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SPECIAL FOCUS

**DR. LOUIS CHARLES ROUDANEZ:  
THE REVOLUTIONARY  
ATLANTIC'S CREOLE VISIONARY**



**THE COLOR OF FREEDOM:  
LOUIS CHARLES ROUDANEZ, NEW  
ORLEANS, AND THE TRANSNATIONAL  
ORIGINS OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN  
FREEDOM MOVEMENT**

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Dr. Louis Charles Roudanez, one of New Orleans's most significant nineteenth-century figures, remains relatively unknown and unexplained.<sup>1</sup> Roudanez distinguished himself as successful businessman, medical doctor, and founder of *L'Union* and its successor, *La Tribune de la Nouvelle Orléans*, the first African American daily newspaper published in the United States. The paper, produced for local, national, and international audiences and a journal of politics and letters produced for the Creole community of New Orleans and greatly influential in Reconstruction politics, was described by W. E. B. Dubois in his seminal *Black Reconstruction in America*, as "an unusually effective organ." However, Roudanez, the wider Creole and interracial community of which he was a member, and the transnational character of Reconstruction politics evident in his life's work, have remained surprisingly obscure. Roudanez's personal papers were not preserved, and he has received only passing attention from scholars. The following essays begin to illuminate the life and times of this underappreciated New Orleanian in order to reconstruct the vibrant political community in antebellum and Reconstruction New Orleans and use Roudanez's life to examine the international character of abolitionist and radical Republican politics. Many historians have recently drawn our attention to the "long" civil rights movement and the international character of much African American activism in the twentieth century. The essays by Nathalie Dessens and Caryn Cossé Bell aim, in part, to do the same

for the nineteenth century. Roudanez's life, we see, not only suggests important continuities between pre- and post-civil war activists, but also the significance of international events such as the Haitian Revolution and ideas such as French republicanism in the formulation of demands for domestic American civil rights. Roudanez's life and letters serve as a unique entry into a much larger understanding of mid-nineteenth-century community that was interracial and transnational.

The title of this brief introduction to Roudanez suggests its scope and emphasis: a glimpse into the life and times of Dr. Roudanez, nineteenth-century New Orleans history, and the transnational historical issues that reinvented our notions of what it means to be "American." The social and historical forces which led to his radical republican advocacy of the rights of all people of color, free and freed, are subjects of great interest and research, and documents which help us understand his personality, daily activities, and motivations are regrettably under-examined in relation to rethinking social constructions of racial identity, history, and identity politics in New Orleans.

Historians from Eric Foner and David C. Rankin to Caryn Cossé Bell and Nathalie Dessens have demonstrated eloquently the cultural significance of black activism to Reconstruction, and we hope to build upon their contributions by using Roudanez as a point of entry into a rethinking of social constructions of race, community, and identity within New Orleans and beyond. This, then, is but the very beginning of a much larger project.

The story of Dr. Louis Charles Roudanez has been briefly summarized in several studies. He was born in 1823 in St. James Parish, the son of Louis Roudanez and free woman of color Aimée Potens, both immigrants, we believe, from Saint-Domingue. His aunt, Anne-Marie Roudanez, married into the prominent Bringier family. His grandparents were prominent French planter Pierre Roudanez and Anne Elisabeth Fleury. Roudanez lived in the French Quarter, made a fortune in municipal bonds, and went on to receive two medical degrees, one from the Faculté de Médecine de Paris (the other from Dartmouth), where he was greatly influenced by republican proponents. Returning to New Orleans in the 1850s, he married a free woman of color, Celie Saulay. He maintained a successful medical practice that served blacks and whites of all classes.

In 1862, Roudanez financed and published the French language *L'Union*, and immediately afterwards, the bilingual *La Tribune de la Nouvelle Orléans*. He was an advocate of equal rights for free and freed, at a time when Republican politics were often characterized by tensions between these groups. His papers were powerful organs, as W. E. B. Dubois reminds us, for democratic change and social justice, laying out a radical new notion of citizenship for all people of color. These groundbreaking publications reflected the remarkable literary, social, and political aspirations of New Orleans's Afro-Creole community. As Dana Kress suggests,

For Creole and Black writers who either chose or were forced to remain in Louisiana because of financial considerations after the Civil War, the newspapers of the period quickly became the forum of preference for their social activism. The first of these newspapers that play a significant role in Louisiana was the radical publication, *L'Union*, founded at the beginning of the Civil War by Louis Charles Roudanez (1823-1890). Its stance was both abolitionist and revolutionary. Renamed *La Tribune de la Nouvelle-Orléans* in 1864, this paper [. . .] included ample selections of poetry and serialized short fiction by Creole writers. During Reconstruction the paper became the official organ of those advocating radical change, and for the paper's Creole readers, literature became a highly political and socially engaged act. (Kress 42)

Our research in Summer 2008 at the Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer at Aix-en-Provence, France, yielded significant information on the Saint-Domingue past of the Roudanez/Fleury family. In France, we also met, for the first time, 13 cousins directly linked to Roudanez, who are providing additional facts for this project. Newly discovered direct descendants in the United States—Georges Roudanez and Andrea Henderson Fahnestock—have also provided additional biographical information on Roudanez, as has David C. Rankin. We also learned about a 90-year-old Roudanez living in New Caledonia who may have, we were told, some of Roudanez's personal papers. No historian has ever located such papers. So, if true, this could be a major breakthrough in scholarly inquiry.

Nathalie Dessens greatly aided our recent research in France. Although unfortunately the records from Dondon, their hometown, are available only for the 1777-1788 period, Pierre Roudanez, Louis

Charles Roudanez's paternal grandfather, died in 1782 and his death record mentions the name of his plantation in Dondon. With the assistance of Dessens, we discovered that the records of the indemnification of the Saint-Domingue refugees granted by the French government (from the debt paid by the Haitian government) between 1828 and 1832 confirm the status of plantation owners of the Roudanez and Fleury families. Louis Charles Roudanez's paternal grandfather was a coffee plantation owner at Dondon and his grandmother was descended from a planter family, the Fleurys. According to the indemnification records, her three brothers (Philippe, Baptiste, and Pierre Fleury) owned coffee plantations at Dondon. Their property is drawn on a map of the Dondon area available in the Moreau de Saint Méry papers at Aix. Louis Charles Roudanez's aunt, Anne-Marie Roudanez Bringier, was indemnified for the loss of those properties (in 1829 concerning the Pierre Roudanez plantation and in 1831 for the Fleury plantations). The records also suggest a whole family network of plantation ownership (with such prominent families as the Silly family, for instance). We also discovered, thanks to Dessens, that the records of Jean-Baptiste Bernard Legrand, notary at Dondon, give information on the succession of Pierre Roudanez, whose minor children were under the guardianship of Jean-Baptiste Fleury. The above represents original breakthroughs in the relevant scholarship.

There is much to do, particularly with respect to the Roudanez' exodus from Saint-Domingue, a migration that greatly shaped the unique and unusually activist character of Louisiana Creoles of color. On one hand, Roudanez descended from white Saint-Domingue planters. On the other, Pierre Roudanez's son, Louis, married Aimée Potents, a free Creole of color. Accordingly, we can view the life of Louis Charles Roudanez in the context of the Saint-Domingue "ferment" described by Nathalie Dessens. He was part of a cohesive refugee group that maintained solidarity, crossed racial boundaries, and ultimately advocated for interracial democracy.

Dr. Louis Charles Roudanez and brother Jean Baptiste Roudanez emerged as forceful leaders of America's first civil rights movement. In a letter and petition delivered by Jean Baptiste to Lincoln during the Civil War, Roudanez pressed the President to grant full citizenship and voting rights to former slaves. The Roudanez brothers' vision was radical and hopeful: completely equal civil, political, and economic rights for all people of color, free and freed. Historians such as David

Roediger have examined the way that American republican ideology was warped by the existence of slavery and the definition of the citizen as white. The Roudanez brothers, however, influenced by their family's history in Saint-Domingue and Louis Charles Roudanez's experiences in France, imagined and proposed a more egalitarian republic. These ideas in turn influenced the Reconstruction politics that developed in Louisiana.

Color and citizenship, historian Michelle Brattain reminds us, were complicated in mid-nineteenth century New Orleans by the region's historic tripartite racial conception of people as either white, enslaved, or free people of color. Reconstruction politics exacerbated tensions between free people of color and newly freed slaves. Roudanez was unusual in his commitment to the elimination of all color distinctions in the definition of citizens and his willingness to link the political fate of free people of color to former slaves.

Dr. Roudanez played an important role in the development of Louisiana's Republican party. Frustrated with a lack of racial progress and the restoration of planter influence, Roudanez was often at odds with the emerging political elites of the Reconstruction era. In 1873, in a final effort to establish a political foothold, he led the biracial, bipartisan Louisiana Unification Movement. From the mid 1870s until his death in 1890, Dr. Roudanez left the world of politics and returned to medical practice.

Beyond researching Roudanez himself, however, we wish to construct a larger ongoing narrative that reveals the international and cosmopolitan world of New Orleans and the various ways in which he participated in debates that animated as they shaped the course of Reconstruction, black politics, and the rhetoric of nationhood. Roudanez's activism and his newspaper provide insight into free people of color's role in Reconstruction in Louisiana and the emergence and local expression of radical politics in Louisiana. The *Tribune* reveals the alliances forged between free people of color and freed people in Reconstruction, two populations that had been divided by law and custom for much of New Orleans's history.

The following essays, then, are at once an account of Roudanez's life and influence but also a larger cultural history of New Orleans, emerging conceptions of nationhood, and the transnational influences on African American activism before and after the Civil War. It was somehow fitting that, after his death in 1890, Louis Charles Roudanez

was hailed in the local press as a great visionary leader whose indefatigable spirit played a key role in reshaping politics in Louisiana and, indeed, the United States.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Many scholars have provided invaluable assistance to us during our ongoing research. We particularly wish to thank Nathalie Dessens (Université de Toulouse) and Michelle Brattain (Georgia State University), whose insights about Roudané and U.S. History helped shaped this brief overview. Thanks, too, to Caryn Cossé Bell, David C. Rankin, Jari Honora, and Laura Rouzan.

#### WORKS CITED

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