

## Codes of bondage

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In his new book on Louisiana slave law, Vernon Palmer calls Louisiana's effort to incorporate slavery into the Civil Law a “strange science”: It produced the rigorous and elaborate set of rules regulating bondage but wove them into a code otherwise devoted to freedom.



In his book *Through the Codes Darkly*, law professor Vernon Palmer examines how Louisiana incorporated slavery into its civil law. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

While *Through the Codes Darkly* is first and foremost a legal history and analysis of slave law in Louisiana, it also is to some extent a contemplation of the society that enacted those laws.

“This was the first effort and the last effort in modern history to integrate slavery into a European-style civil code,” says [Palmer](#), the Thomas Pickles Professor of Law. “Bringing in Spanish and Roman law, it was a very deep science.” In incorporating slave law into the 1808 Digest of Orleans, Louisiana developed ? unlike the rest of the slave holding states of the Deep South? a “coherent, consistent, almost learned jurisprudence on the subject of slavery,” says Palmer.

There's no end to the irony, he adds.

“Here you have [the Digest of Orleans] developed from the French Civil Code of 1804. This was a code of enlightenment incorporating all the gains of the French Revolution: freedom of property, abolition of social distinctions, the breaking up of the power of the Church and so forth. And then here comes a code with all those things in it, but only for white Louisianians. For the black slaves it was only a code of darkness, a code of bondage.”

As to why Louisiana wished to create this “exceptional” kind of civil code, Palmer speculates that “they were making a statement that 'this is our way of life. This is something important to us. We're not just regulating field labor; slavery is very deep in our culture.'”