

TOM MORENO: A PENSACOLA CREOLE

by WILLIAM S. COKER

A recently published volume about the Moreno family of the Gulf coast contained a picture and brief note about Tom Moreno who died in Pensacola, September 23, 1942.¹ Tom reportedly was over 100 years old at the time of his death, but he could have been as young as eighty-three or as old as 105 depending upon which source one used (see table). An article by Gary R. Mormino, which was published in the *Florida Historical Quarterly*, called attention to an interview with Moreno conducted by Modeste Hargis in 1937 as part of the Work Projects Administration, Federal Writers' Project.² The Moreno interview was one of four that Hargis did with blacks living in Pensacola.³

There is a picture and a brief reference to Tom as the slave of Francisco Moreno among the Moreno family papers. Further research questions whether Tom was a slave, and, if so, whether he ever belonged to Francisco Moreno. In his interview he does not admit that he was a slave, and his daughter, Annie Reese,

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1. The date of Moreno's death is not officially recorded, but according to Mrs. King, he died in Pensacola on the date given and is buried in Magnolia Cemetery in Milton. See also Regina Moreno Kirchoff Mandrell, in collaboration with William S. Coker and Hazel P. Coke, *Our Family: Facts and Fancies, The Moreno and Related Families* (Pensacola, 1988), 84.
2. Gary R. Mormino, "Florida Slave Narratives," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 66 (April 1988), 408-09.
3. The Hargis interviews, "Interviews with Colored People Who Live in West Florida" (Florida Historical Society collection, University of South Florida Library, Tampa) include Joe Youder (age eighty-six), May 27, 1937; Thomas Moreno (age ninety-six), June 1, 1937; Alex Thompson (age eighty-six), June 4, 1937; and Richard Lindsay (age seventy-nine), July 6, 1937.

Differing ages and dates of birth for Thomas Moreno
and Nancy Jackson Moreno.⁴

<i>Year</i>	<i>Age</i>			<i>Birth</i>	<i>Occupation</i>
Thomas					
1870	22			[1848]	Laborer
1880	42 [32]			[1848]	Carpenter
1895	43 [47]			[1852]	Carpenter
1900	42 [52]			2/1858 [1848?]	Carpenter
1910	61			[1859]	Carpenter
1937	96			[1841]	Carpenter
1942	105			[1837]	Carpenter
Nancy					
1880	35			[1845]	Wife
1895	45 [50]			[1850]	None
1900	36 [55]			10/1863 [1845?]	Washerwoman
1910	58			[1852]	None

emphatically stated, "he was never a slave."⁵ During the conversation with Hargis, Tom referred to Don Francisco Moreno but not by name. He described Moreno's chest of gold and paints a rather fanciful story about the chest; he talked about Francisco's three wives and his great fear of cemeteries.

Francisco Moreno was born in Pensacola in 1792. He married the first of his three wives, Josefa Lopez, in 1815. Three children were born of that marriage. Josefa died in 1820, and Francisco soon after married her sister, Margarita Eleutaria. The couple had twelve children born between 1822 and 1846.

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4. Information on age and occupation for the years 1870, 1880, 1900, and 1910 from manuscript returns of Ninth U. S. Census, 1870, Schedule I, Pensacola, Escambia County, FL, 69; Tenth U. S. Census, 1880, Schedule I, Pensacola, Escambia County, FL, 12; Twelfth U. S. Census, 1900, Schedule I, Pensacola, Escambia County, FL, 197A; Thirteenth U. S. Census, 1910, Schedule I, Pensacola, Escambia County, FL, 5577B, on microfilm, John C. Pace Library, University of West Florida, Pensacola. Age and occupation for 1895 in Sidney Phoenix Thomas, Jr., *Early Vital Records of Pensacola, Florida 1891-1899: Births and Deaths*, Special Publication No. 4 (Pensacola, 1988), 140. The 1937 age and occupation was noted in the Moreno-Hargis interview. The 1942 record of Moreno's age is in a letter from his daughter, Annie Reese, to the editor of the *Pensacola Journal*, August 12, 1959, Leora Sutton collection 86-1, box 5, folder 74, John C. Pace Library. The numbers in brackets are probably more accurate ages.
 5. Reese to editor, *Pensacola Journal*.



Thomas Moreno (1841?-1942). Date of photograph unknown. Courtesy of Pensacola Historical Society.

Margarita died in 1851, and a year later Francisco married seventeen-year-old Mentoria Gonzalez. She also gave birth to twelve children between 1853 and 1871. Francisco engaged in various enterprises during his nearly ninety years as a resident of Pensacola. He owned large tracts of land in and around Pensacola, served as the Spanish consul there from 1836 to 1865, reportedly opened the first hotel in the city (the Hotel de Paris),

and loaned money from the chest he kept under his bed. Francisco was often referred to as the “king of Pensacola.” He also owned many slaves which was surprising for someone who lived in town and who was not a large-scale planter. In 1850, Francisco owned twenty-one slaves ranging in ages from three to seventy years old; in 1860, he had thirty slaves from one to sixty years of age.⁶ Although the slaves are not identified by name, any one of the several young males could have been Tom. When freedom finally came with the end of the Civil War, three of the freedmen remained with the Moreno family: Old Mose, Uncle Dick, and Teresa.⁷

According to his family, Tom’s father was named Chico Moreno. Although he talks about his mother in his interview, she, like Francisco Moreno, is never mentioned by name. He intimates that he accompanied the Union soldiers to Mobile Point, and perhaps witnessed the siege of Fort Morgan. Tom moved to Philadelphia for several years sometime after the Civil War and then tried his hand at seafaring, but he returned to Pensacola and was there when the 1870 census was recorded. He was classified as a laborer.⁸ In 1876, Tom was under contract with George W. Wright and Co. of Pensacola, a lumber company, to operate a lathe. Fifteen months later he “mutilated” his hand on the lathe and blamed the company for failing to keep the machine in safe operating condition. He sued for \$5,000, but the court did not find in his favor.⁹ Tom became a carpenter, a trade he continued the rest of his life. His sons, John and Ernest, were also carpenters.¹⁰

About 1875, Tom married Nancy Jackson. Although she was born in Florida, both her parents were from Virginia.¹¹ By 1895, eight children were born of this marriage. These include John, Thomas, Annie, Ernest, Matilda, Pearl, Frank, and one child

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6. Manuscript returns of Seventh U. S. Census, 1850, Schedule II (slaves), Pensacola, Escambia County FL, 133B; Eighth U. S. Census, 1860, Schedule II (slaves), Pensacola, Escambia County, FL, 6, on microfilm, John C. Pace Library.
 7. Francisco died in 1883, Mandrell, *Our Family: Facts and Fancies, The Moreno and Related Families*, 31-96.
 8. Ninth U. S. Census, 1870, 69.
 9. *T. Moreno v. Wright and Dorr*, case no. 1878-6137, filed February 4, 1878, Escambia County Circuit Court.
 10. Twelfth U. S. Census, 1900, 197A; Thirteenth U. S. Census, 1910, 5577B.
 11. Thirteenth U. S. Census, 1910, 5577B.

for whom no name is recorded. One can trace the family residence in Pensacola from Nineteenth Avenue and Second Street in 1893, to Wright Street (near Bayou Texar) in 1903, to East Chase Street in 1910. Tom and his family resided at 608 East Chase Street for many years. About 1939 or 1940, the family moved to 1115 North Sixth Avenue and was living there when Nancy died on November 18, 1940, and Tom two years later.¹² They are buried in Magnolia Cemetery, Milton, Florida. In 1988, the family included three grandchildren, three great-grandchildren, fifteen great-great-grandchildren, thirty-three great-great-great-grandchildren, and six great-great-great-great-grandchildren, for a total of sixty people.¹³

In the interview with Tom, Miss Hargis classified him as "creole." A number of blacks in Pensacola considered themselves creoles and segregated themselves from the rest of the black population.¹⁴ Pensacola creoles were a distinct group in the community and literally created their own particular classification. According to the normally accepted criterion, there was only one way for Tom to have been a creole; he had to have some Spanish (or caucasian) blood which was possible. On the other hand, if he had been raised by the Morenos, he might have considered himself a creole because of the Spanish heritage acquired through his association with the family. His interview notes his affection for things Spanish and especially Spanish cooking.

TOM MORENO'S INTERVIEW WITH MODESTE HARGIS, 1937

"I was born in 1841 in Pensacola, Fla. I was christened in the Episcopal Church.

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12. Pensacola city directories for 1893-1894, 1903, 1910, 1911, 1919-1920, 1927-1928, 1931, 1940, and 1942, Special Collections, John C. Pace Library. See also Reese to editor, *Pensacola Journal*.
 13. Information provide by Moreno family members.
 14. Ruth B. Barr and Modeste Hargis, "The Voluntary Exile of Free Negroes of Pensacola," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 17 (July 1938), 3-4; Linda Ellsworth, "Pensacola's Creoles: Remnants of a Culture," 1-16, unpublished manuscript in the files of the Historic Pensacola Preservation Board, Pensacola. See also D. C. LaFoy, "A Historical Review of Three Gulf Coast Creole Communities," *Gulf Coast Historical Review* 3 (Spring 1988), 6-19.

"The Lord has been very good to me," he said. "I have lived to see grown up great grand daughters. I have been married seventy-one years and I have traveled many places.

"All the old Spanish people had Claret wine by the barrels. You didn't see drunk people on the streets in those days. There was pitchers full at the dinner table. Childrun was raised on it. The chillun in those days—people didn't care which way they went. They let them run loose fat as little pigs. They didn't have no doctor every time they had something wrong with them. Every morning they gave them a teaspoon of dogwood, cherry bark, and whiskey and let 'em go.

"I didn't fool with all these doctors. Taint good for nothing all these medicines. If I can get my roots, I'll get 'em. I gather Queen's Delight, wild sage, sassafras, catnip, peppermint and prickley [sic] pear. That prickley [sic] pear, you see it over yonder in the corner of my garden, is the most valuable thing I got. It's worth thousands of dollars if you know how to use 'em. It's going to make the hair grow, and the finest kind of a hair tonic. I also makes medicine of it, but I'm not going to tell you how.

"One time I was recommended to build a home for a white lady here. She spent so much money on herself, more than a thousand dollars and still couldn't get herself cured. One day she said to me, 'Moreno, if I had a gun, I'd blow my brains out. No, mam, Don't do that. Self murder is one sin that the Lord doesn't forgive.' She had heard that I made medicines. She asked me. 'Moreno, are you in the habit of telling everything you know?' As I says, 'no, mam, why?' She told me that she had thought my medicine would help her. I fixed her up two boxes. I only charged her \$7.50. She was cured and she was so happy that she did her work right along.

Spanish Cooking

"When a Spaniard was doin' his cookin' and you come along a block away, you would want to go right in there. He used plenty of garlic, pepper, onions and tomatoes. You couldn't stand their coffee. It was so strong. I used to work for a captain here. Every morning I parched and ground coffee by hand. It all came in boatloads from Cuba and they used the very best, not with any chickory [sic]. The captain was a Frenchman from New Orleans. I used to pack the coffee into the pot. I'd put a small amount of boiling water on it and let it sweat out. It would

seep out just like poison and the captain would drink a small cup of it.

“Bananas and plantains came in. In Cuba and in old Pensacola they used to have bum boats peddling things.¹⁵ Oranges and figs grew all around Pensacola. I hang irons on my trees to keep them from freezing. My mother belonged to a very rich lady who lived in Holmes Valley, ten miles from Vernon. She set them free and went to California. Her brother in law, Baker, stole the colored folks and took them to the slave market in Pensacola. He sold them for \$900.00. I was not born yet. When the lady in California, I don’t remember her name, heard about it, she came right away. She took us all back and Baker lost his \$900.00. I was then born. She held me in her arms all the time. She took us to a hotel out in East Pensacola and kept us there a while. After that she made Baker the gardeen [guardian] over us to see that nobody got us.¹⁶

“There was a selling of slaves in the public square. They used to kidnap the colored people and then sell them very cheap for slaves. They picked out the good looking daughter and married her. Colored people had to have gardeens. They paid the slaves \$5.00 and the gardeen got the rest.

“At the Navy Yard in Pensacola they treated them well. You couldn’t whip a slave here. But some places they was mean as dogs. The worst place ever I went was a place near Sparta, Alabama, just above Brewton. I got off the train at sundown. There was one man that had about a hundred slaves. He had a large log in front of the house and it had two rings driven into it. They was made fast to those and lashed and then he made the bullhide sing. It kept on until ten and eleven o’clock at night. He bathed them in blood and then rubbed them down with salt and pepper. I got out of that town the next morning. I couldn’t stand it.

15. Bumboats were used to peddle provisions, etc., to vessels in port or anchored off shore.

16. For the appointment of gar-deens (guardians) for “Free People of Color” in Pensacola, see Barr and Hargis, “The Voluntary Exile of Free Negroes of Pensacola,” 9-14. Francisco Moreno was appointed guardian of Isabella and Maria Durant (p. 13). A search of the Escambia County deed books, wherein appointments of guardians are recorded, did not reveal any reference to a guardian named Baker, nor any free blacks named Moreno for whom guardians had been appointed. Thus, if Tom is correct in his statement about Baker as a guardian, perhaps this is recorded somewhere other than Pensacola or Escambia County.

“When the slaves was bad, their massa gave them a note that they couldn’t read, and he would carry this note to the jailer who would give him a whipping. Then he would say, ‘Now you go home and be a good boy.’

“I was sitting in my yard on Aragon Street when the first gun was fired. The first Florida Regiment fooled them all. They made out as if they were on Jeff Davis’s side and they were all on Abe Lincoln’s side. So many of the soldiers were buried on Santa Rosa Island. Then they left Pensacola and went to Fort Morgan where they fought eight days and nights without ceasing. I was old enough to ride the horses and I stayed with them till just before the end of the war. I came back to Pensacola Navy Yard and then went to Philadelphia and stayed four years. My brother never did come back. He went to Maine.¹⁷ I returned to Pensacola, shipped out and went to sea, landing at Cuba. There I found mo’ war. We loaded the ship with sugar and syrup. We went to Matanzas and Mount Tanimar. Then I went to Boston, but I got off the ship. She was going to the strait and I didn’t want to go. I shipped on another vessel to Mobile. I came back to Pensacola and went to Molina to work in the mill. Ayer was one of the first to have a big mill up there.

“In those days Milton was called Scratch Ankle. Floridatown was nothing but a settlement. There was a cotton factory at Arcadia and mills at Bagdad. In traveling we used to go across Carpenter’s Creek, where there was a fording place. There wasn’t any bridge across Bayou Texar like there is now.

“Jacob Kelker owned piles of land around Floridatown. He still owns some. The creek there is called Jacob’s Creek for him. My wife is a cousin of the Kelkers. I remember all the Spaniards and a few of the English who were here. One of them used to sit on his porch and cry, ‘Jesus Christ was a dark complected man and had very large eyebrows.’ He had his coffin made long before he died and every morning he used to git in it and say, ‘Here restes [?] in Heaven. Oh, I wish I were dead.’ All day Sunday the people had cock fights. Sometimes they had duels.

“There was two kinds of money, for the Spaniards, gold and silver. One of the old Spaniards [Francisco Moreno?] found a chest full of gold near Baylen Street. He took it to the blacksmith

17. His brother’s name was John, and according to Tom’s daughter, Annie Reese, he never returned to Pensacola. Reese to editor, *Pensacola Journal*.

shop and told the smith, 'You open dis chest. I pay you.' The next day when he came back the chest was there full of gold. The smith met him in the door with a hammer and said, 'I kill you. You make me out tief, stealing gold.' And the Spaniard had to beg for his life. He paid the smith for opening the chest. He loved gold so that when he loaned money, or sold land he wouldn't take checks or bills. Every bit of it had to be paid in gold.

"He had three wives, but he was so afraid of dying that when his wives died, he wouldn't go any nearer the cemetery than Alcaniz and Intendencia Street. 'I go there soon enough,' he say. Every evening he used to ride in a hack. He told the driver not to go near the cemetery. He was reading one day and when he looked up they were in the gate of the cemetery. Not one cent would he pay the driver.

"In the Spanish American War I was following my trade as a carpenter. I helped to build the large lighters. During the World War, I helped build ships at the shipyard. They used to call me and tell me to come work at the navy yard and I could have a home on the reservoir long as I lived, but I never would go.

"Before Witherspoon came to Pensacola everybody was one big family, and whites and colored worked together for the good of everyone.¹⁸ We used to make from \$6.00 to \$10.00 a day. But Witherspoon sold the colored people out. He promised them all kinds of things and after he left the colored women had to pull grass in the parks.

"There is one white man who is burning in the bad place for trying to take my land from me. I was working at Point Washington at the mill. I heard that he was trying to get my land so I come back in a hurry. When I came back, my friend, Wright, said, 'Have you any money?' A little bit. 'Then get a lawyer.' I did, but there wasn't much in the case except what I said. Then the jury went out and hardly stayed ten minutes. They came back and said, 'We find that this man has a title deed to the land.'

18. Witherspoon cannot be positively identified. There is a George W. Witherspoon noted in the 1885-1886 Pensacola directory. He was listed as pastor of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and as a city commissioner for Pensacola.

“The meanest man that was ever in Pensacola was Sam Pollard. He lied and he stole. One day he went up to Jo Shierra [José Sierra] and said to him ‘My wife can’t take care of the goose. I sell them to you cheap, for \$3.00 a dozen.’ Shierra said, ‘All right, you bring them goose here.’ When Sam brought them he told Shierra, ‘You better be careful. You better watch. People steal you goose.’ That night Shierra sat up until four o’clock watching. He went in to get his coffee. When he came back half of the geese were gone. When he met Pollard that day, Pollard ask him ‘How dem goose?’ The next night the rest of them disappeared.

“He stole a fine western cow and took her across the other side of the bayou, and hid her in the bushes. When Hutchinson came to look for the cow and found her, Pollard said, ‘That not you cow. That my cow.’ Hutchinson said, ‘I don’t want to send you to jail or to kill you, but if you don’t drive that cow across bayou, I’ll shoot you down. Mind, no tricks now.’

“While they were fording the Bayou, Pollard caused the cow to trip and upset Hutchinson in the Bayou. Hutchinson got up and said, ‘You hurt that cow? I’ll kill you.’ She wasn’t hurt. Pollard ended up by gettin’ lynched.

“There was haunted houses all round Pensacola. You didn’t never know when you was going to get in one. I’m going to [tell] you the truth, I remember the house that I used to live in. Me and my wife lived in one half and a woman had the other half. It was on the short street [Bru]. That woman on the other side was tormented but she just moved out and wouldn’t tell us there was ghosts. One night I was lyin’ in the bed and something come walkin’ and walkin’ and just worried me to death. Somethin’ tall and thin and white come in the room and stood over me and my wife. The dishes would rattle and me and my wife both went out of the window. That must have been the house where the sailor was murdered and there was blood all over this house. I had a dog that Gam Bell gave me. One night he hollered an awful holler and I haven’t seen that dog till this day.

“There was a house by Escambia Bridge. Every night when the moon was bright as day, there would be a crunching on the oyster shells and the tallest man I ever seen or heard of would walk about. They wanted me to follow him but I wouldn’t do it. One time a woman followed him and went to a certain spot where she dug up a jar of gold. Anybody born with a caul over

the eye can see spirits. When you die, your body is in the cemetery. Your soul and spirit are not. They are in the wind, everywhere.

“There weren’t pirates right in Pensacola. They were on the peninsula and the island. There’s a graveyard on the island. You can’t find it but one time. When you go back, it will be gone. Near Forty-nine Point there was a hole in the ground. They tried and tried but they couldn’t get to the bottom.

“If you spend the night at that place on the island, I’ll guarantee you can’t sleep. You’ll hear guns and shooting, horses runnin’ and commands given same as in war. The noise was terrible. At Town Point, if you go over there any night at twelve o’clock and anchor your boat, you’ll hear the most beautiful music that nobody knows where it comes from. Town Point was really treasure ground.

“There was once a young man who, when he was a good lad of a boy, about eighteen or nineteen years old, killed another fellow with a Barlowe knife. In those days the courts would keep after you for years and years, especially if you’d killed a person. One day years later this man wrote a note at his office on Palafox Street and killed himself. In the note he said that the man he killed had come for him and said to him, ‘Get yourself ready. It’s time for you to go with me.’

Yellow Fever

“The last big fever we had was in 1882. I seen them die like sheep. it used to always be fever and smallpox, but it isn’t that way now.

“There was one old colored man who wanted his daughter to marry a white man so bad that he offered \$10,000 to any white fellow who would marry her. He had more money than he had sense.”