

**FREEJACK LORE AND ANOMALY:
A STUDY OF THE FIFTH WARD SETTLEMENT OF SOUTHEASTERN LOUISIANA**

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Much research has been reported concerning black and white folklore in the American South (see Hill 1977). Most studies have proceeded with the assumption that racial categories are biologically determined and are part of the "natural order" of human diversity. Some groups have grown up in the South, however, that defy traditional racial classification. These mixed-blood groups do not fit into any of the "pure" categories of white, black, or Indian. As a result they are considered obscure and mysterious peoples, marginal to the mainstream of society (Hudson 1971:8). They are rejected by whites and are unwilling to fraternize with blacks. They are "suspended, so to speak, between two social worlds, reflecting in their lives the tragedy of a people doomed to racial isolation" (Parenton and Pellegrin 1950:152).

The Freejacks of the Fifth Ward Settlement¹ are such a group. For over 150 years they have lived geographically and socially isolated from their neighbors. Their anomalous nature has fostered a wealth of lore and beliefs to perpetuate and accentuate their racial and social distinctiveness.

In the most definitive work to date on mixed-blood groups, Edward Price (1962:5) outlines three criteria for such groups:

- (1) The people must be racial mixtures of White and non-White groups, Indian and/or Negro peoples presumably constituting the non-White element;
- (2) They must have a social status differing from that accorded Whites, Indians, or Negroes in the area such as to throw them generally together in their more personal social relationships; and
- (3) They must exist in such numbers and concentrations as to be recognized in their locality as such a group and usually to be identified by a distinguishing group name.

The latter criterion is of special significance in the development of this paper. The acquisition of a distinctive group name is mandatory for the establishment and maintenance of a mixed-blood group like the Freejacks.

Once a group name is developed, it becomes easier to classify individuals under the label and to generalize about the entire mixed-blood community. *Freejack*, the name applied to residents of the Fifth Ward Settlement, functions in a far greater

capacity than just to label. As an analysis of the group name reveals, the actual name and the vast lore that surrounds that name serves to explain, justify, and reify the enigmatic nature of the Fifth Ward Settlement.

THE FIFTH WARD SETTLEMENT

The Fifth Ward Settlement is located in southeastern Louisiana along the northern coast of Lake Pontchartrain. The Settlement is shrouded in mystery as are most mixed-blood communities. This is partially due to the anomalous nature of their racial categorization. Many mixed-bloods chose to remain obscure, however, because they "would prefer to remain unnoticed because they are keepers of secrets. Some of them . . . have crossed racial boundaries so that it would not do for them to receive much attention" (Greissman 1971:693).

Whites and blacks in the Settlement area assume that Freejacks are homogeneous in origin and racial mixture. This is partially due to the predominant bipolar racial ideology that permeates most of Anglo-America. This bipolar model has been long established and tends to classify individuals into two categories: "white" and "other" (Hicks and Kertzner 1972:1-24). This ideology has also encouraged the perpetuation of the traditional belief that "one drop of nigger blood makes a nigger." So to whites, Freejacks are no better than blacks. To the black community, however, Freejacks are looked upon with contempt because, according to one informant, Freejacks are "trying to act and be white." Thus Freejacks are generally not welcome in the black community even if a Settlement resident wants to be associated with the blacks.

The black and white racial mixture in the Fifth Ward Settlement goes back to colonial times. Most of the original Freejack families were mixed-bloods from Haiti's revolutions of 1791-1809 (Nicaud 1973:285-305). They entered Louisiana as Free People of Color. This special racial status reflected the high esteem with which many of these Haitian refugees were held.² The early Freejack families were well-educated, quite wealthy, and themselves owned slaves.³

Just before the Civil War, however, Free People of Color were stripped of their social and political positions. Harsh laws were passed against these mixed-bloods and many retreated to geographically isolated areas. The Fifth Ward Settlement grew out of this retreat and further became solidified after the Civil War. When slaves were freed in the United States, any vestiges of the distinction between a Free Person of Color and other blacks was totally eliminated.⁴ Thus, the Fifth Ward Settlement was no longer able to cling to a racial category distinct from blacks in the area.⁵

Along with the demolition of the social and political distinctiveness that had characterized the Freejacks, their economic base was also destroyed. By the turn of this century, they were as poor as any black in the area. They have remained primarily "dirt farmers" until recently.

It was also after the Civil War when many Freejacks began to marry Choctaw Indians. A remnant Indian village remains today only 20 miles from the Settlement. There is still intermarriage between the two groups. Thus the Freejacks can accurately be considered a tri-racial mixed-blood group, being part black, white, and Indian. Though there is no effort to adopt an Indian identity by members of the Fifth Ward Settlement, many Freejacks look very much like Indians and talk about the Indian ways of their ancestors. The intermixture with Indians has also undoubtedly encouraged and promoted the emergence of folklore about the Freejacks.

The folklore surrounding the Freejacks is too vast to relate in a single paper. I have chosen an analysis of the Settlement name because this name seems to crystallize, codify, and exemplify attitudes and beliefs about the Freejacks and their anomalous racial and social position. The name is used not only to justify and explain the enigmatic nature of the Settlement, but it also serves to reify existing stereotypes and established racial models.

ANALYSIS OF THE SETTLEMENT NAME

One of the three major qualifications for a community to be classified as a racially-mixed isolate or marginal group is the development of a distinctive group name. Recalling one of Price's criteria (1962:5), "They must exist in such numbers and concentrations to be recognized in their locality as such a group and usually to be identified by a distinguishing group name."

This is not simply an arbitrary statement resulting from a generalization about mixed-blood groups, but a very real requirement for development and maintenance of the community. For only when there are enough individuals of mixed-race to receive a name, can these people assume a group of community identity.

The assumption of a group identity is often imposed upon the marginal group against its will and, indeed, usually with serious objection. Nonetheless, the identity has been established and is made viable through continued use by the other population strata. A formalization of the group's existence is then followed by a solidification of social boundaries (Cohen 1969:103). It is much easier to perpetrate generalities about a group than it is to create prejudice against many individuals. Once a name for the marginal group has been established, other strata of the society find it easier to attach labels, develop stereotypes, and advance derogatory generalizations about the groups. Naming can also signal to scattered individuals of mixed-race the existence of a group of "their kind" and thereby encourage movement of such individuals into formalized groups.

Perhaps it is advisable to reiterate at this point Hudson's insistence that the names for mixed-blooded groups are not merely labels for genetic mixtures, but rather signify an actual social category (1971:8). For the inhabitants of the Fifth Ward Settlement, however, the name *Freejack* not only denotes a particular genetic mixture and social category, but also pinpoints an exact geographic location—a specific community. This is not always the case. The term *Redbone*, for example, refers to a racial and social category of mixed-blooded peoples scattered over a tremendous area of western Louisiana. The *Melungeons* illustrate another somewhat different example. Several "Melungeon" communities are described in a limited area of Eastern Tennessee and Southwestern Virginia, but which, according to Werner (1974:83), may not actually be related to "true" Melungeons at all. "The fact that the term 'Melungeon' most exactly coincides with this geographical area seems to indicate more about cultural unity in this region of the state than biological unity among all the people to whom the term applies."

A sharp contrast to this is noted with the Fifth Ward Settlement. There are at least three additional communities of people with similar racial mixtures within thirty miles of the Settlement. Yet only in the Fifth Ward Settlement are the inhabitants called *Freejacks*. In contrast to the Melungeon or Redbone then, the use of the term *Freejack* would seem to indicate a community that has not only a high degree of cultural unity, but also a high degree of biological unity.

The name *Freejack* is derogatory. As for other racially-mixed groups, it encompasses all the prejudices and biases ascribed to marginal peoples. The term is primarily used by whites, and as one white informant stated: "I don't know for sure how they got that name *Freejack*, but I know it sure describes that group real well—and when you

say to somebody around here 'Freejack,' they know what you mean exactly."

Black informants indicated that the term *Freejack* is used between blacks when discussing people of the Settlement, but only when privacy is assured. The name is never used by a black in talking with a white, however, unless the white can unquestionably be trusted. Blacks have most often been the object of the wrath and volatility of the Freejacks, and the black community strives very hard to avoid any confrontation. Using the term *Freejack* indiscriminantly—or even being overheard using it—would assure trouble. Nonetheless, blacks attribute the name *Freejack* to the whites, and more often use their own designation for the Freejacks—"crackers." "Cracker" is in rather common usage by blacks in the South in referring to the traditional "poor white trash." However, in the Settlement area, "cracker" takes on a slightly different meaning. When asked why "cracker" was used to describe these people, one black explained: "because they are like those soda crackers—all white and all, but with little brown spots." Thus "cracker" has been taken and modified into a term that reflects the black community's beliefs about the Freejack's mixed-blood and is limited to describing Settlement inhabitants; the term is not used to describe any other white group or individuals.

Freejack is never used jokingly by anyone in the Settlement. One Settlement member would never call another a Freejack unless a fight was in order. One incident was witnessed in a crowded bar that resulted from an inhabitant calling another a Freejack. Pistols were drawn and participants squared off. Fortunately, some sobriety rallied from a few bar frequenters and those riled were hustled outside to settle things with their fists. The barkeeper himself was as usual too drunk to be thankful that his establishment was not dirtied with blood and bullet holes, but the writer, not more than four feet away, was immensely relieved.

There are several stories used to explain the origin and derivation of the term *Freejacks*. These explanations offer some insights into attitudes about inhabitants of the Fifth Ward Settlement.

(1) The only thing of any type published about the Freejacks is a small tourist-type book called *Why Louisiana Has* (1947:34). In this booklet, Andrew Navard (pseudonymed André Cajun) claims that the term "Free Jack" originated from an old Louisiana custom. "In the early days a group of farmers who desired to raise mules, pooled the necessary amount of cash and purchased a Jack (a male donkey), and turned the animal loose on open range. When a farmer required the services of the animal, he would round up the Jack, and after a period of time drive it back to the open

range to be at the disposal of another farmer—hence the term 'free jack.'"

There is no historical evidence or local tradition to add any credence to this explanation. If the story itself is not enough to lead one to dismiss the factual basis of this tale, certainly the author's pseudonym would remove the last vestige.

(2) A second explanation is equally amusing, though considerably more colorful. It was related by a well-respected white rancher in the Settlement area. Fancying himself as a local historian, he began to explain: "You see, son, when them Indians lived round here—and that wasn't too long ago—those young warriors'd go off on raiding parties for months at a time and they'd leave their women behind. I mean to tell you, son, some of those Indian women were beautiful—that long black hair and dark eyes and pretty complexion. Well, you see they got kinda lonely—you know what I mean—for their menfolk and they kinda liked white men, too. So the menfolk around would venture off to the Indian camps for some free 'jack.'" "What's free jack?" I asked with programmed naiveté. With semi-disgust he replied: "Jack is what you have to pay to get down at those bawdy houses in New Orleans!"

There may be some factual basis to this explanation, but probably very little. This story was related by two different individuals, so it apparently has a few devotees.

(3) By far the most popular explanation for the origin of the name *Freejack* concerns Andrew Jackson and the Battle of New Orleans. Of the 30 whites asked about the derivation of *Freejack*, 24 of them advanced this story or a variation thereof.

When Andrew Jackson came from Tennessee to help defend New Orleans in the War of 1812, he and his troops traveled the Natchez Trace (Watson 1969). The Trace ran from Nashville to Natchez and an extension, called the Turnpike, continued on to New Orleans (Hyde 1964).

The Turnpike ran through the center of the Fifth Ward Settlement—or, more correctly, the Settlement grew up along the Turnpike. Jackson and his generals, especially General Coffee, needed labor to assist with paramilitary activities (i.e., to be carpenters, blacksmiths, cooks, etc.). Slaves were acquired from local farmers to perform these tasks. After the successful expulsion of the British in the Battle of New Orleans, Jackson freed these slaves and gave them land grants in the Settlement area as a reward for their services. To prove their freedom, the former slaves were given slips of paper with the simple notice, "Men of Color, Freed by Jackson." According to informants, Jackson's signature was said to have been hurriedly scrawled so that only "Free Jack" was legible.

There is absolutely no historical or factual basis to this account. Neither courthouse records nor the *American State Papers* bears out the notion that any land was granted to these "former slaves." Likewise in none of the numerous histories of Louisiana or the Battle of New Orleans is there any evidence whatsoever to substantiate the notion that Jackson freed any slaves, nor even had the power to do so. There is also a major conflict of terms in this explanation. "Men of Color" were already free and themselves could own slaves, therefore, "Men of Color Freed . . ." is a contradiction. The lack of distinction between Men of Color and slaves is a post-Emancipation Proclamation development and is unfortunately still prevalent in today's writings about the ante-bellum South. Therefore, this explanation is probably a relatively modern development.

(4) A somewhat different account seems historically and factually more possible. According to two white informants, the name *Freejack* is derived from "Men of Color who fought for Jackson." A search of Casey's (1963:ixii) compilation of men who fought in Fortier's (Lacoste's) First Battalion of Free Men of Color, shows no less than 23 individuals who later reappear as residents of the original Settlement. Thus, even though this explanation was advanced by only a few white residents, it seems to be supported by documentary evidence. One major fallacy, however, makes this explanation tenuous: Casey's list does not show a single member of the Raab family, which was the nucleus for the Fifth Ward Settlement.

(5) Another account is heard that is quite simple, yet historically feasible. In the South, Jack was a common name for blacks and was used by whites to refer to black males in general. Thus, people who are mixed-racially, but who were not slaves, could quite logically be called "Free Jacks." The writer favors this explanation as being the most feasible.

The correct explanation of the origin of the term *Freejack* is impossible to determine. Local documents and historical records, however, point rather conclusively to a combination of the last two accounts. Unravelling the origin of the term is not as important as analyzing why certain explanations predominate over others. It is indicative, for example, that the most prevalent account of whites—that *Freejack* means "men of color freed by Jackson"—is the least plausible based on historical evidence. It is also significant that this explanation is most evident in members of the white community under fifty years of age. Older persons believe that Freejacks were simply "free-niggers."

This may indicate that the former explanation was later in its development, or perhaps more

accurately, later in general acceptance. The tendency for younger people to adhere to the "freed by Jackson" account is possibly due to a change in attitudes toward Settlement residents. To older generations, Freejacks were indeed the "scum of the earth," and it was harder to be scummier than "free-nigger" to traditional middle class white Southerners. Today, Freejacks, although in a social strata lower than that of the white, are thought to have made considerable advancements and are admired by some whites for their hard work and honesty. Thus, the idea that they are "men of color freed by Jackson" satisfies both needs of the white in summarizing the status of the Freejack. A degree of honor is afforded anyone who fought for Andrew Jackson in the famous Battle of New Orleans and is worthy of praise, but the ever important stigma of being a descendent of a mixed-blood is preserved.

The support that this notion gets from whites is even more interesting in light of the contrast with black ideas. Without exception, all the blacks encountered advanced the explanation that Freejacks were simply freed Negroes. This is not surprising, for blacks contend that the Freejacks are, according to one informant, "just colored people trying to pretend they ain't."

One perspective is missing: How do the Freejacks account for their name? In a fortunate and rare interview, one Settlement inhabitant talked about being a Freejack and explained the derivation of the name as follows:

(6) "The first settlers in these parts were English. They came to America as indentured servants and settled here. That's the only way they could afford to get over here. They had to work for a long time and then after they'd worked off their indenture, they'd be free to do what they wanted. So I guess when they were free—lot of 'em would be called 'Jack something'—and they'd just say to him, 'you're free, Jack,' and that's how most of our families got that name."

This explanation gives a third angle of insight into naming. There is no mention in this account of any racial mixture; quite the contrary, acceptable English ancestors are used to explain the origins.

These six accounts are, therefore, more than simple attempts to explain the origins of a term. They represent the contrasting attitudes of the three strata of society (white, black, and Freejack) in the Settlement area, and they point out that a name has a considerably larger function than just to help identify a group of people.

CONCLUSION

The name of the group, and the folklore that

surrounds that name, not only accelerates the formation of social boundaries that are established to define and separate the marginal group, but also functions to justify these barriers. Folklore functions to explain and justify the enigmatic nature of the mixed-blood, but it also serves to reify the stereotypes developed to label such groups. And, finally, it is argued that these are all important functions of myth and folklore: to justify and explain anomaly, yet at the same time to reify traditional cultural categories and, therefore, create anomaly. The name *Freejack* is far more than a label for a mixed-blood group, for the name carries with it a wealth of lore reflecting the place of residents of the Fifth Ward Settlement in the social structure of the area.

NOTES

¹*Freejack* is the actual name applied to this mixed-blood group. All other family and place names, however, are fictitious.

²Free People of Color are often called "colored" Creoles. For a discussion of this distinctive racial and social category, see Cabel (1848); Rightor (1900); Gayarré (1903); *DeBow's Review*, 1858 (Vol. XXXVI).

³See Carter Goodson's *Negro Owners of Slaves in the United States in 1830* (1924).

⁴To trace the changing status of Free Persons of Color see Stahl (1934); Sterx (1972); and Rousseve (1937).

⁵Sr. Frances Woods (1972) has traced a single Louisiana colored Creole family through ten generations to illustrate their struggle to maintain a separate identity from blacks.

⁶For information concerning the role of Free People of Color in Jackson's defenses of New Orleans, see McConnell (1968) and Christian (1965).

⁷See Cohen (1971:90-91) concerning use of the term *Jack* in other mixed-blood groups.

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