Long before the Civil War, New Orleans’ free people of color had established themselves as a vital and often unruly factor in the city’s political and civic life.

Well educated, often through private schools in the city and universities in the North or abroad, many were solid members of the petit bourgeoisie, while some few were exceptionally wealthy. This black creole caste had built a tradition of challenging racial restrictions over decades, through legal strategy, manipulation of regulatory systems, and occasionally direct conflict. Many of those who would emerge as political leaders during the tumultuous period of Union occupation and Reconstruction had also fought at the Battle of New Orleans, or served in the Union army as part of the Louisiana Native Guard.

In 1863, Louis Charles Roudanez – black creole, a University of Paris and Dartmouth-educated physician with a thriving practice – became the founder of L’Union, a French-language tri-weekly newspaper. L’Union was printed in the spirit of the Creole class: “it is not the time to follow in the path of white leaders; it is time to be leaders ourselves.” His editor, Paul Trévigne, a black creole educator with literary inclinations, incorporated poetry and literature into the paper’s political agenda. Printed in French when most blacks spoke only English and few read, L’Union was essentially a creole caste paper; Trévigne’s editorials were erratic in supporting civil rights while accepting social and economic distinctions in their application. Nonetheless, some whites found L’Union’s political message threatening. Calls to burn the building and murder Trévigne combined with limited circulation shut the paper down in July 1864.

Two weeks after L’Union’s closure, Roudanez would launch a bilingual and far more militant publication, the New Orleans Tribune, which advocated relentlessly for universal male suffrage and universal education, along with land tenure and labor reform, while pushing its readers to organize the tumultuous period of Union occupation and Reconstruction had also fought at the Battle of New Orleans, or served in the Union army as part of the Louisiana Native Guard.

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The Tribune group’s most visible white members were Radical lawyer Thomas Durant, who as a leader in the Union Associations offered sharp opposition to pursuing universal suffrage at the state level and without Federal guarantees, citing the near certainty of a violent response. His foresight was soon validated, likely cold comfort as he fled the city and to Mexico on the same underground routes.

Sources: