

Background

Just who were these Creole people that added so very much to Louisiana culture? The meaning of the word “Creole” has evolved over time. Taken from the Spanish word *criollo*, it, in earlier times, meant white children born in the Caribbean. To Louisianans, Creoles were those individuals of European descent, particularly the descendants of the French and Spanish settlers.

As set forth by the Council on Development of French in Louisiana, Creole means “home grown, not imported.” At one time Creole meant offspring of French aristocrats born in the New World. More generally, it means native-born Louisianans who are descended from continental European stock.

Creoles of Color are Louisianans of mixed (mainly) French, African, Spanish, and Native American heritage. The term sometimes suggests a combination of cultures that is all the richer for the mix.

Cajun is a corruption of the word “Acadian.” The term Cajun covers descendants of French Canadians who came to Louisiana after the great expulsion in the eighteenth century. Speaking a distinctive dialect of French, the Cajuns also include other cultures that have come to share the Acadian language and South Louisiana landscape.

Creole Architecture

Experts do not agree as to the origin of traditional Creole architecture. Its important features are said to be imported from the West Indies, Canada, and France. Other experts cite the importance of Creole ingenuity and adaptability to accommodate Louisiana’s humid climate and damp ground in their architectural style. The “adapted” Creole house most likely resulted from the combination of local needs and imported ideas. Of America’s six colonial building traditions, Creole architecture is the only one actually to have evolved in America. The Swedes, Dutch, Flemish, Spanish, and British all imported building types from the mother country instead of developing their own native colonial styles.

A distant ancestor of the Creole house most probably was the Italian double loggia house, which had first appeared in the Spanish West Indies in the sixteenth century. In the West Indies its front “loggia” (the central open area flanked by a single room at each corner) was changed to a full-length gallery, while the rear loggia and flanking rooms stayed intact. Creoles called these rear corner rooms *cabinets*. French settlers in the Caribbean copied the house but altered the internal plan to meet their preference for asymmetrical room floor plan arrangements. This house design was what French planters from the West Indies brought to Louisiana.

Also, blended into the house design are the Canadian spreading roof plus the internal chimney, the popular French wraparound mantel, and a unique kind of timber frame construction indigenous to northern France. As expected, the new Louisiana house evolved as a folk adaptation because of use of local building materials. Out of the folk adaptation came three distinct residential types of the Creole house. They are the single-story house or cottage, the raised two-story plantation house, and the townhouse. Creole houses shared several common features. Early examples were built using Norman truss roof systems and heavy-braced timber frames. The space between the timbers was filled with either bricks or *bousillage*, a confection mixture of Spanish moss and mud. The Creole house was built with multiple French doors and rather large galleries beneath broad, spreading rooflines. Weather permitting, the galleries served as sitting rooms, dining rooms, and even bedrooms (with curtains put up on iron rods between the columns for privacy). Because of this gallery use, Creoles often decorated the galleries as outdoor rooms with cornices, wainscoting, and chair rails. However, in tightly packed New Orleans the Creole cottage typically had no gallery, only a roof overhang.

Early Creole houses featured broken pitch roofs. As time went by, houses had straightly pitched gable or hipped roofs. Piers or blocks raised houses several feet up from the ground. Creole decorative elements used often included chamfered or turned gallery columns, wraparound mantels, exposed beaded ceiling beams, and utilization of a French diamond-shaped parallelogram dubbed a lozenge. Wraparound mantels centered on boxed chimney flues on interior walls. Wealthier homes added elegant overmantels. Creole single-story house floor plans varied, but there was always one range of rooms paralleling a front gallery. This range, or set, consisted of a nearly square *salle* (parlor) and at least one narrow *chambre* (bedroom) adjacent to it. Three to five rooms stretched across the front of larger houses. Often, a second range of rooms was behind the first. Most houses included a rear *cabinet/loggia* range, too. The rooms generally opened directly into one another; thus, most houses lacked hallways.

As colonial planters prospered, grander houses appeared. The raised Creole plantation house still possessed many of the distinguishing characteristics of the single-story house but added several new special characteristics of its own. An example is Homeplace, located on the Mississippi River’s west bank near Hahnville. This house’s lower floor is an unfinished above-ground brick

basement used for general storage plus other utilitarian purposes. The primary living area is the much decorated frame upper floor. Full encircling galleries are on both levels. Outlining the lower gallery is a row of thick brick columns. The upper gallery is outlined by narrow turned columns. Exterior stairways connect the two floors. This raised Creole plantation house represents the apex of Louisiana's Creole architecture.

The Creole building tradition also spawned a uniquely important outbuilding type, the *pigeonnier*. *Pigeonniers*, small tower-like structures with upper-floor nesting boxes for birds, appeared on the most prosperous Creole plantations. An office was sometimes housed on the lower floor. *Pigeonniers*, generally in pairs, were located to ornament the plantation complex's overall appearance. Fewer than twenty *pigeonniers* still exist in Louisiana.

Creole townhouses were built in more populated areas like Natchitoches and New Orleans. Natchitoches is the site of an excellent example of this type building. Ducournau Square is a two-story brick building with an iron balcony stretching across its façade. The first floor is used for mercantile pursuits, and the second floor serves as the main living space. There is a wide, gated carriage passage connecting the street with a rear utilitarian courtyard, which is surrounded by service structures. Additional outdoor living space is provided by a rear gallery.

Creole architecture was dominant in the state on into the nineteenth century. New architectural trends brought into the state by the Anglo-Americans altered slightly the Creole houses, but distinctive Creole-style houses appeared well into the 1880s. Some architectural experts argue they were built even after that. Modern houses built with Creole galleries and rooflines exist today.