



## **Dominicker: A Regional Racial Term**

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## DOMINICKER: A REGIONAL RACIAL TERM

Most people are familiar with the terms *mulatto* and *high yellow*, which refer to persons of mixed white and black blood, but in Holmes County, Florida, a rural county located halfway between Tallahassee and Pensacola, another term, *dominicker*, is commonly used to designate people of mixed ancestry. I have heard this term all my life in my home county, but the term is unfamiliar to speakers elsewhere.

There is indeed in Holmes County, Florida, a group of poverty-stricken people of dark skin called "dominickers," who for the most part keep to themselves on their small farms in the swampy regions of southwest Holmes County near the Choctawhatchee River. Until the time of complete integration of the county's schools, the "dominicker" children attended their own one-room school, not being allowed to attend the white schools and refusing to attend the black schools. Most of these people are Spanish or Cuban in appearance; in fact, some of them claim to be Spanish in descent. However, most white people of the area claim that these people are of mixed white and black blood, and thus have adopted the term *dominicker* to refer to them as well as to any person of mixed breed. I have often heard acquaintances state, "He must be a dominicker," when they were referring obviously to a person of black and white ancestry.

The only record of the term I have found is in the 1939 edition of the American Guide Series on Florida. Concerning one of the small communities in Holmes County, an article states:

Ponce de Leon . . . (64 alt., 382 pop.) is the site of Ponce de Leon Springs, one of many "fountains of youth" named for the Spanish explorer. In adjacent background live "Dominickers," part Negro and part white, whose history goes back to the early 1860's. Just before the War Between the States, Thomas, a white, lived on a plantation there, with his wife, two children, and several Negro slaves. After his death his wife married one of the slaves, by whom she had five children. . . . Of the five children, three married whites, two married Negroes. Today their numerous descendants live in the backwoods, for the most part in poverty.

The men are of good physique, but the women are often thin and worn in early life. All have large families, and the fairest daughter may have a brother distinctly Negroid in appearance. The name originated, it is said, when a white in suing for divorce described his wife as "black and white, like an old Dominicker chicken." Dominicker children are not permitted to attend white schools, nor do they associate with Negroes. About 20 children attend a one-room school. As no rural bus is provided, the pupils often walk several miles to attend classes. An old cemetery, containing a large number of Dominicker graves, adjoins the school.<sup>1</sup>

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1. *Florida: A Guide to the Southernmost State*, American Guide Series (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1939), pp. 445-46.

Thus, in the region of Holmes County, Florida, a term that originally applied to a specific group of people has by generalization come to refer to any person of mixed blood.

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### MUGGING IN BRITAIN

Rarely does the observer of language have such a neat example of the movement of a word from one dialect to another as he has in *mugging* (noun) and *mug* (transitive verb). Until recently in Britain the phenomenon of mugging was regarded as an unsavory aspect of New York and other large American cities. The same crime in Britain, when it did occur, was called variously "robbery with violence," "assault and robbery," or "robbery and grievous bodily harm." As the crime became more noticeable and as Britons were conscious of its existence in the United States under the name *mugging*, that term began to be used to describe the British phenomenon. The verb, of course, entered British speech at approximately the same time. During late 1972 and the first half of 1973, *mugging* became almost a vogue word.

In the London *Daily Telegraph* of 11 October 1972, a headline reads: "Muggers 'Take Britain Back 200 Years'"—the quotation being the words of a Crown Court judge. The judge, delivering sentence, is quoted as saying to the defendants, "You have been engaged in what I understand is called mugging. That is a euphemism for going about the streets with weapons to get money." Around the time of this article, *mugging* and *mug* were regularly explained when they were used on BBC news reports.

In *The Guardian* of 20 March 1973, *mugging* appears in a headline and in the first sentence of the story without quotation marks; but in the third paragraph *mugging* is in quotation marks, as though it is not a completely assimilated word. Still, the word is not explained except in a casual way when the criminal charge is given. *Mugging* appears in quotation marks again in *The Guardian* on 6 April 1973. By 7 June 1973, there is evidence that the word is very well known. In a summary in *The Guardian* of an annual report of the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, this passage is quoted: "Much of the increase [of crime] consists of robberies after sudden attacks in the open, known commonly as mugging, but robberies of banks and business premises have also been numerous enough to provoke comparisons with cities abroad." Although it is not stated clearly, the "also" in that sentence suggests that the incidence of mugging (and the name for it) is also comparable to that in "cities abroad" (American cities particularly).