

A detailed, sepia-toned historical map of New Orleans, Louisiana, serves as the background. The map shows the Mississippi River winding through the city, with numerous street names and landmarks labeled in French and English. A central red line, possibly a canal or a major thoroughfare, runs vertically through the city. The map is oriented with North at the top, indicated by a compass rose.

# THE WORLD OF ROSE NICAUD

## *A Legacy of Freedom & Coffee*

Julia Walsh, Derven Scholar 2021

The Historic New Orleans Collection



Rose, who sells coffee in the French Market  
Print; ca. 1876  
Léon Joseph Frémaux  
*The Historic New Orleans Collection*, [1951.78](#)

## AN INTRODUCTION TO ROSE NICAUD

In the later decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, visitors to the French Market of New Orleans, Louisiana were drawn to the intense aroma of roasting coffee that arose from a simple wooden stand in the Hall of Vegetables. There, patrons of all races, classes, and nationalities would sip café au lait and chat as they passed their compliments and payments to the stand's famed proprietor, Rose Nicaud. Selling coffee in the heart of New Orleans defined Rose's life and legacy. It allowed her to purchase her own freedom before the age of twenty-eight, and then then as a Free Woman of Color, to own and run her coffee stand for decades. In the one hundred and forty-two years since her passing, Rose's life and legacy has been immortalized in New Orleans' memory through writing, businesses, and art.

# WHY WE REMEMBER ROSE NICAUD

Rose Nicaud's life and legacy is a crucial window into the complex world of Free Women of Color in 19<sup>th</sup> century New Orleans. Rose is remembered as a survivor, businesswoman, and symbol of perseverance, and she did not exist alone. To properly honor Rose's life and legacy, ask why the stories of her fellow Free Women of Color have been largely disregarded by public history, and question the dominant narratives of the past that disregard marginalized peoples.

# Creating the New Orleans of Rose Nicaud

From New Orleans' beginning as a simple French outpost, there were enslaved Africans doing enforced service and labor. By 1731, the enslaved population grew to outnumber the white French colonists which caused the Crown to fear slave revolutions. In order to divide and control the enslaved population, the French introduced a controlled racial caste system of White, Free, and Enslaved peoples.

The following timeline traces important developments for New Orleans' Free People of Color leading up to American statehood in 1812.

1682

The French claims the vast lands of French Louisiana.

1718

New Orleans is established on unceded Chitimacha land.

1724

The French colonial government puts *Code Noir* into effect in order to control the growing enslaved population.

It prohibited interracial marriage, made Sunday a day of rest for slaves, and allowed emancipation through *manumission* if petitioned by the slave master.

1763

The French sell Louisiana to the Spanish after economic downfall both in the colonies and France.

1769

The Spanish crown establishes law and military power in Louisiana.

1777

The Spanish enforce their *Black Code*, based on *Code Noir*, which legalizes *manumission* in addition to *coartación* - enslaved peoples being able to purchase their own freedom for 25 pesos if permitted by both slave masters and a approval board.

1803

The Spanish sell Louisiana back to the French for a three-week period before the U.S makes the Louisiana Purchase.

1809

Thousands of refugees from San Domingue, Haiti arrive in New Orleans changing the racial landscape of the city and increasing the Free People of Color population.

1812

Louisiana officially becomes a U.S state



A historical map of New Orleans, Louisiana, with a red path highlighted. The path starts in the upper right, goes down, then left, then down again, ending near the Mississippi River. The map shows the city grid, the Mississippi River, and various landmarks like the French Quarter and the Garden District. The text 'FREEDOM' is overlaid on the left side of the map.

# FREEDOM

I

Rose's path to purchasing freedom.

II

Free Women of Color in New Orleans



Pictures Of New Orleans - The Bazaar,  
Sunday Morning - The Celebrated French  
Market

Wood engraving (print); ca. 1867  
By James Earl Taylor  
The Historic New Orleans Collection,  
1982.93

# I

Rose was most likely born enslaved to the white Nicaud family in 1812 around the time period when they emigrated from Haiti to Louisiana. From a young age, Rose was likely to have developed her culinary skills in the kitchens of the Nicaud's bakery at [530 Dumaine Street](#). Following colonial frameworks, New Orleans' American government allowed enslaved peoples to have a day of rest on Sunday, and on that day numerous enslaved individuals would sell their own goods in the French Quarter to earn money for self-purchase. It is likely that Rose followed this path alongside hundreds of other women of color known as *les vendeuses* – selling goods, food, and coffee from pushcarts.

By 1840, Rose was legally Free according to a [City Census](#) which lists her as a Free Woman of Color (FWC) and the Head of her household comprised of three other women. The cost of self-purchase was high, but also more achievable for women of color compared to men as they were less valued as laborers. According to an emancipation court case from 1847 (*Phany v. Bouny and Poincy*), enslaved vendors made approximately \$20 to \$30 a month between 1822 to 1847. The earnings Rose would have accumulated through extra Sunday work would have taken years to match price of self-purchase which was an equivalent appraisal match to her value on the local slave market.



Merchant of rice fritters  
Print; ca. 1876  
By Léon Joseph Frémaux  
The Historic New Orleans Collection, [1951.78](#)

## II

The Free population of New Orleans had great success both in social acceptance and economic advancement in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century due to the influx of people of color emigrating from Haiti, but as American culture took hold so did their harsher restrictions. In 1830, Free People of Color made up 25% of New Orleans' population, but by 1860 that percentage had declined to 6.7%.

In Antebellum New Orleans, Free Women of Color (FWC) had narrow freedoms and broad limitations. Rose, like many of her FWC working-class contemporaries, held positions in the service industries. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, other FWC owned businesses like Rose's coffee stand, and a smaller group were in the professional class as seamstresses and nurses.

Famous and wealthy Free entrepreneurs, such as Eulalie de Mandeville, retained high social and economic statuses due in part to their mixed-race heritage as natural children of white men and black women. *Manumission* due to paternity was common in the era. It is possible that Rose's former enslaver, Michel Nicaud, emancipated her through *manumission* before his death in 1841 or in his will, although it is highly unlikely that Rose was his offspring as she was not described as 'mulatto' in the racial classification system of the 1840 census.



A historical map of New Orleans, Louisiana, showing the Mississippi River and the city's layout. The map is in a sepia tone and includes various street names and landmarks. A dark red rectangular box is overlaid on the left side of the map, containing the word "COFFEE" in white capital letters.

# COFFEE

I  
The coffee industry in New Orleans

II  
Rose's famed coffee stand



# I

Coffee has sustained New Orleans for centuries, as a beverage and as an industry. The port of New Orleans was and still is a major importer of South American and Caribbean coffee beans. The popularity of coffee as a beverage then led to a large amount of local coffee shops in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Following the French Enlightenment style of such shops as sites of education and community among the exclusive patron class of white businessmen it meant that they were also sites of monetary exchange which included the slave trade, like the famed Maspero's Exchange Coffee House.

In 1850, New Orleans was home to over five hundred coffee shops and exchanges, and then in 1857, the city was annually importing over 500,200 bags of coffee beans. The Civil War reduced the city's coffee importation and local abundance, but by 1865 the industry bounced back and continued to grow into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Unlike the coffee houses, coffee vendors were innumerable and mostly people of color.



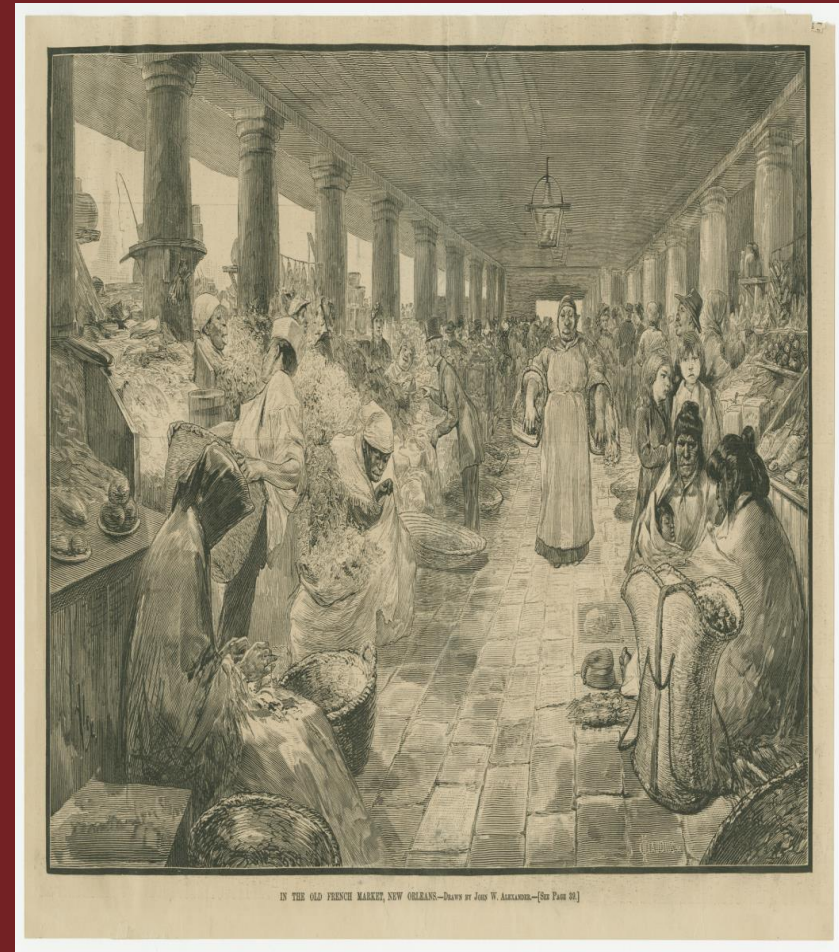
**Coffee stand, French Market**  
Photography; ca. 1885-1900  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Elvert M.  
Cormac  
*The Historic New Orleans*  
Collection, [1981.290.49](#)

## II

Rose was not the only coffee vendor in the Market, but it is likely she had gained a loyal following from her years as a pushcart vendor near the St. Louis Cathedral. Her stand was patronized by a diverse crowd, and as such there was no separation by race or class among her customers. She described it as such while on stand as a witness in the 1868 trial of Arthur Guerin, a white man who fatally shot a black man named Edward Forest after a heated confrontation at her stand. Rose's testimony is the only recorded instance of her personal view of her business.

The French Market had several halls, including the meat, fish, fruit, and vegetable, where Rose's stand was located. The French Market went through several iterations; the one that is still-standing was built in several sections beginning in 1813. Vendors in the French Market had a busy schedule working from midnight until noon to serve their vast clientele. In Rose's era, vendors had to acquire business licenses, make monthly revenue-fee payments to City collectors, and pay a daily fee to the Market.

It was not until the late 1800's that New Orleans was producing ground coffee in local factories. Rose would have been buying her beans wholesale from the Port next to the Market and grinding them herself before starting the drip brewing process. It is likely she also substituted with chicory during lean economic years, as was popular in New Orleans, but she was most famous for her café noir and café au lait.



**In the Old French Market, New Orleans**

Ink on paper; ca. 1882  
By John W. Alexander  
*The Historic New Orleans  
Collection, 1953.71*

# A TIMELINE OF NEW ORLEANS & ROSE NICAUD, 1812 - 1880

1812

Rose Nicaud is born.

1830

American racial attitudes begin to take hold as all Free People of Color who arrived after 1825 are ordered to leave the state.

1836

The city is divided into three municipalities in an attempt to segregate the diverse population,

1840

Rose, now 28 years old, is listed in the city census as a Free Woman of Color and the Head of her household, with three female dependents, in the First Ward which contained the French Quarter and French Market.

1861-1865

The American Civil War begins in 1861 and in 1862 the Union captures New Orleans. The Louisiana state constitution is ratified in 1864 to abolish slavery a year before the War's end in 1865.

1868

Rose Nicaud testifies as a witness in the trial of Arthur Guerin for the murder of Edward Forest on September 28<sup>th</sup>, 1868. The fatal shooting took place in front of Rose's coffee stand and the inciting incident occurred at her counter.

1871

Rose Nicaud's coffee stand is listed in the New Orleans City Directory.

1880

Rose passes away on September 13<sup>th</sup> and her death certificate lists her residence at #185 Bourbon Street.



# THE LEGACY OF ROSE NICAUD

Rose Nicaud passed away at the age of 68 on September 13<sup>th</sup>, 1880. Within her lifetime, Rose survived enslavement, the Yellow Fever epidemics, the Civil War, and the tumultuous Reconstruction of the South. Well known as a Free businesswoman in life, Rose's legacy after her death was immortalized into a local legend.

In 1916, Martha Field's (pseud. Catherine Cole) *The Story of the Old French Market* was published despite being written on the behest of the New Orleans Coffee Co. decades earlier. In her work, Field provides the most vivid and popular description of Rose Nicaud and her business,

*"Here, or hereabouts, "Old Rose," whose memory is embalmed in the amber of many a song and picture and story, kept the most famous coffee stand of the old French Market. She was a little negress who had earned the money to buy her freedom from slavery. Her coffee was like the benediction that follows after prayer; or if you prefer it, like the benedictine after dinner."*

Rose Nicaud was memorialized in other written accounts, such as George Washington Cable's 1892 novel *Dr. Sever*, or in black-owned businesses like Café Rose Nicaud which operated for twenty-six years on Frenchman Street until 2019. In her own lifetime, Rose's business was captured in artwork by local artist Richard Clague Jr in the 1850's.

Rose's legacy as a Free Woman of Color who purchased her own freedom against insurmountable odds and ran her own business is extraordinary, but it is not alone among her era. The fame of Rose's coffee gave her memory extra prestige and elevated her legacy above those of her numerous and unrecognized contemporaries. The legacy of Rose Nicaud sheds light not just on her own life, but also the lives of the Free Woman and Men of Color who were not afforded the privilege of public memory. As we remember and celebrate Rose, we can work to rediscover the lives and legacies of those left hidden in New Orleans' history.

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