

# Economics and Authenticity: A Collision of Interpretations in Cane River National Heritage Area, Louisiana

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## Introduction

Melrose Plantation, a United States national historic landmark, is a focal point for cultural tourism in northern and central Louisiana (Figure 1). It is celebrated as a pre-Louisiana Purchase property, for the origins of Melrose may go back as far as 1796. In that year, legend has it that a freed slave of African descent named Marie-Thérèse Coincoin acquired the land grant for this property on behalf of her son, Louis Metoyer, who was then still a slave (Mills and Mills 1973:33–59). Louis Metoyer was a Creole of Color, which in central Louisiana refers to a distinct group of people of mixed European, Native American, and African ancestry. Cane River is home to the descendants of this original colonial-era community, and the Cane River Creoles, as they call themselves, are a vibrant group of people who have experienced a strong cultural revitalization over the last decade. In the Cane River region, Marie-Thérèse herself is considered a founding figure of exceptional—almost mythic—importance, and most members of the Creole community trace their genealogical ties back to Marie-Thérèse and her ten children by the Frenchman, Jean Claude Thomas Pierre Metoyer. Marie-Thérèse's prominence in popular culture is due in no small part to the fact that their descendants became one of the South's wealthiest antebellum families of African descent (Louisiana State Museum 2003). Her more global importance has been highlighted recently by the attention given Cane River and Marie-Thérèse by Oprah Winfrey and two contemporary novelists (Tademy 2001; Mills 2003).

For the last four years we have worked at Melrose and the other plantations of Marie-Thérèse and her family as part of a collaborative archaeological and archival project between Northwestern State University of Louisiana (NSU) and University College London (UCL). During these years we have lived very much in the shadow of Coincoin's legend (for the story

of the Maison de Marie-Thérèse, see MacDonald, Morgan, and Handley 2002/2003; MacDonald, Morgan, and Handley, in press; MacDonald et al., in press). Little by little our research has unraveled the links between traditional narratives and certainties about the history of these properties, forcing us, as academics, to refine our understanding of the plantation's develop-

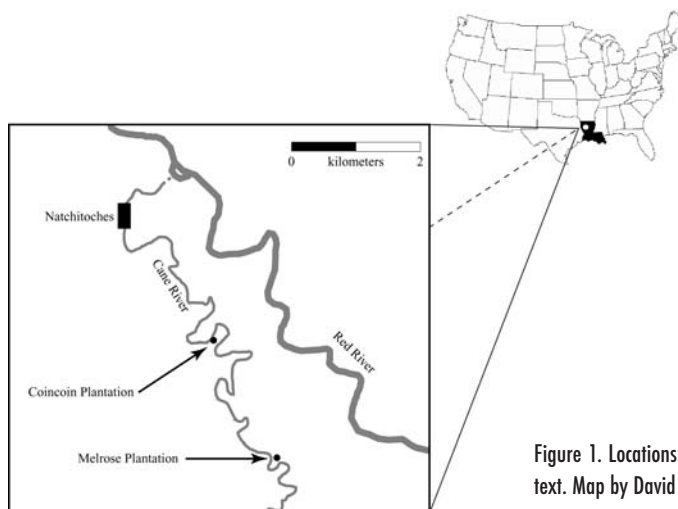


Figure 1. Locations of sites discussed in the text. Map by David Morgan.

ment. This has thrust us into a position we did not anticipate, in which our findings are sometimes welcomed, but sometimes are seen as contesting, contradicting, or denying accepted narrative “truths.”

There are three main parties who wish to stake a claim in the way in which Marie-Thérèse’s story is told. One, obviously, are the individuals who self-identify as Cane River Creoles. A second party is the Association for the Preservation of Historic Natchitoches (APHN), a not-for-profit preservation group composed mostly of affluent Anglo women who currently incorporate Marie-Thérèse and Creole heritage into their interpretation of Melrose Plantation. Lastly, there are the outside academics, represented by us, as well as members of the National Park Service’s Historic American Buildings Survey program and, over the years, an assortment of other social scientists.

In this paper we attempt to show how these three corporate voices come together to relate the tale of the Cane River Creoles. Sometimes the voices are harmonious,

sometimes they are discordant. As such our negotiations over the legend of Marie-Thérèse provide an interesting case study with which to illustrate the tenets of the third draft of the proposed Ename Charter for the Interpretation of Cultural Heritage Sites (see Silberman, this volume). Other similar charters have mentioned the need for sensitive, effective interpretation, but the Ename Charter, drafted under the auspices of ICOMOS, the International Council on Monuments and Sites, attempts to “define the basic objectives and principles of site interpretation in relation to authenticity, intellectual integrity, social responsibility, and respect for cultural significance and context” (ECPAHP 2005). It is particularly appropriate here, for it begins with the recognition that interpretation can be contentious and should acknowledge conflicting perspectives. As an international standard for all types of heritage sites, the charter is necessarily broad, but there are three principles that are especially appropriate to the case we present, because together they address the need for interpretation through

scholarly methods and through living cultural traditions, the need for authenticity, and the need for fiscal sustainability.

### APHN's Melrose Narrative

Melrose Plantation is the only publicly accessible cultural heritage site at which the history of Cane River Creoles is currently presented to the public. The APHN has owned the historic core of the plantation and acted as its steward for 34 years. The society's members obviously govern in a large measure how the tale of Marie-Thérèse and her family is interpreted there. Melrose, with its grand oaks and architecture, is certainly capable of attracting tourists for aesthetic reasons alone (Figure 2). The real marketing and advertising efforts of the APHN, however, are to convey Melrose as embodying the tale of three influential women: Marie-Thérèse Coincoin, Carmelite "Cammie" Henry, (the

Anglo owner responsible for Melrose's renaissance in the early twentieth century), and Clementine Hunter (the celebrated African-American artist who lived and worked at Melrose during the Cammie Henry era). The APHN's clear focus on strong-minded, independent women, two of whom were African American, is unusual, if not unique, in historic house interpretation in the southern U.S., and is an extremely important and valid interpretive approach.

The interpretive tour explaining these women's histories is based around five key "original" buildings. Three are of particular importance because they have been associated directly with the Marie-Thérèse legend:

- *Yucca House*. It is presented as being built around 1796, and legend has it that this was the original main house, built and lived in by Marie-Thérèse

Figure 2. Main house at Melrose Plantation. Photo by Jack Boucher, National Park Service, Historic American Buildings Survey.



(Figure 3).

- *Africa House*. It is also presented as being built around 1796 as a grain store, or, according to some accounts, a slave jail built in a Congolese style by Marie-Thérèse (Figure 4).
- *Ghana House*. A third supposedly original 1796 structure, this small cabin is reported to have been built in an architectural style reflecting Marie-Thérèse's African heritage (Figure 5).

The story of Marie-Thérèse is famous in Cane River country, and the APHN uses it to their advantage. For instance the Melrose Plantation tourist brochure (2002) proclaims, "The story of romantic Melrose Plantation begins with the legend of Marie Thérèse Coincoin." It is accurate advertising, for so too does a visitor's trip to the plantation. Special tour groups are sometimes greeted by Betty Metoyer, a descendent of Marie-Thérèse. Metoyer typically awaits her tour groups from the upstairs porch of the main house, dressed in period

costume, and from her dramatic perch delivers the story of Marie-Thérèse and the plantation's founding; she then sweeps downstairs and across the lawn to commence the heart of the tour at Yucca and Africa houses.

As another example, the APHN website's main page leads visitors to two tourism sites, one of which is Melrose. Each heritage site is linked to a text blurb intended to draw a reader into a closer inspection, and Melrose's lure is telling:

*"According to the tradition preserved by her descendants, Marie Therese Coincoin was the recipient of the grant of land known as Melrose Plantation."*

The legend of Marie Therese Coincoin is not just the story of a woman but the story of a family grounded in African tradition, mellowed by French culture, this family developed in the briefest span of years into one of the unique societies in American history, a culture so distinct, so close-knit, that they have always termed themselves

Figure 3. Yucca House at Melrose Plantation. Photo by Jack Boucher, National Park Service, Historic American Buildings Survey.







Figure 4. Africa House at Melrose Plantation. Photo by Philip Gould, reproduced with his permission and courtesy of the Cane River National Heritage Area.



Figure 5. Ghana House at Melrose Plantation. Photo by Jack Boucher, National Park Service, Historic American Buildings Survey.

“The People.” According to legend, it was here that the story began ....

By choosing and italicizing a quotation from the author François Mignon, whom we discuss below, and invoking the word “legend” twice in their explanatory text, the APHN brochure exploits the allure of the Marie-Thérèse mythos, while attempting to reinforce it using documented history. But, how academically reliable are the accounts they have chosen to use?

### **APHN and Melrose’s link to Marie-Thérèse**

Much of the legend of Marie-Thérèse told by the APHN at Melrose grew from Cammie Henry and the artists’ colony that she created around her in the early 1900s (Figure 6). It was one of the members of the Henry community, the self-styled Frenchman François Mignon (Figure 7), who did the most to embroider and popularize the tale of Marie-Thérèse, first as writer of a regionally syndicated column, “The Cane River Memo” (1961–1963) and then as author of a book on the topic (1972). He invented the name Yucca for the earliest plantation at the property, a name also applied to what is supposedly the original plantation home, and claimed that Marie-Thérèse, a free slave from the Congo, owned Yucca plantation from 1743 onwards and built Yucca and Africa House in 1750 (Mignon 1972:1–2). Mignon (1972: 1–2) stated that Louis Metoyer inherited Yucca from his mother, and that Louis’ son built the main house in 1833, at which point Yucca House was turned into a home “for indigent slaves.” Mignon (1972:5, 30–31) also claimed that the two-story Africa House was “a replica of tribal houses on the Congo river in Africa” and that it

served simultaneously as both a jail for Coincoin’s recalcitrant slaves and as a store-room.

Local folk historian Louis Nardini scornfully disputed Mignon’s claims that same year. Nardini (1972) asserted that Coincoin never owned Melrose; did not build Yucca, Africa, or Ghana houses; and lived in her own plantation at Cedar Bend until at least 1816. That her son alone was involved with the construction of Yucca—and much later than had previously been believed—became a point of heated debate, particularly as the dialogue took place in the pages of the local newspaper.

Figure 6. Folklorist Lyle Saxon and Cammie Henry at Melrose Plantation. Cammie G. Henry Research Center Collections, Lyle Saxon Album, #014pl., Northwestern State University, Louisiana.





Figure 7. François Mignon. Cammie G. Henry Research Center Collections, Mignon Collection, #105-22, Northwestern State University, Louisiana.

The next year, amid growing controversy, the APHN hired the historians Gary Mills and Elizabeth Mills to write a proper account of the origins of Melrose plantation (1973). It later developed into the book *The Forgotten People* (Mills 1977) that now defines the conventional story of Melrose's origins. The Mills, with solid archival evidence, laid aside Mignon's claim for the 1750 establishment of the plantation. They focused instead on a Melrose property dispute that raged in 1806–1807. Louis Metoyer, Marie-Thérèse's son, filed claim to what is now Melrose in 1806. Sylvestre Bossier, the original 1789 grantee, contested the claim. Louis Metoyer rebutted that Bossier's right to the land had lapsed, since he had not made the required land improvements, and that the land had then been deeded to him in 1796. Louis ultimately won. In hindsight the Mills saw one flaw in Louis Metoyer's story: he was legally a slave until May 1802, and slaves could not be deeded land. To bridge this logical gap, the Mills (1973:41) echoed Mignon by assert-

ing that Marie-Thérèse acquired the land in 1796 for her son and settled in Yucca House as the plantation matriarch.

### Cane River Creoles and Melrose's link to Marie-Thérèse

The story is intriguing, and relatively uncomplicated, when told from only the APHN's perspective. The issue of telling the Marie-Thérèse tale at Melrose gets more complex when one listens to the second voice: that of the Cane River Creoles themselves. For many years the Creoles on Cane River were aware of the narrative related at Melrose, but were content to shrug it off as "somebody else trying to tell what we already know" (J. Colson, director, Creole Heritage Center, personal communication, 17 May 2005). As the Cane River Creoles became more invested in revitalization, they began to ask questions. Why should the largely Anglo members of the APHN tell their version of our story for the benefit of their organization? More to the point, why are they telling our story inaccurately? That query was the most problematic, for most Creoles believe that Marie-Thérèse was not as firmly connected to Melrose as the APHN claims. The Creoles, moreover, knew exactly where on the landscape Marie-Thérèse's story *should* be situated: a private residence several miles upriver.

According to the Cane River Creoles, what remains of Marie-Thérèse's home is a pink-painted, cypress-clad residence on a piece of property encompassing a portion of the 68-acre land grant given to Marie-Thérèse in 1786, when her long-term relationship with Jean Claude Thomas Pierre Metoyer ended (Figure 8). For many years it was generally accepted by the Creoles that the extant house on this property (known as the Coincoin-Prudhomme House) was the





Figure 8. The Coincoin-Prudhomme House on the Whittington Archaeological Site (16NA591). Photo by David Morgan.

original and only dwelling associated with Marie-Thérèse (Shaw 1983:6). This claim actually had more documentary backing than the Mills' Melrose claim, as there is a tax map of 1794 that depicts the “*maison de Marie-Thérèse negresse libre,*” which is shown as occupying almost the exact spot as the standing structure. On the basis of the map and the discovery of 1700s French pottery in the home owner's flowerbed, the structure was placed on the National Register as the home of Marie-Thérèse and subsequently featured in *African American Historic Places* (Savage 1994).

As far as the Creoles were concerned, the location of Marie-Thérèse's home was known to them, it was not Melrose, and the debate thus centered on issues of cultural appropriation. Who has the right to tell this story? They also began turning their attention to the dilemma of using this house—well-known among the Creoles—as a vehi-

cle for reclaiming the Marie-Thérèse story. One possible solution a member of the Creole community broached with us was to possibly rehabilitate the structure into a bed and breakfast into which a museum display could be incorporated.

### The academic voice on Melrose

At this point let us introduce the third perspective on Creole heritage sites: the academics'. Since 2001 we have actively been re-examining the archival documents, oral traditions, and material culture at Melrose Plantation and the Coincoin-Prudhomme property in hopes of learning about the material culture process of creolization. Our work has particularly sought to elucidate the role Africans and Native Americans played in the development of Cane River during the colonial and antebellum periods.

Turning first to Melrose, we found the



claims of APHN to be overstated, to say the least. The Millses' hypothesis that Marie-Thérèse founded and managed the plantation at Yucca House did not make much logical sense since Bossier's challenge to the land claim would have been directed at Marie-Thérèse, not her enslaved son, and the specter of Louis' legal rights as a slave would never have been raised. Thus the association of Marie-Thérèse with Melrose is founded upon gaps in the documentary record, rather than any actual written proof of her presence. Furthermore, as Nardini (1972) already indicated, the documents that do exist place Marie-Thérèse on her own plantation in 1816.

Other academics found little veracity in the supporting myth that Ghana House and Africa House are examples of architecture inspired by Marie-Thérèse's African experience. For one thing, it is uncertain whether Marie-Thérèse was born in Louisiana or Africa. For another, the African influence on the houses is a notion that does not hold up under close scrutiny. Ghana House is a simple log cabin, like many others along Cane River in the nineteenth century, and several local informants have told us that it was re-located from another property along the river by Cammie Henry in the 1920s. More attention has been given to Africa House. In a recent study of Creole building practice, Edwards (2002:66) argues persuasively that "nothing about this building can be directly related to African tradition. The builders of Africa House employed no customary African methods or design principles, but rather those of France." He goes on to supply illustrations of French farm structures closely resembling Africa House (see Figure 44 in Edwards 2002).

Our initial findings and Edwards'

architectural conclusions cast doubt on many of the "factual" constructs placing Marie-Thérèse at Melrose as its matriarch. The archaeology we subsequently conducted in tandem with our documentary work shed further light on the plantation's enigmatic founding at Yucca House. Without going into the details, which are published elsewhere (MacDonald et al., in press), a circa 1810 or later initial occupation date for Yucca House seems reasonable based on the associated material culture. Louis could not have built this structure in 1796. As if this were not enough, the artifacts are supported by three recently discovered survey documents held in the Louisiana State Land Office (MacDonald et al., in press). These three show, without doubt, that Louis' dwelling in 1814 was not Yucca House, and it is probable that Yucca House had not yet even been built, as it is unmarked and unreferenced on these maps. Indeed, Louis' residence, which was used as a reference mark, was not even on the same side of the river as Yucca House is today.

It is apparent that François Mignon, the local writer-in-residence at Melrose in the mid-1900s, created the backbone of the increasingly dubious Melrose legend. The irony is that Mignon's biggest myth was in fact himself. Rather than being French, as he intimated, Mignon was actually born in Cortland, New York, as Frank VerNooy Mineah (Cammie G. Henry Research Center 2004). Mineah, a long-term guest of Cammie Henry's at the plantation, invented Melrose as the point of origin for Creole culture by associating it with the story of Marie-Thérèse. Thus, by rewriting local history Mignon secured both the importance of his adopted home and made himself the indispensable gatekeeper of knowl-

edge about the Creoles and Melrose (Figure 9). In short, Marie-Thérèse has become firmly associated with the story of Melrose Plantation's origins on the basis of no positive evidence and in the face of a significant amount of contrary evidence (MacDonald, Morgan, and Handley 2002/2003; MacDonald et al., in press).

### **The academic voice on the Coincoin-Prudhomme House**

After exploring Melrose, we turned our attention to the oral tradition of the Cane River Creoles, hoping it could lead us to the place where Marie-Thérèse lived her life. The Cane River Creoles really did not object to our findings at Melrose, because it strengthened their own convictions. This time, however, our archaeology was on ancestral turf, and by searching for trash deposits and slave homes at the Whitting-

ton site (16NA591) we again unwittingly entered into a debate on authenticity, especially regarding the Coincoin-Prudhomme House that the archaeological site surrounds. Conventional wisdom about the Coincoin-Prudhomme House's tie to the Creole ancestress was academically challenged for the first time immediately prior to our initial fieldwork in 2001, when work by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) of the National Park Service cast doubt on the age of the standing structure. The HABS team dated this Creole cottage to no earlier than the 1830s on the basis of nail chronology and a few stylistic features (National Park Service 2001).

Details of our work are published elsewhere (MacDonald, Morgan, and Handley 2002/2003; MacDonald et al., in press), so suffice it to say that copious earth moving on our part and re-inspection of excavations

**Figure 9.** François Mignon in Yucca House at Melrose Plantation. Cammie G. Henry Research Center Collections, Mignon Collection, #105-21, Northwestern State University, Louisiana.



from the 1970s failed to yield artifacts associated with the late 1700s or even the first decade or two of the 1800s, Marie-Thérèse's intensive plantation period, when she accumulated some 16 slaves. We ultimately began from scratch, georeferenced the original 1794 map, and discovered that the extant house's location and the location of the *maison* shown on the map were off by about 50 m. We redirected our investigations and, sure enough, some 50 m away, we found a cluster of artifacts typical of the late 1700s, as well as sub-surface features: the missing *maison de Marie-Thérèse*.

Stepping back, it was apparent that our work and HABS's severed the myth of Marie-Thérèse from the Coincoin-Prudhomme House, placing the latter firmly in the mid-1800s and associating it with a different family line entirely. That we went on to locate the vicinity where Marie-Thérèse's house actually stood probably was not much of a sop to the Cane River Creoles. Before our work they had something to look at, something to fire the imagination. We left them with an empty hay field owned, no less, by a non-Creole family.

### Melrose and the draft Ename Charter

Let us move now from the concrete to the more abstract in order to examine how this case study reflects key aspects of the draft Ename Charter. A core theme of the charter's provisions is how to ensure the authenticity of interpretation, when nationalism, economics, power dynamics, authority roles, and competing epistemologies all determine what we perceive and interpret as "true" and "accurate," a conundrum discussed in many of the academic disciplines comprising heritage resource management (e.g., Shanks and Tilley 1987; Greenfield

1989; Handler 1991; Greaves 1994; Díaz-Andreu and Champion 1996; Posey and Dutfield 1996; Haley and Wilcoxon 1997; Ziff and Rao 1997; Messenger 1999; Warren 1999; Whiteley 2002). In this case, we think our years of academic archival and archaeological investigations embrace the first component of Principle 2, which states interpretation should be "based on systematic and well-researched evidence gathered through accepted scientific methods." But what about the second component, which insists that evidence also should come from "traditional sources of living cultures"? The Millses' archival work overwrote in many respects the myths Mignon created from traditional stories and, presumably, a healthy dollop of his own imagination. But, are our findings also not a partial refutation of the knowledge carried by members of the Cane River Creole community and the APHN? We outside academics advocate that Melrose's development be reconsidered in light of our "expert" findings, along with the identity of the Coincoin-Prudhomme House, and that the interpretations of these properties be revised accordingly. Should our claims trump those of the Cane River Creoles or the APHN?

Turning from the academics' view to look at authenticity in another fashion, the Creoles assert that the APHN is picking and choosing select aspects of the Marie-Thérèse story to suit their own purposes, and thus tell an inauthentic story even as they appropriate it. Marie-Thérèse is referred to in the standard tour as an example of Melrose's female residents, even as a strong, independent African American woman, but not as the founder of what is an active, thriving Creole community. In a tour given in May 2005 by a member of the APHN, a Creole woman from Natchitoches

was rather dismayed to hear twice on the tour that the Cane River Creoles had been “wiped out by Jim Crow” (Michelle Pichon, personal communication, 17 May 2005). Will APHN’s tale be the accepted one, simply because it is repeated to the greatest number of people, far more than the numbers that make up the Creole community or who will thumb through academic books and journals?

Rather than enter discussions of who has the right to speak for whom, whose epistemology has greatest validity, and whether one historic narrative is more important than any other, the Ename Charter measures claims of legitimacy against the definition of “authenticity” the United Nations considered in its 1994 Nara Document. This definition recognizes that value judgments on cultural properties, as well as the credibility of pertinent information sources related to them, differ cross-culturally and sometimes intra-culturally, making it impossible to establish fixed criteria of legitimacy. Instead, heritage sites must be considered and judged within their own contexts. This is the tautology of relativism, apparently broken by the requirement of inclusivity woven through both the Nara and Ename documents. Alternate views must be heard, or, in the language of Principle 6 of the charter: “Interpretation of cultural heritage sites must actively involve the participation of all stakeholders and associated communities,” who must contribute to the planning process of the interpretive program and receive its benefits.

At this point it bears mentioning that we are in the enviable position where our academic information contests aspects of the APHN and the Cane River Creole’s information, while relations between these three corporate groups—Creoles, outside

academics, and the APHN—remain remarkably cordial considering the emotional and economic issues at stake. We have, for instance, worked closely with the APHN and the Louisiana Creole Heritage Center, an outreach and research unit housed at Northwestern State University of Louisiana, as well as with many individual representatives of the Creole heritage revitalization effort. Part of the reason for the amiability is that all of the parties involved share, at some level, a fundamental grounding in Western epistemologies, so the problematic fixed criteria of legitimacy discussed in the Ename Charter is less an issue here than in some other cultural contexts. Unlike traditional stakeholders contesting interpretation at other sites, we do not face the dilemma where one person’s body of proof simply does not exist as a conceptually valid measure of authenticity.

Accepting the value of the Creole traditional narrative as the Ename Charter advocates has not been difficult for those of us on the academic side of the table. We recognize the importance of oral tradition both for the sociohistorical data it contains and for its importance in the transmission of cultural values and knowledge, so the dialogue that develops from these personal interactions is akin to an information exchange between any set of researchers. The Creoles want to know what we have discovered that they either did not know, or to which they can contribute a personal or familial perspective. We want to know what personal or familial links we either will never find in the archival or archaeological records or will simply have overlooked because of our own cultural or methodological blinders. We are not in opposition because our work does not diminish the importance of their past or present, and



indeed only serves to highlight them in professional, national forums. As part of their desire to no longer be lost between the color lines, “the forgotten people” of America, as they are sometimes described (Mills 1977; Sarpy interview in Rodman 2005), seek knowledge and information about their past from whatever quarter it may derive, be it oral tradition or empirical testing.

Accommodating and presenting the traditional or academic narratives may not be quite as straightforward from the APHN perspective. By linking the Creoles to Marie-Thérèse and by linking Marie-Thérèse to Melrose, the Creoles’ heritage has become pivotal to the economic success of the heritage site and the area at large, a concept addressed by the Ename Charter’s fifth principle on economic sustainability. Central Louisiana is characterized by poverty, geographic isolation, and low taxation capacity. Heritage tourism is one of the few local industries that exists outside of lumber and agriculture. In a region with poverty levels nearly three times greater than the national average and with a median household income less than half that of the national average (Sims 2005:4), the ability of heritage tourism to generate tax dollars from outside visitors cannot be overstated.

A survey in 2003 of 399 heritage tourists in the Cane River National Heritage Area, which encompasses Melrose, indicated that 65% of the visitors to this area came from out of state and 4% were international visitors (Stynes and Sun 2004:5, Table 2). Of the 399 visitors, 74% of them stayed an average of 2.4 nights in the area (Stynes and Sun 2004:6, Table 3). This last figure is especially important, because Michigan State University researchers calculate that while the average day-trip travel party spends about \$100 on admissions, travel

costs, meals, and shopping, the average overnight travel party brings \$217 to \$466 dollars to the area, depending on whether or not they stay overnight in a hotel or a bed and breakfast (Stynes and Sun 2004:9, Table 13). Melrose is one of the major cultural tourism sites within the National Heritage Area and central Louisiana. Of these 399 sampled visitors, for instance, Melrose was the heritage site visited by the greatest number of people and was the heritage site of which visitors rated themselves most aware (Figures 10 and 11) (Stynes and Sun 2004:8, and Figure 2 therein). To put this in more concrete terms, last year Melrose brought to the parish 13,564 visitors, not counting those who attended various festivals and the annual Tour of Homes (Iris Harper, Natchitoches Tourist Commission, personal communication, 6 May 2005). At \$7 per adult and \$4 per child, these tourists represent a significant income stream for the APHN and a hefty contribution to the parish’s tax base. For example, in 2003 and 2004 Melrose brought in from admission fees an average of \$81,687, and visitors in the first four months of 2005 brought in \$32,028, an increase of 173% over the amount brought in on average from January to April in the prior two years (Sue Weaver, executive director, APHN, personal communication, 2 June 2005). Losing one of the three women who form the narrative sequence at Melrose could diminish the heritage site’s appeal to many tourists, hence creating a significant economic impact and threatening Melrose’s long-term sustainability.

Melrose is a contested location for more than economic reasons. What makes this particular situation unusual is that, although we academics have shed considerable doubt on the validity of the traditional

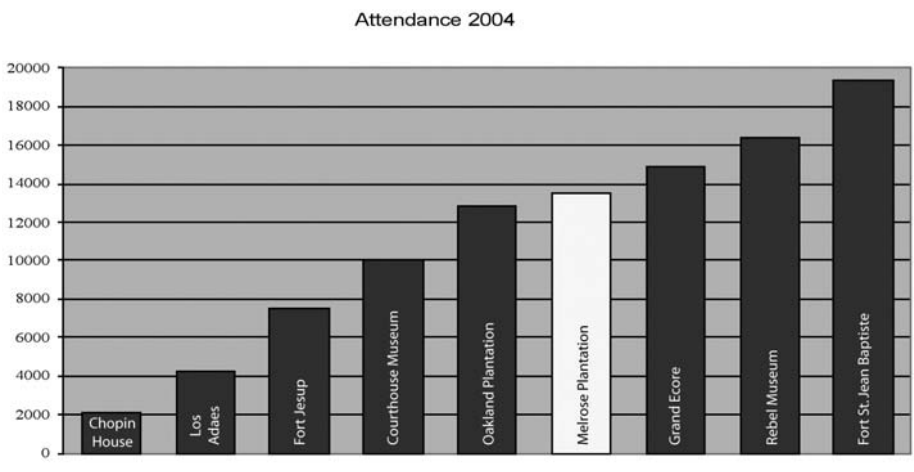


Figure 10. Visitor attendance at heritage tourism sites in Natchitoches Parish, 2004 (adapted from Figure 2 in Stynes and Sun 2004, 8).

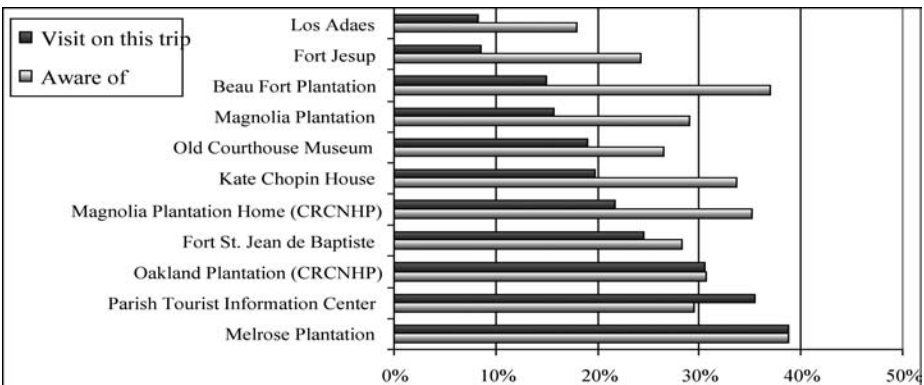


Figure 11. Visitor attendance at and awareness of Melrose Plantation (adapted from Figure 2 in Stynes and Sun 2004, 8).

Marie-Thérèse myth, and although the Creoles have their own origin location, Melrose remains the only place where the historically documented story of Marie-Thérèse can be told in an original historic setting or landscape (Martin, n.d.:44)—an important interpretive link recognized by Ename Charter’s third principle. No other structures associated with her life, however remotely, still stand. So, what happens once

the link between the Creole progenitor and Melrose is pruned apart by archival and archaeological evidence, or when the owner of the Coincoin-Prudhomme House succeeds in his plans to develop a combination museum/bed and breakfast?

The tenets of the Ename Charter would direct us to continue telling the Creoles’ story at Melrose, for the Creoles are primary components of the social context in

which Melrose developed and operated. It is simply impossible to comprehend what Melrose represents without their story and, according to the charter, their direct input on its interpretation. The point may be moot, because Louis will become the vehicle by which his mother's tale is told, and Louis and Melrose will come to symbolize the prosperity of Marie-Thérèse's descendants; however, for this to happen the APHN would have to recognize the voices of Creole oral tradition and academic archival and archaeological research. The Coincoin-Prudhomme property, if ever developed into a private commercial venture, could serve as a visitor center for the (archaeological) Marie-Thérèse home site next door and be marketed in concert with Melrose, so that the two complement each other and add yet another dimension to a visitor's experience.

Collaborative input on the part of the stakeholders is in fact the avenue of resolution currently being negotiated between these various voices we have described. For instance, the negotiation of a mutually satisfactory narrative is still in progress. The Tour of Homes Committee has asked for assistance in telling the "alternate" history the Creoles prefer (J. Colson, director, Creole Heritage Center, personal communication, 17 May 2005), and the Creole Heritage Center currently is creating a traveling exhibit on the formation of the Cane River Creole community that will debut in October 2005 at Melrose during the Tour of Homes. The exhibit will explain the history of the Metoyer family and their kin (J. Colson, director, Creole Heritage Center, personal communication, 17 May 2005). Brochures will supplement the exhibit and will be distributed to visitors at Melrose after the exhibit has moved elsewhere. The

APHN thus is not deprived of one of the three women around whose lives their interpretive tours center, and has the added incentive of being able to deliver a more robust, authentic narrative to the public.

Once the APHN and the Creoles agree on the manner in which the Marie-Thérèse narrative is presented, cultural appropriation issues will lose much of their potency. Melrose, with its imposing main house, would come to serve the Creoles as an important symbol of the Metoyer family's wealth, as is evidenced by its use as a backdrop in this context in a 2005 documentary on Cane River Creoles aired on Louisiana Public Broadcasting (Rodman 2005). Viewed in the context of Melrose plantation, it is easy to argue that America's "forgotten people" once were a very successful, prosperous part of the American past.

Meanwhile, the Cane River National Heritage Area has identified Cane River Creole culture as one of their primary interpretive themes. Their interpretive plan urges that more research be conducted focusing on the links between Marie-Thérèse and Melrose, but that her story should continue to be told at the plantation in recognition of her importance to visitors and the local community (Martin n.d.:44). More broadly, the challenges faced by the APHN, like other heritage organizations, are in developing well-researched interpretive themes and delivering them through well-trained guides and up-to-date presentations, while operating within a tight budget and dealing with on-going conservation issues. In this sense, persuading the APHN to accept historic information from both stakeholders and academics as valuable contributions to Melrose's interpretation is easy; it is much harder to see a clear way through the remolding of the interpretation

of the site, from advertising pamphlets to retraining guides, especially when the status quo of the site operates well from a financial point of view.

What this discussion reiterates however, is that the Cane River has a rich resource of material and social history to draw upon in developing heritage tourism. Eventually, the stories of Marie-Thérèse as an influential African American woman, *and* as the head of the Cane River Creoles, could be told. The more variety there is in interpreting these histories, whether through changing presentations at Melrose to encourage repeat local visits, or even through developing new audience attractions aimed at the overnight visitor market, the more it will not only add to the nuances of the stories told, but also alleviate the pressure on one location to present *the* definitive history.

As far as we academics are concerned, the process by which these different competing narratives formed, the myths they generated, and the way they became integrated into something deemed authentic

becomes yet another element of the story. We would like to think that we were able to learn something about the structures, their history, and their inhabitants that added greater depth and texture to the narratives told by both competing voices, and thus profited the APHN, Cane River Creoles, and the public at large. Even if we revealed more questions than answers, or threatened the interpretive status quo, perhaps our worth is measurable by the motion our inquiries are beginning to lend to an otherwise static interpretation. When it comes to the many daily interpretive tours at Melrose, or general conversations within the local community, how our voice ultimately is interpreted and incorporated ironically will be under the control of those who have perpetuated Mignon's legends. Through the ENAME Charter, it may be possible for all stakeholders to use and reinvent competing Cane River Creole histories in a way that fosters economically viable, informative, and balanced interpretations of valuable heritage resources.

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## ADDENDUM

[Ed. note: In April 2008 the co-authors requested that the following addendum, which clarifies some of the key conclusions of the article based on new evidence, be appended to the online (PDF) edition. The addendum was accepted and posted in May 2008.]

Since writing both this article and a chapter which appeared in the edited volume *A Future for the Past*, we have entered into correspondence with Elizabeth Shown Mills of Samford University Institute of Genealogy and Historical Research, and the widow of the late historian, Gary B. Mills. Through this correspondence we have learned that our assertions concerning her and G.B. Mills's conclusions regarding the involvement of Marie-Thérèse Coincoin with the foundation of Melrose do not represent the views expressed in their more recent publications on the subject (cf. Mills and Mills 1982:177; G.B. Mills 1984:101; E.S. Mills, in press). Indeed, we have been informed by Elizabeth Mills that their original Melrose booklet, which remains in use at the heritage property and from which our assertions were principally derived, had in fact been nuanced by the property's proprietors—without the authors' consent—in order to reflect a stronger link between Marie-Thérèse Coincoin and that property (E.S. Mills. pers. comm., 13 December 2007). We (the co-authors) request that this addendum be published to make clear that our own views and the published views of Elizabeth Mills concerning the relationship of Marie-Thérèse Coincoin and the Melrose property are in fact largely in agreement, and that it was not our intention to in any way to diminish the outstanding scholarly reputation of E.S. Mills and the late G.B. Mills, for whom we have the greatest respect.

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