his father, Pierre-Jérémie Desdunes, were first-generation Louisianians. Henriette's father was from France and Pierre-Jérémie, whose mother was born in Cuba, belonged to a distinguished Haitian family. His Caribbean relatives possessed considerable wealth and influence with one family member, Alcibiade Desdunes, serving in the Haitian Senate for several years.

Pierre-Jérémie's close ties to Haiti would explain his separation from his young family in 1850. Together with Emile Desdunes, a Haitian-educated native New Orleanian, he evidently returned to the Caribbean in the 1840s. Once there, he apparently assisted Emile in persuading Faustian Soulouque, Haiti's head of government from 1847 to 1859, to offer asylum to free Creoles of color from the mounting oppression and violence in antebellum Louisiana.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Coleman, *Creole Voices*, xxxviii-xxxix, 109-128; Tureaud, "Lost Ledgers," 154-56.

<sup>4</sup> Notarized Pension Declaration, May 18, 1912, in Pension Files of Aristide Desdunes, National Archives [hereafter cited as NA]; Coleman, ed. *Creole Voices*, xxv; Seventh U.S. Census (1850), Orleans Parish; Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes, *Our People and Our History*, trans. & ed. Sister Dorothea Olga McCants (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1973), xiv, 112-13; Joseph Logsdon with Lawrence Powell, "Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes: Forgotten Organizer of the Plessy Protest" in *Sunbelt Revolution: The Historical Progression of the Civil Rights Struggle in the Gulf South, 1866-2000*, ed. Samuel C. Hyde Jr. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 47; Caryn Cossé Bell,

At some point in the 1850s, Pierre-Aristide joined his father in Haiti and spent considerable time on the "vast" landholdings of one of his cousins. For the Desdunes family and other members of the state's free population of color, such visits presented considerable risks since travel between Louisiana and Haiti was banned. Louisiana lawmakers, terrified of insurrection after slavery's destruction in the Haitian Revolution, legislated a series of laws to suppress contact with the Caribbean nation. In 1831, they barred resident free persons of color from returning to Louisiana if they visited the West Indies. That restriction notwithstanding, Creole New Orleanians like the Desduneses maintained close ties to the Western Hemisphere's first independent black nation.

*Les Cenelles* contributor Nelson Desbrosses, for instance, visited Haiti for several years to study Vodou, a fusion of ancient West African religious beliefs with Roman Catholicism. Upon his return to New Orleans, Desbrosses achieved widespread acclaim for his power to heal in "the laying on of hands and in the transmission of spiritual messages." Like Desbrosses, the young Pierre-Aristide found Vodou irresistible during his Haitian visit in the 1850s. He was clearly impressed with "*Compère* (godfather) *Jean-Josephe*," an adherent of the religion and a veteran grenadier in the army of Haitian revolutionary Alexandre Pétion.<sup>5</sup>

Pierre-Aristide pressed Jean-Josephe, who lived in a remote area of his cousin's property, for details of Vodou's religious rites. The youth likely had some understanding of the religion's influence in the Haitian Revolution when Vodou priests mobilized fifteen thousand slaves in a 1791 lightning offensive that proved crucial to the revolution's success. The religion, though suppressed by Toussaint Louverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, and other Haitian leaders, flourished in the 1850s under Soulouque's regime.

Pierre-Aristide visited Jean-Josephe often and described him as a Vodou *papalwa* [high priest] of "regal bearing." And though he later repudiated Vodou, he clearly admired his elderly friend and noted his

*Revolution, Romanticism and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana, 1718-1868* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1997), 86.

<sup>5</sup> P.A. Desdunes Ledgers [hereafter cited as PAD Ledgers], Historic New Orleans Collection, vol. 1, 180, all translations by author unless otherwise indicated; Judith Kelleher Schafer, *Becoming Free, Remaining Free: Manumission and Enslavement in New Orleans, 1846-1862* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2003), 132; Régine Latortue & Gleason R.W. Adams, eds. & trans., *Les Cenelles: A Collection of Poems by Creole Writers of the Early Nineteenth Century* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1979), xiv; Desdunes, *Our People*, 53.

good fortune when Jean-Josephe invited him to attend a Vodou funeral service. During the ceremony, Desdunes was even initiated into the religious sect as an honorary member.

Pierre-Aristide's friendship with veteran Haitian soldier Jean-Josephe and his initiation into Haitian Vodou exposed the youth to influences that Louisiana's slaveholding elite most feared. In New Orleans, in fact, police harassment of Vodou practitioners intensified during the 1850s as sectional tensions mounted. And yet Aristide and his father apparently returned to New Orleans without incident.

Pierre-Jérémie's decision to risk taking his young son with him probably originated in a plan to emigrate to Haiti with his entire family. During the 1850s, however, the political turmoil leading up to Soulouque's 1859 overthrow dashed those hopes and forced Pierre-Jérémie to return to Louisiana.<sup>6</sup>

Whatever the nature of Pierre-Jérémie's activities in Haiti, he retained close ties to the Caribbean nation and imbued his offspring with an intense sense of pride in their Haitian identity. Henriette, with equally deep roots in the broader Atlantic world, no doubt had a hand in educating her children to events in both France and the Caribbean.

In New Orleans, Pierre-Aristide's family lived in the Faubourg Marigny and attended Annunciation Church where Father Pierre Morisot, the church's kindhearted and popular pastor, ministered to the Marigny's French-speaking population. In 1848, Pierre-Aristide was baptized by Father Morisot, his godfather and a family friend. In fact, as Desdunes later explained, he shortened his name to Aristide to avoid confusion since both his father and his godfather were named "Pierre." He seldom used his Christian name. Morisot's presence also influenced Aristide's intellectual pursuits. The French cleric's 1839 poem "*Le Ciel*" ("Heaven") made a lasting impression on his godchild. In later life, Aristide transcribed Morisot's poem together with his own moving 1876 response,

"*Imitation à la prière de poésie 'le Ciel'*" ("Reply to the Poetic Prayer 'Heaven'").<sup>7</sup>

Aristide was the firstborn child in a large family of seven children, one girl and six boys. His brother Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes, the second eldest and most renowned of the Desdunes offspring, was born on November 15, 1849. Four other brothers, Daniel, Sarazen, Joseph, and Louis, his youngest sibling, are among the lesser known family members. Census takers consistently categorized family members as "mulatto" and a visiting 1880 census taker noted that 22 year old Sarazen suffered from a mental disability. His handicap notwithstanding, Sarazen was gainfully employed as a laborer.<sup>8</sup>

Aristide and his siblings attended the Faubourg Marigny's *L'institution Catholique des orphelins indigents* (Catholic Institute for Indigent Orphans) founded in 1848 when Armand Lanusse and other Creole leaders succeeded in executing the 1832 will of Justine Firmin Couvent. A wealthy widow and former slave, Madame Couvent had provided in her bequest for the creation of a free school for the Marigny's orphaned children of color. Lanusse and his allies expanded the proposed school's admission policy to include boys and girls of modest means as well as destitute children after New Orleans officials barred all children of African descent from attending the city's new, tuition-free public schools in 1841. When the Couvent school opened in 1848, families like the Desduneses paid a nominal tuition fee for the education of their children.<sup>9</sup>

Aristide and Rodolphe excelled under the influence of the institute's remarkably gifted teaching staff. Lanusse, for instance, the Couvent school's principal from 1852 to 1867, had published *Les Cenelles* in 1845, the nation's first anthology of African American poetry. Another extraordinary teacher, Paul Trévigne, taught languages at the school until

<sup>7</sup> PAD Ledgers, vol. I, 350-53.

<sup>8</sup> Seventh (1850) & Tenth (1880) U.S. Censuses, Orleans Parish; Roger Baudier, *The Catholic Church in Louisiana*, (New Orleans: 1939), 367; Rodolphe Desdunes's *Crusader Scrapbook*, Sept. 10 & 12, 1895, Xavier University, Louisiana; Annunciation Baptisms No. 1 (1844-1860), Archives of the Archdioceses of New Orleans [hereafter cited as AANO]; Rodolphe Desdunes to René Grandjean, February 3, 1919, in the René Grandjean Collection, University of New Orleans; Death Record, Louis Desdunes, 8-1-1918, Louisiana State Archives.

<sup>9</sup> Desdunes, *Our People*, 16, 22, 101-04; Donald E. DeVore & Joseph Logsdon, *Crescent City Schools: Public Education in New Orleans, 1841-1991* (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, 1991), 1, 42.

<sup>6</sup> PAD Ledgers, vol. I, 180-83; Carolyn E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 44, 94, 104-06; Leslie G. Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 33-34; David Nicholls, *From Dessalines to Duvalier: Race, Colour and National Independence in Haiti* (1979; rev. ed. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 82-83; Ina Johanna Fandrich, *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveaux: A Study of Powerful Female Leadership in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 136.

the Civil War when he braved repeated threats on his life to edit two newspapers, *L'Union* (1862-64), the first African American newspaper in the southern states, and the New Orleans *Tribune* (1864-71), the nation's first African American daily newspaper.

Under Lanusse's direction, a corps of teaching assistants educated in France and Haiti assisted the faculty. Altogether, they reinforced what Aristide and his siblings had learned of the Atlantic francophone world from their parents and their own experiences. In addition, teachers instructed their students in the democratic advances of the American, French, and Haitian Revolutions.<sup>10</sup>

For Aristide and Rodolphe, the age of democratic revolutions bore directly on their own lives. They were born in the midst of a new wave of republican upheavals with the 1843 Haitian Revolution and the 1848 French Revolution which ended slavery in France's colonial possessions and extended male suffrage to free men of color and the newly freed slaves. The Couvent school's highly politicized teaching staff seized upon these contemporary events to drive home the message of the revolutionary age. Given their Haitian identity, their familial ties to the Caribbean, and the oppression they suffered in Louisiana's increasingly repressive slave regime, the Desdunes brothers wholeheartedly embraced that message.<sup>11</sup>

Joanni Questy, another popular Creole teacher whose students affectionately addressed him as "*Monsieur Joanni*," was regarded by his peers as one of the most learned men of his day. Fluent in English, French, and Spanish and a prolific writer, the flamboyant Questy wore

side whiskers and a top hat. In 1843, he was a founding writer of a short-lived interracial literary journal, *L'Album littéraire: Journal des jeunes gens, amateurs de littérature* (*The Literary Album: A Journal of Young Men, Lovers of Literature*). He also contributed to *Les Cenelles*, worked with Trévigne as a staff writer on the *Tribune*, and collaborated on numerous other publications.<sup>12</sup>

Aristide makes his admiration for Questy clear in two stanzas from his poem "*Hommage à mon estimé professeur Joanni Questy*" ("*Hommage to My Esteemed Professor Joanni Questy*"):

Oh! If like your lute, my unmanageable zither  
Might resonate with an enchanting harmony,  
I could surely die with peace of mind  
Bequeathing to my homeland my heartfelt feelings;

If I were able to taste, like you, the heavenly ambrosia  
With which kind Poetry nourishes her offspring  
Green laurels would always grow on my grave!<sup>13</sup>

While the poem is an artful expression of Aristide's high esteem for his mentor, it also offers insight into the intellectual milieu in which he and his classmates were educated. Questy, Lanusse, Trévigne, and the other members of the teaching staff kept their students fully abreast of the latest French literary trends and when Aristide and his brother Rodolphe entered the Couvent school the French Romantic literary movement was in full flower.

Couvent educator Trévigne captured the movement's excitement in his amusing description of the Creole intelligentsia's obsession with French literature in the 1830s. At the time, he wrote, "Louisiana, especially New Orleans, was considered part of France." As the Romantic movement grew in popularity in the city, the defenders of Enlightenment Classicism could not "fathom the downfall of their idols." The "struggle between the Classicists and the Romantics overtook everyone and was as intense in New Orleans as in Paris." In the end, however, "thanks to

<sup>10</sup>Desdunes, *Our People*, 13-14, 66, 104; Caryn Cossé Bell, "Haitian Immigration to Louisiana in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," in the *African American Migration Experience* (Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture: New York Public Library, 2005), p. 14.

<http://www.inmotionaame.org/texts/?migration=5&topic=99&type=text>; John W. Blassingame, *Black New Orleans, 1860-1880* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 130-31; Edward Larocque Tinker, *Creole City: Its Past and Its People* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1953), 169-70; Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), 63; Betty Porter, "The History of Negro Education in Louisiana," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, XXV (July, 1942), 734; Roussève, *The Negro in Louisiana*, 118-19; Mary Niall Mitchell, "'A Good and Delicious Country': Free Children of Color and How They Learned to Imagine the Atlantic World in Nineteenth-Century Louisiana," *History of Education Quarterly*, v. 40, no. 2 (Summer 2000), 124-25.

<sup>11</sup> Bell, *Revolution*, 104, 159-60.

<sup>12</sup> Desdunes, *Our People*, 25-26; Roussève, *The Negro in Louisiana*, 73-74; Tinker, *Creole City*, 264; Bell, *Revolution*, 105.

<sup>13</sup> PAD Ledgers, vol. I, 116.

Victor Hugo” the Romantic triumph was as complete in Louisiana as in France.<sup>14</sup>

By 1830, as Trévigne acknowledged, Victor Hugo had already achieved towering stature among French Romantics. Together with poet Félicité de Lamennais, Hugo had revolutionized French Romanticism by linking demands for freedom of artistic expression to the broader struggle for political equality and social justice. In his anti-Classical tragedy *Hernani*, Hugo galvanized support for the movement with a dramatic declaration: “Liberty in the arts, liberty in society, *voilà*, that is the double goal.” The play’s tumultuous debut caused a riot in Paris and when France’s 1830 July Revolution erupted soon afterwards, Hugo eagerly embraced the republican cause.<sup>15</sup>

By his actions, France’s foremost Romantic exponent affirmed the ties that bound Romanticism’s cultural revolution to the age of democratic revolutions. Romantic literary rebels throughout the Atlantic world joined in an intellectual and artistic rebellion that would reverberate in the 1843 Haitian Revolution, the 1848 French Revolution, and the 1870 Parisian insurrection. Romanticism’s impact was equally profound in Creole New Orleans.

Contrary to the promise of the revolutionary age, the city’s African Americans, both slave and free, suffered mounting oppression during the antebellum decades. For the free black community’s well educated Creoles, Romanticism’s use of literary art to attack injustice held enormous appeal. Undeterred by the passage of an 1830 law prohibiting the use of language or reading materials “having a tendency to produce discontent among the free coloured population . . . or to excite insubordination among the slaves,” they readily appropriated the new mode of artistic expression. Not long after Romanticism’s triumph in France, they produced at least two French-language works of protest literature. In a poem, “The Campaign of 1814-15,” written during the 1830s, Hippolyte Castra, a free man of color and a participant in the 1815 battle of New Orleans, protested the humiliating treatment of free veterans of color and dramatized the plight of Louisiana’s free black

population. In 1837, shortly after emigrating to France, New Orleanian Victor Séjour published “*Le Mulâtre*” (“The Mulatto”), an impassioned attack on slavery and the first short story by a native-born African American.

In New Orleans, Joanni Questy and Armand Lanusse pressed forward notwithstanding an 1830 law banning dissent and subjecting violators to imprisonment at hard labor for 3 to 21 years, or death, at the discretion of the judge. In 1843, they played a leading role in creating and publishing *L’Album littéraire*, which disappeared within a few months of its debut after a reader charged the literary journal with instigating revolution. With the demise of *L’Album*, Lanusse produced *Les Cenelles*, a collection of poems by Creole writers. Taken together, *L’Album littéraire* and *Les Cenelles* contain all of the major components of Romantic style and thought that swept the Francophone Atlantic world in the nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup>

Quoting republican proponents Victor Hugo, Félicité de Lamennais, Alphonse de Lamartine, and Alexandre Dumas in the two publications, Lanusse, Questy, and other contributors signaled their admiration for four of French Romanticism’s most politically active writers. In the introduction to *Les Cenelles*, Lanusse stressed the importance of education and urged young Louisianians to seek inspiration in the celebrated careers of Hugo and the larger-than-life Dumas who was himself the grandson of an enslaved woman, Marie-Cessette Dumas, in the French colony of Saint Domingue (present-day Haiti).<sup>17</sup>

At the Couvent school, Lanusse and his staff acted upon their commitment to education as a force for change. Through the medium of political Romanticism, they immersed their students in studies of the francophone Atlantic’s most articulate republican spokesmen. They found eager protégés in both Aristide and Rodolphe who readily embraced Romanticism’s political use of art and history to teach lessons in the

<sup>14</sup> Paul Trévigne to Fisk University Librarian, July 28, 1902, in the Southern Writer Series, Tulane University.

<sup>15</sup> Warren Breckman, *Marx, the Young Hegelians, and the Origins of Radical Social Theory: Dethroning the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 156-58; quotation from Warren Breckman, *European Romanticism: A Brief History With Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2008), 28.

<sup>16</sup> Breckman, *European Romanticism*, vii-40; Frank Paul Bowman, “The Specificity of French Romanticism” in *The People’s Voice: Essays on European Romanticism*, ed. Andrea Ciccarelli, John C. Isbell & Brian Nelson (Clayton Melbourne Vic.: Monash University, 1999), 76; Bell, *Revolution*, 88-105. For a translation of “*Le Mulâtre*,” see *The Multilingual Anthology of American Literature: A Reader of Original Texts with English Language Translations*, ed. Marc Shell & Werner Sollors (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 148-181.

<sup>17</sup> Bell, *Revolution*, 105-15; Johnathan Edwards, “Dumas, Alexandre, Père,” in *Microsoft Encarta Africana*, 2000.

present. Fortuitously, electrifying events in France and the French Caribbean opened an inspiring new field of study.

Rallying to the cause of “*Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*” in the 1848 French Revolution, insurgents proclaimed the Second French Republic and chose literary artist Alphonse de Lamartine as the head of France’s Constituent Assembly. Upon seizing control of the French government, Lamartine and his republican allies abolished slavery and proclaimed universal male suffrage. In 1848, all African-descended males including the newly freed slaves in France’s Caribbean colonies elected representatives to the Second French Republic’s National Assembly. With one exception, all of the representatives were men of African descent.

By the time Aristide entered the Couvent school, Louis Napoleon Bonaparte was in the ascendancy. In 1852, he proclaimed the Second Empire and named himself Napoleon III. Still, for the school’s students and staff, the 1848 Revolution stood out as an inspiring new milestone.<sup>18</sup>

Aristide’s study of these events convinced him that literary rebel Lamartine stood head and shoulders above France’s political Romantics for carrying his ideals into practical effect. In his retrospective discourse “On the Genius of the Great Lamartine,” Aristide lavished praise on the French “poet of poets” for his *History of the Girondists* published between 1847 and 1848. In the multivolume study, Aristide wrote, Lamartine had “paved the way for *La République de 1848*” by defending the 1789 French Revolution and France’s First Republic.<sup>19</sup>

At an early age, Aristide developed an equally high regard for the work of poet Coriolan Ardouin who is credited with authoring Haiti’s first Romantic literary work. Ardouin, considered “the Haitian Lamartine,” was born in 1812 and died of tuberculosis in 1835 at the age of twenty-three after a morbidly tragic life. He lost both of his parents by the time he was twelve years old. Not long afterwards, a beloved sister perished as well. He married at an early age but both his wife and child died by the time he was twenty years old.

Aristide found Ardouin’s commemoration of Haiti’s revolutionary heritage especially inspiring in two poems, *Pétion* and *Le Pont Rouge* (“The Red Bridge”). Ardouin’s *Pétion* paid tribute to Alexandre Pétion, a veteran of the American, French, and Haitian Revolutions and the republican president of Haiti from 1807 to 1818. *Le Pont Rouge*

dramatized Jean-Jacques Dessalines’s role in Haiti’s independence, his betrayal of the revolution’s ideals, and his assassination at Pont-Rouge near the entranceway to Port-au-Prince (the present-day site of Haiti’s International Airport). Aristide copied two stanzas of *Le Pont Rouge* into his manuscript and juxtaposed the two works in heroic terms in his commentary: “But let him [Ardouin] hail, on the one hand, the noble and melancholy countenance of Alexandre Pétion while, on the other, evoking the bloody memory of Pont-Rouge with the immortal figure of Dessalines.”

During his Haitian visit, Aristide often visited Ardouin’s grave where “a modest memorial in one of the Port-au-Prince cemeteries” commemorated the poet. Deeply moved by Ardouin’s poem “*Moi-Même*” (“Myself”), Aristide eventually transcribed it in its entirety in his manuscript together with quotations from Ardouin’s other works. Aristide especially admired Ardouin’s ability to express his innermost feelings: “Yes truly, of all the Haitian poets that I have read, C. Ardouin is closest by far to my sense of the true poet....In the lyre of Coriolan Ardouin, in place of the seven conventional cords, the very fibers of his heart serve as those cords.”

The commitment to communicate one’s inner feelings was a core feature of Romanticism—a feature rooted in the revolutionary era’s liberating influence. As much a product of the age of revolutions as Ardouin, Aristide clearly admired the depth of personal self-expression that the Haitian poet had achieved and endeavored to emulate him in his own work.<sup>20</sup>

Aristide’s moving tribute to Ardouin reveals another component of his education. His metaphorical comparison of the Haitian poet’s literary genius to a lyre, a small harp-like instrument used to accompany recitations in ancient Greece, underscores his familiarity with eighteenth century Classicism, an aesthetic mode of expression in which artists emulated the Greeks and the Romans. Again, in his “*Hommage à mon estimé professeur Joanni Questy*,” Aristide describes his mentor as a

<sup>18</sup> Bell, *Revolution*, 160; R.R. Palmer & Joel Colton, *A History of the Modern World*, vol. 2 (8<sup>th</sup> ed.; New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1995), 501-07.

<sup>19</sup> PAD Ledgers, vol. II, 95-97, 133.

<sup>20</sup> J.-J. Luthi, A. Viatte, & G. Zananiri, *Dictionnaire Général de la Francophonie* (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1986), 57; Brothers of Christian Instruction & Pradel Pompilus, *Manuel Illustré d’Histoire de Littérature Haitienne* (Port-Au-Prince: Henri Deschamps, 1961), 41-50; Jan Pachonński & Reuel K. Wilson, *Poland’s Caribbean Tragedy: A Study of Polish Legions in the Haitian War of Independence, 1802-1803* (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1986), 296-97; PAD Ledgers, vol. I, 207-10; Breckman, *Marx*, 3.

“disciple of Virgil,” the Roman poet who authored the *Aeneid*, a literary masterpiece.

In his manuscript’s “*Avant propos*” (“Foreword”) to his poetry, he depicts the “*jardin des neuf Soeurs*” (garden of the nine Sisters), the nine Muses of Greek mythology, and names four of the goddesses who inspired the arts and sciences among mortals. Though Couvent school professors were among Romanticism’s most enthusiastic proponents in antebellum New Orleans, they nonetheless continued to educate their students in Classicism. Aristide’s numerous references to ancient mythology, art, and culture confirm this practice.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to literature, languages, geography and history, the Couvent school’s curriculum required Aristide and his classmates to study mathematics, geometry, and drafting in preparation for an occupation as a grocer, tailor, machinist, carpenter, or some other skilled trade. Owing to discriminatory practices that barred virtually all free persons of African descent from practicing law, medicine, and most other professions, school administrators recognized the necessity of preparing their students for occupations as tradesmen and skilled workers.

Aristide, for instance, studied carpentry while his younger brother Rodolphe learned the cigar-making business. Those skills served them well during their lifetimes. But as their literary works, commentary, and political activism demonstrate, the two brothers aspired to apply their first-rate education to occupations of a higher calling. That possibility presented itself with the onset of the Civil War.<sup>22</sup>

Fully aware of advances in freedom and political equality in the Atlantic world and schooled in the empowering ethics of the Romantic art form, Aristide was well prepared to meet the challenge. After the fall of New Orleans to United States forces in April 1862, he heeded the call of his former instructors and other community leaders who urged free men of color to join the U.S. Army and take up “the cause of the rights of man” in the tradition of Haitian revolutionaries. “Hasten all,” Creole activist Henry Louis Rey insisted, “our blood only is demanded.” Though only a teenager, Aristide joined the struggle at the first opportunity.

The Desdunes family and most other members of the free community of color anticipated that the war would bring momentous changes. Rey, whose father, Barthélemy Rey, was a Couvent school founder, expressed their feelings best when he compared the war to the American Revolution and toasted “the present Revolution” and “all Revolutions—for they give birth to the progress of man, and lead him on the way to true fraternity!”<sup>23</sup>

Despite the U.S. Army’s ban on the enlistment of African American soldiers, Rey and other community leaders finally convinced U.S. General Benjamin F. Butler, the commander of Union forces in Louisiana, to accept the services of free men of color. Eighteen-year-old Aristide was among the first to enlist in the 1<sup>st</sup> Native Guard Regiment when he signed on as a private on September 1, 1862. The army official who documented his enrollment listed his occupation as a carpenter and described him as 5 feet 4 inches tall with a light complexion, black hair and eyes, and “no permanent marks or scars.” On September 27, Aristide’s regiment, 1,000 strong, was mustered into military service for three years. It was the first officially authorized regiment of African American soldiers in the U.S. Army.<sup>24</sup>

General Butler’s call to arms was addressed solely to the city’s free men of color since government policy prohibited the arming of fugitive slaves. Butler assured Washington officials that the 1<sup>st</sup> Native Guard Regiment was composed “altogether of free men.” In fact, however, over half of the recruits in Aristide’s regiment were contraband soldiers. In describing Butler’s Native Guards, a government agent in New Orleans explained to Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase that “nobody inquires whether the recruit is (or has been) a slave.” As a result, “the boldest and finest fugitives have enlisted.” Military service alongside such men made a great impression on Aristide. During the postwar era, he transcribed a poem, “*Toussaint-Louverture: A l’aspect de la flotte française, 1802*” [Toussaint-Louverture: Upon Sighting the French Navy, 1802], by Tertulien Guilbaud, one of Haiti’s seminal Romantic literary artists. Desdunes introduced the poem with the title “*Les pensées d’un*

<sup>21</sup> PAD Ledgers, vol. I, 113-14, 116. For Classicism’s influence, also see Desdunes, *Our People*, 13-16.

<sup>22</sup> *Prospectus de L’Institution Catholique des Orphelins Indigents* (New Orleans: Imprime par Maître Desarant, 1847), 4; Mitchell, ““A Good and Delicious Country,”” 125; Desdunes, *Our People*, xiv.

<sup>23</sup> Rey’s letter to the New Orleans *L’Union* as cited in the *New York Times*, November 5, 1862.

<sup>24</sup> Bell, *Revolution*, 229-31; James G. Hollandsworth, Jr., *The Louisiana Native Guards: The Black Military Experience During the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1995), 16-18; War Department, Record & Pension Division, November 12, 1896, in Pension Files of Aristide Desdunes, NA.

*esclave soldat*” [“The Thoughts of a Slave Soldier”], a heading that recalled his own perceptions of his fellow Civil War soldiers.<sup>25</sup>

The poem begins with Louverture's account of slavery's torment. “The Lord brought me forth,” he prays, “like Moses of ancient times, From the foul bottomless depths to which the slave has sunk....” He continues:

Can it be that the clanking chains with which they confine us  
Resound forever, echoing in our flowering dales?  
Can it be that facing a destiny filled with sorrow,  
My soul is adrift like a rudderless ship?

He replies with a call to arms: “Array yourselves beside me, noble sons of Africa!...for *les Noirs* the hour of retribution approaches.”<sup>26</sup>

He continues:

I have faith in my destiny, and I will be triumphant.  
When danger hurls its violent furies into his path,  
The man whose courage rises above those outrages,  
Sees his stature soar.

Woe to whosoever advances upon our impregnable fortifications!  
In my far-reaching designs, I have God on my side!  
And I feel boiling in my veins of iron  
The creative power which brings forth worlds!<sup>27</sup>

With a vengeful God on his side and a sword in hand, he seeks retribution and asserts his power to “bring forth worlds.” Guilbaud's hero is a composite of two triumphal figures immortalized by French writer Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *L'An deux mille quatre cent quarante* (*The Year 2440*) and Hérard-Dumesle, the first Haitian poet to take up the subject of Haiti's national independence.

In his 1771 *L'An deux mille quatre cent quarante*, Mercier prophesied the triumph of an “Avenger of the New World,” a black man who had broken the chains of his compatriots and ended slavery in the Americas. With his “virtuous vengeance” and his heroic genius, he

inspired the enslaved who awaited “only his signal to become as many heroes.” He was the “exterminating angel to which God and Justice had handed its double-edged sword.” The book's impact was enormous. When Jean-Jacques Dessalines proclaimed Haiti's independence in 1804, he declared: “I have avenged America.”<sup>28</sup>

In much the same vein, Hérard-Dumesle's 1824 *Voyage dans le nord d'Hayti* (*Voyage to the North of Haiti*) recounted the Bois-Caïman ceremony which sparked the Haitian Revolution's decisive slave revolt. At the gathering, revolutionary leader “Zamba” Boukman Dutty rose from among the enslaved participants to rally his followers. Hérard-Dumesle's account compares Boukman to the “illustrious Spartacus,” the leader of a famed slave revolt in ancient Rome. Nature, he continues, had stirred after “Three centuries of slavery [had] outraged her clemency [and ] Dirtied her august presence with its crimes.” Now, he wrote, “Vengeance awakens and flashes the double-edged sword.” Addressing the crowd, Boukman Dutty delivered a “fiery speech” in which he proclaimed that “God who is so good orders us to vengeance: He will direct our hands, and give us help,...Listen to the liberty that speaks in all our hearts.” Like Guilbaud and Hérard-Dumesle, Desdunes viewed the hemispheric struggle for freedom through the prism of the Haitian Revolution. In his experience, however, the “exterminating angel,” the “*esclave soldat*,” wore the uniform of the U.S. Army.<sup>29</sup>

Whereas Desdunes drew inspiration from his fellow men-at-arms, white New Orleanians reacted angrily. Their hostility to the presence in the city of the newly recruited African American soldiers led to increasingly violent confrontations. In an effort to diffuse tensions, General Butler ordered the 1<sup>st</sup> Native Guard Regiment to join an expedition outside of the city. Their assignment involved an overland offensive to clear the region between New Orleans and Brashear City (present-day Morgan City) of Confederate forces and restore transportation links on the Mississippi River's west bank.

On their first mission, Desdunes and his fellow soldiers impressed Butler as they forced the Confederates to retreat from Des Allemands,

<sup>25</sup> Hollandsworth, *Native Guards*, 18; PAD Ledgers, vol. I, 129-31; Anténor Firmin, *De l'égalité des races humaines* (F. Pichon: Paris, 1885), 450-55.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>28</sup> Laurent Dubois & John D. Garrigus, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2006), 54-55; Pompilus, *Manuel Illustré*, 18; For Dessalines quote, see Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2004), xiii.

<sup>29</sup> Dubois & Garrigus, *Slave Revolution*, 86-88; Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 92, 297n5.



restored fifty-two miles of railroad track, and rebuilt two large bridges. As Desdunes and the other Native Guards soldiers advanced through St. Charles Parish repairing rail lines and bridges in the vicinity of Des Allemands and the small town of Boutte, it is possible that the young soldier met Louise Mathilde Denebourg, his future wife.

Denebourg was born on a small, remote farm near Boutte approximately thirty miles southwest of New Orleans. Like Aristide, she was of African descent and born free. Perhaps Denebourg even introduced him to the young woman who inspired his poem “*Paroisse Saint-Charles Narration: Démence de Cornélie*” (“Saint Charles Parish Narrative: Cornélie’s Madness”). In the piece, Aristide recalls the beauty of rural south Louisiana as he relates the torment of the nineteen year old Cornélie whose unrequited love for François drives her to contemplate suicide. Whatever the circumstances surrounding their first encounter and subsequent courtship, Aristide and Denebourg waited until well after the war to marry.<sup>30</sup>

Aristide’s 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment remained in the St. Charles Parish region until white planters, fearing that the presence of the black soldiers would inspire a slave revolt, prevailed upon General Nathaniel P. Banks, Butler’s replacement, to withdraw the men from the area. Beginning in December 1862, Banks dispersed the various companies of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Native Guard Regiments to isolated fortifications guarding coastal Louisiana and the region’s major waterways. Aristide’s company was dispatched to the Louisiana marshlands at Fort Macomb on Chef Menteur Pass, a tidal waterway that connects Lake Pontchartrain with the Gulf of Mexico. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Native Guard Regiment remained in the St. Charles Parish area to harvest the sugar cane crop.<sup>31</sup>

In May 1863, Aristide’s 1<sup>st</sup> regiment received orders to join General Banks at Port Hudson, a Rebel stronghold on the Mississippi River approximately fourteen miles north of Baton Rouge. President Abraham Lincoln had directed Banks to lead an upriver expedition to assist General Ulysses S. Grant who was advancing on the enemy’s fortifications at Vicksburg, Mississippi. Union control of the river would divide the Confederacy in two and open a vital pathway into the South. When Rebel forces halted the Union advance at Port Hudson, Aristide’s 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment

was among the 15,000 Union soldiers who besieged the city on May 23, 1863.

Banks ordered two assaults on the heavily fortified city on May 27 and June 14. Both offensives failed disastrously with Union forces suffering ten times as many casualties as Port Hudson’s defenders. After the second bloody failure in June, Banks decided to settle down for a siege. With Vicksburg’s fall on July 4, however, Confederate forces at Port Hudson had no choice but to surrender giving Union forces complete control of the Mississippi River.<sup>32</sup>

In the first assault on May 27, Aristide’s 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment attacked the strongest Confederate position and though they were repulsed with crushing losses their courageous conduct made an enormous impression. General Banks could hardly contain his enthusiasm in a personal letter to his wife: “They fought splendidly! splendidly! Everybody is delighted that they did so well! The charges upon the rebel works, of which they made three, exhibited the greatest bravery and caused them to suffer great losses.”<sup>33</sup>

But the impact of their actions extended well beyond the battlefield. Only two weeks before their offensive, the *New York Tribune* had reported that the majority of white Northerners “have generally become willing that [blacks] should fight, but the great majority have no faith that they will really do so.” Only eleven days after the May assault, The *New York Times* concluded that the battle at Port Hudson “settles the question that the negro [*sic*] race can fight.” Indeed, a white officer expressed the views of many Northerners when he observed: “You have no idea how my prejudices with regard to Negro troops have been dispelled by the [Port Hudson] battle the other day.”<sup>34</sup>

The assault was the first major engagement between Confederate forces and African American soldiers and though the Native Guard Regiments suffered a tactical battlefield defeat, their courage under fire was an enormous strategic victory. Many Northerners who had doubted that blacks would make effective combat soldiers were now convinced otherwise. “It is no longer possible,” the *New York Times* asserted on June 11, 1863, “to doubt the bravery and steadiness of the colored race, when rightly led.” After Port Hudson, the army redoubled its efforts to

<sup>30</sup> Hollandsworth, *Native Guards*, 29-35; Notarized Pension Declaration, November 12, 1918, in Pension Files of Aristide Desdunes, NA; PAD Ledgers, vol. I, 127-29.

<sup>31</sup> Hollandsworth, *Native Guards*, 38-41.

<sup>32</sup> Hollandsworth, 51; James M. McPherson, *Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 334, 359-60.

<sup>33</sup> Hollandsworth, 53, 62.

<sup>34</sup> McPherson, 380-82.

recruit black soldiers and by the end of the war, one in ten U.S. soldiers were African American.<sup>35</sup>

In the May 27 assault, Aristide's 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment led the attack under the command of Captain André Cailloux, a former slave. By the time of the Civil War, Cailloux, who boasted of the blackness of his skin, cut a dashing figure in Creole society for his superb skills as an equestrian and marksman. After Butler authorized the recruitment of black soldiers, the popular Cailloux quickly raised a company. Butler rewarded him with a captain's commission in the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment.

On the Port Hudson battlefield, Cailloux steadied his men as he moved along the line and spoke to them in both French and English. Even after enemy fire shattered his left arm he led the men forward until a fatal shot struck him down. Confederate sharpshooters prevented his men from removing his body until Port Hudson's surrender six weeks later. On July 29 at Cailloux's burial services in New Orleans, thousands of African Americans, both free and slave, lined the route to the cemetery on both sides of Esplanade Street for over a mile to honor the slain officer's memory.<sup>36</sup>

It is entirely likely that Rodolphe Desdunes, in his later description of Cailloux's courage under fire, based his account on Aristide's first-hand experiences at Port Hudson. His older brother's testimony would explain Rodolphe's insistence on the accuracy of his description:

The eyes of the world were indeed on this American Spartacus [Cailloux]. The hero of ancient Rome displayed no braver heroism than did this officer who ran forward to his death with a smile on his lips and crying, "Let us go forward, O comrades!" Six times he threw himself against the murderous batteries of Port Hudson, and in each assault he repeated his urgent call, "Let us go forward, for one more time!" Finally, falling under the mortal blow, he gave his last order to his attending officer, "Bacchus, take charge!" If anyone should say the knightly Bayard did better or more, according to history, he lies.<sup>37</sup>

For Desdunes and his comrades-in-arms, their losses did not end with Port Hudson's surrender.

In 1862, in response to the U.S. army's organization of black regiments, the Confederate government had threatened to enslave or execute captured black soldiers. The South's refusal to exchange captured black prisoners added a dangerous new dimension to the wartime hardships of African American servicemen like Aristide. The retaliatory policy led to a number of cold-blooded battlefield murders such as an incident involving some of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment's soldiers.

In the aftermath of Port Hudson, General Banks ordered the black troops under his command to join with white units to clear the surrounding countryside of remaining Confederate forces. Near the town of Jackson, Louisiana, a Confederate cavalry unit captured a detachment of twenty-one soldiers of the 1<sup>st</sup> Native Guard Regiment including their Creole officer, Lieutenant Oscar Orillion. All of the defenseless men were summarily executed with one of the Confederate officers taking credit for shooting thirteen of the prisoners himself.<sup>38</sup>

For Aristide, the executions hit close to home. On September 27, 1862, he and Orillion had been among the men who made history when the U.S. Army officially authorized its first regiment of African American soldiers. Aristide may have known a number of the other murdered men as well.

After the initial May 27 assault on Port Hudson, Aristide was incapacitated for two weeks with a medical condition. With his recovery and the city's surrender, he was ordered to the Point aux Herbs (Grassy Point) outpost on Lake Ponchartrain for detached service. For the remaining two years of the war, his garrison duty included assignments at Forts Bienvenue and Macomb, military posts guarding the southeastern approaches to the city. Though African American soldiers like Aristide distinguished themselves in a number of major engagements, they continued to bear a larger share of garrison and fatigue duty than their white counterparts. Such duty explains the high rate of death from disease for black soldiers.

In Louisiana's marshlands, Aristide's garrison duty was particularly hazardous since it exposed him to mosquitoes, poor water, and deadly accumulations of bacteria that resulted from close quarters and primitive sanitation. During the Civil War, disease killed twice as many soldiers as battlefield combat and the number of fatalities from disease among black

<sup>35</sup> Hollandsworth, 66-68.

<sup>36</sup> Stephen J. Ochs, *A Black Patriot and a White Priest: André Cailloux and Claude Paschal Maistre in Civil War New Orleans* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2000), 1-4, 16-17, 141; Bell, *Revolution*, 240.

<sup>37</sup> Desdunes, *Our People*, 124-25.

<sup>38</sup> McPherson, *Ordeal by Fire*, 380; Hollandsworth, 70-71.

troops was almost twice as high as for white Union soldiers. Troops confined to garrisons were particularly vulnerable.<sup>39</sup>

Aristide's poem "*Imitation: Les vœux d'un jeune soldat*" ("Imitation: The Wishes of a Young Soldier") offers insight into the unhealthy conditions and mind-numbing drudgery of such duty. He describes his "sickly body [and] tired soul" and depicts the scene in his marshland outpost:

Time passed. Then came the afternoon rest,  
And among the soldiers,  
Weariness: one stretched out on a simple mat,  
Another chatted softly;  
The commander, at last, amused himself among these men of war  
Each in his own fashion  
Attempting to cheat the oppressive and obscene boredom  
Born of the garrison.<sup>40</sup>

Aristide consoled himself in solitude with his "*pipe au col noir*" ("black-stemmed pipe"), a favorite pastime. For many years to come, he would formulate his thoughts in the company of "*ma modeste pipe de tabac, ma chère pipe au col noir*" ("my simple tobacco smoking pipe, my cherished black stemmed pipe").<sup>41</sup>

In addition to the boredom and health risks of garrison and labor duty, Aristide and his comrades suffered the indignities of obsolete weapons, the hand-me-down uniforms of white soldiers, and poor equipment including knapsacks without shoulder straps. In one incident involving the 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment at Baton Rouge, the post commander refused to recognize the men as U.S. soldiers and denied them any supplies whatsoever.

Race prejudice even extended to the soldiers' paychecks. Aristide, like other African Americans in the U.S. Army, received \$10 per month which was \$3 less than white soldiers with the added humiliation of a \$3 deduction for uniforms. Finally, in June 1864, the government equalized the pay of white and black soldiers. The discrimination, danger, and hardships notwithstanding, Aristide faithfully performed his duties until

he was honorably discharged after three years of service on September 26, 1865 in New Orleans.<sup>42</sup>

When Aristide and his fellow Creoles took up arms in the U.S. military, they expected that they would achieve the revolutionary gains that republican forces had achieved in the 1848 French Revolution. At the outset of their military service in October 1862, François Boisdoré, their Creole spokesman, proclaimed their vision:

Brothers! The hour strikes for us: a new sun, like the one of 89 [1789 French Revolution], must soon appear on our horizon. Let the cry which electrified France in the taking of the Bastille resound today in our ears... Rise up, brothers, rise up therefore, in the majesty of principles which form the basis of true liberty... Cast a backward glance on the French Chamber in [18]48, while this noble France was a Republic: we see there these monumental geniuses, Dupont de l'Eure, Victor Hugo, Lamartine, Lamennais, and others... seated on the same bench, alongside [representatives of Martinique and Guadeloupe] Pory-Papy, Mazaline, Charles Dain, Louisy Mathieu [the first former slave elected to the National Assembly], Périnen, and other celebrated negroes [*sic*] and mulattoes, also representing their native country!... Nations of America! Whatever may be your system of government in the name of Christianity copy your fundamental principles from those of France and, like it, you will arrive at the apogee of civilization!<sup>43</sup>

Inspired by France's interracial republic, Aristide and his fellow men-at-arms had pressed forward for change on the battlefield. At the same time, their civilian allies had taken up the struggle on the home front. They achieved extraordinary gains.

In 1862, influential Creole New Orleanians Louis Charles Roudanez, Paul Trévigne, and their allies had announced their campaign to revolutionize race relations in their newly launched French-language newspaper, *L'Union*. The paper's contributors demanded slavery's abolition and insisted on voting rights for African Americans. When local officials undermined their suffrage campaign, they sent representatives to

<sup>39</sup> War Department, Record & Pension Division, November 12, 1896, in Pension Files of Aristide Desdunes, NA; McPherson, 383, 416.

<sup>40</sup> PAD Ledgers, vol. I, 137.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>42</sup> Hollandsworth, 42-45, 87; McPherson, 380-83.

<sup>43</sup> *L'Union*, October 18, 1862; Anna Brickhouse, "'L'Ouragan de Flammes' (The Hurricane of Flames): New Orleans and Transamerican Catastrophe, 1866/2005," *American Quarterly*, v. 59, no. 4 (December, 2007), 1108.

Washington to meet with President Abraham Lincoln in 1864 to urge him to extend voting rights to all men of African descent.

The city's Creole leadership envisioned the complete assimilation of African Americans into the nation's political, social, and economic life. To that end, the *Tribune*, *L'Union's* successor, also pressed for the settlement of freedmen on confiscated rebel lands. The former slaves, the *Tribune* insisted in 1864, "are entitled by a paramount right to the possession of the soil they have so long cultivated."<sup>44</sup>

At the outset of Congressional Reconstruction in 1867, the *Tribune* and its supporters called for voting rights, proportional representation in office holding, equal access to public accommodations, and land reform. Their aggressive stance and republican idealism ensured that Louisiana's 1868 constitution would be one of the Reconstruction South's most progressive blueprints for change. It required state officials to recognize, by oath, the equality of all men. It alone among Reconstruction constitutions explicitly required equal treatment in public accommodations including equal access to public schools.

The chances for meaningful change suffered a devastating setback when a white Republican conservative, Henry Clay Warmoth, won the 1868 gubernatorial election. Warmoth stymied civil rights legislation, opposed enforcement of the constitution's equal accommodations provision, appointed white Democrats to political office, and resisted desegregation of the public schools.

Warmoth's opposition to school desegregation notwithstanding, the teachers and former students of the Couvent school played a leading role in pressuring the administration to open the public school system to every New Orleans child. By 1874, hundreds of black and white schoolchildren attended approximately nineteen racially mixed schools. No other school system in the South achieved the public school ideal of equal access to education for all children. Tragically, however, school desegregation ended with Reconstruction's collapse in 1877 when U.S. troops were withdrawn from the South. In the absence of Federal authority in New Orleans, conservative Democrats moved immediately to segregate the city's public schools.<sup>45</sup>

During the postwar years, Aristide resumed his prewar occupation as a carpenter. In his spare time, he continued writing and in 1866 he began transcribing his own literary works as well as those of his intellectual

peers and predecessors. Aristide entitled the first of two handwritten volumes of approximately five hundred pages of text "*Recueil de R-Poésies et de Proses, De 1866-1889*" ("Collection of Selected Poems and Prose, From 1866 to 1889"). However, he continued transcribing correspondence, literary works, and other materials until 1894.

In volume one, he began by transcribing all but four of the poems published in Armand Lanusse's *Les Cenelles*. The missing poems include Lanusse's dedication, "*Au Beau Sexe Louisianais*" ("To Louisiana's Fair Sex"); two poems by B. Valcour, "*Épître à Constant Lépozé*" ("*Letter to Constant Lépozé*") and "*À Malvina*" ("To Malvina"); and Victor Séjour's poem "*Le retour de Napoléon*" ("Napoleon's Return").

The omission of B. Valcour's two poems was an oversight; they are listed in Aristide's table of contents. As for Lanusse's one stanza dedication, he apparently felt that it did not rise to the level of a fully developed poem. Séjour's paean to Napoleon Bonaparte was more problematic. Séjour's extraordinary success in the French theater was an enormous source of pride for Creole New Orleanians. But Aristide's thorough knowledge of French and Caribbean history unquestionably made him well aware of Bonaparte's attempt to crush the Haitian Revolution and restore slavery in the rebellious French colony. For this reason, perhaps, Aristide could not bring himself to include Séjour's poem in his transcriptions.<sup>46</sup>

Immediately following the *Les Cenelles* transcriptions, Aristide included eight poems by Victor-Ernest Rillieux beginning with "*Le Berceau et la Tombe*" ("The Cradle and the Grave"). The poem, as Aristide explains, was "a sincere testimonial of condolences that a childhood friend addressed to me on the occasion of my father's death." Pierre-Jérémie Desdunes died on October 20, 1894, and Rillieux completed the poem the next day. He had been moved to write the piece, he explained, when he received an invitation to a baptism at the same time that he learned of the death of "Monsieur Jérémie Desdunes."<sup>47</sup>

Aristide and Rillieux were born within a year of one another and remained close friends throughout their lives. Tragically, Rillieux, like Aristide's brother Rodolphe, suffered deteriorating eyesight and died

<sup>46</sup> PAD Ledgers, vol. I, 17-103; Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 215; For insight into Séjour's extraordinary success, see Victor Séjour, *The Jew of Seville*, Norman R. Shapiro, trans. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), xv-xvi.

<sup>47</sup> PAD Ledgers, vol. I, 103; Louisiana Vital Records, Orleans Parish Death Records, vol. 109, 510.

<sup>44</sup> Bell, "Haitian Immigration," 16-18.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*; Logsdon & Devore, *Crescent City Schools*, 42, 81-89.

nearly blind on December 5, 1898. But, like Rodolphe, he remained politically active and prevailed over his disability to become one of Louisiana's most prolific French-language literary artists, though few of his works have survived.<sup>48</sup>

After entering Rillieux's poems into his manuscript, Aristide set about transcribing his own voluminous collection of poetry. In his preface, "*Clémence et indulgence*" ("Mercy and Forbearance"), he begged his reader's indulgence and described his work as the "meager result of a poor and uncultivated imagination, and of the flow of events that a youth encounters on his passage." He modestly insisted: "In placing myself alongside my literary predecessors, it is without any intention of winning praise for myself, and still much less the admiration of readers." The facts tell an entirely different story.<sup>49</sup>

In France, Romanticism came under increasing attack after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 when the political right blamed its influence for the nation's defeat. In Haiti and Louisiana, however, the movement enjoyed a second flowering. In New Orleans, Aristide and Rodolphe Desdunes and Victor Ernest Rillieux helped insure Romanticism's vitality in the post-Civil War era. Like Romantic writers in Haiti and France, they considered their work a means of preserving resources that would serve their community and their country in the future. A knowledge of past events, they believed, would lead individuals to make decisions that would contribute to everyone's well being; as Haitian writer Beaubrun Ardouin, Coriolan's brother, observed, "the past is the regulator of the present as of the future."<sup>50</sup>

In this view, the writer's object was to inspire future generations by educating them to the deeds of their predecessors. It is in this Romantic spirit that Aristide transcribed *Les Cenelles*, the poetry of Rillieux, and his own works. The same logic led his brother Rodolphe to translate excerpts of Joseph Saint-Rémy's five volume work *Pétion et Haïti* for serial publication in the New Orleans *Daily Crusader* from July through October 1895. Like Haitian Romantics, Rodolphe and Aristide revered Pétion for his military prowess in the Haitian Revolution, his popular

republican presidency, his abolition of forced labor, his transfer of confiscated plantations to freedmen, and his active support of international abolitionism.<sup>51</sup>

In the tradition of highly politicized Romantic historians like Haiti's Joseph Saint-Rémy and France's Jules Michelet, Rodolphe later authored his own historical tribute. His book, *Nos Hommes et Notre Histoire (Our People and Our History)*, published in Canada in 1911, documented the history of the city's French-speaking Creoles of color in their struggle for freedom. At the time of its publication, it was the only historical study of the city's francophone population of color authored by a member of the community. It remains a starting point for studies of the nineteenth century Creole population.<sup>52</sup>

For Aristide, Rodolphe, and other Louisiana and Haitian intellectuals, the achievements of their fellow Creoles as recounted in their histories, literary works, and commentary also served to refute the nineteenth century racist theories of Count Arthur de Gobineau and the Social Darwinists. In an essay written in 1888, Aristide echoed the work of Haitian anthropologist Anténor Firmin. In 1885, Firmin's treatise *De l'Égalité des Races Humaines (On the Equality of the Human Races)* rebutted Gobineau's racist *Essai sur L'Inégalité des Races Humaines (Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races)*, a multivolume work published between 1853 and 1855).<sup>53</sup>

Aristide emphasized some of the main points raised by Firmin in responding to a series of white supremacist articles authored by French writer Charles Canivet and published in France in 1888 in the newspaper *Le Soleil (The Sun)*. He disputed the theories of Social Darwinists, defended African peoples against the charge of inferiority, and attacked the notion that the achievements of men like Haitian leader Alexandre Pétion and Romantic writer Alexandre Dumas resulted from the "white blood which flowed in their veins."

<sup>51</sup> Eric Foner, *Nothing But Freedom: Emancipation and Its Legacy* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1983) 11-12; Nicholls, 46-47. For an excellent description of the *Crusader* clippings in a scrapbook at Xavier University, New Orleans, see Lester Sullivan, "The Unknown Rodolphe Desdunes: Writings in the New Orleans *Crusader*," *Xavier Review*, issue 10 (1990), 1-17.

<sup>52</sup> Breckman, *European Romanticism*, 36; Roussève, *The Negro in Louisiana*, 155.

<sup>53</sup> Nicholls, *From Dessalines*, 93; Anténor Firmin, *The Equality of the Human Races*, trans. Asselin Charles (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000), xii-xiii

<sup>48</sup> Ruby Van Allen Caulfeild, *The French Literature of Louisiana* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 1998), 255; Desdunes, *Our People*, 59; Bell, *Revolution*, 278-79.

<sup>49</sup> PAD Ledgers, vol. I, 113;

<sup>50</sup> Bowman, "The Specificity of French Romanticism," 76; Pompilus, *Manuel Illustré*, 98; Nicholls, *From Dessalines*, 90-93.

In his article, Canivet charged that, “All the blacks who come here to undertake or complete their studies in Paris retain among themselves the same vices and defects of their race. It is an indelible defect.” Aristide summed up his critique in the title of his commentary. Insofar as he was concerned, the only “indelible defect,” was “*La Tare indélébile de Mr. Charles Canivet*” (“*The Indelible Defect of Mr. Charles Canivet*”).<sup>54</sup>

As their work indicates, Aristide and Rodolphe, like French historian Jules Michelet, recognized the power of history in the struggle for freedom and equality. In discussing his passion for recreating the past, Michelet, an ardent republican, explained that history writing sustained the living as well as the dead: “I have exhumed them [the dead] for a second life... Thus a family is formed, a common city between the living and the dead.” In Louisiana, France, and throughout the Atlantic world, Romantic activists gave this idea powerful expression in the practice of spiritualism.<sup>55</sup>

At spiritualist séances, influential Creole mediums like Aristide’s revered mentor Joanni Questy engaged in a highly politicized religion of social action that transcended the boundaries of death and racial division. Their spirit communications instructed believers in the path to a future millennium of universal brotherhood and political republicanism. The Creole medium J.B. Valmour attracted an interracial following for his spiritual healing. His following included Northern admirers and French mesmerists. Antebellum New Orleans acquired a national reputation as a spiritualist stronghold.

In the postwar era, some of the city’s most important Creole leaders including Henry and Octave Rey, François and Auguste Dubuclet, Victor Lavigne, Aristide Mary, and Rodolphe Desdunes, practiced spiritualism. Aristide’s poem “*Les Vivants et les Morts*” (“The Living and the Dead”) leaves little doubt that like his brother and friends he was involved in the movement as well. In the piece, the spirits of the dead reassure the living:

We entrust to the sepulchers,  
Only our heavy shrouds;  
We have neither bodies nor shapes,  
And we seek nothing from you.

Our existence is immaterial.  
Invisible without concealing ourselves,

We pass silently  
All around you, without touching you!<sup>56</sup>

As Aristide’s poem indicates, the spirits of the dead were ever present. At spiritualist séances, deceased members of the community transmitted their superior otherworldly intelligence to relatives and friends through the person of the medium. Since such communications were considered sacred texts, participants carefully transcribed them into hardcover books. Thus was preserved, in yet another inspirational form, the Creole community’s collective memory in a mode of history writing that “exhumed” the deceased for a “second Life” to create a “common city between the living and the dead.”<sup>57</sup>

Aristide’s personal life took a happy turn on August 25, 1873, when he married Louise Mathilde Denebourg. His new wife was born on a small, remote St. Charles Parish farm. The isolation of her Catholic family was such that the infant girl, an only child, was baptized by a French priest from New Orleans making his yearly rounds. In the baptismal ceremony, Saint Domingue immigrant Annette “*Petit*” Bourry served as the baby’s *marraine* (godmother).

Tragically, Denebourg’s mother died when she was only five months old. Owing to the death of her mother and the death, prior to the Civil War, of the French priest who baptized her, Denebourg possessed no record of her birth. On the basis of other documentary evidence, however, it appears that she was born free in 1846. After her marriage to Aristide, she returned to her birthplace in St. Charles Parish only once to find that “everyone white and colored who were living when I was born are all dead.”<sup>58</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Bell, *Revolution*, 197, 263-64, 208-215; PAD Ledgers, vol. I, 140-41.

Interestingly, German literary scholar Janheinz Jahn singled out this poem as an example of a neo-African literary work in which the author introduces a traditional West African sensibility. The vibrancy of West African religious retentions in nineteenth century New Orleans unquestionably proved hospitable to spiritualism’s emphasis on spiritual healing, herbal medicines, spirit possession, and an egalitarian religious ethnic. Given the city’s religious culture, Jahn’s observation merits further study. See Janheinz Jahn, *A History of Neo-African Literature: Writing in Two Continents*, trans. Oliver Coburn & Ursula Lehrburger (London: Faber & Faber Limited, 1968), 133-34.

<sup>57</sup> Bell, *Revolution*, 187, 210, 217.

<sup>58</sup> Notarized Pension Declarations, July 25, November 12, 1918, in Pension Files P.A. Desdunes, NA.

<sup>54</sup> PAD Ledgers, vol. I, 167-68, 174.

<sup>55</sup> Breckman, *European Romanticism*, 189.

Nothing in her background could have prepared Denebourg for the world into which she entered when she married Aristide. In striking contrast to her experience as a motherless only child on a remote Louisiana farm, her marriage drew her into the orbit of a large, highly politicized and close-knit family circle at the center of a thriving, cosmopolitan and activist Afro-Creole community. Her well-educated and compassionate husband helped to ease her transition and she became “well and intimately acquainted” with the Desdunes family in a close marriage partnership that lasted forty-five years. The couple had no children.<sup>59</sup>

Up to the end of his life, Aristide’s devotion to his wife’s well-being is clear. In 1918, less the two months before his death on July 19, he wrote to the U.S. Pension Bureau explaining that he was well aware of the “difficulties many widows have experienced in their claim for pension.” To ensure that his wife received the government benefits to which she was entitled, he submitted a sworn statement reiterating the details of his military record and marriage and assured the pension agent that he felt “safe in saying that only death will part us.” Owing to his efforts, Louise Mathilde received her monthly pension up to the time of her death in 1936.<sup>60</sup>

By 1880, the Couvent school had fallen into almost complete ruin as a result of the Civil War, the desegregation of the city’s tuition-free public schools during Reconstruction, and administrative neglect. In response, Aristide’s *L’Union Louisianaise*, a Creole organization whose membership included Rodolphe, Paul Trévine, Arthur Estèves, and Louis A. Martinet, acquired the authority in 1884 to restore the institute to its prewar role as a tuition-free school for indigent orphans. For president of the school’s board of directors, the men chose Estèves, a native-born Haitian with a highly successful sailmaking business. Together with Martinet, the school’s legal advisor, Aristide and Rodolphe played key roles in the restoration project as members of the board of directors. Upon completion of the renovation, Rodolphe taught at the school.

Within a few years, Aristide was soliciting contributions for the publication of a French-language journal reflecting the interests of *L’Union Louisianaise*’s membership and bearing the name of the organization. The publication’s 1887 prospectus assured its readers of its “*républicain*” credentials and explained that its “efforts will always be

directed toward reclaiming the privileges which follow from our participation as members of the great human family in the moral and intellectual development of all classes of society.” The editorial committee also explained that they had secured “the services of foreign correspondents—especially a Haitian correspondent—which undoubtedly offers a guarantee of the success of our enterprise.”<sup>61</sup>

Soon after announcing their publication’s debut, however, a mounting white supremacist campaign to legally nullify the intent of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments persuaded Aristide and the other members of *L’Union Louisianaise* to redraw their plans. He and his fellow activists soon joined forces in a legal struggle against state-enforced segregation that would have enormous repercussions.

In early March 1889, *L’Union Louisianaise* member Louis A. Martinet launched the New Orleans *Crusader*, a weekly newspaper. In the tradition of its predecessors, *L’Union* and the *Tribune*, the *Crusader* served as the public platform for an aggressive new civil rights campaign. By the end of its first year, the paper boasted an office in the heart of the French Quarter and an electric-powered printing press. With the support of black New Orleanians, the paper would evolve in the 1890s into the only African American daily newspaper in the United States.

At the outset, the *Crusader* expressed concern for a topic near and dear to Aristide’s heart, the subject of workers’ rights:

We shall pay much attention to industrial and economic questions...and particularly shall we devote space to questions of labor. Our special aim, in fact, shall be to make a great Republican-Labor organ through which the working classes can at all times be heard and have their grievances made known and their wrongs righted.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Editorial Committee, *Prospectus* (September 15, 1887); Desdunes, *Our People*, 101n3, 107-108; “History of the Catholic Indigent Orphans’ Institute” (Typescript, Marcus B. Christian Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans).

<sup>62</sup> Logsdon with Powell, “Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes,” 52-53, 65n30; Joseph Logsdon & Caryn Cossé Bell, “The Americanization of Black New Orleans, 1850-1900” in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, eds. Arnold R. Hirsch & Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1992), 256. For Aristide’s interest in workers’ rights, see his essay “Réponse à Mr. P. Trévine Apropos de la Grève de 1877,” August 4, 1877, PAD Ledgers, v. 2, 64-70.

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, July 25, 1918.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, June 1, 1918.

The English-language paper included a French page edited by Paul Trévigne “for the benefit of our large number of readers who have retained the love of their mother tongue.” Trévigne had edited both *L’Union* and the *Tribune* and, in the few clippings and issues of the *Crusader* that have survived, Aristide’s prominent association with the newspaper is clear. In such circumstances, it appears highly likely that his poetry and commentary appeared alongside the published works of Rodolphe, Victor Rillieux, and other Creole literary artists in the newspaper’s French-language section.<sup>63</sup>

Just as Aristide and his allies had feared, the Louisiana state legislature passed an 1890 law mandating the segregation of the state’s railway cars. On July 10, Louisiana governor Francis T. Nicholls signed the separate car act into law. In response, Aristide issued a July rallying cry that would surely have appeared in the *Crusader*:

Remember fellow citizens that it is harmony that gives rise to the infinite; that it is discord that causes the downfall of the great. Scorn the putrid morass of prejudice. Draw together more closely than ever under the folds of the flag of Fraternity. The first duty of all oppressed Louisianians who call themselves patriots is to preach union. If our young people of letters are afraid of sparking debate, let the old guard come to the fore. My goodness! There are many of these pioneers among us who are well prepared to meet the challenge.<sup>64</sup>

On September 1, 1891, Martinet, Rodolphe Desdunes, and Estèves and fifteen other community activists established the *Comité des Citoyens* (Citizens’ Committee) to fight the new segregation law. Throughout the organization’s history, Aristide remained a committed supporter who would take his turn as a member of the tightly knit group. Within a week of its creation, the committee issued an appeal “to the citizens of New Orleans, of Louisiana, and of the whole Union to give us their moral

sanction and financial aid in our endeavors to have that oppressive [separate car] law annulled by the courts.”<sup>65</sup>

The committee recruited Homer Adolphe Plessy, a Creole descendant of the Haitian refugee population. The committee arranged for Plessy to board the East Louisiana Railroad train bound for Covington from New Orleans. On June 7, 1892, as they anticipated, he was arrested when he took a seat in the white railway car and refused to move to the segregated coach. As the case made its way to the nation’s highest court, the 1892 election of Democratic president Grover Cleveland and the increasing number of conservative Supreme Court appointees boded ill for a favorable decision. Discouraged at these developments and outraged at the increasing lynchings and other acts of violence targeting African Americans, Martinet exclaimed: “Let us get out of this hell of the United States.”<sup>66</sup>

Aristide shared Martinet’s anger and frustration. In “*Ressentiment d’un être sans patrie! Rêve*” (“Resentment From a Being Without a Country!: Meditation”), he expressed his disillusionment. His eloquent response was inspired by a visit to the Place de la République, a square in Paris dedicated to the First (1792-1804), Second (1848-1852), and Third (1870-1940) French Republics. The square’s awe-inspiring monument was commissioned by the political radicals who won control of the Parisian city council in 1878. The enormous bronze statue of Marianne, the allegorical emblem of the French Republic, resting atop the square’s pedestal wears the Phrygian cap of liberty and cradles the “Rights of Man” in her left arm. Aristide visited the edifice at some point after its completion in 1883.

On the beautiful Parisian day of his visit, he was deeply moved by the scene at the square. In the poem, he describes a child pointing to the monument’s bas-reliefs, twelve brass plaques that depict the history of the Republic from 1789 to 1880. When the boy asks his mother, “What are all those, Mamma?” Aristide sets forth her reply and the manner of her explanation:

And, there are your thinkers whose sheaves have  
ripened

<sup>63</sup> Logsdon with Powell, “Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes,” 65n30. Also see 63n13 for the fate of at least one complete file of the *Crusader*. They describe how A.P. Tureaud attempted to recover Louis A Martinet’s *Crusader* collection in the 1920s only to learn that Martinet’s wife had sold them to a junk dealer as scrap material; Frans C. Amelinckx, “Forgotten People, Forgotten Literature: The Case of Creole Authors of Color,” *Louisiana Literature*, v. 11, no. 2 (Fall 1994), 50.

<sup>64</sup> Logsdon with Powell, “Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes,” 53-54; PAD Ledgers, July 1890, v. 1, 126.

<sup>65</sup> Logsdon with Powell, “Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes,” 55, 67n29-30.

<sup>66</sup> Plessy’s name on his birth record is Homere Patris Plessy. For his fascinating background, see Keith Weldon Medley, *We as Freeman: Plessy v. Ferguson* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, Inc., 2003), 20-25; Logsdon with Powell, “Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes,” 58.



In the furrows of the world, and these beardless  
 heroes  
 Whose names, Oh France, your bards have  
 celebrated;  
 Those who under the murderous fire of the canons,  
 Of your [17] 89 scattered the seeds;  
 That spread through Europe....

In her touching, sweet, and melodious voice,  
 The mother interpreted the gleaming images,  
 Simply, and imparted to the dear one's heart  
 The pride of the French name, the love of Country!

And then, Aristide, having fought for his own country, expressed his  
 disillusionment:

No one esteems an ungrateful people who through  
 neglect  
 Abandon to the abyss those who have ennobled  
 them!  
 Courage, Oh forsaken ones! Free your spirits  
 Of the deadening shackles whose wretched bonds  
 Yet obstruct your flight towards the azure heavens!  
 Cast off, Oh chrysalis, in a final thrust,  
 As you cast off your chains in heroic times,  
 The foolish tatters of fiendish prejudice!<sup>67</sup>

In that spirit, Aristide, Martinet, and their allies pressed on. Between  
 1892 and 1896, as their challenge to segregation made its way through the  
 courts, the Citizens' Committee also attacked the practice of barring  
 African Americans from sitting on criminal juries. They fought efforts to  
 disfranchise black voters, advocated workers' rights to unionize, and  
 reported instances of police brutality, forced labor, and lynching in the  
*Crusader*.<sup>68</sup>

By 1895, however, a financial shortfall threatened the newspaper's  
 survival. Aristide and six other members of the *Cercle de la Concorde*  
 (Circle of Harmony), a Creole socio-political organization, responded by

organizing a committee that called for a special meeting at Perseverance  
 Hall for June 30. The men proposed to solicit funds from the society's  
 general membership to ensure the newspaper's survival. In an article  
 entitled "*Aide À Notre Organe*" ("Aid to our Organ"), the men explained  
 their actions:

For seven years these compatriots [the *Crusader's*  
 staff] have assiduously given all of their intelligence, all  
 of their foresight as well as all of their vigilance in  
 support of a noble and enlightened patriotism. We must  
 give our willing cooperation to their work which, were it  
 to be discontinued, would be seriously detrimental to the  
 victories already accomplished against the caste laws  
 designed to oppress and dishonor us.<sup>69</sup>

At the June 30 meeting, Aristide read the resolutions:

Whereas the safeguarding of liberty rests on  
 intelligence and patriotism in an environment where a  
 pernicious doctrine contrary to the rights of man reigns,  
 and whereas the most appropriate means in defense of  
 our well being is the press, the following plan is  
 submitted to you for your approval:

In consequence of these considerations, we the  
 undersigned, assembled at this time, in this hall, in the  
 name of justice and tranquility and that of the great and  
 essential principles of liberty, especially the hallowed  
 philosophy which declares that all men are born equally  
 free and independent, and that all have certain inherent  
 and inalienable rights,...we pledge to pay the sum of  
 \$2.60 by each individual...to be applied to the aid and  
 upkeep of the *Daily Crusader*.<sup>70</sup>

The *Cercle de la Concorde's* members unanimously approved the  
 resolutions. Aristide's efforts in behalf of the newspaper had helped stave  
 off economic ruin, but on the following day, July 1, shortly after he  
 delivered the funds to the *Crusader's* office, he fell seriously ill. The  
 newspaper reported his convalescence at the end of the month but he had

<sup>67</sup> PAD Ledgers, v. 1, 131-32.

<sup>68</sup> Logsdon with Powell, "Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes," 53, 57; *Crusader*,  
 December 17, 1892, May 21, 30, 1895.

<sup>69</sup> *Crusader*, June 22, 1895.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, July 2, 1895.

apparently suffered one of the first attacks of a protracted illness that would eventually take his life.<sup>71</sup>

More bad news followed. On May 18, 1896, the Supreme Court upheld Louisiana's separate car law in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision on the basis of the "separate but equal" doctrine. The disastrous ruling sanctioned a system of state-enforced segregation that endured for over fifty additional years and eventually extended to nearly every facet of southern life. In compliance with the court's decision, Plessy pleaded guilty and paid a fine of twenty-five dollars. Soon afterwards, the Citizens' Committee disbanded and the *Crusader* ceased publication.<sup>72</sup>

The decision was a devastating blow. The bad news compounded the other hardships that Aristide and Louise Mathilde suffered during this period. When a social aid society to which Aristide belonged discovered the long-term nature of his incurable illness, its officers revoked his membership. In desperation, Louise Mathilde enrolled him in a "Street Society" under the pretense that he was twenty years younger. The society guaranteed burial costs if weekly fees were promptly paid and support from family and well-connected friends helped ease other concerns.

With Attorney Martinet's legal assistance, they navigated the U.S. government's bureaucratic requirements with relative ease and Aristide's military pension assured them of a steady income. In addition, Dr. Louis Charles Roudanez, whose celebrated father had published *L'Union* and the *Tribune*, assisted them with their medical needs. Finally, on July 19, 1918 at the age of seventy-four, Aristide succumbed to the long illness for which there had been "no hope for recovery." He died at his home where Dr. Roudanez noted the cause of death as a cerebral stroke. Louise Mathilde survived her husband by eighteen years. She preserved his manuscripts and before her death at the age of ninety on August 16, 1936, she ensured Aristide's legacy by entrusting his manuscripts to A.P. Tureaud. Attorney Tureaud proved a worthy champion of the civil rights legacy that Louise Mathilde's gift embodied.<sup>73</sup>

Born in 1899 soon after the *Plessy* decision, Tureaud embraced his Creole heritage. Like Aristide, he revered the literary works and political commentary that belied the notion of white supremacy. He studied the experiences of his nineteenth century predecessors who, like Aristide, aspired to revolutionize race relations in the Civil War and Reconstruction. After graduating from Howard University Law School, he set a course to give full meaning to the promise of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments.

Beginning in the 1920s, he worked with Thurgood Marshall and other members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People for nearly fifty years arguing over one hundred cases in state and Federal courts. Those cases represented all of the significant civil rights litigation in Louisiana—litigation that produced salary equalization for teachers, expanded voting rights, and the desegregation of public education, public buildings, buses, parks, and housing. Finally, in 1954 in his work with Marshall and the other members of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund to end racial segregation in *Brown v. the Board of Education*, Tureaud helped overturn the *Plessy* decision.

Both Aristide and Tureaud recognized the power of history to breathe "a second life" into the extraordinary lives of their civil rights predecessors. They both understood that in that way "a family is formed, a common city between the living and the dead." In their lives and in their legacies, they helped build a "common city"—a distinctly Creole "common city" with a history and a collective memory that moved the nation closer to an interracial democracy of freedom and equal citizenship.

In addition to opening a new chapter in the history of New Orleans, the Tureaud family's recovery of the Desdunes manuscripts has breathed "a second life" into Pierre-Aristide Desdunes. Among other equally important topics, Aristide's hundreds of pages of poetry, transcriptions, and personal commentary reveal the familial and intellectual links between New Orleans and Haiti, the personal experience of a young African American soldier in the Civil War, and the deep ideological ties that bound Aristide and his Creole allies to the revolutionary Atlantic's francophone world—ties that were central to the formulation of their nineteenth century civil rights movement. Whereas this study focused on Aristide's poetry and the major outlines of his life, further examination of his commentary and Victor Ernest Rillieux's transcribed poetry will yield

<sup>71</sup> *Crusader* clipping, July (?), 1895; Notarized Pension Declaration, July 25, 1918, in Pension Files of Aristide Desdune, NA.

<sup>72</sup> Bell, *Revolution*, 281.

<sup>73</sup> Notarized Pension Records, October 8, 1896, May 18, 1912, & July 25, 1918, & Death Certificates for Aristide & Louise Mathilde Desdunes in Pension Files of Aristide Desdunes, NA.

an even deeper understanding of *concitoyen* Pierre-Aristide Desdunes and the nineteenth century Creole world in which he lived.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Worthy, “The Travail and Triumph of a Southern Black Civil Rights Lawyer,” 2, 4, 21; Fairclough, *Race & Democracy*, 65-68; Author’s interview with A.P. Tureaud Jr., North Eastham, Massachusetts, August 16, 2006; For quote, see Breckman, *European Romanticism*, 189.