Some Free Blacks prospered

By Joyce Davis Robinson

When Louisiana seceded from the union in 1861, there were approximately 18,700 persons designated as "free men of color."

More than one half of those free persons of color lived in New Orleans. They owned, according to a local black historian, more than one fifth of the city's property.

Those free Negroes living in New Orleans before the Civil War contributed much to the growth of the city and to the strength of the nation, according to Charles Rousseve, prominent author of "The Negro in New Orleans—Prospects for the Future."

Many were extremely wealthy, owned extensive property in the city, and were educated and learned men and women, he said.

At least economically, the state of black persons in New Orleans has dimmed over the past 100 years, said Rousseve.

"They owned more than one fifth of all the taxable property in the city. Today we probably own less than one five hundredth," he said.

Publications such as "The Free Negro in Antebellum Louisiana," by H.E. Sterkx, and "The American Negro, History and Literature," edited by William Loren Katz, point out the prominent black authors, poets, businessmen and philanthropists living in New Orleans before the Civil War.

The full accomplishments of these black men and women will never be fully realized in Louisiana history. Most of their work is not documented, except by a few historians who strove to set the record straight.

Such an historian was Rudolph Lucien Desdunes. Born of a Haitian mother and a Cuban father, Desdunes lived at 928 Marais St. in New Orleans.

Although he spoke English, Desdunes preferred French. His book, "Nos Hommes et Notre Histoire," was published in French and celebrated the many contributions and sufferings of the Negro people.

Other Negro writers had works published, one of the best known of which was an anthology of poems of 17 free men of color entitled "Les Cenelles."

Historians note, in addition to the literary contributions of these free men of color, Negroes, both free and enslaved, were great musicians, inventors, and businessmen, and fought in the wars of the United States.

In "Nos Hommes et Notre Histoire," Desdunes praises the Negro soldiers who fought in the Battle of New Orleans. Desdunes noted the free black soldiers who fought in the Battle of New Orleans were praised by Andrew Jackson, and the state legislature "gracefully praised their patriotism and bravery."

Desdunes said the Louisiana Battallion of Free Men of Color was the "only Negro volunteer militia with its own officers," and Jackson welcomed them to aid their country.

During the Civil War, according to Rousseve, Maj. Francis Dumas became the ranking black officer in the federal forces. Dumas owned a plantation and slaves, himself, said Rousseve, and he freed his slaves and organized them into a company to fight for the union.

According to Rousseve, many of the wealthy free black men during that time owned plantations and slaves.

"Most people become shocked when they learn black people owned slaves," said Rousseve, "but owning slaves then is like having maids and butlers today."

Many blacks bought slaves to free them or make their lots easier, said Rousseve. "In some cases, the relationship between the master and the slave was a very good one," he said.

Although free blacks paid taxes and were wealthy, they were not allowed to attend public schools when they were instituted in New Orleans, said Rousseve.

Those who could afford it were educated in Europe or in the East. Others hired private tutors, said Rousseve.

Free men of color such as Victor Sejour, a distinguished poet and playwright, left New Orleans to become popular in Paris. Edmond Dede, an accomplished concert violinist and composer, left New Orleans to become a conductor in France.

There are many other free men of color who left their mark on Louisiana history, such as Thomy Lafon, a great philanthropist, who once loaned the city of New Orleans money.

Lafon was one of the wealthiest people in New Orleans during the 1800s and when he died, he left his vast property holdings on Canal Street and his wealth to various charities which served both black and white.

There was Norbert Rillieux, educated in Europe, who revolutionized the Louisiana sugar industry with his invention of a vacuum pan in 1846. According to "The Negro Handbook," Rillieux's invention "aided very materially in developing the sugar industry in Louisiana."

Although there are volumes of works written on the contributions and achievements of free men of color in Louisiana, there is much that is left unsaid, according to historians.

Yet it is worthwhile to realize that despite the immense prejudices of their day, free men of color did their part in shaping the history of a state, and of a nation.