

DARE Newsletter

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Dictionary of American Regional English

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Connie Eble at Oakland Plantation in Natchitoches, Louisiana, the oldest permanent town in the Louisiana Purchase territory, founded 1714

DARE and the Louisiana Purchase

Connie Eble

During the meeting of the Modern Language Association in New Orleans in December 2001, I played tourist in my hometown. As I walked across Jackson Square, I saw a large banner stretched across the upper story of the Cabildo: "Louisiana Purchase Bicentennial 2003." I was taken aback. Almost half a century had passed since, as a fifth-grader, I had crossed the same square with my mother and her eighth-grade Louisiana history students on a field trip occasioned by the *sesquicentennial* of the Louisiana

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Funding Update

David Simon

Director of Development

The *Dictionary of American Regional English* is fortunate to have supporters all around the United States. Interest in the *Dictionary* extends literally from Maine to Florida, from Michigan to Texas, and from Washington to Arizona.

DARE has many different kinds of supporters. Many of you make financial gifts to the *Dictionary*, which enables our work to continue. Some people write a check each year to *DARE*. Other individu-

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Purchase. On December 20, 1803, at this very place, then a muddy military parade ground called the Place d'Armes, the French flag had come down and the flag of the United States had gone up.

In 1953 the year-long commemoration of this event was thrilling to a child of romantic bent. The word *sesquicentennial* itself was a source of pride, as I mastered its pronunciation, meaning, spelling, and the explanation that it meant "a half of one hundred plus one hundred." Editorial cartoonist John Chase doled out the history of Louisiana and of the Louisiana Purchase in the newspaper day after day, three or four frames at a time. From this comic strip I learned about James Monroe and Robert Livingston from the United States and Napoleon's ministers with the grand-sounding names François Barbé-Marbois and Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord. At a book fair held in the gym of a local high school, I even met John Chase, who inscribed my mother's copy of his book *Frenchmen, Desire, Good Children and Other Streets of New Orleans* with a small sketch. But at the time, I confess, I was more excited to meet the author of the book I chose, *The Pirate Lafitte and the Battle of New Orleans*, folklorist Robert Tallant. This was probably the first book event I ever attended, and the first authors I ever met.

This year's bicentennial celebration of the Louisiana Purchase included the sumptuous exhibit *Jefferson's America and Napoleon's France* at the New Orleans Museum of Art, the ongoing publication of volumes in *The Louisiana Purchase Bicentennial Series in Louisiana History* by the Center for Louisiana Studies at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, and many books reassessing the event, its causes and consequences, and its principal players. However, I have found little in the way of language study—though it was the Louisiana Purchase that guaranteed American English passage across the Mississippi River and eventually across the continent, making English the language of the United States from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

The territory that opened to English two hundred years ago was vast—827,192 square miles—covering now the entirety or major part of thirteen states. *DARE* is currently the best repository of the effects that the Louisiana Purchase had on the English language. The pages of *DARE* hold many regional expressions that were born in the westward trek of American English, and in some in-

stances are still alive. Some regionalisms were transplanted to portions of the Louisiana Territory by English-speaking Americans from east of the Mississippi River. Others arose on site. Still others preserved vocabulary from Native American and previous European inhabitants of the areas. The indices compiled for the first three volumes of *DARE* by Luanne von Schneidemesser and Allan Metcalf (*Publication of the American Dialect Society* 77 [1993] and 82 [1999]) list *DARE* entries by region and state, allowing users to pull together and study the vocabulary of a particular geographic area. I have done that elsewhere for the Louisiana terms in the first three volumes. In the Winter 2002 issue of *American Speech* dedicated to the memory of Frederic Cassidy, von Schneidemesser shows that *DARE* entries can also contribute to the understanding of settlement history, focusing her study on German-speaking immigrants. I take the opportunity here to use selected entries from the recently published Volume IV (P–Sk) of *DARE* to show how English adapted to life in the first state created from the Louisiana Purchase territory, Louisiana.

At the time of the Louisiana Purchase, inhabitants of European and African heritage were concentrated in the southernmost part of the colony, with the port city of New Orleans its economic and cultural center. Even though the colony had been under the rule of Spain for almost forty years, the language of the colonists, slaves, and free people of color was generally some form of French. Indeed, French remained the language of everyday life in the Acadian parishes of the southern part of the state until the middle of the twentieth century. It is not surprising, then, that the vocabulary of Louisiana documented in *DARE* shows the influence of French.

The letter P alone offers many obvious examples of direct borrowings from French. *Paille-en-queue* is a Louisiana name for a pintail duck, literally "straw-in-tail." *Paille fine*, "fine straw," is a grass that grows on the open plains of southwestern Louisiana. *Le pape*, "the pope," applies to a variety of small, colorful birds; *pied jaune* to birds with long, yellow legs; *pique bois*, "stick wood," to any kind of "woodpecker"; and *plongeur*, "diver," to birds that dive. *Pissenlit*, "urinate in bed," is the name of a common wildflower with a yellow center that looks like an aster. (Children were told not to pick it, or else they would wet the bed that night.)

Perhaps the most widely known French word referring to wildlife is *poule d'eau*, literally "water

hen," commonly spelled *pulldoo* or *pooldoo* and pronounced to match one of those spellings. In Louisiana, *pooldoo* are lowly waterfowl and not prized game birds as ducks are. *Pooldoo* meat tastes fishy. In the past, *pooldoo* lived in great numbers on the borders of the marshes and would do for food when other wildlife was scarce. In hard times they were the most readily available source of protein, and many families depended on them. It is said that Catholics even had a dispensation to eat them on Fridays because *pooldoo* were as much fish as fowl.

The *DARE* entries for these and for other French borrowings into English that name plants and animals contain dated citations. *Pape*, for example, is first attested in a history of Louisiana written in French in 1758 and most recently in the Reinecke Collection of 1983. Most of the French borrowings above, however, carry no citations from after 1983. Recent popular lexicons of Cajun French and Cajun English in print or on the Web almost never include these examples culled from *DARE*, with the possible exception of *pooldoo*. The loss of these borrowings among current Louisianans reflects the fact that the younger generations do not fish, hunt, trap, and farm as a way of life and thus are not so attuned to nature as their forebears were. They are not opposed to using French words; they simply do not have specific vocabulary for these referents at all.

Pecan (with the stress on the open o sound of the second syllable, as in *lawn*) and *pirogue* are part of the English vocabulary of every Louisianan. Though filtered through French phonology in Louisiana, they both were early borrowings from indigenous North American languages and were widely disseminated. *Pecan* is originally from an Algonquian language. The second citation for *pecan* in *DARE* dates from 1772 and is a description in Spanish of the nut called "*Pacanos*" written by Antonio de Ulloa, Spanish governor of Louisiana from 1766 to 1768. Ulloa, an internationally known scientist who had spent most of his adult life in Spain's colonies in the New World, was expelled from Louisiana by disgruntled French colonists. His written reports of his observations remain valuable to a wide range of scholars, including historians of language. The word *pirogue* came to Louisiana via Spanish *piragua*, originally from the language of the Caribans in the West Indies. *DARE*'s early citations of *pirogue*, the earliest dated 1810, come from the Upper Mississippi Valley. Most of the twentieth-century evidence, though,

locates *pirogue* chiefly in Louisiana and Mississippi, where it refers to a canoe-shaped, flat-bottomed wooden boat used in shallow water. As the Louisiana saying goes, the *pirogue* can "float on the dew."

Other French borrowings in the P's show the persistence of French heritage in other spheres. *Parrain*, "godfather," and *pépère*, "grandfather," are still commonly used, even among families that have long abandoned the French language and families that have no French ancestry at all. *Passé*, from French *passer*, "pass," is a game of "pitch and catch, often with an object, not a ball, owned or valued by the third person, from whom the other two try to withhold it." *Pain perdu*, sometimes called by its English equivalent, *lost bread*, is the homey term for "French toast." *DARE*'s report of the spelling *pan-pan-doux* suggests the kind of folk-etymology that occurs regularly with foreign borrowings and probably verifies that its originators know French imperfectly if at all. The *pièce de résistance* of Louisiana food with French names is, perhaps, the *praline*, "a patty of candy made usually with brown sugar and pecans," first attested in 1893. Natives pronounce it with an open o or low back vowel in the first syllable, and it used to be common to hear a version with metathesis, as if spelled *plarine*. (That was my grandmother's pronunciation.) *DARE*'s citation for *praline* from the March 15, 1997, issue of the *New York Times* even points to the reason for the robustness of this borrowing from French: "A recent health study ranked New Orleans as the most obese city in the United States. . . ."

The local expression *not worth a picayune*, "worthless," preserves an approximation to French *picailon*, a coin worth one-sixteenth of a Spanish silver dollar, in circulation in the early nineteenth century. *Picayune* is first attested in 1804 and today is best known as part of the name of the daily newspaper, the *Times-Picayune*.

The verb *pass* in Louisiana English is influenced by the use of *passer* in French. In Louisiana, someone who *passes by* your house stops, enters, and usually stays for a visit. The phrases *pass a mop*, *pass a broom*, and *pass a cloth* are common equivalents to "mop," "sweep," and "wipe with a cloth." And a stereotypic expression in Cajun English is *pass a good time*.

Not all regionalisms from Louisiana have French in their history. For example, *poor boy*, "a long sandwich on French bread," was apparently creat-

ed and named in New Orleans early in the twentieth century.

Many expressions used in Louisiana are found in adjoining states as well. The verb *peel*, "to shell, hull, or husk," is also found in Texas and along the Gulf Coast, as is *pygmy rattler* for a short rattlesnake native to the Southeast and elsewhere called a *ground rattler*. *Puredee*, "genuine, real," as in "pure-d dumb," occurs in Louisiana and throughout the South and South Midland.

This brief tribute to the bicentennial of the Louisiana Purchase, and to *DARE*, is limited to entries that begin with P, where words with Louisiana provenance tend to reflect the French heritage of the area. The remaining letters of Volume IV include other words, with their own stories, showing how American English developed in Louisiana after the Louisiana Purchase. Among them are *racacha*, *redbone*, *redbug*, *roup-garou*, *second line*, *shell road*, and *shotgun house*. The completion of *DARE* and its combined index will provide an incomparable resource to assess the linguistic consequences of important historic events like the Louisiana Purchase, the Civil War, and World War II. ♦

Connie Eble is a native of New Orleans, where she lived until she completed her B.A. at St. Mary's Dominican College. She holds a Ph.D. in Linguistics from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and has taught there as the English Department's linguist since 1971. She is Editor of American Speech.



Funding Update

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als send gifts of stock. In recent years, the *Dictionary of American Regional English* has received a growing number of estate gifts from people who want to see the *Dictionary* reach the letter Z.

Every gift to the *Dictionary of American Regional English* is very important. Each gift helps financially, of course. Your generosity is also a wonderful reminder of the value that you place on our work. We treasure that vote of confidence.

An estate gift is a special gift. In almost every case, I have had the opportunity to speak with the donor during his or her lifetime and learn why *DARE* has been selected as a recipient of the estate gift. Sometimes the individual expresses a special respect for Fred Cassidy, *DARE*'s founder. Other times it is the high quality of the work being done at the *Dictionary of American Regional English* that catches the donor's eye. Or perhaps it is the ability to make a significant difference that attracts the person's generosity. There have also been other reasons.

Every gift to *DARE* helps our work move toward completion. This notion is not taken lightly.

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Notes and Quotes

Here are some samples from our recent mail. If you'd like to describe your experiences with this wonderfully varied language of ours, feel free to get in touch with us at the addresses listed on the mailing page of this Newsletter.

"I loved the article by Richard Davis [in the Spring/Summer 2003 issue]. . . . Just as with Richard Davis, many of my students are confessing that they have learned not to judge others based on their speech. . . . When they surveyed people for lexical variation, many were frustrated and rather saddened by how sensitive people are about their dialects. Now that they feel themselves enlightened dialectologists, I hope many will become champions of regional variation. I'm encouraging those who are going into teaching to consider letting their pupils conduct surveys of their own. Long live *DARE* and may it continue to inspire!"

Stephanie Hysmith
Ohio University

"*DARE* has become my favorite reading and has helped me in the Blue Ridge Mountains section of the novel I'm now working on."

Tom Wolfe
New York

"In the late 90's when I was at U. Va., I discovered the *DARE* at the main library. . . . I took it upon myself to try to answer the fundamental, burning question, 'Where do people say *pop* and where do people say *soda*?' There were only three volumes, the ones from A to O. Opening one up, I found *exactly* what I was looking for—wonderful little demographic maps, state by state, showing the places where different colloquial terms are used. 'This is *wonderful!*' I thought. 'Someone in the reference reading room here must have the other volume.' . . . Hearing the story [about *DARE* on National Public Radio] today, I figured there must be a new volume! . . . It has P *but only goes to Sk*. And thus 'pop' must be covered, but 'soda' must once again be left in the dust. Can you help a guy out?" [DARE Ed: We were happy to send Douglas an article by Editor Luanne von Schneidemesser about the panoply of synonyms for carbonated beverages, including *DARE* maps for twelve of them.]

Douglas Blair
Germantown, Maryland



Judith A. Taylor, Volunteer

Volunteer Profile

In this continuing series of profiles of the people who make *DARE* a reality, Joan Hall interviews Judith A. Taylor, a language lover who has been a volunteer for the project for more than sixteen years.

Q: We first met in an organization called Women in Communications, Inc., so I know that your career involved working with language. What kinds of writing or editing did you do?

A: In my twenty-six years of working for UW–Madison and UW System Administration, I did a variety of writing and editing. I started out in 1961 editing the course catalog for the College of Letters and Science—this was before the use of computers and automated typesetting—and worked my way through all the schools and colleges. I gained considerable knowledge of the variety of courses taught on the campus.

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"Thanks again for the wonderful presentation [about *DARE*] to my class; you may find half of them beseeching employment with *DARE*! You did make a number of converts who up to then thought that dialect study was trivial and dilettantish, fit only for retired gentlemen and ladies in sensible shoes."

Edward Callary
Northern Illinois University

Over the years I produced a couple of newsletters, which taught me to write concisely to fit a limited space. I also wrote or edited a variety of informational and promotional publications for students and the general public, and I answered inquiries from the Board of Regents, system administrators, legislators, and the general public. One question that remained constant throughout the years was “Why can’t I get better football tickets?”

Q: How did you first become aware of the *DARE* project?

A: I was aware of Prof. Cassidy and his dictionary throughout the years I worked at the UW because he had a worldwide reputation. When I “retired” to keep my husband company in his retirement, I looked around for something worthwhile to do, and I came across an article that noted *DARE* was looking for volunteers. That was in 1987.

Q: What kinds of tasks has our volunteer coordinator asked you to do for *DARE*?

A: At first I did a lot of filing of paper quote slips; then I progressed to using the computer to transfer quotes and information into the central database. I spent quite a while going through *DARE*’s cookbook collection, indexing recipes for *DARE* and indulging in periodic in-depth research for myself. I’ve read assigned books and selected words I thought would be of interest, and now I’m putting new bibliographic references into a special computer database.

Q: I know that you travel quite a bit; do you find that you listen to people’s speech more intently now that you’ve been immersed in the study of language variation?

A: The first time I was aware of different terms being used in different parts of the country was when as a teenager I went to New York City from Madison. I asked someone where I could find a bubbler. He said he’d never heard of such a thing. I felt like a real rube, but did get it straightened out that I was looking for a drinking fountain. Now when I travel I like to make note of the different terminology. I even find myself writing down new usage when I’m reading novels. ♦



Coming in Volume V

<i>slash</i>	A low, swampy area; a shallow, marshy pool. (Chiefly Sth, S Midl)
<i>slippy</i>	Slippery. (Chiefly PA; also Sth)
<i>slough pumper</i>	A bittern (<i>Botaurus lentiginosus</i>). (Chiefly Upper Missip Valley, esp MN)
<i>smurry</i>	Hazy, overcast. (Chiefly eNEng)
<i>snake feeder</i>	Dragonfly. (Chiefly Midl)
<i>some kind of</i>	Extremely. (Chiefly VA, S Atl)
<i>spatzie</i>	A sparrow. (Chiefly Missip-Ohio Valleys, PA)
<i>splunge</i>	To plunge; a plunge. (Sth, S Midl, esp sAppalachians)
<i>spoon meat</i>	The meat of an immature coconut. (HI)
<i>spoon wood</i>	The mountain laurel (<i>Kalmia latifolia</i>). (NEast, esp MA, NH)
<i>spung</i>	An area of low, swampy ground. (Chiefly sNJ)
<i>squat</i>	To pinch, crush, squeeze. (Esp ME)
<i>squin</i>	Some or all of the edible viscera of a pig. (Esp RI)
<i>squinch</i>	To draw up one’s face; esp, to squint. (Chiefly Sth, S Midl, SW)
<i>tabby</i>	A concrete made of lime, sand, and oyster shells. (SE)
<i>tag-tail</i>	A tagalong. (Chiefly Nth, N Midl)
<i>take in</i>	Of a church service, session of school, etc: to begin. (Chiefly Sth, S Midl)
<i>take one to do</i>	To criticize one, take one to task. (NEast)
<i>thunderwood</i>	Poison sumac (<i>Toxicodendron vernix</i>). (Sth, esp GA)
<i>torup</i>	A snapping turtle (<i>Chelydra serpentina</i>). (Long Island NY)
<i>tulip poplar</i>	The tulip tree (<i>Liriodendron tulipifera</i>). (Chiefly Midl, C Atl)
<i>tush hog</i>	A tough, aggressive person. (Sth, S Midl)

DARE Newsletter

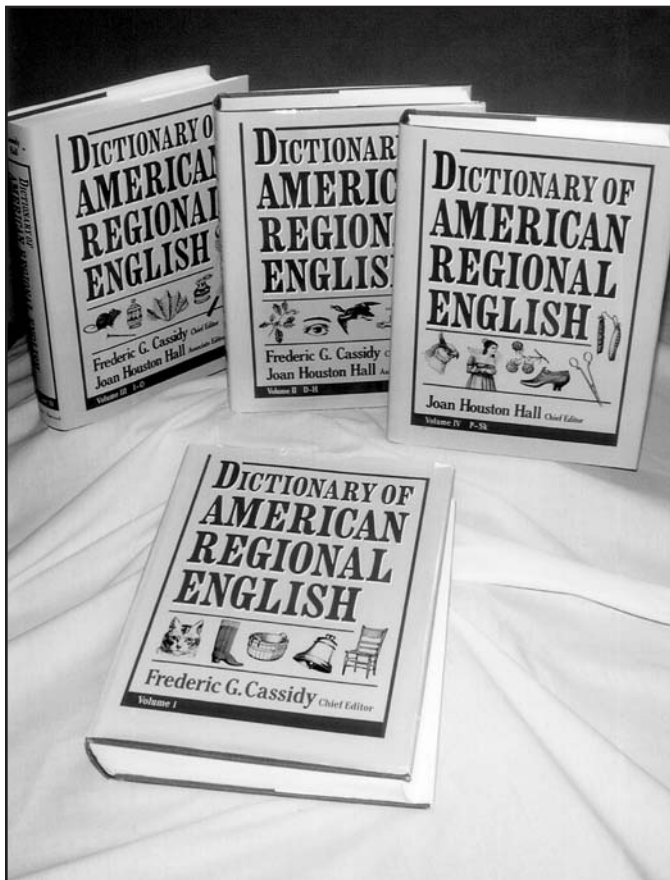
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