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“Because Colored Means Negro”
The Houma Nation and its Fight for Indigenous Identity within a South Louisiana Public School System, 1916-1963

A Thesis

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Abstract

In 1917, Henry Billiot sued the Terrebonne Parish School Board because his children, who identified as Houma Indian, were denied access to a local white school. The resulting case, *Henry Billiot v. Terrebonne Parish School Board*, shaped the way in which the community of Terrebonne Parish categorized the race of not only the Billiot family but also the Houma tribe over the course of fifty years. Through the use of Jim Crow legislation, the white community legally refused to consider the Houma tribe as American Indian, and instead chose the derogatory term *Sabine* as the racial classification of this indigenous group, which detrimentally impacted the United Houma Nation’s fight for federal recognition as an American Indian tribe.

Key Words: United Houma Nation; school segregation; race; Jim Crow; American Indians
Introduction

In 1916, a man named Henry Billiot attempted to enroll his children in the Terrebonne Parish school system in Southern. However, the teacher to whom the children were assigned sent the children home because she claimed they did not belong in Falgout School, a local white school located five acres from their home on Bayou DuLarge, because they were “colored.”¹ Billiot called upon the school board to fix this error because he and his family identified themselves as American Indian, a designation that he claimed was not important to school enrollment because “there is but two lines and I [Billiot] been following the white lines all my life.”² The school board disagreed, and refused to readmit his children.³

Billiot sued the school board for his children’s admittance into the Falgout School. However, his case was quickly thrown out for miscellaneous reasons such as missing paperwork and incorrectly listing the name of the defendant. Because of this, it took Billiot three filings before his case appeared before the local court. On February 3, 1917, testimony began in the 20th Judicial District Court within the State of Louisiana. Henry Billiot was the first to be examined. The questions asked of him were primarily in regard to his lineage and the lineage of his wife. Through his cross-examinations, the school board’s attorney pointed out that there was missing information within Billiot’s family tree. For example, Billiot had no knowledge of the identity of his wife’s paternal grandfather, nor did he have knowledge about the identity of his own paternal grandfather or either of his maternal grandparents.⁴ This lack of knowledge would allow the defense to insinuate the possibility of African ancestry in Billiot’s family.

Billiot was then asked a series of questions regarding members of the community with whom he associated, and he was asked directly if he ever associated with members of the African race. Billiot responded, “Not if I knew it.”\(^5\) Billiot explained that as a child he had attended school on the lower part of the Bayou Terrebonne in Terrebonne Parish below Montegut, Louisiana, and these schools contained a mix of Indian and white children.\(^6\) After this, the case became increasingly focused on the subject of whiteness. The school board’s attorney made it a point to prove that not only were Henry Billiot and his family not white, but also their claims of American Indian heritage were also false. In this case, the Terrebonne Parish School Board and the local community began to systematically deny the indigenous population of the Houma region their American Indian identity and replace it with a mixed-race status.

This thesis will argue that the American Indian education experience of the early twentieth century is not cemented solely within the context of the boarding school experience; rather, some Indian groups were forced to navigate the traditional white- versus- black dichotomy in order to secure a basic education within the Jim Crow South. The story of the Houma Indians’ struggle with the Louisiana education system, which began in 1916 when Henry Billiot insisted that his children should attend a white school, illuminates the complex nature of racism and racial classifications as it applies to groups of people that exist within the “borderlands” between black and white. Despite the verdict against Billiot and the efforts by the white community to instill one color line, the testimony in the case underscored the social

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\(^6\) Henry L. Billiot v. Terrebonne Parish School Board et al., 7876 (D.C. LA 1916), 2. Nicholas Ng-A-Fook claims that a school existed on Bayou au Barre that allowed white and Houma children to attend, but it closed in 1910 for unknown reasons. However, the school board minutes do not mention this school and it is not referenced by other sources on the subject of Houma education. See Ng-A-Fook, *An Indigenous Curriculum of Place: The United Houma Nation’s Contentious Relationship with Louisiana’s Educational Institutions* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007), 36.
construction of racial segregation in this period. It was perhaps for this reason that a third category *Sabine* had to be invented.

The use of public school systems to define groups of people in ethnic or racial terms was not an uncommon practice in the nineteenth and twentieth century United States. Before the Civil War, non-white groups rarely had access to education in the South. After Emancipation, free people of color, with the help of abolitionists and missionaries, established schools for their black children. However, as historian Mary Niall Mitchell showed, “These schools not only challenged the professed superiority of the white race but also threatened the existence of a permanent, unschooled black labor force.”

American Indians may have existed outside of the black/white dichotomy, but they were also considered a threat to white supremacy. After Indian removal in the 1830s, small tribes like the Houma were often ignored by the federal government because it was assumed that these tribes would be forced to assimilate into the white-American communities in which they were situated. However, in the Jim Crow South, in order to more easily assert supremacy, it became important for whites that American Indians be associated with black society, often through the label of “person of color,” making it imperative for American Indians to distance themselves from blackness in order to maintain full citizenship within these communities, which included the right to education. Because the Houma Indians were not a federally recognized tribe, any protection of their claim to American Indian ancestry was practically non-existent. Furthermore, their children were not forced to attend the notorious Indian boarding schools since the Houma

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were never relocated by the federal government. As a result, Indian children in Terrebonne Parish were forced to either attend the black schools, which would secure a black identity in the eyes of the community, or not attend school at all.

Often, in the South, the school system was the only way for lines to be drawn that classified and segregated racial groups. In rural towns at the turn of the twentieth century, there were few public spaces that allowed for social interaction between different racial groups, and Terrebonne Parish, specifically the towns of Houma and Golden Meadow, had even less interaction because many members of the Houma tribe lived in areas along the bayous that did not yet have roads, making boats the only method of transportation. This isolation put an even greater distance between the American Indian and white groups of this community. Because interactions between these groups were so limited, public schools had the greatest opportunity to make decisions about segregation that impacted the children of the area, who would then grow up with an understanding of their supposed place within the community. This situation was particularly apparent in Terrebonne Parish, where the superintendent of the schools, Henry Bourgeois, whose tenure as such encompassed forty years, openly regarded the Houma Nation with hostility and publically referred to the group as “so-called Indians.”

Histories written about the Houma Nation are limited and varied. The tribe has released excerpts from its petition for federal recognition in book format; however, there is almost no source material for the Houma in the nineteenth century.10 Mark Edwin Miller provides an in-depth look at the federal acknowledgment process as it relates to the Houma tribe in Forgotten Tribes: Unrecognized Indians and the Federal Acknowledgment Process, which contributes to

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the understanding of why the Houma were denied federal recognition. The history of the Houma Nation’s battle for recognition plays a large, yet subtle role in their history of segregation. Because the Houma did not have federal recognition, their American Indian identity could not be upheld by the federal government. This meant that there was no protection from the white community within Terrebonne Parish that wanted to create its own racial classification for them.

The most documented section of Houma history is the tribe’s relationship with the Terrebonne Parish School Board; however, these works focus heavily on the period after Henry Billiot v. Terrebonne Parish School Board (1917), with the emergence of missionary schools in the late 1930s and the 1963 case Margie Naquin v. Terrebonne Parish School Board, which overturned Billiot’s case and allowed for the integration of white and Indian schools. Within the scholarship pertaining to the Houma tribe’s relationship with the Terrebonne Parish school board, Nicholas Ng-A-Fook’s *An Indigenous Curriculum of Place: The United Houma Nation’s Contentious Relationship with Louisiana’s Educational Institutions*, provides one of the most intensive studies of the Houma’s educational problems. However, the case of Henry Billiot v. Terrebonne Parish School Board (1917) is merely a paragraph and a footnote in his two-hundred page work on the subject. The glossing over of this case has been a mistake on the part of scholars within the historiography of not only the Houma Nation but also the history of race relations within Louisiana. The testimony within this case clearly shows an evolution and emerging legal definition of terms such as ‘people of color’ and *Sabine*, a derogatory term created by the community of Terrebonne Parish in order to reject the Houma tribe’s Indian

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identity, that had been used for decades to suppress minority groups within the State of Louisiana.

On a broader scale, there has been a great amount of work dedicated to American Indian education, with particular emphasis on the boarding school experience. David Wallace Adam’s *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* provides a comprehensive analysis of the American Indian children’s experiences in the boarding school, highlighting the programs of indoctrination that they were forced to endure in order to cure the “savage” ways in which they were raised. Ward Churchill’s *Kill the Indian, Save the Man: The Genocidal Impact of American Indian Residential Schools*, explains that the boarding school experience can be seen as a form of genocide as the white civilization sought to eradicate American Indian cultures. However, the boarding school experience does not apply to the Houma tribe as they were never classified as American Indian by the federal government, so the federal government and the state never felt the need to civilize them through Indian boarding schools.

There has also been work done on race and segregation within Louisiana, but most writings focus primarily on the segregation of African Americans and Afro-Creoles. Ariela

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Julie Gross’ *What Blood Won’t Tell: A History of Race on Trial in America* is necessary for the study of race, particularly court cases that determined racial identity. Her work shows that communities often created their own racial orders through the court system, where reputation and hearsay testimony were often encouraged in court proceedings.¹⁴

The District Court case *Henry Billiot v. Terrebonne Parish School Board (1917)* acts as a lens in which to view the evolution of racial terms within a rural Louisiana community. The testimonies of this case reveal the tumultuous relationships between the people in this town, most of whom determined the race of a family through memory and reputation rather than fact. It is only through the study of this court case that one can fully grasp how the community of Terrebonne Parish was able to refuse the Houma Nation’s American Indian identity through the exploitation of Jim Crow policies in order to maintain white supremacy and the restriction of non-white education in a multiracial space for over fifty years.

**The Houma: A History**

Currently residing along the bayous within Terrebonne and Lafourche parish, the Houma Indian tribe, by a final ruling in 2015, has been denied tribal status by the federal government. One of the reasons for this denial is the decision held by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), a department within the executive branch of the federal government, that there are inconsistencies within the Houma’s history as a tribe. According to the BIA, an American Indian tribe must meet seven criteria in order to achieve federal recognition. The Houma Nation failed to meet three of these criteria: that it descended from a historic tribe, that it maintained a continuous

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community from historical times to the present day, and proof that it has maintained political authority over a continuous community from historical times until present day.\(^{15}\)

The most important criterion for federal recognition is a group’s ability to prove that it descended from a historic tribe. According to the Houma Nation’s written history, the historic Houma Tribe was discovered in 1682 by the French explorer LaSalle as he traveled along the Mississippi River.\(^{16}\) During this early period, there were several tribes living in close proximity to New Orleans.\(^{17}\) However, most of these tribes had conflicts with each other, and would exterminate their respective enemies. Anthropologists such as John Swanton claim people belonging to most of these smaller extinct tribes were absorbed into the Houma tribe by the end of the eighteenth century.\(^{18}\) Additionally, disagreements exist between the Houma Nation and the BIA on the land settlement of the Houma Tribe. The Houma Nation believes that their ancestors settled at Bayou LaFourche after 1770; however, the BIA believes that the historic Houma Tribe never left the Mississippi River.\(^{19}\)

This disagreement is a result of correspondence provided by the Spanish between 1773 and 1775. At this time, the historic Houma Tribe was fractured into three separate groups led by three different chiefs. In their petition for recognition, the Houma Nation claimed that the entire tribe eventually reunited and settled along Bayou LaFourche. The BIA and Houma Nation interpret the language of the correspondence differently, as the Spanish correspondence places the historic Houma Tribe at the location where Bayou LaFourche forked from the Mississippi


\(^{18}\) See John Swanton, *The Indians of the Southeastern United States*.

\(^{19}\) Greg Bowman and Janel Curry-Roper, *The Houma People of Louisiana*, 18; Mark Edwin Miller, *Forgotten Tribes*, 161.
River. The BIA claims that this meant at least parts of the tribe (rather than the entirety that the Houma Nation claims) never left the Mississippi River, while the Houma Nation claims that their oral tradition interprets “the fork” as the entire bayou. Because the Houma Nation had only oral histories to back their claims, the BIA ruled against them in favor of a literal interpretation of the Spanish documents.

The BIA determined that the historic Houma Tribe had become extinct by the turn of the nineteenth century. The Houma Nation notes within the history section of their petition for federal recognition, published in book format by their tribe, two Anthropologists who detrimentally impacted the tribes’ relationship with the United States government. The first was Daniel Clark, who in 1803, reported that the Houma was near extinction, and the second was Dr. John Sibley, who filed a report in 1806 that stated the Houma had mostly married into the Attakapa village located in present day St. Martinville, while the few remaining members lived on the east side of the Mississippi River and barely existed as an organized nation. These reports, the Houma claim, became the basis for anthropological research conducted in the nineteenth century, and created a precedent for the federal and state government’s ignorance of Louisiana tribes.

The BIA did agree with the Houma Nation’s assertion that three ancestral families of the Houma Nation purchased land grants on Bayou Terrebonne, but the BIA did not believe they consisted of historic Houma Tribe members. The Houma lists Louis le Sauvage and the family of Jean Billiot as the first members of the Houma tribe to hold land in Terrebonne Parish around 1788.

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20 Mark Edwin Miller, *Forgotten Tribes*, 161.
21 Mark Edwin Miller, *Forgotten Tribes*, 161.
23 Mark Edwin Miller, *Forgotten Tribes*, 161.
Between 1800 and 1840, French men married into the tribe and became socially identified as Indian, and the unions of American Indians and Europeans, would become more commonplace for succeeding generations. 24 The Houma Nation has agreed that their group should be considered multiracial as their ancestors did participate in unions with African Americans in the nineteenth century.25 By the 1850s, because of these unions, legal records became muddled and listed Houma Indian families as black, other, or Indian. In many cases, different races were listed for people within the same family.

For example, the family members of Henry Billiot were listed under various races in the United States census records. Henry Billiot was labeled Indian in the 1880 census, and his wife Celesie Frederick was labeled white in the 1900 census. Billiot’s father, Severin Billiot, and his mother, Rosaline Molinaire, were both labeled Indian in the 1880 census. Severin Billiot’s mother, Mannette Renaud, was labeled Mulatto in the 1850 census. Henry Billiot’s wife, Celesie, had parents both labeled white in the 1900 census; however, her mother, Clarisse Billiot, was labeled other in the 1880 census when she still lived in her parents’ home.26 In this family, no member had been listed as black by census records, and several members of his family were listed as Indian; however, Henry Billiot’s grandmother was classified as Mulatto and his grandfather’s identity was unknown, allowing for the community to make its own assumptions and myths about this family, and by extension, the Houma Tribe.

**Henry Billiot v. Terrebonne Parish School Board (1917)**

It was within this context of rejected identity that the term Sabine was created. No known documentation as to the origin of the term exists. There is a Sabine river that creates the border

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25 Mark Edwin Miller, *Forgotten Tribes*, 166.
26 U.S. Census records, Terrebonne Parish, 1850, 1880, 1900.
between Louisiana and Texas, but the Houma tribe never lived in that region to create an association to their group. Many scholars reference the term, but there is no writing about the term Sabine until after the court case Henry Billiot v. Terrebonne Parish School Board (1917), which supported the white community’s claim that there were no American Indians located within Terrebonne Parish.

Perhaps one of the most telling testimonies in the case was that of Henry L. Bourgeois, the superintendent of schools in Terrebonne Parish. Bourgeois claimed he offered enrollment for Henry Billiot’s children at an Indian school, located five miles from Billiot’s home.27 However, most scholars suggest that Indian schools funded by the parish school board did not exist until the 1940s, at the earliest. In the 1930s, the school board minutes state that an Indian school was in development after a visit from Roy Nash, Special Commissioner of Indian Affairs, who visited the parish in order to determine whether American Indians lived in the area; however, there is no evidence of any Indian school funded by the school board opening at that time.28

According to Bourgeois, Billiot insisted upon his children attending a white school. He stated, “Mr. Henry Billiot said he would rather see his children grow up in ignorance rather than draw the colored line if they could not attend the white school.”29 Bourgeois explained “There had been some misunderstanding between the white people of that ward [in which Billiot’s children would attend] and the people of Indian descent, as they called them. I have heard it said by people in the ward that the white people of that ward always objected to these children entering

27 There is no evidence within the school board minutes or scholarship on the subject to suggest an Indian school existed within Terrebonne Parish in 1915. Bourgeois was elected superintendent the same year that he visited the Billiot’s home. Bourgeois is often characterized by scholars to have lied about the existence of Indian schools. See Bowman and Janel Curry-Roper, The Houma People of Louisiana: A Story of Indian Survival (1982); Ng-A-Fook, An Indigenous Curriculum of Place: The United Houma Nation’s Contentious Relationship with Louisiana’s Educational Institutions (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007).
their school.” Bourgeois’s language throughout his testimony suggests that Indian ancestry for the Houma tribe was less debatable. He believed that the Houma had a noticeable black heritage. Historian Ariela Gross asserts that claims of black ancestry were not uncommon in the Jim Crow South. She states, “For those who lived in the borderlands between black and white, all it took for a family’s children to be barred from the white school was for one neighbor to charge another with having ‘negro blood.’” This was the case for the Billiot family who had to endure physical descriptions of multiple generations of their family through the memories of the white community in order to prove that an association with blackness existed.

Bourgeois, as the superintendent of schools, was one of the most influential people within the white community of Terrebonne Parish, especially in regard to the treatment of members of the Houma tribe. In the few instances that he mentioned the Houma at school board meetings over his tenure as Superintendent, 1914-1955, he referred to them as the “So-Called Indians” of Terrebonne Parish. In 1938, he also wrote a Master’s thesis on the subject of setting up an efficient school system within Louisiana, and he chose to devote an entire chapter to the “So-Called Indians of Terrebonne Parish.” In this chapter, Bourgeois explained that the Houma Indians had caused great problems for his school board because they refused to submit to having their children placed in segregated schools. He quickly attempted to clarify their racial definition:

They call themselves Indians, and claim a social status comparable to that of the white man. But, as a matter of fact, they are not Indians. They are the descendants of that union of the

33 Henry L. Bourgeois, Four Decades of Public Education in Terrebonne Parish (Master’s Thesis, Louisiana State University, 1938), iv.
Indian and the free *gens de couleur* of many generations back, with large infusions of white blood. They are pariahs. They disdain contact with the negroes, and they find the doors of the whites closed against them. Consequently, they have thrust themselves into an imaginary racial zone standing midway between the whites and the blacks.\textsuperscript{34}

Bourgeois continued his rant by stating that no American Indians live in Terrebonne Parish, and those Natives who once lived on that land were not the Houma. However, he claimed that any Native settlement in Terrebonne Parish is a moot point as “[T]he ‘Indians’ of the parish have few, if any, of the earmarks of their boasted ancestry. And if Indian blood ever coursed through their veins, it has been washed thin with white and colored infusions.”\textsuperscript{35}

Bourgeois broached the subject of school segregation by blaming the Houma Indians for causing so much trouble in their refusal to be segregated in schools. He claimed that they did not truly care about their children’s education; rather, he believed that their petition for rights to education was an excuse to seek equal status to white people. He stated, “But their interest and zeal have not been directed at their needs in school matters. They have sought a social or racial parity with the whites through the acceptance of their children in the white schools.”\textsuperscript{36} Furthermore, “Their illusions and social aspirations, like old sagas, perpetuate themselves from generation to generation, and these hapless souls continue their unavailing efforts to lift themselves from the milieu where circumstances have placed them.”\textsuperscript{37} As one of the key testimonies and as the acting interpreter and defendant in the 1917 court case, Bourgeois’s biased observations helped to shape the white community’s view of their legal right to create an imposed identity on the Houma people.

\textsuperscript{34} Henry L. Bourgeois, *Four Decades of Public Education in Terrebonne Parish*, 64.
\textsuperscript{35} Henry L. Bourgeois, *Four Decades of Public Education in Terrebonne Parish*, 65.
\textsuperscript{36} Henry L. Bourgeois, *Four Decades of Public Education in Terrebonne Parish*, 66.
Other citizens of Terrebonne Parish were also interviewed during the court proceedings, and they spent most of their time refusing to acknowledge that American Indians lived in the region and providing personal definitions for the term “colored.” One such citizen was Leufroy Chauvin, who lived close to Henry Billiot’s family. When asked the race of Billiot’s family, Chauvin replied that they were colored. He was then asked to define “colored,” he replied: “I don’t know what it means. They pass for colored people. That is all I can tell you.”38 Next, he was asked if American Indians lived in his neighborhood. He replied, “I never knew any.”39 He was also questioned on what he considered to be the race of Henry Billiot. Mr. Milling, the school board’s attorney, asked if he was black or white, and Chauvin replied “dark.” The way that Mr. Milling chose to clarify the term “dark” was to have Chauvin provide a physical description of Billiot:

Q: Was his hair kinky?
A: I never noticed his hair.
Q: Wasn’t his hair straight and black?
A: I never noticed the color.
Q: Was his nose flat?
A: I never noticed that.
Q: Were his lips thick?
A: Not necessarily.40

Following these questions, Mr. Milling explained that these questions were asked because “There is a good big difference between a white man’s lips and a negro’s lips…There is a big difference between the nose of a negro and that of a white man…There is a big difference

between the hair of a negro and the hair of a white man.”41 These questions were asked again to other witnesses.

The next testimony was provided by Marcel Falgout, a neighbor of the Billiot family for fifteen years. He was asked the same questions as discussed above, as well as further definitions of colored people. Falgout admitted that he called Henry Billiot and his family colored because he was instructed to do so as a child by his family, and that he was unsure as to its actual definition. However, he then stated that if he saw a full-blooded American Indian, he would call him an American Indian. He finally conceded after several more questions by Mr. Milling that a man must be part black to be considered “colored.”42

After a few more witnesses were called to discuss the general lineage of Henry Billiot, Felix Theriot was sworn in for direct examination. In 1897, Theriot was a teacher at a school in Pointe-au-Chien, Louisiana, which is known in the area to be home to Houma/Pointe-au-Chien Indians. It is within his testimony that the definition of the term “colored” is once again brought to the surface of the case. He was first questioned about what type of school he taught in Pointe-au-Chien, and he answered that the school was colored. He was then asked if he had any black pupils to which he responded he did not, but that some children who attended might have had black blood. This proceeded into a line of questions by Mr. Gagne, the Billiot’s attorney:

Q: Were you used to teach colored schools, Mr. Theriot?
A: You mean a negro school? I taught it as a mixed school.
Q: Mixed in what sense, Mr. Theriot?
A: There were different nationalities of blood. That what I mean by mixed.
Q: What were the nationalities of the ancestors of the children that you taught?

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A: They must have been a mixture of white blood or Indian blood.  

At this point, Mr. Gagne asked Felix Theriot to elaborate upon his definition of a *colored* person. He asked “Mr. Theriot, in order to fix in the record what you mean by a colored person, I ask you what would you class a child born of a full blooded white man and a full blooded Indian woman?” Theriot responded, “Class him as a colored child.” After this Mr. Milling asked Felix Theriot, “What is the common acceptance of the word “Colored” in the Country? In other words, when we speak of a colored man, what do we mean, and Indian or a white man?” to which Theriot responded, “It looks to me like he is considered a negro.” After this exchange, Felix Theriot was sworn out.

The next witness was Aurelie Theriot, a citizen of Houma who lived on Bayou Dularge near Henry Billiot. Aurelie Theriot was asked the status of Henry’s possible grandfather, King Billiot, to which Theriot claimed he associated in the town as a colored man. Aurelie Theriot was then asked his definition of the term “colored,” to which he replied, “I mean a man that is mixed up with Indian and black or black with white, that’s what I mean.” He was also asked if in Terrebonne Parish and the entire state of Louisiana the term colored referred to a man who was at least part black, and Aurelie Theriot agreed to that statement. Mr. Gagne proceeded with follow-up questions:

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46 Henry Billiot’s father, Severin Billiot claimed that his father was a Frenchman, but his mother had given him to Etienne (a.k.a King) Billiot as a child. However, in the census records Severin’s mother is listed in the 1850 census as married to Etienne Billiot, so it is possible that Etienne was, in fact, Severin’s biological father. See U.S. census records, Terrebonne Parish, 1850; Henry L. Billiot v. Terrebonne Parish School Board et al. 7876 (D.C. LA 1916), 6.
Q: Mr. Theriot, in this Parish of Terrebonne, what would a full blooded Indian be considered, a colored man or not?
A: An Indian is considered a free born American.
Q: Would he be considered a colored man?
A: I don’t believe.
Q: Would a child born from a full blooded Indian man and a full blooded white woman be considered a colored child?
A: They would be considered as mixed blood.
Q: Would he be considered a colored person?
A: No. I don’t believe, because colored means negro.48

Three more witnesses were deposed, and their questions revolved around the social life of King Billiot. They were asked who ate at his family’s home and if those whom he associated with were black. Ariela Gross has explained that reputation evidence, which she defines as “the testimony of neighbors as to how a person held himself out, how he was treated by his neighbors, and how he performed in social and civil life,” was a common occurrence in racial identity trials as it became widely accepted source of testimony in the twentieth century.49

The final witness in this trial was Levy Theriot, a member of the Bayou Dularge community, who knew King Billiot. Once again, the examiner asked if King Billiot was an Indian:

Q: Was old man King Billiot an Indian?
A: Sure he was. He was known as one.
Q: Was he a negro or an Indian.
A: I don’t know, but he was black.
Q: When you say black, do you mean the color of his hair?
A: No.

Q: Was he an Indian or a negro?

A: I can’t tell you what he was. I am under oath and in the Court room, but I am compelled to say that my grand-father, who was Aurelien Thibodaux, told me that King Billiot’s grandmother was a negress slave.\footnote{Henry L. Billiot v. Terrebonne Parish School Board et al, 7876 (D.C. LA 1916), 30.}

Finally, the examiner asked “Mr. Theriot, did you regard him as an Indian or a negro?” to which Theriot replied, “We did not know what he was. He was well looked upon by the people. He was not looked upon as a white man, but he was well considered by the whites.”\footnote{Henry L. Billiot v. Terrebonne Parish School Board et al, 7876 (D.C. LA 1916), 31.}

There was one testimony after Levy Theriot, by Taylor Beattie, the judge in the case, who issued a statement that said

King Billiot had in those days the reputation of claiming to be and being recognized as being the King or the Chief of the Houmas Tribe of Indians that settled in this portion of the State. The Houmas Tribe of Indians are a portion or sub-tribe of the Choctaws and lived on the River and on Lafourche before the Americans settled the Country. As to whether he was the Chief of them, I know nothing. That was his reputation.\footnote{Henry L. Billiot v. Terrebonne Parish School Board et al, 7876 (D.C. LA 1916), 31.}

After this, evidence was closed on the case. Beattie, the judge presiding over the case, who made the previous statement, had acknowledged the potential for Indian identity within the Houma tribe, but it was not enough to deter the community from the possibility that the Billiot family and other members of the Houma tribe might have black ancestors. The Jim Crow one drop rule was too important to the white community. The court ruled that Henry Billiot’s children would not be allowed to attend a white school because they were not white.\footnote{It is not specifically stated within the court records whether the case was tried before a jury or judge. The author of this thesis wrote under the assumption of a trial by jury.}

Though this court case only involved the ancestry of one family, the entire Houma tribe was impacted by the testimony and rulings of this court case, which often occurred in racial identity
cases of the twentieth century. Ariela Gross explained that these cases “no longer concerned primarily the status of an individual but rather the status of an entire group- not whether this individual is or is not a white person, but whether [the group]…should be considered white.” It was still unclear as to what the Houma community would label the Billiots, as well as the entire Houma tribe, at the end of this case. However, over the course of fifty years, one classification would become most favored by the white community of Terrebonne Parish: the derogatory term “Sabine.”

“Sabine”

It was not a unique phenomenon for white communities to create new labels for nearby indigenous groups that did not fit within the binary race system that existed under Jim Crow, especially when the indigenous group had not been recognized as an American Indian tribe by the United States government. Malinda Maynor Lowery, a scholar on the Lumbee Indians stated, “Under U.S. law, Indian tribes primarily had political identities, not racial ones. ‘Tribe’ and ‘race’ were not synonyms.” She continued, “Being a legally recognized ‘tribe’ created new opportunities for organizing to preserve autonomy, while being a socially acknowledged ‘race’ authorized white power and control.”

Because the Houma tribe had been rejected as an American Indian tribe in the nineteenth century by anthropologists who visited their community on behalf of the U.S. government, and had not yet petitioned for federal recognition, they had been placed in a precarious position in regard to their race and identity. Like the Houma, the Lumbee Indians of Robeson County, North

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Carolina, were classified under a derogatory term in order to remain inferior to white society after their refusal to be grouped together with the African American groups within the town. The term given to the Lumbee Indians was Croatan because of that region’s association with the legendary Croatan and Roanoke tribes of the sixteenth century. This term was then shortened to Cro, “with the derogatory association of Jim Crow.” Lowery provided an instance when a black citizen informed an anthropologist in the area that the Lumbee people believed themselves to be equal to white society and stated, “‘But I tell you, they ain’t nothing but Croatans.'” Once this term became generally accepted within the town, the Lumbee Indians petitioned to have their legal name changed to prevent such association.

Another instance of racial classification through the use of invented terminology occurred in Alabama, among the Mobile and Washington (MOWA) band of Choctaw. In this case, the MOWA Choctaw were often referred to as Cajuns. The use of Cajuns was established in the 1880s by an Alabama senator, who “reasoned that the group shared many characteristics with and resembled the Louisiana Cajuns.” Strikingly similar to the struggle of the Houma Indians, the MOWA Choctaw were classified in articles throughout the 1950s as “racial hybrids who were a combination of white, black and ‘possibly’ Indian and concluded that they were nothing more than an isolated community of African Americans with some white ancestry.” The MOWA Choctaw also fought primarily through the school systems in order to achieve validation.

61 Denise E. Bates, *The Other Movement*, 76.
62 Denise E. Bates, *The Other Movement*, 76.
of their American Indian identity, and eventually won the first part of their fight through the achievement of state recognition in 1979.

The situation for the Houma people in relation to the term *Sabine* is murkier than the groups previously mentioned. As stated earlier, there is no known origin for the term other than the knowledge that the word predates the 1917 case *Henry Billiot v. Terrebonne Parish School Board*. Another difference is that there are claims that the term might have originated within the Houma tribe. Claims to this effect are made by Max Stanton in his master’s thesis written in the 1960s. Stanton claims that the white community of Terrebonne Parish adopted the term *Sabine* from the Houma people, who would use it as a derogatory term for tribal members along the bayou that they believed to have African ancestors.63 There is a history of fractures within the Houma tribe as members from the lower section of the bayou often did not get along with members from the higher section of the bayou. This can be best seen in the 1990s as groups like the Pointe-au-Chien Tribe, originally considered to be Houma Indian, broke away from the Houma Nation and have since claimed alternative ancestry in separate petitions for federal recognition. However, there is no recorded evidence to support the claim that the term *Sabine* originated within the Houma Tribe.

When the term *Sabine* is mentioned in academic writing, the 1950 article by Sociologists Vernon Parenton and Roland Pellegrin is one of the first citations. Racist in nature, Parenton and Pellegrin claimed “Negro slaves accompanied the settlers and within a few years outnumbered their masters. Meanwhile, the process of intermixture among the Indians had continued….Moreover, by 1907…the Indians had mixed with whites and Negroes to such an

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extent that they no longer maintained their racial identity. A racial hybrid, the ‘Sabine,’ had come into being."\textsuperscript{64}

Parenton and Pellegrin only referred to the Houma Indians as \textit{Sabines} for the rest of their essay because they believed that they had just discovered a new racial classification. They broke their essay into categories such as “number and distribution,” “age,” and even “fertility.” Under the category of “race,” Parenton and Pellegrin wrote:

While it is known that the Sabines are a tri-racial people, it has not been established that either the white or Indian admixture is the predominant one. Certainly the Negro is not. In appearance, many seem white; i.e., their skin color, hair form, nasal form, etc. are characteristics of whites. Too, a significant number have some of the identifying features of the Indian. On the other hand, a few have dominant Negroidal characteristics and could not be otherwise identified except by careful inspection.\textsuperscript{65}

Parenton and Pellegrin also claimed that the \textit{Sabines} suffered from serious physical ailments, using language often seen in medical histories referencing populations who had racial intermixing.\textsuperscript{66} They stated, “The Sabines are a rather hardy people; nevertheless, many of them suffer from physical ailments of a more or less serious nature….they often fear and distrust doctors, and consult \textit{traiteurs} (healers) of their own group, who attempt to assuage their maladies by copious use of herbs, prayers, mystic signs, etc.”\textsuperscript{67} The authors went through various other scientific definitions, and concluded their paper with the statement, “it appears that the plight of the Sabines has been maintained primarily as a result of their racial, social, and cultural

This essay was the culmination of racist thought toward the Houma Indians created by the community of Terrebonne Parish, particularly the beliefs held by Henry Bourgeois, who was still superintendent of schools at the time of its publication. However, not all who visited the Houma Tribe and interacted with the surrounding society believed that a Sabine race existed.

In 1931, Roy Nash, an anthropologist and Special Commissioner for the Office of Indian Affairs, traveled through Louisiana and met with the Houma Indians. He claimed that they came from mixed heritage, where most was a mix of Indian and French, but five percent had definite African blood, which had created the problem of Houma education since the one drop rule under Jim Crow was still in full effect and had been proven in *Henry Billiot v. Terrebonne Parish School Board (1917)*. However, he did not mention the term Sabine as a reference to their race; instead he chose “Indian mixed bloods.” Nash still advocated for their rights as American Indians and petitioned the Terrebonne Parish School Board and the Louisiana State school board to build the Houma tribe a school. He ended his observations by stating, “One can only pity a state where three sets of public schools are required to educate American citizens.”

Nash also visited with the Coushatta tribe in Southwest Louisiana, and he observed a major contrast between the two tribes as he observed them. At the time of his report, the Coushatta had not yet been federally recognized and were in a similar economic situation as the Houma. However, he stated that the economic situation of the Coushatta was no different from

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69 Roy Nash Reports, Mss. 2819, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La, 9.
70 Roy Nash Reports, Mss. 2819, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La, 9.
the poor white people of the community.\textsuperscript{71} As far as the subject of educational opportunities was concerned, the Coushatta had a more equal experience to white children. For elementary education, the Coushatta had a school on their reservation, and if any child desired to attend high school, “all these Indian children have to do is to go out on the highway and hail the bus which carries white and Indian alike to the public schools in Elton.”\textsuperscript{72} Furthermore, Nash claimed “Far from discriminating against them, the schools of Elton regard the Indians as favorites because of their athletic prowess.”\textsuperscript{73}

Very little has been written on the subject of the Coushatta Tribe of Louisiana; however, based upon the observations made by Nash, one might conclude that the community of Elton, Louisiana, did not have as much reason to doubt the validity of the Coushatta Tribe’s Indian identity. According to their tribe’s website, the Coushatta has strong historical evidence to support their Indian status going back to first contact in 1540. The Coushatta had no problem proving their American Indian status to the federal government, and they were federally recognized in 1973.\textsuperscript{74} It is possible that the Coushatta did not experience Jim Crow segregation policies because there was never any ambiguity toward their Indian identity. Though they were not federally recognized in 1931, the tribe had its own school on a reservation. The Houma Nation was not as organized, did not have a recognized chief, and did not have access to tribal land, thus throwing them into a state of racial uncertainty within Terrebonne Parish.

\textbf{Margie Naquin et al. v. Terrebonne Parish School Board (1963)}

\textsuperscript{71} Roy Nash Reports, Mss. 2819, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La, 7.
\textsuperscript{72} Roy Nash Reports, Mss. 2819, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La, 5.
\textsuperscript{73} Roy Nash Reports, Mss. 2819, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La, 5.
The Houma Nation finally received its validation of American Indian identity through the court case *Margie Naquin et al. v. Terrebonne Parish School Board (1963)*, which overturned the *Henry Billiot v. Terrebonne Parish School Board (1917)* decision that Houma Indian children could not attend white schools because these children might be part black. This decision came after fifty years of restrictions in education of the Houma Nation by the Terrebonne Parish school board as a result of the utilization of Jim Crow policies. This court case decision occurred almost ten years after *Brown v. Board of Education (1954)*, and it only allowed for the integration of Indian children into white schools. Complete desegregation of Terrebonne Parish schools did not occur until 1967 after the case *Redman v. Terrebonne Parish School Board*.

The Terrebonne Parish school board minutes briefly mentioned the decision of *Brown v. Board of Education*. Henry Bourgeois was in his final year as superintendent of schools at the time of the landmark decision, and his only response was to ask the school board to halt the construction of a new Indian school in case desegregation was forced upon the white community at the start of the next school year.\(^75\)

Between 1922 and 1944, the education of Houma children was almost exclusively done through missionary schools as a result of the school board’s refusal to provide public education opportunities for the indigenous community. In 1922, five years after the Billiot case, the Methodist Church had begun working with the Houma community, and by 1932, a Methodist mission school had been established for Houma children.\(^76\) By 1938, 262 Indian children were enrolled at the Methodist school.\(^77\) A total of four church-related schools had been established for the Houma community by 1939, of which two were Baptist and two were Methodist. Before

\(^{75}\) School Board minutes, Houma, July 13, 1954, Record book vol. 5, p. 415.
this, the Houma community was primarily Catholic, but the Catholic Church did not wish to allocate resources to educate the Houma people. As a result, many tribal members converted from Catholicism to either the Baptist or Methodist faith.\textsuperscript{78}

In 1940, a Catholic school did open at Bayou Pointe-aux-Chien called St. Isaac Jogues School, and its teacher salaries were paid by the Terrebonne Parish School Board.\textsuperscript{79} Because the Catholic school was financed through the School Board, the Church also petitioned Bourgeois to finance transportation for the Houma children to attend the school. This was refused, and many children had to “walk or paddle in their pirogues four to seven miles just to attend the Catholic school in Lower Terrebonne parish.”\textsuperscript{80} In 1939, Superintendent Henry L. Bourgeois announced the construction of four Indian schools for the Houma tribe; however, only one, the Lower Montegut Indian School, is remembered by the community, and it supposedly opened for the 1942-1943 school year, though tribal members do not remember a school before 1944. Teachers were paid fifty dollars a month, and the school year was only eight months long.\textsuperscript{81} At the time of the Indian School’s opening in 1942, a census declared 536 Houma Indian children to be an educable age, of which 345 children were registered in the missionary schools and 155 children who were not receiving an education.\textsuperscript{82}

It was not until 1944 that a more permanent Indian school was put in place for Indian children. The Dulac School was originally a single hall within the Dulac Catholic Church, where Indian students could be taught by two women who had only secured a high school education. By 1953, the school board, with the help of the Methodist missionaries, moved the school to a

\textsuperscript{78} Ng-A-Fook, An Indigenous Curriculum of Place, 45.  
\textsuperscript{79} Ng-A-Fook, An Indigenous Curriculum of Place, 45.  
\textsuperscript{80} Ng-A-Fook, An Indigenous Curriculum of Place, 47.  
\textsuperscript{81} Ng-A-Fook, An Indigenous Curriculum of Place, 46.  
\textsuperscript{82} Ng-A-Fook, An Indigenous Curriculum of Place, 47.
five classroom building.\textsuperscript{83} The school continued to grow with more Indian children in attendance each year.

In 1957, it was recommended that the Dulac School move to a former black school because the African-American community had received a new building and its former building was vacant. The Indian community was opposed to its children attending a school located within the African-American community.\textsuperscript{84} The reason for this opposition of the Houma tribe was likely fear of the implications that might occur if tribal members were associated with the black community in any way as they were still fighting the white community’s assertion of the Houma’s black identity validated in the 1917 Billiot case.

In 1955, Henry L. Bourgeois announced his retirement. School board regulations had required that he retire the year previously, but the community circulated a petition with the help of school board members asking that he remain active for one more year.\textsuperscript{85} Before Bourgeois’s final term as superintendent concluded, he died. Grief was felt within the white society of the parish as he had been a fixture of the community for multiple generations, upholding Jim Crow traditions within the school system for the entirety of his tenure. His replacement was Carlton Miller, a man who had been working for the school board for over twenty years under Bourgeois. There is little difference within the school board minutes to denote a change in tone from Bourgeois to Miller. Miller continued the tradition of referring to the local indigenous population as “So-

\textsuperscript{83} School Board minutes, Houma, July 13, 1954, Record book vol. 5, p. 415.
\textsuperscript{84} Ng-A-Fook, An Indigenous Curriculum of Place, 51.
Called Indians,” and even provided the definition of the term Sabine in his deposition for Margie Naquin et al v. Terrebonne Parish School Board.86

The questioning involved in the deposition of Carlton Miller by John P. Nelson, a New Orleans based Civil Rights attorney who volunteered his services for the Houma Indians, consisted of proving to the court that white schools and Indians schools were not equal and should be integrated. Most of the questioning referred specifically to the unequal status of the two schools, but Nelson also had to establish how Miller, and the white society within Terrebonne Parish, classified the Houma Indian tribe. The racial classifications described by Miller show a direct connection to the 1917 Billiot case as Miller used similar reputation-based testimony, which can be seen when Nelson asked Miller, “what is the basis for determining whether a child is Indian or not?” and Miller responded, “Well, that was just handed down for years and years…It was established from a family name, the name of the family.”87 This is in reference to the five historically Indian family names associated with the Houma Nation, including both Billiot and Naquin.

Differing from the 1917 case, Miller used the term Sabine directly to classify the Houma Nation.

Nelson asked

Q: And in your teaching have you considered these students and their families that are assigned to the Indian schools, historically have you considered these people as Indians?

A: No.

Q: What race would you consider these people?

86 School Board minutes, Houma, October 27, 1964, Record book vol. 7, p. 102. Miller lists the Houma Indian children a “a group known as Indians.” In the case Margie Naquin et al v. Terrebonne Parish School Board, John P. Nelson Jr. papers, 1957-74, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, box 4, folder 11, p.7., he calls the group “So-Called Indians.”

A: We call them sabines.
Q: What is your definition of a sabine?
A: Amalgamated person of different races.  

Nelson continued this line of questioning to include Miller’s use of this term in comparison to the white community.

Q: What distinction do you draw between them and caucasians? What is this distinction based on as far as you are concerned?
A: As far as I’m concerned its based upon a mixed race.
Q: And insofar as you are concerned – I know you can’t speak for anybody else, but it is your feeling they are not members of the caucasian race, is that right?
A: That’s the way I think of them.
Q: As superintendent of schools in Terrebonne Parish is this the reason why they are assigned to particular schools?
A: Not being Caucasian?
Q: Yes.
A: I think so.  

The case was won by the Houma Indians, the Billiot case had been reversed, and integration had to occur between white and Indian schools. Brenda Dardar Robichaux was one of the first Indian students to attend the integrated schools in Terrebonne Parish. In 2010, Louisiana State University conducted an oral history with her, in which she described what life was like for her family before and after the 1963 Naquin case.

Robichaux was born in 1958, and lived below Golden Meadow, Louisiana. Robichaux began school after the Naquin case, but she was told stories by her parents about their school

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experiences. Indian schools only consisted of grade kindergarten through grade seven, and the teachers were only required to have a high school diploma. There were no roads down the bayou, so a school boat would pick children up for school. She also explained that many members of the Houma tribe moved to New Orleans in the 1930s and 1940s, where children could attend white schools and discriminatory practices were less frequent as anonymity would be more easily established in a large city. Robichaux stated that after the Naquin case, since integration in Terrebonne Parish was strictly limited to the Houma Indians, it was more difficult for her to attend an (almost) all-white school.

Throughout her childhood Robichaux remembered that American Indians, specifically the Houma Indians, could not live within the corporation limits of Golden Meadow. In fact, the Houma Indians could not even attend church in Golden Meadow, so they had their own church down the bayou. However, white members of the community still attended the Indian church, which was segregated by aisles well into Robichaux’s adulthood. This account shows that by the 1950s, segregation between the white community and the Houma Indians occurred in every aspect of their society, not just within the public school system. By this time there were more roads connecting the Indian population to the rest of the community, allowing for more opportunities of discrimination.

Below Golden Meadow, where many Houma Indians resided, there were no doctors or post offices. They used a healer, Robichaux’s grandfather, who held business in his home and accepted trades, often various vegetables from neighbor gardens, in exchange for his services.

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90 Also mentioned in Ng-A-Fook, An Indigenous Curriculum of Place, 50.
91 Brenda Dardar Robichaux oral history interview, 2010, Mss. L: 4700, 2100, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, LA.
92 Brenda Dardar Robichaux oral history interview, 2010, Mss. L: 4700, 2100, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, LA.
Their community did have a single grocery store, church, as previously mentioned, and a bar/dance hall. She also explained that oil companies tricked many tribal members of valuable property. Houma Indians would make what they believed to be a purchase of property and the home on said property; however, there was often a clause that stipulated that the buyer could only live there until the day he died. This often resulted in families being forced to pay rent on their family home and property or even move after the death of an elder.93

The successful reversal of segregation policy as it pertained to American Indians within Terrebonne Parish did not completely guarantee the Houma Nation its Indian identity. In 1965, an article published by Ann Fischer still referred to the Houma as “So-Called Indians.” Fischer was an anthropologist from Tulane who lived with the Houma Indians for a summer and motivated John P. Nelson to take on the 1963 Naquin case. She was an advocate for the Houma Indians, but still could not accept their identity.

Fischer claimed, “[T]hose who have some claim to Indian ancestry are known as so-called Indians. This term is apt for a people of tenuous racial status and mixed ancestry.” She continued, “The Houma, a group of so-called Indians of Louisiana, live in scatter settlements isolated from the Negro settlements of the same area.”94 Her use of this term was a safe way to appease the Houma Indians in a way that validated their ability to call themselves American Indian, while reserving her own beliefs on their identity, which she revealed later in her article. She explained, “Ruth Underhill says, in a report to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and I agree, that ‘It is the opinion of the writer that Houma has become a generic name for a number of

93 Brenda Dardar Robichaux oral history interview, 2010, Mss. L: 4700, 2100, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, LA.
Muskogian remnants which mixed and concentrated in southern Louisiana.” In other words, the use of the name Houma is a blanket term to encompass the multiple tribes that were nearing extinction in the eighteenth century who absorbed each other over time. This was a small improvement from past anthropologists who refuted the Houma’s Indian status by perpetuating alternative racist classifications such as Sabine.

The Houma Indian tribe did succeed in becoming a state-recognized tribe in 1972, which, at least partly, solidified their American Indian status, and helped reverse sentiments created by the Billiot case in 1917. However, the Houma tribe did not yet know the lasting damage of the school integration that occurred after the Naquin case. Though they now had a more equal status to the white community and a clearer separation from the black community, the Houma tribe had forfeited a large part of their American Indian cultural heritage through the assimilation that occurred when they gained entrance to public schools.

In the public school system, Houma Indians were forced to speak English rather than Houma and French. Also, they were not taught cultural traditions of the Houma tribe. Nicholas Ng-A-Fook, an education scholar who worked closely with the Houma Nation, asserted “Although gaining access to the colonial education system during the 1940s helped the United Houma Nation integrate into colonialism’s culture, many youth have lost, and are losing touch with the traditional- historical, ecological, and cultural- knowledge of elders.” This is a common concern for American Indian tribes throughout the United States as many tribes were forced to send their children to boarding schools in order to more quickly assimilate to white culture. However, it is uncommon for a tribe like the Houma to face this problem because they fought for

this assimilation as a way to prevent themselves from being labeled black. In other words, in order to claim their Indian identity, they had to lose the cultural heritage that went with it.

The Houma Nation now has programs available that teach youth the Houma languages and customs. Laws are now in place that encourage the teaching of American Indian children by American Indian teachers, such as the Indian Education Act (1972). The United Houma Nation also established a summer camp at Bayou Signette State Park, located just outside of New Orleans in the city of Westwego, where Houma Indian children spend a week with Houma elders and instructors who teach the children Houma culture and traditions.97

However, in great irony, H.L Bourgeois High School opened in Terrebonne Parish in 1973, is nicknamed “The Reservation” with a school mascot of an American Indian Brave, a fight song entitled “Cherokee,” a dance team called the Raindancers, and a series of publications including *Smoke Signals* (monthly newspaper), *Shaman* (yearly literary magazine), and *The Calumet* (the yearbook). This school is still open in Terrebonne Parish, displaying an obvious example of the appropriation of a racist nature that this community still reserves for the Houma Nation and its quest for an American Indian identity as its petition for federal recognition has since been denied.

The tumultuous relationship between the Houma Nation and the Terrebonne Parish School Board has existed since the school system was established. However, the fight did not truly begin until Henry Billiot insisted that his children receive an education equal to the education of a white child in *Henry Billiot v. Terrebonne Parish School Board (1917)*. This suit created problems that Billiot could not have foreseen as the court case was used by the white community to establish

their own perceived black identity for the Houma Nation in order to prevent them from entering a white school. It did not matter that the Billiot family identified as American Indian and believed that they navigated the “white line” of society. The Jim Crow South would not allow a group perceived to be non-white to inhabit the same space as a white group.

As the decades passed after the 1917 case, the Houma Nation found ways in which to educate their American Indian children in spite of the continued evolution of their racial classification as *Sabines* that was created by the white community. Finally, in 1963, the Houma Nation achieved a degree of equality through their successful suit against the Terrebonne Parish School Board, which reversed the decision handed down in the 1917 case. From 1917 to 1963, the Houma Nation fought Jim Crow policies exerted by the white community of Terrebonne Parish, who sought to maintain white superiority through the rejection of Houma Indian identity as a result of black ancestry. Only time will tell if the Houma Nation receives its final validation of Indian identity through federal recognition; however, the tribe has validated itself through its re-education programs which have reclaimed aspects of their cultural heritage previously lost through the assimilation that occurred with public school integration.

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Figure 1: Map of Louisiana, where yellow highlighting shows Louisiana Parishes, particularly Terebonne and Lafourche, where Houma tribe settled. http://dogsanddoubles.com/phototbdc/terrebonne-parish-map
Figure 2: 1879 map of Terrebonne Parish, including waterways on which the Houma tribe settled, including Bayou Terrebonne, Bayou Lafourche, and Bayou DuLarge. http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~laterreb/1879map.htm
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