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A Gathering of Rivers

Lucy Eldersveld Murphy

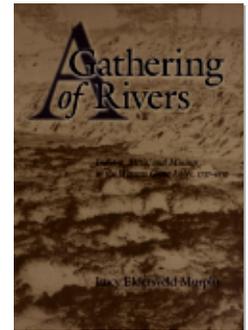
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Creole Communities

Sometime around 1760 a family named Cardinal—a fur trader with his Indian wife and Métis children—arrived at the confluence of the Mississippi and Wisconsin Rivers and beached their canoes at a place where a prairie extended back for several miles to high bluffs. Prairie du Chien, “Plains of the Dog,” was named for a Mesquakie village leader, Le Chien, whose community was nearby.¹ The beauty of the spot, with its level clearing surrounded by deciduous forests and rolling hills, must have impressed the Cardinal family. They probably stayed for a while and traded with the local Indians, as many traders did, and then went on their way. But the family remembered the place, and by 1780 several of them would return and make this place their home.

The family’s patriarch was Jean Marie Cardinal. A man of French ancestry, he resisted the English domination of the Mississippi Valley that accompanied the decline of the French regime. He was an adventurous man, and his journeys took him up and down the Mississippi River and westward along river routes to trade with Plains Indians. In 1763, when the French regime in mainland North America ended and Pontiac led an indigenous rebellion against their new British rulers, Jean Marie and a fellow trader were accused of killing two Anglo-American fur dealers in the Fox-Wisconsin region, and they made their escape to Illinois. Two years later his family was settled at St. Philippe in Illinois, but together with the town’s fourteen other families, they soon moved across the Mississippi River to a brand new settlement in Spanish Louisiana, St. Louis, in order to escape living in an English colony. Jean Marie continued to travel, however, and he ranged not only to the northwest to trade with the Osages but also north to mine for lead and to trade with Indians in eastern Iowa.²

Jean Marie’s wife, Careche-Coranche, a Pawnee woman from present-day Nebraska, was with him on some of his journeys. By 1776 they had eight living children, all of whom were baptized by a priest in St. Louis. Careche-Coranche was christened Marie Anne by the priest, who

proceeded to formally marry the couple; they were accompanied by their Mandan Indian slave, Nicolas Colas. Sometime during the following four years, Careche-Coranche, Colas, Jean Marie *fils* (junior—born in 1771), and probably some of the other children settled at Prairie du Chien, along with several other families. Jean Marie *père* (senior) established several land claims at Prairie du Chien, but he was killed in 1780 while defending St. Louis against a British attack during the American Revolution. Sometime after, Careche-Coranche married the slave, Nicolas Colas. She lived into her eighties (she claimed to be 130 years old) and became the town's oldest citizen and the repository of early local history.³ Jean Marie *fils* married a Métis neighbor, Helizabeth Antaya, and raised four children.⁴

The Cardinals and other multiethnic mixed-race families created Creole communities at either end of the Fox-Wisconsin riverway that blended Native American and Euro-American social and economic traditions. Prairie du Chien and the town of Green Bay came into being at the end of the French colonial era in North America, when the Cardinals and others like them resisted living under British control or fled to the Fox-Wisconsin region from war-ravaged regions of Canada. There were many other communities like them in the Midwest: one scholar has identified fifty-three such settlements of varying sizes in the western Great Lakes region between 1763 and 1830.⁵

Like many Latin American communities, Prairie du Chien and Green Bay were created when white male immigrants married indigenous women and developed syncretic cultures. Unlike the Southwestern experience, however, there was little Christian missionizing, the communities did not result from government-planned conquest or immigration projects, and the residents escaped most government control, intervention, or administration for over half a century.⁶

As frontier communities, Green Bay and Prairie du Chien represent the possibility of biracial accommodation on the northern borderlands. In both inter- and intracommunity relations, Indians, Euro-Americans, and people of mixed ancestry developed patterns of mediation, compromise, and cooperation that allowed them to coexist, creating social and economic relationships that ranged between the tolerable and the mutually beneficial. They demonstrate that ethnic and racial conflict were not inevitable.

Between the French and Indian War (1754–63) and the end of the eighteenth century, a distinct Creole culture—a regional mixture of several ethnic and racial influences—emerged at the growing trade communities located at either end of the Fox-Wisconsin riverway. In 1781 Prairie

du Chien and Green Bay residents arranged a treaty with their Native neighbors for permission to occupy the towns, but they had been important outposts of Mackinac's fur trade for half a century.⁷ At least since the 1730s traders had lingered at Green Bay and Prairie du Chien for varying amounts of time—perhaps as long as a season or two—setting up shop near Indian villages. The Marins' fort was near Prairie du Chien, and the fort at La Baye also served as a trade center during the French regime.⁸ Blacksmiths, government interpreters, and clerks were permanent residents in these forts, although they may have occasionally traveled to visit Michilimackinac or friends and family in Native villages. When Indians attacked Michilimackinac and threatened La Baye in 1763, the British army abandoned Wisconsin.⁹ Perhaps for this very reason, during the next several decades more French Canadians from Mackinac and Montreal moved into these two towns.

Families that had divided their time between Mackinac and Green Bay now established their primary residences in the latter settlement. One such family, the Langlades, included a prominent Odawa woman named La Blanche who moved to Green Bay with her husband, French Canadian trader Augustin de Langlade; their son, the trader and military leader Charles; and daughter-in-law Charlotte Bourassa, bringing with them several children, cousins, and slaves. About 1763 they joined four other families already residing at Green Bay.¹⁰ This move probably was the greatest change for the women and young children, who were less frequent travelers than the men.

These communities developed a culture that was neither purely European nor Native American but had elements of both in a creative mix. This culture—referred to here as *Creole*—contained a distinctive regional multiethnic blend having roots in many Indian and European traditions. Although the families who lived in these towns had Métis children—that is, of mixed Indian and Caucasian races—it would not be accurate to call these towns *Métis*, a term used here only as a racial indicator. To do so would be to miss the point that these towns were not only multiracial but also incredibly multiethnic: A typical family might include a French Canadian husband, a Dakota or Ojibwe wife, their Métis children, and kin, servants, and other employees with Winnebago, Mesquakie, Menominee, Pawnee, Scottish, or even African ethnic heritages. Their neighbors might represent several different ethnicities. These people maintained their separate ethnic identities even into the fourth generation, but together they created the culture presented here. The general term *Creoles* is used to refer to all of the residents who participated in this culture, regardless of race. Similar towns and cultures

appeared throughout the Great Lakes and upper Mississippi Valley at places as far apart as Mackinac and St. Louis.

Virtually all of the husbands were French Canadian and nearly all of the wives were Native American during the 1760s and 1770s, after which grown Métis children joined the ranks of householders.¹¹ A variety of tribes was eventually represented in these towns: slaves like Nicolas Colas were Mandan, Pawnee, or Osage; some traders like Augustin de Langlade brought Odawa, Dakota, and Ojibwe wives from their wintering villages and previous homes or married local Menominee, Sauk, Mesquakie, and Winnebago women.¹² Traders created strong links to the Indian communities they dealt with when they married local daughters. Of sixty wives and mothers identified from 1817 Prairie du Chien church records (with other sources), eleven were Dakota, five Mesquakie, two Ojibwe, and one each Pawnee, Sauk, Menominee, and Winnebago. Twenty-three were Métis, two were French African, and the ethnicity of the other thirteen was not ascertained.¹³

Men tended to be Francophone and either French, Canadian, or Métis descended from Frenchmen. There were only three English names among twenty-nine householders at Prairie du Chien before 1785. Even among seventy-two adult male residents who lived there about 1820 whose names could be identified, only eleven had English names: all the others, except Colas, had French names.

Population figures are difficult to estimate because the towns swelled significantly during summer months with fur trade workers (who wintered in Indian hunting regions but summered in town) and hundreds of Indians (who came to trade in fall and spring on their journeys from and to their summer villages). However, Jacqueline Peterson estimated Prairie du Chien population at 370 in 1807 and about 600 in 1816, and Green Bay population at 533 in 1796 and 900 in 1816. Probably several hundred more could be added during the busy seasons.¹⁴

In such multiethnic communities, language proficiency could be very important, particularly in French or Ojibwe, both of which served as the region's trade and court languages. Many Creole people were multilingual, and spouses undoubtedly interpreted for and taught each other, yet villagers must have experienced occasional difficulty communicating, particularly when they were new to the community. A few Anglo-American traders moved in during the 1780s, but French and Ojibwe continued to be the *lingua francas* of these towns until the 1820s.¹⁵

Intermarriage also brought together distinct approaches to domestic economy and production, the melding of which created a Creole—that is a blended multicultural—economy. In addition, although they had initially been dependent on Indian villages and distant markets such

as Mackinac for food and other provisions, families gradually became more and more self-sufficient toward the end of the century.

Green Bay began as a small outpost of Mackinac, both a regional trading center and a base for traders who ventured into the north and west on short or seasonal expeditions. Jonathan Carver passed through the Fox-Wisconsin riverway in 1766, and his travel account gives us a glimpse of Green Bay as a very small town. On the west side of the Fox River, several families had taken up residence in the old abandoned fort; on the east bank were “some French settlers who cultivate the land and appear to live very comfortably.”¹⁶ A few years later, trader (and creative speller) Peter Pond recalled that the villagers raised “fine black Cattel & Horses with Sum swine.”¹⁷

Prairie du Chien was first a Mesquakie village of about three hundred families in 1766, Carver generously estimated, just north of which a trading center had developed that served as a depot for traders going west of the Mississippi. It was located at or near Peminan’s Prairie, the village Marin visited a dozen years earlier (see map 1).

During the 1760s Prairie du Chien was the site of huge annual trade fairs. Carver wrote, “This town is the great mart where all the adjacent tribes, and even those who inhabit the most remote branches of the Mississippi, annually assemble about the latter end of May, bringing with them their furs to dispose of to the traders.”¹⁸ These must have been colorful and exciting festivals with hundreds of families from many different tribes and villages camping, meeting old friends and making new ones, feasting, dancing, and challenging one another to horse races, lacrosse matches, and games of chance.

By the 1770s Prairie du Chien was the site of twice-yearly rendezvous: Indians stopped there in the fall to get ammunition and other goods on credit on their journeys to their winter camps. At the spring trade fair they would pay their debts and shop with the extra pelts they had saved.¹⁹

During the Prairie du Chien fairs in the mid-1760s, traders had to deal with a consortium of Indian bands working jointly to maximize profits. Carver noted: “It is not always that they conclude their sale here; this is determined by a general council of the chiefs who consult whether it would be more conducive to their interest to sell their goods at this place, or carry them on to Louisiana, or Michilimackinac. According to the decision of this council they either proceed further, or return to their different homes.”²⁰

The growth of St. Louis as a trade center during the last two decades of the eighteenth century was another factor contributing to Prairie du Chien’s development. As long as traders had relied solely upon receiving

goods from Mackinac, this town's remoteness made trade goods only moderately accessible. Once St. Louis became a depot, however, it provided both an alternate market for furs and a source of goods. Prairie du Chien traders then imported and exported from both St. Louis and Mackinac.²¹

Prairie du Chien had, by the 1760s, become a safe haven, a place of refuge and peace for the purposes of trade. "Whatever Indians happen to meet at La Prairie le Chien," Carver observed, "though the nations to which they belong are at war with each other, yet they are obliged to restrain their enmity, and forbear all hostile acts during their stay there. This regulation has been long established among them for their mutual convenience, as without it no trade could be carried on."²² As long as this tradition was honored, it was a safe place for traders' families to live.

It made good sense for traders to have their wives and families with them at or near their base of operations because this meant that a source of food, clothing, other provisions, and labor to assist with the work of trading was readily available. Land-claim records show that in the years before 1800 at least thirty-nine households were established on new lots at Prairie du Chien and thirty-five at Green Bay.²³

Gradually the towns took shape, with houses built near the riverbanks on narrow lots that extended back in long strips of indefinite lengths. In addition, both towns had commons for the use of all inhabitants, including haying areas and fenced cultivated fields.

Initially, the residents of Prairie du Chien adopted Native housing styles.²⁴ Carver described Sauk dwellings like these as being "built of hewn plank neatly joined, and covered with bark so compactly as to keep out the most penetrating rains," with overhanging roofs in front that formed a sort of inset porch.²⁵ The advantage of this type of house to a Creole family was that they could construct it without recourse to Euro-American artisans or large heavy tools.

At the turn of the century, some of the Prairie du Chien elite had homes constructed of squared logs, the prevalent style at Green Bay.²⁶ Zebulon Pike, who came through in 1805 and 1806, mentioned that "part of the houses are framed, and in place of weather-boarding there are small logs let into mortises made in the uprights, joined close, daubed on the outside with clay, and handsomely whitewashed within."²⁷ By 1816 many of the houses were whitewashed or covered with oak clapboards.²⁸

Creoles of all ranks were famous among outsiders for being fun loving and, according to their own memoirs, deserved the reputation. Sleigh rides, dancing (accompanied by any number of enthusiastic fid-

dlers), horse racing, drinking, and card parties filled up the time, which could hang particularly heavy during the long winter months. They planned parties on short notice; hosts cleared out some of the furniture to make room and often provided baby-sitting in an adjacent room.²⁹ Invitations were often general and the guests enjoyed themselves heartily. One woman remembered a “real western hop” at Green Bay: “Nothing could exceed the mirth and hilarity of the company. No restraint, but of good manners—no excess of conventionalities—genuine, hearty good-humor and enjoyment . . . with just enough of the French element to add zest.”³⁰ Those with the larger homes and greater resources were most often the hosts of these events.

Creoles were known for their gracious manners; one man remarked: “politeness and strict ‘good-breeding’ was the rule, from the highest to the lowest.”³¹ The Grignons were especially noted for their elegant manners; Judge Lawe “was a perfect gentleman, very hospitable and generous to a fault.”³²

HIERARCHY

Before the turn of the century, as these settlements matured, a social and economic hierarchy emerged. Like both Native American and Euro-American communities, Creole towns included a few families with substantial influence, their more numerous neighbors of the middling sort, and a very small number of enslaved people. To some extent this stratification probably contributed to social control. However, Creole families and communities seem to have been less patriarchal than their Euro-American counterparts, as gender relations tended toward a mutuality that facilitated negotiation across cultures.

A number of factors determined a person’s place in the community’s hierarchy. Since most men were affiliated with the fur trade, a man’s status generally reflected his rank within that commercial world. His own kin connections were important, however, as was his tenure in the region. In addition, a man’s status could be enhanced by marriage to a high-ranking Native or Métis woman—one connected to a prominent Indian family. In addition, the work of wives and other female family members enhanced a man’s authority by allowing him to offer hospitality. A man’s prestige could also be enhanced by military participation in colonial armies or navies, and the Green Bay and Prairie du Chien militias served as men’s honor societies; Canadian fathers tried to purchase commissions for their sons. Officers were known by their military ranks (even honorary ones), which continued to function as badges of honor throughout their lives. These titles of address, together with civil

titles (such as “Judge”) bestowed by the United States government after the War of 1812, gradually replaced the old markers of the elite, “Sieur” and “Squire.” To some extent young people expected to rise in society as they grew older, just as Indian men and women gained status with age.³³

Like that of a man, a woman’s status in Creole society could be based on kin connections in nearby Native or Creole communities or on her age.³⁴ A husband’s status affected a Creole woman’s standing, probably more so than her counterparts in Native communities but less so than in Euro-American society. And a woman’s own work could gain her respect and prestige.

For example, Marianne LaBuche Menard was Prairie du Chien’s midwife and healer, “a person of consequence” according to a man who knew her in the early nineteenth century. She was a mixed African French native of New Orleans who had thirteen children by three husbands. “[S]he was sent for by the sick, and attended them as regularly as a physician, and charged fees therefor, giving them . . . ‘device and yarb drink.’ . . . [S]he took her pay in the produce of the country, but was not very modest in her charges.” After the U.S. Army brought a physician who would attend civilians, many still preferred “Aunt Mary Ann,” as she was called, and she sometimes cured people despaired of by the army doctor.³⁵

ELITES

As these communities matured and their social hierarchies emerged, a handful of families came to dominate Green Bay and Prairie du Chien. In the latter town these included the Brisbois, Fishers, and Rolettes, while in Green Bay it was the Grignons—descendents of the Langlades—and the Franks/Lawe families that dominated. Jacob Franks and his nephew John Lawe, Anglo-Canadian Jews, migrated to Green Bay in 1797. Both married Métisses: Jacob was joined to a woman named Therese DeGeredit LaRose, and John to Sophia Theresa Rankin, who had separated from Louis Grignon. Both women were related to prominent Menominee and Odawa families.³⁶ The Grignon women were kin to leading families of Winnebago, Ojibwe, and Menominee communities.³⁷ The men were the leading fur traders of Green Bay. They also had farms and local retail stores that sold goods on credit or in exchange for produce: there was little specie in circulation before the War of 1812.³⁸ As the *bourgeois* or employer of numerous *engagés*, each expected and generally received a degree of deference to which visitors and immigrants were not accustomed.³⁹

These elites, in paternalistic fashion similar to leading Native American families, provided hospitality to all travelers (there were no formal inns in either Green Bay or Prairie du Chien until about 1830).⁴⁰ Thus, when Elizabeth and Henry Baird arrived at Green Bay in 1824, she recalled, “we cast anchor opposite Judge Lawe’s residence, which was the stopping place for all travelers.” After dining with the Lawes, they were invited to spend the night with Louis Grignon and his second wife, Catiche Caron.⁴¹ Elite families thus could keep a wary eye on the comings and goings of strangers in their realms. In addition, the elites were expected to dispense charity and care to the sick and needy of all races, sometimes an expensive proposition.⁴²

The elites’ houses, made of whitewashed log and plank rather than frame with bark, were a little nicer than other dwellings. The Lawes’ home was a commanding presence, as indicated by its prominence on a map of the town painted in 1819 by Dr. J. Ponte C. MacMahon.⁴³ Elizabeth Baird described it as “a large one-story building with many additions. The ceilings were very low and the windows small, so small that when the Indians came peering in, the room would be almost darkened. . . . There was a sort of a dreamy appearance about the whole. It stood near the water with only a path through the grass leading to the river. Then, all around the house and the store stood Indians waiting to trade off their peltries.”⁴⁴ While some of the furniture was “rustic,” Zebulon Pike remarked, “The inside furniture of their houses is decent and, indeed, in those of the most wealthy displays a degree of elegance and taste.”⁴⁵ These items might include imported tables and armoires containing imported silverware, china, and crystal.⁴⁶ Even elite interiors were regionally distinctive: Creole families covered their floors with Indian mats instead of carpets.⁴⁷

Native cultural influences were also evident in the dress and speech of elite women. Sophia Theresa Rankin Lawe and Catiche Caron Grignon revealed their part-Indian identity to new acquaintances. Lawe, whose Indian name was Nekickoqua, Otter Woman, “wore the Indian dress,” and Grignon “used neither the French nor English language, but spoke the Chippewa” to Elizabeth Baird, who herself had Ojibwe (Chippewa) kin.⁴⁸ Elite men, however, wore Euro-American fashions, including trousers, jackets, white shirts, and top hats. Most other people wore some version of Native American dress, which by the end of the eighteenth century included ready-made cotton shirts, high-waisted dresses, bright red or blue leggings for both sexes, and moccasins for everyone. Leather clothing was also very popular, and garments were often decorated with embroidery, beads, and quillwork. Men favored fancy hats.⁴⁹



4. Rachel Lawe Grignon, daguerreotype. An elite Creole Métisse from Green Bay. (Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin WHi [x3] 24634.)



5. Augustin Grignon, daguerreotype. Note the pipe-tomahawk this elite fur trader is holding. (Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin WHi [x3] 24630.)

ENGAGÉS AND PETITS BOURGEOIS

The elites depended on the work of Indians, Métis, and Euro-Americans to keep their businesses and households functioning. These workers were often referred to by the general term *engagés*, or retainers, an occupational category encompassing a variety of jobs and functions. In the

fur trade, there were clerks, literate white or Métis men in training to become the people known as the *bourgeois*—proprietors and employers.

Since there were no community schools until the 1820s, boys and girls had either to be tutored at home by someone literate (which was seldom done) or sent outside the region to Mackinac, Montreal, or Quebec to be educated, which few illiterate fathers apparently could afford. Only a very few illiterate people became successful traders, such as Therese Schindler and Madeleine LaFramboise of Mackinac, grandmother and great-aunt of Elizabeth Baird. The ranks of the elite traders were in this way essentially closed to mobility from below, although many wives of leading men could neither read nor write.

Other workers besides clerks were also engaged in the fur trade. One class of laborers were the *voyageurs*, or boatmen—including steersmen, helmsmen, and oarsmen—who might be Indian, Métis, or French Canadian; few Anglo-Americans held these jobs. Sometimes guides were needed, and one such man was a Menominee named A-Wish-To-Youn, The Blacksmith, described by Elizabeth Baird as “one of the most reliable persons I ever knew.” He was “as good a guide by land as by water,” hired sometimes as “guide,” “guide and waiter,” or as “steersman.”⁵⁰ There were also interpreters, personal servants, and the occasional cook.⁵¹ Cooks and interpreters might be either male or female, and Native women sometimes helped to carry burdens over the portages, but most positions were filled by men of any race.

These *engagés* normally hired on for specific journeys, jobs, or seasons—sometimes they agreed to multiple-year contracts—and negotiated the terms of their employment within a common set of practices. For example, Anglo-Canadian Thomas Anderson entered the fur trade in 1800 as a clerk for a Montreal trader. When he arrived at Green Bay for the first time, he had to hire someone to serve as his interpreter and steersman for a winter among the Sauks along the Mississippi River. The man Anderson hired, a Mons. Bartram, evidently drove a hard bargain: “Only one suitable person could be found, and he must feed with the bourgeois [Anderson]. That was well enough, but he had an overgrown squaw wife, with two papooses not long hatched, and they must join the same mess.”⁵² The elitist Anderson complained to Jacob Franks, who “laughed at [his] . . . delicate ideas,” and said Anderson would get used to it.⁵³ When “Lady Bartram” took over cooking for the party and proved to be extremely good at it, Anderson began to appreciate her presence. No doubt the thought of leaving his wife and babies and wintering with a stranger while subsisting on the usual dull fare provided for *engagés* (dried hulled corn and tallow with the men’s own scaveng-

ings) did not appeal to Bartram, so he had negotiated to have his wife included in the contract. In addition, it was a mark of status for the Bartrams to eat with their employer rather than with the *voyageurs*.⁵⁴ The term of derision *mangeurs de lard*, greenhorns or literally “lard eaters,” was applied to newcomers to the region or the trade and to low-status workers. Bartram apparently opted to avoid this characterization. It may be that although men often cooked their own meals while traveling, food preparation was gendered enough that men like Bartram preferred to eat meals cooked by women. In any case, Madame Bartram’s culinary skills vindicated her husband’s stubbornness.

Engagés might perform a number of different jobs in various capacities over the course of a year or two. Augustin Grignon mentioned two men, Amable de Gere *dit* LaRose and Pierre Caree, each of whom worked “sometimes [as] a clerk for other traders, and sometimes trading for himself.” Caree also worked occasionally as an interpreter.⁵⁵

Around the homestead, elites also depended on the help of laborers to chop wood, mend fences, take care of farm work, help with the housework, and hunt for game. Some of the household workers were the same people who hired on as *voyageurs*. The variety of tasks can be seen in the example of Joseph Houle of Green Bay, probably a descendant of one of Joseph Marin’s *voyageurs*. Houle was employed as a laborer for Louis Grignon in 1817. Sometimes he worked as a boatman, between 1809 and 1823 he did farm work in a variety of capacities, and by 1827 he was himself a “farmer,” joining the ranks of what we might call the *petite bourgeoisie*.⁵⁶

This was a class of the middling sort between the elites and the retainers in Creole villages consisting of independent farmers, a few small traders, and the occasional artisan. After the United States gained regional dominance after the War of 1812, professionals such as lawyers, civil officials, and even a teacher or two gradually found their way into the communities.

By the 1820s many of the elite and middling families kept Indian men on staff as hunters. For example, Pierre Grignon’s “Indian retainers and hunter . . . kept his table bountifully supplied with game—venison, fish, and fowl,” according to an Anglo observer.⁵⁷ Elizabeth Baird described the hunter who worked for her husband and herself and lived on what they considered “their” land: “Near the river . . . stood the wigwam of our hunter, where he and his wife and twin babies lived. Everyone who was not an Indian trader had to keep a hunter. *Wa-ba-gen-ise*, White Swan, was a famous hunter. . . . [He] would go off on his hunt and re-

turn with many ducks and pigeons, often more than we could use, which enabled us to be neighborly.”⁵⁸ Wa-ba-gen-ise was also sometimes hired as a helmsman.⁵⁹ However, the forms of payment for services such as these remain far from clear.

Like the hunters, many other *engagés* had special quasi-feudal relationships with particular families of elites that endured over time. By the early nineteenth century these workers and their families lived as tenant farmers on their employers’ lands. A man who moved to Green Bay in 1827 noted of the elites that “some of their farms were occupied by tenants, who were frequently those who wintered with their employers in the Indian country engaged in trade with the natives. . . . All these enclosures of men more or less employed as laborers by the traders were cultivated by their women, whom they called *wives*, but really Indian women with whom they lived after the Indian custom.”⁶⁰

The Green Bay census listed seven tenant farmers, two of Louis Grignon and five of John Lawe. At Prairie du Chien the Rolettes had seven different lots, and Michael Brisbois had five lots confirmed after the 1820 land claims inquiry.⁶¹ There were apparently many other tenant farmers besides these few officially noted.

How did elite families get control of so much property? They gained ownership of land surrounding their own residences by moving onto land and “improving” it, by inheriting the land, or by purchasing it either at debt auctions or through private transactions (some of which cancelled debts owed to the elite buyers).⁶² Some women, even wives, owned land in their own names. During the land claims proceedings in 1820 and 1823, some women testified for themselves, and some husbands entered claims on behalf of their wives. Three women claimed lots inherited from their Native American grandfather Ashawabemay.⁶³

Another way for elites to increase land holdings, however, was to employ retainers to modify the landscape and farm it. Two depositions taken during 1821 land claims cases illustrate how the Grignon brothers expanded their holdings in this way. In one case, Pierre Charlefoü testified that in 1808 he worked for Pierre Grignon “and fenced and cultivated a part of the above-described premises; that he [Grignon] continued to cultivate the same by Indians, who planted small pieces until the commencement of the late war.”⁶⁴ In a separate case, another man testified that “Amable Roy cultivated a part of the above-described premises in the year 1805, and continued to cultivate the same by a half-breed Indian, who was considered as a slave.” At Roy’s death, the land passed to his widow, Agathe Villeneuve Roy, whose nephew Louis Grignon inherited it.⁶⁵

SLAVES

During the eighteenth century the lowest caste of workers consisted of Indian slaves such as Nicolas Colas. Thousands of Indians were held as slaves in Canada, and in the Great Lakes region slavery was legal until Judge Augustus Woodward of Detroit declared in 1807 that slaves born after 1793 were considered freed at age twenty-five.⁶⁶ These Indians were war captives or their children, taken by the Odawas, Sauks, or other Natives; some were given or sold into the Creole communities. Augustin Grignon, who was born in 1780 at Green Bay, remembered having known fourteen such slaves, not all of whom lived in that community. There were certainly others he never knew at Prairie du Chien and at La Baye before 1790.⁶⁷

Most of the Native slaves were from the Plains; such a large majority were Pawnee that the terms *panis* for a male or *panise* for a female came to mean “slave” in the regional French dialect. About half of Green Bay slaves were apparently Pawnee, while the rest were Osages, Missouris, Mandans, and Sioux. A slight majority of slaves were female, and most were probably captured as children or teenagers.⁶⁸

Some of these slaves had sexual relationships with their masters, and it is safe to assume that these were not always voluntary. In the autumn of 1746 Charles Langlade’s Sioux slave Non-non-ga-nah gave birth to their daughter, Marguerite Okemauk, at the Green Bay wintering ground. As the child of a slave, Okemauk was legally also a slave. She married a French Canadian named Charles Gautier de Verville, a farmer and relative of Langlade; one wonders how voluntary Okemauk’s association with her master-father’s cousin was.⁶⁹ In 1776 Baptiste Brunet, a farmer from Quebec, “married a natural daughter of Gautier De Verville by a Pawnee servant woman of Charles De Langlade,” Grignon recalled, suggesting that Gautier had sexual liaisons with several of his cousin’s slaves.⁷⁰ Another Pawnee woman was purchased at Mackinac as a wife by Augustin Bonnetterre, who moved with her to Green Bay and “raised a large family of girls.” The price of female slaves in the late eighteenth century was about \$100.⁷¹ It is not clear whether Careche-Coranche was purchased as a slave to be Jean Marie Cardinal’s wife; probably he met and married her while on a trading expedition up the Missouri River.⁷² However, her marriage to Nicolas Colas, her former slave, seems an extraordinary reversal of the slave wife–free husband pattern.

Slaves such as Non-non-ga-nah and Colas occupied the lowest rungs of the social ladder. When freed, they might rise a notch in Creole fur trade society or they could join Native communities and rise to prominence. Male freedmen tended to leave their Creole communities, while

women generally stayed. Grignon recalled one Osage man owned by Charles Langlade: "Antoine, must have remained as his servant not less than ten years, when he gave him his freedom, and then employed him as an *engage*. Antoine subsequently hired himself successively to several different persons, and finally got back among the Osages, when he was recognized by his mother, from whom he was taken when a mere child; his brother was a chief among the Osages, and he was soon raised to the chieftainship."⁷³

There were but a few black slaves in these Creole communities. Joseph Marin owned an African American man who escaped during the 1750s, and Brunet purchased a young black boy in about 1800 but treated the youth so cruelly that the Indian agent at Prairie du Chien came to Green Bay and took the boy away.⁷⁴ Three African American women and one man were held as slaves in Prairie du Chien in 1830 according to the U.S. census.⁷⁵ Most of the region's black slaves were held in the U.S. Army garrisons and in the lead mining region. (These will be discussed later.)

As slavery was being slowly phased out during the early nineteenth century, many residents sought servants for household help. With the creation of regional branches of federal courts in the wake of the War of 1812, the common Anglo-American practice of binding out poor children provided one source of household labor. For example, in 1824 John, Jane, and Harriet Glass were "bound out to service" by the court of Prairie du Chien because their father was in jail and their mother was a poor "immoral woman" who had "improper earnings."⁷⁶

DOMESTIC ECONOMY

Among the "middling sort" was Henry Baird, a young Irish lawyer, who married a fourteen-year-old Métisse named Elizabeth Thérèse Fisher at Mackinac Island in 1824 and brought her to Green Bay. The bride, who spoke French, Odawa, and Ojibwe, but little English, taught her spouse the nuances of the Creole and Native American cultures of the region. Henry, in turn, taught her English, helped her teach herself to read, and trained her as a legal assistant in his law office, where she served as the interpreter for most of his clients.⁷⁷ Elizabeth's memoir, gracefully written in English and published serially in a Green Bay newspaper during the 1880s, is a rich source of information about daily life in that community during the 1820s and 1830s. Together with Augustin Grignon's and several other reminiscences, Elizabeth's memoir allows us to piece together a picture of the day-to-day domestic economies of Green Bay and Prairie du Chien after about 1790.

The ways in which communities founded on trade began to produce goods on their own can tell us much about the lives of the inhabitants. Although Creoles bought much of their food and other provisions during the eighteenth century, they gradually increased their own domestic production. Yet Creoles produced little before the War of 1812 besides items for their own consumption, even though they had a ready market in their Native American customers.

In the years after about 1790, these communities focused on agricultural production to reduce the amount of food (particularly flour and pork) imported from Mackinac, the St. Lawrence Valley, and other distant markets. They continued to trade for some fresh food with local Native Americans, however. Indian villages provided corn to Prairie du Chien, while Green Bay residents traded imported salt, cloth, and tobacco to Menominees for sturgeon and trout.⁷⁸

A particularly interesting issue concerns the ways that spouses and other family members from different cultural traditions adapted their inherited gender roles. Because most Creole wives in the eighteenth century were Native American, their production probably followed Indian patterns while French Canadian husbands contributed their traditional skills. One observer commented, however, that the men “had generally been so long in the Indian trade that they had, to a great extent, lost the little knowledge they had acquired of farming in Canada so that they were poor cultivators of the soil.”⁷⁹ Gradually, Creole variations developed as spouses learned from each other, as Métis children grew up, as households grew in size, and as immigrants from other cultures contributed additional skills, traditions, and markets.

In a letter to a superior in 1811, U.S. Indian agent Nicholas Boilvin described one Prairie du Chien homestead in terms that disclose much about this family’s domestic economy. On a narrow lot facing the river stood two bark-covered houses, one sixty feet in front by twenty-five feet (part of which no doubt served as a store for the late owner, U.S. factor John Campbell), the other, “new . . . not quite finished,” thirty by twenty-five feet in addition to a separate kitchen, milkhouse, and two old stables.⁸⁰ It is difficult to know how typical this homestead was; most others probably did comprise multiple buildings, including at least one stable.

Visitors noted livestock in these communities from the 1760s on. Cattle and horses were common; Peter Pond remembered “Sum swine” at Green Bay. Augustin Grignon, born in 1780, recalled of that community: “Horses, cattle, hogs, and fowls were plenty as far back as I can remember; and they must have been common in the settlement for many years before my day. The earliest horses were brought from Detroit, of

the small, hardy, Canadian breed. There were no sheep till shortly after my father erected his new house, about 1790, when he purchased seven head, at Mackinaw, and brought them home in a barge; and by carefully watching them, but few were lost by wolves, and they soon increased till they became numerous.”⁸¹

Creoles allowed their horses and cattle to roam wild and graze on the prairies during the summers. The animals were seldom needed for work as long as the rivers were open because canoes were the preferred vehicle for travel whenever possible.⁸² One-horse carts with two wheels were used for local hauling. The horses were most useful, though, during the winter for long-distance sleigh travel. An observer noted that the Creoles “had ponies of a hardy kind with which they managed to propel . . . a kind of sled, called a train, or another called a cariole, in winter; . . . loaded with ten to fourteen hundred pounds, they would undertake journeys in winter to the Rocky Mountains, if required.”⁸³ To feed and bed their livestock, residents cut wild hay grasses on public lands and unclaimed prairies.⁸⁴

Some of the cattle provided beef of course, but their other uses highlight interesting issues of gender roles in these multicultural, multiracial communities. In European and Euro-American communities, people also used cattle for dairying and to pull large cultivating tools such as plows and harrows. In the Euro-American communities of eastern North America, milking was generally considered women’s work, although men otherwise cared for the animals.⁸⁵ Native Americans, however, had no such traditions since they had not kept cattle. Historian Rebecca Kugel has found that to the northwest in present-day Minnesota, Ojibwes were wary of cattle because they believed them to have spiritual power, which could become malevolent.⁸⁶

According to several documents, a few people in these Creole communities were involved in dairying during the early nineteenth century. Besides Boilvin’s 1811 “milkhouse” on land that had belonged to U.S. agent John Campbell at Prairie du Chien, legal papers dated 1805 refer to Jacob Franks’s “seven milch cows” on his farms at Green Bay.⁸⁷ We may wonder whether Franks’s wife, Thérèse LaRose, a Métisse, milked these cows. If so, where did she learn how; if not, who did milk them?

Some Métis daughters acquired Euro-American domestic skills when they spent time outside the region; traders sometimes sent their children to Mackinac, St. Louis, or other towns to be educated at boarding schools. Elizabeth Baird’s mother, Marianne LaSaliere Fisher, ran such a school for teenagers at Mackinac, where “the girls were taught to read, write, and to sew. . . . In addition, they were taught general housekeeping.”⁸⁸ This certainly would have included some dairying or supervis-

ing of it, as there was a “maid who milked” at that home.⁸⁹ Some other Métis daughters spent time with Euro-American family members who lived outside of the region. Girls who brought some of these domestic skills into Green Bay or Prairie du Chien were soon wives and mothers, who taught daughters, nieces, and cousins the skills they had learned. Even so, their application of the lessons was bound to be selective: some were ignored while others were altered or embellished. For this reason, perhaps, butter continued to be imported into the region through the 1820s.⁹⁰

A conflict of gender roles revealed in Elizabeth Baird’s memoir suggests why. Around 1825 at Green Bay, she and Henry hired a “man servant” from Montreal who would chop wood, bring in water, take care of the horse and cow, and milk the cow. “[T]he latter,” she recalled, “he considered almost a disgrace.”⁹¹ She also remembered: “My husband was an Irishman and of course never milked a cow. His mother in after years used to say ‘a gentleman from Dublin never did.’”⁹² When their servants quit several years later, Elizabeth had to milk, which shocked Henry’s mother. The Indians, of course, had no dairying tradition, and although she was third-generation Métis, Elizabeth hated milk but was expected to process it for others. She wrote, “All who know of my great dislike of milk, especially cream, may imagine what I suffered in taking care of milk and making butter.” A combination of inherited ideas about the gender- and class-appropriateness of dairying seems to have made everyone in the Baird household try to avoid milking the cows. A few days after the servants quit and left Elizabeth to milk, she was kicked and injured by a cow; her husband “declared that I never should milk again, and *I never did.*”⁹³ Perhaps Elizabeth’s Ojibwe cousins were right about the potential malevolence of cattle, or perhaps this was a negotiation that ended in her favor.

If the dairying problem was that Native-descended women had no such traditions but their Euro-American husbands believed it was women’s work, then gender relations were even more complex when it came to working in the gardens and fields. Native Americans believed that farming was women’s work; Euro-Americans thought housewives might keep a “kitchen garden” but that men ought to take charge of the farms and fields. What were the work arrangements in bicultural multiracial marriages in which separate traditional gender roles designated each spouse as the proper farmer? How did they organize the farm work? Unfortunately the evidence is scanty.

Families had cultivated plots, usually called “gardens” and up to several acres in size, fenced in near their homes. In addition, both Green Bay and Prairie du Chien had common fields. In 1817 an observer described

the fields at Prairie du Chien: "About one mile back of the village is the Grand Farm, . . . an extensive enclosure cultivated by the inhabitants in common. It is about six miles in length, and from a quarter to half a mile in width, surrounded by a fence on one side and the river bluffs on the other, and thus secured from the depredations of the cattle and horses. . . . Upon this farm, corn, wheat, potatoes, etc., are cultivated to considerable advantage."⁹⁴ When U.S. land commissioners took testimony to establish land claims in 1820, 1821, and 1823, groups of citizens asked that the Green Bay and Prairie du Chien commons be confirmed.⁹⁵ Regarding the latter commons, commissioner Isaac Lee wrote, "from the earliest periods in the history of this settlement, all that part of the said prairie not enclosed . . . was . . . and is used as a common . . . in which all the inhabitants are acknowledged to have an equal interest."⁹⁶

Since *engagés* were often called away in their capacities as boatmen or other fur trade workers during the growing season, their wives did a substantial amount of the farm work.⁹⁷ Tenant wives and other women must have taken active roles in agriculture. Lists of crops grown in these communities suggest both European and Indian influences: Native crops such as maize, pumpkins, and melons joined standard Euro-American foods such as wheat, barley, oats, peas, cucumbers, beets, carrots, turnips, rutabagas, lettuce, cabbages, and onions. (Ironically, the potato, adopted by Europeans from Native farmers elsewhere in the Americas, was introduced to Indian and Creole Midwesterners by Euro-Americans.)⁹⁸ This variety in crops suggests that husbands and wives learned from each other to grow particular fruits and vegetables.

By one account, Green Bay families of that era had on average only two or three acres under cultivation.⁹⁹ Before the War of 1812, most husbands were, at best, part-time farmers; some may have agreed with Missouri Métis men who, Tanis Thorne argues, "firmly held the idea that agriculture was the work of slaves and women."¹⁰⁰ Apparently John W. Johnson, whose wife from about 1810 to at least 1816 was a Sauk and Mesquakie woman named Tapassia, did have some input with regard to planting, since he wrote to a friend from Prairie du Chien in 1816 asking for some garden seed and commented, "I have an elegant situation for a garden, now vegetables in it worth 150 dollars."¹⁰¹ In many cases, husbands and wives both helped plan the gardens and may have worked side by side when possible—or necessary.

A few records of mixed couples in which the wives were Métis exist. These couples, including the Bairds, hired men to do the farm work whenever possible.¹⁰² Another couple, the Gagniers, lived near Prairie du Chien in 1827 and had a slightly different approach. The wife, Teresa, was French and Sioux, while the husband, Regis, was French and Afri-

can. They had as a boarder an elderly “discharged American soldier by the name of Solomon Lipcap,” according to an early resident who knew them. Apparently their white Anglo boarder helped with the cultivating, as he was reportedly “at work hoeing in the garden near the house” when Indians attacked during the Winnebago Revolt of 1827.¹⁰³

Although Indian and Métis wives probably tended new vegetables, flower gardens were impractical luxuries. When Henry Baird planned an extensive flower garden and expected Elizabeth to tend it, she wrote, “my cares were too great”; her passive resistance led to a compromise in which she planted and then Henry’s father weeded the gardens.¹⁰⁴

In addition, wives seem not to have learned to plow, harrow, or work with cattle, but some men plowed. Green Bay plows used in the early 1820s were remembered this way: “This plow went on wheels, one of which was twice the size of the other, the larger one going in the furrow, the smaller one going on the land.” Albert Ellis went on to write that “The plow beam was fourteen feet in length; . . . [it] was drawn by six or eight bulls . . . it . . . answered well the end of its construction.”¹⁰⁵ Plowing was probably limited to spring wheat production, with perhaps the occasional stand of oats or barley. Maize was not grown in plowed fields prior to 1817, which suggests that it was grown in the gardens, Indian style, by the wives. Green Bay farmers did not grow buckwheat, nor much grass, taking wild hay where they could.¹⁰⁶ Although some “potatoes and other vegetables” were sold to traders passing through the area, most grain was for home consumption before 1816, which also suggests that plowing was limited. Grignon recalled, “the Green Bay settlement furnished no surplus of flour or corn, though the Indians had corn to barter with the traders.”¹⁰⁷

Wheat provided the basic Euro-American staple, bread, which many Indians loved as well.¹⁰⁸ Grignon later related, “at my earliest recollection a sufficiency of wheat was raised at Green Bay for the purposes of bread-making.” Residents used two-person hand mills to make flour until about 1809, when Pierre Grignon Jr. at Green Bay and Henry Fisher at Prairie du Chien set up the first horse mills. At that time, in the absence of specie, flour sometimes served as a kind of currency.¹⁰⁹ Within the next few years, elite men set up several water-powered grist mills in both towns.

Although Indians made a type of unleavened corn bread, making wheat bread leavened with yeast could be a difficult task for Native and Métis wives whose mothers had not passed along these skills and whose Euro-American husbands considered baking a housewife’s duty. At Prairie du Chien, the problem of bread baking was effectively solved when Michael Brisbois, a prominent trader and farmer, established a

bakery. He traded bread tickets worth fifty loaves for each one hundred pounds of flour, and these tickets became a kind of circulating medium with which “to buy trifles of the Indians.”¹¹⁰

At Green Bay people somehow learned to bake bread. “Lady Bartram,” the Native American wife of the interpreter mentioned earlier, made bread in a bake kettle at a fireplace, although it may have been unleavened.¹¹¹ Elizabeth Baird’s experiences learning to make bread as a fourteen-year-old bride in Green Bay suggest one way the skill was transmitted.

As a third generation Métisse, Elizabeth had eaten plenty of bread in her short life while growing up in Mackinac, but she had never learned how to make it. Because Mackinac, like Prairie du Chien, included bakeries among its businesses, people simply bought bread; Elizabeth had never seen it made. She later remembered that her first biscuits were “heavy,” but her crumpets—“laid in a dry pan and baked by an open fire”—were “a little more palatable.” Fortunately, “we were young and healthy, nothing hurt us, and we did not become the victims of dyspepsia, as one might imagine.”

At last, a neighbor befriended her. “Good old Mrs. Irwin . . . gave me my first instruction in bread-making, telling me the secret of light bread and giving me a cup of yeast to experiment with.” Elizabeth was not completely satisfied with the results, but she kept trying and one day invited Mrs. Irwin’s husband for dinner. “I cannot now tell what we had for dinner, but I do know we had *bread*, which lies heavy upon me yet in memory. However, our new friend assured me that he liked just such bread, an assertion which put an end to my apologies, that were made in such broken English, that they were not soon forgotten, being a great source of amusement in after years.”¹¹² When the occasional woman from the St. Lawrence Valley came to town, she probably brought with her bread making skills and possibly even leavening, as did the Anglophone women like Mrs. Irwin who entered the community in small numbers during the early nineteenth century.

If many Creole wives resisted dairying and bread making, they continued and embellished the Native production of maple sugar, a practice that reveals clearly the cultural syncretism of Creole communities. Sugar making had long been part of the seasonal economy of the Great Lakes Indians, whose many seasonal homes included the family sugar camps. Indians moved after the autumn corn harvest from the summer villages to winter hunting grounds, and then in about March on to sugar camps situated in a grove of maple trees, or “sugar bush.”¹¹³

For Great Lakes Indians, the month or so of sugar making was a festive time during which women managed the boiling of maple tree sap

day and night while children helped or played nearby and men chopped wood for the fires and hunted to provide meat for the whole party.¹¹⁴ The tree sap was collected in birch bark buckets. Before metal pots were acquired in trade, Native women used pottery, wood, or bark vessels and concentrated the sap by boiling it—either dropping hot stones into it or boiling it in birch bark trays—or freezing it and skimming off the frozen water.¹¹⁵ Because European-made kettles made boiling the sap much easier, they were eagerly adopted. The women stored the processed sugar in birch bark containers of various sizes called mococks, which they sometimes decorated with fancy quillwork. These made special gifts. By the early nineteenth century, maple sugar was a commodity of major importance.¹¹⁶

In the Creole communities of the Great Lakes, mixed-race and Métis families continued the spring tradition of moving to sugar camps (which they called *sucreries*). Green Bay was almost deserted during the spring sugar production.¹¹⁷ An observer, Albert Ellis, commented that they moved “from their home cabins on the river bank, into the deep wood, often many miles distant; taking generally most of their household treasures, even to their chickens.”¹¹⁸ Before they married, Elizabeth Fisher took Henry Baird to her grandmother’s sugar camp, where the family owned over a thousand trees.¹¹⁹ Skills and ownership of sugar bushes were passed from Indian mothers to Métis daughters, because this was women’s work.

Creole sugar production methods were quite similar to Indian techniques and continued to be under women’s management.¹²⁰ However, many of the “better class of the French” preferred to refine their sugar more than did Indians, which had the effect of whitening it. After straining the syrup, they added a special clarifying agent, one observer noted, “the product of the chickens, to-wit, the eggs, the whites of which were broken in the boiling syrup, when all impurities immediately came to the surface and were removed.”¹²¹ Like Indian women, Métis women also sold their surplus, the refined sugar fetching higher prices than the regular. Ellis recorded: “Some of the more enterprising and forehanded, bought syrup and coarse sugar of their Indian retainers, and their less able neighbors, and went into the purifying process on a large scale, and thus largely increased their product for the season. A few families of this class had a preference in the sugar market at the frontier trading posts, their mococks, branded with their names, always being first sought, at advanced prices.”¹²²

The sugar season coincided nicely with the Creole Easter celebration, and in the region this festival combined elements from several cultures: day and night sugar boiling and celebrating accompanied by feasting

on Easter eggs and crêpes with maple syrup. The sugar bush rang with “the merry violin and the dance.”¹²³ The tradition of special gifts continued: Creole girls gave their boyfriends maple-sugar candy wrapped in a strip of birch bark that they called a *billet doux* (love letter, literally a “sweet note”).¹²⁴ Creole mothers such as Menominee Métisse Marguerite Griesie Porlier expressed their love to distant children by promising to send a mocock of sugar.¹²⁵

How was the art of sugar making taught? People learned it by participating in the frolicking work. Métis girls like Elizabeth learned from their mothers and grandmothers. Europeans had no maple sugar traditions; European men like Henry Baird learned when invited to visit Indian or Métis friends at their sugar camps. Henry was not likely to need the knowledge to manage sugar production, however, as long as his wife or her mother were available to take charge, since this was clearly considered women’s work.

HOUSEHOLD LABOR

Like householders everywhere, Creole families found that their production potential increased when extra labor was available. Many of them had large families with many children, whose labor when older compensated for the extra care they required when small. For example, a Mesquakie woman named Pokoussee and her husband, Pierre Peltier *dit* Antaya, long-time residents of Prairie du Chien, had at least eleven children between 1781 and 1804 (one of whom married Jean Marie Cardinal *filis*).¹²⁶ Most families were not so large. There is evidence to suggest, however, that Creole householders employed a technique common in other parts of America: calling on extended family members for help and borrowing teenage cousins, nieces, and nephews when they could be spared at home.¹²⁷ For example, when John Dousman became ill with tuberculosis, his wife Rosalie’s mother and brother, Luc Laborde, came to Green Bay to help out; Luc stayed with the Dousman family for many years.¹²⁸

In Elizabeth Baird’s memoirs of everyday life at Green Bay in the 1820s, the family’s servants, and those of the Bairds’ friends and relatives, make brief appearances. Over the course of about a decade, Elizabeth and Henry had ten servants mentioned in the memoir, evenly divided between the sexes. Among these were a “bound boy, Michel Bushy, of fifteen”; at least one of the men was a “young and very green” Canadian from the Montreal area, as was then common; and a couple, Mr. Charles Mette and Mrs. Mette, came from Mackinac, where they had for many years worked for Elizabeth’s grandmother, Thérèse Schindler.¹²⁹ Single

servants lived with the Bairds, who provided them with food and clothing (resulting in extra work for Elizabeth). The Mettes, however, lived in a separate house, and Mrs. Mette may not have been considered an employee of the Bairds, although she had been employed by Elizabeth's grandmother at Mackinac.

Two of the female servants were Native American girls, one of whom was brought from Mackinac by the Mettes. She may have been trained by a group from New England who during the 1820s set up "the Mission House" in which "Ottawa and Chippewa women were taken as servants and taught to work."¹³⁰ The other Indian maid hired by the Bairds, a Mahican was from a reservation for Oneidas and other New York Indians that had recently been established near Green Bay. This girl was "about twelve years of age, [and] wild as a deer"; Elizabeth commented that "she was of very little use to me having never lived a civilized life." This maid evidently was not terribly impressed with "civilized life" and ran away as soon as Henry Baird left town on a work-related trip. We may well sympathize with her, for the girl was apparently subject to unwelcome sexual advances from the servant from Montreal; Elizabeth recorded that "she could fight the man, which she did on every and all occasions." Unless she could speak one of the Bairds' four languages—Ojibwe, Odawa, French, or English—she probably had the additional frustration of trying to communicate with these strangers about an alien domestic routine and in a house far from her home.¹³¹

Elizabeth was fondest of a woman who worked for them for many years, "our faithful Margaret" Bourassa, probably a Métisse. When she married, the Bairds hosted the wedding party, understanding that Margaret would retire to keep house for her own family.¹³²

Occasional work—including babysitting and housesitting—could sometimes be arranged with Creole women from the local community. In addition, one might hire a neighbor to help out for a few days, but the bargain might have a distinctively syncretic Creole style. Elizabeth described an arrangement they made with Madame LaRose for about a week after their servants had quit and while they were waiting for the Mettes to arrive. LaRose came across the river in her canoe twice a day, her baby strapped in a cradleboard, to milk the five cows. Sometimes "she would stay and do any hard work, such as scrubbing the kitchen and scouring the tin pans."¹³³ The milkmaid with canoe and cradleboard seems to sum up nicely the mixed elements of Creole domestic culture.

Most of the servants' work was clearly gendered. The Bairds' first manservant chopped wood, carried it and the water into the house, and tended the horse and cow. However, he strongly resisted milking, which he apparently believed was "women's work." Moreover, he "would not

do a stroke of housework” even when Elizabeth was laid up with a scalded foot because “that was considered degrading.”¹³⁴ Later, when the Bairds had moved to a farm, they hired two men to plow, plant, and tend crops; take care of the horses, pigs, and cattle; and milk five cows. The chickens, however, were under the care of the maidservant. Cooking, indoor cleaning, and childcare were also considered appropriate work for the female hands.¹³⁵

In both bicultural families and Creole communities, gender roles appear to have been in flux at this time. There was a variety of responses to the situation: some townsmen plowed; some Indian wives took charge of the farming; some couples in mixed marriages seem to have both planned and worked in their gardens; others counted on tenant families, boarders, or hired workers to cultivate their land or to milk their cows. When they could, Creole farmers bought bread rather than baked it. If wives resisted some forms of Euro-American production, they continued to make sugar and, their clothing suggests, moccasins as well. Euro-American production such as dairying made additional demands on labor—it was constant, not seasonal, and it interfered with traveling to visit kin or to work in the sugar bush, thus making a poor fit with Native economic and cultural rhythms. But when families could muster extra labor, they could increase and diversify production by drawing on both traditions, thus creating a spirit of creative accommodation.

“A CONQUERED PEOPLE”

In 1816 the United States armies of occupation established themselves in Fort Armstrong at Rock Island, in Fort Crawford at Prairie du Chien, and in Fort Howard at Green Bay.¹³⁶ Although U.S. forces abandoned Prairie du Chien in the face of a nominal British army of men from Mackinac and the Fox-Wisconsin in 1814, the War of 1812 ended with the surrender of this region to the United States, an event that had profound implications for Creole social, political, and economic life.¹³⁷ One resident later recalled, “the officers of the army treated the inhabitants as a conquered people, and the commandants assumed all the authority of governors of a conquered country.”¹³⁸ This conquest would bring new laws and leadership, different cultural norms, massive immigration, changes in economic patterns, and different ideas about race, ethnicity, and gender to the entire Fox-Wisconsin region.

These “Americans,” as they styled themselves, wasted little time in making themselves obnoxious to the Creole residents. Henry Baird summed up the situation in this way: “it occasionally happened that some military genius, possessed of more tinsel than discretion, became

the commanding officer, and to mark the era of his reign, would exercise his 'little brief authority' in an arbitrary manner, and thus contrive to render the condition of the citizens as uncomfortable as possible. Instances of high handed oppression and injustice were . . . frequently committed by some military martinet, upon the persons, liberty or property of those whom they were sent to protect."¹³⁹ Augustin Grignon and another trader, Stanislaus Chappin, were pressed into service against their wills while on business at Mackinac and forced to pilot the vessels bearing the first U.S. troops to Green Bay.¹⁴⁰ Michael Brisbois, the prominent Prairie du Chien trader and bakery proprietor, was arrested on charges of having supported Britain during the War of 1812 and was sent to St. Louis. While he was gone, his wife and children were turned out of their home, which was seized by the commanding officer along with the bake house and winters' supply of cordwood. At the spot chosen for the new fort, Col. Talbot Chambers ordered the resident families to tear down their houses and relocate them to the outskirts of town. At Green Bay the soldiers seized residents' meadowlands for the hay.¹⁴¹ One day in 1817 at Prairie du Chien, a drunken Colonel Chambers "chased a young female into the house of Jacque Menard, with no good motive for doing so," according to a witness. When Menard protested, Chambers ordered the soldiers to bind, strip, and whip him.¹⁴²

According to the terms of Jay's Treaty (1794), all residents were to have U.S. citizenship and were guaranteed the right to trade in the region, but despite these guarantees, some traders were denied licenses. One officer apparently demanded bribes to issue them, and even licensed traders were arrested and had their trade goods seized by Chambers and other officers.¹⁴³ At Green Bay a trader and his Native American employees were arrested, and although the trader was released, the Indians were whipped.¹⁴⁴

Ignorant of the village's long history, Brig. Gen. Thomas A. Smith viewed the Creole residents of Prairie du Chien as squatters. He wrote to his superior: "These persons having, in violation of the laws, taken possession of public lands, were subject to fine and imprisonment. I would have destroyed the settlement, and delivered the male part of the inhabitants to the civil authority to be prosecuted for the intrusion, but for the impression that they could be made useful in provisioning a post so remote."¹⁴⁵

Although these Americans would have happily destroyed their communities and jailed their menfolk, there was one positive effect of the occupation for the Creoles, and it was economic. The garrisons served as customers for provisions, and soldiers bought retail goods and services by paying with sorely needed specie; transactions like these stimulated

local economies. Some Creole women, for example, profited by selling domestic services to government employees: in the late 1820s boarding brought in between two and five dollars per week and washing brought seventy-five cents a dozen items.¹⁴⁶ Unfortunately, there was a certain amount of tension involved in trade between Creoles and soldiers because, according to United States law, individual servicemen were not liable for private debts they contracted while enlisted and so often refused to pay, enraging their local creditors.¹⁴⁷

There may have been an element of revenge in the Creoles' readiness to sell liquor to the enlisted men, who were notorious drinkers.¹⁴⁸ Zachary Taylor, commander of Fort Crawford in 1829, complained that "every other house at least is a whiskey shop, owing to which circumstance & the drunken materials the rank, & file of our army are now composed of . . . I had more trouble . . . with soldiers than I ever before experienced."¹⁴⁹

Provisioning the forts, however, could be extremely lucrative. Men like Joseph Rolette were soon contracting with the army to provide flour and beef to the forts, a circumstance that contributed substantially to the development of commercial agriculture in Green Bay and Prairie du Chien after 1816. One Prairie du Chien resident wrote to a friend in 1819 that "by Farming \$2500 was made here last year on one farm by Mr. J. Rolette only in the article of flour."¹⁵⁰ In 1824 John Lawe received a letter from fellow trader Michael Dousman who wrote that "produce has taken a rise[;] furs are none two good . . . and in fact[,] friend law[,] we will have to turn our attention a littell more to farming and rase our Bred and Pork."¹⁵¹ In essence, that is exactly what they did.

The presence of the garrisons also promoted immigration by people from the eastern United States. While still in the army, many officers speculated in real estate. The rank and file, however, were recruited from the poor farming and artisan classes of the eastern United States; some enlisted for adventure and others for the steady work, food, clothing, and shelter.¹⁵² Sometimes the soldiers were cruelly treated and many deserted; quite a few made their way to the lead mines during the 1820s.¹⁵³ But large numbers of these men remained around Green Bay and Prairie du Chien after their terms of service ended, and many either brought or sent for kin and friends.¹⁵⁴

Although a few women lived and worked at the forts, the posts' populations were overwhelmingly male, and the men sought connections with local women. Some of the soldiers established relationships, developing ties of varying strength and duration to the Creole community. To some extent these relationships depended upon the men's status, and soldiers perceived a clear difference in social class between

the officers and enlisted men. While many enlisted men certainly fraternized with local women when they could and a few even married Indian women, some officers preferred elite Creole Métisses.

One soldier who stayed in the area was James Allen Reed, a Kentuckian born in 1798 who had joined the army soon after the War of 1812 and was promptly sent to Fort Crawford. The army trained Reed as a carpenter and promoted him to sergeant, but when discharged he became a trader and occasional scout. He married an Ojibwe woman, Marguerite Oskache, and they had five children. After her death, he married Agathe Wood, a Menominee Métisse and trader's widow, with whom he had two children. Later he wed Archange Barret, a well-connected Dakota woman who was the widow of trader Amable Grignon.¹⁵⁵

Another man who came to the Fox-Wisconsin region with the army and stayed was Amos Farrar, a native of Connecticut who kept a trading post at Fort Armstrong at Rock Island, "outside of the Fort but directly under cover of the guns," according to a letter to his brother written in October 1820.¹⁵⁶ Farrar was desperately lonely, writing "we have to deplore the want [of] Society for its like Banishment to live in a wilderness country surrounded by savages without it. but in the mein time I enjoy myself tolerably well in the society of the officers of the Post . . . & cultivating the friendship of the Indians as much as I can with safety."¹⁵⁷ He described the Sauks and Mesquakies as "perfectly friendly" and remarked, "I speak a considerable of their language."¹⁵⁸ Soon Farrar found comfort with a Mesquakie woman named Black Thunder, and they had a daughter, Betsey, apparently named after Farrar's mother or sister. By 1830 Farrar and Black Thunder had two children and were living in the mining district.¹⁵⁹

Officers also became lonely for "society" and for female companionship. Officers viewed themselves as part of the social elite because many were educated men with political connections, if not wealth or military training.¹⁶⁰ At Prairie du Chien's Fort Crawford, officers would only socialize with a select few of the Creole elite, but at Green Bay, Fort Howard's officers and the few of their wives who were with them socialized with the Creole elites and middle classes, particularly with the young unmarried women. Elizabeth Baird's Green Bay memoir mentions many marriages between officers and local daughters.¹⁶¹

Formal but temporary marriages were sometimes arranged between officers and Métis daughters of the community, according to James Biddle, brother of the president of the Bank of the United States, who visited Green Bay in 1816 and 1817. If Biddle understood it correctly, an officer arranged a contract with a young woman's parents for a relationship of six or twelve months with payments made both to the

daughter and to her parents, generally in provisions or trade goods. This custom may have been a kind of adaptation of the Indians' traditional eighteenth-century trading partnerships.

But these temporary wives were not necessarily passive concubines. Biddle later remembered being "called upon by [a] Captain, an old acquaintance, to heal some breach between him and his thus acquired wife—for the reason that I could speak some French, which he could not. She was in high *tantrums*, he said, about something which he could not understand." When Biddle and the Captain arrived at the latter's home they "found the fair dame sulky and sullen, but with an eye flashing high anger." She was livid with jealousy, having heard gossip suggesting infidelity on the Captain's part. As Biddle translated, the Captain tried to explain and gave his wife "promises of caution and good conduct for the future." In Biddle's analysis, "the contracts entered into in this manner were regarded by them [Creoles] as sacred," and since the women were never known to be unfaithful, infidelity was "highly resented if occurring on the part of the spouse."¹⁶²

NEW VIEWS OF CULTURE, RACE, AND ETHNICITY

Soldiers, civilian government agents, and new immigrants from the United States brought with them a range of prejudices, beliefs, and attitudes that influenced the ways they viewed the Creole people of the Fox-Wisconsin region, ranging from acceptance to cultural ethnocentrism, condescension, and racism. These attitudes were particularly important because they affected the relations between the newcomers and the local people. An Italian traveling in the region in 1828 commented, "the Americans generally consider the Canadians as ignorant. Whether this be true, I know not; but I do know that I invariably found them very polite and obliging, even among the lower classes."¹⁶³

Henry Schoolcraft, an agent for the United States in many capacities, wrote regarding the "French," "it is but repeating a common observation to say, that in morality and intelligence they are far inferior to the American population."¹⁶⁴ Another U.S. government agent, Caleb Atwater, described the Métis residents of Prairie du Chien. "They are a mixed breed, and probably more mixed than any other human beings in the world; each one consisting of Negro, Indian, French, English, American, Scotch, Irish, and Spanish blood! And I should rather suspect some of them, to be a little touched with the Prairie wolf. They may fairly claim the vices and faults of each, and all the above named nations and animals, without even one redeeming virtue."¹⁶⁵ Even some of the African Americans who came with the army to garrison the newly

established Fort Winnebago at the Portage in the early 1830s questioned the humanity of the French Creoles, commenting in jest, “they . . . were once prairie-wolves, and . . . living so near the white people, they grow, after a time, to be like them, and learn to talk and dress like them. And then, when they get to be old, they turn back into prairie-wolves again.”¹⁶⁶

Many of the Euro-American newcomers were keenly aware that a large number of Indians and people of mixed race were their neighbors. One man wrote to a friend from Prairie du Chien in April 1817, “I have spent a winter of more pleasure than one could calculate on, from the society around me, *we* (I use this word meaning the americans here) had to imagin them to be a white people, their manners were very much in favor, under this impression.”¹⁶⁷ An army officer in Prairie du Chien was particularly disparaging about the local traders: “The mangeurs de l’or¹⁶⁸ are as fat, ragged and black as their great-grandfathers were. (if they ever had any).”¹⁶⁹

The newcomers from the United States were used to thinking of race and social class as being linked and so were jarred by communities in which brown people might be socially and economically superior to whites. One who came with the army as a sutler’s assistant later recalled, “to see gentlemen selecting wives of the nut-brown natives, and raising children of mixed blood, the traders and clerks living in as much luxury as the resources of the country would admit, and the *engagees* or boatmen living upon soup made of hulled corn with barely tallow enough to season it . . . all this to an American was a novel mode of living.”¹⁷⁰

Creole families often formed links with newcomer Anglos, whether they were soldiers, government agents, or immigrants with other types of jobs. Like the mid-nineteenth-century Californios, who were also people of mixed race and culture, some Creole parents arranged marriages between their daughters and the new neighbors from the United States.¹⁷¹ Such arrangements were in the tradition of a region in which marriages linked local families with immigrants who had access to resources or power.¹⁷²

Henry Baird’s marriage to Elizabeth Fisher was sensible from such a viewpoint, although her memoir and their correspondence make clear that a great deal of affection existed between them from the beginning. A lawyer, Henry understood the new legal system and government and also spoke English, skills that could help Elizabeth’s elite Creole family during the transition to United States hegemony. She in turn interpreted the local cultures and translated the local languages while working with Henry and his clients. However, he received a letter from his father in Cleveland following his engagement that suggests the existence

of underlying tensions within his family with regard to race. Lamenting Henry's "painful and unhappy" reply to the father's previous misgivings against the marriage, Henry Sr. claimed he had no "prejudice to the girl herself or in the most remote degree to that affinity she may bear to the natives of America. [T]he contrary ever has been my sentiments and were them people instructed in our mode, and manner of life in habits of industry &c. I never can doubt but they would become useful and good members of society." Since Henry seemed so set on the marriage, his father gave his blessing, as did Henry's mother and sister, "but I am persuaded your Brother Thomas, will not approve."¹⁷³ Clearly, non-Creoles risked causing deep family rifts when they entered into cross-cultural multiracial marriages.

Elizabeth Baird described one wedding between Margaret, a daughter of Augustin and Nancy McCrea Grignon, and Ebenezer Childs. Although the groom was "American," the June 1829 celebration was distinctively Creole. The Grignons invited "nearly all the citizens" of Green Bay and sent a large boat to bring them to their home at the rapids, known as the Grand Kakalin, or Kaukauna. The crew consisted of Indians and "Frenchmen . . . in sufficient numbers to furnish the joyous boat songs." The guests arrived in the late afternoon to find in the yard "the tables . . . laden with all kinds of food, sufficient it seemed to feed a regiment. Not only the invited guests partook, but all the retainers . . . shared in the wedding feast." Justice of the Peace Jacques Porlier performed the ceremony. As for the young couple, Elizabeth could well identify with them because, like the Bairds four years earlier, "the bride spoke no English, the groom no French." The crowd was too large for indoor dancing, but they played cards and told jokes and stories into the night, when "Mr. Grignon, in a very felicitous and amusing manner, announced to his gentlemen friends that they would have to sleep in the barn." This news "was received with pleasure" and "high glee," and the women slept in the house. In the morning all were treated to "a sumptuous breakfast" before departing.¹⁷⁴

From the mid-eighteenth century through the early decades of the nineteenth century, the multiracial multicultural communities at either end of the Fox-Wisconsin riverway developed a syncretic blend of economic and social practices based on Indian and Euro-American traditions as well as local innovations. The resulting hierarchical paternalistic societies were distinctive in many respects but resembled many aspects of contemporary Californio and New Mexican societies in their internal social and labor relations. Elites depended upon the labor of quasi-peons, including detribalized Indian slaves and Indian, mixed-race, and

white retainers. The War of 1812 had much the same meaning for Creoles as the later Mexican-American War (1846–48) had for Californios and New Mexicans: the arrival of the conquering United States Army and waves of new Anglophone immigrants who threatened the existing culture and property relations.¹⁷⁵ Apparently unique to the Great Lakes region, however, were the relationships of mutuality between Creole villagers on the one hand and Native Americans in separate villages on the other at all levels of both societies.

The Creole communities of Green Bay and Prairie du Chien represent one type of multiracial frontier accommodation. Certainly, this was not a conflict-free environment. Couples sometimes divorced, *engagés* were known to run off, masters might sexually abuse their slaves, and trade competitors were occasionally nasty. But Indians, whites, and Métis lived and worked together while separate Indian communities existed nearby. This was possible for three reasons. First, Creoles and Indian villagers each specialized in an effort important to both societies, the fur trade. While Indians produced furs, Creoles traded them for imported items. Neither group competed for resources or for the role of processors, and they seldom threatened one another's security. Second, the Creole and Indian communities were linked by ties of kinship and friendship. People learned and taught each other their languages and cultural traditions. Third, although Creole communities were hierarchical, they developed patterns of negotiation, many of which were tied to mutual gender relations. These patterns allowed cultural and economic compromise, fusion, and experimentation.

By the end of the eighteenth century, however, the Sauk, Mesquakie, and Winnebago people of the Fox-Wisconsin region developed another important commodity for the international market, one that helped them diversify their economies and—for a while—maintain their autonomy. Ultimately, however, Anglo-Americans created very different types of communities to produce and market it. That commodity was lead.