

Exiles and Fugitives: Labor, Mobility and Power in French Colonial Louisiana, 1699-1769

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University of Pittsburgh, 2020

“Exiles and Fugitives” examines the eighteenth-century colonization of the Mississippi Valley and the mobility of the unfree workers who built French Louisiana. In a vast area that largely remained Indian country, limited arrivals of enslaved Africans and European settlers, servants, and soldiers resulted in chronic labor shortages. Nowhere did France claim so much territory with so few people to defend and exploit it. As imperial officials and colonial elites sought to control the movements of a scarce but mobile multiracial workforce, malcontent laborers frequently resisted by running away. Escaped convicts, deserters, and fugitive slaves of African and Indigenous descent defied French authorities and employers, compelling them to revise their ambitions and metropolitan notions of sovereignty. By 1700, France was the most populous and powerful state in Europe. By contrast, its Northern American empire, which collapsed in 1763, appears as a shocking failure. Focusing on labor and geographic mobility illuminates this discrepancy through a case study of how empires operated on the ground. While the King’s sovereignty was far from absolute in France, overseas it relied fully on improvisation, accommodation, and negotiation—including with lower-class whites, slaves, and indigenous communities.

In the tradition of history from below, this dissertation highlights the agency of ordinary, often anonymous workers who shaped policies and institutions as they reclaimed their mobility. Although military desertion or *marronage* (slave flight) were viewed as isolated acts of

desperation, a close reading of judicial records reveals that runaways relied on the cooperation of multiple actors to provide otherwise powerless workers with tools of collective negotiation. Fugitives rarely managed or even attempted to escape to freedom, but they often “petitioned with their feet” to assert customary rights. While recent scholarship portrays Louisiana as a slave society founded on a rigid racial hierarchy and a brutal labor regime similar to the Antilles, I examine the interaction of workers of various origins and legal status to conclude that race and class formation occurred along a complex and moving spectrum of unfreedom. Despite the rapid racialization of work, shortages of manpower continued to present Afro-Louisianans with opportunities for spatial and social mobility.

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1.0 Introduction

On September 26, 1739, a French soldier known only by his nickname, La Pigeonnière, deserted with three of his comrades from a small fort north of New Orleans, a military installation that defended the entrance of Bayou Saint-John on Lake Pontchartrain (figure 1). Under the cover of the night, they stole their superior's belongings and the post's dinghy, which they loaded onto a sloop along with their supplies—clothes, guns, food, liquor, and tobacco—and sailed away. Steering the boat was a fifth accomplice, a white boatman nicknamed Quimper (after the Brittany town he came from), who had been employed in ferrying tar and pitch from a manufacture on the Northern shore of the lake. The sloop was not the only property Quimper was taking from his employers. Four Black men and two women enslaved at the factory, who must have accompanied the boatman to handle the naval stores, also joined the deserters.¹ Among them were the Creole (i.e. American-born) Marie, aged 25, and the 35-year-old Soquoy, a Fon man who had survived the middle passage onboard one of the six slave ships that transported West African captives from the Bight of Benin between 1719 and 1728.²

¹ Declaration of Antoine Aufrere and François Jahan, 1739-10-16/1 (Year-month-day/document number), Records of the Superior Council, Louisiana State Museum, New Orleans (RSC). All translations from French sources are my own.

² Slave Voyages: The Transatlantic Slave Trade Database (TSTD), <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database>.



Figure 1. Satellite view of the Mississippi River delta. In white, the approximate route followed by the enslaved runaways and the military deserters in 1739.

While the motley crew sailed toward the Gulf of Mexico, a search party of six soldiers and as many volunteer settlers nearly caught up with them near Pearl River Island, where the runaways swiftly abandoned their boat, crammed themselves into the dinghy, and vanished into the marshlands. The pursuers found the sloop’s deck and sails covered in blood, the rigging pierced with a bullet, and a corpse floating nearby. In his official report to the metropole, Louisiana’s *commissaire-ordonnateur* (commissary, the highest ranking administrator and civilian counterpart of the governor), described it as “a white man half-eaten by crocodiles [sic], believed to be the

boatman, who was assassinated.”³ Yet the only eyewitness account, by a planter who owned some of the enslaved runaways and had joined the search party, noted that they were not “able to identify it [the body] nor to affirm whether it was white or black.”⁴ No other trace of the runaways was discovered despite the assistance of nine Biloxi Indians, who searched the coast for weeks, and of the Spanish governor of Pensacola, where the fugitives were thought to be headed. The authorities ultimately decided that everyone was dead, lost to a tropical storm in those “flooded and shifting lands, which one must be extremely familiar with to find a way out.”⁵

Neither La Pigeonnière, who had been enlisted against his will at his family’s request only a year earlier, nor the other soldiers were ever heard of again.⁶ The enslaved, however, resurfaced nine years later, when two other Black runaways recently returned from Spanish Havana testified that all six of them had been living freely there. Soquoy and Marie, who had each left a spouse

³ Edmé Gatien de Salmon to the Minister of the Marine, 12 October 1739, Archives Nationales d’Outre Mer, Aix-en-Provence (ANOM), Correspondance à l’arrivée en provenance de la Louisiane (C13), A24, fols. 174-175. Unless mentioned otherwise, all the letters in this collection were addressed to the Minister of the Marine, who presided over France’s colonial administration in Versailles or Paris. The Minister might inform the King of the most prominent business, but in practice bureaucrats handled most of the correspondence. For an overview of those transatlantic communications, see Kenneth J. Banks, *Chasing Empire across the Sea: Communications and the State in the French Atlantic, 1713-1763* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002), esp. 50-52, 209-210.

⁴ A third report by the King’s lieutenant in New Orleans simply omitted the race of the “drowned man”: Henri de Louboey to the Minister, 12 October 1739, C13, A24, fols. 205-06. The confusion about the body’s race is highly unusual and especially striking given the stakes of the incident: officers were accountable for the troops, and slaveholders would seek compensation for their missing chattel. We can only speculate about it, but even if the floating remains were too mangled to assert their origin it must have rattled the colonists. Officials and colonists used the term *blancs* (whites) far less often than the two racial categories *sauvages* (“savages,” i.e. Native Americans) and *négres* (“negroes”), which are sadly omnipresent in the archives and that I choose to translate by terms that reflect their less derogatory nature at the time. They routinely distinguished the *Français* (French people) by status, from *habitants* (settlers, residents) at the top to soldiers and *forçats* (“convicts”) at the bottom. For a thorough analysis of the language of race in French Louisiana, see Cécile Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans: Empire, Race, and the Making of a Slave Society* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2019), 372–90.

⁵ Louboey to the Minister, 12 October 1739, C13, A24, fols. 206 (quote); same to same, 6 January 1740, C13, A25, fol. 214.

⁶ Minister to Bienville and Salmon, 3 October 1738, ANOM, Correspondance au Départ (B), 66, fol. 338. Unless mentioned otherwise, the outbound (from the metropole) letters in this collection are from the Minister or the Council of the Marine.

behind in Louisiana, had since remarried and earned a living as street peddlers.⁷ At least three more self-liberated Afro-Louisianans lived alongside them among Havana's free Blacks. That trio of runaways had fled New Orleans just two months before Marie, Suquoy, and La Pigeonnière, with another mariner accomplice—an enslaved “Spanish mulatto” sailor named Pierre, who had jumped ship before the departure of his so-called master and had been eluding capture around town for weeks.⁸ Like the boatman Quimper, Pierre played a critical part in this successful escape by supplying his maritime expertise, a boat stolen from his employer, and crucial information about Spanish colonies.⁹ While it is impossible to know if the two groups coordinated their movements, this earlier escape was widely discussed and likely inspired the military and enslaved runaways who followed in their wake.

The stories of these two collective escapes are exceptional because they were successful and well documented, the latter mostly as a result of the slaveowners' efforts to recover or seek compensation for their human property and their vessels. They illuminate several aspects of the power struggle over labor mobility in the colony. First, Soquoy, Marie, and their enslaved

⁷ Declaration of Jean and Manuel, 1748-03-22/1, RSC; Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana the Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 147.

⁸ Quotations aside, I eschew the term “master” to avoid reproducing the language used to justify slavery, but also to emphasize that controlling enslaved men and women relied not only on legal conditions but also on day to day violence and oppression. The history of runaways in itself shows how enslaved people resisted the mastery claimed by slaveholders over their bodies, their labor, and their relations. I therefore agree with the growing number of scholars who write of enslavers and enslaved people, which implies a recognition that enslavement was a violent, ongoing process that never erased the rich lives led by African and Indigenous individuals held in bondage. The legal and racial status of the enslaved, in other words, was obviously critical in shaping their existence, but it did not capture all of it. I continue to use the words slaves and owners, however, when discussing their condition as human property, such as business transactions or legislation.

⁹ Power of Attorney by André (Andres) to Jean Gonzalle (Juan Gonzales), 1739-06-07/1; Petition of Jean Gonzalle, 1739-06-15/5; Declaration of Joseph Chaperon, 1739-11-07/2, RSC. These two escapes illustrate Marcus Rediker's argument that successful runaways required specific skills pertaining to three kinds of knowledge—social, natural, and technical. See Marcus Rediker, *Outlaws of the Atlantic: Sailors, Pirates, and Motley Crews in the Age of Sail* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), 46–62.

companions planned this getaway with Quimper, La Pigeonnière, and the three other deserters, in a striking example of cooperation across racial lines. Yet the official version of their disappearance, as well as the slaveowners' related petitions, erased the bondspeople's agency by describing the escape as a simple theft of boats and human property committed by Quimper and the defectors. Most of the blame fell on the boatman who, because of his role as the linchpin of the operation, his higher social status, or simply because he was deceased and now forever silent, was accused of having enticed the soldiers to desert and abducted the Black men and women. The full body of evidence, however, suggests that, even if the white men had planned to sell Marie, Soquoy, and their four companions and initially tricked or forced them aboard, the latter were more likely to have been co-conspirators rather than hostages. They ended up playing an active part during their escape—especially after Quimper's death.¹⁰

Surveillance too was a collective enterprise that required the partnership of multiple actors—military officers, slaveholders, and their respective subordinates, but also Native allies and other European empires. A year prior to La Pigeonnière and his shipmates' escape from Lake Pontchartrain, the military command of Louisiana attempted to stem the flow of deserters toward Pensacola by reminding Indigenous communities to intercept them and refusing any assistance to Spanish authorities unless they agreed to return the defectors.¹¹ This was especially critical as Swiss soldiers serving alongside French troops in the Mobile garrison had recently defected to

¹⁰ Colonial authorities were prone to assert that white accomplices of Black runaways had kidnapped or “stolen” them, and to suspect mutinous leaders whose corrupting influence induced soldiers and slaves to run away. This tendency to dismiss the autonomous initiatives of runaways reflected racial and social prejudice, but it also minimized the responsibilities of slaveholders, military officers, and their subordinates. In addition, this approach also made it easier to punish or execute alleged ringleaders rather than the large numbers of workers in short supply in Louisiana. The answers of prosecuted fugitives indicate that they were aware of this search for scapegoats and exploited it in their defense.

¹¹ Diron to the Minister, 12 April 1738, C13, A23, fols. 179-180.

Florida and Mexico, finding refuge under the pretext that Franco-Spanish *cartels* or agreements for the exchange of deserters did not extend to foreign auxiliaries.¹² As in other Caribbean borderlands, the recovery of runaway slaves required similar inter-imperial negotiations.¹³ One of the accomplices of the Spanish sailor Pierre in 1739 was identified in Havana five years later, but Louisiana slaveholders failed to secure the cooperation of the governor of Havana until 1748-1749, when he finally ordered that two other fugitives be brought back to New Orleans and a third one sold to his owner's profit.¹⁴ Enslaved laborers assigned to the tar works north of Lake Pontchartrain may also have enjoyed more mobility in this period since their owners feared that a nearby Choctaw faction allied with the British might raid the area and abduct their human property.¹⁵ Runaways from slavery and military service were certainly aware of this instable geopolitical context, which encouraged further desertions, as administrators failed to confine such news to government offices and rumor spread by word of mouth around New Orleans, Mobile, and other settlements through the daily interactions and movements of workers and colonists.

This dissertation places ordinary men and women like Marie, Pierre, La Pigeonnière, Quimper, or Soquoy, who often found themselves in extraordinary circumstances, at the center of the history of French Louisiana. My goal is to explore a critical issue for the colonization of the New World—the vexed recruitment and management of an unfree, multiracial workforce.

¹² Bienville and Salmon, 13 April 1735, C13, A20, fol. 29; Analysis of a letter from Bienville, 18 March 1738, C13, A23, fol. 41.

¹³ Jane Landers, "Spanish Sanctuary: Fugitives in Florida, 1687-1790," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (1984): 296–313; For comparison, see the Spanish policy of granting refuge and freedom to runaways to strengthen frontier settlements in Linda M. Rupert, "Marronage, Manumission and Maritime Trade in the Early Modern Caribbean," *Slavery & Abolition* 30, no. 3 (September 1, 2009): 361–82.

¹⁴ Declaration of Chaperon, 1744-09-01/2, RSC; Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 147–48.

¹⁵ Salmon to the Minister, 25 November 1738, C13, A23, fol. 135; Louboey to same, 28 November 1738, fols. 162-164.

Nowhere else in the early modern Atlantic world did France rely on so few soldiers, settlers, and slaves to claim so much territory as in the Mississippi Valley and along the Gulf coast. These swollen claims generated unprecedented efforts by colonial authorities to organize the movements of African, European, and Indigenous workers. In an area considered alternately as a buffer zone, a strategic outlet, and an emerging plantation ground, local elites and administrators relied on a mobile workforce of various legal and racial statuses to remedy the colony's chronic lack of manpower and to fulfill the competing needs of sovereignty, security, and labor. Geographic mobility, however, also proved a weapon of everyday resistance for runaways of all sorts. As they confronted private and public authorities eager to control their movements and exploit their labor, military deserters and enslaved runaways created conflicts that blurred the lines between free and coerced movement, especially by taking advantage of the mobility required by their daily work. This is why my dissertation presents a multi-scale study of mobility and power, combining a macro-level perspective on forced migrations with a focus on local forms of struggle such as *petit marronage*, to examine both officially sanctioned migrations and movements that colonial authorities deemed criminal.

From 1682 to 1762 (by treaty, but de facto 1769, when Spain effectively took over its administration), France claimed the Northern American colony of Louisiana, the last addition to its empire under the Ancien Régime, named after the Sun King Louis XIV. Yet most of this vast territory, which stretched over twenty percent of the present-day contiguous United States along the Mississippi Valley, from the Illinois Country south of the Great Lakes to the Gulf Coast and from the Red River and to Mobile, was Indian country. By 1715, when the Crown and commercial proprietors first attempted to populate the colony, this area counted

about 77,000 Natives but hardly more than 300 Europeans, most of whom belonged to the military, and 100 Africans.¹⁶ Despite the arrival of thousands of European migrants and African captives in subsequent years, Louisiana remained much less populated than England's North American colonies or France's own settlements in Canada and the Caribbean. The fledgling plantation economy of the Lower Mississippi exported commodity crops produced by enslaved labor, chiefly tobacco, indigo, and rice, but its transatlantic commerce paled in comparison with sugar islands like Martinique and Saint-Domingue, which Louisianans supplied with timber and foodstuffs. Throughout its relatively short existence, this immense colony remained massively and chronically undermanned and underfunded, a peripheral settlement that was arguably a low priority for the metropolitan government.

The swift response of local authorities to incidents of collective resistance like the 1739 desertion of La Pigeonnière and Soquoy's band reflected their fear of interracial resistance, but also their concern with the chronic labor shortages that plagued the colony. Slaves and soldiers, by far the two largest groups of workers in French Louisiana, remained in short supply throughout its history. Around the time of this escape in 1739, the permanent population of French settlements was estimated at 2,450 white residents and 4,422 enslaved people—4,222 Blacks and 200 Natives.¹⁷ Most of the region, however, remained under Indigenous control. Lower Louisiana alone, south of Natchez, where the colonial population was concentrated, counted about 31,500 Natives.¹⁸ The troops should have increased the European population by about 850, but those

¹⁶ James S. Pritchard, *In Search of Empire: The French in the Americas, 1670-1730* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 99, 423.

¹⁷ "État récapitulatif du recensement général de la Louisiane," C13, C4, fol. 197.

¹⁸ Peter H. Wood, "The Changing Population of the Colonial South: An Overview by Race and by Region," in *Powhatan's Mantle: Indians in the Colonial Southeast*, ed. Peter H. Wood, Gregory A. Waselkov, and M. Thomas Hatley (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 59–61.

numbers—already entirely inadequate for the defense on such an immense territory—were constantly diminished by at least ten percent due to sickness and mortality, discharges and returns to Europe, and desertion.¹⁹

As La Pigeonnière deserted Bayou Saint-John with his three comrades, the French were gathering the largest army they ever assembled in the colony for a second ill-fated expedition against the Chickasaw nation. At Fort Assumption, 400 miles upriver from New Orleans (near present day Memphis, Tennessee), more than 1,000 soldiers, most of them reinforcements recently arrived from the metropole, prepared for attack with the support of Canadian troops, local militias, Indigenous allies, and even requisitioned slaves. This hardly left enough men to defend the colonial settlements, most importantly New Orleans, or to stop runaways. The runaways recognized that 1739 was a propitious time for all to escape as many officers and slaveholders, including Soquoy and Marie's owner, were engaged in the expedition. The influx of troops mobilized for the Chickasaw campaign was only temporary, and defections compounded the losses that crippled Louisiana's military. Disease killed nearly half the troops engaged in the campaign and most of the survivors returned to serve in Europe, while others obtained their release from service, prompting Louisiana officials to plead with the crown to send badly needed recruits.²⁰

For years, Louisiana officials had been warning against the demographic decline that threatened the colony, as limited arrivals failed to compensate human losses among soldiers and settlers. When *Commissaire* Edmé Gatien de Salmon warned that “the colony is imperceptibly becoming depopulated” in 1740, he expressed an inaccurate but common sentiment among

¹⁹ Salmon to Beauharnais, 4 May 1738, C13, A23, fol. 72; Louboey to the Minister, 11 July 1738, C13, A23, fol. 162.

²⁰ In June 1740, the 13 companies permanently stationed in Louisiana were 80 soldiers (more than 12 percent) short of being fully staffed, after losing 60 men to disease, desertion, and releases within the previous 18 months. See Bienville to the Minister, 21 June 1740, C13, A25, fols. 117-120.

Louisianans.²¹ Artisans, in particular, were so few and their services so expensive that officials demanded to rescind the royal ban on convict transportation to supplement the local workforce with French prisoners.²² In 1741, colonial authorities reported the arrival from Martinique of two colonists from Martinique, who asked permission to settle themselves and their nine or ten slaves in Louisiana and to bring the rest of their human property later. “It is difficult to imagine,” acknowledged Salmon, “that people ask to move to a country from which the others desert.”²³ Yet Salmon and the governor wishfully claimed that 1,500 “small inhabitants” were ready to do the same, which would cause no harm to the already overpopulated Martinique. Louisiana, by contrast, was “an immense expanse without inhabitants.”²⁴

The Louisianans’ chief complaint, however, was the “scarcity of [enslaved] negroes” (*disette de nègres*).²⁵ The colony from which Marie, Suquoy, and their fellow runaways fled counted about 4,000 Black and women, almost all of them enslaved, who formed a small majority of the population since the late 1720s. Yet their numbers stagnated and paled next to the concentration of bondpeople of African descent in the Antilles. The first slave ships from West Africa had reached the Gulf Coast in 1719, but this transatlantic trade stopped when the *Compagnie des Indes* returned the colony to the Crown in 1731. In the aftermath of the 1739-1740 Chickasaw campaign, officials reminded the metropole that Louisiana had received no African captives for a decade, which made it impossible to rejuvenate an aging Black population and to replace inevitable

²¹ Salmon to the Minister, 28 June 1740, C13, A25, fol. 185 (quote). See also Salmon to the Minister, 25 November 1738, C13, A23, fols. 136-137; See also Louboey to the Minister, 7 March 1741, C13, A26, fol. 179. In 1738, the King’s lieutenant wrote with much exaggeration that “there are currently in the colony only half as many inhabitants as there were six years ago.” Louboey to same, 28 November 1738, C13, A23, fol. 171.

²² Salmon to the Minister, 25 November 1738, C13, A23, fols. 136-137.

²³ Salmon, 29 September 1741, C13, A26, fol. 168-169.

²⁴ Bienville et Salmon to the Minister, 27 September 1741, C13, A26, fol. 29.

²⁵ Among many examples, see Salmon to the Minister, 26 April 1741, C13, A26, fols. 138-139.

losses. New Orleans planters had lent a total of 350 enslaved laborers, a fifth of their chattel, for an expedition that lasted over six months, and they now sought compensation for those killed or injured during the campaign as well as for crops lost for lack of harvesting hands.²⁶ Colonial society in Louisiana was therefore a contested space of negotiations, where the collective cooperation or resistance of labor could easily make or break the day to day operations of war, commerce, or commodity production (rice, indigo, and tobacco but also tar, timber, and furs).

This dissertation explores the history of state formation, sovereignty, and imperialism in French Louisiana, a particularly intriguing case study because its short life and stunted growth have been described in much historiography as the ultimate embodiment weak or “reluctant” empire in North America.²⁷ An older but still influential body of scholarship sought the roots of colonial failure in administrative organization and incoherent imperial policies, focusing heavily on New France and the West Indies while treating Louisiana, if at all, as a marginal and mismanaged settlement.²⁸ By 1700, France was the most populous and arguably the most powerful state in Western Europe. Generations of scholars have considered its court, army, and bureaucracy as model achievements of early modern absolutism. By contrast, its North American empire, which collapsed in 1763, has appeared to many historians as a fiasco—and an even more shocking one in hindsight given the spectacular US expansion into the region following the Louisiana Purchase.

²⁶ Bienville and Salmon, 24 June 1740, C13, A25, fol. 9; Louboey to same, 4 January 1740, C13, A25, fol.205; Declarations of Jonathan Darby 1739-11-05/1, Etienne Delalande Dalcourt, 1739-08-15/1, Marie Bonnet, 1739-12-03/3, Françoise Trepagnier, 1739-12-05/2, Joseph Chaperon, 1739-12-21/1, RSC.

²⁷ Glenn R. Conrad, “Reluctant Imperialist: France in North America,” in *La Salle and His Legacy: Frenchmen and Indians in the Lower Mississippi Valley*, ed. Patricia Kay Galloway (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 93–105.

²⁸ This trope, which can be traced back to the work of Francis Parkman, has had a surprisingly durable impact on the historiography of New France. See Francis Parkman, and John William Tebbel. *The Battle for North America* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1948), 428-438; Philip P. Boucher, *Les Nouvelles Frances: France in America, 1500-1815, an Imperial Perspective* (Providence, R.I.: John Carter Brown Library, 1989); W. J. Eccles, *France in America* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1990); James S. Pritchard, *In Search of Empire*.

A focus on labor recruitment, geographic mobility, and the experiences of exiles and fugitives illuminates this discrepancy through a case study of how an eighteenth-century empire operated on the ground and as multi-level resistance frustrated its designs. The King's sovereignty was far from absolute in France and even further diluted overseas, where it relied similarly on improvisation, accommodation, and negotiation with colonial elites, lower classes, enslaved persons, and Indigenous people.²⁹

In the tradition of history “from the bottom up,” I emphasize the agency of ordinary, often anonymous workers who challenged but also reshaped policies and institutions as they reclaimed their mobility. As they ran away—or even threatened to—escaped convicts, deserters, and fugitive slaves defied elites and authorities, compelling them to revise their ambitions, their notions of sovereignty, and the socio-racial order they wished to construct in the colony. By demonstrating the impact of runaways on imperial policies and colonial ambitions, this dissertation highlights how the collective resistance of workers limited the sovereignty of royal administrators, military officers, and slaveholders. This focus on the ways in which the actions of supposedly powerless men and women forced transformations of policies and objectives goes beyond the simple analysis of their experiences—however difficult that enterprise may be on its own. I also aim to contribute to the growing recognition of “intellectual history from below,” which considers the ideas of all social actors, including (and perhaps especially) lower-class, often illiterate individuals, as worthy of analysis because they offer new insights on popular politics and culture.³⁰

²⁹ On the metropolitan dimensions of this debate, see James B. Collins, “State Building in Early-Modern Europe: The Case of France,” *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no. 3 (1997): 603–33; William Beik, “The Absolutism of Louis XIV as Social Collaboration,” *Past & Present*, no. 188 (2005): 195–224. On the limits of imperial power, see Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge University Press, 2011); Banks, *Chasing Empire*.

³⁰ For a sample of works approaching intellectual history from below, see E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture* (New York: New Press, 2015); Jesse Lemisch, “The American Revolution

“Exiles and Fugitives” therefore borrows its methodology and interpretative framework from studies that explore similar dynamics around the early modern Atlantic world. Scholars combining legal and social history have explained how the actions of people in motion shaped institutions and policies from below as much as they responded to them. Louisiana’s Spanish and US administrations, for instance, adopted contradictory regulations of slave imports and Black mobility to prevent the Haitian Revolution from spreading to Louisiana.³¹ Atlantic historians of colonial economies and communications show that the same flows of slaves, soldiers, and sailors that formed the lifeline of empires also challenged imperial circuits, posing an enduring dilemma to elites and authorities who needed mobile laborers as much as they feared their autonomy.³² Louisiana was part of a French empire organized by policy from above, but it was also influenced by the personal, cultural, commercial, and political connections its inhabitants maintained with Spanish settlements in Florida and Cuba, the Biloxi and Choctaw territories on the Gulf Coast, or

Seen from the Bottom Up,” in *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History*, ed. Barton J. Bernstein (New York: Vintage, 1967), 3-43; Marcus Rediker, “‘Good Hands, Stout Heart, and Fast Feet’: The History and Culture of Working People in Early America,” *Labour / Le Travail* 10 (1982): 123-44; Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000); Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Harvard University Press, 2005); Laurent Dubois, “An Enslaved Enlightenment: Rethinking the Intellectual History of the French Atlantic,” *Social History* 31, no. 1 (2006): 1-14; Julius Scott, *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution* (London: Verso, 2018); Chloé Ireton, “Africans’ Freedom Litigation Suits to Define Just War and Just Slavery in the Early Spanish Empire,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 73, no. 4 (2020).

³¹ Jean-Pierre Le Glaunec, “Slave Migrations and Slave Control in Spanish and Early American New Orleans,” in *Empires of the Imagination: Transatlantic Histories of the Louisiana Purchase*, ed. François Weil and Peter Kastor (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 204-38; Rebecca J Scott and Jean M. Hébrard, *Freedom Papers: An Atlantic Odyssey in the Age of Emancipation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012). The formation of imperial law is analyzed as the product of conflicts between state authorities and their mobile subjects in Lauren A Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400-1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010). For a multi-scale approach of world-historical migrations, see Lara Putnam, *Radical Moves: Caribbean Migrants and the Politics of Race in the Jazz-Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

³² In the context of Louisiana, see Daniel H. Usner, *Indians, Settlers & Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley before 1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992) esp. 219-243; Banks, *Chasing Empire*; Shannon Lee Dawdy, *Building the Devil’s Empire French Colonial New Orleans* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). On the global impact and challenge of mobile workers, see Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*; Scott, *The Common Wind*.

the Bight of Benin in West Africa as well as Paris or Brittany. Recent studies help answer important questions about the tensions generated by the control of colonial labor in the Lower Mississippi Valley, notably by connecting colonial transformations with socio-economic and political conditions in Europe, West Africa, or continental America.³³ My research expands upon this scholarship to consider the intersecting trajectories of multiple groups of coerced migrants from three continents as part of a common colonial experience fraught with racial tensions, class struggles, and violence.

In order to examine this dynamic from both governmental and popular perspectives, this dissertation mobilizes a wide array of manuscript records. In addition to the entire correspondence from and to Louisiana (supplemented with samples for Canada and the West Indies, chiefly Martinique), which constitutes the main source of information for a top-down approach of colonial operations, I have consulted military, maritime, diplomatic, and police records in French national archives. Dictionaries and legislative texts have provided additional evidence of official discourse. In Louisiana, the most important archive by far has been the judicial and notarial Records of the Superior Council, which served as the colony's highest tribunal and the district court of New Orleans for both civil and criminal cases, as well as the city's de facto government. This vast collection, which is now digitized, contains some of the richest evidence on the lives of enslaved

³³ Like almost all studies of colonial Louisiana from the past three decades, including this dissertation, the following works are indebted to the landmark monographs of Gwendolyn Midlo Hall and Daniel H. Usner published in 1992. See Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*; Usner, *Indians, Settlers & Slaves*; Cécile Vidal, ed., *Louisiana: Crossroads of the Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014); Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans*; Jessica Marie Johnson, "Wives, Soldiers, and Slaves: The Atlantic World of Marie Baude, La Femme Pinet," in *New Orleans, Louisiana & Saint-Louis, Senegal: Mirror Cities in the Atlantic World, 1659-2000s*, ed. Emily Clark, Ibrahima Thioub, and Cécile Vidal (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2019); Sophie White, "Geographies of Slave Consumption," *Winterthur Portfolio* 45, no. 2/3 (2011): 229–48; Sophie White, *Voices of the Enslaved: Love, Labor, and Longing in French Louisiana* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019); Elizabeth N. Ellis, "The Many Ties of the Petites Nations: Relationships, Power, and Diplomacy in the Lower Mississippi Valley, 1685-1785" (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2015); George Edward Milne, *Natchez Country: Indians, Colonists, and the Landscapes of Race in French Louisiana* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2015).

people in America, the details of which inform the stories in this study. Combined with mostly published memoirs and narratives, censuses, and other lists, those materials have yielded sufficient data to create a database of fugitives, which contains qualitative and quantitative evidence about 197 enslaved runaways and 300 to 400 military deserters (who were paradoxically less documented, including in often vague numbers). Based on those sources, I have reconstituted administrative efforts to mobilize colonial labor, measured and charted the statistical impact of various forms of desertion, mapped the movements of some runaways, and analyzed individual experiences of runaways through several case studies. Their actions and their voices (when we can hear them) reveal a sense of community, cooperation, and solidarity that allowed poor workers to assert their own choices and values. In that respect, this study seeks to contribute to the growing collection of individual and collective biographies of peripatetic people that constitutes a significant sub-genre of Atlantic history.³⁴

“Exiles and Fugitives” thus examines how different groups of coerced migrants and workers—from European convicts and soldiers to enslaved Africans and Natives—came to serve in the colony, how employers and administrators sought to control their labor, and how those men and women reclaimed on their mobility to secure informal or customary rights as well as some measure of autonomy and freedom.

³⁴ From Ira Berlin’s “Atlantic Creoles” to Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh’s revolutionary sailors, commoners, and slaves, historians have uncovered multiple examples of lives in motion and unexpected trajectories that escape easy categorization. See Ira Berlin, “From Creoles to Africans: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African-American Society in Mainland North America,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (1996): 251–88; Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*; Rediker, *Outlaws of the Atlantic*; Cassandra. Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom: Runaway Slaves of the American Revolution and Their Global Quest for Liberty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006); Jon F. Sensbach, *Rebecca’s Revival: Creating Black Christianity in the Atlantic World* (Harvard University Press, 2009) For my main contribution and further citations, see Section 7.0.

The first half of this dissertation compares the evolution of the three forms of unfree labor—convict, military, and enslaved—involved in France’s colonization of the Mississippi Valley. Chapter 2.0 explores Louisiana’s short-lived experiment with convict transportation (1716-1721), when the Compagnie des Indes supplemented voluntary emigration by shipping more than 1,300 prisoners overseas. Though not unprecedented, this systematic policy of mass transportation involved initiatives from administrators, merchants, financiers, hospitals, both public and private, whose interests converged in the favorable political context of the Regency. By focusing on the metropole, I situate this episode within a long history of penal practices that facilitated deportation, notably via the preexisting infrastructure of the galleys. Yet the violence of deportations “to Mississippi” shocked the population of French cities, especially in Paris and the Atlantic ports, where they generated so much social unrest that the policy was quickly dropped to prevent further protest and disorder. Although most convicts died, deserted, or blended into Louisiana’s white population, their impact on the colony, I argue, has been underestimated because many coerced migrants continued to arrive as *engagés* (indentured servants) or among the troops—like La Pigeonnière. In other words, the colonial doctrine according to which “nobody is sent there by force” had even more exceptions than the freedom principle it mirrored, which proclaimed that “there are no slaves in [metropolitan] France.” The collective memory of the deportations durably affected perceptions of Louisiana.

Chapter 3.0, on military labor, confirms the existence of a tradition of desertion among French workers and its impact on the imperial policies they refused to serve. According to my calculations, at least ten percent of all recruits absconded while serving in Louisiana. Though less frequent than in European armies, deserting in America was an even more radical decision that required determination, organization, knowledge, and skill. Rather than individual acts of

desperation, I interpret the vast majority of defections as a form of collective resistance and at times explicit protest against the soldiers' living and working conditions. A labor problem as much as a military one, desertion had a profound impact on French colonial rule in the region. While local authorities sought to stop and punish runaways, their assertion of French sovereignty paradoxically depended on the cooperation of European and Indigenous neighbors, which forced them to reconsider metropolitan norms of justice and diplomacy.

Chapter 4.0 analyzes the rise of African slavery and how enslaved Africans, rather than European workers or Indigenous captives, became the dominant source of labor and demographic growth. I argue that this reliance on enslaved Black workers mobilized racial attitudes first elaborated in the Antilles, but that the racialization of labor was a dynamic process still ongoing by the 1760s. A second section reviews the history of the short-lived transatlantic slave trade to elucidate how Europeans sought to supply enslaved Africans to the Gulf Coast. After Native and African resistance helped to interrupt this commerce in 1731, local and metropolitan efforts failed to revive it. A largely clandestine Caribbean traffic channeled a small stream of Black captives to the region in the following decades, causing security concerns among local white elites who nevertheless ousted the incoming Spanish administration in 1768, in part to protect this slave smuggling business. I conclude this chapter by investigating the reality and the effects of the chronic *disette de nègres* ("shortage of negroes," i.e. Black slaves) decried by settlers and officials. The circulation of enslaved labor, notably through slave rentals, partly compensated for the colony's slow growth without altering its lopsided geographic and social distribution. By the 1760s, the contrast between slavery and freedom, which closely followed racial lines, was the main divide within colonial society, and unequal access to slave labor the principal measure of socio-economic status.

The second half of this study offers a comprehensive analysis of a single phenomenon, slave desertion, to reevaluate the importance of so-called *petit marronage* from three different perspectives—top down and quantitative, bottom up and narrative, and microhistorical. Chapter 5.0 explores the prevalence of *marronage* and its suppression by providing a statistical overview of runaways. Analyzing how slaveholders and authorities recorded and punished this behavior, I demonstrate that public reports, prosecutions, and executions of runaways remained exceptional as slave discipline was usually considered a private matter of the slaveholder's sovereign power over his property. The 197 fugitives I have identified in French colonial records therefore represent only the tip of the iceberg. Yet this sample yields demographic conclusions that are remarkably consistent with other slave societies in North America, such as the smaller number and younger age of female runaways. Race and origin patterns like the decreasing importance over time of Indigenous fugitives, on the other hand, reflect the specific evolution of Louisiana's slave trade and the social composition of its servile population. By contrast with the soldiers studied in Chapter 3.0, the majority of enslaved fugitives left on their own, for a limited time, and remained in familiar terrain near New Orleans and other colonial settlements.

Nevertheless, as Chapter 6.0 demonstrates, *marronage* was a form of collective resistance in its means and its objectives. Running away required not only shared knowledge and resources, but also the cooperation of multiple actors, including white colonists who knowingly employed fugitives. Based on a close reading of judicial records, I argue that although very few runaways escaped bondage permanently, even their temporary absences empowered enslaved men and women to “negotiate with their feet,” protest the worst abuses of slaveholders, and assert informal rights. While economic and geopolitical transformations triggered a brutal government crackdown on slave mobility in the last decade of the French regime, by then bondsmen and women had

established customary privileges like owning property and self-hiring so firmly that Spanish institutions would soon be compelled to recognize them legally.

The final chapter (7.0) is a microhistory focused on the unique case of two Chickasaw siblings who, before being sold in their late teens, absconded sixty-one times over a period of nine years—more than any two slaves on record in North America. Beyond the shared motivations of runaways examined in Chapter 6.0, I analyze their efforts to stay connected to their people while growing up among Europeans and Africans in New Orleans, but also to demand the manumission once promised to them. The fragmentary evidence I piece together to reconstitute some of the siblings' experience illuminates the daily, concrete operations of fugitives, slaveholders, and the state—including an informal and previously undocumented system of slave catching. Mapping the spatial distribution of Baptiste and Marianne's movements, who repeatedly ran away to reunite when kept apart from each other, also highlights the existence of the bonds they forged across racial lines with friends, allies, and adopted kin. From their perspective, the main achievement of their *marronages* was to break the isolation caused by their enslavement and to create a social world of their own making.

Taken together the chapters make three main contributions to the social history of early Louisiana. First, they reframe seemingly isolated acts of labor resistance like military desertion or *marronage* as forms of collective resistance, by demonstrating that runaways relied on the cooperation of multiple actors to “negotiate—and occasionally petition—with their feet.” Fugitives rarely escaped to freedom successfully or permanently, as Marie or Soquoy did, but their cumulated absences served them and others as protests against their exploitation and defenses of customary rights. Running away, in that sense, was an ongoing social and communal process that outlasted and transcended the discrete incidents of desertion.

Second, this study shows how the French settlement of the Mississippi Valley challenged European norms of government and relied on negotiated sovereignty. With more urgency and improvisation than in the metropole or in the more prosperous, better populated colonies in Canada and the West Indies, local authorities had to accommodate the demands of planters, Native allies, and even marginal actors like soldiers and enslaved persons to secure cooperation they could not achieve through force alone. As recent scholarship has demonstrated about other parts of the early modern French empire, this practice of colonialism reliant on collaboration and shared authority proved critical in asserting control over distant territories when only limited forces were available.³⁵

Lastly, I argue that enslaved Black men and women quickly became the main source of labor, as problems posed by other unfree migrants—white convicts, soldiers, and Indigenous captives—accelerated the racialization of work. Nevertheless, chronic shortages of manpower presented Afro-Louisianans with opportunities for spatial and social mobility. While recent scholarship portrays early New Orleans (often read as a metaphor for the colony as a whole) as a slave society founded on a rigid racial hierarchy and a brutal labor regime similar to Caribbean colonies, my research suggests that race and class formation in Louisiana occurred along a complex and moving spectrum of unfreedom, which was partly defined by the ideas and actions of laborers themselves.³⁶

³⁵ Robert Michael Morrissey, *Empire by Collaboration: Indians, Colonists, and Governments in Colonial Illinois Country* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); Danna Agmon, *A Colonial Affair: Commerce, Conversion, and Scandal in French India* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017).

³⁶ Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans*; Thomas N. Ingersoll, *Mammon and Manon in Early New Orleans: The First Slave Society in the Deep South, 1718-1819* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999).

2.0 *La Peine de l'Amérique*: The Louisiana Experiment with Convict Transportation, ca. 1716-1721

In 1719, the lieutenant general of the police of Paris petitioned the government to have a prisoner transported to France's newest American settlement. "Here is a true subject for Louisiana," explained the magistrate, "a very bad subject who deserves [...] to be among those who are destined for the new colonies."¹ For months, French authorities had been producing similar documents as they organized the transportation of hundreds of captives as soldiers or *engagés* (indentured workers) to the Gulf Coast. Just as governor Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville led a group of French and Canadian workers to clear canebrake on the future site of New Orleans, across the Atlantic recruiters enlisted and shipped hundreds of European settlers as slave ships took the first cargoes of enslaved Africans to Louisiana.² Men and women deported from France were a crucial component of this colonizing effort.

Between 1716 and 1721, over 1,300 smugglers, vagabonds, military deserters, and other men and women deemed socially undesirable were deported to Louisiana as *forçats* (convicts sentenced to hard labor). Those captives, who represented about twenty percent of all arrivals from

¹ Cited in Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 6. "Suitable subjects for Louisiana" was already a common derogatory phrase among Parisians, due to the colony's association with convict transportation. See Marcel Giraud, *Histoire de la Louisiane française, III: L'époque de John Law, 1717-1720* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1966), 257; James D. Hardy, "The Transportation of Convicts to Colonial Louisiana," *Louisiana History* 7, no. 3 (1966): 211; Edgar Faure, *La Banqueroute de Law* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), 418.

² According to a rare description of New Orleans's founding, written by a long-time resident thirty years later, the workers led by Bienville were "all convicts." Conrad M. Widman, ed., "Some Southern Cities in the U.S. (From an Unpublished French Manuscript, Written 1751-1753)," *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia* 10, no. 2 (1899): 201-2. For the circumstances of this founding, see also Marc Villiers du Terrage, *Histoire de la fondation de la Nouvelle-Orléans (1717-1722)* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1917), 24-28; Richard Campanella, *Bienville's Dilemma: A Historical Geography of New Orleans* (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, 2008), 109-10.

France over that period, were by far the largest number of prisoners shipped to any French colony during the Ancien Régime. By no means was this policy of mass transportation unique in the annals of European expansion, and its magnitude is dwarfed by the numbers of exiles dispatched by the English and the Portuguese across their empires. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Britain alone shipped about 50,000 convicts to its North American colonies, most of them after its Parliament passed the 1718 Transportation Act.³ Like their English counterparts, French authorities sent prisoners to the New World to populate their colonies and supply them with cheap labor, on the one hand, and to punish and deter crime while removing indigents from the metropole, on the other. “Sending this sort of people,” wrote the Minister of the Marine, who also supervised the administration of the colonies, to the Minister of War, “is advantageous to the Kingdom, which discards useless mouths to feed in this way, moreover it makes Paris safer.”⁴ And yet at the time he wrote those lines, the Gallic monarchy was already in the process of aborting its short-lived experiment with mass transportation. In May 1720, a royal decree ordered “that no more vagabonds, smugglers and criminals will be sent to Louisiana; that the orders given by His Majesty on this topic will be changed, and the said vagabonds destined for other French colonies.”⁵ Two years later, another royal edict officially ended the oversea transportation of vagrants, beggars, and other banished individuals.⁶

³ For international comparisons, see Timothy J. Coates, *Convicts and Orphans: Forced and State-Sponsored Colonizers in the Portuguese Empire, 1550-1755* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), xv–xviii, 184.

⁴ Minister to Le Blanc, 18 May 1721, ANOM, B, 44, fol. 260.

⁵ “Arrêt qui fait cesser l’envoi de vagabonds et de criminels en Louisiane,” 9 May 1720, ANOM, Actes du Pouvoir souverain (A), 23, fol. 29.

⁶ “Déclaration du Roy, concernant les vagabonds, gens sans aveu, mendiants et bannis,” 5 July 1722, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Site François-Mitterrand (BNF-M), Département droit, économie, politique, F-21091, <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8608431z/f1.item.zoom>

This chapter examines why a new government engaged in this exceptional experiment with mass transportation in the early years of the Regency after Louis XIV's death, how they rapidly came to abandon this policy in the face of popular unrest, and what the impact of those decisions was in France, Louisiana and the French Atlantic. According to criminologist Pieter Spierenburg, while England adopted criminal transportation as a "centrally dominant secondary punishment," a non-capital alternative to the death penalty rendered necessary by the rise of crime and the absence of a large-scale prison system, French galleys, like Dutch sites of forced labor, offered suitable alternatives, which explain why the latter colonial empires did not embrace deportation on a similar scale.⁷ However useful, this structural comparison hardly accounts for the sudden historical rise and fall of the Louisiana experiment with forced emigration, which in fact belies some of these assumptions.

Neither Louisiana nor oversea transportation were entirely unknown in the metropole before 1715. Both had only a marginal existence, however, until a new colonial proprietor, the Compagnie des Indes headed by the powerful Controller General of Finances John Law, endeavored to accelerate the development of its American settlement by shipping thousands of poor men and women from France against their will under various pretexts. Unprecedented in their scope and the active involvement of the state, those deportations showed that French subjects were no longer considered immune to servitude and could be exiled by ordinary courts. Taking advantage of the political and economic transformations of the Regency, notably a government by councils eager to remove the vagrant poor from the kingdom and to restore its finances by

⁷ Pieter Spierenburg, *The Prison Experience: Disciplinary Institutions and Their Inmates in Early Modern Europe* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), 266–77.

encouraging colonial commerce, various actors from merchants to bureaucrats pushed for the adoption of this policy of forced emigration, which nevertheless remained short-lived.

Along with legislative innovations, colonial transportation relied on preexisting penal infrastructure and personnel to arrest, imprison, and ship involuntary migrants. Yet prisoners too benefitted from a collective, multi-generational experience that enabled many to escape or rebel. Fueled by growing public hostility toward Law and the failed financial scheme he designed to fund the Kingdom's debt via private investments in the Compagnie, the popular support for this resistance to forced emigration culminated in riots against the agents employed to round up individuals destined for exile off the streets of Paris. While the Compagnie justified its abandonment of deportations to Louisiana by external motives, such as the replacement of European convicts by enslaved Africans, the timing of its decision suggests that the militant actions of ordinary Frenchmen and women played a critical part in ending this experiment.

2.1 Genealogy and Context of the Louisiana Experiment

No systematic policy of penal transportation to French colonies preceded the Louisiana episode, but this experiment was part of long history of migration, punishment, and social control. As early as 1540, only fifty years after Columbus brought the first European convicts to the New World, Francois I had allowed explorers Jean-François de La Rocque de Roberval and Jacques Cartier to embark 39 criminals, including five women, on a voyage to settle Canada.⁸ A century

⁸ Gustave Lanctôt, *Filles de joie ou filles du roi: étude sur l'émigration féminine en Nouvelle-France* (Montréal: Chantecler, 1952), 25–27; Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty*, 169.

and a half would pass before the French monarchy sponsored the oversea deportation of *forçats*—men condemned to serve on the King’s galleys at Marseille, theoretically as oarsmen but increasingly as workers in a naval labor camp, who could not reintegrate French society since their sentence entailed their civil death.⁹ Between 1680 and 1715, almost half of those sentenced to galley servitude were convicted of military crimes, chiefly desertion, 31 percent of theft and other ordinary crimes, and 16 percent of fraud and smuggling.¹⁰ About four percent were Huguenots persecuted after the 1685 repeal of the Edict of Nantes, which deprived them of religious and civil liberties, banning Protestant worship as well as emigration.¹¹ In 1686, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, Marquis de Seignelay, who succeeded his father as Louis XIV’s Minister of the Marine, the powerful administration that presided over all colonies as well as the galleys, approved a proposal to transport some of the 1,400 invalid *forçats*.¹² The proposal came from the new intendant of the galleys, who had previously been chief administrator in the Lesser Antilles and sought to relieve Marseille’s overcrowded floating prisons at the same time as shortage of white laborers plagued American settlements. “In order to obtain the greatest advantage from shipping these *forçats*,” replied Seignelay, “it seems necessary to arrange to sell them as *engagés* to the residents of the

⁹ For overviews of the galleys and the experiences of the convicts, see Paul W. Bamford, *Fighting Ships and Prisons: The Mediterranean Galleys of France in the Age of Louis XIV* (Saint Paul: University of Minnesota Press, 1973); Marc Vigie, “Justice et criminalité au XVIIIe siècle : le cas de la peine des galères,” *Histoire, économie & société* 4, no. 3 (1985): 345–68; André Zysberg, *Les Galériens: vies et destins de 60 000 forçats sur les galères de France, 1680-1748* (Paris: Seuil, 1987); Alain Berbouche, “La justice prévôtale des galères,” in *Marine et justice: la justice criminelle de la Marine française sous l’Ancien Régime* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2010), 179–99.

¹⁰ Zysberg, *Les Galériens*, 65. I choose to avoid the dominant translation of galériens as “galley slaves” and of their punishment as “galley slavery,” which suggest a false equivalence between their condition and the enslavement of Native Americans and Africans. Paul Bamford distinguishes French galley convicts from actually enslaved men, mostly Mediterranean Muslims but also some Sub-Saharan Africans and even a few Iroquois captives exiled from New France. Paul W. Bamford, “Slaves for the Galleys of France, 1665-1700,” in *Merchants & Scholars: Essays in the History of Exploration and Trade*, ed. John Parker (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1965), 171–91.

¹¹ Didier Boisson, “The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes and the Désert,” in *A Companion to the Huguenots*, ed. Bertrand Van Ruymbeke and Raymond A. Mentzer (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 221–45.

¹² Bamford, *Fighting Ships and Prisons*, 255.

[Caribbean] islands and Canada.”¹³ That same year, convicts were first listed among the population of the Lesser Antilles in a census and 150 smugglers arrived in Saint-Domingue.¹⁴ While metropolitan and colonial authorities carefully distinguished those convicts from the religious exiles who would soon join them, Huguenots formed the bulk of those deported to the West Indies in 1686-1688, for which the best documented study estimates their number between 426 and 455.¹⁵

Beside this brief first episode of forced migration, however, the flow of prisoners from Europe remained limited and erratic. From 1688 to 1715, no more than 600 recorded exiles reached the French colonies of the Greater Caribbean, including Guyana.¹⁶ Along with the debilitating effects of Louis XIV’s wars on the country’s shipping and treasury, two considerations prevented the adoption of a consistent policy of penal transportation. First, metropolitan officials appeared anxious to preserve American settlements from moral corruption and, in the face of protests from colonial elites, came to regard convicts as unfit to become settlers except as a last resort. In 1704,

¹³ Seignelay to Michel Bégon, 7 February 1686, cited in G. B. Depping, *Correspondance Administrative Sous Le Règne de Louis XIV*, vol. 2 (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1851), 948–49.

¹⁴ “Analyse d’une lettre de Cussy,” 1687, ANOM, Correspondance à l’arrivée en provenance de la Martinique (C8), A4, fol. 270.

¹⁵ Gérard Lafleur, “Les Protestants aux Antilles françaises du Vent sous l’Ancien Régime,” *Bulletin de la Société d’Histoire de la Guadeloupe*, no. 71–74 (1987): 196, 202. Precise estimates are difficult due to the contradictions between numbers of deportees intended for the colonies, actually sent, and arrived, as well as the confusion between different categories of migrants, all of which has led to some scholarly approximations. Debien mentions a total of 1,000 Huguenots exiled in 1686-1688, but his own evidence suggests he mistakenly included 500 prisoners who never left Marseille. Bamford states that 821 invalid convicts were shipped to America in 1686 alone, but he does not cite a source for this improbably large figure that outweighs all the recorded exiles in this period. A more recent survey advances that over 500 deportees left for Martinique alone in 1687-1688, apparently based on a misuse of Debien’s information that does not support this assertion. Gabriel Debien, *Les engagés pour les Antilles, 1634-1715* (Paris: Société de l’histoire des colonies françaises, 1952); Bamford, *Fighting Ships and Prisons*; Pritchard, *In Search of Empire*, 20.

¹⁶ See for instance “Gitton, marchand de La Rochelle, enverra 150 faux sauniers au Cap Français à Saint-Domingue: ils seront engagés six mois,” September 1700,” Centre d’Accueil et de Recherche des Archives Nationales (CARAN), Archives du contrôle général des finances (G7), 1258; “12 faux-sauniers embarqués,” 1705, G7, 1255; Minister to Beauharnais, 30 October 1710, B, 32, fol. 247; same to Mithon, 30 October 1710, B, 32, fol. 240.

for instance, West Indian governors requested permission to return some invalid *forçats* sent from France, arguing they were useless on the islands.¹⁷

But French authorities also showed reluctance to embrace forced migration because it violated the “freedom principle” according to which the King’s subjects were immune to servitude. As Sue Peabody has demonstrated, a free-soil ideology claiming “there are no slaves in France” motivated judges and administrators to reject the legal existence of slavery within the metropole. This principle knew plenty of exceptions and adjustments, from the galley servitude of convicts and foreign captives to the persecution of Huguenots, and it did not affect the enslavement of Africans and Indigenous people around the colonial empire, but it was upheld in the successful freedom suits of least 150 Black men and women manumitted by mainland courts in the eighteenth century.¹⁸ The correspondence of the Marine reveals a comparable attitude toward the colonial recruitment of *engagés*, soldiers, and even prisoners, who were all theoretically embarked of their own accord. In 1670, when the governor of the French Antilles asked the elder Jean-Baptiste Colbert to send boys and girls from metropolitan hospitals, which also served as orphanages, poorhouses, and prisons, the minister insisted “it is not in the power of the king, however powerful he is, to people said islands by force.”¹⁹ In 1684, only two years before ratifying the deportation of invalid galley convicts and many more Huguenots, Colbert’s son Seignelay claimed “this

¹⁷ “Extrait d’un mémoire sur l’employ que l’on peut faire des forçats invalides des galères de Sa Majesté,” 1704, in a volume of transcripts collected by nineteenth-century historian and archivist Pierre Margry entitled “Émigration, femmes dans les colonies,” Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Département des manuscrits, Site Richelieu (BNF-R), Nouvelles Acquisitions Françaises (NAF), 9328, fol. 9. For earlier examples of protests from colonial administrators, see Amblimont to the Minister, 12 March 1698, C8, A10, fol. 220; Robert to same, 3 March 1702, C8, A14, fol. 66; Bamford, *Fighting Ships and Prisons*, 256–57.

¹⁸ Sue Peabody, “*There Are No Slaves in France*”: *The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 55, 144–145n.6; Gillian Lee Weiss, “Infidels at the Oar: A Mediterranean Exception to France’s Free Soil Principle,” *Slavery & Abolition* 32, no. 3 (2011): 397–412.

¹⁹ Colbert to De Baas, 9 avril 1670, cited in Debien, *Les engagés pour les Antilles*, 177.

punishment is not known in France.”²⁰ Seignelay’s own successor Jérôme Phélypeaux de Pontchartrain repeatedly denied private requests to transport wrongdoers overseas during his tenure (1699-1715). “Nobody is sent there by force,” explained the minister, because “America is not a punishment.”²¹ Correspondingly, Pontchartrain reminded his subordinates that the King forbade enlisting *engagés* against their will. “His Majesty approves that they be enlisted willingly,” he wrote in 1699, “but not otherwise.”²² Yet the enforcement of such proclamations was inconsistent. That such reminders had to be issued, in fact, proves that no consensus existed on forced emigration to the colonies, which had promoters within the kingdom and even inside the Marine administration.

Before the Louisiana experiment with mass deportation, nearly all prisoners dispatched from France landed in the Antilles, as servants or soldiers, to punish one or more of three crimes: contraband, desertion, or disorderly conduct, for which families requested the exile of troublesome young men. These forced migrants therefore shared several characteristics. First, they had not been condemned by ordinary courts but rather by special decisions and tribunals: direct orders from the King, court martials or *conseils de guerre*, and *greniers à sel*, the provincial storehouses whose personnel supervised the sale of salt, enforced its taxation, and prosecuted related violations. On average, 4,000 salt cheaters (*faux sauniers*) were arrested in the seventeenth century and half of

²⁰ Seignelay to Le Camus, 6 mars 1684, in Depping, *Correspondance Administrative*, 2:245.

²¹ Quotes from Pontchartrain to Bishop of Poitiers, 9 July 1704 (“nobody”) and Pontchartrain to Coriolis, 15 June 1705 (“America”), in Depping, 2:841 and 424. See also same to Lourand, 12 March 1713, B, 35, fol. 61; Charles Frostin, “Du peuplement pénal de l’Amérique française aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles : hésitations et contradictions du pouvoir royal en matière de déportation,” *Annales de Bretagne et des pays de l’Ouest* 85, no. 1 (1978): 73–74; Marcel Giraud, *Histoire de la Louisiane française, I: Le règne de Louis XIV, 1698-1715* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1953), 152–54.

²² Pontchartrain to Bernage, 19 September 1699, B, 21, fol. 390.

them sentenced to prison each year.²³ Second, these exiles or their representatives had agreed to their transportation, which was offered as an alternative to a harsher punishment (death, galleys, prison). While seemingly arbitrary, their removal preserved the fiction of voluntary emigration. Lastly, almost all deportees were men. Women were heavily involved in smuggling activities, but they found themselves locked up in jails, hospitals, and monasteries rather than in the galleys like men.²⁴ This gendered segregation of penal sites, the larger demand for male farmers and artisans in the colonies, and the fact that most convicts were destined to hard labor or military service account for the low rate of female deportation until 1715. Despite enduring misconceptions about the so-called *filles du roi* (“King’s daughters”), very few of the women shipped at the King’s expense in this period as potential brides for European settlers in North America were prisoners.²⁵ The confusion largely resulted from the subsequent experiment with mass transportation to Louisiana and the collective memory of dramatic stories, real or fictional, of destitute women exiled to the Mississippi. Although hundreds of smugglers, deserters, and disorderly youths were shipped to America, bureaucrats went to great lengths to maintain the pretense that French colonial expansion relied on voluntary migration and penal transportation, which had never been extensive even in the case of the Huguenots, whose treatment remained controversial after the death of Louis XIV in 1715.

Between November 1718 and May 1720, however, no less than six royal ordinances changed the scale and nature of oversea transportation by targeting the urban poor, including

²³ Sheila T. Sturdivant, “Rich Man, Poor Man, Beggar Man, Thief: Frenchmen Exiled to Louisiana, 1717-1721” (M.A. thesis, University of Southern Louisiana, 1971), 15.

²⁴ Kwass, *Contraband*, 100; Yves Durand, “Le contrebande de sel au XVIII^e siècle aux frontières de Bretagne, du Maine et de l’Anjou,” *Histoire sociale / Social History* 7, no. 14 (1974): 240–41.

²⁵ Lanctôt, *Filles de joie ou filles du roi*; Yves Landry, *Les Filles du roi au XVII^e siècle: orphelines en France, pionnières au Canada* (Montréal: Leméac, 1992).

women.²⁶ The decrees allowed for the deportation of able-bodied beggars, vagabonds, and other indigents of both sexes detained in the kingdom's prisons and hospitals, answering the "need to send people to our colonies, to serve as *engagés* and work to cultivate the land and at other tasks."²⁷ This new legislation, which granted ordinary courts the power to issue transportation sentences, dissolved even the mere appearance of consent from the exiles. Progressively, such innovations laid the foundations for a systematic policy of penal relegation like the one adopted in Britain under the 1718 Transportation Act, reflecting a similar combination of repressive strategies against both crime and poverty. "In the eyes of most contemporaries," write Gwenda Morgan and Peter Rushton, "idleness and crime were intimately associated, and the search for some way to employ the unemployed or those without masters, and prevent dangerous forms of wandering deviance, concentrated particularly on the young."²⁸ The removal of socially undesirable subjects across the Atlantic under the Regency (1715-1723), France's government during the minority of Louis XV, also expanded upon a long history of confinement and banishment.²⁹ But the American colonies, and Louisiana in particular, would now serve as an alternative site of exile and punishment. The royal declaration of January 8, 1719 on criminals and vagabonds introduced colonial transportation as a conditional and additional penalty: only those who violated the terms of a local banishment

²⁶ Jacques Depauw, "Pauvres, pauvres mendiants, mendiants valides ou vagabonds? Les hésitations de la législation royale," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 21, no. 3 (1974): 412–13.

²⁷ "Déclaration concernant les condamnés aux galères, bannis, et vagabonds," 8 January 1719, cited in *Recueil général des anciennes lois françaises*, ed. François-André Isambert, Decrusy, and Alphonse-Honoré Taillandier (Paris: Belin-Leprieur, 1821-1830), 21:169-171.

²⁸ Gwenda Morgan and Peter Rushton, *Eighteenth-Century Criminal Transportation*, New York (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 10 (quote); Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty*, 168–69.

²⁹ Overviews of that history include Depauw, "Pauvres, pauvres mendiants, mendiants valides ou vagabonds?"; Bernard Schnapper, "La répression du vagabondage et sa signification historique du XVe au XVIIIe siècle," *Revue historique de droit français et étranger* 63, no. 2 (1985): 143–57; Robert M. Schwartz, *Policing the Poor in Eighteenth-Century France* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

could be deported overseas.³⁰ Because the courts misread the text and overlooked its novelty, another declaration soon clarified that it applied not only to Paris but to the whole kingdom.³¹ Far from being unprecedented, the new legislation therefore introduced transportation gradually and, initially, as a footnote to the legal apparatus deployed against vagrancy.

The legislative flurry of 1718-1720 also came out of a changing social, economic, and political context. Following Louis XIV's death, the Regent Philip, Duke of Orléans, inaugurated an ephemeral new system of government by councils (*polysynody*, 1715-1718), which favored the rise of mercantile, maritime, and colonial interests.³² In October 1716, an important edict authorized slaveholders to import Black men and women from the colonies to the mainland to receive Catholic instruction, learn a trade, or simply work as their domestic servants without running the risk of losing their human property, which violated the free-soil principle and effectively legalized African slavery in the metropole.³³ In a parallel ideological shift, various voices converged on Paris, once again the seat of the Court as ministries relocated from Versailles, to call for a systematic policy of forced transportation, starting with administrators who sought to populate Northern American colonies.³⁴ A memorandum from Canada's governor Philippe de Rigaud de Vaudreuil examined by the Council of the Marine identified two obstacles standing in

³⁰ "Déclaration concernant les condamnés," 8 January 1719.

³¹ "Déclaration du Roi, concernant les Vagabonds & Gens sans aveu," 12 March 1719, BNF-M, F-21082, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8607775v>.

³² Alexandre Dupilet, *La Régence Absolue: Philippe d'Orléans et La Polysynodie, 1715-1718* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 2011); Patrick Villiers, "Le Régent, la marine et les colonies 1er septembre 1715-2 décembre 1723," *Revue du Nord* 412, no. 4 (2015): 879–93.

³³ "Edit du Roy concernant les esclaves nègres des colonies," October 1716, Archives Municipales de Nantes, HH, 236; Frostin, "Du peuplement pénal de l'Amérique," 89; Peabody, *No Slaves in France*, 6, 15–22; Jennifer L. Palmer, *Intimate Bonds: Family and Slavery in the French Atlantic* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 50–56.

³⁴ Laurent Lemarchand, *Paris ou Versailles?: la monarchie absolue entre deux capitales (1715-1723)* (Paris: Éditions du Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques, 2014).

the way of emigration overseas: a lack of volunteers and the exhaustion of the royal treasury, which limited the means to ship and settle them in America. In order to populate New France at a minimum social and financial cost for the metropole, Vaudreuil suggested solving both problems by transporting 150 salt cheaters every year.³⁵ This operation would come at the expense of the *Ferme Générale*, the private syndicate that collected indirect taxes and custom duties on behalf of the King. Its agents, the farmers general, were also responsible for the suppression of salt and tobacco contraband that violated the Crown's monopoly on these two commodities. *Faux-saunage*, a capacious criminal denomination that included manufacturing, transporting, storing, or selling salt illegally, was an enormous business—taxes on this product alone represented 13 percent of the national income by the mid-eighteenth century.³⁶ Like other forms of “social banditry” analyzed by Eric Hobsbawm, the rise of contraband resulted from the profound crisis of the French economy consecutive to the ruinous wars of Louis XIV, but also from the growing repressive efforts to criminalize the subsistence activities of the rural poor.³⁷ Each year the farmers general arrested thousands of smugglers, mostly peasants or day laborers seeking to eke out a livelihood, judged them in their own courts, and sentenced them to prison or hard labor on the King's galleys, where their proportion rose from 16 percent of all convicts under Louis XIV to 44 percent under the Regency and Louis XV.³⁸

³⁵ “Mémoire de Vaudreuil au Conseil de Marine,” February 1716, ANOM, Correspondance à l'arrivée en provenance du Canada (C11), A36, fols.97-99.

³⁶ Jean-Claude Hocquet, *Le Roi, le Marchand et le Sel* (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 1987), 36; Theodore Sands and Chester Penn Higby, “France and the Salt Tax,” *The Historian* 11, no. 2 (1949): 145–65.

³⁷ Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels* (London: Little, Brown Book Group, 2017). For a recent study of smuggling and social banditry of eighteenth-century France, see Kwass, *Contraband*. Classic studies of the criminalization of subsistence activities include Douglas Hay et al., *Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Verso, 2011); E. P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters* (London: Breviary Stuff Publications, 2013).

³⁸ Zysberg, *Les Galériens*, 65, 85–102. The importance of salt smuggling was such that French authorities occasionally used the term *faux-saunier* to describe even those guilty of tobacco contraband. See for instance the case of Honorade

Many voices, like Vaudreuil, reasoned that shipping convicts to French America would be a far better response. In 1710, the farmers generals themselves had already petitioned the Marine to exile a “number of salt cheaters condemned to the galleys and fit to labor at all sorts of works.”³⁹ This earlier proposal recommended shipping the convicts from the port of Nantes, where they could easily be taken via the Loire valley, locked up in the imposing castle of the Dukes of Brittany, and deported on enough merchant vessels to carry 450 *forçats* each year at no cost to the King, since they would replace the *engagés* that shipowners were required to carry on transatlantic voyages. In the fall of 1716, Louisiana’s first proprietary owner, the financier Antoine Crozat, obtained from the Council of the Marine the right to remedy the lack of voluntary migrants by transporting 100 salt cheaters per year directly from Western France. Crozat considered them valuable laborers because they possessed useful trades, were accustomed to working the land, and were cheaper to maintain than soldiers.⁴⁰ “This will progressively produce very good settlers,” argued Crozat, “who incidentally would be of no use in the kingdom.”⁴¹ While claiming that the exiled salt cheaters “will not be treated differently than servants in the farms of France,” Crozat proposed “to distribute them among the colonists to make them work in the same manner as the

Roux, a woman from Provence eventually pardoned after having been condemned to deportation in Louisiana, whipped, marched to the Western city of Saumur, and imprisoned for three years for tobacco contraband. Judgment against Honorade Roux and others, 7 October 1717, Archives départementales des Bouches-du-Rhône, Série B: Cours et juridictions, 1456; “Lettre de rappel de ban,” 13 November 1720, B, 42, fols. 126-127.

³⁹ “Mémoire des fermiers généraux au sujet des faux sauniers condamnés aux galères qu’on peut envoyer aux isles françaises de l’Amérique à moindre frais qu’à Marseille,” 11 February 1710, C8, B3, no. 5, ark:/61561/zn401mhmmmm.

⁴⁰ “Mémoire sur la colonie pour le conseil de Régence,” 11 February 1716, Centre des Archives Diplomatiques, La Courneuve, Mémoires et Documents (MD), Amérique, 1, fols. 52-68; “Arrêt du Conseil de la Marine sur un mémoire de Crozat,” 13 October 1716, C13, A4, fol. 419.

⁴¹ “Mémoire sur la Louisiane,” MD, Amérique, 1, fol. 151

colonists of the islands of America employ *engagés*, namely *as slaves for three years* after which time they will be required to grant their freedom.”⁴²

The arguments of Canada’s governor, Louisiana’s proprietor, and the metropolitan farmers general in favor of forced emigration were all the more convincing as they echoed those of merchants from the major Atlantic ports of Bordeaux, Nantes, and La Rochelle. Since 1698, every commercial ship traveling to the Antilles had to transport a minimum number of *engagés*, a requirement intended to supply enough carry European workers to limit the risks of foreign invasion and slave insurrection—West Indian colonists were required to employ at least one white laborer for every 20 enslaved Africans. Following the peace of Utrecht (1713-1715), enlistments for the colonies first peaked as ship captains rushed to sign up young men discharged from the military, but voluntary indentures soon dropped once this surplus of labor was absorbed. As the new government reasserted the obligation to carry *engagés* and extended it to Canada in 1716, owners and captains of merchant vessels protested they could not find enough volunteers to fill their quotas.⁴³ The traders of Nantes, for instance, estimated about 200 private ships per year departed from French Atlantic ports toward American colonies, where they should carry a total of 1,200 indentured servants, a number that would easily balance the 6,000 African captives imported each year. Yet the merchants complained it was “almost impossible to find such a large number of people who decide to willingly become slaves for three years,” and that since “no one can be taken

⁴² “État de la colonie en 1717 et de ce qu’il est nécessaire d’y transporter pour empêcher sa rechute,” MD, Amérique, 1, fol. 78 (“will not be treated”); “Mémoire sur la Louisiane,” MD, Amérique, 1, fol. 150-151 (“to distribute them”).

⁴³ “Règlement au sujet des engagés et fusils qui doivent être portés par les navires marchands aux colonies des îles françaises de l’Amérique & de la Nouvelle-France,” 16 November 1716, cited in René-Josué Valin, ed., *Nouveau commentaire sur l’ordonnance de la marine*, vol. 1 (La Rochelle: J. Légier et P. Mesnier, 1776), 424–25; Christian Huetz de Lempis, “Indentured Servants Bound for the French Antilles in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” in *To Make America: European Emigration in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Ida Altman and James Horn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 183–87; Caroline Oudin-Bastide, *Travail, capitalisme et société esclavagiste* (Paris: La Découverte, 2005), 82n7.

by force, they have to hire themselves willingly and sign their indentures at the notaries.”⁴⁴ *Engagement* could describe either the physical document or the contractual obligation that defined the terms of service of both soldiers and indentured workers. Instead, the merchants of Nantes and La Rochelle and their counterparts at La Rochelle petitioned to replace *engagés* with healthy vagabonds and beggars selected from the kingdom’s hospitals.⁴⁵

The traders rejected a burden that was social and perhaps moral as well as financial. Deportees were not only cheaper to transport than *engagés*, but paradoxically less troublesome too, because the same institutions that supplied the former—poorhouses, the farmers general, or the state—were responsible for their subsistence and their surveillance.⁴⁶ In sum, merchants proved reluctant to embark indentured servants and eager to embark prisoners because they knew firsthand how difficult it was to enroll young workers for the colonies, and that many *engagés* already were involuntary migrants who would desert before their departure without close supervision. In May 1718, traders from La Rochelle were still denouncing “the obligation they have to recruit *engagés*.” Their petition to the Council of the Marine insisted they were “not asking to be discharged from carrying some to the colonies on all their ships, but they beg that hospitals or another approved source supply them.”⁴⁷

The enthusiastic though cautious approval of colonial transportation by the new

⁴⁴ *Mémoires* of the traders of Nantes regarding the decree of November 16 on *engagés*, November 1716, Archives Départementales de Loire-Atlantique, C, 727, nos. 83-84.

⁴⁵ Comments and proposals of the traders of La Rochelle and Nantes regarding the decree of November 16 on *engagés*, 1716, NAF, 9328, fols. 14-15.

⁴⁶ As Leslie Choquette points out in the case of Canada, the transportation of *engagés* also became more expensive in the eighteenth century because the French state no longer subsidized it. Leslie Choquette, *Frenchmen into Peasants: Modernity and Tradition in the Peopling of French Canada* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 253.

⁴⁷ Merchants of La Rochelle to Council of the Marine, ca. May 1718, CARAN, Archives de la Marine (MAR), Délibérations du Conseil de marine (B1), 30, fol. 5.

government first appeared in a 1717 *mémoire* and the annotated draft of an ordinance it informed. Their main author, the seasoned colonial agent and general inspector of the Marine Louis Hyacinthe Ploumier de La Boulaye, synthesized many of the arguments raised in various documents over the previous months regarding forced emigration.⁴⁸ To remedy the lack of *engagés* decried by transatlantic traders, he recommended extending the term of indentures from the customary three years to seven and shipping vagrants held in poorhouses to the Antilles to supplement their number.⁴⁹ Like salt cheaters, the vagabonds would be banned from returning to France, but they were offered free passage for their families and some freedom dues, including wages and a piece of land, at the end of their indenture.⁵⁰ Along with other bureaucrats who commented the projected decree, La Boulaye anticipated some objections, “which are not perceived but that certainly did not escape M. Colbert, who otherwise would not have missed such an easy means to populate the islands.”⁵¹ In particular, the administrators of the Marine expected local parliaments, the appellate courts that once again oversaw the local application of royal legislation in Paris and the provinces after years of absolutist rule, “could raise some difficulties about this disposition as contrary to public liberty.”⁵²

⁴⁸ Before 1717, La Boulaye invested in the slave trade, inspected fortifications in the West Indies, and drafted reports on Canada and Guyana as well as the Antilles. See Charles Frostin, “Les Pontchartrain et La Pénétration Commerciale Française En Amérique Espagnole (1690-1715),” *Revue Historique* 245, no. 2 (1971): 313–14, 328–29; Guy Frégault, *Pierre LeMoyne d'Iberville*. (Montréal: Fides, 1968), 147; Pritchard, *In Search of Empire*, 349, 369, 374. La Boulaye was prominent enough in the administration of the Marine for one of the first French forts in Lower Louisiana to be named after him. Jay Higginbotham, *Old Mobile: Fort Louis de La Louisiane, 1702-1711* (Tuscaloosa: University Alabama Press, 1991), 17n5.

⁴⁹ “Mémoire contenant les raisons pour lesquelles il convient que les engagés le soient pour sept années au lieu de trois,” 22 January 1717, C8, B4, no. 8. I used the transcript of the *mémoire*, which precedes the annotated draft of a projected ordinance, in “Emigration,” NAF, 9328, fol. 12.

⁵⁰ Council of the Marine to Creil, 15 February 1717, B, 39, fols. 113-114.

⁵¹ “Projet d’ordonnance,” January 1717, NAF, 9328, fol. 13.

⁵² “Projet d’ordonnance,” fol. 13. On provincial parliaments under the Ancien Régime and the brief constitutional crisis opened by the death of Louis XIV, see Peabody, *No Slaves in France*, 16–19; Daniel Roche, *France in the*

Having acknowledged that “the law forbids to force anyone’s freedom,” La Boulaye sought to reconcile this principle with the benefits of deportation.⁵³ First, the projected ordinance did not target all vagrants but only “those without relatives or domicile...convicted of a crime deserving corporal punishment like whipping or branding.” Foundlings in their teens were considered ideal candidates for transportation, whereas “one will be careful not to enroll those who have father and mother, wife or children to whom their presence or industry could be useful.”⁵⁴ Moreover, even isolated youths and offenders were expected to earn wages and to sign their indentures just like voluntary *engagés*, even though the bureaucrats of the Marine spelled out the limitations of this alleged consent. “When those beggars or vagabonds are requested by some merchant to be taken to the islands,” reflected the administrators, “they will be offered to sign a voluntary indenture ..., or if they refuse to sign it will be done by judicial authority.”⁵⁵ Because most were illiterate, suggested La Boulaye, the directors of the hospitals would really be the ones signing their contracts.

Beside this paradoxical vision of exiled prisoners converted into free waged workers by papers few of them could read, which blurred the lines between different categories of labor, La Boulaye’s project also countered potential critics by referring to English and Dutch penal policies as well as Gallic precedents “for locking up vagabonds and even orders to send them to the islands.” While it would “purge the kingdom of an infinity of beggars who choose this profession out of pure laziness,” La Boulaye stressed the necessity to keep the repression of vagrancy in the

Enlightenment (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1998), 465–69; Frédéric Bidouze, ed., “Parlements et parlementaires de France au XVIIIe siècle,” *Parlement[s], Revue d’histoire politique* 1, no. 15 (2011).

⁵³ “Mémoire contenant les raisons,” 22 January 1717, NAF, 9328, fol. 12.

⁵⁴ *Projet d’ordonnance*, fols. 13–14.

⁵⁵ *Projet d’ordonnance*, fols. 13.

hands of local judges and “separate from the decrees for the islands even though it is their motive.”⁵⁶ The impulse to hide the novelty of penal transportation and to keep colonial emigration distinct from the criminalization of the poor help explain the apparent indecisiveness and inconsistency of the Marine, starting with their emphasis on the dubious consent of the exiles. Administrators and merchants alike argued that involuntary indentures overseas were little different than or even preferable to various forms of bounded labor French subjects experienced in the metropole, from galley convicts and apprentices to domestic servants.⁵⁷ By stressing the incentives offered to those exiles at the end of their term, La Boulaye could claim that colonial deportations could be advantageous to everyone involved—the *engagés* themselves, the traders who carried them, their future employers in America, and the home country that got rid of them.⁵⁸ “It would be a great benefit for the Kingdom” agreed the merchants of La Rochelle, “to be discharged of these vermin.”⁵⁹

By May 1719, when royal decrees authorized the removal of poor boys and girls from Paris hospitals, as many as 4,000 youths were already rumored to be destined to the colonies.⁶⁰ Once again, social forces anticipated and encouraged legal and policy changes. Like the farmers general, hospital directors proved eager to dispatch some of the outcasts they were entrusted with to the New World and volunteered lists of potential recruits among their charges before even being asked to. Following the wars of Louis XIV, France suffered a severe economic crisis, and the criminalized poor who fled the impoverished countryside stretched the capacities of both

⁵⁶ *Projet d’ordonnance*,” fol. 13.

⁵⁷ Merchants of La Rochelle to Council of the Marine, ca. May 1718, MAR, B1, 30, fol. 5.

⁵⁸ “Mémoire contenant les raisons,” 22 January 1717, NAF, 9328, fol. 12.

⁵⁹ Merchants of La Rochelle to Council of the Marine, ca. May 1718, MAR, B1, 30, fol. 5.

⁶⁰ Jean Buvat, *Journal de la Régence (1715-1723)*, vol. 1 (Paris: Plon, 1865), 386–87.

charitable and repressive institutions in towns across the kingdom. The General Hospital of Paris, the largest of its kind, which housed between 8,000 and 9,000 inmates of both sexes on average in the early eighteenth century, provided medical and spiritual care for aging, sick, or invalid indigents, but it also served to incarcerate the wayward and wandering poor. At the Maison de Saint-Jean de Bicêtre south of the city, for instance, 73 percent of the 1,313 men detained in May 1713 were physically or mentally handicapped, and only 26 percent were able-bodied vagabonds, beggars, and other criminals.⁶¹ Six years later, administrators were drafting lists of “professional thieves,” vagrants, and other inmates they volunteered for exile in America, which they submitted to the Lieutenant General of the police—himself a board member of the Hospital General. “It seems that one could only relieve the hospital of them,” an accompanying note explained, “and purge Paris, even the Kingdom, by transferring them to the colonies.”⁶² A list of 13 vagabonds released in June 1719 by the Lieutenant General, who judged them ineligible for deportation due to their age and health, shows that in spite of instructions to provide only worthy laborers some hospital administrators took advantage of the new transportation policy to unload unfit inmates (figure 2). The average age of this group was 46 years old, and several of them were crippled or chronically ill.

⁶¹ Schwartz, *Policing the Poor in Eighteenth-Century France*, 43–44.

⁶² Anonymous note, 28 March 1719, BNF, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Archives de la Bastille (Bastille), Ms. 12708.

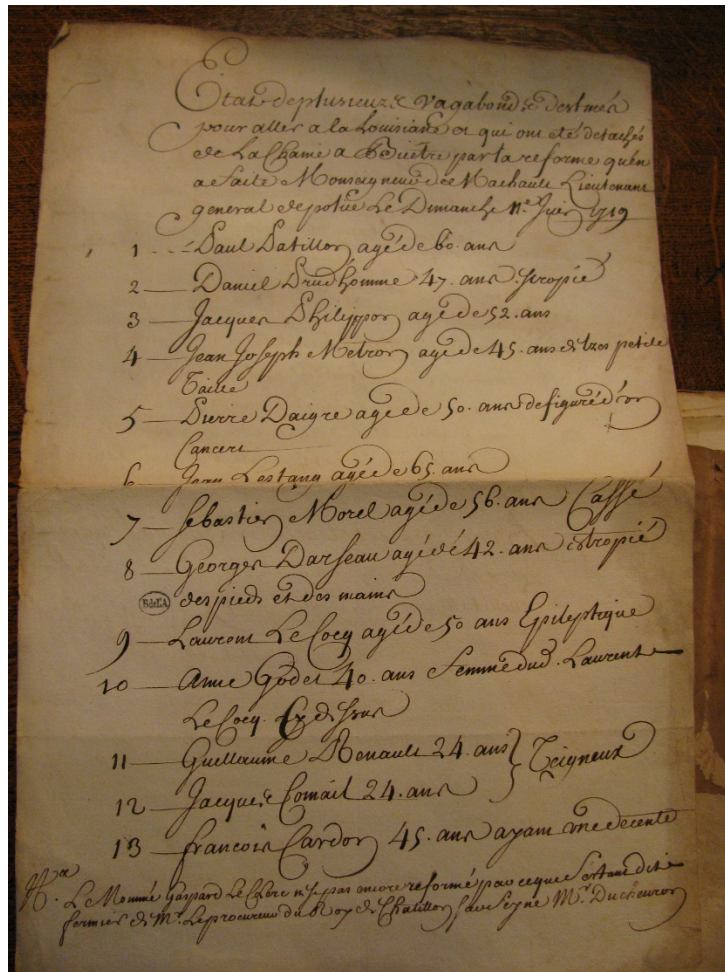


Figure 2. “List of several vagabonds destined to go to Louisiana,” 11 June 1719. The individuals listed had been “removed from the chain at Bicêtre after the review made by Monseigneur de Machault, Lieutenant General of Police.” Bastille, Ms. 12708.

From a governmental perspective, such individual releases, pardons, reprieves, and commutations were just as important assertions of authority as the legal decrees, judicial sentences, and political orders that produced the deportations. The apparent chaos of decisions and counter-orders found in the archives can be deceiving, but what shines through those administrative

contradictions is the monarchy's discretionary—though not always arbitrary—power to forgive as well as to punish.⁶³ Nearly all royal orders to arrest, imprison, or exile individuals without trial took the form of sealed documents known as *lettres de cachet*, which were part of the exceptional *justice retenue* (retained by the King) as opposed to the ordinary justice delegated to the courts. Although they came to be viewed as infamous embodiments of tyranny following the French Revolution, scholarly studies of those administrative decisions have shown that they responded to the demands of families and helped maintain a direct relation between the King and his subjects.⁶⁴ Whether they requested the condemnation of their relatives or their pardon, however, petitioners required the intercession of local authorities, both secular and religious, whose own power was reinforced by such interactions. Because the monarch's authority was not actually absolute but depended on networks of patronage and the collaboration of provincial elites, it effectively affirmed its sovereignty through a myriad of separate decisions regardless of their overall coherence.⁶⁵

The highest-profile prisoner to be sentenced to exile in Louisiana was arguably Jean François Gruet, a police agent who was first condemned to being publicly humiliated, pilloried, and sent to the galleys for extortion and embezzlement of taxes he had been assigned to collect in 1716 Paris.⁶⁶ Gruet was imprisoned until 1719, when his punishment was commuted to exile to

⁶³ Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 52–57; Reynald Abad, *La grâce du roi: Les lettres de clémence de Grande Chancellerie au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Presses de l'université Paris-Sorbonne, 2011).

⁶⁴ Arlette Farge and Michel Foucault, *Le Désordre des familles: lettres de cachet des Archives de la Bastille au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982).

⁶⁵ Peter Campbell, *Power and Politics in Old Regime France, 1720-1745* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1996), 12–20; Collins, “State Building in Early-Modern Europe”; Beik, “The Absolutism of Louis XIV as Social Collaboration.”

⁶⁶ Gruet had been harassing and incarcerating hundreds of poor Parisians. For a thorough discussion of his crimes, trial, and punishment, see Erik Henry Goldner, “Public Thieves: French Financiers, Corruption, and the Public in the Chamber of Justice of 1716–17” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2008), 138–43, 231–37, 351–54, 377–79.

Louisiana. But that sentence too was suspended, either for family reasons or to allow him to settle his accounts, and in 1723 the 13-year-old Louis XV granted Gruet a full pardon on the occasion of his coronation.⁶⁷ “We recall,” read the draft of the decision, “and discharge via these [papers] signed of our hand the petitioner of the punishment of being ~~transferred~~ported_[sic] to the Mississippi by our letters of the month of July 1719.”⁶⁸ A marginal comment on the final text justified the correction by insisting “transportation to the colonies is not called a relegation, because it would appear to carry a civil death and the two declarations that introduced this punishment decided it did not.”⁶⁹ Such fine legal distinctions, which distinguished between transported individuals and galley convicts and spared the former’s property, had concrete consequences, but they did not explain why privileged men like Gruet were pardoned while less fortunate individuals were exiled by force.

2.2 Arrests and Riots: A Brutal but Short-Lived Experiment

While ordinances authorized deportations and bureaucrats emphasized the largely fictional consent of the exiles, in practice forced emigration could not occur without violence. Louisiana remained a proprietary colony after Crozat renounced its exploitation, passing under the administration of the Mississippi Compagnie (or Compagnie of the West) soon renamed Compagnie des Indes. The latter rapidly expanded into a vast commercial empire as it absorbed

⁶⁷ Royal pardon for Jean Francois Gruet, February 1723, BNF-R, Joly de Fleury (Fleury), 27, fols. 147-149. According to Natalie Zemon Davis, “the king’s special pardons when he entered a town for the first time after his coronation were as important as his touching for scrofula.” Davis, *Fiction in the Archives*, 53.

⁶⁸ Draft of royal pardon for Gruet, February 1723, Fleury, 27, fol. 150.

⁶⁹ Royal pardon for Gruet, Fleury, 27, fol. 148

other companies to secure a monopoly over French overseas commerce, including the African slave trade. The Compagnie also wielded extensive political power and its chief director, the Scottish banker John Law, was one of the main advisors of the Regent. In an ingenuous financial “system” or scheme to solve the country’s enormous debt through the circulation of bonds and paper money, Law created France’s first central bank, turning the Mississippi Compagnie into a joint-stock venture to back it up.⁷⁰ He also convinced the Duke of Orléans of the absolute necessity to recruit colonists and to grant extraordinary powers to the Compagnie, including the use of force, to do so. By the time Law became Controller General of Finances in 1720, his Compagnie relied on a private militia to round up vagrants in the streets of Paris.

Law found a powerful ally in Secretary of State for War Claude Le Blanc, who owned one of the largest land concessions in Louisiana. The same man supervising the arrest, transfer, and detention of those exiled overseas was also one of the colony’s main investors. Le Blanc, who launched France’s modern legislation against deserters in 1716, provided more potential recruits when he reorganized the *maréchaussée*, a rural police force whose duties included arresting vagabonds.⁷¹ When the new policy of deportation to the colonies was first introduced in November 1718, the Secretary of War was the one entrusted with approving individual deportations. While some historians have argued that state-sponsored and coerced migration replaced private recruitment by planters, traders, and ship captains in the early eighteenth century, the timing of decision-making in this case highlights how commercial affairs and government business

⁷⁰ Goldner, “Public Thieves,” 473–90.

⁷¹ On Le Blanc and the reorganization of the *maréchaussée*, see Zysberg, *Les Galériens*, 80; Clive Emsley, *Gendarmes and the State in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 16–18.

interlaced under the Regency.⁷² As Pernille Røge's recent work demonstrates, this was only the latest example of "the intertwined nature of public and private interests that suffused the French monarchical state and undergirded colonial policy."⁷³

The logistics of deporting convicts was facilitated by a preexisting infrastructure inherited from a long penal tradition. The demands of military recruitment, the confinement of the poor, and the operation of the galleys provided a network of detention sites, established routes of transportation, and experienced personnel, from guards to bureaucrats. The same police agents contracted to march *chaînes* or convoys of hundreds of *forçats* to Marseille, competed for the privilege to conduct similar cohorts of colonial exiles to Atlantic ports.⁷⁴ In the absence of modern penitentiaries, the hubs of this penal network were the hospitals, monasteries, forts, and dungeon-like edifices where prisoners were held, dispatched, collected, and released in every town across the kingdom. Due to the demographic weight, central geographic position, and political importance of Paris, its jails and hospitals received hundreds of convicts destined for the colonies. A contemporary engraving depicts the arrival of such a convoy of men chained by the neck at the prison known as the Tournelle (formerly Tour Saint-Bernard), across the Seine river from Saint-Louis island, where smugglers, thieves, and other exiles awaited their deportation (figure 3).⁷⁵ Like

⁷² Huetz de Lemp, "Indentured Servants Bound for the French Antilles in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," 183; Choquette, *Frenchmen into Peasants*, 253–77.

⁷³ "Court intrigue, political favoritism, and economic maneuvering dictated who oversaw fiscal, financial, naval, foreign, or military matters – all government branches that bore on colonial policy. The rise and fall of particular policies could therefore be immediately dependent on the rise and fall of political careers, fortunes, and misfortunes as well as on the personal economic and political interests of people temporarily in charge." Pernille Røge, *Economistes and the Reinvention of Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 45.

⁷⁴ On conductors, see Langlade to Machaut (undated, filed with papers from May-September 1719), Bastille, Ms. 12708; "Mémoire du Conseil de Marine aux Srs. Langlade, Robillard, ou Roux chargés de la conduit des prisonniers destinés pour les colonies," 20 October 1721, B, 44, fol. 253-254.

⁷⁵ Council of the Marine to Arnoul, 21 November 1716, NAF, 21375; "Mémoire pour Guillaume Marot," annotated 25 April 1723, Fleury, 27, fol. 155-158.

other prints celebrating the conviction of Gruet and other swindlers by the Chamber of Justice, a special tribunal that investigated thousands of agents suspected of corruption—including Louisiana’s proprietor Crozat—this image participated in broadcasting the public spectacle of judicial punishment, which turned urban dwellers into audiences.⁷⁶ Yet it also understated the harsh conditions endured by prisoners, especially those of more modest means.⁷⁷



Figure 3. “The reception of the convicts on the arrival of Gruet at the Tournel [sic],” 1716. Anonymous engraving. *L’ancienne France. [9], La Justice et Les Tribunaux. Impôts, Monnaies et Finances* (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1888), 199, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k2055747>.

⁷⁶ Pascal Bastien, *L’Exécution publique à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 2006), 14.

⁷⁷ On those trials, see Erik Henry Goldner, “Corruption on Trial: Money, Power, and Punishment in France’s Chambre de Justice of 1716,” *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés / Crime, History & Societies* 17, no. Vol. 17, n°1 (2013): 5–28; Elisabeth Heijmans, *The Agency of Empire: Connections and Strategies in French Overseas Expansion (1686-1746)* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 31–35. For other prints, see Goldner, “Public Thieves,” 419–29.

The memoirs of a Protestant prisoner condemned to the galleys on religious grounds, who was incarcerated at the Tournelle in 1712, provide a rare glimpse of the miserable conditions inside. A vast and round “cellar,” the Tournelle could hold up to 500 men bound in tight rows, as they would on galley ships, to thick wooden beams laid three feet apart on the prison floor.

As the unfortunate *galériens* arrive in this dungeon, they are being laid down half-way so their head rests on a beam. Then an iron collar is placed around their neck, locked, and fastened... Since these collar chains are two feet apart, and most beams are forty feet long, twenty men in a row can be chained to each other...Imagine that a man chained in this manner cannot lie down, the beam where his head is being too high, nor sit up, this beam being too low” and his chain too short.⁷⁸

Yet the influx of prisoners to be deported stretched the thin resources of the Marine and tested the capacities of this penal infrastructure. The cramped conditions inside often squalid or decayed edifices incited revolts and escapes, which exposed the weaknesses of this transportation policy and the lie of voluntary exile upon which it rested. In the Western city of Saumur, the local curate denounced the sordid situation within another dungeon known the Tour Grenetière, where chained “salt cheaters condemned to the galleys are confined and laid on rotten straw so full of vermin they can hardly breathe... They suffocated and infect each other for being crammed together so tightly, and dysentery and the plague killed over 200” in 1710-1711. When “the chain of galley convicts went through Saumur,” reported the cleric, “these poor people begged to be

⁷⁸ Jean Marteilhe, *Mémoires d'un protestant, condamné aux galères de France pour cause de religion* (Rotterdam: chez J.D. Beman & fils, 1757), 326–27.

attached to it and rushed to be among the first to be delivered from a prison they found more insufferable than the galleys and even death.”⁷⁹ Most captives destined for the colonies were repeat offenders familiar with the poorly maintained and guarded jails of early modern France, from which escapes were frequent.⁸⁰ Armed with collective traditions of resistance, the deportees frequently rebelled and sought to escape during their arrest, their incarceration, their transfer, or their embarkation. In 1716, as the first exiles to Louisiana were marched toward the coast, a revolt of salt cheaters detained at Saumur’s overcrowded Tour Grenetière persuaded the Marine to seek safer prisons.⁸¹ Finding local jails full, officials were ordered to lock up the captives awaiting their embarkation in military strongholds around the Bay of Rochefort, in the same places and often at the same time as colonial troops. With the approval of the Council, dozens of prisoners sentenced to the galleys soon awaited their embarkation for Louisiana in French Atlantic ports.⁸² In May 1717, the Council of the Marine ordered “thirty-eight vagrants and vagabonds arrested in the vicinity of Paris” to be sent to Rochefort. A year and a half before any legal act justified their transportation, local officials were instructed to lock them up until they could be taken “to the

⁷⁹ Jacques Lebrun to Bishop of Angers, 11 November 1711, G7, 1242, reprinted in G. Delage, “A propos de la tour Grénetière,” *La Province d’Anjou*, no. 1 (1926): 188-206; François Lebrun, *Les hommes et la mort en Anjou aux 17e et 18e siècles: Essai de démographie et de psychologie historiques* (Paris: Mouton, 1971), 362–63.

⁸⁰ Even in the Conciergerie, one of Paris’s largest prisons, 91 breakouts were recorded in the first half of the seventeenth century. For an overview of incarceration and evasion in Ancien Régime France, see Marie Houlemare, “Des fers à l’évasion. Les rebelles dans les prisons royales à l’époque moderne,” *Criminocorpus. Revue d’Histoire de la justice, des crimes et des peines* [Online], 2014; Berbouche, “La justice prévôtale des galères.”

⁸¹ Council of the Marine to Creil, 19 January 1717, B, 39, fol. 4; same to Villars, 15 February 1717, B, 39, fol. 9. The archives of the Commission de Saumur, a special court that prosecuted offenders against salt taxes, document the breakout of another group of cheaters and smugglers from the same tower in 1743. Some prisoners destined for the Mississippi escaped through the fetid latrines, probably with the assistance of mason laborers hired to repair them, who left their vents unsealed. See “Pierre Goupil dit Marmiton (Pied pourry), détenu aux prisons de Saumur pour aller en Mississippi,” and Proceedings against Jean Masson, Pierre Goupil and others, escaped 28-29 June 1743, CARAN, Cour des Aides de Paris, Z/1A, 1081.

⁸² Council to Villeroy, 24 October 1716, B, 38, fol. 56; Council of the Marine to Beauharnais, 9 June 1717, B, 39, fo 46.

colonies where they would serve as *engagés* or in the [military] companies.”⁸³ Two years later, eighteen women taken from Paris jails and hospitals escaped during their transfer to the Normandy port of Le Havre. Dozens more rose up against their escort in La Rochelle, who managed to force them onto ships bound for Louisiana only after shooting six of them dead.⁸⁴ But the most spectacular escape happened at the priory of Saint-Martin-des-Champs in Paris shortly afterwards. On January 2, 1720, a local diarist employed in the King’s library, Jean Buvat, described how more than half of 107 men and women detained inside the abbey broke free, after attacking the guards and forcing the gates “to excuse themselves from the pilgrimage to the Mississippi, to which most of them had been condemned.”⁸⁵ Just as soldiers and *forçats* had been doing for generations, the captives destined for Louisiana thus escaped from prisons and the long *chaînes* (chains or convoys) leading them to Atlantic ports. Their resistance complicated the task of the authorities in charge of their recruitment and transportation, adding the issue of surveillance to the long list of logistical problems they had to solve before outfitting transatlantic voyages.⁸⁶

What made matters worse and forced migration an increasingly questionable option was the growing popular support for the exiles and a parallel hostility toward police agents, whose corruption and abuses had recently been exposed by several scandals. By the spring of 1720, Law’s

⁸³ “Estat des filoux et vagabonds qui ont ete pris dans les fours a platre de Belleville Montmartre et au gros caillou proche les Invalides,” attached to the letter from the Council of the Marine dated 23 march 1717, Service Historique de la Défense at Rochefort (SHD-R), Letters from the Court to the Intendant of Marine (1A), 3, fol. 227. Such lists lumped colonial recruits together with vagabonds and pardoned deserters, which erased the difference between social and military crimes. See “État des déserteurs ou vagabonds destinez pour aller servir aux Isles qui sont detenus dans les prisons de l’abbaye de Saint-Martin des champs de Paris et de Chatelleraud,” 23 February 1718, SHD-R, 1A, 4, fol. 81.

⁸⁴ Buvat, *Journal*, 1865, 1:426.

⁸⁵ Jean Buvat, *Journal de la Régence (1715-1723)*, vol. 2 (Paris: Plon, 1865), 1; Giraud, *Histoire de la Louisiane française*, III, 268.

⁸⁶ For a detailed analysis of the logistics involved in transatlantic communications, see Banks, *Chasing Empire*, 43–64.

mercenary force had become odious to Parisians, who swapped stories of kidnapping inspired by arrests of domestic servants, artisans, and office workers.⁸⁷ Buvat bemoaned the loss of “the public liberty to get out of one’s home without being arrested to go to Mississippi.”⁸⁸ According to another memorialist, the patrolmen, soon nicknamed of the Mississippi *bandouliers* (bandits), arrested more than 900 men and women within days of their appearance in the city, causing twenty to thirty thousand poor to flee Paris for fear of being deported.⁸⁹ In April, the local Parliament asked the Court to investigate the activities of “a large number of patrolmen dispersed in all the neighborhoods of this city [who], under pretext of the orders they have to seize vagrants and vagabonds, seize all sorts of persons without distinction, which is against the laws and public liberty.”⁹⁰ The unrest of the population, which had been boiling for weeks in the city, culminated in a two-day riot against the press gangs. On April 29-30, an angry mob chased the agents on Saint-Antoine Street and the Notre-Dame Bridge, assaulting them with anything they could lay their hands upon. According to various contemporaries, they killed or seriously wounded eight to twenty *bandouliers* before besieging the house of the lieutenant general of police. An injured patrolman was reportedly finished off by the patients of the hospital where he was being treated.⁹¹ For their

⁸⁷ Arlette Farge and Jacques Revel, *The Vanishing Children of Paris: Rumor and Politics before the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 31–33; Arlette Farge, *Dire et mal dire: L’opinion publique au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), 169; Goldner, “Public Thieves,” 138–40, 174–79, 232–34.

⁸⁸ Buvat, *Journal*, 1865, 2:40.

⁸⁹ Chevalier de Piossens, *Mémoires de la régence de S.A.R. Mgr. le duc d’Orléans, durant la minorité de Louis XV, roi de France*, vol. 2 (La Haye: Jean Van Duren, 1729), 398.

⁹⁰ Registre du conseil secret du Parlement de Paris, 29 April 1720, CARAN, Extraits et procédures judiciaires (U), 363.

⁹¹ For contemporary accounts of the riots, see Louis de Rouvroy duc de Saint-Simon, *Mémoires de Saint-Simon* (Paris: Hachette, 1925), 37: 256–258; “Relation inédite du greffier du Parlement,” printed in Saint-Simon, 37: 474–475; Édouard de Barthélemy, ed., *Les correspondants de la marquise de Balleroy: d’après les originaux inédits de la Bibliothèque Mazarine*, vol. 2 (Paris: Hachette, 1883), 159–60; Buvat, *Journal*, 1865, 2:77–78; Piossens, *Mémoires de la régence de S.A.R. Mgr. le duc d’Orléans*, 2:398–400; Hardy, “The Transportation of Convicts,” 215–18. On comparable incidents in the city of Orléans, see Dorothy Mackay Quynn, “Recruiting in Old Orleans for New Orleans,” *American Historical Review* 46, no. 4 (1941): 832–36.

involvement in the uprising, a coachman and a female peddler who had incited the mob to “kill the dogs” were briefly imprisoned at the Bastille.⁹²

Fearing further disorder, the Regent immediately issued orders to prevent the abuses and arbitrary arrests committed by the press gangs while reaffirming their mission. A royal ordinance required agents to receive weekly wages in advance rather than a bounty per arrest, to always wear their uniforms, to act under the supervision of police officers, and to arrest only vagrants and beggars rather than artisans and other workers—hereby acknowledging the abuses it purported to stop.⁹³ Just one week later, however, the King’s Council of State ordered that “no more vagabonds, vagrants, cheats, and criminals will be sent to Louisiana.”⁹⁴ The new decree listed five reasons for the abandonment of this short-lived policy: convicts were a bad influence on the colony and its Native inhabitants; landowners refused to hire them; employing them in the more populated colonies of the Antilles was easier and safer; many French and foreign families were ready to emigrate willingly; and the Compagnie des Indes had begun transporting enslaved Africans slaves to the Gulf Coast. The list was entirely too long to be convincing, and some of it was little more than wishful thinking. While the colony’s first cargo of African captives had arrived in June 1719, they were still far too few to satisfy the labor needs of the young settlement and its nascent plantation economy. Settlers might have preferred to employ enslaved workers whose permanent

⁹² Frantz Funck-Brentano, *Les lettres de cachet à Paris: étude suivie d’une liste des prisonniers de la Bastille (1659-1789)* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1903), 194.

⁹³ “Ordonnance concernant ce qui doit être observé en arrêtant les Mandians [sic] & Vagabonds,” 3 May 1720, in Louis-François-Joseph de La Barre et al., *Journal historique sur les matières du tems (Suite de la Clef)*, ed. Claude Jordan, vol. 7 (Paris: E. Ganeau, 1720), 437–39; Buvat, *Journal*, 1865, 2:77–78; Piossens, *Memoires de la régence de S.A.R. Mgr. le duc d’Orléans*, 2:399; On the sizeable rewards paid by the Compagnie for each arrest, see Giraud, *Histoire de la Louisiane française*, III, 268; Faure, *La Banqueroute de Law*, 427.

⁹⁴ “Arrest du Conseil d’Etat du Roy qui ordonne qu’il ne sera plus envoyé de Vagabonds, Gens sans aveu, Fraudeurs & Criminels a la Louisianne; que les ordres que Sa Majesté auroit pu donner a ce sujet seront changez, Et la destination desdits Vagabonds faite pour les autres Colonies Françaises,” 9 May 1720, ANOM, Actes du Pouvoir Souverain (A), 23, fo. 28 (quote); Buvat, *Journal*, 1865, 2:82–83.

and hereditary chattel status promised more potential profit, but they showed no qualms about hiring convicts. The Compagnie had succeeded in recruiting hundreds of Swiss, German, and Alsatian families in the preceding years, but their limited numbers had made it necessary to resort to forced emigration in the first place.

The abandonment of the Louisiana experiment with mass transportation resulted from a combination of other factors conspicuously absent from official explanations. First, the mass arrivals of convicts had caused much trouble and suffering regardless of their moral character. Within less than four years, from 1717 to 1721, the Compagnie shipped over 7000 people in in 43 voyages without enough supplies or preparation, of whom one fourth was reported to have promptly died of disease, starvation, and exposure unless they deserted or returned to France.⁹⁵ Moreover, the Compagnie faced a dire financial situation and could hardly afford to fit out any more voyages. Rumors of bankruptcy circulated for weeks before the “Mississippi bubble” burst at the end of May 1720. News of Louisiana’s misery and of the impending collapse of the Compagnie fueled public hostility against Law, his system, and his colonial enterprise.⁹⁶ A growing sentiment of physical and financial insecurity created a volatile atmosphere in Paris, especially among merchants, artisans, and their employees.

Financial speculation spread tension like wildfire within the French population. Growing numbers of men and women of various backgrounds flocked to trade paper money at the Compagnie’s headquarters on Quincampoix street. “Anyone, without distinction of class,

⁹⁵ “Mémoire sur l’état actuel où est la colonie de la Louisiane pour juger de ce que l’on peut en espérer,” after May 1721, C13, C1, fol. 329-332; Marcel Giraud, *Histoire de la Louisiane française, IV: La Louisiane après le système de Law, 1721-1723* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1974), 168-95; Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 7-8; Usner, *Indians, Settlers & Slaves*, 32-33.

⁹⁶ Carl A. Brasseaux, “The Image of Louisiana and the Failure of Voluntary French. Emigration, 1683-1731,” in *The French Experience in Louisiana*, ed. Glenn R. Conrad (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, 1995), 153-162; Faure, *La Banqueroute de Law*, 417-27.

nationality, or even sex,” writes historian Arlette Farge, “could play a direct part in the operation, as his own interests alone dictated. The liveliest scenes of the early eighteenth century took place on Quincampoix street, in the open air and publicly. The frenzy affects everyone.”⁹⁷ Farge and others have shown how this collective activity transformed public life in this period, when Parisians fantasized about—and occasionally witnessed—sudden changes of fortunes that threatened to turn the social world upside down and imagined themselves, perhaps for the first time, as direct participants in the life of the state. Traditionally, under the Ancien Regime, a narrow elite of financiers and moneylenders quietly dominated any discussion of state finances behind closed doors.⁹⁸ By contrast, Law encouraged the widespread and transparent participation of speculators regardless of status, from servants to their noble or bourgeois employers, which attached a larger, popular public to government affairs.⁹⁹ But the backlash was proportional to the passion generated. Within a few weeks, anxious investors rioted in the area even after the authorities closed the Quincampoix street and banned further share trading, the directors of the bank were condemned for fraudulent bankruptcy, and Law was forced to resign his government duties and placed under house arrest.¹⁰⁰

Meanwhile, a series of gruesome murders inflamed the imagination of humble and elite Parisians alike, who blamed them on the speculative fever triggered by the Scotsman’s

⁹⁷ Farge, *Dire et mal dire*, 172.

⁹⁸ According to Robert Darnton, “information about the inner workings of the power system was not supposed to circulate under the Old Regime.” Robert Darnton, “An Early Information Society: News and the Media in Eighteenth-Century Paris,” *American Historical Review* 105, no. 1 (2000): 4.

⁹⁹ Farge, *Dire et mal dire*, 171–73; Goldner, “Public Thieves,” 484–86, 38. Goldner distinguishes *public financier* from *public populaire*, and shows how both were colliding in this period.

¹⁰⁰ Buvat, *Journal*, 1865, 2:58–59, 92–96; Thomas Kaiser, “Money, Despotism, and Public Opinion in Early Eighteenth-Century France: John Law and the Debate on Public Credit,” *Journal of Modern History* 63, no. 1 (1991): 17–21.

Mississippian scheme rather than on the shadowy or outright imaginary criminal networks they were prone to accuse in similar circumstances.¹⁰¹ With some dramatic exaggeration, Buvat recounted how “a number of arms, legs, and other body parts of people assassinated and chopped into pieces were being pulled out of the river, which was attributed to the despicable commerce of paper money, in which all sorts of people got mixed up since Mr. Law unfortunately introduced it.”¹⁰² The semi-literate population of eighteenth-century Paris lived in what Robert Darnton describes as an “early information society” in the making, where news circulated through a multiple of printed, manuscript, and oral forms, including sometimes dubious rumors.¹⁰³ This was a far cry from the rational, bourgeois public sphere conceptualized by Jürgen Habermas, and historians of the Ancien Regime continue to debate whether and when anything like a public opinion emerged before the Revolution.¹⁰⁴ Nevertheless, French subjects were quickly becoming as curious about state affairs as the state was to learn about them, in a reciprocal “new sort of gaze” that transformed their relation to a monarchy whose bureaucracy was increasingly “seeing like a

¹⁰¹ Patrice Peveri, “‘Cette ville était alors comme un bois...’ Criminalité et opinion publique à Paris dans les années qui précèdent l’affaire Cartouche (1715-1721),” *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés / Crime, History & Societies* 1, no. 2 (1997): 63–65.

¹⁰² Buvat, *Journal*, 1865, 2:75.

¹⁰³ Farge argues that “the public lived—and knew they lived—between truth and falsehood, the possible and the unverifiable.” Farge, *Dire et mal dire*, 289; On the role of rumors in eighteenth-century French society and popular politics, see also Steven L. Kaplan, “The Famine Plot Persuasion in Eighteenth-Century France,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 72, no. 3 (1982): 1–79; Arlette Farge, *La vie fragile: Violence, pouvoirs et solidarités à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Hachette, 1986), 290–321; Farge and Revel, *The Vanishing Children*.

¹⁰⁴ On the public sphere, see Jürgen Habermas, “The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964),” *New German Critique*, no. 3 (1974): 49–55; Jeffrey K. Sawyer, *Printed Poison: Pamphlet Propaganda, Faction Politics, and the Public Sphere in Early Seventeenth-Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 15–28; Laurent Lemarchand, “Philippe d’Orléans, la cour et les lettres (1713-1723),” *Cahiers d’histoire. Revue d’histoire critique*, no. 115 (2011): 8. Important studies of public opinion as a concept and a sociological phenomenon in eighteenth-century France include Keith Baker, “Politique et opinion publique sous l’Ancien Régime,” *Annales* 42, no. 1 (1987): 41–71; Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 20–37; Keith Baker and Roger Chartier, “Dialogue sur l’espace public,” *Politix. Revue des sciences sociales du politique* 7, no. 26 (1994): 5–22; J. A. W. Gunn, *Queen of the World: Opinion in the Public Life of France from the Renaissance to the Revolution* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1995); Mona Ozouf, “Le concept d’opinion publique au XVIIIe siècle,” *Réseaux. Communication - Technologie - Société* 1, no. 1 (1997): 349–65.

state”—to borrow James C. Scott’s phrase¹⁰⁵ The language describing the polity reflected this evolution as nouns like public, society, and nation came to underscore its man-made, secular, and collective dimension.¹⁰⁶ The policymakers of the Regency and the interests they served could no more afford to ignore mounting popular hostility than other elites in early modern Western Europe, even as they strove to control lawmaking in order to protect private property from the reach of the state, chiefly through taxation, while using its very power against propertyless classes.¹⁰⁷

In this context, satirical tunes played a critical role in the voicing and circulating political dissent, captured in the aphorism likening the French state to “an absolute monarchy tempered by songs.”¹⁰⁸ The vast array of anonymous song lyrics recorded by contemporaries were no spontaneous reflections of popular sentiment or a unified public opinion, in fact many must have served to criticize rival factions, but they contributed to the formation of everyday political discourse since they were easily memorized and adaptable. Ditties lambasting Law’s financial system and the tyrannical arrests of French subjects, whom the following likened to the Hebrews enslaved in biblical Egypt, were so numerous that “the air of Mississippi” became a well-known

¹⁰⁵ David Avrom Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 34; James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

¹⁰⁶ Bell, *The Cult of the Nation*, 26.

¹⁰⁷ “Western European propertied elites” writes James B. Collins, “shared a fundamental political concern—the maintenance of a central political entity that would best define and preserve their private property... The evolution to the nation-state... reflected the primacy of the consent of the governed in the construction of political legitimacy, and the critical balance between rights of private property and state authority.” Collins, “State Building in Early-Modern Europe,” 603 (quote), 630, 633. In mid-eighteenth-century England, the author Henry Fielding went so far as to label the power of the mob a “fourth estate” that influenced the operations of Britain’s government. James J. Willis, “Punishment and the Cultural Limits to State Power in Late 18th-Century Britain,” *Punishment & Society* 10, no. 4 (2008): 414.

¹⁰⁸ The likely apocryphal aphorism, attributed to the late eighteenth-century writer Nicolas Chamfort, is cited in Robert Darnton, *Poetry and the Police* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 104.

melody in that period.¹⁰⁹

Like Pharaoh once did,
The Great economist
Through his great caution
Relieved the Kingdom.
Thus Law, anticipating the evil
That Fate threatens us with
Brings capital to the Hospital,
Where his project puts us.¹¹⁰

Other song lyrics connected the ruinous speculation encouraged by the Compagnie with the disreputable character of the men and women it deported to Louisiana.

To populate the Mississippi,
The illustrious colony,
Rogues and w... from Paris
Are leaving in company.
Here is the most solid capital
Of the new bank,
Let us all buy some shares,
This capital is unlimited.¹¹¹

Sympathy for Law's victims grew as songs, caricatures, and even plays denouncing him as a fraud spread around the capital and beyond.¹¹² A vivid account of the violent revolt against the bandoleers penned by the clerk of the Parliament of Paris concluded that "the people were right" to fight them, a perspective shared tacitly at least by elite memorialists who condemned the press

¹⁰⁹ For other examples of contemporary songs denouncing deportations to Louisiana, see Jennifer Tsien, "Quoniam le rôtisseur et les prisonniers du Mississippi," in *"Gagnons sans savoir comment": Représentations du Système de Law du XVIIIe siècle à nos jours*, ed. Florence Magnot-Ogilvy (Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2017), 207-220.

¹¹⁰ Buvat, *Journal*, 1865, 1:433.

¹¹¹ Chansonier dit de Clairambault, XII (1718-1720), BNF-R, Français, Ms. 12697, fol. 267.

¹¹² Speculative fevers, which also affected English and Dutch societies around this period, were a favorite subject of satirical texts and cartoons. See Frans De Bruyn, "Reading *Het groote tafereel der dwaasheid*: An Emblem Book of the Folly of Speculation in the Bubble Year 1720," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 24, no. 2 (2000): 1-42; Jérôme Gautheret, "1720 : le théâtre de foire parisien prend pour thème la banqueroute de Law," *Le Monde.fr*, July 22, 2009; Magnot-Ogilvy, ed., *"Gagnons sans savoir comment,"* 99-125.

gang rather than the rioters.¹¹³ Just two weeks later, a celebratory parade of French captives rescued (ransomed) from Northern African slavery at the hands of Muslim powers took place along the same streets.¹¹⁴ Even though Parisians familiar with chains of galley convicts were well aware of exceptions to the freedom principle that there were no slaves in France, some may have been shocked by the spectacle of liberating Christians from Mediterranean slavery while submitting others to servitude in America.¹¹⁵ Meanwhile in La Rochelle, yet another group of captives was rescued by the English ambassador, who secured the release and eventual passage to Britain of eighteen Protestants destined for transportation to Louisiana.¹¹⁶ Among Huguenot communities especially, the threat of American exile caused a collective trauma that far exceeded the small number of actual deportees, as it reactivated the memory of generations of persecution. “We are made to fear everyone else will be sent to Mcissipi [sic],” wrote a Protestant man detained in Montpellier to his relatives. “If that were the case we would all be very miserable for I believe galley servitude, though harsh, to be a sweeter fate than being removed and deprived of one’s homeland for ever. At least at the galleys one has the comfort of one’s family and friends.”¹¹⁷ Around the same time, by contrast, an English pamphlet opposing penal transportation wondered why British subjects feared “worse consequences from confining felons to hard labour at home in respect to our Liberties, than we find at present from Transporting them abroad to our

¹¹³ “Relation inédite du greffier,” in *Mémoires de Saint-Simon*, 474–75.

¹¹⁴ Buvat, *Journal*, 1865, 2:88.

¹¹⁵ On the contradictions between freeing Christians and imposing galley servitude, see Gillian Lee Weiss, “Back from Barbary: Captivity, Redemption and French Identity in the Seventeenth-and Eighteenth-Century Mediterranean” (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 2002), 247–48.

¹¹⁶ Bertrand Van Ruymbeke, “‘A Dominion of True Believers Not a Republic for Heretics’: French Colonial Religious Policy and the Settlement of Early Louisiana, 1699-1730,” in *French Colonial Louisiana and the Atlantic World*, ed. Bradley G. Bond (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 90.

¹¹⁷ Cited in Lafleur, “Les Protestants aux Antilles françaises du Vent sous l’Ancien Régime,” 181.

plantations.”¹¹⁸ According to criminologist James Willis, this popular hatred of incarceration identified with tyrannical state power helps explain why deportation remained a favored form of criminal punishment in Britain.¹¹⁹

By contrast, the opposition of the French metropolitan population, who rejected and actively resisted mass transportation, rendered forced emigration not simply impractical but also detrimental to the image of Louisiana and American colonies in general. The collective impact of the *peine de l'Amérique* reached urban and even rural classes well beyond the sole numbers of the captives. In Paris and Western provinces especially, French subjects learned about the deportations from friends and relatives of the captives, the personnel of prisons and the Court, and others who witnessed the chains of men and women marched to Atlantic ports.¹²⁰ Boys and girls as young as ten years old were rumored to be victims of kidnap and transportation to the “Mississippi,” partly to replace the exiled women allegedly killed in the loss of a vessel from La Rochelle.¹²¹ This was the latest incarnation of a perennial urban myth that would again resurface in 1750, when Parisians wrongly speculated that vanishing children were abducted to Louisiana. The resulting hysteria crystallized widespread collective fears around a distorted projection of recent events.¹²² Female captives had indeed been killed in La Rochelle, in an uprising against their forced embarkation rather than a shipwreck; the poor people of both sexes who had been rounded up and locked up as

¹¹⁸ Thomas Robe, *A Method Whereby Criminals Liable to Transportation May Be Render'd Not Only Useful but Honest Members of the Publick* (London, 1726), 8–9.

¹¹⁹ “The form and force of penal practices,” explains Willis, “are influenced by the values and sentiments intrinsic to social relations within which government power and authority are exercised.” Willis, “Punishment and the Cultural Limits,” 420.

¹²⁰ Lanctôt, *Filles de joie ou filles du roi*, 29–30.

¹²¹ Buvat, *Journal*, 1865, 2:93, 96–97.

¹²² Farge and Revel, *The Vanishing Children*, 93–95; Jean Nicolas, *La rébellion française. mouvements populaires et conscience sociale: 1661-1789* (Paris: Seuil, 2002), 356–62.

suitable candidates for involuntary migration were typically quite young, but rarely under sixteen. Lastly, foundlings were considered ideal candidates for transportation precisely because they had no family relations to support or rely upon.¹²³

In this context, government initiatives to control the movements of the poor could hardly assuage the anxiety of the middling and upper classes. While provincial intendants ordered curates to send them lists of the vagabonds, idlers, and libertines of their parishes, the Lieutenant of police of Paris asked merchants and artisans to file a different kind of human inventory, identifying all their children, apprentices, and hired hands so they could be notified should they be arrested. Workers circulating without certificates from their employers could also be deported.¹²⁴ During the summer of 1720, popular fears of indiscriminate arrests spread so widely across Northern France that they limited the number of laborers available for the harvest, as seasonal farm hands from Normandy to Burgundy avoided the Paris region where they usually migrated to seek temporary employment.¹²⁵

2.3 The Fate of Convicts in Louisiana and the Afterlife of the Experiment

The impact of the exiles on Louisiana, unlike in the metropole, was seemingly short-lived although their actual numbers were likely underestimated. According to an official *mémoire*, the 7,020 passengers shipped to the Gulf Coast between October 1717 and May 1721 included 1,717

¹²³ La Boulaye's 1717 proposal to transport vagabond offenders overseas, for instance, recommended "caution not to enroll those who have father and mother, wife or children to whom their presence or industry could be useful." See "Mémoire contenant les raisons," 22 January 1717, NAF, 9328, fol. 13

¹²⁴ Buvat, *Journal*, 1865, 2:92.

¹²⁵ Schwartz, *Policing the Poor in Eighteenth-Century France*, 33.

women and children; among the 5,303 men, the three largest groups were 2,262 *engagés*, 1,099 troops, and 1,278 convicts.¹²⁶ Based on those figures, one fourth of all male migrants were therefore sent by force in those founding years. Some vessels carried exceptionally large contingents at the height of the deportations: 67 of the 193 passengers aboard *L'Union* and 85 of 157 on the *Duc de Noailles*, which both sailed from La Rochelle in 1719, were coerced travelers.¹²⁷ The data compiled from the surviving passenger rolls of 35 voyages outfitted by the Compagnie, from 1717 to 1731, yield further details about a more limited sample. Of 5,762 passengers in total, 570 or about ten percent were identified as forced migrants and their families. The 497 men listed as smugglers, cheaters, vagabonds, deserters, or otherwise exiled by the King represented 89 percent of deportees, and 12 percent of male passengers. Adding female prisoners to the few wives of male convicts, about 7 percent of all women aboard those ships were transported by force.¹²⁸

Yet the total number of men and women exiled to Louisiana was assuredly higher than indicated by either of those estimates, which do not account for merchant ships and intercolonial voyages. We know that some commercial vessels transported small numbers prisoners to the colonies along with their cargo, as the Marine authorized shipowners to substitute them for the *engagés* they required them to carry.¹²⁹ When instructing merchant captains in Bordeaux to purchase irons for the transport of those “mutinous” passengers in 1720—probably because unlike

¹²⁶ “Mémoire sur l'état actuel où est la colonie de la Louisiane pour juger de ce que l'on peut en espérer,” after May 1721, C13, C1, fol. 329-332; Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 7.

¹²⁷ “Liste des passagers embarqués pour la Louisiane sur le vaisseau L'Union commandé par De La Mancetière. Concessions Renaud, de Pont Val, engagés au service de la Compagnie, exilés par ordre du roi,” 19 May 1727, ANOM, Dépôt des papiers publics des colonies (DPPC), 5 DPPC, 16.

¹²⁸ Those numbers are calculated using data compiled by Erin Greenwald from ship rolls and passenger lists in 5 DPPC, 16, 49, 57 and the archives of the Compagnie des Indes at the SHD site of Lorient. Many thanks to Dr. Greenwald for sharing her unpublished dataset based on these sources, “Passengers on Compagnie ships from 1717 to 1731.”

¹²⁹ Peter N. Moogk, *La Nouvelle France. The Making of French Canada: A Cultural History* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2000), 101–3.

Nantes or La Rochelle the port had almost no history of slave trading yet—Marine officials argued such a small expense was easily offset by the money saved on *engagés*.¹³⁰ Still, some exiles directly requested the right to be sent on private ships rather than those of the King or the Compagnie des Indes, no doubt because they expected better treatment.¹³¹ Another reason why European prisoners transported to the Mississippi were likely undercounted is that some of the vessels on which they traveled from France listed the Antilles as their destination, because it was their first port of call, and that West Indian authorities took advantage of the intercolonial trade to remove some troublesome individuals from the islands.¹³² Many of the captives bound for the Gulf Coast perished before the voyage, onboard, or shortly after their arrival, especially around the starving times of 1719-1721, when the largest arrivals of European immigrants and enslaved Africans coincided with the War of the Quadruple Alliance, exacerbating the chronic lack of supplies that plagued the fledgling settlement. Officers had to send soldiers and workers to stay with local Native communities to find food, shelter, and supplies. The survivors of “this Mississippian inferno” went to serve on land concessions, for the Compagnie, or among the King’s troops.¹³³ More than six months after deportations to Louisiana were officially banned, the Regent himself instructed Bienville to receive the smugglers and vagabonds he continued to dispatch to the colony, with letters commuting their punishment to a five-year indenture. Local authorities were to set

¹³⁰ Minister to Michel, 4 December 1720, B, 42, fol. 545.

¹³¹ “Mémoire au sujet de Guillaume Marot, ayant obtenu la commutation de la peine des galères à celle de passer dans les colonies royales,” Fleury, 27, fol. 153-154.

¹³² Huetz de Lemps, “Indentured Servants Bound for the French Antilles,” 199; Superior Council to the Compagnie, 1725-1726, C13, A9, fols. 241, 328; Périer and La Chaise to the Minister, 2 November 1727, C13, A10, fols. 190-191.

¹³³ Moret and Delaye to La Mancelière, 1721, Tulane University, Louisiana Research Collection (LARC), Kuntz Collection, French Colonial Period (Kuntz), Box I (quote); Dumont de Montigny, *The Memoir of Lieutenant Dumont, 1715-1747: A Sojourner in the French Atlantic*, ed. Gordon M. Sayre and Carla Zecher (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 144-48; Marc Villiers du Terrage, *Les Dernières Années de La Louisiane Française* (Paris: Guilmoto, 1905), 18; Usner, *Indians, Settlers & Slaves*, 35-36.

their supplies and freedom dues, to supervise their “humane” treatment, but also to prevent those exiles from returning to France.¹³⁴

Contemporary testimonies denounced the poor character of those involuntary colonists, but they also confirm that governmental records undercounted their numbers since many emigrated as *engagés*. The manager of a large land concession near Mobile, Jean-François Willart, summarized his services when he later sued his employers for unpaid wages and expenses. On arriving in Brittany in 1720 to inspect the 400 laborers recruited for the concession, Willart had been stunned at the sight of many, who looked “nothing like people who had to travel 3000 leagues across the sea to clear forests and cultivate the land. Among the *engagés*, Mr. Willart saw many who had been enlisted as workers of a certain trade they had never had, “as well as beggars and prostitutes rounded up by force.”¹³⁵ The manager claimed that he was forced to dismiss this “crowd of bad subjects” and to replace many coerced *engagés*, causing costly delays he should not be held responsible for. Willart added that workers traveling with him were to join twenty smugglers already at work on the concession. Landowners recruited an untold number of convicts who are indistinguishable from voluntary indentured migrants on passenger lists, since complacent ship captains eager to fulfill their quotas registered both as *engagés*.¹³⁶

This also explains an otherwise puzzling passage in the colorful memoirs of a lieutenant, Jean-François Benjamin Dumont de Montigny. Shortly after his arrival on the Gulf Coast in 1719, the young Dumont met Bienville at a dinner with fellow officers, where the Canadian-born

¹³⁴ Regent to Bienville, 4 December 1720, B, 42, fol. 569.

¹³⁵ Jean-François Willart d’Auvilliers, *Mémoire pour le Sr Jean-François Willart [...]* (Paris: Gissey, 1747), 15–16.

¹³⁶ See for instance Passenger lists for the ships *L’Union*, 27 May 1719, and *Le Duc de Noailles*, 12 September 1719; “Rôle des passagers embarques sur les vaisseaux de la Compagnie des Indes pour passer à la Louisiane depuis le premier Juillet 1719”; 5 DPPC, 16.

governor inquired about the newcomer's previous stay in Quebec. Bienville, recounted Dumont, "asked me whether I had not been sent there for a period of thirty-six months. I was a bit shocked, but since this was my superior officer, what could I do?"¹³⁷ The seemingly innocuous question insulted Dumont, perhaps as it was meant to, because three years was the habitual term of *engagés*, whereas the troops usually enlisted for six years or more.¹³⁸ Yet it was not simply the suggestion that he might have been a manual laborer in New France that embarrassed Dumont, but rather the shared knowledge that many indentured workers were pardoned convicts and exiles actually "sent there" against their will. The lieutenant could not have missed the allusion, for only a few months earlier he had been personally assigned to guard the captives destined for the colonies at the Tour Saint-Nicolas in La Rochelle.¹³⁹

The confusion between convicts and *engagés* in early Louisiana was equally manifest during a trial in 1722 New Orleans. For stabbing another Frenchman who had caught him stealing meat, the Superior Council, seating as a criminal court, sentenced Jean Melun alias "Lagrange" or "Bourguignon" to whipping, although they denied the perpetual banishment requested by the Attorney General (*Procureur du Roi*, "royal prosecutor"). The latter introduced the accused as a violent and villainous repeat offender who had often been imprisoned, "having come by force in this colony; the life he has led makes us believe he had already been condemned in France."¹⁴⁰ Bourguignon stated he had arrived as an *engagé* for a concession, rather than a convict, on the *Duc*

¹³⁷ Dumont de Montigny, *Memoir*, 116.

¹³⁸ Peter N. Moogk, "Reluctant Exiles: Emigrants from France in Canada before 1760," *William and Mary Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (1989): 478–80.

¹³⁹ Dumont de Montigny, *Memoir*, 93–94.

¹⁴⁰ Petition of prosecutor Fleuriau, 1728-05-22/1 (quote); Prosecution case against Bourguignon, 1728-05-29/5; Judgment against Bourguignon, 1728-05-29/8, RSC.

de Noailles in 1720.¹⁴¹ The ship carried both indentured workers and prisoners—over half its passengers were vagabonds, deserters, and especially smugglers—but Bourguignon is not listed among either group, although two different smugglers appear under the same name (Jean De Marly).¹⁴² Bourguignon probably disguised his identity at some point between his embarkment and his trial, as many convicts (and others) did to facilitate their social mobility in Louisiana. It is impossible to know if he was an *engagé* wrongly suspected of being a former convict, an actual convict pretending to have been an *engagé*, or simply a convict who had indeed signed up as an *engagé* before sailing crossing the Atlantic, but the confusion suggests the porosity of these categories.¹⁴³ While ship captains carrying European convicts were instructed to lock them under deck to prevent their escape at least until they were out of sight of the Atlantic coast (in the same manner of African captives during the middle passage) they were to let white prisoners disembark unchained and to assure them they would not be sold as slaves, but only contracted as temporary workers like other *engagés*.¹⁴⁴ While transported Africans were effectively enslaved and transformed into chattel during their voyage across the Atlantic, some white deportees at least went through the reverse experience before landing in Louisiana as indentured workers, a significant social improvement over their status in the metropole—if they managed to live.¹⁴⁵

Exiled Europeans seem to have quickly vanished from early Louisiana because of their efforts to escape their condition, but those who cheated death played a significant role in this

¹⁴¹ Interrogation of Bourguignon, 1728-05-22/3, RSC.

¹⁴² Passenger list for the *Le Duc de Noailles*, 12 September 1719, 5 DPPC, 16.

¹⁴³ On convicts shifting identities, see Dawdy, *Building the Devil's Empire*, 166–69. For a different interpretation of this case, see; Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans*, 291.

¹⁴⁴ Instruction from Directors of the Compagnie to Captain Beranger, commandant of the brig *Neptune*, October 1717, B, 42bis, fol. 177.

¹⁴⁵ Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Penguin, 2007), 263–307; Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Harvard University Press, 2009), 33–64.

founding era.¹⁴⁶ The first census of New Orleans, compiled in 1721, was the only one to include distinct categories for male and female convicts. Of the 239 white adults living in the city, the 42 men and 13 women who had been deported from France formed a total of 23 percent.¹⁴⁷ Two years later, the colony's engineer-in-chief "there is not a single *forçat* left, the inhabitants have taken some as you have ordered, others have been hired as sailors, and many of them have died, along with almost all the women."¹⁴⁸ What the engineer confirmed, in fact, was that former convicts had worked so hard to be incorporated within the colonial population that only their reputation could distinguish them from the rest of European labor anymore. In 1725, a male salt cheater who had arrived on one of the first voyages of the Compagnie was caught deserting "to the Spaniards with people of his kind" (other convicts), prompting local authorities to proclaim "the necessity to purge the colony of those vagabonds and especially of numerous women of ill repute who are entirely lost."¹⁴⁹ Indeed, they would soon request permission to send back to France all the exiles who had arrived without orders of the King.¹⁵⁰ Only a few months earlier, however, Louisiana's administrators had ordered all *forçats* to register with local authorities—a surprising admission that they had no reliable record of this population.¹⁵¹ The Compagnie requested the deportees to

¹⁴⁶ A rare glimpse of the experience of *forçats* sent to American colonies can be found in the interrogation of Jean Lafarge, a galley convict tried and condemned to perpetual servitude for desertion in 1719 Saint-Domingue. See Trial of Jean Lafarge, 19 September 1719, ANOM, Personnel colonial ancien (E), 244.

¹⁴⁷ "Recensement des habitants et concessionnaires de La Nouvelle-Orléans," 24 November 1721, 5 DPPC, 16, cited in Villiers du Terrage, *Histoire de la fondation de la Nouvelle-Orléans (1717-1722)*, 94.

¹⁴⁸ Le Blond de La Tour to the Compagnie, 21 October 1723, C13, A7, fol. 194.

¹⁴⁹ Superior Council to the Compagnie (abstracts), 28 August 1725, C13, A9, fol. 241. The man, only identified as "Blanchard" in official correspondence, must have been Jean Blanchard, who had arrived on the *Neptune* in 1717, or the 15-year-old Louis Blanchard who traveled in 1719 aboard the *Duc de Noailles*. "Passengers on Compagnie ships," unpublished dataset. The Council's rant against the loose morals of the exiles echoed the diatribes of missionaries. See Father Raphaël to Directors of the Compagnie, 16 May 1724, C13, A8, fols. 418-419.

¹⁵⁰ Superior Council to the Compagnie (abstracts), 17 March 1726, C13, A9, fol. 250.

¹⁵¹ Deliberations of the Superior Council, 24 May 1725, C13, A9, fol. 108; "Arrêt du Conseil Supérieur du 24 mai 1725 qui ordonne aux gens de force envoyés de force dans la colonie de faire leur déclaration," A, 23, fol. 59.

provide their names, nicknames, age, birthplace, and the motive of their deportation, plausibly in order to return many of them to France. Indeed, those who failed to come forward within a month would lose the privilege of requesting their passage back—for which transported convicts were supposedly ineligible in the first place.

French scholar Cécile Vidal concludes, perhaps too hastily, that the Compagnie, by contrast with its commitment to enroll *engagés*, was “never comfortable with the convict labor imposed on the colony by the crown.”¹⁵² Racial considerations may have explained this reluctance at a time when the first generation of Africans was being enslaved in the region, but such arguments were hardly presented until several decades later. In 1761, for instance, a *mémoire* on the means to develop the population and commerce of Louisiana and Guyana warned that employing European convicts alongside enslaved Africans would only threaten the social-racial order of those colonial societies. “If unfortunately we associate them with some of our fellow [whites] who are in chains, or who they will learn to have once been” held in servitude, argued the author, Black bondspeople would feel emboldened to question white superiority and to seek their own liberty.¹⁵³ In the 1720s, though, criticisms of European convict labor had less to do with discomfort with white unfreedom than with long-established indictments of the poor in elite discourse. Six months after royal decrees officially put an end to deportations to Louisiana in 1720, the directors of the Compagnie asked permission from the Minister of the Marine “to retain the cheaters, vagabonds, and other individuals who have been sent to the said country by order of His Majesty” in their employment “on the same terms as *engagés*, even those who could be sent there in the future, and to authorize

¹⁵² Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans*, 291.

¹⁵³ “Mémoire concernant la population et le commerce à la Louisiane et Cayenne,” 1761, C13, A42, fol. 290.

them also to contract some of them with the inhabitants in case the Compagnie does not need all of them.”¹⁵⁴

2.4 Conclusion

Convict transportation was not unknown in the French Atlantic before 1718, nor did it did not entirely disappear after 1720. Governmental correspondence in the following months revealed some hesitations within the Marine administration. On the one hand, the Minister instructed officials in Rochefort to ship smugglers and vagrants already detained in local prisons, as well as those on their way, to Louisiana “and not elsewhere,” indicating that the recent prohibition only affected future arrests.¹⁵⁵ Yet other orders redirected the captives, who were indentured or enlisted in the troops, to the Antilles and Canada, or simply freed them.¹⁵⁶ The King continued to supply prisoners for merchant vessels from Nantes, Bordeaux, La Rochelle, and the other ports engaged in the transatlantic trade to carry to other colonies in lieu of *engagés*.¹⁵⁷ Most tragically, not only did few galley convicts survive among those enlisted to collect and bury corpses during the plague that killed half the population of Marseille in 1720-1721, but some only received the freedom

¹⁵⁴ Petition of the Compagnie, MAR, B1, 52, fol. 307

¹⁵⁵ Fleuriau d'Armenonville to Beauharnais, 19 June 1720, B, 42, fol., 526 (quote).

¹⁵⁶ See Excerpt of the King's letter to Sorel and Mithon, 18 June 1720, A, 28, fols. 90-91; Council of the Marine to Beauharnais, 19 June 1720, SHD-R, Letters from the Intendant to the Court, 1E, 94, fols. 719-724, and the extensive correspondence dedicated to the fate of the deportees formerly destined for Louisiana from June through December 1720, B, 42, fols. 518-571; Minister to Lajus, 4 May 1721, B, 44, fol. 161.

¹⁵⁷ “Ordonnance du Roy au sujet des engagés,” 20 May 1721, LARC, Kuntz, I, reprinted in Elie Moreau de Saint-Méry, ed., *Loix et constitutions des colonies françoises de l'Amérique sous le Vent.*, vol. 2 (Paris: L'auteur, 1784), 745-46.

promised to them at the price of their removal to the Antilles.¹⁵⁸

Once again, officially at least, this policy was not strictly or only penal, since the administrators of the Marine stressed that beggars, vagabonds, and other captives should not be transported unless their work could be useful overseas.¹⁵⁹ In October 1723, the mayor of Nantes still suggested sending 32 incarcerated vagabonds “to the Mississippi, to purge the city of such people.”¹⁶⁰ His emphasis on their stature indicates he meant those captives to join the ranks of military recruits or *engagés*, from whom a minimum height was required, and they might have arrived in Louisiana in either of these capacities. The recorded number of involuntary migrants only dropped after additional ordinances banned transportation to all colonies in 1722 and 1724. Of all passengers departing Bordeaux, for instance, they still accounted for 76 percent in 1722, 28 percent in 1724, but only 3 percent in 1726. According to historian Christian Huetz de Lemp, this decline was due to the abandonment of the Louisiana experiment and the refusal of West Indian colonists to accept the “dregs of metropolitan society.”¹⁶¹ Recent revolts of *petit blancs* (poor whites) in Martinique and Saint-Domingue must have incited metropolitan officials to pay attention to the protests of planters and colonial administrators.¹⁶²

A limited revival of penal transportation as a source of colonial emigration took place between 1730 and 1743. Under the impulse of Controller of Finances Philibert Orry and Secretary of the Marine Jean Frédéric Phélypeaux de Maurepas, a few hundred salt cheaters were ordered to

¹⁵⁸ Bamford, *Fighting Ships and Prisons*, 246–47, 260; Zysberg, *Les Galériens*, 353.

¹⁵⁹ Minister to Rostan, 3 December 1721, B, 44, fol. 229; same to La Veillere, 21 May 1721, B, 44, fol. 239

¹⁶⁰ Minute of a letter from Mellier, 7 October 1723, Archives Municipales de Nantes, FF, 7.

¹⁶¹ Huetz de Lemp, “Indentured Servants Bound for the French Antilles,” 199.

¹⁶² Charles Frostin, *Les révoltes blanches à Saint-Domingue aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2008); Brett Rushforth, “The Gauolet Uprising of 1710: Maroons, Rebels, and the Informal Exchange Economy of a Caribbean Sugar Island,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (2019): 75–110.

Canada as “the only colony where this kind of people is sent.”¹⁶³ Nevertheless, a handful also went to Louisiana where royal administrators expressed a renewed interest in importing convict labor from Europe after 1731, when the Compagnie renounced its monopoly of the colony’s commerce and stopped supplying enslaved Africans to its inhabitants.¹⁶⁴ On the eve of the Seven Years’ War, a group of 47 Lutherans from Lorraine, who had been condemned to galley and prison sentences for illegally crossing the border toward Germany, were pardoned on the condition they would convert to Catholicism and accept being deported to the Mississippi Valley.¹⁶⁵ Lastly, another experiment took place in 1764 Guadeloupe, which France had recently recovered from Britain via the peace treaty of Paris, as “bad subjects” from the metropole were briefly deported to the island of la Désirade.¹⁶⁶ Radically different from the attempt to colonize Louisiana using forced migration under the Regency, this new project anticipated the ways in which the French Republic would turn Guyana and later New Caledonia into penal sites of hard labor.

Starting with the French Revolution, the successive republican regimes transported many more prisoners overseas, perhaps twenty times as many as the monarchy had exiled during the

¹⁶³ Maurepas to D’Angevilliers, 30 August 1734, B, 60, fol. 78 (quote); Minister to Chauvelin, 21 December 1734, B, 60, fol. 110; “Ordonnance au sujet des faux sauniers destinés pour Canada,” 14 February 1742, in *Édits, ordonnances royaux, déclarations et arrêts du Conseil d’État du roi concernant Canada*, vol. 1 (Quebec: Fréchette, 1854), 560–61; Mario Boleda, “Trente Mille Français à La Conquête Du Saint-Laurent,” *Histoire Sociale / Social History* 23, no. 45 (1990): 169; Josianne Paul and Josianne Paul, *Exilés au nom du roi: les fils de famille et les faux-sauniers en Nouvelle-France, 1723-1749* (Sillery, Québec: Septentrion, 2008).

¹⁶⁴ Bienville and Salmon to the Minister, 6 September 1736, C13, A21, fol. 113; same to same, 1 June 1737, C13, A22, fols. 41-42; same to same, 28 June 1740, C13, A25, fols 29-30; Vaudreuil to the Minister, 6 December 1744, Vaudreuil Papers, Huntington Library (VP), Letterbook 1, fol. 42; same to same, 30 October 1745, C13, A29, fol. 92; Rouillé to Vaudreuil, 26 September 1750, VP, LO 230.

¹⁶⁵ Glenn R. Conrad, “L’immigration alsacienne en Louisiane, 1753-1759,” *Revue d’Histoire de l’Amérique Française* 28 no. 4 (1975): 567-577.

¹⁶⁶ Bernadette Rossignol and Philippe Rossignol, “Les ‘mauvais sujet’ de la Désirade,” *Bulletin de la Société d’Histoire de la Guadeloupe*, no. 153 (2009): 3–98.

Ancien Regime.¹⁶⁷ Yet while advocates of convict transportation in Republican France acknowledged the influence of the British example in Australia, they hardly ever referenced previous experiences in Louisiana, Canada, and the West Indies. Beyond the obvious desire to distinguish Republican justice from the supposedly arbitrary power of absolutism, two factors accounted for this silence. On the one hand, nineteenth century penal colonies were conceived as overseas prisons within a new approach to discipline and punishment, which privileged incarceration rather than pre-modern penalties like exile, torture, death.¹⁶⁸ In that respect, they were the colonial successors of the *bagnes* (hard labor camps) that replaced the galleys in metropolitan ports. On the other hand, most boosters of France's so-called second colonial empire would have remembered the first as a relative failure, and the Mississippian episode of forced emigration was an important element of that memory. Several published histories of Louisiana highlighted the enduring damage to the colony's reputation caused by this early episode of forced emigration, which outlived its cession to Spain in the 1760s and then to the United States in 1803. In his influential *Histoire des deux Indes* first published in 1770, the Abbé Raynal condemned the experiment with transportation half a century prior, for turning the colony into "the terror of free men" and "a sewer where all the refuse of the Kingdom ended."¹⁶⁹ A contemporary narrative presented as its sequel blamed the Compagnie for making a poor choice of migrants, sending them by force, and successfully establishing less than twenty of those involuntary colonists in

¹⁶⁷ Jean-Lucien Sanchez, "The French Empire, 1542–1976," in *A Global History of Convicts and Penal Colonies*, ed. Clare Anderson (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 123–56.

¹⁶⁸ Although Michel Foucault barely mentioned convict transportation, its evolution fits his analysis of the birth of the modern prison. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977). For an early proposal during the French Revolution, see *Observations d'A. Pomme l'Américain, sur le mode d'exécution de la déportation à la Guyanne*. ([Paris]: De l'Imprimerie nationale, 1793).

¹⁶⁹ Guillaume Thomas Raynal, *Histoire philosophique et politique, des établissemens & du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes.*, vol. 6 (Amsterdam: s.n., 1770), 107.

Louisiana.¹⁷⁰ Many more historical accounts were published in the first years of the nineteenth century, as France was preparing to recover a territory Napoleon would soon sell to the US administration of Thomas Jefferson after Haiti's independence cheapened its strategic value—an unforeseen effect Laurent Dubois called “Thomas Jefferson’s unpaid debt” to the Haitian Revolution.¹⁷¹ *L’Itinéraire des Français dans la Louisiane*, for instance, pleaded for a patriotic effort to populate the colonies with free settlers by copying Raynal’s arguments almost verbatim.¹⁷²

Most famously perhaps, the memory of convict transportation was kept alive by *L’Histoire du chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut*, a novel narrating the dramatic story of a courtesan who dies in Louisiana after being exiled with her lover. First published in 1731, and partly inspired by eyewitness accounts of prisoners departing from Paris, *Manon Lescaut* became one of the best-selling books in eighteenth-century France and later inspired several operas.¹⁷³ The transportation of women had particularly struck popular imaginations, as evidenced in literature, songs, and caricatures like the “Sad Embarkation of the Prostitutes of Paris” from 1724 (figure 4).¹⁷⁴ Representations of America as populated by depraved women, which predated and outlasted the Louisiana experiment, also tarnished the image of Canada, but the sinister echo of the

¹⁷⁰ Jean Bochart Champigny, *Etat-present de la Louisiane avec toutes les particularités de cette province d’Amerique, pour servir de suite à l’Histoire des etablissements des Européens dans les deux Indes [de G.T.F. Raynal]* (La Haye: F. Staatman, 1776), 17–18.

¹⁷¹ Laurent Dubois, “The Haitian Revolution and the Sale of Louisiana; or, Thomas Jefferson’s (Unpaid) Debt to Jean-Jacques Dessalines,” in *Empires of the Imagination: Transatlantic Histories of the Louisiana Purchase* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 93–116.

¹⁷² Dubroca, *L’Itinéraire des Français dans la Louisiane [...]* (Paris, 1802), 21.

¹⁷³ Pierre Heinrich, *L’abbé Prévost et la Louisiane; étude sur la valeur historique de Manon Lescaut* (Paris: E. Guilmoto, 1907); Lanctôt, *Filles de joie ou filles du roi*, 11, 18, 180.

¹⁷⁴ In 1720 Paris, a memorialist reported that numerous women imprisoned in Marseille to be transported to Louisiana had to be freed because they were too sick with sexually transmitted infections. See Buvat, *Journal*, 1865, 2:78.

3.0 “More Dangerous for the Colony than the Enemy Himself”: Military Labor, Desertion, and Imperial Rule, ca. 1715-1760

Louisiana’s peripheral settlement was of strategic value to the French empire as a buffer between English and Spanish colonies, a protection for New France, and as an entrepôt for the French West Indies. A dozen forts materialized the Gallic presence in the region, yet their chronically shorthanded garrisons represented a poor defense for the colony and its Indigenous allies, who often had to guard them against enemy raids.¹ The meager number of troops sent overseas by the Marine in charge of the colonies were dwarfed by the French army, the largest state institution in Europe at the time: from 1700 to 1763, when two million men went through the ranks of the army, Louisiana received fewer than 5,000 soldiers.²

In spite of their small numbers, soldiers were instrumental to colonizing plans. Beyond their military duties, much of the labor required in the colony fell on the troops, whose service involved patrolling settlements and policing slaves in the absence of formal militias; performing hard labor on public works like levees and fortifications; loading and rowing boats on various voyages; compensating the chronic shortage in craftsmen by providing skilled trades like carpentry; trading food, clothes, and other basic goods with other lower-class whites, Africans, and especially Natives through the informal networks of a “frontier exchange economy”; and eventually becoming settling as farmers or artisans. Controlling the mobility of this limited yet

¹ Arnaud Balvay, *L’épée et la plume: Amérindiens et soldats des troupes de la marine en Louisiane et au Pays d’en haut (1683-1763)* (Québec: Presses de l’Université Laval, 2006), 88.

² T. A. Crowley, “The Forgotten Soldiers of New France: The Louisbourg Example,” in *Proceedings of the Third Meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society* (1977), 52-69; John A. Lynn, *Giant of the Grand Siècle: The French Army, 1610-1715* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 32-66.

critical manpower was therefore an imperative for colonial administrators.³ Desertion was a social as well as a military problem, and French Louisiana could hardly afford the massive defections that plagued European armies.

Colonial troops often proved unwilling to serve imperial ambitions. Mutinies were exceptional but desertions occurred in every garrison. As in Europe, soldiers primarily deserted to escape poor living and working conditions, although the consequences could be more spectacular in the distant frontier of America, a new physical and political environment that runaways learned to navigate using skills acquired during their military service. While local authorities sought to retrieve defectors, punish them, and limit future losses of manpower, such assertions of French sovereignty paradoxically depended on the cooperation of European and Indigenous neighbors. Focusing on the impact of military desertion therefore highlights how power was negotiated on the ground when soldiers, designated agents of imperialism, frustrated imperial designs by reclaiming their mobility.

3.1 Frequency and Significance of Military Desertion

A recent article analyzing a 1752 desertion trial in the Illinois Country claims that, although military officers exploited such affairs to advance their career, “the phenomenon was not that important, involving about one percent of colonial troops.” According to legal historian Éric Wenzel, “soldiers of New France were thieves, smugglers, and brawlers much more often than

³ Usner, *Indians, Settlers & Slaves*, 198, 220–27.

[they were] guilty of a crime against the state that was akin to treason.”⁴ Desertion and its significance are admittedly difficult to assess given the limits of the available documentation. Both quantitative and qualitative evidence about Louisiana’s deserters is limited: muster rolls are incomplete and uneven, and very few other records of colonial *conseils de guerre* (“war councils” or court martials) have survived. Information must therefore be supplemented from multiple and fragmentary sources, including colonial correspondence, official memos, and personal files. Taken together, these sources suggest that Wenzel’s argument minimizing the importance of desertion is misleading.

A biographical database of military personnel in French Louisiana lists 4,239 soldiers who served between 1715 and 1771, of whom 170 or four percent were either tried or simply reported as deserters.⁵ My own calculation, which relies on a more comprehensive approach, more than doubles the number of runaways. Most deserters were never condemned or even prosecuted, much of the documentary evidence fails to mention them by name, and their reported numbers are often approximate, so that repeated offenders in particular are difficult to estimate. But by incorporating unnamed runaways discussed in various sources, I have identified 54 desertion plots or incidents involving 400 to 500 individuals (figure 5).⁶ These findings indicate that nine to eleven percent of all soldiers absconded, or attempted to, during their service in the colony.

⁴ Éric Wenzel, “Justice et culture militaires dans le Pays des Illinois au XVIII^e siècle à travers une affaire de désertion (1752),” *Revue d’histoire de l’Amérique française* 68, no. 1–2 (2014): 90.

⁵ Carl A Brasseaux, “France’s Forgotten Legion Service: Records of French Military and Administrative Personnel Stationed in the Mississippi Valley and Gulf Coast Region, 1699-1769,” (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), [CD-ROM].

⁶ The evidence for those 54 desertion incidents comes from the following narratives and archival collections: Jean-Philippe Goujon de Grondel, *Lettre d’un Officier de La Louisiane a M *** Commissaire de La Marine a **** (New Orleans [probably the Netherlands]: n.p., 1764); Louis Narcisse Baudry des Lozières, *Second Voyage à La Louisiane, Faisant Suite Au Premier de l’auteur de 1794 a 1798 [...]* (Paris: Chez Charles, 1803); ANOM, Collection Moreau de Saint-Méry (F3); B; C13; E; RSC; VP.

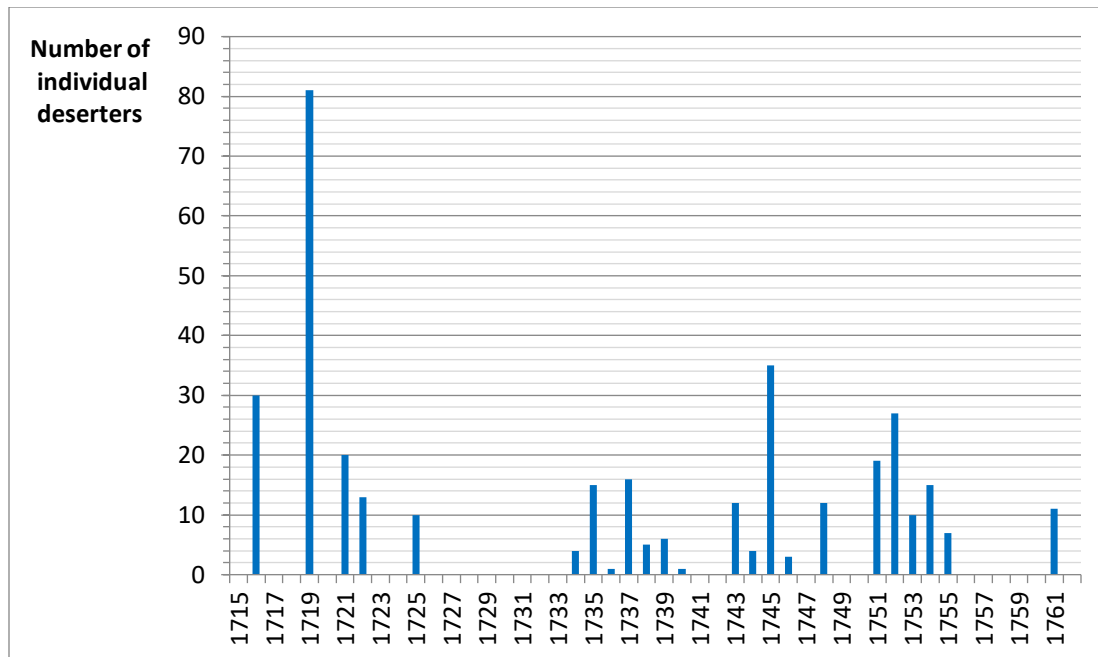


Figure 5. Number of reported deserters per year in Louisiana (1715-1762).

Other recruits deserted en route to the New World or even before their departure. In 1733, for instance, one fourth of 60 recently enlisted soldiers deserted before embarking for the colonies.⁷ Taking advantage of the Marine’s enrollment difficulties, many unskilled workers tricked recruiters by signing up using false names to cash in enlistment bounties only to disappear before embarkment—sometimes with the connivance of unscrupulous ship captains.⁸ No shows on America-bound vessels were frequent enough to motivate the passing of successive decrees. A 1718 ordinance denounced enlisted soldiers and artisans whose desertion “delayed the progress” of Louisiana’s settlement, causing “considerable damage” to its inhabitants and the Compagnie

⁷ Minister to La Croix, 13 July 1733, B, 58, fol. 167.

⁸ Minister to Dargenson, 5 December 1714, B, 36, fol. 314; Minister to Du Quesne, 27 November 1718, B, 40, fol. 79; Minister to Rocquemont, 6 July 1746, B, 84, fol. 138.

des Indes, for which they should be condemned to forfeit all their wages while serving in the colony.⁹ Armed with a long tradition of resisting mandatory enrollments, whether in the royal militia or in the rotating system of maritime conscription into the French Navy known as the *classes*, coastal residents facilitated escapes and defections that metropolitan authorities were powerless to stop.¹⁰ Successive reports of deserting crews and troops stationed on the islands of Aix and Oléron, in the Bay of Rochefort, denounced the ferrymen and fishermen who left behind unmoored rowboats used by the fugitives—due to the amphibious geography of Lower Louisiana, stealing boats and pirogues would prove equally crucial to desertions across the Atlantic.¹¹ A 1720 order reminded the Marine personnel of the necessity to keep colony-bound soldiers under close watch inside in military forts, so as to prevent losses like those of the latest batch of recruits for Saint-Domingue, of which one fourth of had deserted before they could be embarked.¹²

The desertion rates of early modern militaries were staggering across Europe and in France in particular. Louis XIV's minister of war estimated that half a million soldiers deserted between

⁹ “Arrêt sur l'obligation pour les soldats-ouvriers, engagés au service de la Compagnie d'Occident, et pour les habitants qui passent en Louisiane pour s'y établir, de tenir leurs engagements,” 8 November 1718, A, 22, fol. 95. See for instance “Rolle du Philippes,” 26 January 1719, 5 DPPC, 16. Unskilled men also pretended to possess a trade in order to obtain the higher pay promised to artisans, which led to a quick abandon of this policy “Ordonnance qui supprime la haute paie des gens de métier engages dans la cie d'infanterie à la Louisiane,” 8 December 1718, F3, 241, fol. 229.

¹⁰ On the royal militia, see André Corvisier, “Service Militaire et Mobilité Géographique Au XVIIIe Siècle,” *Annales de Démographie Historique* 1970, no. 1 (1971): 188–91; Lynn, *Giant of the Grand Siècle*, 381–94. On the maritime classes, see André Zysberg, “Les Gens de Mer et l'Etat: La Mobilisation Navale En Europe,” in *The Sea in History - The Early Modern World*, ed. Christian Buchet and Gérard Le Bouëdec (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2017), 827–29; Niklas Frykman, *The Bloody Flag: Mutiny in the Age of Atlantic Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020), 21–23.

¹¹ “Arrêt du Conseil de la Marine sur une lettre du marquis de la Galissonnière,” 25 August 1716, C13, A4, fol. 279; Minister to La Galissonnière, 19 October 1716, B, 38, fol. 183; same to same, 2 February 1718, B, 40, fol. 3; Minister to Karrer, 11 April 1724, B, 46, fol. 428; same to Beauharnais, 6 June 1724, B, 46, fol. 506.

¹² Minister to Champmeslin, 8 May 1720, B, 42, fol. 62. For earlier examples of recruits locked up in forts while awaiting their departure, see Minister to Arnou and Robert, 20 October 1713, B, 35, fols. 173–175.

1666 and 1690.¹³ Over seventeen months in 1716-1717, the Council of War identified 11099 denounced deserters, of whom 624 only were arrested (5.6 percent), 388 executed (3.5 percent), 88 sentenced to the galleys (0.8 percent), and 148 found not guilty (1.3 percent).¹⁴ In the next half-century leading to the Seven Years' War, France lost up to 25 percent of its troops to defection each year.¹⁵ A plan for the settlement of Louisiana submitted around 1760 claimed that over 60,000 deserters had been executed since the beginning of the century, who could have been sent overseas instead.¹⁶

The significance of military defection, however, was vastly different in the Mississippi Valley, where soldiers were prized commodities. In 1751, Louisiana governor Pierre Rigaud de Vaudreuil (the son of the Canadian governor) informed the French Court at Versailles that he barely possessed enough forces to protect New Orleans after manning the colony's other posts. The capital's garrison was so small that he resolved to drill soldiers inside the barracks, "daring not inform the public, the Savages [i.e. Native Americans], and the Negroes of our weakness."¹⁷ A few years later, his successor reported that, despite recent reinforcements, only 1,216 troops were available instead of the 1,850 projected by the French state.¹⁸ The Crown continued to increase the number of companies stationed in the colony, each of which was to include 50 men.

¹³ Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban, *Les oisivetés de monsieur de Vauban, ou ramas de plusieurs mémoires de sa façon sur différents sujets*, ed. Michèle Virol (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 2007), 1028.

¹⁴ "Registre des deliberations du Conseil de la Guerre, depuis Janvier 1718 jusqu'au 24 Septembre," Service Historique de la Défense at Vincennes (SHD-V), Correspondance, A1, 2545, fol. 12.

¹⁵ Albert Babeau, *La vie militaire sous l'ancien Régime* (Firmin Didot, 1890), 328-29; André Corvisier, *L'armée française de la fin du XVIIe siècle au ministère de Choiseul. Le soldat* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1964), 2:693-748.

¹⁶ "Projet de peuplement de la Louisiane," C13, C1, fol. 31.

¹⁷ Vaudreuil to Court, 4 April 1751, VP, LO 9, Letterbook 2, fol. 106.

¹⁸ Report on the Louisiana Troops, 10 September 1754, C13, A38, fol. 213.

Yet disease, mortality, and desertion in America, combined with the difficulties of recruitment in Europe, rendered all companies permanently incomplete.

The *compagnies franches de la Marine* detached in Louisiana alongside a company of Swiss auxiliaries were freestanding units, independent of any regiment, and devoid of territorial bases. The majority of soldiers came from Atlantic provinces and the Paris area, yet the nicknames used by many testified to the diversity of their origins (e.g. “Champagne”, “Picard,” “Provençal”). Whereas Army captains mostly recruited their troops themselves locally, the Marine relied on recruiting agents or *racoleurs* to raise men across the Kingdom as the need arose. A favorite strategy was to send recruiters to the location of demobilized units to try and reenlist seasoned soldiers with limited prospects outside the military. In both military branches, French authorities insisted that recruitment be free and voluntary.¹⁹ They even released and compensated some soldiers who had been tricked or forced into service while reprimanding their officers.²⁰ In seventeenth-century France, colonial historian Gabriel Debien observes wryly, “the vagabonds arrested at the gates of the cities were pressed to enlist even though deception and kidnappings were forbidden, that is to say reserved to army recruitment.”²¹ While it is impossible to know precisely how frequent those cases were, they reveal that the realities of recruitment differed markedly from the official doctrine of voluntary enlistment.²² “Unscrupulous *racoleurs*,” explains the foremost scholar of eighteenth-century troops André Corvisier, “chose to meet their quotas

¹⁹ Minister to Bigot de la Mothe, 4 February 1737, B, 65: 10.

²⁰ “Second registre des délibérations du Conseil de la Guerre,” 10 November 1716, SHD-V, A1, 2534: 95; See cases of forced enrollment in the same register, folios 16, 246, and 260.

²¹ Debien, *Les engagés pour les Antilles*, 185.

²² Zysberg, *Les Galériens*, 82; Leslie Choquette, “Recruitment of French Emigrants to Canada, 1600-1760,” in “*To Make America*”: *European Emigration in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Ida Altman and James Horn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 150–53.

through impressment, which became almost an institution in areas of heavy recruitment. Several taverns in Paris, for example, acted as ‘ovens’, that is to say, places where unfortunates who had been lured in or kidnapped were shut up until they signed an enlistment.”²³ Although France never adopted a systematic policy of impressment, the Marine’s limited budget and the particular constraints of overseas service made its agents even more likely to enlist young and surplus labor via dubious methods involving drink, debt, and deception.²⁴ Colonial recruits repeatedly complained against *racoleurs* and *conducteurs* who cheated and abused them, pushing many to desert before their embarkment.²⁵

In a 1713 circular letter to port administrators, the Minister of the Marine Pontchartrain hinted at the unspoken ambiguities of the divide between free and coerced migrants. Pontchartrain offered to exempt merchant vessels of the quota of *engagés* they were required to carry on transatlantic voyages if they replaced each of them with two veterans. Not only were military recruits a smaller expense for shipowners, argued the Minister, they could be more helpful aboard “than inexperienced *engagés* who are mostly indentured against their will.”²⁶ The troops, by contrast, must “all be enlisted willingly as the King does not want anyone to be sent by force.”²⁷ Three months later, the intendant of Brest had only managed to find fifteen soldiers... including three from a local prison.²⁸ “I do not know,” wrote the dubiously incredulous minister to an official

²³ Corvisier, *L’armée française*, 186.

²⁴ On the crisis faced by the Marine in the early eighteenth century, see Marcel Giraud, “Crise de conscience et d’autorité à la fin du règne de Louis XIV,” *Annales* 7, no. 2 (1952): 172–90.

²⁵ For a sample of complaints, see Council of Marine to Beauharnais, 1 June 1716, Service Historique de la Défense at Rochefort (SHD-R), 1A, 2, fol. 409; Le Blanc to Council of the Marine, 15 July 1718, MAR, Lettres reçues (B3), 254, fol. 52; Clairambault to same, 15 October 1750, MAR, B3, 491, fols. 100-102

²⁶ Minister to Robert and others, 31 May 1713, B, 35, fols. 106-107.

²⁷ Minister to Sorel, 19 July 1713 (with copy to Rochalard, Beauquaire), B, 35, fols. 127-128

²⁸ Minister to Robert, 23 August 1713, B, 35, fol. 147; same to Beauharnais, B, 35, fol. 149

at the arsenal of Rochefort, where a large number of recruits awaiting embarkation were pardoned convicts, “who could have occasioned the rumor going around that the King wanted to force discharged soldiers to go serve in the islands.”²⁹

Officials identified several obstacles to the enlistment of soldiers and workers for the colonies.³⁰ The Marine had to compete for a limited pool of laborers against other employers who offered better rewards or conditions. Seamen were excluded from military service by conscription into the maritime *classes* and preferred to join fishing trips. Times of harvest and military campaigns, when labor was in high demand, further limited the number of available candidates.³¹ Finally, potential recruits proved reluctant to emigrate toward “the islands of America” and Louisiana in particular. In 1716, the Council of the Marine secretly ordered the intendant at Rochefort not to send any troops to the Gulf Coast against their will, for they feared it might lead to rebellion.³² Three years later, the mass desertion of an entire crew of sailors from Antibes, on the Mediterranean coast, revealed the profound impact of news and rumors about the colony among the population. “The single word Mississippi,” explained a local official, “where those people believe they are bound to, and which they imagine to be a much more distant and savage land than Peru or Japan, scared them away.”³³ Contemporary reports of high mortality among early migrants, deportations, abductions in the streets of French cities could hardly have reassured potential recruits. To persuade more men to enlist, recruiters highlighted the benefits of military

²⁹ Minister to Rochalard, 2 September 1713, B, 35, fol. 152.

³⁰ Minister to Macarty, 21 January 1737, B, 65, fol. 494; Macarty to the Minister, 5 February 1737, C13, A22, fol. 246; Bienville and Salmon, 15 April 1736, C13, A21, fol. 7.

³¹ See for instance Robert, 23 August 1713, B, 35, fol. 147; same to Rochalard, 2 September 1713, B, 35, fol. 152.

³² Conseil de la Marine to Beauharnais, 20 March 1716, B, 40, fol. 92.

³³ La Coeurtière to Conseil de la Marine, 13 December 1719, MAR, B3, 260, fol. 57.

service overseas, notably the prospect of earning additional wages and a tract of land at the end of their term, as did *engagés* (indentured servants).³⁴

Although most troops enlisted for six years, a significant number of soldiers were condemned to lifetime service overseas as commutation of a death or galley sentence, mostly for desertion. Their numbers can only be estimated, but various samples studied by Boris Lesueur suggest that 5 to 15 percent of colonial recruits were in fact convicted deserters, exiled overseas “by order of the King.”³⁵ Lesueur argues both that such decisions were made on an individual basis and that enlisting deserters was costly, troublesome, and exceptional. Rather than a desperate method of forced labor recruitment, he views this policy as a disciplinary and largely symbolic strategy. Yet military authorities on both sides of the Atlantic explicitly acknowledged that no punishment served as a deterrent against desertion. Because the companies detached in the colonies were perpetually incomplete, reinforcements of 5 to 15 percent were all but negligible, especially since those exiles were sent overseas to stay. Enrolling “all these deserters who embark in spite of themselves” remained controversial, since it risked encouraging further defections and degraded the image of military service, but at the same time enrollment was too essential to prohibit and continued to supply troops for Louisiana until the Seven years’ War.³⁶ The Marine also supplemented the small numbers of its recruits by enlisting prisoners, including smugglers and vagabonds from the interior marched to Rochefort and other port cities’ passenger lists and

³⁴ Salmon, 1 December 1731, C13, A39, fol. 108.

³⁵ Boris Boris Lesueur, “Les Troupes Coloniales Sous l’Ancien Régime” (Ph.D. diss., Tours, 2007), 398–99, 471–472.

³⁶ Minister to La Galissonnière, 10 March 1718, B, 40, fol. 11 (quote); Minister to Hautefort, 17 July 1724, B, 46, fol. 179; Minister to Duc de Gramont, 11 May 1741 and Royal warrant for the arrest of Michel Bonne, 26 May 1741, B, 73, fol. 91; “Fleury-Guibert, ancien officier marinier à Bordeaux, soldat déserteur, envoyé à la Louisiane,” 1738, E, 185.

muster rolls typically listed them as soldiers rather than convicts.³⁷ During the War of the Quadruple Alliance in 1719, French forces captured and occupied the Spanish base of Pensacola, at the Western edge of Florida, in a rare episode of direct inter-imperial warfare in the region.³⁸ The joint commandant of Louisiana reported that 56 of his men deserted “all at once to go to the Spaniards at St-Joseph’s Bay, “being for the most part soldiers sent by force and for punishment of their crimes.”³⁹ But the fugitives failed to reach their destination and returned to Pensacola three weeks later, having obtained a pardon for all but their two leaders, who were executed by gunshot in front of their comrades and Spanish prisoners, “to make an example of them.”⁴⁰ Enlisting convicts was still practiced by mid-century, when Governor Vaudreuil allowed the wife and children of a soldier “arrived in this colony as a *faux-saunier*” to travel from France, and the family was soon reunited in Louisiana.⁴¹

Successive governors denounced the troops sent to the Mississippi as insufficient, physically unfit, and morally deficient. These poor reinforcements had sometimes hardly

³⁷ Giraud, *Histoire de la Louisiane française*, III, 274; Dawdy, *Building the Devil’s Empire*, 151–52. Among many, see the case of François Thétio, who had killed a man with a sabre as he was being forced to join the militia he had been drafted into. Thétio’s galley sentence was commuted to lifelong service in Louisiana troops. “Letter of commutation,” 14 June 1719, B, 41, fol. 614; Petition of the Compagnie des Indes, 4 June 1719, in “Thétio François,” E, 377bis.

³⁸ For an overview of this conflict, see Alan Galloway, *Colonial Wars of North America, 1512-1763 (Routledge Revivals): An Encyclopedia* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 554–56.

³⁹ Sérigny to the Minister, 26 October 1719, F3, 24, fol. 112.

⁴⁰ Sérigny to the Minister, 26 October 1719, F3, 24, fol. 112. The phrase used to describe the execution of these and other deserters *avoir la tête cassée*, literally means “to have one’s head broken.” Perhaps due to the fact that tomahawks were called *casse-tête*, it has been mistranslated as “being tomahawked,” despite the absence of any description of such a punishment. There is no doubt, in fact, that this sentence meant execution by gunshot in Louisiana as it did in France, where it was reserved to the military. For some examples, see Etienne de La Jonchère, *Système d’un nouveau gouvernement en France*, vol. 4 (Amsterdam: Le Bon, 1720), 65; Gabriel Coste, *Les anciennes troupes de la marine (1622-1792)* (L. Baudoin, 1893), 151; Michel Bée, “Le Théâtre de l’échafaud à Caen, Au XVIIIe Siècle,” in *La Vie, La Mort, La Foi, Le Temps: Mélanges Offerts à Pierre Chaunu* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1993), 267.

⁴¹ Vaudreuil to Court, 20 November 1746, LO 9, Letterbook 2, fol. 96; Vaudreuil to the Minister, 20 March 1748, C13, A32, fol. 35.

disembarked before colonial officers dismissed some individuals as unable to serve. Sick, crippled, epileptic, insane, or simply too young or too weak, numerous soldiers were thus immediately released, admitted to the hospital, or sent directly back to France. Vaudreuil described the most improbable case in 1748, after finding on the ship *Le Parham* “fifteen newly enlisted soldiers who are unfit to bear arms, being only children, some of whom are deaf and blind.”⁴² Better not to send any troops, argued some officers, who repeatedly demanded that the recruits be carefully selected and inspected before their departure.⁴³ The staggering number of recruits deemed unfit is remarkable since the Marine had considerably relaxed its standards regarding the minimal height and age of soldiers by the early eighteenth century. Although military leaders struggling to rule an immense territory with limited resources may have inflated such reports, numerous testimonies confirm that recruiters often resorted to enlisting only the men who acquiesced or were forced to serve in the dreaded “Mississippi.”

The language employed in the governors’ correspondence reflected their frustration with soldiers depicted as “vagabonds,” “dusty feet,” and “professional deserters, of the most vicious kind.”⁴⁴ Thirty years after Versailles officially ended mass deportation to Louisiana, colonial administrators still lamented that “the sort of recruits that has always been sent in the colonies, made of rounded up people, and very often bandits, has caused many desertions, many judicial executions, many assassinations among them, which has diminished their numbers... All they breath here is revolt and desertion... can solid establishments be expected of such petulant and

⁴² Vaudreuil, 17 June 1748, C13, A32, fol. 106.

⁴³ Bienville and Salmon, 28 February 1734, C13, A18, fol. 8; Kerlérec, 22 June 1754, C13, A38, fol. 74.

⁴⁴ Périer to the Minister, December 7, 1731, C13, A14, fol. 158; Vaudreuil and Michel to the Minister, 20 May 1751, C13, A35, fol. 13; Kerlérec to the Minister, 20 October 1757, F3, 25, fol. 17.

erratic characters?”⁴⁵ Such complaints were not just rhetorical, as numerous recruits went to serve in the colonies as a punishment for previous acts of desertion in Europe, some of whom would become repeat offenders and leaders of mutinies in the New World. Local administrators thus blamed defections in Louisiana on the pernicious influence of convict workers and those soldiers already condemned for desertion and other crimes in the metropole.⁴⁶ Vaudreuil went as far as to argue that all colonial recruits possessed a “spirit of desertion” that motivated them to emigrate in the first place.⁴⁷ He and other officials lamented in similar terms the wandering habits that seemingly affected every group in the colony, from settlers and traders to slaves, sailors, and *engagés*.⁴⁸

Elite obsession with social control and the management of working-class mobility was nothing neither new nor specific to Louisiana. European precedents such as vagrancy laws and anti-smuggling legislation informed colonial efforts to curb the movements of the troublesome Indian traders known as *coureurs des bois* (“wood runners”). Yet these preoccupations took a different meaning in the colonial context, where they intersected with new racial and legal categories. Desertion was such a ubiquitous concern that Louisiana officials liberally applied the term beyond military parlance. Along with runaway slaves, defecting indigenous allies and their families were occasionally referred to as deserters.⁴⁹ There was little reason for Native inhabitants and enslaved Africans to display loyalty to their self-proclaimed rulers. Forbidding bondspeople

⁴⁵ Vaudreuil and Michel to the Minister, 20 May 1751, C13, A35, fols. 14-17.

⁴⁶ Superior Council to Directors of the Compagnie, 27 February 1725, C13, A9, fol. 64.

⁴⁷ Vaudreuil to Court, 20 March 1748, VP, LO 9, Letterbook 2, fol. 44.

⁴⁸ Louboey to the Minister, 20 May 1733, C13, A17, fol. 226; Vaudreuil to Maurepas, August 30, 1744, VP, LO 9, Letterbook 1, fol. 28; Bienville and Salmon, 14 May 1737, C13, A22, fol. 28; Vaudreuil to the Minister, 20 March 1748, C13, A32, fol. 31.

⁴⁹ See for instance Crémont to the Minister, 24 February 1734, C13, A19, fol. 121; Vaudreuil to Louboey, 6 November 1743, VP, LO 9, Letterbook 3, fol. 20; D’Orgon to Vaudreuil, 7 October 1752, VP, LO 399.

to run away obviously served the interests of Louisiana's slaveholding class, yet petty, temporary *marronage* was far more common than outright and permanent slave desertion.⁵⁰ As for Indigenous warriors, their notions of warfare and authority were hardly compatible with French expectations of military discipline.

By contrast, soldiers who chose to desert knew perfectly well that they committed a capital offense. A 1717 ordinance reinstituted the death penalty for the desertion of Marine troops regardless of circumstances.⁵¹ In the Marine as in the Army, which reestablished the death penalty for desertion in 1716, it replaced a life sentence to the galleys accompanied by the cropping of the ears and nose and the branding with a fleur de lys, a punishment increasingly reserved to runaway slaves.⁵² Deserting from military duty in Louisiana was much more difficult and dangerous than it would have been in Europe. The landscape of the Gulf Coast and the Mississippi Valley offered plenty of opportunities to hide and escape, but American swamps and woods remained largely unfamiliar to European soldiers, not to mention inhabited by Indigenous nations, some of which some were more likely to capture than to assist them. While some fugitives managed to escape as stowaways with the complicity of sailors and ship captains, most recruits lacked the local connections and community support they would have found in their home country. Unlike their European counterparts, colonial troops were stationed in forts or barracks and found themselves extremely far from home in a most isolated colony. Even the larger and better-connected settlements along the coast like Mobile and New Orleans only received a handful of ships from France every year.

⁵⁰ Ingersoll, *Mammon and Manon*, 85–87.

⁵¹ “Ordonnance du roi qui accorde l'amnistie générale aux soldats déserteurs [...],” 2 January 1717, A, 25, fol. 117; Conseil de la Marine to Intendant, 3 May 1717, SHD-R, 1A, 3, fol. 187.

⁵² Bamford, “Slaves for the Galleys of France, 1665-1700,” 188.

3.2 Causes and Means of Desertion

Why then did hundreds of men commit such a seemingly desperate act? What means and routes did they rely on as they attempted to run away? Given the fragmentary nature of extant sources, reconstituting the trajectories of Louisiana's fugitive soldiers requires some speculation regarding their numbers, motives, destinations, and even their fate. Although the term desertion applied to a wide variety of acts ranging from individual flight to mutiny, most incidents were collective affairs, a few of which mobilized entire garrisons. Most deserters ran away in small groups of seven men on average: 28 percent of incidents involved two or three soldiers, 35 percent four to ten, and 26 percent ten or more. Except for the few who defected on their own, soldiers rarely sought the assistance of other types of workers, probably because they found enough trust and resources among themselves. Even in the rare cases where enslaved Africans or Natives joined military deserters, it is unclear whether they acted as coerced servants, hired hands, or fellow conspirators.⁵³ Large-scale, outright mutinies remained exceptional, but local authorities investigated five alleged desertion plots in Natchitoches (1720), New Orleans (1728), Fort Tombecbé (1736), and Mobile (1723, 1744) (figure 2).⁵⁴ What actually happened in these conspiracies is hard to demonstrate, and the administrative correspondence from the colony mentions only the last one. Successive governors may have been tempted to silence such events in order to avoid blame.

⁵³ "Déclaration des nègres fugitifs appartenant à Monsieur de Benac," RSC, 1748-03-22/1; Macarty to Vaudreuil, 2 September 1752, VP, LO 376.

⁵⁴ "Dossier Maret Dupuy," E, 301; Interrogation of Langlois, RSC, 1728-06-04/2; Louboey to Bienville, RSC, 1723-07-29/1; Vaudreuil to Maurepas, 30 August 1744, VP, LO 9, Letterbook 1, fol. 28; Baudry des Lozières, *Second Voyage*, 57–61.



Figure 6. Map of North America with locations cited in this chapter.

The largest mutiny in the history of French Louisiana took place in the summer of 1745 at Fort Tombeché, two hundred miles north of Mobile, where thirty-five soldiers seized their officers, plundered supplies, and deserted aboard a stolen long boat.⁵⁵ The Minister of the Marine was quick to draw a connection to a similar event in Mobile the year before, as he lectured Governor Vaudreuil that “such an adventure would likely not have happened if the authors of the 1744 revolt

⁵⁵ Vaudreuil to the Minister, 30 October 1745, C13, A29, fol. 57; Louboey to the Minister, 6 November 1745, C13, A29, fol. 196; Maurepas to Vaudreuil, April 25, 1746, F3, 242, fol. 380; “The Bad Bread Mutiny, 12-14 July 1745,” *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 14 (2): 263-267.

had been severely punished.”⁵⁶ Another spectacular mass desertion occurred a quarter century earlier on the Gulf Coast, during the War of the Quadruple Alliance (1718-1720). In this unique episode of direct inter-imperial warfare in the region, French troops captured the Spanish fortress of Pensacola in Western Florida, but the entire garrison quickly surrendered and defected en masse at the sight of the enemy’s counter-offensive. When French reinforcements retook the citadel, they captured over fifty fugitives from their own ranks among the Spaniards. Thirty were condemned to death, the remainder to a life sentence in the King’s galleys.⁵⁷ One of the men condemned to galley servitude, a seventeen-year-old cadet named Nicolas Godefroy de Barbin, claimed to have been forced to join the deserters and was pardoned a year later. Barbin owed this clemency to his youth and even more importantly his privileged background. Many of his relatives belonged to the *noblesse de robe*, the aristocrats whose status came from administrative and judiciary positions, “in view of which, and desiring to prefer mercy to the rigor of justice, His Majesty on the advice of Mr. the Duke of Orleans Regent acquits, releases, and pardons” him.⁵⁸ Upper-class men like Barbin were clearly not the ones targeted in the 1720 journal of a ship captain, who insisted after returning from Louisiana that “one should recruit able farmers, instead of sending convicts or bandits who are good for nothing, and in no use for war. This was sadly demonstrated last year, when the Spaniards attacked Pensacola: all the soldiers deserted, and the only ones left in the fort

⁵⁶ Maurepas to Vaudreuil, 13 April 1746, VP, LO 60.

⁵⁷ Serigny to Conseil, 20 June 1719, F3, 24, fol. 109; Serigny to Conseil, 26 October 1719, F3, 24, fol. 112.

⁵⁸ See “Brevet de grace pour Louis [sic] Godefroy Barbin,” 19 November 1720, B, 42, fols. 128-130; Draft of royal pardon and Deliberations of the Council of Marine 19 November 1720, MAR, B1, 52, fols. 284, 287; Ratification of royal pardon, 1724-12-23/3, RSC. Barbin later became a successful and powerful member of Louisiana’s colonial society, first appointed *garde-magasin* or manager of the royal warehouse at Balize, then attorney for vacant estates in New Orleans. He also acquired numerous slaves and a plantation near the city. See Sale of two slaves by Nicolas Godefroy and others to Antoine Aufrere, 18 March 1738, New Orleans Notarial Archives, Notary Nicolas Henri, box II, folder 9; Marriage contract between Barbin and Hélène Voisin, 1735-06-25/1, RSC; Interrogation of Baraca, RSC, 1748-04-15/1; Petition of Barbin, RSC, 1752-07-26/1; “Nicolas Godefroy Barbin” in Brasseaux, “France’s Forgotten Legion,” Section Administrators.

were the commandant and the major, forcing them to surrender as prisoners of war.”⁵⁹ The governor in question, Vaudreuil’s predecessor Bienville, concurred and demanded that only voluntary, fully supplied migrants be sent for the safety of the colony. In the aftermath of the Pensacola debacle, he lamented having no one to defend it,

but a gang of deserters, smugglers, and rascals who are always ready not only to abandon you, but also to turn against you. How indeed could such people be attached to this country, where they are sent here by force, with no hope left to go back to their homeland? Can one believe that they will not make their efforts to leave it, especially in such an open country where they can go to the Spaniards or to the English?⁶⁰

Bienville understood why colonial troops defected. Despite official decrees against impressment, many soldiers were indeed coerced or tricked into service, while others were condemned to serve overseas for the rest of their life. Even a standard term of six years could mean a life sentence, due to the high mortality rates in Louisiana’s frontier conditions and the habitual policy of reenlisting soldiers. Commanders reserved military discharges for sick and aging soldiers or those ready to settle in the colony, so that flight was the only hope to go back home for many recruits. Officials in Canada confirmed that Frenchmen were reluctant to enlist for the colonies due to the widespread notion that their service could only end in death, infirmity, or desertion. Writing from the Louisbourg fortress on Cape Breton Island in 1752, a few years after the local garrison mutinied and occupied the town for several months, a civil administrator urged that all soldiers be dismissed when their terms expired. Colonial troops were so frequently denied their

⁵⁹ Vallette de Laudun, *Journal d’un voyage à la Louisiane, fait en 1720* (Paris: Musier, Fils, & Fournier, 1900), 259.

⁶⁰ Bienville to Council of the Marine, 20 October 1719, F3, 24, fol. 130

discharge papers and forced to serve indefinitely, he argued, that they had come to believe “they will only leave from here to go to the *Invalides*,” the Paris hospital for old and disabled veterans.⁶¹ Direct statements from runaways are scarce, but their actions demonstrated that desertion was a powerful form of collective protest and mobilization. In 1716, Louisiana’s governor Antoine de La Mothe Cadillac reported that a large group of soldiers from the Mobile garrison freshly arrived from France had walked up to him angrily,

saying they were skilled artisans, that they did not enlist to serve the King, but only to settle in this colony where they were told and promised they would find a lot of work, that it was a land of gold and silver where they would make a fortune; that having found nothing of the sort, and seeing themselves reduced to carrying the musket, almost naked, and poorly paid, they decided to go to the Spaniards.⁶²

Cadillac was well known for his conning schemes and flamboyant rhetoric.⁶³ Yet the *commissaire-ordonnateur* confirmed the desertion of at least two dozen soldiers—fifteen percent of all men serving in Louisiana at the time.⁶⁴ This early incident offers rare evidence of the struggles involved in the recruitment of military labor. Not only did these disgruntled soldiers brazenly announce to the highest-ranking officer in the colony their intention to desert, but they also claimed to be skilled workers who had been deceived into emigrating to Louisiana, without

⁶¹ Prevost to the Minister, 9 October 1752, C11, B32, fol. 173.

⁶² La Mothe Cadillac to Conseil, Ile Dauphine, 7 February 1716, C13, A4, fol. 575.

⁶³ Richard Weyhing, “‘Gascon Exagerrations’: The Rise of Antoine Laumet (Dit de Lamothe, Sieur de Cadillac), the Foundation of Detroit, and the Origins of the Fox Wars,” in *French and Indians in the Heart of North America, 1630-1815*, ed. Robert Englebert and Guillaume Teasdale (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013), 77–112.

⁶⁴ Summary of letter from Jean-Baptiste Dubois-Duclos, 25 January 1716, C13, A4, fol. 269.

realizing that they would be serving in the troops.⁶⁵ The rest of their grievances echoed the motives invoked in most desertion cases. Running away to foreign colonies or indigenous settlements allowed some criminals to escape the reach of French jurisdiction, yet the vast majority of fugitives defected at least in part for material reasons.⁶⁶

From the soldiers' perspective, desertion was a radical but often convenient option in a spectrum of collective acts aimed at seeking what they regarded as fair treatment from their officers. In defense of this moral economy of the military, the troops protested in speech and in writing, plundered warehouses to appropriate supplies, threatened and occasionally manhandled their superiors, and mutinied.⁶⁷ In 1723 New Orleans, for instance, 40 soldiers marched to the house of first councilor Antoine Bruslé, who headed the Superior Council, menacing "since he would not satisfy them willingly they would make him do so by force."⁶⁸ This collective action, which recalled the picketing of the house of Paris's lieutenant general of police three years earlier during the riots against the random arrests of people destined for Louisiana, was a perennial form of popular protest for urban crowds in early modern France that mobilized momentary, ritualized, and spatialized violence to challenge the authority of the state.⁶⁹ The rebellious troops opposed Bruslé's decision to deduct the cost of their food and clothes from their already meager wages, in

⁶⁵ For similar complaints from military recruits in mid-century Canada, see Choquette, "Recruitment of French Emigrants," 154.

⁶⁶ See for instance two cases involving non-commissioned officers from the Natchitoches garrison in Bienville and Salmon to the Minister, 26 March 1734, C13, A18, fol. 8; same to same, 1 April 1734, C13, A18, fol. 20.

⁶⁷ "Délibération du Conseil sur le payment des troupes," 26 May-5 June 1723, C13, A7, fols. 162-165. The classic examination of a moral economy based on customary rights is E. P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the 18th Century," *Past & Present* 50 (1971): 76-136.

⁶⁸ La Chaise to the commissaries of the Compagnie, 6 September 1723, C13, A7, fol. 23.

⁶⁹ On the Parisian mob, see above Section 2.2. On popular protests in early modern French towns, see Colin Lucas, "The Crowd and Politics between 'Ancien Regime' and Revolution in France," *Journal of Modern History* 60, no. 3 (1988): 436-38; William Beik, *Urban Protest in Seventeenth-Century France: The Culture of Retribution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

application of the Compagnie's policy. Local authorities arrested two of the mutineers, but they also rescinded the pay cuts to prevent further revolt. The soldiers were not satisfied and wrote a threatening anonymous letter to Bruslé that demanded the liberation of their comrades.

The troops' motivations for absconding nearly always revolved around the poor quality of their pay, living conditions, and nourishment. The 1745 revolt at Fort Tombecbé symbolically began with the garrison's protest against the moldy bread they received.⁷⁰ A few years later, eight soldiers including four Swiss ran away from the same post, leaving behind a note to explain their motives. Due to high prices and their long overdue pay, they could not afford decent clothes and food, especially flour.⁷¹ Colonial authorities repeatedly warned that the insufficient and erratic delivery of supplies to Louisiana posts was a major cause of desertion. Already in 1717, the *commissaire-ordonnateur* reported that the troops had been poorly supplied, "which has caused desertions and seditions that could be very dangerous... We should not believe that a soldier can live in this country where everything is extremely expensive as he does in France where he has resources."⁷² More surprisingly, even the governors acknowledged that many soldiers also defected to escape abuse and beatings from their superiors. Unrestrained, wrote Vaudreuil, "most officers . . . would treat soldiers like slaves."⁷³

⁷⁰ Interrogations of Braude aka Dominique and others, 1745-07-13/1-8, 1745-07-14/1-2, RSC.

⁷¹ Vaudreuil to the Minister, 20 July 1751, C13, A35, fol. 158; Dupumeu to Vaudreuil, 18 June 1751, C13, A35, fol. 354. Bread was the mainstay of French diet in the eighteenth century. While the colony imported wheat from Europe and the Illinois country, flour was so often spoiled or lacking that settlers and soldiers reluctantly turned to rice and corn. See below Section 4.1.

⁷² "Mémoire au sujet de l'établissement de la colonie de la Louisiane envoyé par ordre de Mgr le duc de Noailles," 1717, MD, Amérique, 1, fol. 144.

⁷³ Summary of letter from La Mothe-Cadillac, 7 February 1716, C13, A4, fol. 203 (quote); Vaudreuil to Court, 22 March 1748, VP, LO 9, Letterbook 2, fol. 44.

Local realities also encouraged or facilitated desertion. Slow communications between France, New Orleans, and the various settlements spread across the interior and the Gulf Coast compounded the logistical difficulties of transporting and accounting for all recruits. In 1752, the new civil administrator Honoré-Gabriel Michel described a troubling discovery made by his predecessor. While inspecting the New Orleans garrison during the governor's absence, the *commissaire* inquired about an allegedly sick soldier, only to realize that he had deserted a month earlier but had not yet been reported. Michel added that such incidents were common, because most captains kept no muster of their companies and hardly knew their men.⁷⁴ A well-informed but undated *mémoire* detailing conditions in the colony echoed Michel's observations. According to its author, an experienced administrator of the Marine, "the officers themselves often ignore the location of their companies' soldiers and their number; there are soldiers in the colony who have never met their captain or their officers; this is undoubtedly of the reasons for the lack of order and discipline evident among the troops."⁷⁵

Such administrative shortcomings, combined with the colonists' assistance or at least passive complicity, made it especially difficult to stop deserters. In 1752, a group of 21 soldiers from three different companies ran away from Kaskakia Fort in the Illinois country by stealing two pirogues, loading supplies, and heading east toward English colonies. The commandant of the post, Jean-Jacques de Macarty, informed Governor Vaudreuil he could not provide *signalements* (civil identification and physical description) for most of the soldiers because neither he nor their captains had any, in blatant violation of military policy, and he asked him to send that information

⁷⁴ Michel to the Minister, 15 January 1752, C13, A36, fol. 220.

⁷⁵ "Minute d'un mémoire en 9 cahiers par M. Beletrus, ancien commis de la Marine à Versailles," Fleury, 1726, fols. 80-81.

from the registers kept in the capital.⁷⁶ He also struggled to gather enough volunteers for a search party, which returned empty handed after being delayed by bad weather and the uncooperative attitude of the local militia.⁷⁷ As Vaudreuil's reply noted, the connivance of the Illinois settlers was an open secret all the way to New Orleans, where "a rumor spread that these residents had gone so far in their insubordination...you were forced to order the troops to take arms against them."⁷⁸ By the time the letter reached Macarty, a convoy returning from Canada had encountered two of the fugitives, who were briefly locked up at Fort Vincennes, on the lower Wabash river, but soon escaped again with a pair of their captors.⁷⁹ Along with that update, Macarty sent the proceedings of the *conseil de guerre* that condemned all of the 21 deserters, in absentia, to death by hanging.⁸⁰ Remarkably, those papers identified each of the fugitives in detail as was customary to aid their arrest, even though Macarty had complained of their missing *signalements* a full month *after* their trial. The only plausible explanation was a bureaucratic cover up: the proceedings had been doctored to include those descriptions before sending it to Versailles, in order to hide the blunder of local officers from the Minister.⁸¹ The sober reports he received from Vaudreuil and

⁷⁶ Macarty to Vaudreuil, 27 March 1752, VP, LO 339. Embarrassingly, the exact same situation prompted Macarty to make another request six months later. Macarty to Vaudreuil, 6 September 1752, VP, LO 378:

⁷⁷ Macarty to Vaudreuil, 18 and 27 March 1752, VP, LO 338 and 339.

⁷⁸ Vaudreuil to Macarty, 28 April 1752, VP, LO 365.

⁷⁹ Macarty to the Minister, 1 June 1752, C13, A36, fol. 309-310.

⁸⁰ "Procès criminel," 29 February 1752, C13, A36, fols. 104-117, attached to Vaudreuil to the Minister, 28 September 1752, C13, A36, fol. 100. This is the trial examined in the aforementioned Éric Wenzel, "Justice et culture militaires dans le Pays des Illinois au XVIII^e siècle à travers une affaire de désertion (1752)," *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française* 68, no. 1-2 (2014): 85."

⁸¹ A tell-tale sign lies in the petition of the three captains who formally requested the trial, only of whom provided descriptions of his men. See Petition of captains de la Mazellière, de Moncharveaux, and de Reggio and motion to trial, 29 February 1752, C13, A36, fols. 102-103.

Macarty, unlike their internal correspondence, made no mention of the flawed record-keeping that benefitted defectors.⁸²

Louisiana deserters also took advantage of their knowledge of local geography to run away. During their time in the colony, soldiers learned to navigate a foreign environment as they were assigned to or hired themselves out on military and commercial expeditions. The skills they gained as hunters, fishermen, and rowers on these voyages proved invaluable to those who defected. Like the twenty-one fugitives from the Illinois country, most of them stole boats and canoes to escape along maritime or riverine routes. In 1722, another large group of at least 14 French and Swiss soldiers absconded from New Biloxi, a frontier post between New Orleans and Mobile, aboard two brigs they had captured with the assistance of sailors and convict laborers (figure 7). Spanish authorities arrested twelve of the French defectors in Saint Joseph Bay, 150 miles east of Pensacola, and returned them to Louisiana. Others found refuge in Carolina, while the Swiss offered their services in Havana.⁸³ The proximity of other Spanish and English settlements in Texas, Florida, and the Caribbean offered more potential havens to runaways, who would also have learned that soldiers received much higher wages in those colonies.

⁸² Macarty to the Minister, 1 June 1752, C13, A36, fols. 309-312; Vaudreuil to the Minister, 28 September 1752, C13, A36, fols. 100-101.

⁸³ Le Blond de la Tour to the Minister, New Orleans, 30 August 1722, C13, A6, fols. 330-1; Analysis of letters to the council no.2, 24 January 1723, C13, A6, fol. 392.



Figure 7. “View of the camp of Mr. Law’s concession at New Biloxi,” 1720. Engraving by Michel Le Bouteux, Newberry Library, Ayer MS map 30, sheet 77.

Most deserters did not set off on an unknown adventure, but rather followed well-known paths. In short, they knew where and when to run away. In 1735, six Swiss deserters followed the well-established route from Mobile to Pensacola, where the Spanish commandant in turn sent them to Mexico. Governor Bienville demanded the fugitives’ extradition, which was denied on the grounds that the Swiss, as foreign and auxiliary troops, were not included in Franco-Spanish agreements for the return of deserters. Mexican monks had even offered asylum to the runaways and threatened to excommunicate those attempting to arrest them. Bienville tried to keep the news from the troops for fear it would encourage further defections, yet the word got out and three more Swiss soldiers absconded soon afterwards.⁸⁴ Historian Julius Scott shows how, during the era of the Haitian Revolution, Black populations of the Caribbean developed informal networks of

⁸⁴ Bienville and Salmon, 13 April 1735, C13, A20, fol. 29; Analysis of a letter from Bienville, 18 March 1738, C13, A23, fol. 41.

communication to keep each other informed of events that Europeans sought to hide from them, like slave revolts and abolitionist movements.⁸⁵ Such a “common wind” appears to have carried the news among laborers of the Gulf Coast and the Mississippi Valley.

The deserters of French Louisiana were also quick to adopt new routes when an opportunity arose. In 1743, the newly arrived predecessor of Macarty as commandant of the Illinois country reported the recent defection of ten soldiers headed toward New Mexico, a march into unknown territory that the officer judged foolhardy, especially given the threat of Chickasaw raids against the French. Those men, who were more familiar with the area and their Native neighbors than their superior, had enlisted Missouri Native guides to accompany them.⁸⁶ The commandant also seems to have ignored that another, official expedition had left the Illinois country eighteenth months earlier “to discover the Western Sea and the unknown countries that border this province.”⁸⁷ Its leader, André Fabry de la Bruyère, carried a letter of introduction from Louisiana’s administrators to the Spanish governor of Santa Fe. By a remarkable coincidence, the message requested that any potential fugitive be returned, as “we follow the same usage with the neighboring Spanish garrisons, with which we have cartels for the mutual restitution of deserters.”⁸⁸ Most members of Fabry’s expedition failed to reach New Mexico, but the defecting soldiers had plenty of time to gather information from their experience before escaping in their footsteps, just as colonial authorities had anticipated.

⁸⁵ Scott, *The Common Wind*.

⁸⁶ Bienville to the Minister, 4 February 1743, C13, A28, fol. 31.

⁸⁷ Letter to the Governor of Sante Fe, 1 June 1741, F3, 242, fol. 320.

⁸⁸ Letter to the Governor of Sante Fe, 1 June 1741, F3, 242, fol. 320.

Louisiana's runaways mobilized geographical and geopolitical knowledge to navigate between different worlds and competing authorities, Indigenous as well as European. The 21 men who deserted Kaskaskia in 1752 would have never been successful, assured Commandant Macarty, but for exceptional circumstances they took advantage of, chiefly the intermittent warfare between Native groups. Seventeen remaining fugitives met a French Indian trader on the Ohio river, whom they forced to "lead them to the English" until he managed to escape.⁸⁹ Despite this intelligence, Louisiana's leadership assumed the runaway gang would die miserably in the woods, "which will be an example for all those with a penchant for desertion."⁹⁰ Their ultimate fate is unknown, but several of them seem to have settled in Indian country where, contrary to the hopes of their superiors, they inspired at least another group of ten soldiers to run away the following year. In 1753, Macarty sent a detachment of 100 men from Kaskaskia to the Ohio Valley, where they were to bring supplies for a Canadian mission to build a series of forts between the river and Lake Erie.⁹¹ The French military had been trying, without much success, to secure a foothold in the Ohio valley for over a decade. In 1749, for instance, a Canadian had led a previous expedition from Montreal to buttress Gallic influence, during which he expelled English traders, renewed Native alliances, and buried leaden plates that claimed possession of the Ohio river in the name of Louis XV.⁹² His final stop was an Indigenous settlement near present-day Portsmouth, Ohio

⁸⁹ Macarty to the Minister, 1 June 1752, C13, A36, fols. 311-312.

⁹⁰ Vaudreuil to the Minister, 28 September 1752, C13, A36, fols. 100 (quote).

⁹¹ Kerlérec to the Minister, 23 June 1754, C13, A38, fols. 66-67. W. J. Eccles, "Marin de la Malgue, Paul," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 3 (University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003), http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/marin_de_la_malgue_paul_3E.html.

⁹² Mason Wade, "The French in Western Pennsylvania," *The Catholic Historical Review* 43, no. 4 (1958): 430-41; White, *The Middle Ground*, 206-8; Eric Hinderaker, *Evasive Empires: Constructing Colonialism in the Ohio Valley, 1673-1800* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 39-44; Stephen Warren, *Worlds the Shawnees Made: Migration and Violence in Early America*. (University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 198-213.

known as Lower Shawnee Town. Now this multiethnic center was the rendezvous for the troops from New France and the Illinois country, but the Canadians never materialized. As Louisiana's new governor Louis Billouart de Kerlérec reported to Versailles, the men who had traveled 450 miles east from Kaskaskia encountered instead "several English traders and several of our deserting soldiers, of whom some have taken wife" at Lower Shawnee Town.⁹³ Rather than return to the Illinois villages with their captain, ten members of the detachment found it the perfect place and time to desert, knowing they were out of reach of French authorities and their European and Native rivals would welcome them. Back in Kaskaskia, they too were tried and condemned to death in absentia.⁹⁴ But at Lower Shawnee town, an English trader soon guided four of the defectors further east to Logstown, near the three-river site of present-day Pittsburgh, where a young Virginian lieutenant, George Washington, anxiously gathered intelligence from them before inviting them to continue their journey toward Philadelphia.⁹⁵

The other fugitives may have joined the ranks of Frenchmen who joined Native society, some of whom managed to make themselves indispensable as cultural brokers and go-betweens in the area. Such had been the case of Jolicœur, a soldier from the Illinois garrison who went missing for six years to live with a Shawnee band, whose métis chieftain Pierre Chartier adopted him and asked for clemency on his behalf. In 1746, when a Shawnee party visited the post and asked for a military escort on a diplomatic trip to the Cherokees, the local commandant obliged and

⁹³ Kerlérec to the Minister, 23 June 1754, cited in Villiers du Terrage, *Les Dernières Années*, 55.

⁹⁴ Simars de Bellisle to the Minister, 12 July 1754, C13, A38, fols. 197-198. For another desertion trial around that time, see Macarty to the Minister, 20 May 1753, C13, A37, fols. 189-190; "Procès verbal du conseil de guerre tenu aux Kaskaskias," 31 January 1753, C13, A37, fols. 191-197.

⁹⁵ Entry for 25 November 1753, in "Founders Online: Journey to the French Commandant: Narrative" (University of Virginia Press, n.d.), <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/01-01-02-0003-0002>.

recommended Jolicœur for his linguistic skills and personal connections.⁹⁶ Chartier was well aware that such individuals were indispensable to Natives and Europeans alike: his own father, Martin Chartier, was a French soldier who deserted from the 1682 expedition of Robert de La Salle down the Mississippi River to the territory that would become Louisiana. More than sixty years after Martin abandoned La Salle to find refuge among the Shawnees, it was his son's turn to shelter colonial deserters and help them become "white Indians."⁹⁷ A similar case is that of Étienne Vénard de Bourgmond, who deserted from the Detroit garrison in 1706 after being deported to Canada. Bourgmond later lived among the Missouri and Illinois Indians as a fur trader, eventually worked as a liaison between the Natives and Louisiana's authorities, and even traveled to France with a small Indigenous delegation in 1725.⁹⁸

3.3 The Impact of Military Desertions on the Colony

The most immediate impact of military desertion in the Mississippi colony was numerical. Added to the losses caused by death and sickness, desertion limited the number of available troops and crippled French imperial ambitions in the region. The threat of further defections also disrupted military service. Following the mutiny and desertion of at least seven soldiers at Cat Island along the Gulf Coast in 1757, governor Louis Billouart de Kerlérec declared his own recruits

⁹⁶ Vaudreuil to the Minister, 20 November 1746, C13, A30, fol. 75.

⁹⁷ Stephen Warren, *The Worlds the Shawnees Made: Migration and Violence in Early America* (University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 112-113, 224, 217-219.

⁹⁸ Among Bourgmond's accomplices was a soldier also known as Jolicoeur, but the nickname was quite common, and he is unlikely to have been the same individual adopted by Chartier. See Louise Dechêne, "Étienne Vénard de Bourgmond," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 2, http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/veniard_de_bourgmond_etienne_de_2E.html

“more dangerous for the colony than the enemy himself.”⁹⁹ Several officers even disarmed their own men to prevent such incidents.¹⁰⁰ The risk of desertion was enough of a strategic concern to justify locating forts and trading posts where they could halt potential fugitives.¹⁰¹ Defections were so common in certain areas like Mobile and Natchitoches, on the Red River, that colonial administrators were reluctant to send them supplies or new recruits, despite official recommendations to rotate garrisons regularly.¹⁰² Vaudreuil asked for the removal of Spanish recruits and the stationing of Swiss soldiers alongside French troops because he considered them less likely to run away together—even though that notion was evidently disproven at Fort Tombecbé during the 1745 “bread mutiny” and again in 1751.¹⁰³

Desertion was as much a labor problem as a military one. Fugitive soldiers aggravated the chronic labor shortage that plagued the colony. Given the lingering scarcity of slaves and artisans, colonial troops provided much needed additional labor, to be used in construction, transportation, and the skilled trades. Metropolitan and local authorities logically sought to enlist artisans among the troops as *ouvriers-soldats* (working soldiers), and regularly listed the trades most needed in the Mississippi. This was most evident in the Swiss company, which was to be made of 210 Catholic men, including 159 “*soldats-ouvriers gens de métier*”—craftsmen such as carpenters, sawyers, stonecutters, and brick makers—paid almost twice as much as enlisted men from the Marine. Military duties could be required of the Swiss only if other troops were unavailable, and

⁹⁹ Kerlérec to the Minister, 20 October 1757, F3, 25: 17.

¹⁰⁰ Decision of the Conseil de la Marine on three letters from La Mothe-Cadillac, 2 January–7 February 1716, C13, A4, fol. 185; Analysis of a letter from Louboey, 30 November 1722, C13, A6, fol. 390.

¹⁰¹ Diron D’Artaguiette to the Minister, 24 October 1737, C13, A22, fol. 233; Vaudreuil to the Minister, 6 December 1744, C13, A28, fol. 245.

¹⁰² Vaudreuil to the Minister, 28 April 1751, C13, A35, fol. 78; Kerlérec, 22 October 1757, C13, A39, fol. 284.

¹⁰³ Vaudreuil to Court, 20 March 1748, VP, LO 9, Letterbook 2, fol. 44.

they could only be drilled on Sundays and holidays so as not to disturb their work.¹⁰⁴ But even those laboring soldiers occasionally disappointed colonial administrators. Only a few months after the arrival of the Swiss troops in Louisiana, Governor Bienville wrote that less than 30 recruits remained healthy enough to work, many of whom specialized in nonessential trades such as millers and stonecutters. “One cannot force them to perform unskilled work,” lamented Bienville, “since they are entitled to be employed according to their profession. One cannot reduce their wages either since it is not their fault that they are not employed.”¹⁰⁵ Recruiting, transporting, and retaining European soldiers were such challenges that Louisiana’s administrators increasingly sought alternative sources of labor. Not only were free and enslaved Africans trained to replace white artisans but, in times of crisis, some also served on military expeditions alongside the local militia to remedy troop shortages. Most importantly, France’s indigenous allies constituted its military arm in the colony rather than mere auxiliaries.¹⁰⁶

Still more problematic were the judicial and diplomatic issues posed by efforts to suppress desertion. Officers and administrators preached the most severe application of martial law for this capital offense. In practice, though, executions remained exceptional and mostly limited to unusual circumstances involving other crimes such as murder, mutiny, or treason. A total of 36 deserters were put to death during the French regime, one-half by hanging and the other by gunshot. All but six were executed collectively in front of their peers in 1719, for having joined Spanish forces during the fight for the control of Pensacola. While many fugitives were condemned in absentia, others were spared after drawing lots with their comrades and sentenced to hard labor. Deserters

¹⁰⁴ “Capitulation avec le Sr Bugnot pour une Compagnie Suisse,” 27 February 1720, ANOM, Troupes et personnel civil, Louisiane (D2C), 51, fols. 21-29.

¹⁰⁵ Bienville et Lorme to the Compagnie, 24 June 1721, SHD-V, A1, 2592, fol. 109.

¹⁰⁶ See for instance Salmon to Beauharnais, 4 May 1738, C13, A23, fol. 72.

from Louisiana could be found from New Mexico to Carolina and from Cuba to the Yucatan—although official records provided almost no details about their situation, perhaps for fear of encouraging further defections. French authorities negotiated their return by offering individual pardons and collective amnesties, and by seeking the cooperation of their indigenous and European neighbors. At the end of the war of Austrian succession in 1748, when Governor Vaudreuil declared a royal amnesty for all deserters who would return within a year, he made sure to send a copy to Havana. He claimed that many hoped for an opportunity to come back from Spanish or Indigenous settlements where they had found refuge, and he argued that their return would curb desertion by dispelling the notion that they were welcome there.¹⁰⁷ This amnesty was neither the first nor the last, but few defectors seemed to have embraced the opportunity: only during the Seven Year War did military rolls mention significant numbers of pardoned soldiers among the troops.¹⁰⁸

The risk of desertion was especially high in certain posts within reach of *terres de franchise* (“free lands”), namely foreign colonies.¹⁰⁹ At Natchitoches and Mobile, in particular, French officials frequently accused their Spanish neighbors of harboring fugitives and encouraging soldiers to run away.¹¹⁰ For several decades, Louisiana’s officers therefore demanded the adoption of local *cartels* or diplomatic agreements for the return of deserters. European states had long exchanged prisoners and fugitives as part of peace settlements, but to turn this practice into a permanent policy akin to an extradition treaty was a novelty that rapidly spread to the colonies,

¹⁰⁷ Vaudreuil to the Minister, 18 March 1747, C13, A31, fol. 30.

¹⁰⁸ See “Rôle des soldats et matelots déserteurs,” 1 January 1759, D2C, 52, fol. 73.

¹⁰⁹ Vaudreuil to the Minister, 28 April 1751, C13, A35, fol. 78; 20 July 1751, C13, A35, fol. 158.

¹¹⁰ Decision of the Council on two letters from Duclos, 8 September 1715, and 25 January 1716, C13, A4, fol. 267; Le Blond de la Tour to the Minister, 30 August 1722, C13, A6, fol. 330; Bienville to the Minister, 27 August 1734, C13, A18, fol. 188.

perhaps because the restitution of runaway slaves posed similar issues of sovereignty and international law. The term *cartel* first appeared with this meaning in French dictionaries at the end of the seventeenth century, and French authorities in the metropole signed at least fifty conventions for the mutual return of deserters between 1718 and 1763.¹¹¹ The frequent defections of Swiss soldiers to Spanish colonies may have resulted from a mercenary search of better employers, but they were certainly facilitated by the absence of similar agreements with their nation.

Louisiana's Indigenous allies played a major role in these negotiations as they pursued, returned, and frequently protected European deserters. French officials relied on Native warriors not only to defend the colony but also to arrest fugitive soldiers and runaway slaves. This reliance on local *sauvages* to enforce discipline in the King's army laid bare the fiction of French sovereignty in the Mississippi Valley. Even more damaging were the repeated demands of Indigenous leaders that the fugitives be pardoned in exchange for their return, which effectively thwarted their superiors' power to punish and to select those worthy of a reprieve.¹¹² Between 1736 and 1756, French officers reported seven separate instances of such negotiations—and hinted at more—at Mobile, Fort Tombecbé, the Alabama post known as Fort Toulouse, and in the Illinois

¹¹¹ *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* (Paris: Coignard, 1694); Corvisier, *L'armée française*, 723.

¹¹² A comparable incident, related in a journal of the 1739 campaign against the Chickasaws, took place at Fort Assumption (near modern-day Memphis, Tennessee), where French troops from Louisiana and Canada gathered with their Native allies to prepare their attack. After a Canadian soldier assaulted an enslaved Black man belonging to a Louisianan officer, the assailant's comrades rioted to prevent his punishment and "eight or nine of the most mutinous" were imprisoned, but the Iroquois warriors threatened to leave unless Bienville agreed to pardon and immediately release "their brothers." See *Journal de La Guerre Du Micissippi [Sic] Contre Les Chicachas En 1739 et Finie En 1740* (New York? n.p., 1859), 79-80 (quote); Michael James Foret, "Red over White: Indians, Deserters, and French Colonial Louisiana," in *Proceedings of the Seventeenth Meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society, Chicago, May 1991*, ed. Patricia Galloway (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1993), 79-89.

country.¹¹³ In promising to spare the life of deserting soldiers, military leaders bowed to the will of their Native allies and admitted to a dependence that they struggled to rationalize, just like they insisted that the yearly presents delivered to the Natives were not a tribute. Indigenous appeals for the life of deserting soldiers intrigued French observers, but contemporary testimonies provide a few clues about their significance. Europeans and Natives shared some symbols and taboos, as Governor Kerlérec explained by comparing the asylum given in Christian churches with the protection granted to fugitives and criminals who entered the Indigenous *cabanes de valeur* (sacred “valor cabins”).¹¹⁴

Back in France, the King regarded the right to pardon as a royal privilege, and his ministers condemned officers who absolved deserters without the monarch’s explicit permission.¹¹⁵ While their Indigenous allies grew familiar with European ideas of sovereignty, colonial personnel learned to negotiate with their leaders and to recognize their own political principles. In 1755, the commander of the Fort Toulouse informed governor Kerlérec that local Abeka (Creek) warriors had captured two deserters and returned them under the condition that they would not be harmed, which he was forced to agree to. Kerlérec judged “this sort of *cartel* detrimental to the good of the service” but admitted that the officer had no other choice, “since my predecessors have conceded this usage long ago, and the red men (who are no longer savages nowadays but for their color) guard anything resembling a privilege jealously.”¹¹⁶ Remarkably, the governor designated an

¹¹³ Bienville to the Minister, 5 September 1736, C13, A21, fol. 218; Beauchamps to the Minister, 1 May 1737, C13, A22, fol. 249; Vaudreuil to Maurepas, 20 December 1744, VP, LO 9, Letterbook 1, fol. 42; same to same, 29 December 1744, Letterbook 1, fols. 50-51; Dupumeu to the Minister, 18 June 1751, C13, A35, fol. 354; Kerlérec to the Minister, 5 October 1755, C13, A39, fol. 52.

¹¹⁴ Kerlérec to the Minister, 20 June 1756, F3, 25, fol. 11.

¹¹⁵ Minister to Vaudreuil, 25 April 1746, VP, LO 62.

¹¹⁶ Kerlérec to the Minister, 5 October 1755, C13, A39, fol. 52; same to same, 12 September 1756, D2C, 52, fol. 46.

agreement between Natives and colonists by the same word (*cartel*) used between Europeans. Other officers similarly noted that Indigenous petitions differed little from the provisions for the restitution of deserters between Mobile and Spanish Pensacola, which also proscribed executions or afflictive punishments.¹¹⁷ When the French commandant at Fort Toulouse hired Indigenous warriors to chase a group of deserters headed to Carolina in 1737, the Natives, probably aware of the Franco-Spanish *cartel*, demonstrated their own knowledge of European diplomatic practices and advised him to make a similar agreement with the British.¹¹⁸

While some defectors sought asylum in foreign colonies, others like Pierre Chartier's protégé Jolicœur took advantage of Louisiana's dependence on its Indigenous allies to have influential chiefs to lobby for their pardon and reinstatement. Colonial officials might have regarded this behavior as an admission of guilt or an aggravating circumstance, but it paid off, as each level in the chain of command (local officer, governor, minister of the Marine, King) opted to absolve fugitives rather than jeopardize Native support. Through the intercession of leaders like the Shawnee Chartier and the Offfougoula chief Toubamingo (nicknamed *Perruquier* or "Wigmaker," no doubt in reference to his scalping exploits), soldiers who occupied the lowest rank in French society could force the hand of their supposedly absolute, God-chosen monarch.¹¹⁹

Beyond cultural exchanges and "creative misunderstandings" between Frenchmen and Indians, both sides understood that competing authorities and jurisdictions were at stake in such

¹¹⁷ See for example Beauchamp to the Minister, 25 April 1741, C13, A26, fol. 208; Louboey to same, 6 November 1745, C13, A29, fol. 196.

¹¹⁸ Bienville to the Minister, 28 February 1737, C13, A22, fol. 85.

¹¹⁹ Vaudreuil to the Minister, 18 March 1747, C13, A31, fol. 30; *Mississippi Provincial Archives: French Dominion*, ed. Dunbar Rowland, A. G. Sanders, and Patricia Galloway (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 5: 177n.8.

interactions.¹²⁰ Native leaders made their appeals on solemn occasions, and their forceful rhetoric invoked the fictive kinship and common interests that united them to the French, as well as the sacrifices they made for them. Such arguments were especially powerful when coming from the Choctaws, Louisiana's long-lasting military and commercial partners and their strongest allies. In 1751, a Choctaw delegation of fifty visited Fort Tombecbé to return seven deserters and request their pardons in eloquent harangues. Chief Alibamon Mingo notably declared that they would be "sorry to see [French authorities] spill the blood of the persons who bring their daily needs ... moreover are those Frenchmen not like our brothers, do we not live as in a same cabin?"¹²¹ The Choctaw leader may have been moved by a sense of duty toward fugitives whom he had caught but also rescued, which in turn made him responsible for their safety.¹²² Yet his words also had a more literal meaning. The deserters had complained of being poorly fed and clothed due to dwindling supplies, which also affected the Choctaws who obtained most of their French trading goods from the military personnel at the forts. For the soldiers of those frontier posts, joining the ranks of fur traders and *coureurs de bois* in Indian country must have seemed as a relatively easy transition toward a desirable alternative to garrison life, and a powerful motive to run away. It was no coincidence that the report of the Choctaws' speeches at Fort Tombecbé came from the *garde-magasin* "(keeper of stores)", who stressed the visitors' anger that the governor was late in delivering their annual presents. French officers could not ignore their many debts to Indigenous allies like Alibamon Mingo and other Eastern Choctaw warriors who had just waged a brutal civil

¹²⁰ Richard White, "Creative Misunderstandings and New Understandings", *William and Mary Quarterly* 63 (1) no. 1 (2006), 9-14.

¹²¹ Dupumeu to the Minister, 18 June 1751, C13, A35, fol. 354.

¹²² Michelene E. Pesantubbee, *Choctaw Women in a Chaotic World: The Clash of Cultures in the Colonial Southeast* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), 51-53.

war against pro-British Choctaw factions.¹²³ The Natives' support of defecting soldiers resulted from their own notions of justice, hospitality, and solidarity, as both groups shared material grievances against colonial authorities, but Indigenous leaders also recognized that this situation offered them precious political leverage.

As they chased, returned, and protected deserters, Indigenous communities asserted their power over the land and challenged the sovereignty claimed by Louisiana officials, forcing them to reconsider European norms and practices of justice and diplomacy. Governor Vaudreuil offered the most dramatic response to the dilemma of Native demands. Faced with Native threats to no longer arrest runaways and instead to guide them to English colonies, Vaudreuil informed Choctaw warriors that he would hear no more petitions on their behalf. Instead, he offered to pay the same rewards for their scalps as for those of Indigenous enemies.¹²⁴ In the eyes of the governor, this policy would have the additional benefit of breeding hostility and preventing interracial cooperation between soldiers and Natives.¹²⁵ Vaudreuil's successor chose to acknowledge the influence of Indigenous leaders through an equally dramatic but less *sauvage* gesture: he invited Choctaw, Arkansas, and Offogoula leaders to sit in the *conseils de guerre* that decided the fate of deserters, a privilege military officers often refused to share with the colony's civilian personnel.¹²⁶ Following such a council in 1756 New Orleans, Kerlérec issued a general pardon for all deserters, unauthorized by the King yet posted in every post and village of Louisiana.¹²⁷ In addition to its

¹²³ Patricia Galloway, "Choctaw Factionalism and Civil War, 1746-1750" in *Pre-removal Choctaw History: Exploring New Paths*, ed. Greg O'Brien (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), 70-102.

¹²⁴ Vaudreuil to the Minister, 28 January 1752, C13, A36, fol. 55.

¹²⁵ Alan Taylor, *American Colonies* (New York: Viking, 2001), 386.

¹²⁶ "Procès-verbal du conseil de guerre tenu à La Mobile", 12 June 1753, C13, A37, fol. 62; "Procès-verbal du conseil de guerre tenu à La Nouvelle-Orléans", 20 June 1756, C13, A39, fol. 177.

¹²⁷ Kerlérec to the Minister, 2 September 1756, C13, A39, fol. 185.

impact on defense and labor needs, military desertion thus forced the authorities to adapt French judicial norms to the colonial situation in ways that would have been unacceptable, if not outright unimaginable, in Versailles.

3.4 Conclusion

“The soldier was an anomalous type of laborer,” writes historian Peter Way of eighteenth-century British troops, “both free in that he received a wage and unfree as many rights were stripped away from him as a result of the military labor contract.”¹²⁸ The men who served in French Louisiana shared this ambiguous status. As in other early modern armies, however, many recruits were forced into service without contracts, the onerous labor extracted from them went well beyond military duties, and their low wages like their mediocre supplies were often late, diminished, or not delivered at all. The French military presence in the Mississippi Valley was designed to serve the inseparable goals of imperial and capitalist expansion. As soldiers protected the emergence of a plantation economy based on the exploitation of slave labor and the occupation of Native lands, they facilitated the production and circulation of global commodities: furs from Indian country, locally grown cash crops like tobacco and indigo, and even West Indian sugar, whose fabrication partly relied on wood and food exports from Louisiana. Those veterans who settled in the colony may have hoped to reap some of the profits generated by global capitalist circuits, but most enlisted men either deserted, died during their service, or returned to France without having received any.

¹²⁸ Peter Way, “Class and the Common Soldier in the Seven Years’ War,” *Labor History* 44, no. 4 (2003): 458.

The Mississippi soldiers often deserted for the same reasons as their counterparts in France, and in fact many of them had already served there and were transported overseas as a punishment for previous defections. Those repeat offenders embodied a tradition of desertion they carried across the Atlantic, as their superiors recognized when they denounced them as *déserteurs de profession*. While Louisiana troops did not desert at the same staggering rate as contemporary European armies, running away in the New World was an even more radical decision that required determination, organization, knowledge, and skill. Rather than individual acts of desperation, the vast majority of defections were collective forms of resistance and at times explicit protests against the conditions of military life and labor. Even in a colonial setting otherwise more fluid and less hierarchical than Ancien Régime France, soldiers occupied a lowly socio-economic position alongside other unfree workers like convicts and slaves.¹²⁹ From an administrative perspective, military desertion posed quite similar issues as *marronage*, but soldiers certainly resented being treated like bonded laborers in a slave society.¹³⁰ Their actions and their voices (when we can hear them) reveal a sense of community, cooperation, and solidarity that allowed poor workers to reclaim their autonomy and their mobility. Those runaways had a profound impact on French efforts to colonize the Mississippi. As they deprived the colony of valuable troops and labor, defections increased its demographic weakness and stunted its development. Desertion and the threat thereof thwarted ambitious plans and remained a thorn in the side of military officers and

¹²⁹ Dawdy, *Building the Devil's Empire*, 200.

¹³⁰ For a detailed analysis of tensions between soldiers and enslaved people in New Orleans, see Cécile Vidal, "The streets, the barracks, and the hospital: public space, social control, and cross-racial interactions among soldiers and slaves in French New Orleans," in *New Orleans, Louisiana & Saint-Louis, Senegal: Mirror Cities in the Atlantic World, 1659-2000s*, ed. Emily Clark, Ibrahima Thioub, and Cécile Vidal (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2019).

administrators. Eager to catch and punish runaways, as well as to prevent further losses, colonial authorities had no choice but to revise metropolitan judicial and diplomatic norms.

Nowhere did the French, or perhaps any early modern empire, rely on so few military workers to claim so much territory as in Louisiana, and that they did so successfully until the end of the Seven Year War appears even more remarkable given the constant problems caused by desertion. One explanation is that colonial troops did little fighting in the Mississippi Valley, where warfare was episodic, limited, and mostly waged by Native Americans. Another is that the King's sovereignty over Louisiana was in fact entirely relative and relied on various forms of negotiation. Royal officers pardoned defectors, altered strategic operations to prevent desertion, and negotiated the terms of the fugitives' capture and punishment with foreign and Indigenous powers. Accommodation was the rule on the margins of the French empire, where runaways showed that the monarch was by necessity far less absolute even than in his home kingdom.

4.0 “Many negroes are needed”: The Rise of Enslaved Labor, ca. 1700-1770

The earliest view of New Orleans, painted by surveyor Jean-Pierre Lassus in 1726, depicts a young, bustling, and orderly settlement surrounded by dense woods along the Mississippi river, a celebration of nature tamed by human activity in typical Enlightenment fashion (figure 8). While Lassus also portrayed European and Native workers, notably those rowing canoes on the river, he rightly foregrounded the African labor that made the city and surrounding plantations possible. Several groups of enslaved men, set apart by their nudity, are shown clearing the land, chopping wood, and carrying timber on the river’s West Bank across from town—today Algiers Point—which belonged to the Compagnie des Indes, along with Louisiana’s commerce and administration. Beside a farm, a sawmill, a warehouse, and artisan workshops, the Compagnie’s vast plantation served as a prison for thousands of West African captives who landed in this precise spot after surviving the middle passage, where they awaited their distribution among colonists. By the mid-1720s, it was clear that Louisiana’s economic development would rely primarily on coerced labor, mostly the labor of enslaved Africans. A 1727 census of the “department of New Orleans,” which included all settlements of Lower Louisiana along the Mississippi river from its mouth to Pointe Coupée (near today’s Baton Rouge), counted 1329 European settlers (men, women, and children), who lived alongside 133 white *engagés*, and 1634 enslaved people, of whom 1561 were Africans and 73 Natives.¹ Within 30 years of its founding, Africans outnumbered whites in the colony, the only one beside South Carolina with a Black majority in North America.

¹ “Recensement général des habitants, nègres, esclaves sauvages et bestiaux du Département de la Nouvelle Orléans qui s’y sont trouvés,” 1 July 1727, 5 DPPC, 16. The previous year, a colony-wide census counted 1952 white settlers,



Figure 8. “Veüe et Perspective de la Nouvelle Orleans,” 1726. Watercolor by Jean-Pierre Lassus, ANOM, Dépôt des Fortifications des Colonies (DFC), 4 DFC 71A.

This transition to African slavery, which has been analyzed in depth in the case of the English Atlantic, is an especially vexing historical problem for Louisiana because in retrospect it seems not only inevitable but almost immediate. “The identification of Blacks and bondage was in the end so powerful,” explains a specialist of British colonies, “and African slavery was eventually so central a feature of American history that it takes a major effort of imagination to

276 *engagés*, 1540 enslaved Africans, and 229 Natives. “Recensement général des habitations et habitants de la colonie de la Louisiane,” 1 January 1726, 5 DPPC, 16.

entertain other outcomes.”²As Winthrop Jordan argued in his pioneering study *White Over Black*, “at the start of English settlement in America no one had in mind to establish the institution of Negro slavery. Yet in less than a century the foundations of a peculiar institution had been laid.”³ According to Jordan, the mass transportation of African captives and their exploitation in the New World resulted not from carefully designed plans to enslave Africans, but rather from a spontaneous, “unthinking decision” encouraged by prejudice towards Black heathens. David Eltis has supplemented this cultural interpretation by emphasizing the reluctance of colonizers to enslave other Europeans, including criminals and social outcasts, despite economic and political incentives to do so, whereas other “races” remained “outsiders” and their bondage unproblematic until the rise of the abolitionist movement.⁴ As the previous chapters demonstrate by analyzing Louisiana’s short-lived experiment with convict transportation and the resistance of military labor, however, lower-class Europeans periodically had to reassert their status as insiders within their own societies

Other historians contend that the treatment of African laborers as chattel slaves responded to economic interests rather than racial prejudice. In *Capitalism and Slavery*, for instance, Eric Williams argued that English planters adopted African-American slavery because it was the only source of labor that met their needs in terms of prices and numbers.⁵ According to Williams, it was

² Russell R. Menard, *Migrants, Servants, and Slaves: Unfree Labor in Colonial British America* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 33.

³ Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 44.

⁴ David Eltis, “Europeans and the Rise and Fall of African Slavery in the Americas: An Interpretation,” *American Historical Review* 98, no. 5 (1993): 1399–1424. For a critical response to Eltis’s counterfactual, see Seymour Drescher, “White Atlantic? The Choice for African Slave Labor in the Plantation Americas,” in *Slavery in the Development of the Americas*, ed. David Eltis, Franklin D. Lewis, and Kenneth Lee Sokoloff (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 31–69.

⁵ Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944).

indeed a choice, but one dictated less by religion, skin color, or geography than by cash crops—tobacco, indigo, coffee, rice, sugar, cotton—whose cultivation required an abundant supply of cheap workers. Slavery thus fueled racism, rather than the other way around, a hypothesis confirmed by the conclusions of Edmund Morgan’s classic *American Slavery, American Freedom*, which emphasizes that only historical circumstances caused the gradual replacement of white indentured servants by African slaves in colonial Virginia.⁶ By comparison, Ira Berlin has described the development of slavery in the Lower Mississippi Valley as an historical anomaly in North America. Colonial Louisiana, he argued, actually started as a “slave society” with limited European immigration and a large African majority, where slavery shaped all relations and aspects of life, only to “devolve” into a “society with slaves” characterized by a more balanced population, a mixed economy, and a relatively flexible racial order because its isolation and weak export economy. Only at the end of the eighteenth-century, according to Berlin, would large-scale sugar (then cotton) cultivation and the reopening of the slave trade under the Spanish regime belatedly produce a fully mature slave society and racial order.⁷ Much of the historiography of slavery in the region of the last 30 years, starting with the landmark 1992 publication of Gwendolyn Midlo Hall’s *Africans in Colonial Louisiana* and Daniel Usner’s *Indians, Settlers & Slaves* that informed Berlin’s interpretation, has debated the particularities of its slave regime, the social construction of race, and the emergence of an African-American identity.⁸ Most recently, two monographs by

⁶ Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975). See also Barbara Jeanne Fields, “Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America,” *New Left Review* 1, no. 181 (1990): 95–118.

⁷ Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 77–90, 195–214, 325–57.

⁸ Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*; Usner, *Indians, Settlers & Slaves*; Kimberly S. Hanger, *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places: Free Black Society in Colonial New Orleans, 1769-1803* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); Ingersoll, *Mammon and Manon*; Gilbert C. Din, *Spaniards, Planters, and Slaves: The Spanish Regulation of Slavery in Louisiana, 1763-1803* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999); Guillaume Aubert, “François, Nègres

Cécile Vidal and Sophie White have replaced work at the center of social relation in early Louisiana, stress the diversity of slavery and of the Atlantic, Caribbean, and continental connections that influenced its local transformations.⁹

This chapter builds upon this literature to reconsider the expansion of African slavery as a labor system in the colony throughout the duration of the French regime. First, it examines how and why settlers and authorities turned to enslaved Africans, rather than European workers but also Indigenous captives, as the dominant form of labor in early Louisiana. Slavery displaced other forms of unfreedom and was increasingly reserved to Black men and women, although this racialization of labor was a dynamic process that was still ongoing by the 1760s. A second section reviews the history of the short-lived transatlantic slave trade to the Gulf Coast to elucidate how European colonists, merchants, and administrators sought to supply enslaved Africans. After Indigenous and African resistance played a decisive role in interrupting this commerce, which local and metropolitan efforts failed revive after the Compagnie retroceded Louisiana in 1731, a largely clandestine Caribbean traffic is shown to have channeled a small stream of Black captives to the region. The chapter concludes by investigating the reality and the effects of the chronic *disette de nègres* (“shortage of negroes,” i.e. Black slaves) decried by local elites and officials on this emerging slaveholding society. The circulation of enslaved labor, notably through the widespread practice of slave rentals, partly compensated for its slow demographic growth without altering the lopsided distribution of human property across the colony and among its free residents. By the 1760s, the contrast between slavery and freedom, which closely followed racial lines, was

et Sauvages’: Constructing Race in Colonial Louisiana” (Ph.D. diss., Tulane University, 2002); Emily Clark, *Masterless Mistresses: The New Orleans Ursulines and the Development of a New World Society, 1727-1834* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Jennifer M. Spear, *Race, Sex, and Social Order in Early New Orleans* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

⁹ Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans*; White, *Voices of the Enslaved*.

the principal divide within colonial society, and the unequal access to slave labor the main measure of socio-economic status among colonists.

4.1 Black over White and Red: The Turn to African Slavery and the Racialization of Labor

In early Louisiana, the introduction and growing reliance of enslaved Africans represented a shift away not only from European labor, free or coerced, but also from Indian slavery. Starting with the expeditions of René-Robert Cavelier de La Salle into the Mississippi Valley between 1669 and 1686, which prompted France to claim the region, enslaved Natives proved crucial to French voyagers as laborers—e.g. guides or interpreters—but also “as human capital to be bought, sold, or given as presents... to lubricate the machinery of intercultural diplomacy.”¹⁰ As in New France, gifts, exchanges, sales, and returns of captives helped forge commercial, diplomatic, and kinship ties.¹¹ When French newcomers began settling the area in the early eighteenth century, they entered a “shatter zone” whose Indigenous inhabitants had been experiencing disease, death, war, displacement, and enslavement for several decades.¹² Native slavery had existed long before the Europeans’ arrival, but warriors from the Chickasaws and many smaller polities known as *petites nations* now fueled an expansive slave trade by raiding neighboring groups to replace demographic

¹⁰ George Edward Milne, “Bondsmen, Servants, and Slaves: Social Hierarchies in the Heart of Seventeenth-Century North America,” *Ethnohistory* 64 (2017): 123. For a later example, see Summary of the voyage of Pierre and Paul Mallet to Santa Fe [attached to a letter dated 30 March 1741], C13, C4, fol. 228.

¹¹ For Louisiana, see for instance Pierre Margry, *Découvertes et Établissements Des Français Dans l’ouest et Dans Le Sud de l’Amérique Septentrionale (1614-1754)*, vol. 6 (Paris: Imprimerie Jouaust, 1886), 85, 292, 407, 416. On Canada, see Brett Rushforth, *Bonds of Alliance: Indigenous and Atlantic Slavery in New France* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 11–13.

¹² Robbie Franklyn Ethridge and Sheri Marie Shuck-Hall, eds., *Mapping the Mississippian Shatter Zone: The Colonial Indian Slave Trade and Regional Instability in the American South* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009).

losses and fulfill English labor demands. Eager to counter British influence and enlist Native support with limited means, Louisiana officials presented themselves as peacemakers and offered to protect all Indigenous people but their enemies from enslavement.¹³ In 1702, for instance, the colony's founder Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville urged the Chickasaws to make peace with their neighbors, since furs "were the only slaves I asked for."¹⁴

Nevertheless, dozens of Native people quickly found themselves enslaved in French settlements. A 1708 census of the Mobile area counted 80 Native captives of various nations, almost a third of Louisiana's colonial population at the time.¹⁵ Like the 28 Mobilian women and children brought by Alabama warriors the following year, most had been captured in warfare between Indigenous nations, while men were usually tortured and killed.¹⁶ The scarcity of European women meant that female slaves were especially valued. In addition to performing the domestic labor (cooking and laundering) shunned by male settlers and soldiers, Indigenous women were exploited sexually through concubinage, another practice imported into the Mississippi Valley by the numerous Canadians among early colonists. While the Catholic Church authorized some Frenchmen to marry Native women, blurring the distinction between domestic, wage, and slave labor, this intimacy caused perennial objections to the traffic of Indigenous captives for fear of *métissage* (miscegenation) and moral corruption.¹⁷ While French courts never banned, and

¹³ Alan Gallay, *The Indian Slave Trade: The Rise of the English Empire in the American South, 1670-1717* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); Rushforth, *Bonds of Alliance*, 238–40; Ellis, "The Petite Nations," 106–9.

¹⁴ Pierre Margry, *Découvertes et Établissements Des Français Dans l'ouest et Dans Le Sud de l'Amérique Septentrionale (1614-1754)*, vol. 4 (Paris: Imprimerie Jouaust, 1880), 516–17.

¹⁵ Census of the colony of Louisiana, 12 August 1708, C13, A2, fol. 225.

¹⁶ Nicolas de La Salle to the Minister, 12 May 1709, C13, A2, fol. 398.

¹⁷ Superiors of Foreign Missions to the Minister, 1708, C13, A2, fol. 161; La Vente, "Mémoire sur la conduite des François dans la Louisiane," 1713, C13, A3, fol. 390; Cadillac to the Minister, 26 October 1713, C13, A3, fols. 17–18; Jean Delanglez, *The French Jesuits in Lower Louisiana (1700-1763)* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1935); Arnaud Balvay, "L' épée et la plume: amérindiens et soldats des troupes de la Marine en Louisiane

indeed upheld, the ownership of Indigenous slaves regardless of their ethnicity, no law formally recognized Indian slavery in Louisiana as a 1709 ordinance on the enslavement of Black and “Panis” people did in Canada.¹⁸ A major argument against enslaving Native Americans was the threat it posed to the complex network of Indigenous alliances upon which the survival of the colony depended.¹⁹ Louisiana officials repeatedly threatened to arrest Canadian *coureurs de bois* (white Indian traders, literally “wood runners”) for “exciting Indian nations to make war in order to buy slaves” from the interior for sale in New Orleans, Montreal, and even Charleston.²⁰ Recent scholarship has shown that the long war waged by the French against their former allies the Chitimacha (1706-1718) was largely motivated by the desire to supply captives to the colony, but that the destructive Yamasee War (1715-1717) between Natives and British settlers in neighboring South Carolina persuaded Europeans to abandon the Indian slave trade across the Southeast.²¹

Despite the importance of Indigenous labor in the nascent colony, settlers and administrators soon called for the importation of African slaves, whom they regarded as more

et au pays d'en haut : 1683-1763” (Ph.D. diss., Université Laval, Québec and Paris 1, Pantheon-Sorbonne, 2004); Kathleen DuVal, “Indian Intermarriage and Métissage in Colonial Louisiana,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 65, no. 2 (2008): 267–304.

¹⁸ Brett Rushforth writes that in Louisiana, unlike in New France, “Indian slavery hovered between being officially encouraged and being illegal, ensuring it would never thrive.” Rushforth, *Bonds of Alliance*, 135–38, 240 (quote). On the legal status of enslaved Natives in Canada and its evolution, see David Gilles, “La norme esclavagiste, entre pratique coutumière et norme étatique : les esclaves panis et leur statut juridique au Canada (XVIIe-XVIIIe s.),” *Ottawa Law Review* 40, no. 1 (2008): 73–114.

¹⁹ As early as 1702, Governor Bienville ordered officer Louis Juchereau de Saint Denis to release the prisoners he had taken during an attack against the friendly Chitimachas. Bienville further instructed Natives willing to sell captives to carry them to French settlements themselves. See Bienville to the Minister, C13, A2, fol. 567; Higginbotham, *Old Mobile*, 93.

²⁰ La Salle to the Minister, 25 July 1707, C13, B1, fol. 27-28 (quote). See also Bienville to the Minister, 27 October 1711, C13, A2, fols. 572-574; Margry, *Découvertes et établissements*, 6: 316; Rushforth, *Bonds of Alliance*, 163-164, 241.

²¹ Gallay, *The Indian Slave Trade*, 327–44; Sophie H. Burton and F. Todd Smith, “Slavery in the Colonial Louisiana Backcountry: Natchitoches, 1714-1803,” *Louisiana History* 52, no. 2 (2011): 140–43; Ellis, “The Petite Nations,” 96–142.

resilient, better field hands, and a lesser flight risk.²² This cultural prejudice against Native laborers, which had a long history among European colonizers, justified early plans to exchange Indian captives from Louisiana against Black people enslaved in the Caribbean “as practiced among the English.”²³ The suggested exchange rates—three Natives for two Africans, two for one, or three for one—reflected the higher value placed on Black enslaved workers, although differences in purchasing power, local economies, and the slaves’ gender, age, health, and skills make it difficult to estimate precisely.²⁴ At any rate, such schemes hardly received any implementation due to the opposition of metropolitan authorities, the reluctance of West Indian colonists to part with all but unwanted slaves, and concerns over Indigenous reactions.²⁵

The only mass transportation of enslaved Natives away from Louisiana was more akin to ethnic cleansing than a commercial venture. In December 1729, Natchez Indian warriors killed over 200 European soldiers, settlers, and their relatives in a surprise attack against the garrison at Fort Rosalie [modern-day Natchez, Mississippi] and the surrounding plantations, where the expansion of tobacco cultivation encroached on fertile Native lands faster than anywhere else in the region.²⁶ In retaliation, the French and their Indigenous allies launched a war of extermination,

²² Summary of Bienville letter, 28 July 1706, C13, A1, fol. 522; Hubert to the Minister, 16 October 1717, BNF-R, NAF, 9303, fol. 101; Périer to Raguett, 12 May 1728, C13, A11, fol. 7; Jean-Frédéric Bernard, ed., *Relations de La Louisiane, et Du Fleuve Mississippi: Où l'on Voit l'état de Ce Grand Païs & Les Avantages Gu'il Peut Produire* (Amsterdam: Chez Jean Frederic Bernard, 1720), 29.

²³ D'Artaguiette to the Minister, 26 February 1708, C13, A2, fols. 59-60 (quote); Pontchartrain to Begon, 30 November 1708, B, 30, fol. 77; La Salle to the Minister, 12 May 1709, C13, A2, fol. 395.

²⁴ Gallay, *The Indian Slave Trade*, 312–14.

²⁵ Bienville to the Minister, 12 October 1708, C13, A2, fol. 177-178; D'Artaguiette to the Minister, 10 January 1711, C13, A2, fol. 633; Vaudreuil to the Minister, 1 February 1752, C13, A36, fol. 62-63.

²⁶ On the rise of plantation agriculture at Natchez, see Erin Greenwald, “Company Towns and Tropical Baptisms: From Lorient to Louisiana on a French Atlantic Circuit” (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 2011), 186–89. The latest interpretations of the Natchez war, see Milne, *Natchez Country*, 159–77; Elizabeth N. Ellis, “The Natchez War Revisited: Violence, Multinational Settlements, and Indigenous Diplomacy in the Lower Mississippi Valley,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (2020): 441–72.

at the end of which colonial authorities shipped 304 Natchez prisoners—men, women, and children—for sale in Saint-Domingue. Yet the ships *Gironde* and *Vénus* landed only 164 captives in the sugar island after almost as many died en route as a result of disease, abuse, and a shipboard revolt. None of the thirteen Natchez exiles aboard the *Gironde* survived the uprising. The voyage of the *Vénus* accounted for 127 casualties, nearly half its human cargo. Its captain offered no explanation for this shocking mortality, but reported “these *sauvages* [literally “savages,” i.e. Natives] are more difficult and fuller of fantasies than the negroes,” which implicitly admitted their inhuman treatment and the callousness of his crew were responsible.²⁷ The new minister of the Marine celebrated the victory while condemning a removal that risked aggravating Native people more than outright killings.²⁸ Indeed, Indigenous communities themselves revealed the enduring collective trauma caused by such displacements. During the 1746 visit of a French officer to a Choctaw town, a hostile Indigenous leader named Mougoulacha Mingo accused the colonizers of having long “pursued the ruin of the red men.” As proof, Mougoulacha Mingo reminded the audience of a chief exiled to Havana by Louisiana’s governor at least 30 years earlier.²⁹

The share of enslaved Natives in the colonial population declined significantly with the arrivals of Africans and European colonists, but they remained a visible presence around French settlements, officially estimated at 229 in 1726, 122 in 1744, and still 120 after Spain took over

²⁷ For those voyages, see “Analyse méthodique de documents concernant la Louisiane,” C13, A5, fol. 217 (quote); Ship log of the *Gironde* (1730), MAR, 4JJ, 17, no. 44, entry for 26 November 1730, fols. 35-36; Ship log of the *Vénus* (1730), 4JJ, 17, no. 46, fols. 16-31. According to a contemporary account, a total of 342 Natchez prisoners had initially been taken to New Orleans. Dumont de Montigny, *Memoir*, 252. On the Natchez transportation, see also Marcel Giraud, *A History of French Louisiana. V: The Company of the Indies, 1723-1731* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 428; Edward Noel Smyth, “The Natchez Diaspora: A History of Indigenous Displacement and Survival in the Atlantic World” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Santa Cruz, 2016), 54–80.

²⁸ Maurepas to Périer, 15 June 1731, B, 55, fol. 614. Neither Louisiana’s governor nor the Compagnie had informed the metropole, certainly because they expected this disavowal.

²⁹ “Journal du voyage de Monsieur de Beauchamps,” 1746, C13, A30, fol. 225.

Louisiana's administration in 1771. Most were war captives from nations engaged in long-standing conflict with the French or their allies—Natchez, Chickasaws, Meskwaki (Fox), Apaches. The military campaigns against the Chickasaws who sheltered Natchez refugees were similarly fought not only to satisfy imperial objectives, but also to acquire captives, specifically Native women. The memoir of Lieutenant Dumont de Montigny, a member of the 1736 expedition into Chickasaw territory, described how French troops “were planning to capture lots of slaves, and the officers were even bidding for them in advance.”³⁰ While two thirds of captives imported from Africa between 1719 to 1731 were men, the gender ratio among Natives enslaved in French colonial settlements shows the opposite imbalance starting in that period.³¹ Between 1719 and 1769, of 132 enslaved Natives whose sex is identified in Gwendolyn Midlo Hall's database *Afro-Louisiana History and Genealogy*, 57 were male and 85 female (60 percent).³² The proportion is roughly similar in the 1771 census of the colony, one of the first taken by the Spanish administration, which counted 43 enslaved Indigenous men for 77 women (64 percent).³³

Beyond the gendered nature of Indigenous captivity, this contrast indicates how the sexual and domestic demands of Frenchmen continued to shape the Indian slave trade, especially in frontier outposts that counted fewer European women and African plantation workers than the

³⁰ The same eyewitness related that French soldiers went out of their way to capture Indigenous women during a 1723 assault against the Natchez. See Dumont de Montigny, *The Memoir of Lieutenant Dumont*, 183-184, 261 (quote).

³¹ TSTD; “État récapitulatif du recensement general de la Louisiane,” ca. 1737, C13, C4, fol. 197; Paul Lachance, “The Growth of Free and Slave Populations in the French Colonial Louisiana,” in *French Colonial Louisiana and the Atlantic World*, ed. Bradley G. Bond (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 219-26.

³² Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, ed., “Slave database,” *Afro-Louisiana History and Genealogy, 1719-1820*, <http://www.ibiblio.org/laslave/>.

³³ Census of Louisiana, 2 September 1771, in Lawrence Kinnaird, *Spain in the Mississippi Valley, 1765-1794*, vol. 1 (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1949), 196.

New Orleans area.³⁴ In 1770, the commander at Natchitoches, on the Texas-Louisiana border, reported white traders still “pass their scandalous lives in public concubinage with the captive Indian women whom for this purpose they purchase.”³⁵ A Borderlands historian concludes that “French markets gave new value to an old by-product of warfare,” accelerating the commodification of Indian prisoners as chattel slaves.³⁶ Enslaved Indigenous women, in fact, were certainly undercounted because censuses focused on households and overlooked the enslaved concubines of transient men like traders and soldiers.³⁷ ³⁸By mid-century, Louisiana’s governor suspected Apache women to be so numerous among the colony’s enslaved population as to prevent a trade alliance with their people—even though the French had never been at war with the Apaches, their diplomatic options were effectively curtailed by their Indigenous allies.³⁹ Other Natives around colonial settlements and forts worked as hired hands and tribute labor, including porters, rowers, hunters, and mercenaries, a vital source of mostly unfree labor also unaccounted for in censuses.⁴⁰

³⁴ Juliana Barr, “From Captives to Slaves: Commodifying Indian Women in the Borderlands,” *The Journal of American History* 92, no. 1 (2005): 29; Carl J. Ekberg, *Stealing Indian Women: Native Slavery in the Illinois Country* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); DuVal, “Indian Intermarriage and Métissage in Colonial Louisiana,” 273.

³⁵ “De Mézières to Unzaga y Amezaga,” 20 May 1770, in Herbert Eugene Bolton, ed., *Athanase de Mézières and the Louisiana-Texas Frontier, 1768-1780* (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1914, 1914), 1:166.

³⁶ Barr, “From Captives to Slaves,” 28 (quote), 24.

³⁷ DuVal, “Indian Intermarriage and Métissage in Colonial Louisiana,” 275n10. It is also likely that official counts of enslaved Natives grew artificially low as slaves of mixed Indigenous and African descent **mixed**, racial categories hardened, and non-Europeans were increasingly identified as black. Daniel H. Usner, *Indians, Settlers & Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley before 1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 132.

³⁸ DuVal, “Indian Intermarriage and Métissage,” 275n10. It is also likely that official counts of enslaved Natives grew artificially low as slaves of mixed Indigenous and African descent mixed, racial categories hardened, and non-Europeans were increasingly identified as Black. ; Usner, *Indians, Settlers & Slaves*, 132.

³⁹ Kerlérec, “Project de paix et d’alliance avec les Cannecis (ou Apaches),” 1 October 1753, C13, A37, fol. 104. See also “État des sauvages qui habitent depuis les Alibamons jusqu’à la Caroline,” [1713?], C13, C1, fol. 358; Barr, “From Captives to Slaves,” 28.

⁴⁰ Interrogation of Louis Serel, RSC, 1727-01-02/1; Dumont de Montigny, *Memoir*, 228; Ellis, “The Petite Nations,” 108.

Before the first slave ship even landed in Louisiana, officials already voiced their preference for enslaved Africans over Native American and European laborers. In 1717, Louisiana's chief administrator Marc-Antoine Hubert, wrote that the first generation of white settlers were so used to earning a living from the Indian trade they would be reluctant to take up farming on the poor lands around Mobile, unless "they have negroes for this work, who are more industrious than the *sauvage* slaves who desert when worked hard."⁴¹ Black men and women would soon challenge those racial expectations by demonstrating their readiness and ability to tun away, as they had done for centuries around the Caribbean. Yet Hubert recommended training enslaved Africans to replace white artisans in different trades at a much lower cost—not only that of wages, but of food in short supply on the Gulf Coast as well.⁴²

For many French observers, a crucial benefit of employing enslaved African labor was that there was no need to provide them with European foods like wheat flour, whose transportation and storage were a costly logistical challenge for the young settlement, as it had to be imported from Europe or the Illinois country. The puzzling amount of time, energy, and resources dedicated to easily spoiled flour shipments to Louisiana resulted from deep-rooted racial assumptions about the dietary needs of different people, which were articulated most clearly in the early 1720s, as they shaped arguments about labor recruitment. According to the royal engineer who designed New Orleans's street grid, Louisiana was a fertile country but French workers were of little use there as they could not get stomach native foods—corn (which he tellingly called *blé d'Inde*, or Indian wheat), potatoes, and even rice, still alien to early modern French people despite being an Old

⁴¹ Hubert to the Minister, 16 October 1717, BNF-R, NAF, 9303, fol. 101.

⁴² Hubert to the Minister, ca. 1718, C13, A1, fols. 53-4.

World import.⁴³inding them hard to prepare and insufficiently nutritious, he explained, European laborers fell sick without supplies from France. “Many negroes are needed,” concluded the engineer, because “whites do not earn the food they are given.”⁴⁴ Governor Bienville too considered the dietary needs of white laborers an extra burden on the colony. The work of coopers was in particular high demand, as they made the barrels in which many of Louisiana’s main exports were shipped, from tar and pitch to tobacco and indigo. These artisans required not only high wages but, according to Bienville, “they must be fed French food, which costs a great deal both to purchase and to transport.” The governor therefore recommended training African coopers so as “to do without the service of whites whose food and wages carry off all the profits.”⁴⁵ As in other emerging slave societies across the Americas, another common rationale for the superiority or necessity of Black labor was that the local environment was unsuitable to European workers. In 1725, Bienville’s successor recommended the Compagnie provide colonists with “a sufficient quantity of negroes to improve the lands granted to them, since farming cannot rely on the work of whites deprived of their strength and courage by the excessive heat of this climate.”⁴⁶

⁴³ On Europeans demanding wheat flour and their perception of other grains as slave food, see for instance La Chaise to Directors of the Compagnie, 8 March 1724, C13, A7, fols. 18, 26. In 1768, when a Creole revolt ousted the newly appointed Spanish governor Antonio de Ulloa, they accused him of having “caused famine and decided to reduce your subjects to eating tortillas.” Cited in Villiers du Terrage, *Les Dernières Années*, 269.

⁴⁴ Le Blond de la Tour to the Minister, 30 August 1722, C13, A6, fol. 321. On the dietary costs associated with laborers of various origins and legal status, see also Hubert to the Minister, ca. 1718, C13, A.1, fols. 53-4.

⁴⁵ “Mémoire de Bienville sur la Louisiane,” 20 October 1725 [date from copy in MD, Amérique, 1], C13, C1: 404. For an example of the coopers’ importance for the tobacco industry, see Instructions pour le Sr. La Loire Des Ursins, commis principal de la Compagnie des Indes aux Natchez, 29 November 1724, B, 43, fol. 491.

⁴⁶ Boisbriant to the Minister, 4 October 1725, C13, A8, fol. 237. See also G. Musset, “Le voyage en Louisiane de Franquet de Chaville (1720-1724),” *Journal de la société des américanistes* 4, no. 1 (1902): 98–143; Colomb, Memorandum on the commerce of Louisiana (undated, 1754?), C13, A38, fols. 261-262. The latter document, a mid-century report on the colony’s economic situation, similarly stressed the manpower required for farming and hard labor, which “can only get done by a sufficient number of negroes, the country being too hot for whites to work.”

By contrast with the reservations of administrators and employers toward European and Indigenous labor, most of their accounts expressed a remarkable level of confidence in African workers. Beyond farming and hard labor, officials and colonists recommended replacing white artisans with enslaved men in virtually every trade, as the surest and most economical strategy to secure the workforce needed in Louisiana. “Without a great many negroes you cannot expect any profit,” wrote the manager of a large plantation to his absentee employers in 1721, “since white laborers can barely feed themselves.”⁴⁷ Skilled European workers such as sawyers, locksmiths, and edge-tool makers, he argued, should only be employed to train Black slaves, whose owners could quickly quadruple their investment by selling enslaved craftsmen. That same year, the Compagnie spent 75,000 livres, 15 percent of Louisiana’s annual budget and half the amount paid for all its troops, on the wages of white artisans, to whom it soon apprenticed all of the twelve Black youths it owned.⁴⁸ The Compagnie also planned to expand tobacco production in Natchez using enslaved Africans supervised by Black foremen, in contrast with its earlier reliance on the Clairacs, skilled laborers from Southwestern France, who had developed a local expertise in cultivating and manufacturing tobacco since the sixteenth century. The geographic origin of those tobacco workers, some of whom even honed their skills in the British colonies of the Chesapeake, was so essential to their recruitment that they were simply called after one of their native villages.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ “Excerpt of a letter written by Mr. Faucond du Manoir,” 18 July 1721, *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (1919), 168. The author clearly exaggerated the profits slaveholders could expect: the Compagnie sold premium slaves for 660 then 1000 livres, and even the price of Black men with a trade rarely reached twice that sum. Giraud, *A History of French Louisiana*, V, 125.

⁴⁸ See “Récapitulation des dépenses de la Louisiane,” August 1721 and “État des nègres entretenus par la Compagnie à la Louisiane,” 26 August 1723, B, 43, fols. 65 and 310-311.

⁴⁹ “Budget détaillé pour l’établissement, aux frais de la Compagnie, d’une habitation destinée à la culture du tabac aux Natchez,” October 1724, C13, A8, fol. 227; Périer and La Chaise to the Minister, 3 November 1729, C13, A11, fol. 136; “A Chapter of Colonial History: Louisiana 1717 to 1751,” *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (October 1923): 548; Marie-Claude Guibert, Gabriel Debien, and Claude Martin, “L’Emigration vers la Louisiane: La Rochelle, Nantes, Clairac, 1698-1754,” in *Actes du 97ème congrès national des Sociétés savantes, Nantes 1972*, vol. 2 (Paris:

Colonial elites who proposed to develop industries like brickmaking and shipbuilding in Louisiana similarly imagined them operated almost entirely by Black enslaved artisans trained by Europeans—much like generations of skilled bondsmen had been apprenticed, hired out, or directly employed in building and maritime trades in port cities around the Atlantic.⁵⁰ When the Compagnie returned Louisiana to the King in 1731, the fate of its enslaved workforce of 224 men, women, and children became an issue that illustrated the expanding role of Black laborers in the local economy. *Commissaire-ordonnateur* Edme-Gatien Salmon recommended purchasing them for employment on the King’s ships, gardens, and fortifications. Recruiting white laborers was difficult and expensive, explained Salmon, whereas buying local slaves constituted an investment that would generate profits within five to six years.⁵¹

Rare were the dissident voices against the choice of African slave labor. In 1721, the Jesuit priest Pierre François Xavier de Charlevoix concurred with other observers that Louisiana’s concessions only needed workers to prosper, but he expressed a strong preference for white *engagés*. “When their service term expires,” wrote Charlevoix, “they become inhabitants and increase the number of the King’s natural subjects; whereas [Black slaves] are always strangers, and who can be assured that by continually increasing in our colonies, they will not one day

Bibliothèque Nationale, 1972), 97–136; Giraud, *French Louisiana, V*, 134–40; Dumont de Montigny, *Memoir*, 152n24.

⁵⁰ Brenda Lynn Harris, “Charleston’s Colonial Boat Culture, 1668-1775” (Ph.D. diss., University of South Carolina, 2002), 138-140; *France and the American Tropics to 1700: Tropics of Discontent?* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 280; Michael Jarvis, *In the Eye of All Trade: Bermuda, Bermudians, and the Maritime Atlantic World, 1680-1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 129–30, 143; Greg Grandin, *The Empire of Necessity: Slavery, Freedom, and Deception in the New World* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2014), 28; Wim Klooster, “Comparative Perspectives on the Urban Black Atlantic on the Eve of Abolition,” *International Review of Social History* 65 (April 2020): 27–28.

⁵¹ Salmon to the Minister, 16 January 1732, C13, A15, fol. 13. Considering the high wages of European artisans, who earned between 200 and 500 *livres* per year, the relatively modest price paid for the Compagnie’s adult slaves—about 700 *livres*—and the free training young ones could receive from their elders, Salmon’s calculations actually seem to have been conservative. Compare with Salmon to the Minister, 15 January 1732, C13, A15, fol. 9; same to same, 25 July 1733, C13, A17, fol. 167.

become formidable enemies?”⁵² Such fears would briefly surface again ten years later, when two alleged rebellion plots by “Bambara” slaves briefly shook New Orleans in the wake of the Natchez war. During their attack against the French at Fort Rosalie, Natchez warriors had captured nearly all the 280 Africans enslaved in the area and taken them, along with surviving European women and children, to their villages. Most Africans eventually returned to colonial settlements, but only after spending two more years in Indian country, among the French-allied Choctaws who had recaptured them.⁵³ By the authorities’ own admission, it was unclear whether any actual slave conspiracy justified the 1731 insurrection scares. Yet they were quick to execute seven suspected African leaders and to blame the slaves’ newfound “spirit of laziness, independence, and insolence” on the war experiences of Black refugees and the autonomy they had enjoyed among the Natives.⁵⁴ Rather than share Father Charlevoix’s view of enslaved Africans as internal enemies, white Louisianans felt compelled to preserve their emerging slave society from outside threats, whether Indigenous people or rebellious slaves imported from the Caribbean.⁵⁵

When employers complained that white laborers could “barely feed themselves” or “earn the food they are given,” they participated in the process of racializing labor through a series of

⁵² Pierre-François-Xavier de Charlevoix, *Histoire et description generale de la Nouvelle France. Tome 3, avec le journal historique d’un voyage fait par ordre du Roi dans l’Amérique septentrionale* (Paris: Didot, 1744), 415.

⁵³ Dumont de Montigny, *Memoir*, 245–47; Giraud, *French Louisiana*, V, 416–17; Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 102.

⁵⁴ On the insurrection scares, see “Chronologie des mouvements des nations sauvages du 28 avril au 22 octobre 1731,” 21 and 28 July 1731, C13, A13, fol. 87 (quote); “Mémoire de Raymond Amyault, sieur d’Auseville,” 20 January 1732, C13, A14, fols. 273-4; Salmon to the Minister, 18 January 1732, C13, A15, fol. 26; Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 105-112.

⁵⁵ For fears of imports of enslaved troublemakers from the Antilles, see Robert to Minister, 26 November 1708, C13, A2, fols. 359-362; Kerlérec to the Minister, 26 June 1755, C13, A39, fols. 12-13; “Arrêt du Conseil Supérieur de La Nouvelle-Orléans interdisant l’importation en Louisiane, sous peine d’amendes, de nègres venant de Saint-Domingue,” 9 July 1763, C13, A43, fol. 304; “Arrêt du Conseil Supérieur de la Louisiane autorisant la vente, à la barre de la Cour de 21 nègres arrivés de la Martinique en Louisiane,” 16 November 1765, C13, A45, fols. 100-101; Jessica Marie Johnson, *Wicked Flesh: Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom in the Atlantic World* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 90.

cultural judgments. Such reports reflected the implicit assumption that white men and women were not expected to farm in Louisiana, where unlike in the metropole field work, domestic service, and hard labor rapidly came to be considered beneath them and suitable only for slaves. Already in 1720, the royal decree banning the forced transportation of criminals and vagabonds to the colony explained that the recent introduction of enslaved Africans would provide enough manpower for clearing and cultivating the land.⁵⁶ A similar dynamic dictated the system of statutory labor known as the *corvée*, which required slaveholders to provide slaves for public works (levee, roads, fortifications). As the only form of taxation in the colony for decades, the *corvée* made planters shoulder the financial cost of building the colony's infrastructure, but it also meant that the burden of hard labor fell increasingly on enslaved Black people rather than on white convicts, soldiers, or even peasants like in Canada. Unlike for the skilled trades, no argument was necessary to justify the employment of Black slaves in agriculture, domestic work, and other menial toil, which European colonizers already took for granted. Likewise, routine complaints about the insufficient productivity and unruliness of white laborers relied on the implicit contrast with rightless chattel slaves who could be exploited at will through racialized violence. In 1725, a New Orleans councilman successfully petitioned the Compagnie to sell him an enslaved African woman to work in his kitchen, claiming it was "impossible to use white men or women because of their laziness as much as their libertinage."⁵⁷ This racial perception even affected the labor expected of convicts, whom French authorities continued to ship to Canada and the Antilles. After reclaiming Louisiana

⁵⁶ "Arrest du Conseil d'Etat du Roy qui ordonne qu'il ne sera plus envoyé de Vagabonds, Gens sans aveu, Fraudeurs & Criminels a la Louisianne," 9 May 1720, A, 23, fol. 29.

⁵⁷ Decision du Conseil, 4 November 1724, C13, A8, fol. 139. For a comparable argument about the idleness of white workers, see "Extrait du registre de délibérations du Conseil Supérieur de la Louisiane," 22 September 1725, C13, A8, fol. 388-390.

as a royal colony in 1731, its administrators repeatedly urged the Marine to send salt cheaters who would become “industrious and useful inhabitants,” especially in the Illinois Country where they would work as hunters, traders, and plantation overseers.⁵⁸ Remarkably, although convicts had once been employed in farming and hard labor, notably at the time of New Orleans’s founding, colonial authorities implicitly deemed those unfree white workers ineligible for such heavy toil in the heart of Louisiana’s plantation zone, where it was now assigned almost exclusively to enslaved Africans.

The idea that Europeans were entitled to better treatment and therefore excluded from the most menial jobs was not lost on even the humblest workers, who developed superior attitudes in their everyday interactions with enslaved people and their so-called masters. In the Caribbean context, French scholar Caroline Oudin-Bastide has described this phenomenon as an “irresistible erosion of white-skinned [hard] labor” whereby Europeans increasingly rejected grunt work as they aspired to the lifestyle of planters, for whom working meant to make other people work. This process unfolded quickly in Louisiana because its settlers and personnel imported racial views developed in West Indian colonies, notably those shaping the 1724 slave law known as the Code Noir.⁵⁹ Unlike South Carolina, Louisiana was not founded as an extension of the Caribbean sugar islands, but nearly every ship crossing the Atlantic stopped in the Antilles, usually in Saint-Domingue, on its way to the Gulf Coast.⁶⁰ Like early migrants from New France who carried with

⁵⁸ Bienville and Salmon to the Minister, 1 June 1737, C13, A22, fol. 40-41 (quote). See also Minister to Fagon, 13 March 1731, B55, fol. 14; same to Bienville et Salmon, 19 March 1737, B, 65, fol. 499; Bienville and Salmon to the Minister, 29 June 1740, C13, A25, fol. 29.

⁵⁹ Oudin-Bastide, *Travail, capitalisme et société esclavagiste*, 79–132; Vernon V. Palmer, *Through the Codes Darkly: Slave Law and Civil Law in Louisiana* (Clark, N. J: The Lawbook Exchange, 2012), 3–41; Guillaume Aubert, “To Establish One Law and Definite Rules: Race, Religion, and the Transatlantic Origins of the Louisiana Code Noir,” in Vidal, *Louisiana*, 21–43; Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans*, 84–88.

⁶⁰ Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion*, 1975; Ian Beamish and Justin Roberts, “Venturing Out: The Barbadian Diaspora and the Carolina Colony, 1650-1685,” in

them experiences with Indigenous people in Canada, the administrators, military officers, missionaries, sailors, planters, and other workers traveling from Europe were influenced by the racial outlook of Caribbean slave societies before even landing on the continent.⁶¹

This awareness was clearly demonstrated in a dramatic episode involving the suicide attempt of a European convict in 1743 Natchez. Although Catholic and literate, Jean-Baptiste Chevalier alias La Chaume was an outsider. A self-described member of the “Bohemian nation” (Romani or Gypsy people), Chevalier was probably the son of a woman killed in the 1729 raid that launched the Natchez war, when he was just fifteen, and he had been condemned to forced labor for theft in 1741.⁶² While serving a sentence of unspecified duration at the Natchez post, Chevalier suffered much abuse from the French commandant, Mr. Dorgon, who employed him in his gardens, his household, and as an army drummer. His legal and racial status differed from the enslaved Africans around him, but Chevalier felt so aggrieved to be treated like a slave he attempted suicide, a criminal act according to French law for which he later appeared before the Superior Council in New Orleans. As the colony’s highest court, the Council heard both civil and

Creating and Contesting Carolina: Proprietary Era Histories, ed. Brad Wood and Michelle LeMaster (Charleston: University of South Carolina Press, 2013), 49-72; Matthew Mulcahy, *Hubs of Empire: The Southeastern Lowcountry and British Caribbean* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 84-111.

⁶¹ Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans*, 12-14, 79-84.

⁶² Incident report from Natchez, 1743-06-18/1, Petition of Fleuriau, 1743-07-06/1, Interrogation of Chevalier alias La Chaume, 1743-07-06/2, RSC. Unless specified otherwise, all information about this case comes from these three following documents, and all of Chevalier’s quotes are taken from the latter. Chevalier’s sentence has not been preserved and its term is not mentioned in surviving documents. He may have arrived in Louisiana with his mother, since he was 15 when a French priest listed an “old Chevalier woman, Bohemian,” among the victims of the Natchez attack. See “État des personnes du poste des Natchez qui ont été massacres le 28 Novembre 1729 par les Sauvages voisins,” 9 June 1730, C13, A12, fols. 57-58. On Chevalier and Bohemians in the colony, see Ann M. Ostendorf, “‘To Get Himself Out of Slavery’: Escape, Justice, and Honor in the Life of a Colonial French Louisiana Bohemian (‘Gypsy’),” (unpublished typescript), Academia, https://www.academia.edu/42952041/_To_Get_Himself_Out_of_Slavery_Escape_Justice_and_Honor_in_the_Life_of_a_Colonial_French_Louisiana_Bohemian_Gypsy_; Elizabeth Shown Mills, “Assimilation? Or Marginalization and Discrimination? Romani Settlers of the Colonial Gulf (Christophe Clan),” (unpublished typescript), <https://www.historicpathways.com>. For other interpretations of this case, see Dawdy, *Building the Devil’s Empire*, 199-200; Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans*, 312-313.

criminal cases, and it also served as the main institution in charge of policing Louisiana's emerging slave society. In court, Chevalier complained Dorgon overworked him from dawn to dusk even on religious holidays like Easter, hinting that he deserved better treatment as a white Catholic when everyone, including enslaved Africans, was given time off on those days. Asked why he had tried to desert with some soldiers, Chevalier argued it was only "natural for a poor man who lives in slavery to escape it."⁶³ But the last straw was the humiliation he endured following a violent confrontation with another lower-class white, a soldier who worked as Dorgon's cook.⁶⁴ According to Chevalier, the soldier-servant assaulted him for refusing to clean the kitchen as he ordered him to, but the Bohemian convict fought back as "he could not suffer being mistreated in this manner by a man who had no authority over him." Dorgon later punished Chevalier by beating him with a cane and added insult to injury by reminding him it was "not permitted for a slave [meaning Chevalier] to hit a free man [the soldier]," even as he ordered one of the King's slaves, a Black man only known as Brutal, to tie him up.⁶⁵ This was the moment Chevalier grabbed a kitchen knife and stabbed himself twice in the chest, out of "despair for he had not deserved to be mistreated by negroes as no one should be." Because the verdict is missing, it is unknown whether Chevalier managed to persuade the court he had acted drunkenly and angrily, without wanting to

⁶³ Interrogation of Chevalier, 1743-07-06/2, RSC. Dorgon owned at least one young Indigenous woman, but like a growing number of Louisianans Chevalier only referred to slaves as "negroes." See Auction sale of Marie Therese, 1745-08-18/2, RSC.

⁶⁴ The soldier, named Masson, may have been the Jean-Baptiste Masson who returned to France in the fall after being release from the military. See Passenger list for the Charente, 1743, ANOM, Passagers embarqués pour la France (F5B), 34; Bienville to the Minister, 19 October 1743, C13, A28, fol. 44.

⁶⁵ Incident report, 1743-06-18/1, RSC. Brutal's nickname suggests he may have served as an enforcer for the authorities, not unlike the better-known role played by Black executioners in the French Atlantic. André Lachance, *Les Marginaux, Les Exclut et l'Autre Au Canada Aux 17e et 18e Siècles* (Montréal: Fides, 1996); Gene E. Ogle, "Slaves of Justice: Saint-Domingue's Executioners and the Production of Shame," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 29, no. 2 (2003): 275–93; Shannon Lee Dawdy, "The Burden of Louis Congo and the Evolution of Savagery in Colonial Louisiana," in *Discipline and the Other Body: Correction, Corporeality, Colonialism*, ed. Steven Pierce and Anapuma Rao (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 61–89.

kill himself but rather to escape his tormentors and to be “treated more humanely.”⁶⁶ Yet his own words revealed how racial prejudice shaped the expectations of European workers and their appeals to white solidarity.

Whereas labor conflicts involving white workers in the 1720s focused primarily on wage disputes, by mid-century many reflected similar concerns with the dignity and autonomy they deserved compared to enslaved Africans.⁶⁷ A 1752 clash between a white domestic servant and his employer, the military captain Joseph Gamon de La Rochette, further illustrates how European workers internalized the racialization of labor. The officer had recruited the unnamed man to serve as his barber and valet, luring him to Louisiana under false promises. Once in the colony, the domestic reluctantly agreed to serve Gamon as a cook, but he drew the line at hewing wood, protesting it was “negro work in this country, that he would not do it, that he had not been hired for that.” With the help of the New Orleans major, Gamon jailed the insubordinate for two weeks, who he was eventually freed and transferred to the governor’s service. The servant’s words suggest he viewed heavy work as degrading because of its association with African slavery in America, although such jobs were assigned to European men and women in the metropole.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Chevalier may have been sent to serve the rest of his hard labor sentence at Balize, where a year later an unnamed Bohemian man escaped with another convict, a soldier condemned for desertion. See Vaudreuil to Louboey, 7 June 1744, VP, LO 9, Letterbook 3, fol. 89.

⁶⁷ See for example Jean Letellier and other workers v. Verteuil, 1725-08-22/2, 1725-09-06/1, 1725-09-06/2 and 5, 1725-09-07/5, 1725-09-13-01, 1725-10-19/1, 1725-11-05/2, 1725-11-05/5, Petition of Marianne St-Aubin, 1726-07-09/2, RSC. For an early exception, see Petition of Sanson, 1726-10-14/2, RSC.

⁶⁸ Michel to the Minister, 15 January 1752, C13, A, 36, fols. 222-4; “Gamon de La Rochette, Joseph, major au Port-de-Paix à Saint-Domingue, ancien capitaine des troupes de la Louisiane,” E, 197; Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans*, 311. In a comparable case two years later, four white men recruited in Bordeaux to work as pit sawyers petitioned the Superior Council of New Orleans to cancel their indenture. The *engagés* argued they would fulfill their duties “if they were treated like Frenchmen,” but they complained of the poor food, housing, and clothing supplied by their employer, a merchant who also leased their labor to other colonists. Although the judges confirmed the workers’ contract, they validated their grievances by forbidding the merchant from hiring them out and urging him to respect the terms laid out in the document—something slaveholders needed not worry about. “Extrait des registres des audiences du Conseil Supérieur,” 2 March 1754, F3, 243, fols. 106-108; Kerlérec and D’Auberville to the Minister, 24 September 1754, C13, A38, fols. 37-38.

Yet the racialization process that identified Blackness with coerced labor was complicated by a number of local factors. European convicts and soldiers never entirely stopped performing some of the most strenuous tasks, such as rowing on river expeditions and building public works, sometimes alongside slaves. This occasional cohabitation, which could generate racial resentment and conflict between different categories and of unfree workers, fueled the demands of whites for timely pay, decent treatment, and better conditions that would set them apart from the enslaved. While Black men and women were increasingly identified to plantation labor, especially in the Mississippi delta, white farmers from the Illinois country upriver and the German Coast outside of New Orleans were instrumental in feeding the colonial population. Some enslaved Africans, on the other hand, acquired skills that made white artisans redundant. Lastly, free people of color were so few throughout the period that they never represented a distinct category as they did in Caribbean slave societies, but Indigenous communities remained important commercial partners and an important source of labor.

4.2 “Profiting from the Negroes that can be Transported Here”: Louisiana’s African Slave Trade, from Transatlantic to Caribbean

Some menial labor continued to befall poor whites, from soldiers and convicts to *engagés*, because of the chronic shortage of enslaved workers, especially after the Compagnie stopped importing African captives when it retroceded Louisiana to the French Crown in 1731. The first slave ships carrying Africans to Louisiana had only landed in 1719, a century later than in Jamestown, and twenty years after Iberville requested “permission to go to Guinea to trade the

negroes he needed for this enterprise” the same year he founded the colony.⁶⁹ The few Black laborers introduced to the area in the meantime, who arrived as individual servants of European personnel and visitors from France, Canada, or the West Indies, shared the cosmopolitan experience of those Ira Berlin called “Atlantic Creoles.”⁷⁰ Official censuses made no mention of enslaved Africans in 1708 and counted just ten in 1712.⁷¹ Beside the aforementioned proposal to trade Indigenous captives for African slaves in the West Indies, the only attempt to import them in large number had taken place a few years prior. Following Iberville’s privateering raid against British Nevis in 1707, a brig was dispatched to Havana to purchase some of his human booty, but it apparently returned empty after Iberville’s death foiled the plan.⁷²

Ship captains received specific instructions for the selection of slaves, which reflected some experience with and much prejudice toward Africans, but also disregarded local conditions of the trade and the Europeans’ limited control over the supply of captives. The Compagnie ordered slavers to purchase only healthy adults from 18 to 30 years old if possible.⁷³ Yet children still represented over 14 percent of captives landed in Louisiana—and arguably much more since the younger ones were often unrecorded at all except in death, such as the fourteen nursing babies who died onboard the *Vénus* in 1728.⁷⁴ Only men were counted as premium adult slaves or *pièces d’Inde*, and officials praised the ship captains who delivered “well-sorted cargos” that included only a third of women and children.⁷⁵ Late proposals to promote the Atlantic slave trade

⁶⁹ Summary of letters by Iberville to the Minister, ca. 1699, C13, A1, fol. 93.

⁷⁰ Berlin, “From Creoles to Africans.”

⁷¹ Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 57–58.

⁷² Bienville to the Minister, 20 February 1707, C13, A2, fol. 18.

⁷³ “Instructions pour le Sr. Herpin Commandant du Vaisseau *L'Aurore*,” B, 42B, fol. 201

⁷⁴ Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 84; Johnson, *Wicked Flesh*, 96.

⁷⁵ Johnson, *Wicked Flesh*, 87–90.

recommended a similar ratio.⁷⁶ However, slavers who stopped in Caribbean islands were frequently pressured to exchange their fittest male captives with local slaves considered less valuable, leading them to carry more women and children to the secondary slave market that was the Gulf Coast.⁷⁷

Antoine Le Page du Pratz, who published the only planter manual from French Louisiana based on his management of the Compagnie plantation at Natchez, expressed another type of preference as he favored different ethnicities for different lines of work. Although he assumed men and women from Senegal, “who call themselves Jolof [Wolof],” to be unfit for farming, Le Page du Pratz recommended employing them as domestic servants. “Of all the negroes I have known,” he argued, “those have the purest blood, they are more loyal and more intelligent than others, hence better suited to serve or learn a trade”—including commanding other slaves.⁷⁸ As with other ethnic labels involved in the Atlantic slave trade, the origins of Africans identified as “Wolof” or “Senegal” in Louisiana are uncertain, since those terms could interchangeably refer to geographical, religious, or linguistic categories.⁷⁹ Regardless, Le Page du Pratz’s prejudice reflected the extensive ties the French had developed with local inhabitants at their trading posts of Gorée and Saint-Louis since the mid-seventeenth century. Through commercial contacts and

⁷⁶ “Proposition de la Compagnie des Indes à la Marine du Roy,” undated [1732?], MAR, B3, 354, fols. 246-247; “La Louisiane: Mémoire de M. Gradis fils sur cette colonie,” 21 May 1748, C13, A32, fol. 248-250; “Mémoire sur le transport du Sénégal a la Louisianne de 250 têtes de noirs,” attached to a letter dated 15 September 1750, SHD-R, Bureau des colonies de Rochefort (1R), 46.

⁷⁷ Bienville and Lorme to the Company, 25 April 1721, SHD-V, A1, 2592, fol. 106; Johnson, *Wicked Flesh*, 87–90.

⁷⁸ Antoine-Simon Le Page du Pratz, *Histoire de la Louisiane*, vol. 1 (Paris: De Bure, 1758), 344–45.

⁷⁹ Peter Caron, “‘Of a Nation Which the Others Do Not Understand:’ Bambara Slaves and African Ethnicity in Colonial Louisiana, 1718-60,” *Slavery & Abolition* 18, no. 1 (1997): 98–121; Robin Law, “Ethnicity and the Slave Trade: ‘Lucumi’ and ‘Nago’ as Ethnonyms in West Africa,” *History in Africa* 24 (1997): 205–19; David Northrup, “Igbo and Myth Igbo: Culture and Ethnicity in the Atlantic World, 1600–1850,” *Slavery & Abolition* 21, no. 3 (2000): 1–20; Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas: Restoring the Links* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 44–45; Jean-Pierre Le Glaunec, “‘Un Nègre Nommé [Sic] Lubin Ne Connaissant Pas Sa Nation’: The Small World of Louisiana Slavery,” in Vidal, *Louisiana*, 103–22.

interracial unions with local women, French traders, soldiers, sailors, and other Compagnie personnel had come to rely on laborers from Senegal, and slave ships carried this accumulated experience to Louisiana along with their human cargoes.⁸⁰ Because the Compagnie held trade monopolies at both ends of the Atlantic, two thirds of the African captives it transported to the colony came from Senegambia.

Le Page du Pratz was not alone in seeking specific skills among African captives. From the first slave voyages, ship captains received instructions to purchase workers familiar with rice cultivation, and enslaved Africans were instrumental in developing this vital crop. No matter how much French colonists despised grains they regarded as slave fare, African and Native crops provided the colony's workforce with some desperately needed food security.⁸¹ Producing silk, tobacco, and indigo, the exports believed to offer the best prospects for a plantation economy in Louisiana, similarly required outside expertise.⁸² As early as 1713, colonial administrators thus demanded not only indigo seeds from Saint-Domingue, but also enslaved laborers who specialized in their cultivation.⁸³ Beyond the sheer increase of manpower, the importation of enslaved laborers from Africa or the West Indies was to provide agricultural knowledge, including cattle ranching, that was sorely lacking among early colonists.

⁸⁰ Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, "African Women in French and Spanish Louisiana Origins, Roles, Family, Work, Treatment," in *The Devil's Lane: Sex and Race in the Early South*, ed. Catherine Clinton and Michele Gillespie (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 248–50; Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans*, 470–73; Johnson, "Wives, Soldiers, and Slaves."

⁸¹ "Instructions pour le Sr. Herpin"; Usner, "African Captivity to American Slavery," 26; Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 122–23; Ariane Jacques-Côté, "L'Empire du riz en Louisiane française, 1717-1724," *Études canadiennes / Canadian Studies. Revue interdisciplinaire des études canadiennes en France* 82 (2017): 147–51, 156–57.

⁸² Duclos to the Minister, 10 July 1713, C13, A3, fol. 113.

⁸³ Duclos to the Minister, 9 October 1713, C13, A3, fols. 238, 249-50.

Louisiana's first generation of African residents was decimated by mortality. In total, from 1719 to 1731, the Compagnie transported well over 6,000 Africans, but a 1737 census counted just 4,222 Black men, women, and children living in the colony.⁸⁴ This discrepancy partly results from the arrival of the first slave ships on the Gulf Coast amidst a large wave of European immigrants, whom the young settlement was poorly prepared to feed, house, or otherwise supply. Those starving times also coincided with the first—and last—episode of direct inter-European warfare in French Louisiana, whose soldiers were fighting Spanish troops over the control of Pensacola.⁸⁵ Survivors of the middle passage also suffered high mortality rates immediately following their arrival, which represented only a fraction of the death and trauma surrounding them from the time of their capture in Africa through their enslavement in North America. In 1721, for instance, the manager of the largest land concession was ordered to purchase thirty recently arrived African men and women, but he returned the majority of them as he found them too sick to be safe investments.⁸⁶

Early slave voyages through 1723 suffered an unusually low mortality considering the length of the journey—under four percent on average—but when they resumed after 1726 almost all ships lost ten to twenty percent of their human cargo. According to Gwendolyn Hall, this stark contrast resulted from worsening conditions and longer periods of imprisonment on the African coast before being transported.⁸⁷ The deadliest voyages to Louisiana were those of the *Galathée* and the *Vénus* in 1728-1729, which killed about 30 percent of their human cargo. Of 400 captives

⁸⁴ TSTD; “État récapitulatif du recensement général de la Louisiane,” C13, C4, fol. 197.

⁸⁵ Charles Le Gac, *Immigration and War; Louisiana, 1718-1721. From the Memoir of Charles Le Gac*, ed. Glenn R. Conrad (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, 1970), 21–27.

⁸⁶ “Excerpt from a letter written by Mr. Faucond du Manoir,” 18 July 1721, *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (1919), 165.

⁸⁷ Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 75–76.

embarked in Senegal, the *Galathée* delivered only 230 to New Orleans. Disease had been striking captives and captors aboard at such an alarming speed the captain ignored instructions to avoid any Caribbean stopover, leaving 45 ailing Africans in Saint-Domingue before completing a four-month journey across the Atlantic.⁸⁸ A few months later, by contrast, the voyage of the *Vénus* along the same route lasted only half as long, as it sailed to the Gulf Coast without any interruption. But this middle passage was no less fatal to the 450 men, women, and children trapped in its hold. Five committed suicide by throwing themselves overboard. Another 82 succumbed before reaching La Balise, a fortified outpost guarding the mouth of the Mississippi (figure 9). As contrary winds prevented the *Vénus* from landing or entering the river, by the time the remaining Africans could be transferred to smaller crafts and disembarked in Louisiana's capital three weeks later 43 more had died. While some colonists handpicked by the Compagnie drew lots to purchase the fittest among the survivors at a set price, the sick ones were auctioned off, but the latter were so afflicted with scurvy, ulcers, and other disease that two thirds of them died shortly afterwards.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Périer and La Chaise to Directors of the Compagnie, 30 January 1729, C13, A11, fol. 315; TSTD, Voyage no. 32905: *Galathée*.

⁸⁹ Ship log of the *Vénus*, 1729, MAR, 4JJ, 63; Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 89–90. On its next return voyage from Louisiana, the *Vénus* would be the ship transporting most of the Natchez captives to Saint-Domingue.



Figure 9. “A new map of the River Mississippi from the sea to Bayagoulas,” ca. 1761. Norman B. Leventhal

Map Center Collection, Boston Public Library,

<https://collections.leventhalmap.org/search/commonwealth:wd376444x>

According to the latest estimates from the Transatlantic Slave Trade Database, 23 voyages reached Louisiana, where they disembarked 6,235 African captives from 1719 to the end of the French regime in 1769.⁹⁰ Over the same period, Caribbean colonies such as Martinique, Saint-Domingue, and Jamaica received respectively 15 times, 44 times, and 68 times as many slaves as

⁹⁰ TSTD. For overviews of the Atlantic slave trade to Louisiana, see Usner, “African Captivity to American Slavery”; Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*; Thomas N. Ingersoll, “The Slave Trade and the Ethnic Diversity of Louisiana’s Slave Community,” *Louisiana History* 37, no. 2 (1996): 133–61.

the Gulf Coast settlement (figure 10). Even Northern American colonies received 10 to 12 times as many captives. Beside structural problems related to its geographical isolation and slow demographic and economic growth, the main cause of these limited arrivals lies in the Compagnie's abandonment of the transatlantic slave traffic to the Gulf Coast after it retroceded the colony's administration to the King in 1731.

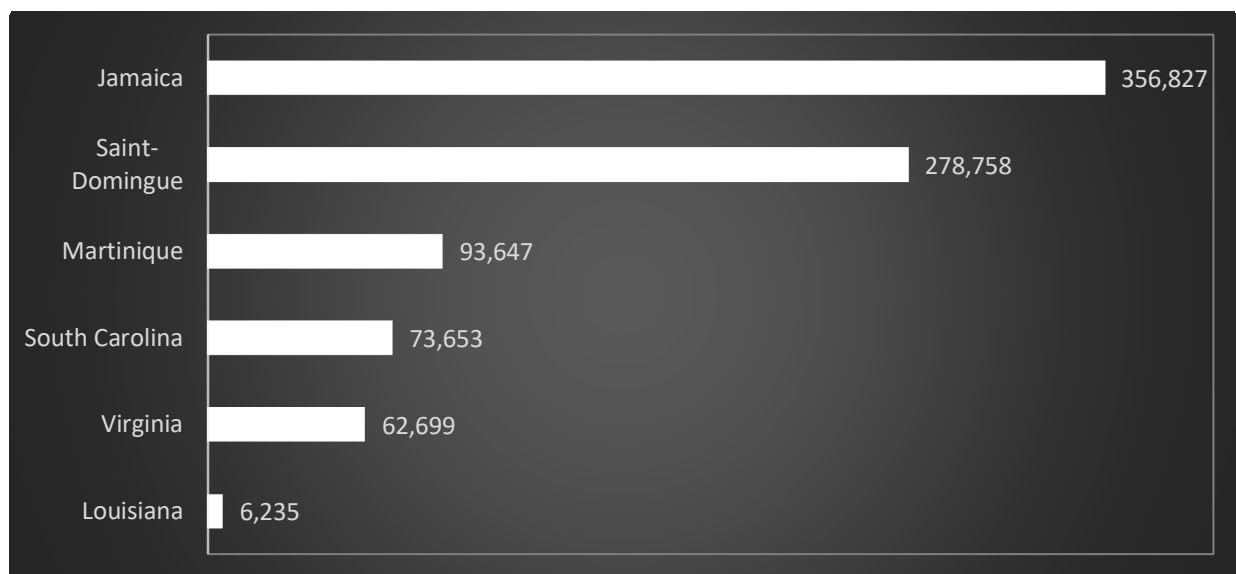


Figure 10. African captives landed by transatlantic voyages, 1719-1769.

The timing of these two interconnected decisions, which radically altered the fate of French Louisiana, suggests they responded to African and Indigenous resistance. Like all slave traders, the Compagnie had already faced shipboard insurrections before the Natchez prisoners rose up on

their way to Saint-Domingue, not to mention revolts at its West African trading post.⁹¹ In 1721, the *Charles* was lost at sea with its entire human cargo of 260 shortly after leaving Ouidah, in the Bight of Benin, in a fire likely started by the enslaved themselves. In any event, the well-documented African fears of white cannibalism materialized in the aftermath, when the members of the crew who had escaped the wreckage aboard a dinghy ate some captives they had taken with them to avoid starvation while awaiting their rescue.⁹² Two years later, as another ship halted in Grenada on its way from Senegal, its captain uncovered a conspiracy “to cut the throat of all the whites” and executed its suspected leader before continuing toward the Gulf Coast.⁹³

The circumstances of the 1729 voyage of the *Annibal*, which never even reached Louisiana, highlighted the difficulties of Louisiana’s transatlantic slave trade and contributed to its interruption. The *Annibal* was supposed to sail from Gorée alongside the aforementioned *Vénus*, but captives at the local slave factories were dying so fast that the former had to travel to the British controlled river Gambia to complete its human cargo of 300.⁹⁴ A quantitative survey of shipboard insurrections indicates that captives transported from Senegambia were by far the most likely to revolt during the middle passage: from 1527 to 1867, less than five percent of all voyages departed

⁹¹ For examples of coastal resistance in Senegal, see Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 92–94.

⁹² For the *Charles*, see Feuquières and Besnard to the Minister, 28 January 1721, C8, A28, fol. 12; Jean Baptiste Bénard de La Harpe, *Journal historique de l’établissement des Français à la Louisiane* (Nouvelle-Orléans, 1831), 248–49. On fears of white cannibalism, see Rosalind Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade: Ritual and the Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 230–32; John Thornton, “Cannibals, Witches, and Slave Traders in the Atlantic World,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 60, no. 2 (2003): 273–294; Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 117–23.

⁹³ Johnson, *Wicked Flesh*, 93.

⁹⁴ Périer and La Chaise to the Minister, 26 August 1729, C13, A11, fol 353. On this voyage, see Périer and La Chaise to the Minister, 26 August 1729, C13, A11, fol 353; *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 88–92; Johnson, *Wicked Flesh*, 93–94 TSTD, Voyage no. 32908: *Annibal*.

from this region, but they featured 22 percent of uprisings.⁹⁵ On May 26, 1729 the *Annibal* was just about to leave the estuary when the male prisoners rose up against the 45 members of the crew. Having stormed out of the hold and broken into the ship's storerooms, the insurgents seized all manners of tools and weapons, including hammers, scissors, files, axes, pikes, and two pairs of pistols, and nearly overpowered their 45 captors. When the crew finally regained control of the *Annibal* eight hours later, 45 African men had fallen in combat, drowned, or escaped to shore. An even larger number were wounded, and a few corpses were soon hanging from the masts as an example. That evening, the captain of a British brig visited the *Annibal* and revealed similar revolts had taken place on "five ships whose crews had been slaughtered in this location," including his.⁹⁶ Six weeks later, the female captives staged a second mutiny that caused alarm around the port of Les Cayes, in Southern Saint-Domingue, where the slaver was anchored, which persuaded authorities to trade its dangerous cargo without delay rather than risk further losses en route to Louisiana. In the ship's log, the pilot explained that officials on the island "decided to retain us here for the safety of the ship and the crew due to the continuous mutiny of our negroes, finding more appropriate to sell them here and to carry sugar" back to France.⁹⁷ As the *Annibal* returned to Lorient, the Compagnie's headquarters in Brittany, its crew carried the news of another slave ship heading to the Gulf Coast, but also of the recent uprising of the Natchez Indians against the

⁹⁵ David Richardson, "Shipboard Revolts, African Authority, and the Atlantic Slave Trade," *William and Mary Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2001): 79–80, 88–91. Rather than some dubious ethnic propensity to revolt, as European slavers were prone to imagine, Richardson attributes this high rate of shipboard rebellion to local conditions of the trade, political violence on shore, and the frequent presence of warriors and coastal residents among human cargoes from Senegambia.

⁹⁶ Ship log of the *Annibal*, 1727-1730, MAR, 4JJ, 17, no. 42, 26 May 1729, fols. 29-31. Four crewmen, four female captives, and two nursing babies had also been killed during the revolt.

⁹⁷ Ship log of the *Annibal*, 13 July through 16 July, fols. 49-50. On the ship's arrival in Saint-Domingue, the quartermaster had informed the captain that the captives threatened to assassinate him unless he helped them overpower the crew.

French (figure 11).⁹⁸ The Compagnie would never outfit another slaving voyage to Louisiana, whose exclusive commerce and administration it soon abandoned.

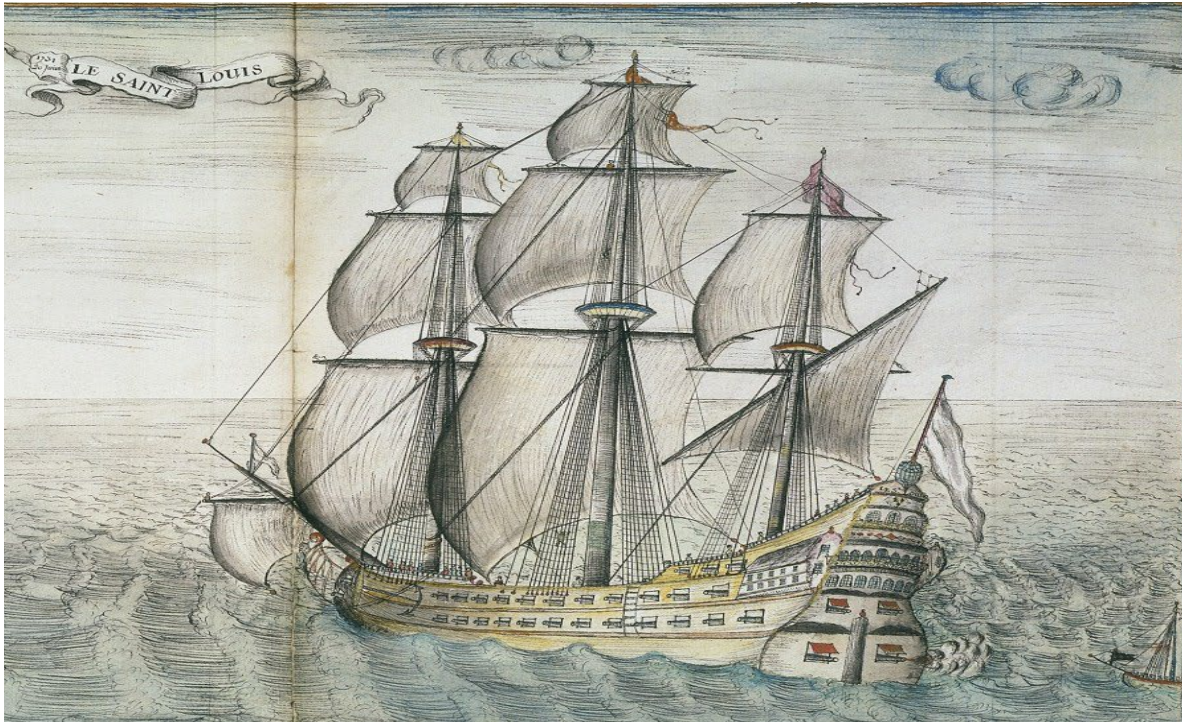


Figure 11. “Le Saint Louis,” 1731. Watercolor by Marc Antoine Caillot, “Relation du voyage de la Louisianne ou Nouvle France,” Historic New Orleans Collection, Williams Research Center, MSS 596, plate 21. The last slave ship sent by the Compagnie to Louisiana, it was a slightly larger frigate than the *Annibal*.

The convergence of Indigenous resistance and African resistance, which threatened the colonists’ access to land and enslaved labor, shattered the Compagnie’s ambitions for Louisiana to become a “second Saint-Domingue,” or “a French version of the Chesapeake,” where plantation agriculture thrived.⁹⁹ While the Natchez destroyed the colony’s richest tobacco plantations, African rebellions around the Atlantic made certain routes and destinations, such as the Gulf Coast,

⁹⁸ Ship log of the *Annibal*, 16 October 1729, fol. 51 and 3 February 1730, fol. 64; Volvire to Kerquenel, 24 March 1730, MAR, B3, 337, fol. 25.

⁹⁹ Quotations from Caillot manuscript, fol. 108; Quotations from Caillot manuscript, fol. 108; Greenwald, “Company Towns,” 199.

unprofitable or outright impractical for the slave trade. Metropolitan administrators of the Compagnie explicitly justified Louisiana's retrocession to the King and the necessity to shift its commercial focus toward East Asia by stressing the cost of financial and military losses in North America and West Africa.¹⁰⁰

Although resistance from below precipitated the end of Compagnie rule in Louisiana's and the interruption of its African slave trade, successive failures to revive this transatlantic traffic in the following decades proved it faced a host of deep-rooted obstacles. Even though the opening of the Atlantic slave trade to private merchants caused it to flourish in the eighteenth-century, this boom hardly affected the Gulf Coast, which received less than 2 percent of captives transported to French American colonies from 1701 to 1763—and almost none after 1731.¹⁰¹ The King's decree enacting the retrocession, which declared "the commerce of Louisiana free to all its subjects," only implicitly included the slave trade—a striking omission since the Compagnie had recently asked to retain the privilege of importing 500 Africans per year, roughly equivalent to average imports during its tenure.¹⁰² In practice, individual merchants and colonists intent on introducing slaves themselves had to navigate a complex system of licensing fees and bureaucratic authorizations. Louisianans could only organize two transatlantic voyages in 1737 and 1743, and while the latter

¹⁰⁰ "Extrait du registre général des délibérations prises dans les assemblées générales d'administration," 1731-01-24/3, RSC; Greenwald, 210–16.

¹⁰¹ Banks, *Chasing Empire*, 35–36.

¹⁰² "Arrêt du conseil d'Etat concernant la rétrocession faite à Sa Majesté par la Compagnie des Indes de la concession de la Louisiane et du pays des Illinois," 23 January 1731, BNF-M, F-21114, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b86025746> (quote); "Extrait du registre général des délibérations, 1731-01-24/3, RSC.

landed 190 captives from Senegambia in New Orleans the former ended abruptly in Martinique where the ship captain died before even crossing the Atlantic.¹⁰³

The unsuccessful efforts to resuscitate the Atlantic slave trade to the Gulf Coast were numerous. Proposals or *mémoires* accumulated in vain upon the desks of bureaucrats unwilling to subsidize either the transportation of Africans or their purchase by Louisiana's credit-poor colonists.¹⁰⁴ The most comprehensive effort was a mid-century scheme to expand tobacco plantations submitted by André Fabry de la Bruyère, an experienced administrator who had served as a scribe in Louisiana for about fifteen years. Fabry presented at least five different versions of his plan, which all relied on unprecedented arrivals of Black enslaved laborers to generate steadily rising profits. His proposal illustrated two problematic assumptions shared by nearly all similar projects. First, his economic calculations translated capital investments into a proportional influx of slaves, regardless of the hazards and difficulties of the trade that had caused its interruption in the first place. While Louisiana had received less than 200 enslaved Africans in the past twenty years, the "table of tobacco's progress" presented by Fabry in his 1750 memorandum estimated over 10,000 captives could be imported during the next decade—which would have doubled its Black population (figure 12).¹⁰⁵ Likewise, Fabry projected the growth of tobacco production,

¹⁰³ Contract between Jacques de Coustillhas and Georges Amelot, 1737-04-24/1; Arnaud Vigeau de Grandmaison v. Coustillhas; 1738-02-26/4; Coustillhas heirs v. Gérard Péry, RSC, 1739-09-27/2; Bienville and to the Minister. 24 March 1742, C13, A27, fol. 5; Vaudreuil to the Minister, 25 August 1743, C13, A28, fol. 82.

¹⁰⁴ Ingersoll, "The Slave Trade," 136–38. For a sample of those proposals, see "Proposition de la Compagnie des Indes a la Marine du Roy" and attached draft of a response (undated, 1732?), MAR, B3, 354, fols. 246-247 and 244-245; Salmon to the Minister, 22 October 1734, C13, A19, fol. 88; "Proposition de la Compagnie de porter des nègres à la Louisiane," 1735, MAR, Faits et décisions de l'administration des colonies (G), 51, fol. 354; "La Louisiane: Mémoire de M. Gradis fils sur cette colonie," 21 May 1748, C13, A32, fol. 248-250; Rasteau fils to Minister, 7 April 1750 and 18 August 1750, MAR, B3, 500, fols. 82-89; "Mémoire sur le transport du Sénégal a la Louisiane de 250 têtes de noirs," attached to a letter dated 15 September 1750, SHD-R, 1R, 46; Kerlrec to the Minister, 19 June 1752, C13, A36, fol. 149; Colomb to the Minister, 1754, C13, A38, fols 236-242.

¹⁰⁵ For different versions of this proposal, see "Examen des moyens et du temps necessaire pour mettre la colonie de la Louisiane en état de fournir à la consommation de tabac en France," ca. 1749, MD, Amérique, 2, fols. 230-232;

exports, and profits as directly proportionate to the numbers of African bondspeople, as if the output of plantation labor was not conditioned by the actions of the enslaved and other human factors.

“Mémoire concernant un projet d’établissement en Louisiane pour la culture du tabac et le commerce du bois par Fabry,” 1 April 1749, C13, A33, fols. 196-220; “Mémoire concernant l’introduction de nègres et la culture du tabac en Louisiane,” 1750, C13, A34, fol. 393. Other individuals may have collaborated on those documents, but Fabry was the only known author. Although he submitted his elaborate plans for plantation agriculture after returning to France, it would be surprising for an official familiar with the American context to share such unrealistic schemes with so much confidence unless they reflected a widespread mindset among colonial boosters. In this regard, the unbroken slave supply men like Fabry imagined in the abstract contrasted with the messy realities of purchasing and transporting enslaved people around the Atlantic, much like the daily experiences of scarcity recounted by early Americans belied the rhetoric celebrating the infinite resources of a bountiful New World. See For different versions of this proposal, see “Examen des moyens et du temps nécessaire pour mettre la colonie de la Louisiane en état de fournir à la consommation de tabac en France,” ca. 1749, MD, Amérique, 2, fols. 230-232; “Mémoire concernant un projet d’établissement en Louisiane pour la culture du tabac et le commerce du bois par Fabry,” 1 April 1749, C13, A33, fols. 196-220; “Mémoire concernant l’introduction de nègres et la culture du tabac en Louisiane,” 1750, C13, A34, fol. 393. Other individuals may have collaborated on those documents, but Fabry was the only known author. Although he submitted his elaborate plans for plantation agriculture after returning to France, it would be surprising for an official familiar with the American context to share such unrealistic schemes, with so much confidence, unless they reflected a widespread mindset among colonial boosters. In this regard, the unbroken slave supply that men like Fabry imagined in the abstract contrasted with the messy realities of purchasing and transporting enslaved people around the Atlantic—much like the daily experiences of scarcity recounted by early Americans belied the rhetoric celebrating the infinite resources of a bountiful New World. See Strother E. Roberts, *Colonial Ecology, Atlantic Economy: Transforming Nature in Early New England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 216n48.

Table de La progression du Tabac

<i>Année</i>	<i>Ancien Negres à l'ouvrage</i>	<i>Produit de leur Travail</i>	<i>Nouveaux Negres à introduire</i>	<i>Produit de leur Travail</i>	<i>Total des Negres à l'ouvrage</i>	<i>Total du produit annuel</i>
1750	500	800000	160		500	800000
1751	500	800000	211	256000	660	1056000
1752	500	800000	278	337600	871	1392600
1753	500	800000	367	444800	1149	1838400
1754	500	800000	481	587200	1516	2405600
1755	500	800000	625	769600	1997	3175200
1756	500	800000	828	1016000	2632	4191200
1757	500	800000	1106	1340800	3470	5532000
1758	500	800000	1464	1769600	4576	7321600
1759	500	800000	1932	2342400	6040	9664000
1760	500	800000	2551	3091200	7972	12755200
1761	500	800000		4081600	10523	16836800

Figure 12. “Table of tobacco’s progress,” ca. 1750. Attached to Memorandum on the introduction of slaves and tobacco cultivation in Louisiana, C13, A34, fol. 392. It lists annual projected slave imports (fourth column) and profits (last) for 1750-1761.

Louisiana’s geographic position meant that most incoming ships stopped over in the West Indies, where the healthiest and most valuable slave cargoes were usually delivered.¹⁰⁶ Continuing across the Gulf of Mexico and up the Mississippi delta exposed slavers to further risks of losing their precious human cargoes to mutiny, mortality, shipwrecks, and piracy. Ocean-going vessels were unable to access New Orleans, the colony’s main slave market, through the “back door” provided by the shallow waters of Lake Pontchartrain, so they had no choice but to navigate its “front door,” the 100-mile river section meandering from its mouth to the capital, a hazardous journey that could require up to six weeks—as long as reaching the Antilles from Europe or West

¹⁰⁶ Greenwald, “Company Towns,” 116n228.

Africa under favorable conditions.¹⁰⁷ One of Fabry's memoranda estimated the additional costs associated with those risks by suggesting Africans be sold for 12.5 percent more in Louisiana than in the West Indies—900 versus 800 *livres*.¹⁰⁸ Not only was carrying slaves to the Gulf Coast more hazardous and expensive, it also reduced profits because Louisianans produced fewer valuable export commodities and had even less access to the credit required to purchase African captives.¹⁰⁹ “It would have been irrational to carry slaves to Louisiana,” concludes Thomas Ingersoll, “except under royal orders and special subsidies as the Compagnie des Indes had done in the early years.”¹¹⁰

As it became increasingly clear that the transatlantic slave trade to the Gulf Coast would not resume, colonists and administrators turned to the Caribbean to supply them with enslaved Black labor. The scarce resources of most Louisianans, the West Indian slaveholders' own labor needs, and French imperial regulations of inter-colonial commerce—however loosely enforced—made this regional trade a small-scale business. The new intra-American slave trade database, which adds 4,685 intercolonial voyages to its transatlantic counterpart, currently includes only three headed to Louisiana, where they landed a meager 43 captives between 1737 and 1748.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ Dawdy, *Building the Devil's Empire*, 108.

¹⁰⁸ “Mémoire concernant l'introduction de nègres,” 1750, C13, A34, fol. 395.

¹⁰⁹ To illustrate the enormous amount of debt generated by slave imports, Alexandre Dubé cites the example of the *Concorde*, a ship captured by the British Navy during the Seven Years' War. The *Concorde* had completed 18 trips to Louisiana and the Antilles since selling a large cargo of Africans in Saint-Domingue, but the export profits from all those voyages amounted to 80 percent only of what was owed by the buyers of this human cargo. Alexandre Dubé, “Les biens publics: culture politique de la Louisiane française 1730-1770” (Ph.D. diss., McGill University, 2009), 271.

¹¹⁰ Thomas N. Ingersoll, “The Slave Trade and the Ethnic Diversity of Louisiana's Slave Community,” *Louisiana History* 37, no. 2 (1996): 137.

¹¹¹ Slave Voyages, Intra-American Slave Trade Database, <https://www.slavevoyages.org/american/database>. See also Gregory E. O'Malley, *Final Passages: The Intercolonial Slave Trade of British America, 1619-1807* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

These low numbers reflect the nature of the database itself, a work in progress first developed for the Anglo-American trade, but also the covert and shadowy character of slave imports to the Gulf Coast. A Jamaican schooner sought to smuggle the largest of these shipments by masquerading as a *parlementaire*, or flag of truce, at the end of King George's War (1744-1748), but colonial authorities seized and sold the clandestine human cargo it carried alongside French and Spanish prisoners.¹¹² Other ships imported more slaves from the Caribbean under the cover of diplomatic missions, maritime accidents, and privateering—all common smuggling strategies—with varying levels of government complicity.¹¹³ This was how 122 men, women, and children from Angola taken from a British prize vessel ended up auctioned in 1758 New Orleans, where they reached high prices due to wartime inflation and years of unfulfilled demand for enslaved labor.¹¹⁴

Many more arrivals from the West Indies resulted from individual transfers of enslaved people that are equally problematic to estimate. Some slaveholders relocated to Louisiana with their human property, while others sold troublesome bondspeople as a punishment and those considered “refuse,” i.e. undesirable due to sickness, age, or injury, to acquire more productive hands. As early as 1720, the Compagnie extended 25,000 *livres* of credit for the manager of a large concession to buy slaves in Saint-Domingue as he traveled from France to Louisiana with a group of European workers recruited for the colony. It is unknown if he managed to purchase any captive

¹¹² IASTD, voyage no. 102574: *Rattan Packet*; Vaudreuil and Dauberville to Maurepas, 10 November 1748, C13, A32, 20-21; D'Auberville to the Minister, 10 November 1748, C13, A32, fol. 200. This might be the same “shipload” of captives from Jamaica mentioned by a New Orleans planter in 1749. See “Louisiana 1717 to 1751,” *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (1923): 567.

¹¹³ Nancy M. Surrey, *The Commerce of Louisiana during the French Régime, 1699-1763* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1916), 456–59; Dawdy, *Building the Devil's Empire*, 117, 129; Dubé, “Les biens publics,” 328–29; Banks, *Chasing Empire*, 278–79.

¹¹⁴ Plas to Rochemore, 7 July 1758, MAR, Campagnes (B4), fols. 89-90; Rochemore to the Minister, 27 September-22 October 1758, C13, A40, fols. 189-190.

in the island, but such a hefty sum would have allowed him to import up to three dozen.¹¹⁵ This small-scale traffic would provide a welcome alternative supply of slave labor in the last decades of French Louisiana.¹¹⁶ Judicial records increasingly featured slaves from the Antilles; between 1764 and 1767, one third of slaves who mentioned their geographic origins in court came from the West Indies.¹¹⁷ By 1755, this traffic was significant enough for governor Billouart de Kerlérec to denounce the corrupting influence on Afro-Louisianans of those “sent here daily from Saint-Domingue and Martinique.”¹¹⁸ Kerlérec’s dramatic plea to ban further imports went unheeded until the end of the Seven Year’s War, when the Superior Council, fearing the contagion of the slave unrest that shook the Caribbean, prohibited the entry of slaves from Saint-Domingue.¹¹⁹ Even then, however, the Council sought to respond to safety concerns without “preventing Louisiana’s

¹¹⁵ Jean-François Willart d’Auvilliers, *Mémoire pour le Sr Jean-François Willart [...]*, 12.

¹¹⁶ For documented examples, see Seignette Dujardin to Rasteau, 1739-02-04/3, Judicial sale of slaves, 1739-03-03/1, Slave sale by André Gerbe to Barbin, 1740-05-19/1, Judicial sale of slaves, 1748-02-08/2, Petition of Triere, 1751-99-99/1 [sic], Petition of Gaillardie, 1769-02-24/5, RSC; Slave sale by Jacques de Coustilha to Petit de Livilliers, 19 January 1738, NONA, Notary Nicolas Henri, box II, folder 3; Michel to the Minister, 23 September 1752, C13, A36, fols. 274-275; A. Baillardel and A. Prioult, eds., *Le chevalier de Pradel; vie d’un colon français en Louisiane au XVIIIe siècle d’après sa correspondance et celle de sa famille*. (Paris: Maisonneuve frères, 1928), 224–25, 252, 319. See also John Clark, *New Orleans 1718-1812: An Economic History* (Gretna: Pelican Publishing Company, 1982), 23–25, 128–34; Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans*, 75–78, 777–78.

¹¹⁷ See for instance Declaration of Jacques Larche, 1743-12-07/2, Interrogation of Jean-Pierre, 1752-02-17/2, Interrogation of Louis, 1764-07-06/2, Interrogation of Jean, 1764-07-31/1, Interrogation of Antoine Paul, 1766-06-05/1, RSC.

¹¹⁸ Kerlérec to the Minister, 26 June 1755, C13, A39, fols. 12-13.

¹¹⁹ This fear of black rebellion was sparked by a series of events that initiated what Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker described as “a new wave of slave resistance” in the 1760s, notably the alleged conspiracy to poison whites in Saint-Domingue, named after its executed Maroon leader François Makandal (1758), Tacky’s war in Jamaica (1760-1761), and the Berbice uprising in Guyana (1763). See Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, 224 (quote); Carolyn E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 61–72; Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2005), 51–57; Trevor Burnard and John Garrigus, *The Plantation Machine: Atlantic Capitalism in French Saint-Domingue and British Jamaica* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 106–7; Vincent Brown, *Tacky’s Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2020); Alvin O. Thompson, “The Berbice Revolt 1763-64,” in *Themes in African-Guyanese History*, ed. Winston F. McGowan, James G. Rose and David A. Granger (London: Hansib, 2009), 80; Marjoleine Kars, *Blood on the River: A Chronicle of Mutiny and Freedom on the Wild Coast* (New York: The New Press, 2020).

inhabitants from profiting from the negroes that can be transported to them.”¹²⁰ Their decree therefore targeted only those “domiciled” or permanently residing in Saint-Domingue, as opposed to Africans taken from slave ship cargoes.¹²¹ The 1765 examination of 16 Black adults brought from Martinique by the brig *La Roue de Fortune* reveals the continued vitality of this intercolonial slave trade. By shedding light on the identities and circumstances of those exiles, it also proves the anxiety of Louisiana officials to have been largely unfounded. Before allowing their sale, the Superior Council interrogated each captive to assess their character, their origins, and the motive of their deportation.¹²² This was a heterogenous group. At least five of the eleven women among them were mothers, although only two had some children with them.¹²³ The adults ranged from 16 to 50 years old, 30 on average. All came from the city of Saint-Pierre, a well-known hub for illegal transshipments, and only eight introduced themselves as “creoles from Martinique.”¹²⁴ Seven identified with an African nation, kingdom, or region (Mina, Congo, Arada, Guinea), which

¹²⁰ Excerpt of the registers of the audiences of the Superior Council, 1763-07-09/2, RSC.

¹²¹ This distinction between the licit transshipment of “saltwater” captives transported from Africa and banned imports of Creole slaves became a common feature of the inter-American slave trade during the Age of Revolution. See for instance Matt D. Childs, *The 1812 Aponte Rebellion in Cuba and the Struggle Against Atlantic Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 51–52.

¹²² Petition of La Frenière, 1765-11-12/3, “Procès-verbal de visite de plusieurs nègres,” 1765-11-13-/1, Auction sale of slaves from Martinique, 1765-12-03/3, RSC. The exact number of captives landed by the *Roue de Fortune* is unclear as it varies across court documents, which do not count children consistently either. The petition introducing the case mentioned 21 men, women, and children, the court interrogations 16 adults with 3 children, and the account of their sale 18 adults and 5 children.

¹²³ The 48-year-old Catherine, also known as Catain, added without being prompted that she had “made 14 children of whom six were alive.” When asked how long she had lived in Martinique, another woman named Jeannette claimed to have had six children aged up to 14 years. Such assertions of motherhood served to stress the Creole identity of these women, as well as the painful uprooting caused by their deportation. A third mother, a Congolese woman named Amaranthe, was not identified as such in the transcript of her examination. “During her interrogations at the jail and in what she repeats every day,” however, she “declared having a daughter named Colassille about three years old” on the island. Invoking the prohibition from selling enslaved parents apart from their prepubescent children, the Frenchman who bought Amaranthe withheld payment for her purchase until her daughter be delivered to him. Petition of Maison, 1765-12-06/2, RSC.

¹²⁴ Kenneth J. Banks, “Official Duplicity: The Illicit Slave Trade of Martinique, 1713-1763,” in *The Atlantic Economy during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries: Organization, Operation, Practice, and Personnel*, ed. Peter A. Coclanis (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), 237.

was probably where they were born. One man recently arrived in the Antilles had to speak through an interpreter since he knew no French “for being *bossal*,” i.e. an unacculturated African. Nearly all the prisoners belonged to different slaveholders and their occupations reflected their urban life in Saint-Pierre: half of them told the Council they worked as domestic servants or street peddlers, but none mentioned farming.¹²⁵ Most had been imprisoned in Saint-Pierre, some for months, before being shipped to Louisiana, but others had been directly led onboard by force or deception. Ironically though, perhaps the only thing shared by all sixteen captives was that they had *not* been convicted of any serious crime (*repris de justice*). The proof lied in their adamant protestations but also on their skin: the surgeon who stripped their bodies to inspect them found whipping scars left by the owners of three prisoners, but none of the branding marks or mutilations inflicted on slaves condemned for theft, assault, or *marronage*.¹²⁶

Based on their testimonies, all but two of the Afro-Creoles from the *Roue de Fortune* provided a clear explanation for their exile. Six mentioned a sickness or injury that crippled their productivity, and another three admitted being unable or unwilling to work to their owner’s satisfaction. Four suggested their owners or their owners’ partners sold them away for deeply personal reasons—to punish and eliminate a romantic or sexual rival—while an equal number blamed their exile on financial motives—their owners had too much debt or expected easy profits from the sale. Two creole men, in particular, understood that the high demand for slave labor in Louisiana made them especially valuable to its white colonists. Michel, aged 30, declared “he heard his master say negroes here were sold at the price of gold, which was why he sent him to

¹²⁵ The 16-year-old Marguerite belonged to the captain of the *Roue de Fortune*, who had directly seized at least two other captives himself.

¹²⁶ Compare with Interrogation of Francois, 1764-02-17/2, RSC.

jail” for transportation to the Gulf Coast. Hyacinthe’s female owner also had him incarcerated for months until the captain of the *Roue de Fortune* asked “what she was doing with a Negro in prison, all she had to do was send him to the Mississippi where [buyers] were not as picky, and for the value of this one she could buy three others in Martinique.”¹²⁷ The Superior Council authorized the auction sale of all enslaved adults and children from the *Roue de Fortune* in New Orleans. At the same time, however, its ruling extended the ban on slave imports from Saint-Domingue “in all its form and content” to Martinique and the rest of the Antilles.¹²⁸

While those prohibitions threatened the main remaining sources of slave arrivals, their enforcement depended on government agents who had long encouraged a bustling intercolonial trade that was itself largely illegal. Louisiana’s maritime commerce was open to all French subjects since 1731, but it remained regimented by the mercantilist system known as *exclusif colonial*. As the name implies, it reserved trade with France’s colonies to French merchants carrying French cargoes aboard French-owned vessels were also required to be licensed and fitted in one of only 13 approved ports in the metropole. In practice, this meant that most commerce with other colonies was considered *interlope*, i.e. contraband—even if this broad definition knew many exceptions, notably during wartime.¹²⁹ As Shannon Dawdy demonstrates in her historical ethnography of New Orleans, various forms of smuggling were instrumental to Louisiana’s economy, which relied on inter-American at least as much as on licit transatlantic trade with the metropole. By mid-eighteenth century, Louisiana’s trade with Spanish colonies alone was worth 250 percent to 333 percent of its exports to France. Between 1735 and 1763, more than half intercolonial voyages to

¹²⁷ “Procès-verbal de visite,” 1765-11-13-/1, RSC.

¹²⁸ “Extrait des registres des audiences du Conseil Supérieur de la Louisiane,” 1765-11-16/5, RSC.

¹²⁹ Dawdy, *Building the Devil’s Empire*, 103–4; Dubé, *Les biens publics*, 157-159.

or from Louisiana went through a foreign and usually forbidden port.¹³⁰ Yet colonial authorities prosecuted very few smuggling cases, and issued even fewer convictions, either because they viewed it as an economic necessity or because they directly profited from it.¹³¹ According to Dawdy, illegal trade was indeed considered legitimate in Louisiana, where merchants and administrators alike participated a form of “rogue colonialism” that flaunted imperial rules and created a distinct political economy. There were no customs house or police to stop contraband in the colony, which allowed institutionalized smugglers to record some of their ventures in civil suits and notarized documents. From 1728 to 1768, a syndicate of local merchants regularly intervened in public affairs, via their influence on the Superior Council or by lobbying colonial administrators, to seek government protection for smuggling operations.¹³²

No contraband was more valuable to Louisiana’s merchants, planters, and administrators than slaves. French governors, who were all among its largest slaveholders, had discreetly but actively assisted colonists in procuring captives from the Antilles since the 1750s at least.¹³³ The colony’s isolation from France during the Seven Years’ War, the opening of its colonial trade negotiated by the British in the ensuing peace treaty, and restrictions on arrivals from the French West Indies encouraged imports from foreign colonies in the following decade.¹³⁴ How many captives reached Louisiana in this manner can only be speculated, but historians have shown that smuggling played an essential part in the transshipment of slaves across the Circum-Caribbean

¹³⁰ Dawdy, *Building the Devil’s Empire*, 119–20. On this intercolonial trade, see Surrey, *The Commerce of Louisiana*, 445–63; Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans*, 69–72.

¹³¹ Dawdy, *Building the Devil’s Empire*, 112–28.

¹³² Banks, *Chasing Empire*, 212; Dawdy, *Building the Devil’s Empire*, 127, 135–37.

¹³³ Baillardel and Prioult, *Le chevalier de Pradel*, 252–54; Dubé, “Les biens publics,” 485–86.

¹³⁴ Ingersoll, “The Slave Trade,” 141–42; Banks, *Chasing Empire*, 171, 179; Dawdy, *Building the Devil’s Empire*, 133–34.

world, especially toward other secondary markets like Guadeloupe or Guyana.¹³⁵ Gregory O'Malley estimate that 235 captives were exported or reexported from the Antilles to the Gulf Coast before 1770 is certainly too conservative. Between 1737 and 1764 alone, approximately one hundred ships visited Louisiana each year, and the anecdotal evidence suggests many carried one or a few slaves, clandestinely or under various legal pretexts, along with their cargo and passengers.¹³⁶

The bloodless insurrection of 1768 against its first Spanish governor, Antonio de Ulloa, provides further evidence of an important regional slave trade embraced by French and Creole elites. When the Superior Council ousted Ulloa from New Orleans in 1768, they denounced the alleged tyranny of his administration in a decree followed by a *Mémoire des Habitants et Négociants de la Louisiane*.¹³⁷ Mobilizing patriotic and liberal Enlightenment rhetoric, the rebels demanded to retain their freedoms and privileges under French rule. While their main grievances focused on Spanish mercantilist regulations, the insurgent council also accused Ulloa of treating enslaved Africans with too much complacency.¹³⁸ In a letter sent to the King of France, they

¹³⁵ Lucien Abénon, "Le problème des esclaves de contrebande à la Guadeloupe pendant la première moitié du XVIII^e siècle," *Bulletin de la Société d'Histoire de la Guadeloupe* 38 (1978): 49–58; David Geggus, "The French Slave Trade: An Overview," *William and Mary Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2001): 126; Pritchard, *In Search of Empire*, 218–19; Banks, "Official Duplicity"; Gregory E. O'Malley and Alex Borucki, "Patterns in the Intercolonial Slave Trade across the Americas before the Nineteenth Century," *Tempo* 23, no. 2 (2017): 314–38.

¹³⁶ Gregory E. O'Malley, "Beyond the Middle Passage: Slave Migration from the Caribbean to North America, 1619–1807," *William and Mary Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (2009): 153. According to Shannon Dawdy's calculations, a yearly average of 28 documented ships reached Louisiana between 1737 and 1764, but "these recorded ship arrivals represent a 20–30 percent sample of *actual* (and largely unrecorded) shipping." Dawdy, *Building the Devil's Empire*, 118.

¹³⁷ "Arrêt du Conseil supérieur," 29 October 1768, F3, 25, fols. 290–301; "Mémoire des habitants et négociants de la Louisiane sur l'événement du 29 octobre 1768," F3, 25, fols. 302–317. Both documents, which were among the earliest printed in colonial Louisiana, are published in Charles Gayarré, *Histoire de La Louisiane*, vol. 2 (New Orleans: Magne & Weisse, 1847), 164–76 and 180–202.

¹³⁸ For an analysis of the ideological language of those documents, see Cécile Vidal, "Francité et situation coloniale: Nation, empire et race en Louisiane française (1699–1769)," *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 64, no. 5 (2009): 1041–49.

claimed “your subjects were threatened with slavery, and their negroes acquired degrees of freedom.”¹³⁹ The colonists’ rejection of commercial rules met their defense of Louisiana’s slaveholding regime as they blamed Ulloa for endangering the intercolonial slave trade supplying the area. “The prohibition he made last year to bring negroes in this colony,” argued the 1768 *Mémoire*, “struck at the same time commerce and agriculture. It took away some considerable profits from merchants and restrained the means of settlers to grow stronger.”¹⁴⁰ But what Ulloa actually imperiled were the thriving slave smuggling activities of local elites. In previous years, the Spanish governor and his French predecessor had promoted slave imports from Barbados, Jamaica, and Pensacola.¹⁴¹ The so-called “prohibition” protested by the New Orleans insurgents was the mere enforcement of preexisting legislation. In 1767, the Spanish governor arrested a French trader named Pierre Cadis and his associate for concealing the fact that some of the captives they sold in Louisiana were not Africans but those “domiciled” in Martinique. The contraband slaves were seized, inspected, and expelled from the colony. The *Mémoire* demanded the merchants’ pardon and protested Ulloa’s heavy-handed policing, alleging that he only acted to eliminate some competition for a slave trading venture of his own. Unmistakably, however, the insurgent were the ones fighting to preserve their business interests. Of the six men sentenced to death as the rebellion’s leaders a year later, three were Cadis’ commercial partners in his slave smuggling operation, including Nicolas Chauvin de Lafrénière, the Creole attorney general, and Pierre Caresse, the co-author of the *Mémoire*. Cadis himself was one of the main financial backers

¹³⁹ “Très humbles representations qu’adressent au roi, notre honoré et Souverain Seigneur, les gens tenant son conseil supérieur à la Nouvelle-Orléans, province de la Louisiane,” 22 November 1768, cited in Gayarré, *Histoire de La Louisiane*, 2:222.

¹⁴⁰ “Mémoire des habitants et négociants de la Louisiane,” cited in Gayarré, *Histoire de la Louisiane*, 2:195.

¹⁴¹ Contract between Evan Jones and Durand brothers, 1765-12-20/2, Declaration of Peter Hill, 1766-09-30/1, RSC; Ingersoll, “The Slave Trade,” 141–42.

of the revolt.¹⁴² Beyond its liberal and nationalist language, the revolt of 1768 confirmed the importance of slave contraband and of Caribbean imports, which were both disproportionately beneficial to local elites.

4.3 “Half the Inhabitants have Few or None”: The Growth, Distribution, and Circulation of the Enslaved Population

Although the abandonment of the transatlantic slave trade in 1731 did not entirely stop arrivals of African laborers, it hampered the expansion of Louisiana’s plantation economy, which would only turn into “second Saint-Domingue” after the Haitian Revolution displaced the first one at the end of the eighteenth century. The limited availability of enslaved workers heightened the importance of their distribution across space and among settlers, their circulation, and their demographic evolution in shaping colonial society. Estimates of Louisiana’s slave population mostly rely on figures from colonial censuses that are inevitably imprecise. As elsewhere in early America, census-taking was irregular, often incomplete, and inconsistent from one document to the next, as the spaces surveyed by administrators and the categories they deployed shifted. Counts of enslaved people, in particular, reflected unstable racial and legal definitions (e.g. Indigenous slaves, free people of color, *nègre* meaning indifferently Black or enslaved). that make comparisons difficult. Colonists also had incentives to underreport their slaves to limit taxation and labor requisitions from the state, which in turn easily overlooked women, children, and

¹⁴² Gayarré, *Histoire de La Louisiane*, 2:174–75, 218–19; Villiers du Terrage, *Les Dernières Années*, 267–68, 278–79, 309; Frances Kolb, “The New Orleans Revolt of 1768: Uniting against Real and Perceived Threats of Empire,” *Louisiana History* 59, no. 1 (2018): 28–29, 37.

transient people (soldiers, voyagers, but also hired slaves) in documents typically focused on households for fiscal or military purposes.¹⁴³ Based on census data and adjustments calculated by demographer Paul Lachance, the following two charts compare the growth of the enslaved Black population, respectively, to the reported number of enslaved Natives and the growth of and the white population (figures 13-14).¹⁴⁴ By 1731, the mass transportation of Africans by the Compagnie had produced a majority Black population in the colony. Excluding Natives, Louisiana counted a little over 7,000 permanent residents around that time, two thirds of whom were enslaved Black men, women, and children. After a sharp but brief drop in the 1730s, their number would continue to grow, albeit at a slower pace, until the end of the French regime. Enslaved Black Louisianans still represented just over half of a colonial population of roughly 11,500 in 1766.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Dawdy, *Building the Devil's Empire*, 154–87; Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans*, 188–92.

¹⁴⁴ Data from Mobile Census, 12 August 1708, “Recensement des habitants du fort Louis de La Mobile et des villages circonvoisins,” 28 June 1721, “Recensement des habitants et concessionnaires de La Nouvelle-Orléans et lieux circonvoisins,” 24 novembre 1721, “Recensement du fort Saint-Jean-Baptiste des Natchitoches,” 1 May 1722, “Recensement ou dénombrement des habitants et concessionnaires qui sont établis sur le fleuve Mississippi,” 13 May 1722, “Recensement général des habitations et habitants de la colonie de la Louisiane,” 1 January 1726, 5 DPPC, 16; “État récapitulatif du recensement général de la Louisiane,” C13, C4, fol. 197; “Mémoire sur l'état de la colonie de la Louisiane en 1746,” MD, Amérique, 2, fol. 211; Census of Louisiana, 2 September 1771, in Kinnaird, *Spain in the Mississippi Valley*, 1:196; Surrey, *The Commerce of Louisiana*, 229–30; Stephen Webre, “The Problem of Indian Slavery in Spanish Louisiana, 1769-1803,” *Louisiana History* 25, no. 2 (1984): 117–35; Lachance, “Free and Slave Populations.”

¹⁴⁵ In Saint-Domingue, by comparison, enslaved people of African descent represented 86 percent of the colonial population in a 1732 census, and over 93 percent by 1775. See “État de Saint-Domingue,” 1732, MAR, G, 51, fol. 125; Ingersoll, *Mammon and Manon*, 123.

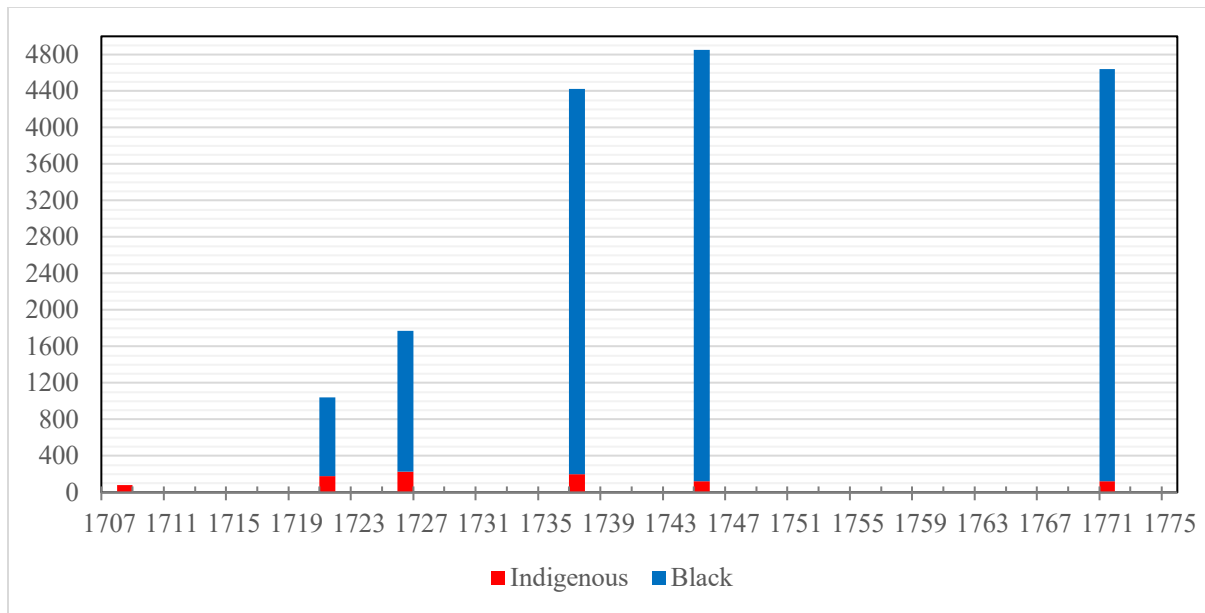


Figure 13. Enslaved Black and Indigenous population in Louisiana censuses, 1708-1771.

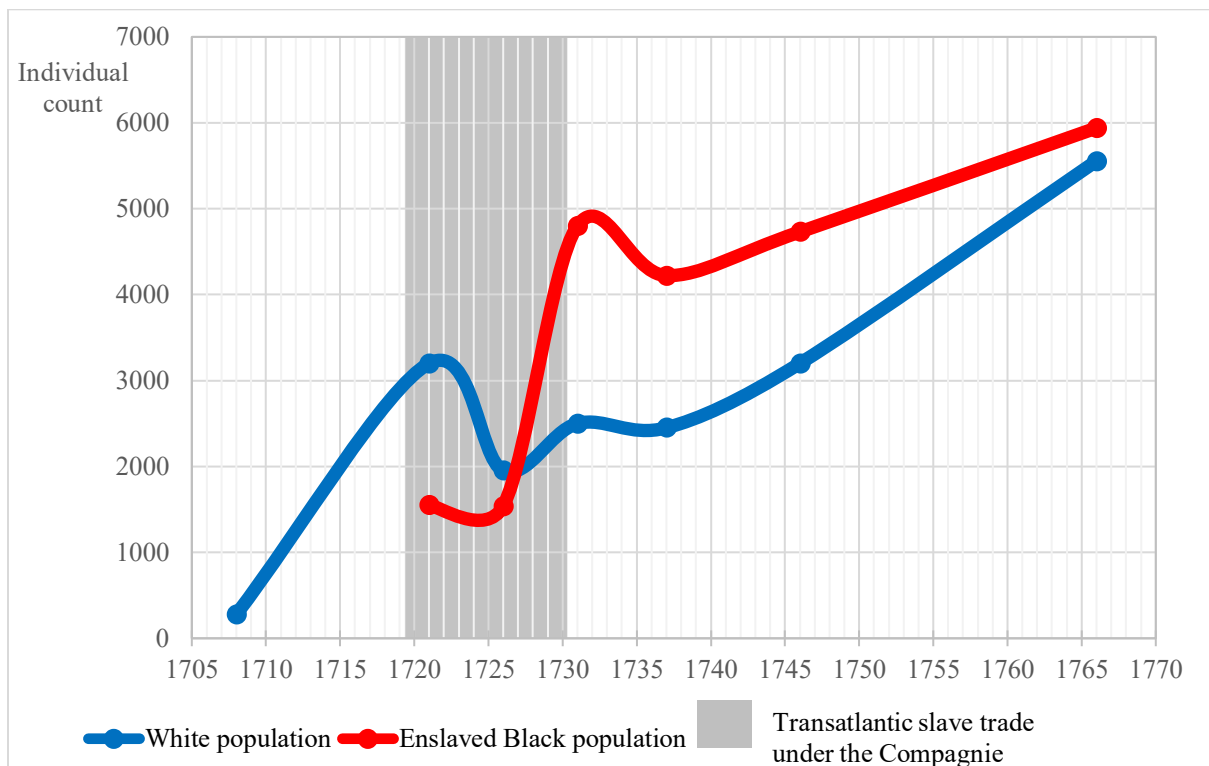


Figure 14. Demographic evolution of Louisiana's colonial population, 1708-1766.

In the ostensible absence of shipments from Africa, this demographic resilience has been interpreted as evidence that the local slave population grew nearly exclusively through natality, as in Britain's thirteen colonies.¹⁴⁶ Louisiana's administrators and colonial boosters repeatedly used this argument in their appeals to reopen the transatlantic slave trade, which they presented as a more urgent but also safer investment on the continent than in the Antilles due to a lesser mortality. When *Commissaire* Salmon promoted a slaving voyage to Africa in 1741, he stressed the settlers' impatient labor demands, but also the fertility of a servile population sustained almost entirely through natural increase. "Of about 4,000 Blacks of each sex and of all ages;" estimated Salmon, "two thirds of them are creole."¹⁴⁷ An ambitious if belated plan to revive tobacco cultivation in the Mississippi Valley similarly presented the natural growth of its enslaved population as a major asset, when Caribbean colonies remained entirely dependent on continuous slave arrivals for their demographic and economic survival.¹⁴⁸ Such assertions likely exaggerated the demographic vitality of Afro-Louisianans while overlooking the impact of their forced and often clandestine mobility between colonies, a problematic emphasis echoed in scholarly interpretations relevant to two major debates among historians of African American slavery. Gwendolyn Hall, in particular, asserted that Louisiana's Black population was self-sustaining as early as the 1730s due to more favorable conditions than in the West Indies, including a healthier environment, a milder labor

¹⁴⁶ Surrey, *The Commerce of Louisiana*, 245; Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 175–84; Ingersoll, "The Slave Trade," 134–35; Dawdy, *Building the Devil's Empire*, 175–76; Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 118–19.

¹⁴⁷ Salmon to the Minister, 25 April 1741, C13, A26, fol. 138.

¹⁴⁸ "Mémoire contenant une idée generale des colonies et l'examen particulier des moyens et du temps nécessaire pour mettre la colonie de la Louisiane en état de fournir à la consommation du tabac," 1758, MD, Amérique, 2, fol. 226. See also "Observations sur les différentes cultures des terres du Mississippi," by Augias, 28 March 1747, C13, A31, fol. 190; "Mémoire sur les projets d'établissement en Louisiane," 1750, C13, A34, fol. 397. The latter memorandum estimated, with some exaggeration, that slave mortality in the Louisiana hardly reached one percent per year compared to ten percent in Saint-Domingue.

regime, and more stable slave families. Equally significant, according to Hall, was the contribution of this natural increase to an early process of creolization, as a growing generation of slaves born in Louisiana developed an Afro-American culture between two waves of African immigration—as Salmon suggested.

Yet several observations indicate that the enslaved population actually experienced a negative natural growth for most of the period, so that it would not have expanded without forced immigration from the Caribbean region. First, Louisiana's white population increased faster over the same period, despite limited arrivals of Europeans who, unlike enslaved Africans, could leave the colony as many had done in the 1720s.¹⁴⁹ Moreover, manumissions were so rare that they could hardly have reduced slave numbers by more than 100 over a half-century.¹⁵⁰ Fertility rates among Black women therefore had to be lower than among whites, as confirmed by child/woman ratios. Simply put, enslaved women did not produce nearly enough children to allow for natural increase, except in small frontier communities like Natchitoches and the Illinois country.¹⁵¹ In the Lower Mississippi valley where most Afro-Louisianans lived, by contrast, mortality outweighed natality. Like in the Antilles then, the growth of this population depended on imports of captives. As early as 1738, Salmon's secretary of commissary urged Versailles to support local plans to import new

¹⁴⁹ Slave exports away from Louisiana, which were banned under the *Compagnie*, remained strongly discouraged by royal administrators even when their owners relocated to France or another colony. See for example Beaubois to Raguët, 11 February 1727, C13, A10, fol. 318; Bienville and Salmon to the Minister, 9 June 1739, C13, A24, fols. 23-24.

¹⁵⁰ Scholarly estimates range between 53 and 119 freed slaves under the French regime. See Thomas N. Ingersoll, "Free Blacks in a Slave Society: New Orleans, 1718-1812," *William and Mary Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (1991): 178; Alejandro de la Fuente and Gross Ariela, "Manumission and freedom in the Americas. Cuba, Virginia and Louisiana, 1500s-1700s," *Quaderni Storici*, no. 1 (2015): 26-29.

¹⁵¹ Lachance, "Free and Slave Populations," 229, 231. According to Lachance, the child/woman ratio among the Black population dropped from around 1.5 to 0.75 between 1737 and 1763, which made its growth impossible without immigration. For evidence of natural growth in smaller communities, see Lachance, 219; Carl J. Ekberg, *French Roots in the Illinois Country: The Mississippi Frontier in Colonial Times* (University of Illinois Press, 2000), 151; Burton and Smith, "Slavery in the Colonial Louisiana Backcountry," 154-55.

captives “from Guinea,” which colonists increasingly considered a necessity because “most are old and decrepit, and they die daily.”¹⁵² Figure 14 shows that the number of enslaved Black people dropped rapidly after the interruption of the transatlantic slave trade, whereas its most spectacular increase coincided with years of mass imports. Another demographic indicator corroborates this conclusion. The sex ratio among Black adults remain unbalanced with almost 130 men for 100 women at the end of the French regime, which could only result from the arrivals of mostly male migrants.¹⁵³ There remains much to learn about the Circum-Caribbean slave trade, but this demographic evidence combined with documented presence of African-born bondspeople reexported from the West Indies, like those aboard the *Roue de Fortune*, suggests its importance has been underestimated.¹⁵⁴ When the officer turned planter Jean Charles de Pradel enlisted the support of Louisiana’s governor to import six captives from Saint-Domingue in 1753, he conveyed to his family in the metropole that it offered a convenient a practical solution to replenish an aging workforce.¹⁵⁵

Not every Louisianan enjoyed such political connections, and the access to a limited pool of slaves that determined white power, wealth, and status depended on their distribution and their circulation within the colony. Within a few years of first arrivals, Governor Bienville reported enslaved Africans in the colony were scattered across its territory and unevenly distributed among its inhabitants.¹⁵⁶ In 1726, the first colony-wide census showed Africans were more concentrated

¹⁵² Couturier, “Mémoire sur la Louisiane: projet de la Compagnie d’importer des nègres de Guinée,” 15 August 1738, C13, A23, fol. 220.

¹⁵³ Lachance, “The Growth of the Free and Slave Populations,” 229, 231.

¹⁵⁴ Lachance, “The Growth of the Free and Slave Populations,” 207; Dawdy, *Building the Devil’s Empire*, 175–76.

¹⁵⁵ Baillardel and Prioult, *Le chevalier de Pradel*, 224.

¹⁵⁶ Bienville to the Minister, 20 October 1725, C13, C1, fols. 406–407 (copy in MD, Amérique, 1, fol. 6).

within Louisiana's vast territory than any other group: three quarters of them lived in the main plantation district around New Orleans, along the banks of the Mississippi river.¹⁵⁷ A decade later, that ratio was still almost 70 percent, and the distribution of bondspeople remained lopsided across the Mississippi Valley until the end of the French era. By 1766, a new census ordered by the incoming Spanish administration located 75 percent of a much larger enslaved population within the New Orleans region. The actual proportion was probably closer to 65 percent, however, since it did not distinguish Black and Indigenous slaves and did not include the Mobile Bay area now under British rule, which had been the second largest cluster.¹⁵⁸ Rural households across the colony counted only five slaves on average, but typical farms on the German Coast or around Natchitoches had even fewer, whereas twenty was the norm on estates near the capital.¹⁵⁹ This imbalance resulted from the fact that New Orleans was the only urban center, but also from proactive policies to compensate the shortage of enslaved laborers by encouraging their concentration in South of the colony, where its plantation agriculture produced the most export commodities for the Atlantic economy. In 1746, Governor Vaudreuil even persuaded Versailles to outlaw the removal of slaves from Lower Louisiana to the Illinois country, under penalty of fines and confiscation.¹⁶⁰ Vaudreuil argued their presence of in Upper Louisiana only damaged food production and wheat cultivation in particular, as it increased the idleness of impoverished white settlers. Given the strategic value

¹⁵⁷ "Recensement général des habitations," 1 January 1726, 5 DPPC, 16. Usner, *Indians, Settlers & Slaves*, 51.

¹⁵⁸ "Listas de las milicias y habitantes de la colonia de la Luisiana año de 1766, Archivo General de Indias, Sevilla, Audiencia de Santo Domingo, Legajo 2595 (digitized copy available online via the Missouri State Archives, <https://www.sos.mo.gov/default.aspx?PageID=9621>).

¹⁵⁹ Usner, *Indians, Settlers & Slaves*, 182.

¹⁶⁰ Vaudreuil to the Minister, 25 August 1743, C13, A28, fol. 85; Vaudreuil and Le Normant to same, 4 January 1745, C13, A29, fols. 7-8; Minister to Vaudreuil and Le Normant, 30 April 1746, F3, 242, fol. 383. For similar arguments to forbid employing enslaved Africans north of Natchez, see Rochemore, "Mémoire sur l'administration de la Louisiane" ca. 1749, C13, A33, fol. 150; "Minute d'un mémoire," BNF-R, Fleury, 1726, fol. 235.

of wheat supply and the fact that for slaveholders working increasingly meant making others work, this ban was clearly designed to preserve the labor resources of planters and urban employers, including secular and religious authorities that were among the largest slaveowners.¹⁶¹

The availability, distribution, and circulation of slaves remained central concerns for white Louisianans because slaveholdings defined social hierarchies and economic opportunities. At one end of the social spectrum, few colonists could enslave enough laborers to join the ranks of the planters and entrepreneurs engaged in the most profitable businesses, such as indigo cultivation or tar manufacturing. An indebted planter who leased a large number of slaves every year asked the Superior Council to allow him to delay the payment he owed their owner until after the next harvest, “having no other means to fulfill [his obligations] than the work of said rental negroes.”¹⁶² For many settlers of modest means, at the opposite end of the spectrum, possessing even a single slave was an indispensable resource, whether they hired them out or relied on their work themselves, notably to grow food in their gardens, peddle goods, and perform domestic labor. In a 1725 letter to the Compagnie’s metropolitan headquarters, the *Commissaire* Jacques de La Chaise insisted that settlers demanded slaves out of necessity rather than idleness. “Most of those who can only have one or two negroes,” he argued, “far from being served by them often pound their foodstuffs to avoid diverting them [from farming] and do not work less than them [...] so we have no more grounds to complain about the indolence of whites here than anywhere else.”¹⁶³ La Chaise cited the alleged manual labor of humble colonists as proof that, unlike in the Antilles, enslaving

¹⁶¹ Heerman, “Beyond Plantations,” 496. Slaves continued to arrive in the Illinois country seasonally as hired hands and servants on trips along the Mississippi, but also more permanently in the service of officers and colonists who skirted legal restrictions.

¹⁶² Petition of Louis Tixerrant, 1746-09-03/1, RSC.

¹⁶³ La Chaise to the Directors of the Compagnie, 29 April 1728, C13, A11, fols. 162-163.

Africans did not make Europeans lazy in Louisiana. Depicting low-ranking slaveowners pounding rice or corn to feed their slaves, however, suggested those white men were not only hard-working but degraded, since this onerous labor was performed by slaves across the colony, especially enslaved women tasked with food preparation as they were in the African and Native societies where they came from.¹⁶⁴ A few years earlier, La Chaise had recommended building mills in New Orleans for the benefit of settlers, who had no choice but to make one slave “spend all day pounding to make food for two.”¹⁶⁵ Accumulating human property therefore granted economic opportunities as well as prestige. Because the absence of landed nobility, trade guilds, or direct taxation made metropolitan privileges irrelevant in America, slaveholding was the main yardstick of status and source of social mobility.¹⁶⁶

Paradoxically though, the acquisition of enslaved labor required some initial capital, both financial and social, because the slave trade was a sellers’ market where demand consistently outweighed supply and purchases relied on credit. As the Compagnie introduced the first generation of African captives into the colony, it favored French and Canadian elites by distributing the largest numbers and the fittest individuals to buyers deemed solvent, reputable, and politically connected.¹⁶⁷ According to the 1726 census, only 25 percent of all households and 30 percent of farms in Louisiana owned at least one slave, and white immigrants clamored for

¹⁶⁴ Dumont de Montigny, *Memoir*, 183, 350; Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 39. La Chaise’s words might have applied to white women despite using the masculine, which in its plural form can designate either an all-male or a mixed group. Considering the settlers’ complaints about the lack of European brides, however, as well as the racialized and gendered scorn for the specific task he identified, ignoring the settlers’ gender was in itself a meaningful omission in this context.

¹⁶⁵ La Chaise to the Directors of the Compagnie, 8 March 1724, C13, A7, fol. 18.

¹⁶⁶ Ingersoll, *Mammon and Manon*, 44; Dawdy, *Building the Devil’s Empire*, 142, 162, 179–80; Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans*, 36, 123, 141, 298.

¹⁶⁷ Ingersoll, *Mammon and Manon*, 41; Dubé, “Les biens publics,” 362; Spear, *Race, Sex, and Social Order*, 58.

more.¹⁶⁸ In 1726, when the colonial administration listed all the residents who wished to buy slaves from future shipments, their demands amounted to 1,862, the equivalent of all the human cargoes landed by eight different voyages since 1721. In evaluating their merits, the Compagnie considered the number of slaves they requested, how many they had already received, how and where they planned to employ them, but also their individual character. A New Orleans colonist who asked for six slaves was considered a “good settler, has received two, still deserves as many more,” while another who demanded 30 “has enough negroes for the work he does.” Others were dismissed as “lazy,” “bad subject,” or “a dissipated man who thinks only of pleasure.”¹⁶⁹ Middling colonists protested the fact that local elites, authorities, and the Compagnie itself monopolized the first picks of slave shipments, forcing them to outbid each other at auction for the “refuse” captives. “As there were always several colonists unable to acquire healthy ones,” wrote one of them, “they often competed to buy the sick, who therefore cost as much as the others.”¹⁷⁰

While no detailed census allows us to track the percentage of slaveholders for the entire colony until 1766, the available evidence indicates that a growing share of households owned slaves at the same time, most of them in small numbers whereas the wealthiest few accumulated large concentrations of human property. Around 1740, an anonymous but experienced and well-informed colonist warned the unequal access to slave labor and its hoarding by local elites continued to discourage European settlers. “Half the inhabitants, “ claimed the author, “have few

¹⁶⁸ Usner, *Indians, Settlers & Slaves*, 51.

¹⁶⁹ “État des habitants qui ont fait au greffe du conseil leurs soumissions pour avoir des nègres,” 30 October 1726, 5 DPPC 16.

¹⁷⁰ Jean-François Benjamin Dumont de Montigny, *Mémoires historiques sur la Louisiane, contenant ce qui y est arrivé de plus mémorable depuis l'année 1687 jusqu'à présent*, ed. Jean Baptiste Le Mascrier (Paris: C.J.B. Bauche, 1753), 2: 241 (quote); Giraud, *French Louisiana, V*, 122–23. A discounted price for ailing slaves was even suggested to prevent hazardous investments. See Périer and La Chaise to Directors of the Compagnie, 26 August 1729, C13, A11, fols. 351-359.

or no negroes and have been living for ten years in the hope of having some, and if none are sent some will head back up to Canada and the rest will return to France, or will go to the English or the Spanish, imperceptibly the colony will destroy itself. All the negroes belong to twenty inhabitants or so, would it not be better to have 200 inhabitants who each own ten negroes, rather than twenty who own them all?¹⁷¹ Rhetorical exaggeration aside, this account alluded to the economic domination of Louisiana's society by its largest slaveowners: the King (who had acquired the Compagnie's bondspeople), the Church (Jesuits, Ursulines, Capuchins), and a select group of planters, military officers, and entrepreneurs. At the same time, however, several factors contributed to broadening the slaveholding class. The low rate of white immigration limited the number of non-slaveholding Europeans and facilitated their exogamous marriages with slave owners.¹⁷² French inheritance rules under the *coutume de Paris* (Paris custom), which mandated that successions be divided equally among all children, mechanically favored the dissemination of human property.¹⁷³ While new arrivals from the Antilles increased the availability of slaves in the colony in the 1750s and 1760s, many changed hands as older settlers from the previous generation died, military officers left the colony, and the Jesuits' holdings were confiscated after their expulsion.¹⁷⁴

The limited redistribution of Louisiana's enslaved population was illustrated by the outcome of slave auctions. In 1753, when the estate of the wealthiest man in the colony, the planter and royal contractor Claude Villars Dubreuil was auctioned following his death, a total of 194

¹⁷¹ "État de la Louisiane de ses productions et des avantages qu'on peut en retirer," C13, C1, fols. 384-385.

¹⁷² Ingersoll, *Mammon and Manon*, 41.

¹⁷³ Susan C. Boyle, "Did She Generally Decide? Women in Ste. Genevieve, 1750-1805," *William and Mary Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (1987): 779; Spear, *Race, Sex, and Social Order*, 31.

¹⁷⁴ Ingersoll, *Mammon and Manon*, 74.

slaves went to 42 different buyers. A single colonist, who was no other than Dubreuil's son, purchased 83, and the widow acquired 6, so that the deceased's family retained 45 percent of his human chattel. The powerful agent of the Compagnie secured 22 of the enslaved, but no one else purchased more than a half-dozen. Twenty-eight buyers procured just one slave— including at least three men designated only by nicknames, a tell-tale sign of their humble origins.¹⁷⁵ A few years later, the widow of another planter, Guillaume Loquet de La Pommeraye who was also the late Dubreuil's mother-in-law, similarly purchased 20 of 66 men, women, and children from her husband's succession. Among the other 18 buyers, 16 purchased only one or two slaves.¹⁷⁶

In 1766, the first census ordered by the Spanish administration confirmed the expansion of the slave owning class, the limited size of slaveholdings, and the domination position of a few estates (figure 15). The New Orleans region, where the largest concentration of Afro-Louisianans was enslaved, counted 626 households. Only 38 percent had no slave, while the other 62 percent claimed ownership of 10 Black people on average. The difference between non-slaveholding whites and the so-called masters of human chattel was arguably the main social divide among colonists, but the distribution of slaves remained very unequal. On the one hand, 24 percent of households owned one to three only, which gave them the strict minimum of independence and respectability to belong to the middling sorts. On the other, just 8 percent of households had more than 20, but together they claimed 57 percent of people enslaved in the area.

¹⁷⁵ "Succession sale of the estate of Dubreuil," 23 October 1753, *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1935): 291-331. On nicknames, see Dadwy, *Building the Devil's Empire*, 163-166.

¹⁷⁶ Succession of La Pommeraye. 1758-06-02/1, RSC.

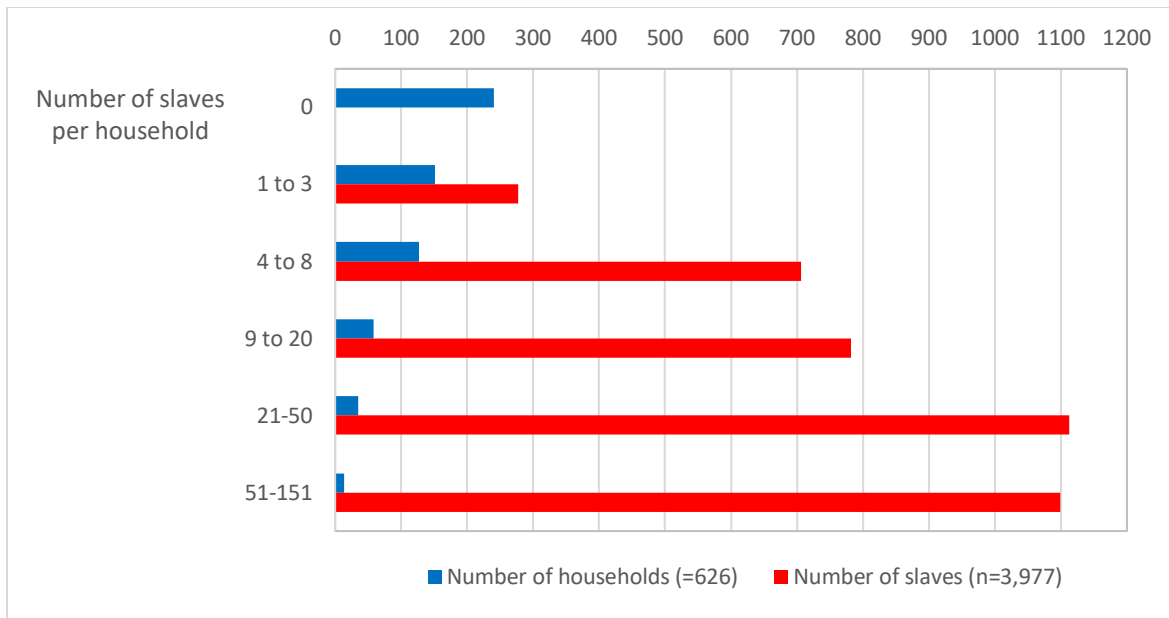


Figure 15. Social distribution of slaves per households in the New Orleans area, 1766.

Short of buying, inheriting, or acquiring human property through marriage, the surest way for colonists to gain access to slave labor in a time of limited importations was to rent bondspeople, a routine business practice in French Louisiana as in many other slave societies. All around the Atlantic the practice consolidated the status of the enslaved as property and at the same time facilitated labor mobility and economic production.¹⁷⁷ Paradoxically, because hiring slaves was easier, cheaper, and more frequent than buying them, such transactions left fewer records and are more difficult to reconstitute than sales. Historians of the “second slavery,” in the Antebellum South in particular, have often argued that slave hiring consolidated the institution by democratizing access to labor and accumulation of capital, but that it also enabled bondspeople

¹⁷⁷ French documents used the same verb “louer” to designate any hire, rental, or lease regardless of cost or duration, which were often unspecified. Those terms are therefore used interchangeably here.

torn between different enslavers to challenge their bondage and preserve some autonomy.¹⁷⁸ The records of the Superior Council may seem to validate this hypothesis for French Louisiana, where leasing slaves was often the only way for modest colonists to expand their labor force. Yet those sources also show that slave rentals strengthened inequalities between white residents and the domination of elite slaveholders.

I have identified 156 cases of slave hiring between 1727 and 1769, chiefly in the notarial and judicial records of the Superior Council. Beside scattered mentions in administrative or personal correspondence, memoirs, and criminal investigations, the vast majority comes from contracts, successions, and financial disputes. Although a few more instances appear in other sources like colonial correspondence and memoirs, their number appears surprisingly small given how difficult it was for colonists to recruit enslaved labor—or any kind of labor. Evidently, slave rentals were a much more widespread phenomenon, but most went unrecorded, as suggested by a reference to a “verbal lease” between a planter and the tutor of his children in his succession’s account.¹⁷⁹ In Louisiana as in early modern France and its other colonies, business transactions and labor arrangements frequently relied on verbal agreements rather than written contracts, which many could not read.¹⁸⁰ Why then were certain arrangements recorded? A number of slave hires originated in probate affairs. In a highly formal process, the curator of the estate, often a relative or business partner of the deceased, also acting as tutor for minor heirs, petitioned for a court order

¹⁷⁸ Anthony E. Kaye, “The Second Slavery: Modernity in the Nineteenth-Century South and the Atlantic World,” *The Journal of Southern History* 75, no. 3 (2009): 627–50; Keith C. Barton, “‘Good Cooks and Washers’: Slave Hiring, Domestic Labor, and the Market in Bourbon County, Kentucky,” *Journal of American History* 84, no. 2 (1997): 436–60; Jonathan D. Martin, *Divided Mastery: Slave Hiring in the American South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

¹⁷⁹ Petition of Bore, 1762-12-04/3, RSC.

¹⁸⁰ Sarah C. Maza, *Servants and Masters in Eighteenth-Century France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 97; Dubé, “Les biens publics,” 254-255, 463.

to rent part or all of its human property, along with cattle and buildings. If granted, the lease was advertised then adjudicated to the highest bidder for one to three years. In half of those “judicial leases”, the lessee turned out to be the same person as the curator and lessor, who was in effect renting slaves to him or herself. The rationale for this convoluted process was that heirs held property in community until their majority, when their estate could finally be divided. Aside for probate accounts, slave rentals were recorded in contracts defining leasing terms (identity of hires, duration, cost, labor and living conditions...) and financial disputes over payment, delivery, or loss (from slave illness, injury, death, *marronage*). The latter are more than twice as numerous, with almost no overlap, which indicates that slave hires routinely went unrecorded until something went wrong. This is also confirmed by criminal cases in which rented slaves appear as defendants or witnesses.

Although only a minority of cases state why slaves were hired, most suggest that rentals served to compensate for the colony’s shortage of labor and capital. A number of lessees sought laborers with certain skills or expertise for specific tasks: cooks, wet nurses, carpenters, coopers, indigo makers. The most established pattern was the rental of enslaved rowers by traders for their arduous trip upriver from New Orleans to the Illinois country. The eight contracts passed for this purpose followed the same model and the same terms: unlike in many other agreements or suits, rented individuals were identified by name; all contracts were signed in summer months, before the seasonal departure of Illinois voyages took advantage of low waters; the lessee was responsible for all accidents including drowning and Indian raids; and payment was to be made in Illinois flour.¹⁸¹ The trader René Bouché de Monbrun even hired the same two enslaved rowers, named

¹⁸¹ See for instance four contracts signed in mid-August 1737: Lease by Tixerant to Monbrun, 1737-08-15/3, Henry Louboey to François Rivard, 1737-08-16/2, Joseph Carrière to François Larche Grandpré, 1737-08-16-/4, Louis Morisset to same, 1737-08-17/3, RSC. The disposition against Indian attacks was enforced at least once, when Pierre

Jacques and Petit Jean, for two consecutive seasons.¹⁸² Traders also recruited free Black men, European soldiers, and Indigenous workers as rowers on Illinois voyages.¹⁸³ Hiring slaves, in fact, appears to have been more expensive, and it involved a risk of being sued in case of accidents.¹⁸⁴ In this case, it was the terms of their employment rather than its cost that dictated the choice of slave labor: in theory at least, slaves could not formulate demands regarding the work they performed, food supplies, or wages. Most importantly in a cash-poor economy, the Illinois traders could pay their owners in kind rather than species. A few lessors rented slaves because they left the colony, but absentee owners were rare in Louisiana and most recorded hires served to fulfill legal or financial obligations. This was the case for curators, tutors, and other guardians in charge of someone else's property, who had to justify their management. In the absence of lawyers, whose trade was officially banned from the colony, a few planters and merchants represented various estates as legal agents, reaping considerable benefits in the process.¹⁸⁵

While slave rentals allowed some lessees to acquire additional labor for a short time with limited investment, their main effect was not to democratize access to and mastery over slaves. Instead, this business practice combined with matrimonial alliances reinforced the concentration of slave ownership in the hands of a few powerful families. In 156 cases of slave hiring, the aforementioned Joseph Chaperon and Jacques Larche, or their relatives, appear respectively 13

Baron sued traders Bienvenu and Mathurin after Jacob, an enslaved man he had rented to them, was taken in a raid in 1739. See Lease by Baron to Bienvenu, and Mathurin, 1739-07-06/2, RSC.

¹⁸² Lease by Tixerant to Monbrun, 1736-08-21/3 and 1737-08-15/3, RSC.

¹⁸³ Indentures of free Black Scipion, 1736-08-21/1 and 1739-03-10/3; Indenture of Nicolas Saint Martin to Louis Marin, 1747-05-04/1, RSC; Usner, *Indians, Settlers & Slaves*, 219-243.

¹⁸⁴ In the late 1730s, the 1,500 pounds of flour paid for the lease of an enslaved rower were worth about 600 livres. By comparison, the aforementioned Scipion and Saint Martin were hired for respectively 200 and 350 *livres*. Surrey, *The Commerce of Louisiana*, 265–66.

¹⁸⁵ Shannon Lee Dawdy, "La Ville Sauvage: 'enlightened' Colonialism and Creole Improvisation in New Orleans, 1699-1769" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2003), 254–55; James D. Hardy, "Probate Racketeering in Colonial Louisiana," *Louisiana History* 9, no. 2 (1968): 109–21.

and 21 times, in turns as owner, legal agent, or lessee. Etienne de Lalande Dalcourt, another prominent planter who sponsored the only transatlantic slaving voyage after 1731, was listed 17 times: twice as owner, seven as agent, and eight as lessee. Since those colonial elites also coopted each other as councilmen, they arbitrated their own affairs and controlled all the legal and financial instruments of Louisiana's economy. In practice, slave rentals represented a wide array of realities ranging from short-time labor contracts to purely financial instruments. In a half dozen cases, settlers and administrators claimed that slaveholders deprived of their human property were entitled to compensation: even though no lease had been contracted, those who failed to deliver their chattel owed them reparation in the form of a retroactive slave rental.¹⁸⁶ While many owners hired out bondspeople to pay their debts, some were so financially vulnerable they opted to sell their slaves before immediately hiring them back, which allowed them to receive a quick influx of cash or credit without losing their labor.¹⁸⁷

Slave hiring therefore provided opportunities to compensate the shortage of labor and capital in the colony, but its impact on the enslaved was more ambivalent. Rental agreements frequently cautioned lessees against mistreating or overworking hired hands. Some contracts even echoing the paternalistic ethos of the Code Noir in ordering renters to treat slaves *en bon père de famille* ("like a good father").¹⁸⁸ Whether such rhetoric afforded any protection to those held in

¹⁸⁶ See for instance Rossard v. Noyan, 1728-02-27/2, Dubreuil v. La Pommeraye, 1752-09-01/1 and 1752-09-02/6, Maxent v. Saint Denis, 1763-03-05/4, RSC.

¹⁸⁷ Sale and lease between Dame Saint-Hermine and Malteste, 1765-11-02/2, Petition of Boitard, 1769-02-18/4, RSC. In the latter case, a man indebted to the King's treasury sold a female slave named Catherine and her "mulatto" son Paul before hiring her back, so she would remain in his service without running the risk of being confiscated. Yet a court order nullified the transaction and ordered Catherine to be sold for the profit of the King.

¹⁸⁸ Lease of Pailhox plantation, 1727-01-21/4, Lease by La Goublaye to Gilbert, 1728-09-07/1, Delisle v. Jung, 1752-07-31/2, RSC.

bondage in French colonies has generated intense scholarly debates.¹⁸⁹ The evidence from leasing records is mixed, but overall it tends to confirm that the legal slave regime had a limited impact on living and labor conditions. In addition to the enslaved workers who belonged to the King and the *corvée*, officials could hire extra hands to complete urgent tasks. In 1739, several colonists who had provided slaves for a military campaign against the Chickasaw Indians demanded compensation from the government after they fell sick or died en route.¹⁹⁰ Others sued renters for having subleased laborers to state officials on public works where they suffered severe injuries. Mingo alias Mercure, for instance, died from a hernia contracted while unloading cargo from the King's vessel in Mobile, and an unnamed Black man lost an eye as he was cutting wood for the construction of the fort at English Turn.¹⁹¹ In the latter case, the lessor argued that subleasing slaves violated the renter's commitment to act as a *pater familias* by keeping his nine laborers on his plantation.

Not all contracts or petitions mentioned the identities or even the number of hired slaves, and those silences convey the commodification at work in leasing human property. Yet in a dozen cases at least slaveholders rented women with their children, sometimes their husbands. By keeping estates intact and placing some unproductive charges in the care of other colonists, this practice primarily aimed to preserve the interests of slave-owners, but it also helped prevent the breakup of nuclear families. Based on the records of the Superior Council, it seems uncertain that

¹⁸⁹ This question can be traced back to Frank Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992). See David C. Rankin, "The Tannenbaum Thesis Reconsidered: Slavery and Race Relations in Antebellum Louisiana," *Southern Studies* 18 (1979): 5–31; Thomas N. Ingersoll, "Slave Codes and Judicial Practice in New Orleans, 1718–1807," *Law and History Review* 13, no. 1 (1995): 23–62; Alejandro de la Fuente, "From Slaves to Citizens? Tannenbaum and the Debates on Slavery, Emancipation, and Race Relations in Latin America," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 77 (2010): 156.

¹⁹⁰ Petition of Étienne Delalande Dalcourt, 1739-08-15/1, Declaration of Joseph Chaperon, 1739-12-21/1, RSC.

¹⁹¹ Petition of Derneville, 1746-06-10/1, Dubreuil v. Derneville, 1746-06-11/1, Delisle v. Jung, 1752-07-31/2, RSC.

rented slaves were more at risk than others. Beside the two men hurt in the King's service mentioned above, colonists only reported one severe injury and three deaths of hired hands imputable to their temporary enslavers. One man was hit in the head with a spade while cultivating indigo; another drowned after falling from a barge. A third, an African man named Tambamané, died of a pneumonia contracted during a *marronage* of four years.¹⁹² Most tragically, the Black carpenter François killed himself by "cutting his throat in despair, from ill-treatment or other causes."¹⁹³ François's suicide likely resulted from some abuse while he was hired out, but his owner's suit for 2,500 *livres*—a high price only paid for the most skilled laborers—showed that renters had a strong financial incentive to look after their temporary workforce. This supposed self-interest failed to protect François and Tambamané, however, and the small number of suits for damage may also have resulted from the slaveholders' preference for settling their conflicts outside of court.

4.4 Conclusion

The contrast between two similar disputes involving New Orleans slaveholders a decade apart illustrates the impact of the dried-up supply of bondspeople on Louisiana's economy. In 1727, the *garde magasin* (keeper of stores) of the Compagnie petitioned the Superior Council to secure an overdue payment for the sale of an enslaved African man. The buyer had given him a bad note drawn on a Paris merchant, which he was unable to cash. The petitioner refused to simply

¹⁹² Declaration of Prat, 1737-09-06/3, De Lorme v. Chenier, 1740-04-22/2, Dalcourt v. Broutin, 1736-12-21/1, RSC.

¹⁹³ Declaration of Viel, 1741-10-06/1, RSC.

take the slave back arguing he had since been branded, and that incoming arrivals of enslaved Africans were about to depreciate their prices.¹⁹⁴ The situation was entirely different by 1738 when a French *indigotier* (indigo farmer) attempted to sue a member of the colonial elite, the planter Pradel, for reneging on an oral agreement to sell him some of his slaves. Pradel easily persuaded the councilors, all of them fellow slaveholders, to dismiss the suit as a misunderstanding caused by idle banter: surely they recognized anyone would much rather buy than sell slaves if only they could.¹⁹⁵ Seven years had passed since the last cargo of African captives had landed in Louisiana, making it increasingly difficult for even the most prosperous colonists to acquire more laborers. Pradel could afford to laugh off the accusation casually because of his superior status, and because he was addressing slave owners who shared his exasperation.

For decades after the Compagnie abandoned the transatlantic slave trade to Louisiana along with the colony in 1731, royal administrators and colonists repeatedly failed to revive the commerce. African and Indigenous resistance were critical in disrupting and ultimately interrupting the transatlantic slave trade to the secondary market of the Gulf Coast, a peripheral destination already less profitable and safe than the Antilles. Enslaved Natives, European convicts, and especially soldiers remained an additional source of coerced labor, but their limited numbers and vexed recruitment prevented them from being viable alternatives. By the 1730s, the racialization of labor was already so deeply established in Louisiana that officials and local elites could hardly imagine the colony's progress without lamenting the *disette de nègres* ("shortage of

¹⁹⁴ Saint Martin de Jauriquibery v. Raguet, 1727-04-17/2, RSC. Two years prior, the Superior Council had informed the Compagnie they could not deny the requests of petits habitants (colonists of modest means) to return to France because the lack of slave shipments to the colony severely hindered their prospects. Superior Council to Directors of the Compagnie, 27 February 1725, C13, A9, fol. 51. In this respect, the limited availability of enslaved labor played a similar role for poor whites in Louisiana as their difficulties to acquire land in the Caribbean. See for instance Frostin, *Les révoltes blanches à Saint-Domingue aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles*.

¹⁹⁵ Mathieu v. Pradel, 1738-11-08/1, RSC.

negroes”) that hampered it. Enslaved Africans, whose toil and knowledge had been instrumental in the colony’s expansion, were now employed in hard labor and agriculture, but also in skilled trades where they replaced white artisans—as demonstrated by the Crown’s purchase of the Compagnie’s slaves. The widespread reliance on enslaved Black workers reflected the rapid adoption of racial attitudes first elaborated in the West Indies, which exposed men and women of African descent to the most violent forms of exploitation.

This chapter offers two additional contributions to the study of slavery in early Louisiana. First, it demonstrates the long-underestimated importance of largely clandestine and poorly documented imports of enslaved people from the Caribbean, which helped sustain the demographic growth of the Afro-Creole population. The defense of those slave smuggling activities even figured prominently among the motives of the Creole elites who briefly expelled the incoming Spanish administration from New Orleans in 1768. Although continuous arrivals from the Antilles partly compensated for the lack of transatlantic imports, they also caused concerns among Louisiana’s slaveholders that their counterparts in Saint-Domingue and Martinique used this trade to dispose of unfit or troublesome individuals. Second, I argue that the colonists’ unequal access to a narrow pool of slave labor was the main source of wealth, prestige, and power. The availability, distribution, and circulation of slaves therefore remained central concerns for settlers and authorities, with conflicting results on colonial society. On the one hand, the main social divide among Europeans was slaveowners versus non-slaveholding whites, even though the ranks of former group grew to almost two thirds of all white households in the New Orleans area by the end of the French regime. On the other hand, their average size of slaveholdings remained small, their distribution of remained extremely uneven, and upward social mobility limited by the lack of slaves available for purchase. In other words, most white

Louisianans owned some Black bondspeople, which set them apart from the large minority that did not, but very few could claim enough to join the ranks of the elite. Although the frequent practice of slave hiring increased the circulation of enslaved workers, thereby mitigating the impact of labor and capital shortage in the colony, such rentals were also dominated by a small number of large slaveowners.

Slave shortages therefore had different meanings and effects for different categories of Louisianans. For planters and administrators, the lack of Black workers available for purchase placed a limit on their economic opportunities and Louisiana's economic development through the exportation of slave-produced commodities. While slaveholders of more modest means decried the scarcity of enslaved labor in similar terms, its immediate significance for them was to hinder their social mobility, to prevent them from joining the ranks of planters, and to force them to supervise the work of their own chattel on farms and workshops instead. For white men and women who owned no slaves at all, by contrast, the *disette de nègres* that elites complained about meant that some menial labor continued to befall to them despite being increasingly identified as slave work. Lastly, the enslaved themselves could benefit from a situation that made each of them an especially valuable asset and encouraged their mobility between employers and labor sites, which many took advantage of to run away from enslavers with the occasional assistance of other white settlers.

5.0 Policing, Statistical Portrait, and Strategies of Enslaved Runaways, 1720-1767

In a typical examination conducted in the summer of 1764, the Superior Council presented thirty questions to a Black fugitive named Pierre (appendix B). Eight queries focused on theft accusations and ten on Pierre's potential accomplices. Only five, by contrast, concerned his whereabouts and just one addressed his motivations.¹ Obviously, Pierre's judges had no interest in creating of his intimate thoughts and feelings about his enslavement, eighteenth-century justice, or life in French New Orleans, and it is almost impossible not to regret their lack of anthropological curiosity. Yet the priorities of Louisiana's highest court, which supervised slave discipline in the colony on behalf of the King, shine through such interrogations. Although runaways have famously been described as enslaved people who "stole themselves," the judges were not concerned with Pierre as a piece of human property, but rather as a human agent capable of taking or damaging other property, including some belonging to another enslaved man.² *Marronage*, in itself, does not appear to have caused much concern, except as sort of gateway crime leading to more serious violations like assault, theft, destruction of property, including living but non-human goods: cash, clothes, and especially farm animals. Even more important in the eyes of the Council as whether Pierre was armed and intimidated anyone (presumably white) was what Black men he knew, if he frequented Black thieves or runaways, and their drinking habits. Whereas runaways like Pierre appeared alone before their judges, the latter's questions indicate that they considered them part of a larger slave community and valuable witnesses of this underworld. For theft and

¹ Interrogation of Pierre, 1764-08-02/1, RSC.

² Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion*, 239.

marronage, the Council sentenced Pierre to be branded with a fleur de lys on the right shoulder and to have his ears cropped, which was executed a month later, together with the punishment of another enslaved male runaway, who was hamstrung and branded on the cheek with a V-shaped hot iron (for *voleur*, “thief”).³

The most widely used sources by studies of *marronage*—slave narratives, plantation papers, and printed runaway ads—are lacking for colonial Louisiana, which had no newspaper until the 1790s.⁴ Instead, most of what can be ascertained about slave desertion in the region must be pieced together from scattered mentions in the notarial and judicial archives of the Superior Council. Fragmentary, heterogenous, and limited in number, this documentary sample does not lend itself to quantitative analysis as reliably as the thousands of runaway advertisements accessible through a growing number of digital collections and databases, but the statistical conclusions I draw from those records help sketch a collective portrayal of the fugitives.⁵

³ “État des nègres justiciés depuis 26 Juillet 1764 jusqu’au 10 Octobre 1765,” 1765-10-10/2, RSC.

⁴ See John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 295-6; Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 418–20; John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 295–96. 418-420.

⁵ Philip Morgan’s study of *marronage* in colonial South Carolina, for instance, identified 5,599 individual runaways in printed notices of capture or desertion. Philip D. Morgan, “Colonial South Carolina Runaways: Their Significance for Slave Culture,” in *Out of the House of Bondage: Runaways, Resistance and Marronage in Africa and the New World* (London: Frank Cass, 1986), 57–78. For digital collections of runaway ads, see Tom Costa, ed., “The Geography of Slavery in Virginia,” University of Virginia (2005), <http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/gos/>; “The North Carolina Runaway Slave Advertisements project,” University of North Carolina at Greensboro, <http://libcdm1.uncg.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/RAS>; “The Texas Runaway Slave Project,” Stephen F. Austin State University, <http://digital.sfasu.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/RSP>; Jean-Pierre Le Glaunec, “Marronage in Saint-Domingue (Haïti): History, Memory, Technology,” Université de Sherbrooke, at <http://www.marronnage.info/en/>; “Freedom on the Move,” Cornell University, <https://freedomonthemove.org/index.html>. A work in progress, this latest database compiles 27,429 items as of November 2020. A scholar involved in an earlier compiling project estimated that “a systematic, comprehensive Atlantic World-level program of research may well generate something on the order of 250,000 runaway slave advertisements,” a contribution to the historiography of slavery whose scope would be on par with the WPA slave narratives and the Transatlantic Slave Trade Database. Douglas B. Chambers, “Documenting Runaway Slaves in the Atlantic World” (unpublished typescript, May 2014), Academia, https://www.academia.edu/8606378/_Documenting_Runaway_Slaves_in_the_Atlantic_World_A_Research_Progra

Moreover, the qualitative evidence from those sources offers precious insights into the lived experiences of enslaved people in French Louisiana. While wills, inventories, petitions, bills of sale, and leasing contracts document the slaves' distribution and circulation examined in Chapter 4.0, declarations of slaveholders and interrogations of runaways shed light on their identities, activities, and motivations, which I analyze in the next two chapters.

In the language of French administrators and slaveholders, who recorded slave voices and resistance, the same word describes all acts of slave desertion, regardless of scale, duration, or motivations: *marronage*, or rather *marronages*, since it typically designates a specific incident rather than the activity of running away. More importantly, unlike its English equivalent "maroon", the French term *marron* is used as an adjective rather than as a noun, especially in phrases like *partir marron* ("to go maroon", i.e. to desert), *être marron* ("to be maroon," i.e. to be on the run), or *nègres marrons* ("runaway Blacks" rather than Black runaways). This usage of *marron* and *marronages* suggests that being a runaway was not regarded as an identity (maroons vs. others, presumably more docile slaves), but rather an activity that all slaves could potentially engage in.

I have identified 197 runaways in the colonial archives of Louisiana, from the earliest documented case of *marronage* around 1720, shortly after the arrival of the first African captives to the end of the French administration in 1769. Among these fugitives, 142 were named (72 percent) and 52 appeared in court (26 percent). According to Louisiana historian Thomas Ingersoll, the number of runaways was too small to threaten the planter class in New Orleans, whose slave society differed little from other Southern or Caribbean colonies.⁶ Yet judicial records of

m, 13. For another ongoing project, updated daily, see Carl Robert Keyes, ed., "The Adverts 250 Project," <https://adverts250project.org/>.

⁶ Ingersoll, *Mammon and Manon*, 86–87. Ingersoll's arguments were largely aimed at Gwendolyn Midlo Hall's Afro-centric work, which may overstate the unity of slave communities and their degree of autonomy. *Marronage* occupies a crucial place in the arguments of both authors. While Hall emphasizes the role of slave resistance in limiting the

marronage like runaway ads represent merely “the top of an ill-defined iceberg.”⁷ Legal documents show that only one of all prosecuted fugitives had previously been reported, which if taken at face value, would suggest that all other mentioned runaways escaped arrest. But this almost complete lack of overlap between different sources reflects the fact that *marronage* and its suppression were a largely private business. Official proclamations notwithstanding, slave discipline belonged to slaveholders who exercised it apart from, although with the implicit approval of, government authorities. Only under exceptional circumstances were fugitives denounced, arrested, tried, and punished in public. *Marronage* involving repeat offenders, larger groups, armed fugitives, alcohol consumption, and especially crimes against whites or their property presented a more serious threat and was therefore more likely to be recorded. Those concerns are evident in official reports and in the questions asked of runaways like Pierre during court interrogations.

In order to assess the significance of *marronage* in French Louisiana, I first examine how slaveholders and authorities documented this practice and sought to suppress it. Public reports, prosecutions, and executions of runaways remained exceptional because slave discipline was largely left to private individuals. Yet judicial records provide by far the best evidence about who ran away, how, and where. A statistical overview of the runaways’ biographical information reveals demographics comparable to other Northern American slave societies, notably the smaller number and younger age of female runaways. On the other hand, patterns of race and origin, such as the declining importance of Indigenous fugitives after the 1720s, reflect the specificities of Louisiana’s slave trade and the evolution of its servile population. The final section, which surveys

expansion of the plantation economy, Ingersoll argues that runaways were too isolated to pose any serious challenge to the socio-racial order imposed by slaveholders.

⁷ Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion*, 240.

the actions of runaways, shows that the majority departed alone, for a limited time, and remained in familiar locations around New Orleans and other colonial settlements—unlike the military deserters studied in Chapter 3.0.

5.1 A Ubiquitous but Underreported Phenomenon

Marronage in French New Orleans was chronic but dramatically underreported. Like the original Code Noir regulating race relations and slave management in the Caribbean, the 1724 Louisiana code did not require slaveholders to register runaways with the authorities. To help prosecute the culprits and compensate their owners if necessary, a local ordinance made it mandatory in 1736. Yet its application proved limited. Over the following decade, only forty-one fugitives were formally reported to the Superior Council (figure 16). Metropolitan officials who compiled Louisiana's colonial legislation around mid-century observed the decree was "not well executed."⁸ A marginal annotation in their transcription of the Code Noir clarified that "masters do not often declare their slaves' *marronage*,"⁹ Indeed, two thirds of all runaways cited in judicial records had not been reported missing. The Superior Council had to reaffirm this obligation in a 1763 decree, proving it was so poorly followed it was virtually forgotten.¹⁰

⁸ "Ordonnance de Messrs. de Bienville et Salmon pour la déclaration des negres marons [sic]," 1 September 1736, A, 23, fol. 121.

⁹ "Code Noir," Article 32.

¹⁰ "Arrêt du conseil supérieur de la Nouvelle-Orléans, ordonnant aux propriétaires de nègres marrons d'en faire la déclaration au greffe du Conseil Supérieur dans les quatre jours qui suivent leur marronage, demandant un recensement de tous les esclaves et imposant aux propriétaires une capitation de 40 sous par tête," 6 April 1763, C13A, 43, fol. 304.

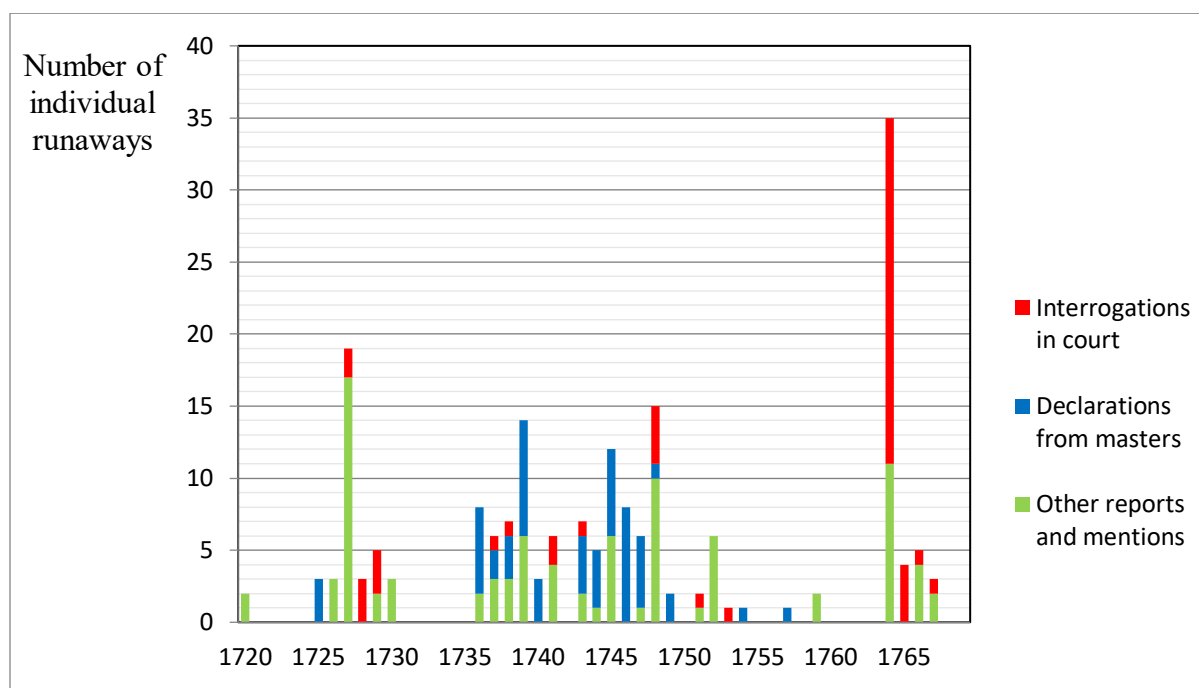


Figure 16. Runaway slaves declared, interrogated, and reported, 1720-1767.

Due to the small numbers involved, a simple adjustment in reporting or an isolated event involving a larger group of runaways could cause a significant chronological variation in the volume of recorded runaways. The first spike, in 1727, corresponded to the discovery of a settlement of over 15 Indigenous runaways outside of New Orleans, about which little was (and is) known with certainty, including its name “Natanapallé.” The second, more diffuse, increase in *marronage* cases occurred from the mid-1730s through the late 1740s. Although largely caused by the emergence of a new type of report, the now obligatory declarations of slaveowners, it also reflected a larger activity in 1739, 1745, and 1748, when several groups absconded the same year. Lastly, by far the most significant change was a spectacular spike in the number of prosecutions

of runaways in 1764. As France officially lost the Seven Year's War and prepared about to abandon Louisiana, a new attorney general exploited white fears of slave unrest exacerbated by this geopolitical crisis to crackdown on slave mobility and alleged criminality. In 1764 alone, the Superior Council ended up prosecuting, torturing, and executing more fugitive slaves than in the previous 40 years combined—without even counting the largest group of enslaved men tried in Louisiana up during the French regime, 12 plantation workers who were its first victims, condemned to public flogging for staging a collective walk out to protest their overseer's abuse.¹¹

From 1720 to 1767, most runaways were reported not by their owners but by overseers, tenants, or estate curators who sought to avoid financial liability. This usually implicit rationale was clearly spelled out in a planter's declaration from 1738. A "Bambara" man belonging to his wife had been missing for three weeks from the estate of his deceased father-in-law. The planter explained he made this declaration "in case the Negro was caught to be punished following the law, and in case he ended up dying in his *marronage*, to serve him as legal discharge of responsibility toward the succession."¹² It was more unusual for slaveholders to denounce the men and women they owned to the Superior Council. According to their declarations, the few who turned to public authorities sought to obtain assistance in recovering fugitives, to warn against the threat of maroon bands, or simply to comply with the law. Some enslavers were more likely than others to share their domestic sovereignty with government authorities, either because they lived within or close to the city, possessed wealth and status, or had personal connections with some councilors—an important factor given the frequent feuds between local administrators.

¹¹ This collective protest and the ensuing repression are analyzed in Section 6.2.

¹² Declaration of Étienne Delalande Dalcourt, 1738-12-15/1, RSC.

Slaveowners had good reasons for not reporting runaways, starting with the brutal punishments the enslaved faced in court, which would simultaneously ruin their bodies and their owners' capital. The Code Noir prescribed that those absent more than a month would be flogged and marked as criminals by having their ears cropped and their skin branded with a fleur-de-lys. Repeat offenders were to be hamstrung to prevent them from running away and executed if they deserted again. Another incentive not to register fugitives was that slaveowners remained responsible for catching, jailing, and other judicial costs, along with the damages they caused. The owners of executed slaves were entitled to a financial compensation determined by two of their peers and theoretically funded by taxes on individual slaveholders—although the actual payments came out of the King's treasury at least until the 1760s.¹³

However, those reimbursements did not allow the replacement of their human property. Imperial regulations combined with local factors—geographic isolation, stunted demographic and economic growth, limited exports, lack of credit—to reduce slave arrivals to scattered imports from the West Indies. Although slave mortality was much lower in Louisiana than in the West Indies, the natural increase of its Black population was far from enough to compensate the “penury of Blacks” (*disette de nègres*) lamented by colonists and officials alike. Black labor came in especially high demand as white workers (indentured servants or *engagés*, convicts, soldiers) and Indigenous slaves were dropped as viable solutions to the colony's chronic shortage of manpower. Not only were there few slaves available for purchase, but this scarcity caused those sold at auction to fetch prices well above the estimates listed in judicial evaluations and probate inventories.

¹³ Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans*, 402.

This partly explains why *marronage* was rarely prosecuted and why no slave received a death sentence for the sole crime of running away—unlike soldiers, whose collective desertions exposed them to charges of mutiny and treason. The Superior Council never examined first time offenders unless their absence lasted more than a month, or they were suspected of more serious crimes. Desirous to assert their domestic sovereignty rather than consolidate the public authority of state administrators, slaveholders preferred to police and discipline their chattel themselves. The only runaway denounced before his trial was Scipion, a Black man employed as a wood sawyer on a German Coast plantation, whose arrest occurred more than two years after his owner's declaration, evidently after another flight. Scipion told his judges that he often absconded for a day or two before returning on his own, but this time he had been gone for weeks.¹⁴ Although never previously convicted, he declared that his owner frequently whipped him, something the court could easily verify by examining his body. The sight of the whipping scars on Scipion's back and untold numbers of enslaved men and women served as a daily reminder of the slaveholders' power. The Code Noir explicitly allowed them, "when they believe slaves have deserve it, to have them chained up and whipped or birched."¹⁵ According to the eyewitness account of a French officer, slaveowners and overseers routinely punished runaways by flogging them after pinning them to the ground with four stakes.¹⁶

¹⁴ Guillaume Lange to X, 1749-02-11/1 and Interrogation of Scipion, 1751-06-21/1, RSC.

¹⁵ "Code Noir," Article 38. An oft-cited essay misinterprets this same article, arguing "floggings were clearly forbidden by the Black Code." Carl A. Brasseaux, "The Administration of Slave Regulations in French Louisiana, 1724-1766," *Louisiana History* 21, no. 2 (1980): 144.

¹⁶ On public punishments, see Ingersoll, "Slave Codes and Judicial Practice in New Orleans, 1718-1807". For private punishments, see "Code Noir," Article 38; Interrogation of Scipion, 1751-06-21/1 and Petition of public prosecutor François Fleuriau, 1743-06-27/2, RSC; Dumont de Montigny, *Mémoires historiques*, 2: 243-244; On domestic sovereignty, see Yvan Debbasch, "Au cœur du 'gouvernement des esclaves': la souveraineté domestique aux Antilles françaises (XVIIe-XVIIIe siècles)," *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer* 72, no. 266 (1985): 31-53.

That the law of the state was only superficially involved in slave discipline is evident in the limited application of prescribed punishments. Despite repeated appeals to the “severity of the ordinances,” local judges applied the harsh prescriptions of slave law selectively and rarely, in part because they examined few cases in the first place. Of 37 runaways examined in court, they sentenced twenty to the following corporal punishments or a combination thereof (appendix C): whipping (19), ear cropping (11), branding (16), hamstringing (3), death by hanging (3) or bludgeoning (2). Only six fugitives were executed, and never for the sole crime of *marronage* but rather for theft or assault, which some enslaved people committed in the process of running away. But such legal distinctions made little difference to fugitives who stole to survive and fought to defend themselves.¹⁷ Cruel and arbitrary by design, the so-called justice meted by the Superior Council served to strengthen the power of enslavers and ensure the submission of the enslaved. In that sense, it operated much like the judiciary in Old Regime France, which combined lax everyday enforcement with rare examples of extreme severity to ensure the obedience of the King’s subjects.¹⁸ In Louisiana as in France, the most extreme sentences were given to murderers, both Black and white.¹⁹ Baraca, for instance, who ran away for two months after beating his wife to death on the King’s plantation, where the African couple was enslaved, was eventually hanged and his body was left exposed for 24 hours, evidently for the murder rather than for *marronage*.²⁰

¹⁷ For examples of runaways fighting back and carrying arms, see Declaration of Soubaine, 1728-07-08/3, Interrogation of François, 1764-02-17/2, Interrogation of Biron, 1728-07-10/1, Interrogation of Cezar, 1764-07-08/1, RSC.

¹⁸ Cécile Vidal, “Private and State Violence Against African Slaves in Lower Louisiana during the French Period, 1699-1769,” in *New World Orders: Violence, Sanction, and Authority in the Colonial Americas*, ed. Thomas J. Humphrey and John Smolenski (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 107.

¹⁹ Vidal, “Private and State Violence,” 105.

²⁰ Judgment against Baraca, 1748-05-04/9, RSC.

Table 1. Enslaved runaways sentenced to public punishments, 1719-1767.

	None (turned to slaveholder)	Whipping	Branding	Ears cut	Hand cut	Hamstring cut	Death by hanging	Death by bludgeoning
Guillory (1728)		X						
Bontemps (1728)							X	
Bayou (1748)	X							
Cezar (1736)			X	X				
Guela (1737)			X	X				
Mamourou (1748)	X							
Joseph (1753)		X				X		
Dodo (1763)			X	X				
Laurent alias Cimba (1764)		X	X	X				
Gabriel (1764)		X						
Mathurin (1764)		X						
François (1764)		X						
Jasmin (1764)		X						
Antoine (1764)		X						
Nicolas (1764)		X						
Appollon (1764)		X						
François (1764)		X						
Sezard (1764)		X						
Jean-Baptiste (1764)		X						
Joseph (1764)		X						
François (1764)		X				X		
Jeannot (1764)			X	X				
Cezar (1764)		X	X					
Charlot (1764)			X	X				
Augustin Poliche (1764)			X	X				
Louis (1764)			X	X				
Cezar (1764)					X			X
Jean (1764)		X	X			X		
Pierre (1764)			X	X				
Louis alias Foÿ (1764)								X
Marguerite (1764)			X	X				
François (1765)			X	X				
Louis (1765)							X	
Basouvant (1765)		X	X					
Francisque (1766)			X					
Bizago (1767)							X	
Catherine (1767)			X					
TOTAL	2	19	16	11	1	3	3	2

Grisly public punishments at the hands of the executioner such as hamstringing, branding, and facial mutilations, which left their victims mangled and traumatized, aimed at facilitating the identification of offenders, preventing recidivism, and intimidate the entire slave population. To this end, the condemned were struck at crossroads around the capital before being executed in its main square, in front of the prison and the church, where slave auctions also took place. Such scenes of judicial terror contrasted with the relative decline of torture and bodily punishments in eighteenth-century France famously theorized by Michel Foucault.²¹ Ironically, executions reached an all-time high in New Orleans in 1764, the same year Cesare Beccaria published his treatise on criminal justice reform *On Crimes and Punishments*.²² But the most common punishment for running away remained whipping, whether privately as in public, which caused only limited damage to the capital invested in enslaved bodies.

Individual colonists were thus largely responsible for slave discipline, as the Code Noir recognized by drawing the limitations of their domestic power. Slaveholders were only prohibited from torturing, mutilating, or outright killing their slaves: the state claimed exclusive right to those punishments in order to affirm its sovereignty through the executioner.²³ Yet this minimal restriction remained solely declarative, for the court never prosecuted any colonist for brutalizing their own slaves. The only cases of slave abuse examined in court were civil suits filed by slaveowners against lessees, guardians, or overseers who ruined their chattel through overwork, beatings, or criminal neglect. Even the worst offenders, however, incurred no other penalty than

²¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 73–134.

²² Cesare Beccaria, *On Crimes and Punishments* (Livorno: Marco Coltellini for Giuseppe Aubert, 1764).

²³ “Code Noir,” Articles 38-39.

to indemnify owners for damaging their human chattel.²⁴ The records of the Superior Council demonstrate that its priority was to protect property, including human property, rather than to police slave behavior on behalf of slaveholders, much less hinder their authority. In 1751, Governor Vaudreuil and *Commissaire-ordonnateur* Michel, whose position made him the first judge on the Superior Council, issued a new police ordinance for the colony, which was largely resulted from their need to reassert the local authority of the King's representatives following a scandalous affair of illicit alcohol sale that implicated military officers. The 1751 regulations reinforced the prescriptions of the Code Noir on slave discipline and warned that the colonial government might intervene directly if slaveowners fail to chastise their chattel with enough severity.²⁵ Beyond *marronage*, the 1751 decree criminalized nearly all independent movements of enslaved people, including entering taverns, peddling, visiting plantations, assembling just about anywhere, traveling by foot or on horseback without permit, leaving their dwellings at night, not yielding the way to whites on the street, and attending church with them.²⁶ Implicitly, those prohibitions recognizing the multiple forms of autonomous activity and community building through which enslaved men and women fought off the isolation and oppression of racialized bondage.

Despite a concomitant proposal to create a *maréchaussée* (rural constabulary), the absence of a police force meant that, even in New Orleans where state power was concentrated, the

²⁴ See for instance François-Louis de Mervilleux v. Pierre Gaulaz, 1727-10-03/1 and 1728-01-10/1; Petition of Raymond Amyault Dauseville., 1730-08-30/1; Dauseville v. Jacques Charpentier alias Le Roy, 1730-09-05/2, RSC; Gilbert C. Din, *Spaniards, Planters, and Slaves: The Spanish Regulation of Slavery in Louisiana, 1763–1803* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999), 13-15.

²⁵ “Règlement sur la police pour la province de la Louisiane,” 28 February-1 March 1751, Article 19, C13A, 35, fol. 46; Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans*, 89–91, 164–65, 178–81.

²⁶ “Règlement sur la police,” Articles 3, 7, 15-17, 20-29, C13, A35, fols. 41-50.

enforcement of those regulations remained limited and contingent upon slaveholders' initiatives. The 1751 ordinance reiterated a provision of the Code Noir, which permanently deputized the entire white population, urging them to stop any Black suspect and check whether they carried a written permission from their owners. Yet there is no evidence of that this white supremacist doctrine was applied in either case—slaveholders were no more willing to embrace a cumbersome pass system, which bondspeople would have found ways to circumvent, than the largely illiterate settlers and soldiers were ready to enforce it. Public officials instead continued to partner with slaveholders over the following years, even acceding their requests to either punish unruly slaves outside of legal proceedings, or on the contrary to pardon those convicted of serious crime to preserve their owners' financial interests.²⁷ In 1743, for instance, the commandant of the Illinois country, acting as local judge, had investigated a desertion plot involving up to seventeen Black and Indigenous slaves of the village of Kaskaskia. Despite finding them guilty, the officer decided to release them “on the pleas and representations of their masters that such justice would do them a disservice due to their indigence, and the promises they made to watch the behavior of their slaves and contain them more carefully from now on, and to follow more exactly the ordinances of the Code Noir regarding their slaves.”²⁸

It is therefore no surprise that Louisiana had no permanent police or slave patrols until the 1760s. Because slaveowners rejected taxation and government supervision, they preferred to hire cheap labor to catch their chattel or do it themselves, which buttressed their own authority rather

²⁷ Interrogation of Jeannot, 1743-09-10/2, Interrogation of Jean, 1744-02-22/2, Claude Joseph Villars Dubreuil to Jean-Baptiste Raguet, 1753-04-23/1, Interrogation of Sozie, 1764-07-19/1, Interrogation of Jean-Louis, 1764-07-20/1 and 1764-07-28/1, RSC.

²⁸ Trial of Jean-Baptiste alias Jeannot, Grandjean, Pierre alias Mammourou, and others, 7 May 1743, Kaskaskia Manuscripts, Randolph County Courthouse, Chester, IL (KM), Miscellaneous documents, II, 17 (digitized microfilm copy, <https://www.familysearch.org/search/film/008423137?cat=58291>, frames 82-85).

than the King's.²⁹ As with military deserters, Native warriors from allied nations like the Tunicas, the Bayagoulas, and especially the Choctaws returned some runaways to colonial settlements, but their assistance was costly and contingent on changing diplomatic relations.³⁰ In 1728, the Compagnie des Indes had set the reward for Indian slave catchers at no less than 160 *livres* worth of trading goods per fugitive—or about ten percent of the market value of an enslaved Black adult.³¹ Most slaveholders were therefore unable to enlist Indigenous warriors. Only four cases involving a total of seven individuals returned by Natives were documented, two of which during exceptional campaigns sponsored by colonial authorities against gangs of runaways.³² European troops, who guarded the capital with occasional civilian support, also demanded payment to stop fugitives, which they considered outside and beneath their military service, but their employment was much less expensive.³³

²⁹ On police forces, see Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 144; Ingersoll, *Mammon and Manon*, 89; Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans*, 107-108, 135-136. On the failure of taxation proposals, see *ibid.*, 315.

³⁰ See Le Page du Pratz, *Histoire de la Louisiane*, 1:137; Interrogation of Pierrot, 1729-09-05/5, Petition of Edelmaire, 1730-11-13/2, RSC.

³¹ Étienne Périer and Jacques de La Chaise to Directors of the Compagnie, 30 March 1728, C13, A11, fols. 97-101.

³² Petition of Fleuriau, 1738-04-11/1, RSC. At least for New Orleans, Daniel Usner's assertion that "the French relied heavily on local Indian nations for restitution of marooned Africans" seems overstated. Usner, "African Captivity to American Slavery," 44.

³³ For examples of runaways caught by soldiers, see Petition of Julien Gaultier, 1730-07-28/2, Interrogation of François, 1748-05-18/3, Investigation against Mr. Battar, 1751-06-15/3, Interrogation of François, 1764-08-10/1, RSC. See also Vidal, "The Streets, the Barracks," 47.

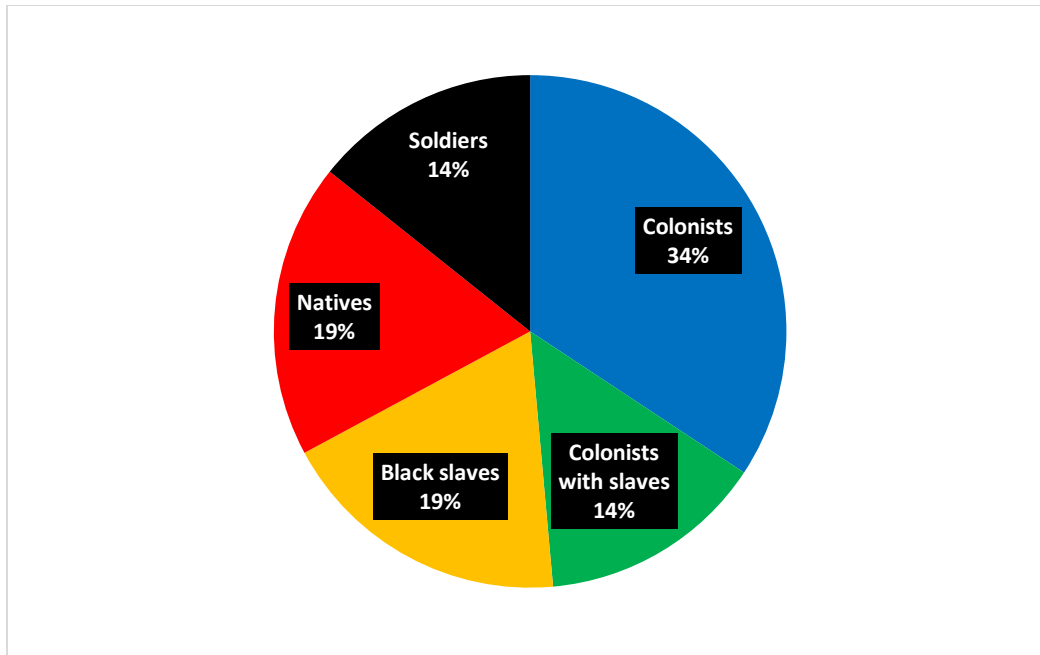


Figure 17. Slave catchers per number of runaways captured (n=35).

Still, two thirds of runaways were caught neither by soldiers nor Native warriors but rather by their owners, other colonists, their slaves, or a combination thereof (figure 17). The few free people of color never played an instrumental role as slave catchers in French Louisiana as they did in many slave societies around the Caribbean, where they formed permanent units like Saint-Domingue's *maréchaussée* to fight off maroons.³⁴ Instead, the Mississippi slaveholders relied on

³⁴ Jean Tarrade, "Affranchis et gens de couleur libres à la Guyane à la fin du XVIIIe siècle, d'après les minutes des notaires," *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer* 49, no. 174 (1962): 86; René Chartrand, "Black Corps in the British West Indies, 1793–1815," *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* 76 (1998): 253-254; Stewart R. King, "The *Maréchaussée* of Saint- Domingue: Balancing the Ancien Régime and Modernity," *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 5, no. 2 (2004); John D. Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint- Domingue* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 100-107; Crystal Eddins and Amy M. Johnson, "Repression, Revolt, and Racial Politics. Maroons in Early Eighteenth-Century Saint Domingue and Jamaica," *Revue d'histoire haïtienne* 1 (2019): 29-63.

the cooperation of other enslaved people to retrieve their chattel in exchange for cash payments.³⁵ This informal system of slave catching was facilitated by two legal provisions instituted by the Louisiana Code Noir, which threatened free Blacks with re-enslavement for aiding fugitives and gave slaveowners the right to search any property for their runaways.³⁶

5.2 Statistical Portrait of Enslaved Runaways

The sample of 197 individual runaways found in colonial records lends itself to statistical calculations that, combined with qualitative evidence from court documents, illuminate the impact of gender, age, and ethnicity on the practice of *marronage*. The only information to be systematically included about the fugitives was their sex—if only indirectly, due to the gendered nature of French grammar. The male/female ratio appears strikingly similar to those observed in other slave societies in the early American South. Women were twice to three times less likely to desert in Louisiana just as they were in Virginia or South Carolina, where men accounted for 75 to 85 percent through the early nineteenth-century even as their slave populations reached an almost even gender balance (table 1).³⁷ Gwendolyn Midlo Hall’s extensive database *Afro-Louisiana History and Genealogy* identifies 41 percent of all individuals enslaved during the

³⁵ The exceptional case examined in Section 7.2 provides some rare evidence of those otherwise largely undocumented payments.

³⁶ Dawdy, “The Burden of Louis Congo and the Evolution of Savagery in Colonial Louisiana,” 65n.9.

³⁷ Data compiled from Hall, “Slave database”; Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry*, New edition edition (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 82; Daniel Meaders, *Dead or Alive: Fugitive Slaves and White Indentured Servants before 1830* (New York: Garland Pub., 1993), 292; Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 211; James Dunwoody Brownson De Bow, ed., *Statistical View of the United States...* (A.O.P. Nicholson, Public Printer, 1854), 86. Costa, ed., “The Geography of Slavery in Virginia.”

French regime as female, yet women represented only 15 percent of documented fugitives. Female runaways were also markedly younger than men: 24 on average as compared to 31, and none was over 35, whereas a fourth of their male counterparts had reached that age (figure 18). This age and gender gap resulted partly from the sexual division of enslaved labor, since most of the tasks involving geographic mobility (e.g., rowing, hunting, carrying messages, herding cattle) were assigned to men.³⁸ Childcare duties also limited the mobility of older women. The only runaway family in the archives of French Louisiana is mentioned in a 1766 estate inventory. Among the deceased's human property, the document listed a twenty-five-year-old Black mother hiding in the wooden swamp of Barataria, south of New Orleans, with her two-year-old daughter and her sixty-year old husband. The woman had likely initiated this family *marronage*, since she was valued at 1,200 *livres* only, well below market price, "because of her bad runaway habits."³⁹ Women rarely absconded in larger groups, and there are no incidents of two woman running away together. By contrast, a third of them ran away in pairs with a male fugitive.

³⁸ These statistical calculations rely on the 197 runaways identified in French colonial sources, whose information supplement the data from Hall, "Slave database." For sex ratios among runaway slaves in other colonies, see Marvin L. Michael Kay and Lorin Lee Cary, "They Are Indeed the Constant Plague of Their Tyrants': Slave Defence of a Moral Economy in Colonial North Carolina, 1748–1772," *Slavery & Abolition* 6, no. 3 (1985): 11; Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 211–12. On the geographic mobility required of slave labor, see Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans*.

³⁹ Inventory of Jacques Langliche's estate, 1766-08-19/2, RSC.

Table 2. Compared sex ratio among runaways and slave populations of three colonies.

	Estimated percentage of female slaves	Percentage of female runaways
Louisiana	1720-1769: 41 %	1720-1769: 15%
Virginia	1735: 43% 1775: 47%	1736-1803: 15%
South Carolina	1735: 38% 1775: 45%	1732-1801: 25%

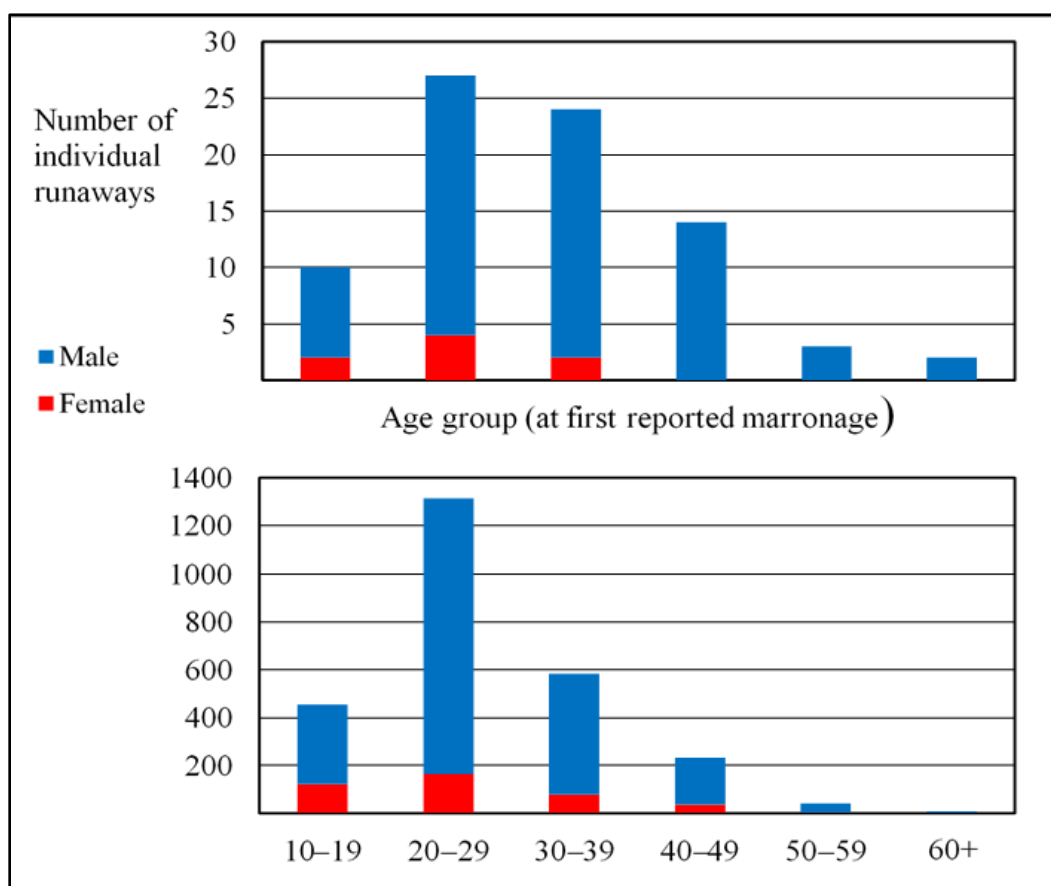


Figure 18. Runaways' age and sex in Louisiana, 1720-1767, and Virginia, 1736-1803.

A few enslaved women found refuge with Frenchmen, either as their concubine or as their servant, perhaps in the hope that they would help them purchase their freedom. In spite of the slaveholders' accusations of abduction against those who harbored their human property, the evidence suggests that enslaved women took an active part in those flights. In 1751 New Orleans, for instance, a mulatta teenager named Charlotte ran away repeatedly, first from her owner, the military officer Pierre Henry Derneville, and then from the authorities. Derneville accused a white merchant captain from Martinique named Battar, who was temporarily stationed in the city, of seducing and harboring his slave.⁴⁰ Since meeting Charlotte on a previous visit to Louisiana two years prior, Battar had been writing her "letters where he called her a hundred times adorable and promised ... to purchase her freedom."⁴¹ Using the polysemic French term *débauché*, which implied that Battar both depraved Charlotte and deprived him of her labor, Derneville denounced the captain's libertinage as well as the threat of desertion in a colony where workers were in short supply. "You do not ignore," he reminded the Council, "that several slaves of the country have been abducted, some are still in Havana; soldiers and inhabitants have also been abducted and this will keep happening unless severe punishments are made to restrain those robbers." The councilors would have been especially receptive to these arguments as they had recently recorded the aforementioned police ordinance supplementing the 1724 Code Noir, through which Governor

⁴⁰ For a detailed analysis of the Derneville-Battar dispute, which draws slightly different conclusions, see Spear, *Race, Sex, and Social Order*, 82–84.

⁴¹ "Extrait des registres des audiences du Conseil Supérieur de La Louisiane," 3 July 1751, F3, 243, fols. 93-94. The first name of Battar, as he spelled his patronym, was not recorded, whose first name. He offered to purchase Charlotte for 1,000 *écus*. This sum would have been worth about 3,000 *livres*, a price only fetched by the most valuable slaves like male artisans and young women probably purchased as concubines, whether their new owners emancipated them or not. On early modern French currencies, see Thomas Fressin, "Convertisseur de monnaie d'Ancien Régime," <http://convertisseur-monnaie-ancienne.fr/>. For two rare examples of female slaves sold for over 3,000 *livres*, see Sale of Indigenous slave Françoise by "the woman Chotard" to Mr. Dubourg, 1762-10-23/1, Sale of mulatta slave Geneviève by François Trepagnier to Louis Barbay alias Sans Chagrin, 1758-05-01/1, RSC.

Vaudreuil and *Commissaire-ordonnateur* Michel sought to impose a stricter control over slave mobility. The ordinance blamed disorder in the colony on slaves “allowed to roam freely at all times and especially at night” and enjoined all whites to stop them. “Traveling negroes and other slaves” would be taken to jail and punished the next morning unless they carried a written permission.⁴² The 1751 regulations also reaffirmed that assisting runaways was a crime, for which free Blacks could be re-enslaved and whites theoretically punished by galley sentences if they were repeat offenders or unable to pay the fines they were condemned to.⁴³

While the exact nature of the relationship between Charlotte and Battar can only be speculated, it energized her to run away from her owner and to seek help from the ship captain. In Louisiana, enslaved Black women who forged relationships with white men other than their owners enjoyed neither manumission, informal rights, nor even the social acceptance of their unions, which almost never became public. Unlike *ménagères* in the Antilles and Indigenous concubines in frontier settlements, women like Charlotte could hardly improve their social position in New Orleans by trading domestic, emotional, and sexual labor in those unequal and violently exploitative situations.⁴⁴ But Louisiana’s enslaved people were likely to hear about them via the colony’s frequent exchanges with the islands, carried by people like the Martinican ship captain Battar, who would also have been more inclined to assist Charlotte because he was an outsider.

⁴² “Règlement sur la police,” Preamble and Articles 24 and 27, C13, A35, fols. 39-41 and 48-49.

⁴³ “Code Noir,” March 1724, Article 34, A, 23, fol. 50; “Règlement sur la police,” C13, A35, Article 10, fol. 44; Commentary on the same, undated, C13, A35, fol. 54. In practice, the Superior Council only fined white offenders, including a French boatswain convicted of harboring another female runaway in 1767. See Judgment against Louis Jourdan and Catherine, 1767-08-29/1, RSC and Section 6.1.

⁴⁴ In the French Antilles, writes Bernard Moitt, “conjugal relations were behind most of the *libre de savane* or *libre de fait* manumissions—an unofficial and incomplete freedom granted by slaveowners mostly to mixed-race slave women and their children without the authority of the state.” See Bernard Moitt, *Women and Slavery in the French Antilles, 1635-1848* (Indiana University Press, 2001), xvii (quote), 151-166; Emily Clark, *The Strange History of the American Quadroon: Free Women of Color in the Revolutionary Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 46-47; Ellis, “The Petite Nations,” 117-25; Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans*, 274-81.

Derneville refused to sell the young woman and sued her suitor with the support of the attorney general, one of Louisiana's most powerful men and his father-in-law. After a *marronage* of almost a month, Charlotte was arrested on the street, imprisoned, and chained. She soon broke her fetters and escaped with Battar's help. A week later, soldiers searched the captain's lodging it and found Charlotte half naked in his bedroom, hiding behind a mosquito net. In Battar's absence, some of his shipmates and houseguests had tried to hide her. They now begged Charlotte's captors to let her go, arguing she was only waiting for his return so that he could take the fugitive to the governor and his wife, who vowed to obtain her pardon from Derneville. Charlotte even offered them a bribe of 100 *piastres*—or 500 *livres*, a considerable sum equivalent to a year's worth of their combined wages—not to turn her to Derneville, who “would slash her with his whip.” When the soldiers refused, Charlotte made one last desperate escape by bolting to the next house, where they apprehended her.

Only then did the judges of the Superior Council, who had initially dismissed the case because all witnesses against Battar were Black slaves who had aided Charlotte's *marronage*, condemn him to compensate her owner for her absence. Derneville and the attorney general wished to see the captain hanged yet their diatribes against Battar's “pleasures and debaucheries” failed to convince the councilors that this interracial liaison warranted a criminal punishment.⁴⁵ Moreover, another account of the affair revealed some troubling details missing from the court proceedings. According to *commissaire-ordonnateur* Honoré-Gabriel Michel, Derneville's family had long been mistreating the teenager, whom they forced to prostitute herself in the city. Their continuous harassment of Battar, argued Michel, had nothing to do with their zeal to suppress

⁴⁵ “Code Noir,” Article 34, A, 23, fol. 50

miscegenation or *marronage*. Instead, Derneville and the officers were simply driven by greed and a personal vendetta against the ship captain, from whom they sought to extract as much money as possible as he tried to buy his enslaved sweetheart. Lastly, Derneville was said to be Charlotte's illegitimate father—as she would confirm in her will a half-century later, he had purchased her from the owner of her Black mother.⁴⁶

Although not unique, Charlotte's situation as the enslaved child of her owner and the mixed-race concubine of another Frenchman was exceptional, but it hardly relieved the weight of her chains, which she showed a remarkable resolve to break—literally. The affair was set in motion by Battar's interest in the young woman, and the male-authored documents privilege the agency, perspective, and voices of white men. Yet Charlotte took the initiative at every turn. She ran away over and over, avoided detection for weeks, exhorted Battar to buy her freedom and seek her pardon, before attempting to bribe her captors with money she could only have received from her suitor. Charlotte demonstrated a shrewd understanding of colonial society, which helped her secure the assistance of Blacks and whites during and even after her *marronage*. First, the governor's promise to demand Derneville's clemency if the runaway returned aimed to help a fellow officer retrieve his human property and to whitewash the scandal of his illegitimate fatherhood. Second, civil officials appalled by the military's continual abuses of power showed leniency toward Charlotte and her suitor. Lastly, Battar's houseguests claimed to have offered the bribe that every soldier testified came from Charlotte—a perjury evidently intended to diminish her wrongdoing in the eyes of her judges. This support may have dissuaded the court from sentencing her to a public punishment, although it did not allow Charlotte to escape New Orleans or Derneville. Two

⁴⁶ Michel to the Minister, 15 July 1751, C13, A35, fol. 283.

decades later, however, the same fortitude, gumption, and social connections revealed by her *marronage*, along with the legal opportunities opened by the Spanish regime, enabled a middle-aged “Carlotta Derneville” to purchase her freedom and that of her son, and to accumulate property including several slaves of her own. Very few cases of female *marronage* were as thoroughly documented as Charlotte’s, and even fewer fugitive slaves went on to join the ranks of Louisiana’s free people of color, but similar factors enabled other enslaved women to desert their owners and challenge the terms of their bondage. Charlotte’s mixed-race probably facilitated her accomplishments, but only two other runaways, both male, were described as “mulatto,” which suggests that the enslaved offspring of Europeans may have relied on other strategies than *marronage* to better their lives.

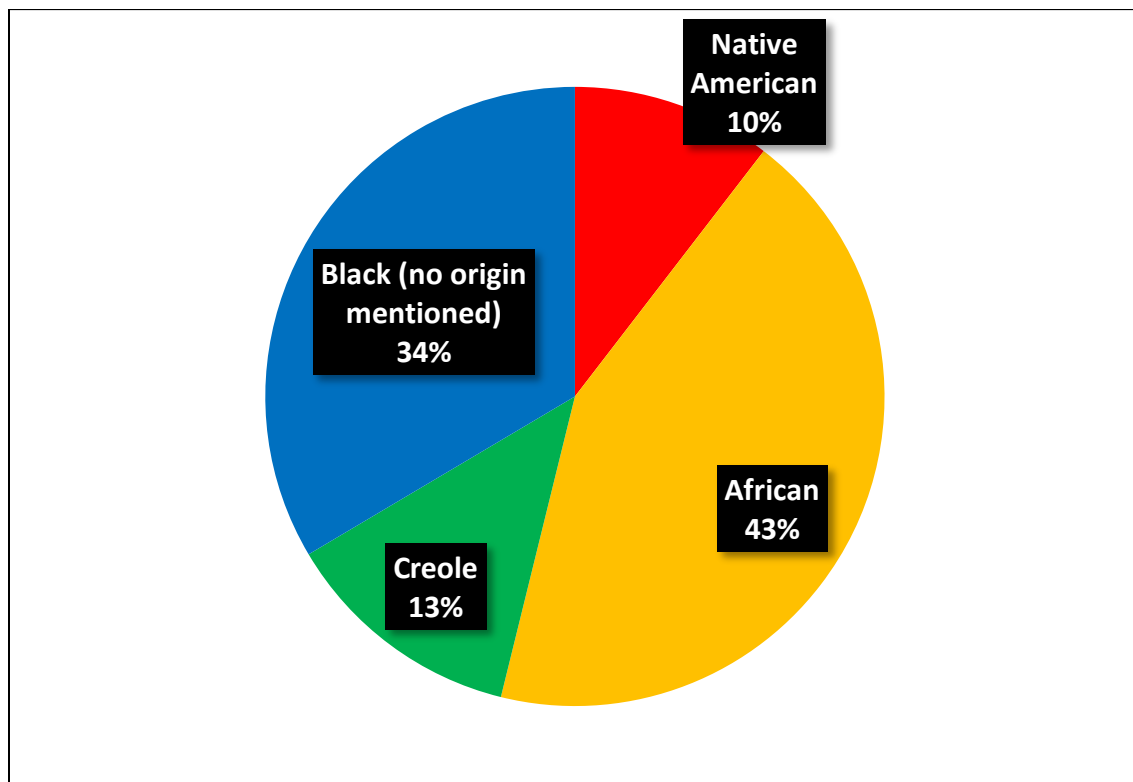


Figure 19. Known origins of enslaved runaways.

The runaways' origins, when they can be ascertained, reflect the ethnic composition and evolution of Louisiana's enslaved population. Among 175 fugitives of known origin, 10 percent were Native Americans, 43 percent African-born, 13 percent Creoles, i.e. Afro-descendants born in North America or the Caribbean, and 34 percent Black of unknown origin. As among slaves as a whole, the vast majority of runaways were Black: 90 percent of runaways were Africans and Afro-Americans (figure 19). Following the transportation of 6,000 African captives between 1719 and 1731 by the *Compagnie des Indes*, while it administered the colony, the numbers of Black slaves grew rapidly, and the ratio of Native fugitives dropped. Louisiana's servile population experienced a rapid creolization after 1731, when the transatlantic slave trade ended as the *Compagnie* retroceded Louisiana to the King. Ten years later, a local report found that two thirds of the enslaved were American born. Yet the proportion of Africans among runaways remained surprisingly high during the nearly half-century covered by French judicial records: two thirds of Black fugitives originated from the Bight of Benin (Fon, Mina, Nago), West Central Africa (Congo), and especially Senegambia (Senegal, Bambara). Only in the 1760s did the ratio of runaways identified as Creoles become substantial, an anomaly partly explained by the large number of Black deserters of unknown origin, since most of these must have been Creole (figure 20). French documents were indeed less likely to mention the increasingly common fact that a slave was born in Louisiana than to mention the origins of Africans, whose linguistic, cultural, and

social background provided important clues for slaveholders and officials to recognize them and predict their behavior—or so they hoped.⁴⁷

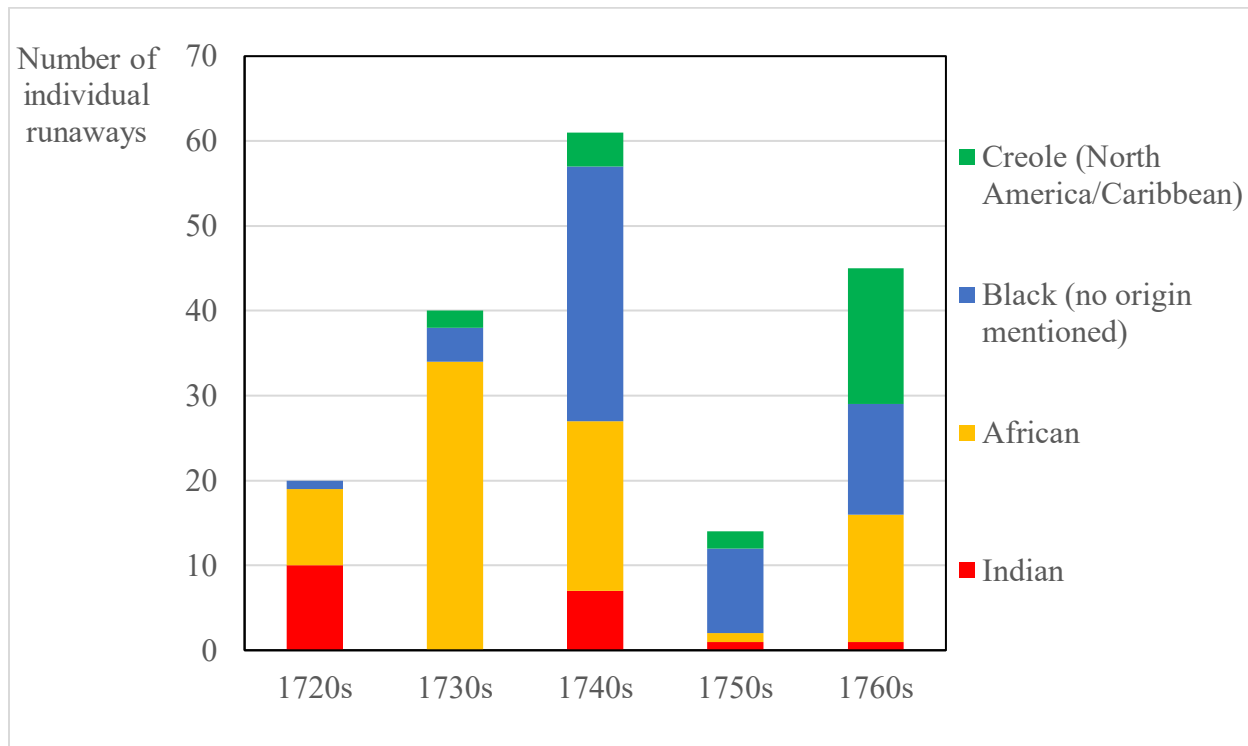


Figure 20. Known origins of identified enslaved runaways, per decade (n=175).

Although the proportion of Indigenous runaways decreased over time, it remained larger than the importance of Natives among the colony’s entire enslaved population. In the 1720s, Indians represented 10 percent of all slaves but half the fugitives. The latter ratio was probably even higher, since it does not account for a dozen unidentified runaways reported in 1727 at a

⁴⁷ Historians of the African diaspora have long relied on the alleged ethnicities or “nations” of slaves mentioned in French colonial records to investigate their origins. See Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities*, 41, 44. It is also plausible that the flights of Creole slaves were reported and prosecuted less frequently.

maroon village called Natanapallé, the only known community of this kind in the history of French Louisiana, which was mostly if not entirely settled by Natives.⁴⁸ In the following decades, by contrast, hardly 5 percent of fugitives were Indigenous, yet they were still overrepresented. The database *Afro-Louisiana History and Genealogy* lists 6 percent of all people enslaved under the French regime as Natives, in successive censuses for the colony their demographic share fell to 4.5 percent in 1737, 3 percent around 1745, and just above 1 percent in 1763.⁴⁹

The overrepresentation of Indigenous *marronage* may seem to validate the judgment of French authorities who considered Natives a greater flight risk than Africans, since they were familiar with Louisiana's environment and could easily run away to nearby villages. As early as 1706, long before the arrival of the first slave ships, governor Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville explained that Louisiana's first settlers asked for African slaves because "the Indian allies of the French bring slaves who are quite suitable for farming, but whose facility to desert prevents colonists from employing them."⁵⁰ Indigenous captives, however, usually belonged to nations in

⁴⁸ Natanapallé has been described as a "coalescence of Negro and Indian runaway slaves," but there is no tangible evidence of an African presence and all known members of this community were Native Americans. See Usner, "From African Captivity to American Slavery," 43 (quote); Natanapallé has been described as a "coalescence of Negro and Indian runaway slaves," but there is no tangible evidence of an African presence and all known members of this community were Native Americans. See Usner, "African Captivity to American Slavery," 43 (quote); Usner, *Indians, Settlers & Slaves*, 58–59; Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 98; Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 88; Mária Amentino and Manolo Fiorentino, "Runaways and Quilombolas in the Americas," in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery: Volume 3, AD 1420-AD 1804*, ed. David Eltis and Stanley L. Engerman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 722.

⁴⁹ Population figures compiled from Hall, ed., "Slave database"; "Recensement des habitants et concessionnaires de La Nouvelle-Orléans et lieux circonvoisins," 24 November 1721 and « Recensement général des habitations et habitants de la colonie de la Louisiane, » 1 January 1726, 5DPPC, 16, cited in Louisiana Historical Quarterly 13, no. 2 (1930): 214-220; "Récapitulation du recensement général de la Louisiane en 1737," C13, C4, fol. 197; "Mémoire sur l'état de la colonie de la Louisiane en 1746," MD, Amérique, 2, fol. 211; "Récapitulation générale des recensements ci-joints faits à la Nouvelle-Orléans," 1763, Archivo General de Indias, Audiencia de Santo Domingo, Legajo 2595, fol. 589 (microfilm copy, Historic New Orleans Collection, Williams Research Center); Surrey, *The Commerce of Louisiana*, 230.

⁵⁰ Summary of letter from Bienville, 28 July 1706, C13, A1, fol. 522. See also Périet to Raguet, 12 May 1728, C13, A11, fol. 7.

conflict with the French or their allies and often found themselves enslaved in colonial settlements far distant from their land and their people. In 1748, for example, a Meskwaki (Fox) man named Cocomina, whose nation lived in present-day Wisconsin, led a group of Indigenous slaves away from New Orleans. One of his companions, called Canesy, likely came from the Southern plains between Texas and Oklahoma.⁵¹ Cocomina's band took advantage of a civil war among the neighboring Choctaw Indians, France's most important allies in the Lower Mississippi, to seek refuge among members of the Western, British-allied faction returning from a raid against the German Coast plantations, thirty miles upriver from New Orleans. Outside of the exceptional circumstances that made this extraordinary escape possible, however, both Black and Indigenous fugitives were more likely to be captured than sheltered by the Native groups who surrounded colonial settlements. Catching and returning runaways—Indigenous or African slaves, but also military deserters—was a crucial diplomatic strategy, since it enabled the Choctaws and Louisiana's *petite nations* to gain leverage in their negotiations with the French.⁵²

It is therefore dubious that Native Americans had more facility to desert than Africans, contrary to the claims of officials eager to promote the transatlantic slave trade and to hinder the commerce of Indigenous captives, which threatened the colony's vital but fragile network of Indian alliances. Enslaved Natives, who stood out among Black and white residents, may simply

⁵¹ Interrogations of François and Joseph, 1748-05-18/3 and 1748-05-26/1, RSC. On the location of the Canesy Indians, see Claude-Marin Saugrain and Du Moulinet, *Dictionnaire universel de la France ancienne et moderne, et de la Nouvelle France [...]* (Paris: chez Saugrain, pere, 1726), 1213–14; Guillaume De L'Isle, *Carte de la Louisiane et du cours du Mississipi dressée sur un grand nombre de mémoires entr'autres sur ceux de Mr. le Maire* [map], scale not given (Paris: Chez l'auteur, 1718), <https://www.loc.gov/item/2001624908/>.

⁵² Daniel H. Usner, "American Indians in Colonial New Orleans," in *Powhatan's Mantle: Indians in the Colonial Southeast*, ed. Peter H. Wood, Gregory A. Waselkov, and M. Thomas Hatley (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 169; Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 115–16; Ellis, "The Petite Nations," 211–12; Yevan Terrien, "More Dangerous to the Colony Than the Enemy Himself: Military Labor, Desertion, and Imperial Rule in French Louisiana, ca. 1715-1760," in *A Global History of Runaways: Workers, Mobility, and Capitalism, 1600-1850*, ed. Marcus Rediker, Titas Chakraborty, and Matthias van Rossum (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 96–114.

appear to have run away more often because they were easier to locate and to arrest. Indigenous captives were also the only ones who absconded in groups more frequently (59 percent) than by themselves, and the widespread concern that they could help Africans escape or incite them to revolt motivated local authorities to suppress their desertions (figure 21). Implicitly, the overrepresentation of Indigenous runaways in judicial records confirms that most *marronage* performed by Afro-Louisianans was considered inevitable and part of a normal labor relationships in a slave society.

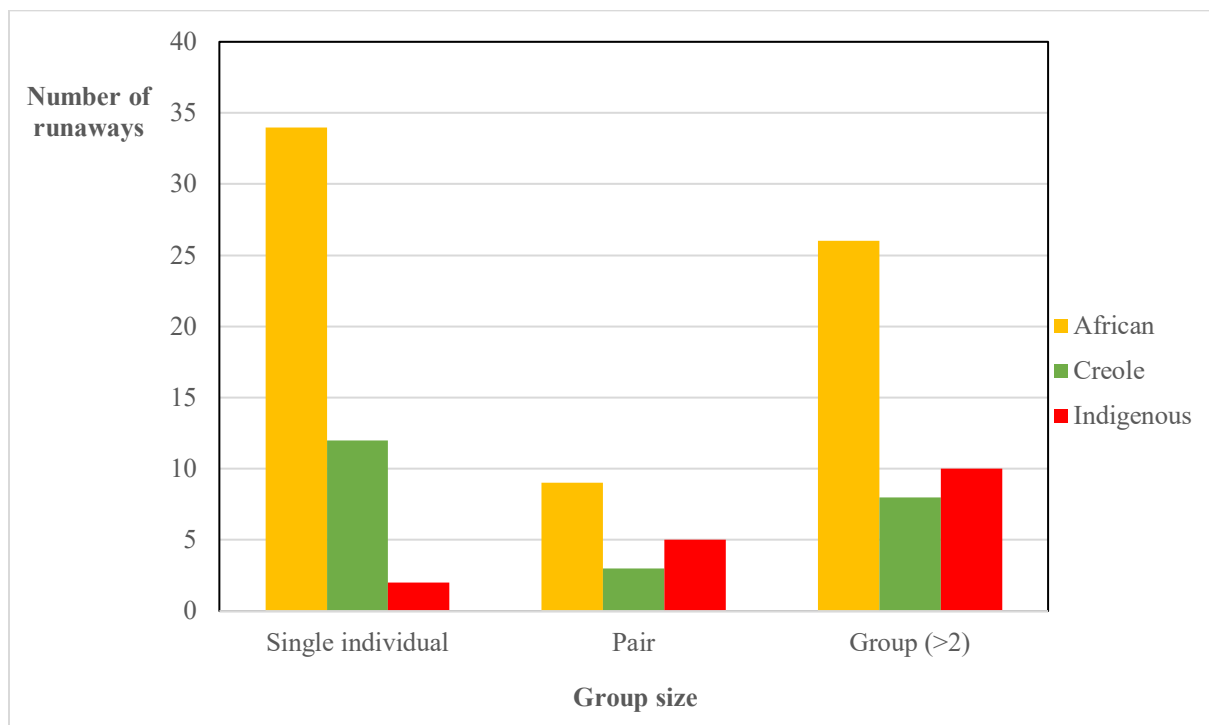


Figure 21. Group size of enslaved runaways, per origin.

Studies of Northern American slavery have shown that the actions of African runaways, especially those transported most recently, displayed distinctive patterns. Compared to their Creole counterparts, they deserted more frequently, were more likely to depart in groups or to join maroon communities, and disproportionately associated with other Africans. With limited resources and social connections, African newcomers found strength in numbers as they escaped, endured, and recreated communities away from colonial settlements. By contrast, most Creole runaways deserted to visit friends and relatives or hide among urban free Blacks, which relied on more discrete forms of cooperation and was better achieved by absconding alone before returning on their own.⁵³ Such a discrepancy is hardly noticeable in the case of French Louisiana, where the *marronages* of Africans and their American-born descendants appear largely similar. There is no significant difference, for instance, between the proportion of Africans and Creoles runaways who deserted alone, in pairs, or in larger groups of three or more. The particularities of Louisiana's slave population help account for such similarities between the two groups. Because of the early interruption of the slave trade in 1731, subsequent African arrivals to the Mississippi remained scarce, so that few runaways were newcomers after this date. Furthermore, because enslaved adults usually lived with their children and their partners, Creole men and women did not need to flee to visit them, and there were scarcely any free Blacks for runaways to join even in Louisiana's only city, New Orleans.

⁵³ Morgan, "Colonial South Carolina Runaways," 59; Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619-1877* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2003), 44-45; Betty Wood, *Slavery in Colonial Georgia, 1730-1775* (University of Georgia Press, 2007), 173-87; Sylviane A. Diouf, *Slavery's Exiles: The Story of the American Maroons* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 39-51. For an assertive analysis that "relates degree and content of acculturation to particular forms of resistance," see Michael Mullin, *Africa in America: Slave Acculturation and Resistance in the American South and the British Caribbean, 1736-1831* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 269 (quote), 268-77.

The African/Creole/Indigenous ratio among runaways therefore reflected the transformations of Louisiana's slave trade and the demography of its unfree population, rather than some cultural predisposition to *marronage*. This does not mean, however, that their origins did not shape their motivations, resources, or strategies. According to Gwendolyn Hall's pioneering work, the ubiquitous Bambaras in particular relied on their shared ethnicity not only to sustain social ties in the New World, but also to organize forms of collective resistance ranging from desertion to armed insurrection.⁵⁴ Africanists and specialists of the slave trade have cautioned against this diasporic approach, notably due to the ambiguous nature of ethnic categories like "Bambara." Yet the enslaved themselves revealed the importance of such cultural connections, especially for recent arrivals.⁵⁵ In October 1764, a "Congo" man named Fribustier explained that both times he absconded he lived on the same plantation, whose owner employed him and allegedly wanted to buy him. Unprompted, the fugitive explained "he stayed at [the planter's] place because he has Blacks of his nation."⁵⁶ Just a few days later, Marguerite, another Congo runaway, admitted that she too fled to a nearby plantation, where she shared the cabin of a fellow enslaved countryman.⁵⁷ By contrast, newcomers with limited connections with diasporic, creole, or mixed communities must have been more likely to get caught. Two months before Marguerite, a male runaway had been arrested on the same plantation, whose slaves, he told the court, "conspired to take him"—a twist on the common complaint among enslavers that their chattel plotted against them.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 96-118.

⁵⁵ Caron, "Bambara Slaves and African Ethnicity"; Law, "Ethnicity and the Slave Trade"; Northrup, "Igbo and Myth Igbo."

⁵⁶ Interrogation of Fribustier, 1764-10-19/1, RSC.

⁵⁷ Interrogation of Marguerite, 1764-10-23/1, RSC.

⁵⁸ Interrogation of François, 1764-08-10/1, RSC.

5.3 Strategies, Routes, and Destinations

Among the 197 runaways mentioned in French colonial sources, the owners of 15 were unidentified. The other 182 belonged to 109 different owners, a very wide distribution that reflected the limited concentration of slave ownership in the colony, compared to Caribbean slave societies for instance. Only three fugitives belonged to either of the largest slaveholders in the colony, namely the government (the Compagnie des Indes then the King), the Catholic Church (Jesuits, Ursulines, and Capuchins), and the wealthiest man in French Louisiana, the planter and royal contractor Claude Villars Du Breuil, who together owned over 650 slaves by the end of the French regime.⁵⁹ This was partly due to better living and working conditions, since most of them were not exploited in staple crop agriculture but employed at lighter tasks as artisans (e.g. Blacksmith, mason, carpenter), domestic workers, gardeners, or dairy farmers. Moreover, enslaved men and women on those large estates were less likely to lack food or clothing and found it easier to create families and communities. The religious orders, in particular, favored slave marriages and kept families together.⁶⁰ Just as importantly, however, the Church, the Compagnie, the King, and the royal contractor may simply have disciplined runaways outside of any judicial proceedings, since they could rely on colonial troops and faced even less scrutiny from the Superior Council than ordinary colonists. In 1727, for instance, an Ursuline nun recently arrived in New

⁵⁹ For the numbers of slaves respectively owned by the Company (then the King), the Church, and Dubreuil, see Edmé-Gatien Salmon to the Minister, 16 January 1732, C13, A15, fol. 13; Villiers du Terrage, *Les Dernières Années*, 187–88; Ingersoll, “Free Blacks in a Slave Society,” 178–79; Clark, *Masterless Mistresses*, 169; Ulrich L. Lehner, *The Catholic Enlightenment: The Forgotten History of a Global Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 202; Henry P. Dart, ed., “The Career of Dubreuil in French Louisiana,” *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1935): 291–331.

⁶⁰ Emily Clark, ed., *Voices from an Early American Convent: Marie Madeleine Hachard and the New Orleans Ursulines, 1727–1760* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 17; Clark, *Masterless Mistresses*, 167–77.

Orleans wrote of the desertion of fourteen or fifteen Black slaves of the Compagnie in a letter to her father, but this collective *marronage* was never mentioned in any official document.⁶¹

By contrast, three other important slaveholders owned 15 percent of all documented fugitive: six belonged to the previously mentioned planter Chaperon, nine to Michel Brosset, who operated a tar manufacture on Lake Pontchartrain in addition to his plantation below New Orleans, and fourteen had run away together from the estate of military officer Barthélemy de Macarty. All three slaveowners were frequently mentioned in legal documents because their commercial activities brought them in regular contact with the court. Yet their overrepresentation in runaway records also resulted from especially harsh conditions imposed on their human chattel. There is evidence that enslaved people at Macarty's and especially Chaperon's were brutally mistreated.⁶² According to a Frenchman's eyewitness account, since Chaperon had burned a slave alive in an oven he had "become the bugbear of the Slaves, and when they are disobedient to their masters, they threaten them by saying: *I will sell you to Chaperon.*"⁶³ As for Brosset, he operated some of the tar factories across lake Pontchartrain, a remote and hazardous work environment where slaves were often hired out or exiled as a form of punishment.⁶⁴ While many among those displaced laborers sought to escape their banishment, runaways from New Orleans and the surrounding plantations looking for a hideout and a complacent employer fled to the tar works. This double movement helps explain why 22 percent of the runaways with a recorded occupation produced naval stores, a surprisingly large ratio given the limited number of slaves engaged in this modest

⁶¹ Marie Madeleine Hachard to her father, 27 October 1727, in Marie-Madeleine Hachard, *Relation du voyage des dames religieuses Ursulines de Rouen à la Nouvelle-Orléans* (Paris: Antoine Le Prevost, 1728), 43.

⁶² Interrogation of Laurent Sainba alias Cimba et al, 1764-01-25/1, RSC.

⁶³ Jean-Bernard Bossu, *Nouveaux Voyages aux Indes occidentales*, vol. 1 (Paris: Le Jay, 1768), 18, cited in Spear, *Race, Sex, and Social Order*, 52-53 (emphasis in original). See also Ingersoll, *Mammon and Manon*, 100.

⁶⁴ Interrogation of Cezar, 1764-07-08/1, RSC.

business. Yet the judicial records of Louisiana rarely mentioned the fugitives' skills or occupations—unlike runaway ads, which contained biographical details to facilitate their identification. Among the 36 whose employment can be ascertained, 54 percent labored as farm hands and 11 percent in woodworking. The small number of runaways working in the city reflected the limited growth of New Orleans, as well as an archival bias. Urban slaves were less likely to appear in formal proceedings and the authorities, being more familiar with them, were also less likely to record their occupation.

This underrepresentation of urban fugitives makes it even more remarkable that slaves typically absconded by themselves, traveling only short distances or hiding in plain sight in the same vicinity. By contrast with military desertion, *marronage* predominantly took the form of individual flights. While less than 2 percent of deserting soldiers left on their own, nearly half of all fugitive slaves absconded alone, 17 percent in pairs, and 37 percent in groups of three or more. This contrast resulted from the fact that soldiers and the enslaved pursued different goals through different strategies. Both needed to avoid detection, but military deserters left in groups to maximize the chances of a successful, definitive escape with little hope of remaining unreported by their officers or negotiating their return as slaves did after temporary absences. Another incentive for enslaved men and women to abscond by themselves was to avoid being accused of more serious crimes such as “seducing” other into running away, forming maroon gangs of robbers, or even conspiring to revolt against the French.

The dozen runaways who found a permanent escape from bondage by leaving Louisiana, however, relied on strength in numbers just as the soldiers did—and in one case at least they even cooperated with military fugitives. An important reason for their collective strategy was the need to obtain and operate a ship, since all those escapes took place at sea. Eleven Black men and women

who ended up in Cuba in the 1740s after escaping from new Orleans, the only ones known to escape successfully through maritime *marronage* and border crossing, a strategy much more widespread in the Antilles due to their amphibian geography and imperial fragmentation.⁶⁵ In that sense at least, the only Caribbean settlement in Louisiana was not New Orleans, but Mobile, whose bay opened on the Gulf of Mexico and was the first stop from Spanish Florida. While deserting soldiers acted as trailblazers in reaching new destinations—some were found in Havana as early as 1707—the enslaved could gather information about maritime routes from sailors, traders, and other bondspeople imported from the West Indies. Unless they managed to enlist a skilled mariner, the surest way for runaways to reach the Antilles or any other Atlantic destination was to make their way to Pensacola by following the Gulf Coast toward the rising sun, and to find passage on an outgoing vessel.⁶⁶ French officials also alluded to enslaved fugitives from Louisiana heading toward Spanish posts in Texas and Florida, without mentioning numbers or further details.⁶⁷

Successive reports regarding the whereabouts of Manuel, one of the two bondsmen returned from Havana who revealed the presence of Black refugees formerly enslaved in New Orleans, highlight the determination of those defectors and the slaveholders' knowledge of the avenues they followed. Manuel was a serial runaway. He had been missing for two years, after escaping from a cabin where his owner had chained and locked him up with another slave for a

⁶⁵ On maritime *marronage*, see Neville A.T. Hall, "Maritime Maroons: Grand Marronage from the Danish West Indies," *William and Mary Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (1985): 476–98; Isaac Curtis, "Masterless People: Maroons, Pirates, and Commoners," in *The Caribbean : A History of the Region and Its Peoples The Caribbean : A History of the Region and Its Peoples*, ed. Stephan Palmié and Francisco A. Scarano (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2011), 149–62; James Dator, "Between the Mountains and the Sea: The Inter-Imperial Desertion Tradition in the Leeward Archipelago, 1627-1727," in *A Global History of Runaways*, 58–76.

⁶⁶ For military deserters in Cuba, see Minister to François-Ambroise Daubenton, 25 May 1707, B, 29, fol. 262; Pierre Le Blond de la Tour to the Minister, 30 August 1722, C13, A6, fols. 330-331; Analysis of letters to the council no. 2, 24 January 1723, C13, A6, fol. 392; Vaudreuil to the Minister, 18 March 1747, C13, A31, fol. 30. For other fugitives, see Interrogation of Dennis Kelly, 1728-06-03/1, RSC.

⁶⁷ See for instance Kérlerrec to the Minister, 22 October 1757, C13, A39, fol. 284.

previous *marronage*. According to the owner, Manuel's audacious breakout was part of a larger plan involving "several negroes who have plotted to go to Cat Island," halfway between New Orleans and Mobile on the Gulf Coast—an ideal stopover on the way to Spanish Florida, near the site where the mixed gang of deserting soldiers and slaves had once abandoned their bloodied boat.⁶⁸ When Manuel's owner died in 1747, the inventory of his estate listed Manuel along with four other slaves, though merely "for the record" since he had "deserted and is said to have gone to Pensacola." Just a few days earlier, a Frenchman on his way back from Havana informed Louisianans that a ship was rumored to have carried enslaved people from New Orleans to Cuba—whether "taken," purchased, or escaped was unclear.⁶⁹

The distance covered by runaways and the duration of their absences varied greatly depending on their circumstances, but there are very few documented cases of individuals leaving the colony or running away toward Indigenous villages and the interior. Most of the latter were Natives themselves, including the members of the maroon community at Natanapallé, which offers yet another reason to question the trope of Black-Indigenous solidarity in the context of *marronage* (table 2). A few others traveled just as far down the Mississippi Valley toward New Orleans as who fled to Cuba, as they ran away from beatings and overwork in the Illinois Country. Bayou and Mamourou, two African men arrested in 1748 near Pointe Coupée, a hundred miles northwest from the capital, had absconded from Upper Louisiana. For a month, first on foot then in a stolen canoe, they had journeyed six hundred miles downriver in the hope of reaching New Orleans to seek the

⁶⁸ Declaration of Jacques Judice, 1746-08-03/2, RSC.

⁶⁹ Inventory of Judice, 1747-03-14/1, Declaration of Pierre Delisle Dupart, 1747-03-10/3, RSC. The gossip was not unfounded, since the same officer rumored to have sold a slave brought to Havana was himself the owner of a runaway named Jean, who was returned from Cuba with Manuel.

protection of their owner’s mother-in-law, who might have once employed them.⁷⁰ Bayou and Mamourou wished to be sold but their judges sentenced them back to their owner, to be punished “as he should judge proper.”⁷¹

Table 3. Known destinations of Louisiana’s enslaved runaways, 1720-1767.

Destinations reached		Count of runaways
Long distance	Cuba	11
	Toward interior and Indian villages	12
	New Orleans area from other settlements	5
	Total long distance	28
Short distance: around New Orleans and other French settlements		79
Total known destinations		107

Three quarters of the runaways whose destination is known, by contrast, stayed close to the capital and other French settlements for most or all their *marronage*. The physical environment of the Lower Mississippi provided a propitious setting for runaways—heavily wooded, sparsely

⁷⁰ Petition of Raguet, 1748-06-09/3, Interrogations of Bayou and Mamourou, 1748-06-11/1 and 1748-06-11/2, RSC.

⁷¹ Judgment against Bayou and Mamourou, 1748-06-24/2, RSC.

populated, and surrounded by wetlands. Yet most fugitives hid around nearby plantations, either in some other slaves' cabins or in the back of the estates, where the terrain quickly turned to muddy woods known as cypress swamps. Within a few years of the founding of New Orleans, maps already showed the distribution of land concessions along the river, the main buildings (houses, warehouses, slave quarters) clustered near the banks, and the wooden swamps surrounding the plantations (figure 7). Since owners and overseers were reluctant to follow the enslaved into the woods, slaves could lie out there, circulate, congregate, and even work virtually unsupervised. Unlike planters and merchants, who operated their shady businesses in broad daylight in the streets of New Orleans and along its riverfronts, slaves, soldiers, poor whites, and their Indigenous neighbors met in the swampy edges of plantations to trade, barter, and fence stolen goods in a small-scale, underground commerce central to Louisiana's "frontier exchange economy."⁷² Despite numerous regulations to keep them isolated on separate plantations, enslaved men and women regularly interacted in the cypress swamp, including with runaways who lingered around the city for months without being arrested, having learned to navigate the network of secret paths and hidden huts that spread behind the estates, some stored with food, arms, and ammunition.⁷³

⁷² Daniel H. Usner, "The Frontier Exchange Economy of the Lower Mississippi Valley in the Eighteenth Century," *William and Mary Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (1987): 166–92; White, "Geographies of Slave Consumption."

⁷³ For runaways around New Orleans, see Interrogation of Pierrot, 1741-01-11/1, Mr. (Jacques?) Fazende to X, 1745-02-17/2, Declaration by Jacques Cantrelle, 1745-03-15/1, RSC. On swamps, see Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 142–44, 202–3; Diouf, *Slavery's Exiles*, 92–95.

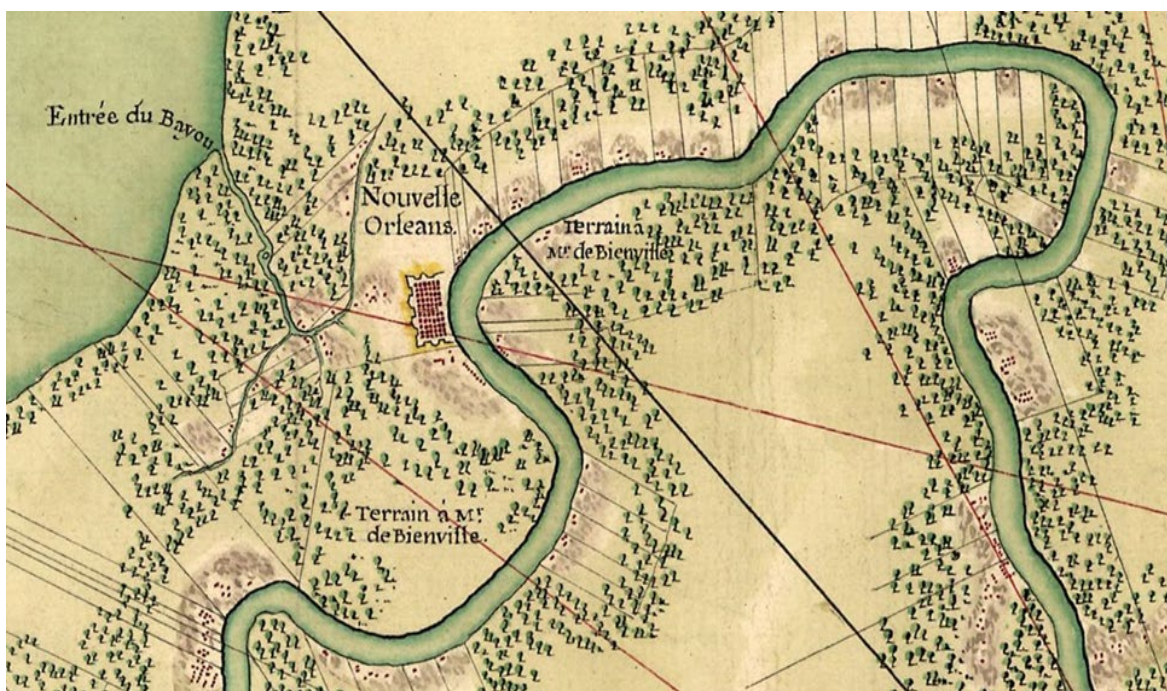


Figure 22. Surroundings of New Orleans, ca. 1722. Detail from “Carte Particulière Du Fleuve [sic] St. Louis [Mississippi River] dix lieües au dessus et au dessous De La Nouvelle Orleans,” Newberry Library, Ayer MS map 30, sheet 80.

The wetlands provided a bountiful food supply for anyone with hunting, fishing, and gathering abilities, which was especially welcome since hunger was a common motive of desertion and killing farm animals was a property crime punished more severely than *marronage* itself. Ironically, Louisiana’s slaveholders were partly responsible for the remarkable surviving skills of underfed bondspeople, who had no choice but to supplement their diet by growing, finding, and killing their own food or selling produce and wood to the colonists. Guns were the most frequently mentioned items during court examinations of suspects and witnesses of *marronage*, not only because they worried judges but also because many male runaways had access to one, which may

be stolen, traded, borrowed, or even supplied by slaveowners who employed them as hunters.⁷⁴ Just as many fugitives insisted they did not have a firearm, but one remarkable characteristic of those items was their circulation: it is often difficult for the reader, as it must have been for the judge, to keep track of whose gun is being discussed, precisely because they kept switching hands and were effectively held in common, providing defense and sustenance for many individuals at once—including women who were never directly associated with them. Armed with rifles as well as knives, axes, and traps, runaways used their environment as a vast commons, which was in itself a challenge to a colonial society founded on the private property of humans and land—as evident in the mapped boundaries of the plantations they were aware of but trampled underfoot in their daily movements (figure 22).

Based on their own statements, the fugitives lived on fish, crawfish, alligator, ducks, egrets, rabbits, muskrats, wildcats, nuts, berries, melons, sweet potatoes, beans, corn, and rice—as well as the taboo farm animals they rarely admitted to killing. The politics of food among the enslaved provide the strongest evidence of the collective resistance to slavery and the solidarity that made it possible for *marronage* to last for years. Runaways tapped into gardens, storehouses, barns, kitchens, and slave cabins, which they effectively treated as part of the slave commons whenever practical, with the assurance that almost anything they consumed was the product of slave labor and the assistance of other bondspeople, who provided shelter, left resources unguarded, and

⁷⁴ Declaration of Jean Prat, 1736-08-29/2, Interrogation of Lafleur, 1738-04-11/2, Interrogation of François, 1748-05-18/3, Declaration of Jean Deslandes, 1748-06-06/3, Interrogation of Basouvant, 1765-10-29/2, Interrogation of Cezar, 1764-07-08/1, Interrogation of Jean, 1764-07-31/1, Interrogation of Louis, 1765-09-07/1, Interrogation of X (fragment), 1767-03-11/1, RSC.

actively shared supplies.⁷⁵ The confidence displayed by some enslaved fugitives and their allies echoes the moral economy historians have identified among slaves in the Antebellum South, which justified theft from slaveholders as a legitimate reappropriation and redistribution of resources they produced.⁷⁶ Individually or in small groups, runaways relied on those shared resources and collective knowledge of their surroundings, through which all enslaved people participated in a common struggle to forge a “rival geography” against the spatial control enforced by their self-proclaimed masters.⁷⁷

5.4 Conclusion

During the half-century of French rule over Afro-Louisianans, successive police regulations failed to prevent slaves from running away, but also from assembling, especially at night, frequenting taverns, trading on their own, riding horses, or carrying guns—all practices which the enslaved strove to maintain as customary. This overview of marronage suggests that this mobility largely escaped state supervision, which does not mean that it was not controlled at all. To a certain extent, slaveholders tolerated desertion and other illicit slave movements in order to organize labor management, to serve their financial interest, and to exercise their domestic sovereignty with limited government intervention. Laws like the Code Noir were not insignificant, but they neither

⁷⁵ See for instance Interrogation of Lafleur, 1738-04-11/2, Interrogation of Charlot alias Kakaracou, 1748-01-10/1, Interrogation of Cupidon, 1765-09-18/2, RSC.

⁷⁶ Michael Kay and Cary, “The Constant Plague”; Alex Lichtenstein, “‘That Disposition to Theft, with Which They Have Been Branded’: Moral Economy, Slave Management, and the Law,” *Journal of Social History* 21, no. 3 (1988): 413–40.

⁷⁷ Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 6–7.

prescribed nor recorded how enslavers and enslaved people viewed and experienced *marronage*. The judicial records of the French Superior Council, by contrast, constitute a crucial source for the social history of slavery in colonial America. While any statistical overview of slave desertion must remain tentative—for it remained a dramatically underreported crime—civil and criminal cases present a sample of evidence that documents a wide range of situations and activities.

More enslaved runaways may have found their way to freedom, for 60 percent of fugitives were not mentioned again after they ran away. In 1751, for instance, five slaves belonging to two different colonists escaped aboard a canoe taken from another. It is impossible to know if the runaways were caught, because the sole record of this incident is a legal dispute between their owners over the compensation owed the boat's proprietor.⁷⁸ Because most *marronage* and its suppression were considered the private business of individual slaveholders, the fugitives' arrests and returns ordinarily went undocumented as well as their desertions. Yet the extant evidence indicates that slaves usually absconded for a limited time, remained relatively close, and sought to ameliorate the conditions of their bondage rather than flee toward an elusive liberation.

Rather than flee to Indian country, maroon communities, or another empire toward this hypothetical freedom, the vast majority of fugitives pursued the improvement of their condition within the colony. For Louisiana's enslaved people, illicit activities like stealing and running away served to protest their conditions, resist bondage, and strike back at enslavers, but also and perhaps foremost to survive traumatic experiences, physically and mentally. This was a political struggle in itself, and one without end, for any rights under slavery remained temporary. As Ira Berlin and Philip Morgan remind us, "the contest did not end with those uneasy bargains, which both sides

⁷⁸ Petition of Nicolas Godefroy Barbin, 1752-07-26/1, RSC.

regarded as temporary truces in a continuing battle, not as the basis of a permanent peace.”⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan, “Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas,” in *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in The Americas*, ed. Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993), 7.

6.0 Negotiating with Their Feet: *Marronage* as Collective Resistance, 1720-1767

In 1764, a few weeks before the official announcement of Louisiana's transfer from France to Spain, the Superior Council sentenced an enslaved Black man to death for theft, housebreaking, and *marronage*. His successive owners called him Louis—like the King after whom the colony was named—but he called himself Foÿ, of the Bambara nation in Senegambia.¹ Foÿ, who was about 35, had formerly been enslaved in Saint-Domingue, then sent to New Orleans, and sold again upriver to the Illinois Country, where he ran away from his brutal exploitation in salt and lead mines. Having returned to New Orleans aboard a stolen pirogue and escaped a first arrest en route, Foÿ managed to roam freely around the capital for nearly nine months. There he survived by disguising his identity, hiring himself out as a day laborer with the alleged permission of invented owners, hunting, as well as pinching food, linen, and clothing. During his interrogation, Foÿ claimed “he was every day in the city, that no one knew him” for a runaway. His trial revealed the extent of his social connections. Along with a wide network of enslaved Africans, including other fugitives, who helped him acquire and fence stolen goods, Foÿ relied on white inhabitants who employed and traded with and him. Foÿ confessed under ruthless torture before the Superior Council. But the testimonies of his associates already provided enough evidence of his crimes against enslavers, whose court only granted him the smallest mercy. The executioner was secretly ordered to strangle the condemned before breaking his body on the wheel ²

¹ On the problematic nature of Bambara ethnicity, see Caron, “Bambara Slaves and African Ethnicity”; Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities*, 96–100.

² Interrogations and sentence of Louis alias Foÿ, 1764-09-10/1-2, RSC.

Foÿ's exploits and tragic fate illuminate several aspects of the slave society that emerged in French Louisiana, including the inhumanity of its judicial system. Most obviously perhaps, this remarkable case of *marronage* reveals how runaways operated in their daily life, and some of the individual and collective strategies they employed to sustain themselves as fugitives. Beyond the resistance of the enslaved, Foÿ's trajectory illustrates the efforts of slaveholders to organize the labor and mobility of their human property. Transported across the Atlantic, the Gulf of Mexico, and the North American interior, he endured three distinct middle passages, some or perhaps all of them as punishments, before traveling back down the Mississippi as a fugitive. From Senegambia to the Illinois Country via Saint-Domingue and New Orleans, Foÿ experienced radically different environments, personal situations, and labor conditions. Court testimonies offer a glimpse of his impressive array of occupations and skills: a one-time miner, rower, wheelwright, burglar, tailor, peddler, and hunter, he probably also worked in farming and domestic service. During his long *marronage* around New Orleans, Foÿ not only boasted to his fellow slaves about not having to toil, he also "pretended to work" to move around freely and steal from his employers.³ While this surprising ability to wander around the center of Louisiana's slave society may seem to validate the historical trope of a disorderly colony—the so-called "chaos of French rule" for Gwendolyn Midlo Hall—it resulted from structural patterns of slaveholding rather than a permissive government.⁴ Having reclaimed his autonomy by running away, Foÿ acted alternatively as a truly "masterless man" and as an enslaved worker who hired himself out on account of the man who called himself his master.⁵ The illiterate Foÿ, who was unable to decipher

³ See testimonies of Jean-Baptiste and Marie Madeleine Celain, 1764-09-03/1, RSC.

⁴ Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 1.

⁵ For parallels between runaway slaves and another class of "masterless men"—the landless, floating European proletariat expropriated by the enclosure movement, see Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical*

the value of bills in his possession, could not have forged a pass, but he did not need to: no one asked him to provide any proof because it had become customary for Louisiana's slaves to hire themselves by the 1760s.

Genuine fugitive, fake wage laborer, and accomplished robber—an especially problematic label in a slave society—Foÿ took advantage of the diversity of working arrangements involving enslaved people to hide in plain sight.⁶ As he recited the long list of his successive owners, including several he made up, it became clear that he had learned to hide his status and his identity from the very people who claimed him as property. While Foÿ's thieving got him arrested and brought the slaveholders' justice down on his head, the reinvention of himself as a day waged laborer, in itself, had caused little concern among colonists who gladly hired whatever workers they could afford. While several Africans, including other fugitives, had helped him commit robberies and fence his loot, his *marronage* relied extensively on white inhabitants who hired and traded with him.⁷ Tellingly, it was not by a colonist or a soldier that Foÿ was finally captured, but instead by another enslaved Black man whose shirt he had stolen.⁸ Rather than his laboring itinerary, it was his prosecution and execution that made Foÿ exceptional in the minds of slaveholders and bondspeople alike. His trial is the only reason we know about him, but the evidence in this case points to a complex underground of enslaved yet mobile workers in unexpected places.

Ideas During the English Revolution (London: Penguin Books, 1984); Dawdy, *Building the Devil's Empire*, 130–35; Curtis, “Masterless People.”

⁶ Lichtenstein, “‘That Disposition to Theft.’”

⁷ Interrogations and judgment against Louis alias Foÿ, 1764-09-02/2, 1764-09-10/1 and 2, Declarations of Jean-Baptiste and Marie-Madeleine Celain, 1764-09-03/1, RSC.

⁸ Sophie White, “Slaves’ and Poor Whites’ Informal Economies,” in Vidal, *Louisiana*, 90.

Running away, in this case as in many others examined in this chapter, was not a mere respite from exploitation, but rather a strategy enabling enslaved men and women to challenge the terms of their bondage. “Slavery,” wrote Ira Berlin, “though imposed and maintained by violence, was a negotiated relationship... Although the playing field was never level, the master-slave relationship was nevertheless subject to continual negotiation.”⁹ Though legally rightless, slaves sought to improve their condition by securing informal or customary rights, such as family protection and personal property. But their self-proclaimed masters, who granted those incentives to maximize obedience and labor productivity beyond what force alone could yield, preferred to consider them as always revocable privileges.¹⁰ Along with other daily acts of resistance, *marronage* was therefore instrumental in claiming such benefits and establishing them as customary expectations, albeit unstable and disputed, between enslaved people and enslavers.

This chapter analyzes *marronage* among people enslaved in French Louisiana as a behavior informed by their own sense of justice, much like the rural poor defended their own “moral economy” through social crime—e.g. poaching, banditry, riots, looting—in peasant

⁹ Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 2.

¹⁰ Studies of American slavery have explored how planters, in particular, viewed the customary rights claimed by enslaved people as non-binding privileges. For slaveholders, argues William Dusinberre in his study of Antebellum rice plantations, “a ‘privilege’ was the free gift of the powerful master, and could at any moment be withdrawn. [An owner] granted privileges in order to make his slaves more dependent on himself, not to convert his slaves into the independent possessors of customary rights.” William Dusinberre, *Them Dark Days: Slavery in the American Rice Swamps* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 179. See also Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 30–31; Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 199–200; Damian Alan Pargas, “‘Various Means of Providing for Their Own Tables’: Comparing Slave Family Economies in the Antebellum South,” *American Nineteenth Century History* 7, no. 3 (2006): 367–70; Robin Blackburn, *The American Crucible: Slavery, Emancipation and Human Rights* (London: Verso, 2011), 122–23; Vernon V. Palmer, “The Customs of Slavery: The War without Arms,” *American Journal of Legal History* 48, no. 2 (2006): 177–218; Palmer, *Through the Codes Darkly*, XIV–XV; Jared Hardesty, *Unfreedom: Slavery and Dependence in Eighteenth-Century Boston* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 66–69.

communities.¹¹ Customs in slave societies, however, relied less on solid traditions and public consensus than on the daily interactions between slaves, owners, and overseers, which were often brutal and always unequal.¹² Like theft from slaveholders, *marronage* therefore provides a window into the permanent “struggle between slaves and masters to define conflicting notions of authority, property and customary rights.”¹³ Running away, or merely threatening to, was part of an ongoing, precarious process of negotiation that neither started nor ended with individual flights. It was also a community affair, not only because it required the cooperation of multiple actors—sometimes across racial lines and the divide between slavery and freedom—but also because of its cumulative impact on slave life. How and where enslaved people ran away was a tactical decision, and the same fugitives could pursue similar objectives through different strategies depending on changing circumstances and opportunities.

¹¹ My understanding of customary rights and their defense through direct action derives from the pioneering works of E.P. Thompson and James C. Scott. See Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the 18th Century”; James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976). On the historiography of social crime, see Hay et al., *Albion’s Fatal Tree*; Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels*; Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); John Lea, “Social Crime Revisited,” *Theoretical Criminology* 3, no. 3 (n.d.): 307–25. For critical overviews of the concept of moral economy and its evolution, see John Bohstedt, “The Moral Economy and the Discipline of Historical Context,” *Journal of Social History* 26, no. 2 (1992): 265–84; Andrew Charlesworth and Adrian Randall, eds., *Moral Economy and Popular Protest: Crowds, Conflict and Authority* (London: MacMillan, 2000); Didier Fassin, “Les Économies Morales Revisitées,” *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 64, no. 6 (2009): 1237–66.

¹² Palmer, “The Customs of Slavery,” 208.

¹³ For studies that extend the concept of moral economy to analyze the actions of enslaved people, see Lichtenstein, “That Disposition to Theft,” 415–416 (quote); Michael Kay and Cary, “The Constant Plague”; Randy Browne, *Surviving Slavery in the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 157–89.

6.1 Petit *Marronage*: Hiding in Plain Sight Among Labor Hungry Colonists

Slave desertion has traditionally been considered along a spectrum between *petit* and *grand marronage*, based on how long slaves ran away; how far they traveled; with whom they left; whether they were armed; and whether they returned on their own. This dichotomy, first proposed by French historian Gabriel Debien and popularized in the US by a landmark collection edited by Richard Price, implies that armed struggles leading to the creation of permanent maroon settlements were a more radical challenge to slavery than the chronic absences of individual runaways.¹⁴ Slave resistance therefore appears more significant in the history of Caribbean nations like Haiti and Jamaica, which celebrate maroons as iconic rebels who paved the way for larger freedom struggles, than in the United States, where maroon communities were scarce.¹⁵ With notable exceptions such as the Great Dismal Swamp and the Black Seminoles of Florida, enslaved people in North America rarely escaped bondage by forming permanent settlements.¹⁶ Instead, they liberated themselves by traveling across borders and jurisdictions—as the Afro-Louisianans Soquoy, Marie and their companions did by reaching Cuba in the 1740s. Recent studies focused

¹⁴ Gabriel Debien, “Le Marronage Aux Antilles Françaises Au XVIIIe Siècle,” *Caribbean Studies* 6, no. 3 (1966): 3–43, translated as “Marronage in the French Caribbean,” in *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas*, ed. Richard Price (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1973), 107–134.

¹⁵ Jean Fouchard, *Les Marrons de la liberté* (Éditions de l'École, 1972); Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982); Gad J. Heuman, *Out of the House of Bondage: Runaways, Resistance and Marronage in Africa and the New World* (London: Frank Cass, 1986); Fick, *The Making of Haiti*; Alvin O. Thompson, *Flight to Freedom African Runaways and Maroons in the Americas* (Kingston, Jamaica: University of West Indies Press, 2006).

¹⁶ For notable exceptions, see Kathleen A. Deagan and Jane Landers, “Fort Mose: Earliest Free African-American Town in the United States,” in “*I Too, Am America*”: *Archaeological Studies of African-American Life*, ed. Theresa A. Singleton (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999), 261–82; Jane Landers, “Cimarrones africanos e indios en la frontera española con los Estados Unidos. El caso de los Seminoles negros en La Florida,” *Memoria e Sociedad, Diásporas Afroamericana* 7 (November 2003): 25–36; Nathaniel Millett, *The Maroons of Prospect Bluff and Their Quest for Freedom in the Atlantic World*. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013); Daniel O. Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People: The Archaeology of Maroons, Indigenous Americans, and Enslaved Laborers in the Great Dismal Swamp* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014).

on mass flights, from Black loyalists who joined British troops during the American War of Independence to the Underground Railroad and the exodus of contraband slaves to Union territory during the Civil War, demonstrate their impact on the politics of abolition.¹⁷ Yet most Northern American runaways engaged in temporary, small-scale desertion by hiding out in cities or on the edge of plantations before returning on their own.

According to the authors of the most comprehensive study of *marronage* in the Antebellum South, “the most common form of absconding was not actually running away at all, but what might be termed truancy, absenteeism, and in some cases, lying out, imprecise terms covering a broad range of resistance.”¹⁸ Some historians have shown how enslaved men and women absconded to escape their exploitation and reclaim control over their bodies, their time, their relations, and their environment.¹⁹ On the other hand, other scholars stress the limitations of *petit marronage*, arguing those absentees and truants chose “family over freedom,” as they gave up formal enfranchisement in a distant land for momentary, illicit autonomy close to their loved ones.²⁰ More broadly, this argument fits within a classical historiographical debate over the political significance of “day-to-day resistance to slavery—stealing, lying, dissembling, shirking, murder, infanticide, suicide,

¹⁷ Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom*; Steven Hahn, *The Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 1–114; Mekala Shadd-Sartor Audain, “Mexican Canaan: Fugitive Slaves and Free Blacks on the American Frontier, 1804–1867” (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers: The State University of New Jersey-New Brunswick, 2014); Eric Foner, *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of America’s Fugitive Slaves* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2015); Damian Alan Pargas, ed., *Fugitive Slaves and Spaces of Freedom in North America* (University Press of Florida, 2018).

¹⁸ John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, “The Quest for Freedom: Runaway Slaves and the Plantation South,” in *Slavery, Resistance, Freedom*, ed. Gabor S. Boritt and Scott Hancock (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 23.

¹⁹ On absenteeism as a form of everyday resistance, see Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 97–100; Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 35–59.

²⁰ On the tension between accommodation and enfranchisement, see Calvin Schermerhorn, *Money Over Mastery, Family Over Freedom: Slavery in the Antebellum Upper South* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), esp. 20, 210; Damian Alan Pargas, “Urban Refugees: Fugitive Slaves and Spaces of Informal Freedom in the American South, 1800–1860,” *Journal of Early American History* 7, no. 3 (2017): 262–84.

arson,” which Eugene Genovese regarded as individual accommodation rather than resistance to the power of slaveholders, because it did not challenge the subordinate position of enslaved people or the existence of human bondage.²¹²² Yet, as the work of James C. Scott demonstrates, this “slower, grinding, background resistance” was often the sole form of political action available to subordinate groups. “If only open, declared forms of struggle are called ‘resistance,’” Scott explains, “then all that is being measured may be the level of repression” rather than the perspective, aspirations, and collective efforts of the oppressed.²³

Even so-called truancy was a genuine and politically significant act of resistance, through which runaways attempted to gain leverage by capitalizing on labor shortages and divisions among white colonists. The generally small radius in which runaways operated meant that many of their neighbors, free and enslaved alike, were aware of their movements. For the fugitives, apprehending their social environment—who to go to and who to avoid—was just as crucial as mastering their physical surroundings.²⁴²⁵ This social knowledge enabled them to hide in plain sight in the

²¹ Like the pioneering study that coined the phrase “day-to-day resistance,” Genovese’s list does not include *marronage*, but he argued that only “running away to freedom and insurrection” were truly political acts of resistance. See Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 598 (quotes); Raymond A. Bauer and Alice H. Bauer, “Day to Day Resistance to Slavery,” *The Journal of Negro History* 27, no. 4 (October 1942): 388–419. An early survey of slave activity in colonial Virginia similarly considers such behavior “token” resistance. Gerald W. Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance in Eighteenth-century Virginia* (Oxford University Press, 1972), 35.

²² Like the pioneering study that coined the phrase “day-to-day resistance,” Genovese’s list does not include *marronage*, but he argued that only “running away to freedom and insurrection” were truly political acts of resistance. See Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, 598 (quotes); Raymond A. Bauer and Alice H. Bauer, “Day to Day Resistance to Slavery,” *Journal of Negro History* 27, no. 4 (1942): 388–419. An early survey of slave activity in colonial Virginia similarly considers such behavior “token” resistance. Gerald W. Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 35.

²³ James C. Scott, “Everyday Forms of Resistance,” *Copenhagen Papers* 4 (1989): 49–51.

²⁴ On the different kinds of knowledge—social, technical, and natural—mobilized by successful runaways, see Marcus Rediker, *Outlaws of the Atlantic: Sailors, Pirates, and Motley Crews in the Age of Sail* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), 46–62.

²⁵ On the different kinds of knowledge—social, technical, and natural—mobilized by successful runaways, see Rediker, *Outlaws of the Atlantic*.

slaveholders' world by capitalizing on their divisions and weaknesses, starting with their insatiable hunger for labor. Anonymity, social entertainment, and work opportunities drew runaways to cities across the Americas, and Louisiana's runaways could take advantage of labor shortages to gain some temporary employment. Yet New Orleans and its free Black population were too small to blend in as Afro-American fugitives did in other cities.²⁶ By the end of French rule in 1769, a census counted only 165 free people of color in all the colony, less than four percent of its Black and mixed-race residents.²⁷ ²⁸In this demographic context, runaways were so easily identifiable that they could only disappear if colonists and especially their slaves allowed them to, either by turning a blind eye or by assisting them.

Numerous cases confirm that the presence of runaways was an open secret. In 1737, the attorney general complained before the Superior Council of repeated cattle thefts on his estate over a period of three months, "without being able to know by whom but it is said that it had to be runaway negroes who plunder the plantations of this riverbank."²⁹ Two decades later, the military officer Pierre Delisle Dupart submitted a strikingly similar petition, after his overseer and six of his slaves arrested two runaways in the woods of his plantation. According to the officer, the fugitives had been hiding out on his estate "for a very long time" and had killed some of his livestock. Dupart could name one of the poachers and knew, either through the military or the slaves' grapevine, that they belonged to a fellow officer.³⁰

²⁶ On runaways hiding among urban free Blacks, see Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 131-136; Jonathan D. Martin, *Divided Mastery: Slave Hiring in the American South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 161-187.

²⁷ Census of Louisiana, 2 September 1771, Archivo General de Indias, Papeles de Cuba, Legajo 2357, cited in *Spain in the Mississippi Valley*, 1:196.

²⁸ Census of Louisiana, 2 September 1771, cited in Kinnaid, *Spain in the Mississippi Valley*, 1:196.

²⁹ Petition of Fleuriau, 1737-03-19/2, RSC.

³⁰ Declaration of Dupart, 1759-03-22/1, RSC.

When reporting runaways, slaveholders frequently added they had no idea of their whereabouts, much in the same manner—and often in the same breath—as they claimed to have no knowledge of their motives.³¹ Whether those owners were entirely truthful, others admitted being apprised of their movements. When the colonial government issued its first ordinance enjoining slaveholders to report *marronages* in 1736, one of the first declarations came from a colonist whose Black bondsman had deserted five years prior. The owner “had not learned any news about him since, other that he had roamed along the [Mississippi] river during the first year without ever having been arrested.”³² Another New Orleans planter had failed to inform authorities of a missing man for almost a year, “as he hoped always and every day that he would catch him, because he was always around this city.”³³ His optimism had proved misplaced, and he finally made the overdue declaration when visiting the Superior Council to report the recent desertion of an enslaved couple, probably because he expected the three of them to join forces..

More concerning were cases in which Europeans assisted, sheltered, or employed runaways, which threatened not only their owners’ authority but also the racial hierarchies that supported Louisiana’s slave society. In 1767, for instance, a Black woman named Catherine stayed in hiding for 30 months in the company of her alleged lover Louis Jourdan, a white boatswain, alternatively in a room rented at a local inn and in a cabin lent by another slave. Catherine’s owner petitioned the Superior Council, lamented in familiar jeremiads she “would not have deserted his house if she had not been incited by said Jourdan; is it not painful that this sort of people take your property away and dispossess you, all the more so because the court may order a corporal

³¹ See for instance Declaration of Mr. La Branche, 1744-10-20/1, RSC.

³² Declaration of Jacques Roquigny, 1736-09-02/2, RSC.

³³ Declaration of Cantrelle, 1745-03-15/1, RSC.

punishment to said negress and mark her; is the value of the plaintiff's slave not entirely lost then?"³⁴ Jourdan was sentenced to pay 300 *livres* of compensation to the plaintiff, thirty times less than the ten *livres* per day of *marronage* he demanded in accordance with the Code Noir but enough to make up for the loss of three years' worth of her labor.³⁵ Catherine's owner had also made the unusual request that Jourdan would reimburse the property damage caused by her judicial branding. Yet his concern that her punishment would reduce her value proved unfounded. Catherine was auctioned for 3,000 *livres* to another colonist, a high price suggesting *marronage* was so common and labor so scarce that competing buyers were ready to overlook a runaway's reputation.³⁶

The examination of witnesses in Jourdan and Catherine's trial confirms that bystanders, Black and white, facilitated slave desertions by actively assisting or simply looking away. The enslaved man whose cabin accommodated Jourdan and Catherine for months denied being their accomplice, claiming to have met Catherine just once in the boatswain's company when he sold them some chickens, and to have never known either her name or that she was a fugitive.³⁷ Still less credibly, the white owner of the tavern where the couple was arrested alleged he had only seen them together once, a year and a half earlier. While the innkeeper admitted having recently spotted a Black woman leaving Jourdan's lodging at dawn, he insisted that upon learning she was a runaway he had warned his tenant "that if he let fugitive negresses sleep in his room he would

³⁴ Petition of François Hery alias Duplanty, 1767-08-08/4, RSC.

³⁵ Judgment against Louis Jourdan and Catherine, 1767-08-29/1 (misfiled), RSC. The date is missing, but the judgment likely took place on August 10. Catherine was auctioned the next day as a result of this judgement, her owner had filed the suit on August 8, and August 9 was a Sunday.

³⁶ Judicial sale of Catherine, 1767-08-11/1, RSC. Catherine was indeed sentenced to being branded, but there is no record of the actual punishment, which could explain why it had not impact on her value.

³⁷ Interrogation of Louis, 1767-07-11/4, Confrontation between Catherine and Louis, 1767-07-12/2, Confrontation between Louis Jourdan and Louis, 1767-08-04/1, RSC.

have to make him leave.”³⁸ The judges must have questioned those self-serving testimonies, but they chose to believe both witnesses rather than investigate them further.³⁹

Hired slaves may have been more likely to run away, taking advantage of their mobility to protest their conditions, reclaim their autonomy, and reunite with families or loved ones for those separated when they were rented out. Many leases mentioned the risk of slave desertion or *marronage*, which owners and renters insisted was not their responsibility. When Michel Brosset rented Polidor and Lafleur to work at his tar and pitch manufacture on Lake Pontchartrain, he agreed to guarantee them from accidents at the lake or the factory. Yet Brosset declined responsibility for “escape or natural death of negroes or accidents caused by *sauvages*, which shall all be considered caused by an enemy.”⁴⁰ In 1740, the indigo farmer Capraise Matthieu rented a Black woman to another colonist, but on visiting her to inquire about some stolen items he learned she had absconded. “That she is a fugitive, and he cannot profit from her,” he complained in court, “only comes from the fact that someone enables her, which absolutely prevents him from being the master of his slave.”⁴¹ Slaveholders like Mathieu could ask authorities to punish rebellious chattel, but they may only sue each other, which reinforced their inclination to ignore the agency of bondspeople. Yet they were not always delusional when they suspected other colonists to incite

³⁸ Investigation against Jourdan, 1767-07-09/2, RSC.

³⁹ While a witness stated, ostensibly as a mitigating circumstance, that Catherine’s owner had refused to sell her to Jourdan for 2,000 livres, the boatswain must have been unable to pay the much more modest fine imposed by the Council, for he was subsequently sentenced to hard labor. Yet Jourdan continued to defy colonial authorities. Not only did he break out of jail with an English mariner convicted of petty theft, who had been scraping by since deserting from the troops taking possession of British West Florida in 1763, but the escapees also managed to obtain outside assistance, evade surveillance, and leave Louisiana without ever been heard of again. Interrogations on the evasion of Jourdan and Laroze, 1767-11-21/1, Decree for the arrest of Jourdan and Laroze, 1767-12-04/1, RSC.

⁴⁰ Lease by Marthe Frémont to Michel Brosset, 1739-01-16/1, RSC. Brosset promised to feed the men, as well as to give “a shirt to [the enslaved Lafleur] to compel him to work.”

⁴¹ Declaration of Capraise Mathieu, 1740-02-04/1, RSC. For similar cases of hired slaves who ran away from those they were rented to, see Declaration of Pierre Manadé, 1736-11-20/2, Declaration of Louis Giscard, called Benoit, 1737-01-08/1, RSC.

or at the very least facilitate their desertions. The 1764 trial of the runaway Louis alias Foÿ revealed that, wittingly or not, multiple white colonists had similarly hired him as he roamed around New Orleans for months.⁴² Whether Foÿ's employers suspected him to be *marron*, enslaved men and women knew that some settlers readily hired fugitives, despite early ordinances forbidding such poaching of labor and conflating it with abetting *marronage*, a sure sign that it was already a serious problem in the 1720s.⁴³

Unable to purchase or hire sufficient numbers of workers, some colonists opted to accelerate the circulation of slaves by helping them steal themselves—at least temporarily—from their legitimate employers. In November 1739, Joseph Chaperon reported that three Black bondspeople of his were missing from his plantation, having absconded aboard a stolen boat with an enslaved “Spanish mulatto” mariner, whose maritime expertise was certainly instrumental to their successful escape. Ironically, it was Chaperon himself who had introduced the runaways to their future accomplice, whom he hired as a cowherd after he jumped ship before his owner departed from New Orleans.⁴⁴ By his own admission before the Superior Council, Chaperon had known about their escape for more than three months before making this declaration—suggesting that the 1736 ordinance requiring slaveholders to file a report within a week was already ignored. Like many others, he must have hoped to recover his human property while sparing the trouble, the costs, and the risks of government intervention—but also the shame of publicly admitting that

⁴² Declarations of Jean-Baptiste and Marie-Madeleine Celain, 1764-09-03/1, RSC.

⁴³ “Arrêt du conseil supérieur de la Louisiane qui interdit aux habitants de débaucher les esclaves appartenant à la Compagnie des Indes ou à des particuliers,” 13 November 1723, A, 23, fols. 43-44; “Arrêt du conseil supérieur de la Louisiane fixant les peines à infliger à ceux qui débauchent les esclaves,” 17 October 1725, A, 23, fol. 63; Arrêt du conseil supérieur de la Louisiane qui condamne à de lourdes peines les affranchis, nègres libres, ou tout habitant qui cacherait et recèlerait les esclaves des autres, ” 31 janvier 1726, A, 23, fol. 67.

⁴⁴ Power of Attorney by André (Andres) to Jean Gonzalle (Juan Gonzales), 1739-06-07/1, Petition of Jean Gonzalle, 1739-06-15/5, Declaration by Joseph Chaperon, 1739-11-07/2, RSC.

the fugitive sailor he had poached from his owner was responsible for this loss. Undeterred, Chaperon remained notorious for employing enslaved fugitives in the following years—and for abusing bondspeople, who knew his reputation and must have decided to hide on his plantation as a desperate move.⁴⁵ While runaway robbed enslavers of their labor, Chaperon was far from alone alone in robbing other slaveholders of their workforce. Eight years later, the entrepreneur Brosset contracted to rent another runaway, named Cezard from a fellow colonist. But the fugitive, who had deserted six months earlier from his owner's estate, had already been working for some time at Brosset's tar and pitch factory on the northern shore of Lake Pontchartrain. The relative isolation of those manufactures, which would have encouraged such illicit arrangements, also made them ideal sites of exile for owners seeking to punish their slaves away from courts apparently used them, and the tar works apparently served as an informal labor camp.⁴⁶ Brosset agreed to return Cezard as soon as possible, to pay retroactive wages to his owner, and even to be compensate him should his human property vanish again. The Superior Council registered the deal as any other business transaction, without taking any legal action against the fugitive or his clandestine employer.⁴⁷ Because producing naval stores was dangerous and difficult, it is quite plausible that Cezard had been employed in this industry before, perhaps even hired out by his owner to Brosset, which would explain why every party seemed easily satisfied with this situation. None of this would have been possible without the scarcity of slave labor affecting the colony (analyzed in

⁴⁵ Petition of Chaperon, 1741-01-10/2, Interrogation of Pierrot, 1741-01-11/1, RSC.

⁴⁶ For other examples of enslaved workers sent to the tar works as a punishment, see the case of the female runaway Kenet in the Conclusion (4.0) of this dissertation, as well as the 1764 trial of another runaway in Interrogation of Cezar, 1764-07-08/1, RSC.

⁴⁷ Agreement between Michel Brosset and René Herpin de La Gautrais, 1747-05-03/1, RSC. For another runaway working for Brosset, see Sale by Claude Boisson to Brosset, 1739-07-22/1. For other cases of slaves employed by a third party during their *marronages*, which indicate a collusion between runaways and slaveholders, see Interrogation of Fribustier, 1764-10-19/1, Interrogation of Bizago, 1767-02-21/1 and 1767-03-11/1, Confrontation between Louis and Bizago, 1767-03-12/1, RSC.

Section 4.3), which created room for negotiation as enslavers competed for a limited pool of workers, who in turn gained some leverage to they trade their skills. For enslaved people like Cezard, the fierce competition over their labor offered opportunities and unlikely allies to negotiate or challenge their condition.

6.2 A Collective Struggle in Defense of Customs

The forms of *marronage* outlined above shed light on the runaways' motivations. While most of them absconded alone or in small groups, their movements depended on the cooperation of multiple enslaved and free people, including at times some slaveholders. Instead of fleeing New Orleans and other settlements in a hazardous escape toward an unlikely emancipation, which required uprooting themselves from their community, the runaways who remained nearby challenged the terms of their bondage within a familiar social environment. Many historians of colonial and Antebellum America, have described other fugitive slaves crossing jurisdictions toward "free-soil" territories as "voting with their feet."⁴⁸ Instead, this chapter argues that *marronage* enabled men and women enslaved in French Louisiana to "negotiate with their feet,"

⁴⁸ For discussions of slaves "voting with their feet," see Sylvia R. Frey, "Between Slavery and Freedom: Virginia Blacks in the American Revolution," *Journal of Southern History* 49, no. 3 (1983): 375-98; Berlin and Morgan, "Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life," 24; Jane Landers, *Black Society in Spanish Florida* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 3; Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 158; Sue Peabody and Keila Grinberg, "Free Soil: The Generation and Circulation of an Atlantic Legal Principle, *Slavery and Abolition* 32, no. 3 (2011), 332-333; Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 382, 543. In a literal sense, voting with one's feet goes back to Ancient Rome, where senators walked to the side of a speaker in support of his argument. The phrase was introduced to modern politics in the 1920s, when it was first attributed to Vladimir Ilyich Lenin's description of the military desertion of peasants during World War One as a vote for peace. Andrew Lintott, *The Constitution of the Roman Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 79; Isaac Don Levine, *The Man Lenin* (New York: T. Seltzer, 1924), 132.

rejecting living and working conditions deemed unbearable while defending customs they came to regard as rights before employers and authorities.

This type of negotiation is almost invisible in the public statements of slaveholders and government authorities who were reluctant to acknowledge the daily struggles of enslaved people and their humanity. Predictably, the most frequent observation found in reports of *marronage* was that it happened without cause. Almost a third of those brief statements echoed a planter's assertion that an enslaved Black man had ran away for the third time "for no other reason than the habit he has to do so."⁴⁹ The common claim that runaways absconded without motive partly aimed to limit the declarant's financial liability toward another colonist. This attitude was so ingrained that a colonist testifying before the Superior Council, when asked why his slave had deserted in the past, first claimed he knew "nothing about it" before providing a detailed answer proving he truly knew nearly everything about it.⁵⁰ Yet the fact that so many slaveholders made the same unprompted denial in almost identical terms, when they faced so little scrutiny, implies a recognition that slaves had legitimate reasons to rebel. "No single act of self-assertion," writes historian Peter Wood, "was more significant among slaves or more disconcerting among whites than that of running away." But one must add that the enslavers' bafflement was rarely sincere.⁵¹

Slaveholders eager to deny slaves the agency that historians have learned to recognize in such incidents were also quick to blame other colonists for their desertion, since they could not expect any compensation from the runaways themselves. Along with their chattel status, the racial prejudice against Black and Indigenous slaves made it possible to claim that runaways were stolen

⁴⁹ Declaration of Delalande Dalcourt, 1740-05-18/2, RSC.

⁵⁰ Interrogation of Brazilier, 1767-07-04/1, RSC.

⁵¹ Wood, *Black Majority*, 239.

property—slaves who did not steal themselves, but who were taken by others as if they had no willpower of their own. Although many owners also claimed that other slaves had enticed their chattel to desert them, rare were the runaways mobilized the same argument to lessen their responsibility.⁵² Indigenous fugitives were especially prone to blame their flights on their fellow slaves, probably because judges were particularly suspicious of their potential influence on their Black counterparts.⁵³ Yet while slaveholders often explained *marronage* away by incriminating external factors—drunkenness, temporary insanity, or outside influence—only six percent of interrogated fugitives relied on such excuses. Given the pressure of the courtroom and the threat of vicious punishments, it is remarkable that numerous slaves chose instead to express their grievances while testifying before elite slaveholders, whose questions left them little room to do so.

The 52 slaves examined by the Superior Council provide the best evidence of what motivated *marronage*. To be sure, their answers were conditioned, potentially distorted, and limited by their position before judges who criminalized slave activities against property and the social order. Nevertheless, these testimonies offer crucial insights into the experience and perspective of enslaved people. In her recent book *Voices of the Enslaved*, Sophie White even analyzes them as short slave autobiographies.⁵⁴ As another historian argues of slave narratives

⁵² Declaration of Jacques Livet, 1738-05-26/1, RSC.

⁵³ See for instance Interrogations of Godin, 1727-04-09/3, Guillory, 1728-05-31/3, and Joseph, 1748-05-26/1, RSC.

⁵⁴ “When the enslaved digressed from lines of questioning to introduce other topics that foregrounded their own viewpoints rather than the concerns of their interrogators,” writes Sophie White, “they produced a substantial corpus of narratives overflowing with personality, character, subjectivity, and humanity in which they seem to quite literally spring to life.” White, *Voices of the Enslaved*, 6. White’s call to “reorient and expand our notion of what a slave’s autobiographical narrative can look like” echoes the efforts to decolonize the archive by locating “embedded slave narratives” in European accounts and records. See Nicole Aljoe, *Creole Testimonies: Slave Narratives from the British West Indies, 1709-1838* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 47-48; “The Early Caribbean Digital Archive,” <https://ecda.northeastern.edu/>.

from the Antebellum South, the voices of enslaved men and women in those court documents present “an alternative account of what was going on—a systemic critique of slavery—which through their practical resistance they forced into the public record.”⁵⁵ As runaways sought to defend and explain themselves, their words, as much as their actions, exposed both the slaveholders’ violence and the limitations placed on their power by the resistance of their human chattel. While enslaved people could not claim any legal rights in French Louisiana, their court interrogations shed light on their commonplace but obscure efforts to assert informal, customary rights through *marronage* and other acts of defiance.⁵⁶

This everyday struggle for what justice could mean for slaves found a powerful illustration in a 1764 case of collective *marronage*. On a freezing December morning, a group of fourteen enslaved Afro-Creole men confronted an overseer named Joseph Verret on a sugar plantation at Cannes Brûlées, twelve miles upriver from New Orleans (today Kenner, the location of Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport). According to Verret’s court testimony, the slaves were late for work again, lingering in their cabins after he rang the bell that ordered them to the fields, for which he whipped them for the second consecutive day: each man received ten lashes as they left their quarters. When the overseer later found them warming themselves up around a fire instead of working, he chopped off a long branch from a nearby tree and proceeded to beat them with this makeshift pole until it fell apart. By his own admission, Verret hit the enslaved “without restraint and without distinction.” This indiscriminate violence was the last straw. The

⁵⁵ Walter Johnson, *Soul by soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 30.

⁵⁶ Alejandro de La Fuente, “Slave Law and Claims-Making in Cuba: The Tannenbaum Debate Revisited,” *Law and History Review* 22, no. 2 (2004): 339-69; Alejandro de la Fuente and Ariela J. Gross, *Becoming Free, Becoming Black: Race, Freedom, and Law in Cuba, Virginia, and Louisiana* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 10-11, 79-131.

overseer's victims "disputed much and told him it was not the way to make them work, he would see that they would do even less, and said 'tis good, 'tis good; and indeed, they deserted the next day."⁵⁷ All fourteen runaways disappeared for over three weeks, after which they finally returned on their own—again as a group. As their accounts of the events would reveal, their dramatic walk out was the culmination of an ongoing series of confrontations between laborers and overseer, through which the enslaved sought to claim some customary rights despite the imbalance of power. Yet their struggle is only known because Verret's employer reported this collective *marronage* to the Superior Council, which a few months prior had issued a decree reminding slaveholders of their obligation to declare their runaways.⁵⁸ Urged by the newly appointed attorney general to arrest the suspected leader of this "apparent conspiracy," the overseer had a man named Laurent Sainba alias Cimba seized and sent in irons to New Orleans for prosecution. According to Cimba, the overseer tricked him into coming forward under the pretext of giving him a letter to deliver in the city—a stratagem made possible by the routine use of slaves as couriers, which hints that that Verret judged it necessary to isolate Cimba lest his companions prevent his arrest.⁵⁹

Unintimidated and undeterred, eleven of them men who had run away with Cimba left the plantation again, this time to seek justice from colonial authorities and defend their companion in the capital. Based on their examinations, it is impossible to assert which authorities Cimba's companions wished to address. Yet the Superior Council was so infamous for serving the planters' interests that they were more likely hoping for support from the governor or the Church. After being arrested, all corroborated the main points of Cimba's testimony during separate

⁵⁷ Deposition of Joseph Verret, 1764-01-28/1, RSC.

⁵⁸ "Arrêt du conseil supérieur de la Nouvelle-Orléans," 6 April 1763, C13A, 43, fol. 304.

⁵⁹ Petition of Attorney General La Frenière, 1764-09-24/1 (misfiled, probably from January 24); Interrogation of Laurent Sainba alias Cimba, 1764-01-25/1, RSC.

interrogations using almost identical terms, which they had probably agreed upon. First, they insisted they had decided “together, unanimously, and with one voice” to abscond at night after coming back from work, “without anyone having proposed it.”⁶⁰ Their escape was planned, and their leadership was collective. In fact, Verret himself admitted “he could not to determine which ones had first proposed this *marronage*.”⁶¹ Second, Cimba and his companions sought to alleviate the circumstances of their desertion by claiming they were gone for 15 rather than 25 days; they never left their owner’s plantation but stayed in the swampy woods behind the fields; and they carried no gun, eating only corn, beans, and potatoes they brought with them. This latter point was crucial because they were also accused of killing cattle, a property crime much more serious than running away and punishable by death. Lastly, the slaves all gave the same reasons for their escape: not only the overseer mistreated them, but he also violated the conditions enslaved people had come to expect on Louisiana’s plantations. Despite the cold that made it impossible to work the cane that morning, Verret had denied them breakfast by rushing them to the fields and punished them for making a fire even though they were due to the cold that morning.⁶² None of the rebels protested against the whippings, but they expressed outrage at the overseer’s unprecedented move of beating them with a tree branch, a serious humiliation that demanded a response.

The judges expectedly ruled against Cimba and his companions despite their spirited defense. Having found no evidence of his leadership, they sentenced Cimba to being whipped, branded, and ear cropped for what was his third *marronage*. As “runaways and conspirators” (*marrons par complot*), the other eleven mutineers were condemned to receive 25 lashes by

⁶⁰ Interrogations of Cimba, Jasmin (quote), and Mathurin, 1764-01-25/1, RSC.

⁶¹ Deposition of Joseph Verret, 1764-01-28/1, RSC.

⁶² Interrogation of Apollon, 1764-01-25/1, RSC.

“anyone *but* the public executioner.”⁶³ But their bold stand was not in vain. Their punishments were gruesome, yet in the end their lives were safe. Not only did the runaway band from Cannes Brûlées repeal the worst accusations, they also exposed their overseer and their owner to public scrutiny, which slaveholders carefully sought to avoid. As marked and notorious rebels, these twelve slaves might have lost value, causing financial loss to their owner.⁶⁴ Lastly, their actions impressed some respect upon those charged with policing them: a Black commander informed Verret “he dared no longer hit or seize a Negro, because he heard the Negroes who had run away wanted to stab and murder him.”⁶⁵ The runaways had become avengers.

Cimba and his companions demonstrated a clear understanding of the slaveholders’ justice, and they articulated their own understanding of the customary limits of their bondage. To protest their mistreatment by their overseer, they first gave him a verbal notice and engaged in a collective work stoppage by withdrawing to the back of their plantation. Later, they marched to New Orleans and voiced their grievances before the Superior Council during court interrogations. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, in analysis of this incident rightly highlights how, “in their testimony, the slaves exhibited a strong sense of justice and solidarity.” More problematic is Hall’s assertion that the runaways displayed “an awareness of their rights under the Code Noir, which prohibited the whipping of slaves with a stick or any hard object.”⁶⁶ The Code, which explicitly authorized

⁶³ Through this extraordinary ruling, the Superior Council must have sought to diminish the infamy of the sentence, which was indeed carried by another slave. Judgment against Cimba and others, 1764-01-04/2 (misfiled, dated February 4). Cécile Vidal, “Public Slavery, Racial Formation, and the Struggle over Honor in French New Orleans, 1718-1769,” *Anuario Colombiano de Historia Social y de la Cultura* 43, no. 2 (2016): 178.

⁶⁴ As mentioned above, the value of the runaway Catherine was not affected by her public prosecution or the branding she was sentenced to, but there is no definite proof that the punishment was executed. Regardless, the 12 men who had staged two successive collective protests against their overseer and government authorities were certainly more likely to put off potential buyers than a young woman who had eloped with her white lover.

⁶⁵ Deposition of Verret, 1764-01-28/1, RSC.

⁶⁶ Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 203-204. Hall writes that enslaved people in French Louisiana “demanded their rights within the framework of slavery. Recaptured slaves consistently explained that they left because they were

private punishments using chains, whips, and birch rods—arguably including the tree branch used by the overseer Verret—spelled out no such prohibition. As enslaved people knew only too well, neither the letter nor the spirit of Louisiana’s slave laws, much less their application, shielded them from abuse. For runaways like Cimba who negotiated with their feet, demanding rights or “claims-making” did not appeal to legal protection but to customary arrangements about slave work, discipline, and living conditions—plantation norms established by decades of labor relations.⁶⁷

As early as 1731, the interrogation of another overseer, Jacques Charpentier alias Le Roy, revealed that certain unusual punishments were already considered off-limits. Accused by the planter who employed him of grossly mistreating his slaves, Le Roy denied being responsible for three deaths, six abortions, and numerous sexual assaults witnessed by the enslaved, but he also claimed he had only punished them with a whip, never by striking them with axe handles and other tools—as if he could have been penalized for this.⁶⁸ Given the gravity of the accusations against the abusive steward, it is equally noteworthy that his employer repeatedly blamed him for violating plantation mores. Not only did Le Roy beat slaves, including pregnant ones, underfeed them, and neglect their health, but he also overworked them. The overseer prevented women from leaving the fields two hours before dusk to prepare food, as was customary, so that the enslaved could not eat until late at night. The planter castigated Le Roy for working slaves on Sundays, in violation of royal edicts, as well as before dawn and on Saturdays, when the usage was to let them rest or labor for themselves, notably by growing food in their own gardens. Lastly, Le Roy had stolen,

overworked, underfed, threatened, assaulted, and maimed by their masters. Some of them demonstrated sophisticated knowledge of their rights under the Code Noir.” Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 128.

⁶⁷ On slaves claiming rights based on legislation, see de la Fuente, “Slave Law and Claims-Making.”

⁶⁸ Interrogation of Charpentier alias Le Roy, 1730-01-17/2 (misfiled, dated 17 January 1731), RSC.

killed, and eaten a suckling pig belonging to one of the slaves.⁶⁹ When another overseer, Verret, harassed Cimba and his companions three decades later, he could not ignore that his actions breached the customary treatment of slaves, for he was almost thirty and his father had been a slaveholder in New Orleans since the 1720s.⁷⁰ In fact, Verret's brutality, which his employer did not disavow, is best understood as part of a broad effort to impose a harsher slave regime, undermine longstanding customs, and deny the enslaved had any right to the privileges granted to them.

It was no coincidence that the confrontation at Cannes Brûlées took place in 1764, at a time when the first Creole attorney general, Nicolas Chauvin de La Frenière, launched a ruthless law-and-order campaign that primarily targeted slaves.⁷¹ The brutal repression meted out by state authorities in this case inaugurated a government crackdown on slave mobility, which departed from the historical norm of letting private individuals police their own chattel. Even without including Cimba's unusually large cohort, more runaways were publicly prosecuted, tortured, or executed in 1764 than in the four decades since the promulgation of the Code Noir (see above table 2 and figure 16). Under La Frenière's impulse, the Superior Council also issued ordinances against *marronage* and vagrancy, mandated a new census of the enslaved population, and banned the importation of slaves from Saint-Domingue for fear of their rebellious influence on Afro-

⁶⁹ Dauseville to Charpentier alias Le Roy, 1730-04-29/1, Petition of Dauseville, 1730-08-30/1; Dauseville v. Le Roy, 1730-12-01/1, RSC.

⁷⁰ Verret v. La Frenière, 1726-12-11/1, RSC.

⁷¹ Brasseaux, "Administration of Slave Regulations," 156–57; Thomas N. Ingersoll, "The Law and Order Campaign in New Orleans, 1763-1765: A Comparative View," in *Signposts: New Directions in Southern Legal History*, ed. Sally E. Hadden and Patricia Hagler Minter (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013), 45–64; Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans*, 410–12.

Louisianans.⁷² Those measures resulted from growing concerns among local slaveholders that slave crime threatened their security and the region's plantation economy, which was finally taking off after decades of sluggish expansion. Between 1755 and 1762, the value of Louisiana's main exports—indigo, tobacco, logwood, peltry—had increased tenfold.⁷³ Yet settlers and colonial authorities feared the contagion of slave unrest that shook the Caribbean—what Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker described as “a new wave of slave resistance,” including an alleged conspiracy to poison whites in Saint-Domingue, named after its executed Maroon leader Makandal (1758), Tacky's war in Jamaica (1760-1761), and the Berbice uprising in Guyana (1763).⁷⁴ The geopolitical consequences of France's defeat in the Seven Year War exacerbated the apprehension of slaveholders. As Britain occupied the east bank of the Mississippi around New Orleans and French troops were being transferred to the West Indies, rumors spread that the King would soon abandon the rest of Louisiana to Spain—as he had indeed secretly agreed in 1762—leaving colonists temporarily unprotected. Moreover, an important number of enslaved men and women changed owners after military officers departed Louisiana, the Jesuits were expelled, and settlers from the first generation died. New proprietors anxious to assert their authority were particularly prone to dismiss what they considered privileges granted by indulgent slaveholders.⁷⁵ The 1764

⁷² “Arrêt du conseil supérieur de la Nouvelle-Orléans condamnant les gens sans aveu ou ne pouvant produire de certificat de bonne vie et mœurs, sortir de la ville,” 3 September 1763, C13, A43, fol. 310; “Arrêt du conseil supérieur de la Nouvelle-Orléans,” 6 April 1763, C13, A43, fol. 302; “Arrêt du Conseil Supérieur de La Nouvelle-Orléans interdisant l'importation en Louisiane, sous peine d'amendes, de nègres venant de Saint-Domingue,” 9 July 1763, C13, A43, fol. 304; Excerpt of the registers of the audiences of the Superior Council, 1763-07-09/2, RSC.

⁷³ Villiers du Terrage, *Les dernières années*, 148.

⁷⁴ See Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, 224 (quote); Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 61–72; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 51–57; Marjoleine Kars, “Dodging Rebellion: Politics and Gender in the Berbice Slave Uprising of 1763,” *American Historical Review* 121, no. 1 (2016): 39–69; Burnard and Garrigus, *The Plantation Machine*, 106–7; Brown, *Tacky's Revolt*.

⁷⁵ Lorena Walsh argues that expectations about work, discipline, and living conditions were also partly negotiated in the plantations of the colonial Chesapeake, where “newly hired overseers who attempted to curtail customary plantation privileges or to change work rules usually met stiff resistance from the slaves.” Lorena S. Walsh, *Motives*

crisis thus rendered manifest a longer, obscure struggle over the customary conditions of slave life and labor.

6.3 Motives of *Marronage*

The most common motive of desertion mentioned by slaves in court interrogations was ill-treatment: 54 percent of them complained of beatings, 15 percent of hunger, and 17 percent ran away for fear of punishment (table 3). Those mistreatments were the only ones explicitly outlined in the Code Noir, which forbid colonists from torturing or mutilating slaves, required them to feed and clothe their chattel properly, and even allowed victims of abuse to complain to the attorney general, who could theoretically sue their owners.⁷⁶ Yet such humanitarian provisions were never enforced. Not only did standards of decent slave treatment remain undefined, the code also failed to prescribe any penalty and barred slaves from testifying against (or for) their owners.⁷⁷ Over 45 years, the Superior Council never recorded any formal slave complaint nor prosecuted anyone for mistreating the men and women they owned. “No case is to be found,” observes Thomas Ingersoll,

of Honor, Pleasure, and Profit: Plantation Management in the Colonial Chesapeake, 1607–1763 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2010), 320.

⁷⁶ On food, clothing, and other supplies, see “Code Noir,” Articles 18 (“food must be supplied weekly and clothing yearly”), 19 (“We [the King] also forbid them [slaveholders] from offloading the costs of feeding and supplying their slaves, by allowing them to work on a given day of the week for their own account”), and 20 (“slaves who will not be fed, clothed, and supplied by their masters will be allowed to inform our attorney general and to place their case into his hands, upon which and at once, if he receives other accounts, the masters will be sued at his request and at no cost, which we want observed for crimes and barbarous and inhuman treatments of slaves by their masters.”).

⁷⁷ According to Article 18, the proper amount and quality of slave supplies was to be decreed by the Crown at the suggestion of the Superior Council, but that prescription apparently went unheeded and no further reference to it exists in the archives. On slaves’ legal incapacities, see “Code Noir,” Articles 24 and 25.

“in which the court interfered with a master’s authority over a slave to protect the slave..., all protective clauses of the Code Noir were interpreted to the masters’ advantage.”⁷⁸

Table 4. Motives of *marronage* and related violations of slave law or customs.

Motive(s) for running away	Mentioned by runaways (n=49)	Mentioned by slaveholders (n=48)	Response to violation of
Beatings or fear of punishment	34	3	Code Noir, Articles 38-39
Lack of food or clothes	8	0	Code Noir, Articles 19-20
Marital or romantic ties	7	2	Code Noir, Article 43
Overwork or labor conflict	6	0	Custom
Sale/lease/transfer wanted or denied	3	4	Custom
Impulse/drunkenness/seduction	3	3	N/A
Denial of the right to raise poultry	2	0	Custom

While a generation of scholars have disproven the notion that the law alleviated the brutality of slavery in French Louisiana, the perspective of the enslaved remains disputed.⁷⁹ None of the runaways defended themselves by citing the Code Noir, but it does not follow that they had

⁷⁸ Ingersoll, “Slave Codes,” 30-32.

⁷⁹ On the legal consciousness of enslaved people, see Palmer, “The Customs of Slavery”: 213-218; de la Fuente, “From Slaves to Citizens?”: 154.

no knowledge of its content. Admittedly, the legal announcements posted at the door of the local church and drummed around colonial settlements were solely destined to Louisiana's white population. Yet the slaves' grapevine allowed largely illiterate people to gather and circulate news—and rumors—with striking efficiency.⁸⁰ In 1743, when the commander of the Illinois country returned seventeen slaves who had planned to desert from Kaskaskia to their owners, the latter requested their acquittal. The officer agreed on the condition that excerpts of the Code Noir “will be read on three consecutive Sundays so they may not claim to ignore them and use this excuse in the future.”⁸¹ The ambiguous wording of this unusual disposition makes it unclear what portions of the Code were concerned, whether it should be read to the colonists or their slaves, and by whom. But the most likely interpretation is that, as white settlers gathered for Sunday mass, the local curate or a bailiff would remind them of the legal limitations and sanctions of slave movement. Regardless, this was an opportunity to learn about the law for enslaved people too. A few years earlier in New Orleans, an African woman showed enough legal understanding to fight back against the owner who promised then denied her manumission. In 1737, a Frenchman took an enslaved Black woman named Jeanneton to jail, after she ran away while he prepared to move upriver to the Illinois country with her. According to his testimony, she “not only threatened to leave him but also said he had impregnated her six weeks prior, which she wanted to report [to local authorities] in order to be confiscated.”⁸² Jeanneton's threat was almost certainly inspired by

⁸⁰ On news transmission and communication networks among enslaved people in other contexts, see for instance Peabody, “*No Slaves in France*,” 48; John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *In Search of the Promised Land: A Slave Family in the Old South* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 60; W. J. Megginson, *African American Life in South Carolina's Upper Piedmont, 1780-1900* (Univ of South Carolina Press, 2006), 135–36; Scott, *The Common Wind*, 76–117.

⁸¹ Trial of Jean-Baptiste alias Jeannot, Grandjean, Pierre alias Mammourou and others, 7 May 1743, KM, Miscellaneous documents, II, fol. 17 (digitized microfilm copy, <https://www.familysearch.org/search/film/008423137?cat=58291>, frames 82-85).

⁸² Declaration of Pierre Garçon alias L'Eveillé, 1737-06-29/1, RSC.

the article VI of the Code Noir against interracial unions, which prescribed that men who impregnated their slaves would lose the mother and the mixed-race child to the state—both would be seized, and their ownership transferred to the local hospital.⁸³ How Jeanneton came to learn of this disposition can only be imagined, since it was seemingly never enforced, but she must have grown interested in the legal boundaries of slave ownership since she had been expecting her manumission for over a year.⁸⁴

In the absence of formal complaints, runaways mentioned their poor treatment not only as mitigating circumstances but also to denounce violations of customary arrangements and expectations. The oldest known fugitive, a 65-year-old man named Jeanot, had been missing for five months when his owner caught him begging in the streets of New Orleans and brought him to prison. In court, Jeanot fought back by accusing his captor of violating his essential duties. Asked if he had any knowledge of Black men who killed the settlers' cattle and poultry, Jeanot answered "no, and he had not seen any runaway negro, and he had only run away because his master gave him no food nor clothes to keep himself from the cold."⁸⁵ As he pointed out his owner's failure to fulfill his most elementary obligations, Jeannot justified his desertion by stressing that his survival was at stake and reversing the accusation of theft against enslavers.

Such grievances belied the official paternalist discourse that deemed slaveholders responsible for the well-being of their slaves as much as for their obedience. The oft-quoted article 49 of the Code Noir, for instance, enjoined temporary rulers such as legal guardians and estate curators to manage slaves "like good family men" (*en bons pères de famille*). A police ordinance

⁸³ "Code Noir," Article 6.

⁸⁴ See Power of Attorney from Garçon, 1736-08-23/3, RSC.

⁸⁵ Interrogation of Jeannot, 1764-04-12/1, RSC.

of 1751 repeated this impossible injunction, extending it to slaveowners themselves.⁸⁶ Unlike the sentimental ideology Eugene Genovese controversially assigned to Antebellum Southern planters, this paternalism did not rely “upon mutual obligations—duties, responsibilities, and ultimately even rights—[that] implicitly recognized the slaves’ humanity.”⁸⁷ In the patriarchal society of early modern France, comparing slaveholders to *paterfamilias* conveyed their authority over their dependents rather than generosity or reciprocity, starting with their right to discipline enslaved people privately without government interference, as men would their children and their wives.⁸⁸ Still, the only instructions published by a French Louisiana planter urged slaveholders to adopt a benevolent attitude. In his *Histoire de la Louisiane*, the former director of the Compagnie's plantation Antoine-Simon Le Page du Pratz argued that “with attention and humanity, one easily manages Negroes, and one has the pleasure of extracting great profit from their labor.”⁸⁹ According to French historian Cécile Vidal, such vision of discipline combining force with charity was widely shared among slaveholders, despite the omnipresence of violence in their daily interactions with slaves. “Progressively,” writes Vidal. “by consensus, officials and masters established collective

⁸⁶ “Règlement sur la police,” Article 19, C13, A35, fol. 46.

⁸⁷ The so-called paternalism of Southern slaveowners, once conceptualized by Genovese as an ideology so hegemonic it was also embraced by the enslaved themselves, has been hotly debated, significantly revised, and increasingly rejected since the 1970s. The new history of American capitalism, which emphasizes the central role played by slavery in US economic expansion, also dispels the myth that planters in the Antebellum South did not fully belong to the modern industrial world because they lacked a bourgeois mentality. On paternalism, see Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, 5 (quote), 3–7; Michael Tadman, “The Persistent Myth of Paternalism: Historians and the Nature of Master Slave Relations in the American South,” *Sage Race Relations Abstracts* 23, no. 1 (1998): 7–23; Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*; Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 4; James Oakes, “‘I Own My Slaves, but They Also Own Me’: Property and Paternalism in the Slave South,” *Reviews in American History* 38, no. 4 (2010): 587–94.

⁸⁸ Mathé Allain, “Slave Policies in French Louisiana,” *Louisiana History* 21, no. 2 (1980): 132–33; Brasseaux, “Administration of Slave Regulations,” 141–42.

⁸⁹ Le Page du Pratz, *Histoire de la Louisiane*, 1:352.

customs that determined how slaves should be treated.”⁹⁰ Yet this assertion erases the crucial role of enslaved people themselves in shaping such customs.

The most evident feature of paternalist slaveholding in Louisiana was the preservation of slave families, which was not only a legal obligation of enslavers but also a customary practice upheld as a right by enslaved men and women.⁹¹ Fifteen percent of interrogated runaways acted to maintain their relationship with a spouse or a partner. A Creole runaway claimed the slave driver on his plantation pushed him to desert by frequently flogging him for being late for work after his nightly visits to a Black woman living on another estate.⁹² Another man explained his owner “wanted to give him a different wife than his, the negress of [another planter] he visited every day.”⁹³ Even Evom, a recently arrived African who spoke no French and did not know his owner’s name, argued he deserted because the latter “took his woman away from him, that he had given him to make his food and drink.”⁹⁴ Based on sacramental records and their declarations, neither of these men appears to have been legally married. Yet the latter two referred to their female partners as *sa femme*, “his wife” or “his woman.” The same French phrase (translated from the “Nago” or Yoruba language in Evom’s case) could have both meanings, but the operative word here was clearly the possessive pronoun, which suggests a widely recognized common law marriage. These men might not have known that the Code Noir, which forbade to marry slaves against their will or

⁹⁰ Vidal, “Private and State Violence,” 106-107.

⁹¹ Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 168-69.

⁹² Interrogation of Pierre, 1764-08-02/1, RSC.

⁹³ Interrogation of Sans Soucy, 1741-01-16/2, RSC.

⁹⁴ Interrogation of Evom, 1765-02-16/1 (emphasis mine), RSC. Sophie White convincingly argues that such cases reveal a shared gendered understanding of conjugal relationships between French colonists and enslaved West Africans, according to which men were entitled to a woman’s body and labor. Those joint expectations would have reinforced the idea that access to a sexual and domestic partner was a customary right. See White, *Voices of the Enslaved*, 189-190, 209-210.

without their owners' consent, also decreed that "a husband and wife and their prepubescent children shall not be seized or sold separately if they live under the power of the same master."⁹⁵ Nevertheless, all were aware of the well-established practice to encourage marriages between slaves and to keep their nuclear families together.⁹⁶ In practice, this relative protection was often extended to long-term couples as few enslaved couples were formally married.⁹⁷ Louisiana's slaveowners pursued those policies out of self-interest at least as much as moral, religious, or legal principles, since they favored the natural growth of the slave population while imports were scarce.

Regardless of their owners' motivations, successive generations of enslaved men and women came to regard permanent unions and stable families as a right, and not a simply a privilege granted—or denied—by slaveholders. In 1773, just four years after Spain took possession of Louisiana, the commandant at the post of Pointe Coupée, a Frenchman, informed governor Luis de Unzaga that two enslaved Black women had deserted and were headed to New Orleans to protest an imminent family separation. The children of Françoise alias Ponpon were to be sold without her, which she and her companion fiercely refused, claiming the mother had the right to keep them and choose their next owner. "I was good enough not to take away the youngest from her," wrote the officer, "but she is not satisfied . . . I beg you to state your intentions in this matter to serve me as a rule for the sale of negroes in the future."⁹⁸ While Unzaga's response is unknown, the two women acted as if separating Ponpon from her offspring violated slaveholding customs and her rights as a mother. They women also believed they could successfully plead Ponpon's case

⁹⁵ Code Noir, article 43.

⁹⁶ Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 168-69.

⁹⁷ Roger Baudier, *The Catholic Church in Louisiana* (New Orleans: A. W. Hyatt, 1939), 206.

⁹⁸ Balthazar de Villiers to Luis de Unzaga, 6 April 1773, Archivo General de Indias, Papeles de Cuba, Legajo 189A, cited in Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 305.

before colonial authorities down in New Orleans, a hundred miles downriver, after defying local slaveholders and officials, no doubt because they knew of other enslaved people who had similarly negotiated with their feet before them. Since the Spanish administration had issued no particular protection for enslaved families, Ponpon's expectations certainly relied on slave experiences under the French regime. Prompted by the initiative of a desperate mother, the French commandant himself implicitly acknowledged those customs by treating her claims with some merit and requesting instructions from his superior—which amounted to asking the new rulers of a European colony whether they granted some rights to enslaved people.

While the preservation of conjugal and kinship relations partly overlapped with legal principles and slaveholders' interests, runaways also strove to assert some control over their ownership and employment. Thirteen percent of those interrogated deserted to avoid—or demand—their sale, lease, or transfer to another slaveholder, which could also serve to protect family and community ties. A Chickasaw man enslaved in New Orleans insisted he had been coaxed into absconding with another Indigenous slave, who got him drunk and said “what are you doing here your master does not give you a wife/woman, he wants to *sell you to a Frenchman that you do not know*.”⁹⁹ Francisque (alias Francis or Francisco), a serial fugitive tried in 1766 who identified as “English from Philadelphia,” was also an outsider. He had once lived in Saint-Domingue, before being exiled to Louisiana for deserting to the Spanish part of the island to escape an abusive overseer.¹⁰⁰ Francisque was later taken to Havana, where a French planter eventually bought him and brought him back to New Orleans. Soon afterwards he ran away to avoid another arbitrary removal. “He had been sold to be sent to the Illinois country,” Francisque told the court,

⁹⁹ Interrogation of Joseph, 1748-05-26/1, RSC (emphasis mine).

¹⁰⁰ Interrogation of Francisque, 1766-04-02/2 (misfiled, dated August 2), RSC.

“he does not know [...] who bought him, and as he did not want to go he left the boat.”¹⁰¹ Captured and sold yet again, in chains, to a New Orleans settler, he went missing for six more weeks before being arrested and prosecuted for *marronage*, theft, attempt to break prison, and menacing other slaves who tried to stop him. Instead of the death penalty requested by the public prosecutor, the Superior Council condemned Francisque to be whipped, branded, and banished from the colony.¹⁰² He almost certainly returned to Saint-Domingue, where a branded runaway named Francisque was advertised twice in the following years.¹⁰³ He must have possessed unusual skills that made him valuable despite his repeated flights and enabled him to move around different slave societies. While the polyglot Francisque, who probably spoke at least some Creole in addition to the major European languages floating around New Orleans, only mentioned farming and logging, his trial showed he might also have worked as a sailor or a cook. The cycle of exile, sale, flight, and punishment that made up his life story was so complex that both he and the judges struggled to keep track of it, but Francisque stood up to at least five different enslavers by refusing to be exploited and displaced at will.

Slaveholders even disclosed, sometimes unwittingly, how their chattel fled to avoid being hired out or sold away—or on the contrary to seek a different owner. Before the Superior Council, a French widow declared that an African woman named Yamma “whom she had brought to sell here had ran away yesterday without any reason.”¹⁰⁴ The reason was plain enough and, even though her owner feigned to ignore it, Yamma like Francisque refused to surrender her life and

¹⁰¹ Interrogation of Francisque, 1766-07-01/1, RSC.

¹⁰² Attorney General’s conclusions, 1766-07-31/6, Judgment against Francisque, 1766-08-02/4, RSC.

¹⁰³ White, *Voices of the Enslaved*, 170-171.

¹⁰⁴ Declaration of Marianne Girardy, 1744-01-31/1, RSC.

her labor to the white men and women who claimed her as human property. In 1736, by contrast, New Orleans settler Jacques Larcheveque informed the court that Marianne, a Black woman belonging to his late brother, had deserted to seek refuge with him. As the legal guardian of the deceased's minor heirs, the planter Joseph Chaperon had leased out most of their human property but he kept Marianne in his service, purportedly to care for the widow and children but in fact for his own service. Terrified of Chaperon's beatings, Marianne begged to be hired away from him. Larcheveque, she argued, knew first-hand how slaves suffered when they worked for others than their owners, since a woman belonging to him was dying after he hired her out to a tar factory. While Chaperon's wife blamed the *marronage* of her servant on Larcheveque, the court ruled in Marianne's favor by having her leased to another colonist. This seemingly compassionate decision, which served the interests of the runaway's legal owners, would certainly have been different had Marianne belonged to the enslavers she ran away from.¹⁰⁵

Enslaved men and women also relied on *marronage*—among other strategies—to exercise some control over their employment. Slaves, by definition, were forced laborers expected to toil without pay or any say about their working conditions. In practice, however, they were not entirely powerless and, short of escaping their enslavement, they challenged the terms of their exploitation by walking away not only from the enslavers they were assigned to, but from some specific tasks assigned to them. In 1764, when the Superior Council asked an African man called Charlot why he had absconded, he replied that his owner, a wealthy New Orleans planter, “had taken him to Pointe Coupée to saw timber with another negro, that his master whipped him over and over

¹⁰⁵ Compare with the Council's decision to send two fugitives back to their owner in Judgment against Bayou and Mamourou, 1748-06-24/2, RSC.

because he knew not how to saw.”¹⁰⁶ Charlot’s feet were chained, perhaps a sign this assignment was a punishment, but he managed to cut the fetters after almost a week of using a file found on a neighboring plantation, and he subsequently evaded capture for eight months. During his interrogation, he denounced the mistreatment he fled, which included physical abuse but also forced relocation to a distant worksite to perform unfamiliar labor. The court sentenced Charlot to being branded and ear cropped for repeated *marronage*, as part of the unprecedented campaign against slave crime led by the new attorney general La Frenière.¹⁰⁷ Among La Frenière’s many victims that year were the aforementioned Louis alias Foÿ and his accomplice Cezar, both serial runaway broken alive on the wheel after committing numerous robberies around New Orleans. They too had remained at large for months after absconding from worksites where they had been exiled as a punishment. Cezar told his judges he had been sent to the Lake Pontchartrain tar works, “wearing chains on his feet and a pair of handcuffs too, and seeing he could not work with the chains he ran away.”¹⁰⁸ The trajectories of these fugitives and their gruesome ends serve as powerful reminders of the limitations of slave agency: when enslavers failed to control the mobility and labor of their chattel, the repressive institutions of the state took over to ensure their submission. Yet the Louisiana’s dependence on enslaved workers who remained in short supply made such deaths a loss for all but the wealthiest slaveholders.

¹⁰⁶ Interrogation of Charlot, 1764-05-18/1, RSC.

¹⁰⁷ Judgment against Charlot, 1764-05-19/2, RSC.

¹⁰⁸ Interrogation of Cezar, 1764-07-08/1, RSC. Cezar was probably too young to have been the homonymous runaway “Cezard” employed at Brosset’s tar works 17 years prior (see Section 3.2.1 above), although that is not impossible and the everchanging spelling of their name offers no clue. He mentions being 30 or thereabout in 1764, and the 1747 document implies that the fugitive was an adult (*nègre*) rather than a boy (*negrillon*), as he should have been if he was only about 13. Brosset was unlikely to have hired such a young man for such a difficult job, who may also have struggled to reach the Northern shore of Lake Pontchartrain. The microhistory in the next chapter (7.0), however, suggests that enslaved children could engage in remarkable forms of *marronage*. For the other Cezard, see Agreement between Michel Brosset and René Herpin de La Gautrais, 1747-05-03/1.

Rather than seek absolute control over all aspects of slave life and labor, enslavers permitted their bondspeople to engage in independent economic activities that came to be regarded as customary rights. Although legally forbidden to own property or purchase their freedom, some slaves in Louisiana managed to improve their conditions by hiring themselves out or selling the products of their labor. Beyond barter and informal commerce in stolen goods, enslaved men and women gained cash through jobbing or by peddling foodstuff grown in their own gardens, which colonists granted them to spare the costs of their nourishment. While successive ordinances explicitly prohibited this arrangement in Louisiana as in the French Caribbean, for fear it would encourage theft and the neglect of plantation farming, it was just too beneficial for them and their owners alike to abandon, and the practice was well-established by mid-eighteenth century.¹⁰⁹ Paradoxically, it was the Code Noir that fueled this custom by exempting slaves from working for their owners on Sundays and holidays, which granted them some time of their own. Already in the 1720s the Compagnie sought to forbid colonists from hiring its slaves on their days off.¹¹⁰

The importance of slaves' autonomous production was such that runaways considered being denied the right to work for themselves or raise farm animals in their free time as intolerable violations of plantation customs and legitimate motives of *marronage*. During his 1764 interrogation, an African man named Augustin first said he had deserted his owner to escape frequent beatings. When asked "if he had anything else to tell us," he added "his master did not feed him and took away from him the chance to raise poultry and other small things he could make on his own to dress himself, which is the subject that caused him to run away, and that he beat him

¹⁰⁹ Palmer, "The Customs of Slavery," 194-196.

¹¹⁰ "Arrêt du conseil supérieur de la Louisiane qui interdit aux habitants d'utiliser des nègres de la Compagnie et de les faire travailler les fêtes et dimanches," 21 August 1726, A, 23, fol. 5.

with a stick over nothing.”¹¹¹ Like Cimba and his companions, Augustin specifically denounced the use of a stick, rather than the whip, as an abnormal and gratuitous form of violence. But he also justified his *marronage* by alluding to two related violations of customary arrangements between bondspeople and enslavers: not only was he not clothed properly, but he was not allowed to sell his own wares to make up for it. The same day, another runaway told the court he had asked his owner to sell him, even though he received enough food, because he refused to let him raise poultry and grow produce in order to buy clothes.¹¹²

Those violations notwithstanding, the customary freedom for slaves to hire themselves out on Sundays became so widespread that the Spanish administration recognized it as a formal right in 1774.¹¹³ The ruling came out of a civil suit between two New Orleans planters prompted by the accidental death of Mulet, an enslaved mulatto craftsman, who drowned as he was heading back to his owner’s on a Sunday night, after working for another man. The latter rejected any liability for the loss of the slave’s, arguing “according to the custom of this country, the negroes work where it seems suitable to them on Sunday without permission from anyone.”¹¹⁴ After gathering opinions from local residents, the court presided by governor Unzaga agreed and denied any compensation to Mulet’s owner, and the jurists of the Spanish Crown in Havana upheld the decision in appeal.

¹¹¹ Interrogation of Augustin Poliche alias Pollux, 1764-07-06/1, RSC.

¹¹² Interrogations of Louis, 1764-07-06/2, RSC.

¹¹³ Palmer, “The Customs of Slavery,” 197. By then, Attorney General La Frenière had been executed for leading an ill-fated anti-Spanish insurrection in 1768.

¹¹⁴ See Joseph Loppinot v. Juan Villeneuve, 1774-04-15/1, Louisiana State Museum, Spanish Judicial Records (SJR); Henry P. Dart, ed. “Civil Procedure in Louisiana under the Spanish Regime as Illustrated in Loppinot's Case, 1774,” *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (1929), 33-120, 89 (quote). This case is analyzed in further detail in Ingersoll, *Mammon and Manon*, 178-9; Din, *Spaniards, Planters, and Slaves*, 57-58; Palmer, “The Customs of Slavery,” 197-198.

The swiftness with which some men and women purchased their freedom starting in the early 1770s, as soon as Spaniards introduced the legal practice of self-purchase or *coartacion*, demonstrates that enslaved people were cognizant of their rights and able to gather significant capital through autonomous work.¹¹⁵ Governor Unzaga would vindicate the property rights of enslaved people in 1775, after three enslaved men from Pointe Coupée ran away to New Orleans to complain against the local commandant, who had unjustly confiscated their horses and sold them to rebuild fortifications. The officer, whose other objective was to curb the disorderly movements of the enslaved, especially at night, argued it was illegal for them to own horses in the first place. Although the plaintiffs were briefly detained for unauthorized travel, Unzaga ordered that their companions be entirely refunded, recognizing in the process the customary property rights of enslaved people, which included cash as well as livestock.¹¹⁶ In practice, French courts were already treating enslaved victims of thefts as the rightful owners of consumer goods or money for several decades.¹¹⁷ “A patrimonial separation between master and slave,” observes legal scholar Vernon Palmer, “wherein the latter had private property of his own, had been established in Louisiana during the French colonial period as a matter of custom resulting from the independent slave economy that had grown around market day, sale of produce and handicraft, free-time work, and contract jobbing.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Spear, *Race, Sex, and Social Order*, 116.

¹¹⁶ Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 305-306; Din, *Spaniards, Planters, and Slaves*, 64; Palmer, “The Customs of Slavery,” 215-216.

¹¹⁷ For reports of goods and money stolen from enslaved men and women, see for instance Declaration of Jean Pugeol, 1744-12-26/4, “Compte de le depence faite par le Sieur Péry,” 1748-04-06/1, Declaration of Mr. Fauret, 1765-08-02/4, RSC.

¹¹⁸ Palmer, “The Customs of Slavery,” 217

That the customary right to labor for oneself predated its legalization is confirmed by the fact that some slaves already received payments for exceptional work decades earlier, including from the white colonists who claimed ownership of their bodies and their labor. When the curator of a planter's estate documented his expenses in 1740, he listed the costs of feeding its workforce, which fourteen *livres* for rice he had bought at market price from his own slaves.¹¹⁹ The same year, the debts of Bertrand Jaffre, another dead planter, contained a sizeable sum of 589 *livres* owed to his slaves—an amount equivalent to the price of a small house, or all his medical bills. Each of Jaffre's fifteen adult slaves received close to 40 *livres* for “the delivery they made to their master of the days he had given them to work for their account, the value of which they delivered to the deceased in tar.”¹²⁰ In other words, those field workers had performed unusual and dangerous toil for their owner—manufacturing tar—on their own time. Despite its convoluted language, this financial statement shows that, only a generation after the introduction of enslaved African laborers, granting them time to work for themselves had become customary in Louisiana. Not all slaveholders would have been willing to pay wages to their own chattel, but this norm had enough weight for such obligations to be diligently recorded by court officials and fulfilled even after death. In a striking paradox, the enslaved people regarded as Jaffre's property were sold at auction to various colonists while receiving an overdue payment for work they were legally bound to perform.¹²¹ Such customary arrangements did not change the iron law of slavery, nor did they did pose a radical threat to slaveholders, but they posed limitations to their power and undermined their supposedly absolute mastery. Such practices also provided opportunities and informal rights

¹¹⁹ “Statement of expenses for the estate of the late Coustillas,” 1740-02-29/3, RSC.

¹²⁰ Succession of Bertrand Jaffre alias La Liberté, 1740-09-22/1, RSC.

¹²¹ Adjudication of Jaffre's estate, 1740-08-16/2, RSC.

for enslaved men and women that would not have existed unless they pressured their owners into granting and abiding by them, notably by running away or threatening to.¹²²

6.4 Conclusion

In 1738, Dame Louise Estiennete de Malbec appeared before the Superior Council to submit a petition that was now routine business—twenty years after the foundation of New Orleans and the first arrivals of African slaves in Louisiana. Following the death of her husband, she asked to be designated as their minor children’s tutrix so that she could manage their human property, which was all they owned. Malbec intended to lease the slaves at auction and to use the proceedings the estate’s debt to the Compagnie des Indes—presumably for the purchase of said slaves and to avoid their confiscation. And she added an unusual argument. The enslaved themselves were so miserable in their current situation that they threatened to steal themselves if they were not hired out. Their warning to Dame Malbec was more desperate than any of the bargains evoked in this chapter, however. Instead of running away, they declared that they would drown themselves rather than remain in her power.¹²³ Like other slaveholders, Dame Malbec resorted to hiring slaves as a quick source of revenues to fulfill legal and financial obligations. However, like the colonists who enslaved Cimba, Foÿ, Francisque, Yamma, and hundreds of unnamed individuals like them who

¹²² According to Roderick McDonald, enslaved people in Antebellum Louisiana similarly relied on different strategies of non-cooperation, including work slowdowns, sabotage, and *marronage*, to obtain “better working conditions and more adequate clothing, food, and shelter. The slaves of Louisiana’s sugar plantations sought protection for their economic activities and secured as a customary right the opportunity, during time off plantation labor, to work on their own, to market the fruit of their labor, and to keep the proceeds.” Roderick Alexander McDonald, *The Economy and Material Culture of Slaves: Goods and Chattels on the Sugar Plantations of Jamaica and Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 50.

¹²³ Petition of Louise Estiennete de Malbec, 1738-06-06/3, RSC.

resisted their commodification, her decisions could not ignore their agency.

The painful circumstances that drove Dame Malbec's human property to make such grim threats were not recorded by the white woman they refused to call their mistress or by the authorities with whom she filed her business request. The legal and fiscal mechanisms of slave rentals, like the whole apparatus of Louisiana's slave society, contributed to the racialization of labor and the domination of elite slaveholders over a highly unequal society. The power of New Orleans's slaveholding class appears on virtually every page of court papers, since they largely designed and controlled the operations of the Superior Council. Yet even those judicial records failed to erase fully the voices, the actions, and the humanity of the enslaved. By exploring the motivations of fugitives, this chapter demonstrates how, even though very escaped bondage permanently, their temporary absences empowered enslaved men and women to protest their abuse by slaveholders, negotiate their living and working conditions, and assert informal rights. Despite a brutal campaign of state repression prompted by economic and geopolitical transformations in the last decade of the French regime, by then some of those customs were so entrenched that Louisiana's new Spanish administration would soon give them legal recognition.

7.0 Baptiste and Marianne in *Balbásha*: A Microhistory of Indigenous Youth, Serial *Marronage*, Freedom, and Belonging, ca. 1733-1748

“Sir, I am sending you back your *sauvage* once again, he does not deserve any pardon after so many repeated *marronages*. He would not return without a letter from my hand.”¹ This note was written in French New Orleans in December 1742 by Father Charles, a Capuchin friar in charge of the local Charity Hospital for the Poor, to Gérard Péry, a prominent merchant of Louisiana’s capital. The serial runaway in question, a thirteen-year old male Chickasaw Indian known to the French as Baptiste, carried the priest’s letter himself that day, but the Capuchins escorted him back eight times between 1739 and 1747. During this period, the friars and their female counterparts the Ursuline nuns similarly returned Baptiste’s younger and *métis* (of mixed Native-European parentage) half-sister, whom they called Marianne, after four *marronages* of her own. Following their mother’s death when they were respectively ten and six years old, Baptiste and Marianne sought the Church’s protection as they demanded Péry’s forgiveness but also the freedom once promised them.² The orphans’ actual owner had vowed to free them when he returned to France in 1733—probably after fathering Marianne, who was born and baptized that same year. Yet the promised liberation never came. This betrayed expectation would shape the siblings’ lives, driving them to pursue freedom as they understood it. However, both the Capuchins and the Ursulines owned slaves and, judging by Father Charles’s exasperated tone, they predictably sided with their enslaver. The priest’s note also proves everyone involved treated those

¹ Letter filed with Account of expenses made by Mr. Péry, 1748-04-06/1, RSC. Unless mentioned otherwise, the evidence about Baptiste, Marianne, and their *marronages* is drawn from this file.

² For the siblings’ ages, see Mathieu v. Péry, 1747-03-24/5, RSC.

“repeated *marronages*” as routine: Father Charles sent his respects to Péry’s wife along with the boy, and Péry drafted an equally casual reply on the back of the letter, thanking him for both gestures.

Although neither Baptiste nor Marianne gained permanent freedom, their relentless escapes were far from futile and their sheer number is astounding. After selling them in 1747, Péry reported the two siblings had run away sixty-one times over nine years, more than anyone on record in colonial America (figure 23). Baptiste, who alone absconded forty-six times for almost 1,000 days in total, roamed free almost a third of the time Péry enslaved him. On average, his flights occurred five times a year and lasted about three weeks each, but increasingly longer as Baptiste grew older and stopped coming back on his own. Marianne’s shorter, less frequent desertions began three years after her brother’s, which reflected their age difference and the gendered dynamics of *marronage*: In Louisiana as in other colonies, runaways were usually men, who were unburdened by childcare duties and assigned most tasks involving geographic mobility (see Section 4.1).

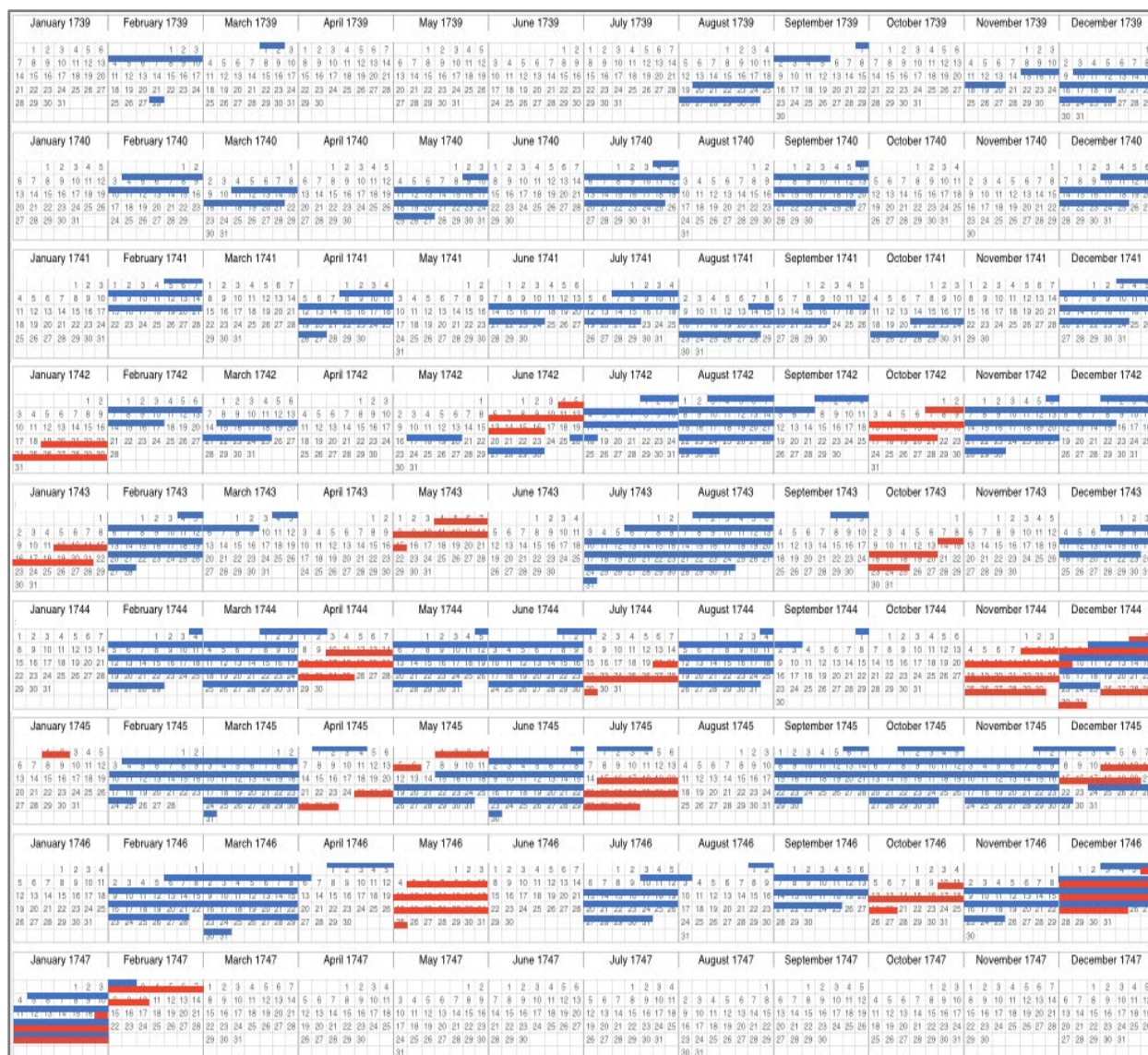


Figure 23. Calendar of Baptiste's and Marianne's absences, 1739-1747. In blue and red, respectively.

Baptiste and Marianne never appeared in court, and the brief mention of Baptiste's plea to Father Charles in the priest's letter is the only recorded echo of their voices. The siblings' actions, however, are described in a probate case containing a most unexpected item: a detailed timeline of their sixty-one desertions, complete with their dates and duration, the identities of those who

returned them when they failed to reappear on their own, and their rewards when applicable (figure 24). Péry submitted this extraordinary account to document his expenses for the Chickasaw youths, for which he claimed most of the proceeds from their sale, although he was not their legal owner but only their guardian. Beside the siblings' *marronages*, he listed the supplies they received, the thefts they committed, and—crucially—the free and enslaved people involved in their activities. Drawing upon these and other Superior Council records, this chapter examines scattered clues about Baptiste and Marianne's material, social, and mental worlds to uncover and imagine aspects of enslaved lives usually invisible in the archives. Admittedly, those sources present methodological, analytical, and ethical challenges. Produced for financial purposes, the legal documents mentioning the Chickasaw siblings contain minimal information about them beyond their ownership history. On their own, those documents provide no direct answers to the most pressing questions about their repeated *marronages*: where did they run away, how, and why? Many other dimensions of Baptiste and Marianne's existence are entirely unknown—and probably unknowable—including their Indigenous names, their fate as adults, or the exact nature of their relationships with Péry and other Europeans, Natives, and Africans.

As recent works informed by feminist and postcolonial insights demonstrate, the archives of slavery reinforced the subjugation of enslaved people by erasing their lives, silencing their voices, and reducing them to laboring bodies, sexualized objects, commodities, and financial assets. Saidiya Hartman sums up the ethical dilemma that those archives pose to scholars of slavery: “How does one recuperate lives entangled with and impossible to differentiate from ... the account books that identified them as units of value, the invoices that claimed them as property, and the banal chronicles that stripped them of human features?”³ Historians can therefore never fully reconstitute their lived experiences of enslaved people any more than they may recover their agency, resistance, or identities—all categories liable to misrepresent the complexity of their conditions and activities.⁴ Yet “the very call to ‘find more sources’ about people who left few if any of their own reproduces the same erasures and silences they experienced,” warns Marissa Fuentes in her study of enslaved women in Barbados, “by demanding the impossible.”⁵ Scholars like Hartman, Fuentes, and Stephanie Smallwood instead propose to “stretch archival fragments” to address, and tentatively, redress this epistemological violence and write “histories accountable to the enslaved.”⁶ My investigation of Baptiste and Marianne’s lives similarly involves empathy

³ Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 3. On archival violence, see also *Social Text* 33, no. 4 (2015), Special issue, “The Question of Recovery: Slavery, Freedom, and the Archive,” ed. Laura Helton et al.; *History of the Present* 6, no. 2 (2016), Special issue, “Slavery and the Archive,” ed. Brian Connolly and Marisa Fuentes.

⁴ On conceptual issues, see Walter Johnson, “On Agency,” *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1 (2003): 113–124; Vincent Brown, “Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery,” *American Historical Review* 114, no. 5 (2009): 1231–1249; Christopher Hodson, “Weird Science: Identity in the Atlantic World,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (2011): 227–232.

⁵ Marisa Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 6.

⁶ Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*, 6–7; Stephanie E. Smallwood, “The Politics of the Archive and History’s Accountability to the Enslaved,” *History of the Present* 6, no. 2 (2016): 119.

and some careful speculation to interpret limited evidence, which have proved essential for writing about enslaved African-American women.

Evidently, the case of these two Native children is atypical. Their youth and ethnicity set them apart from most runaways, who were adult Afro-descendants, as do their numerous *marronages* and the meticulous way they were recorded. Yet this is exactly what makes writing Baptiste and Marianne's story possible and valuable. Their actions and circumstances generated documents *because* they were exceptional, revealing mundane but otherwise unrecorded aspects of New Orleans's slave society—notably the informal employment of slave catchers or the social networks of African, Indigenous, and European relations that enabled some runaways to hide in plain sight. The idea that exceptional documents can describe “a reality so normal it usually remains unspoken” has been instrumental to microhistory, a genre loosely defined as the intensive study of small historical objects.⁷ “The wager of micro-social analysis,” explains French historian Jacques Revel, “is that the most basic experience, that of the small group, even the individual, is the most illuminating since it is the most complex and it belongs to the largest number of different contexts.”⁸ As demonstrated by studies of atypical lives from the African Diaspora, which illuminate how enslaved people interacted with their social, religious, political, or intellectual

⁷ Eduardo Grendi, “Repenser la micro-histoire?” in *Jeux d'échelles: la micro-analyse à l'expérience*, ed. Jacques Revel (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 238 (quote). As a genre, microhistory was pioneered by Italian scholars of early modern society and culture. The most studied example remains Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980). Influential microhistories of Early America include Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale, The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York: Knopf, 1990); John Demos, *The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story from Early America* (New York: Knopf, 1994); Alfred F. Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999); Alan Greer, *Mohawk Saint: Catherine Tekakwitha and the Jesuits* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). For recent assessments of microhistory, see John Brewer, “Microhistory and the Histories of Everyday Life,” *Cultural and Social History* 7, no. 1 (2010): 87-109; Jon F. Sensbach, “Black Pearls: Writing Black Atlantic Women's Biography,” in *Biography and the Black Atlantic*, ed. Lisa A. Lindsay and John Wood Sweet (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 93-107; *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 47 (January 2017), Special issue, “Microhistory and the Historical Imagination: New Frontiers,” ed. Thomas V. Cohen and Thomas Robisheaux.

⁸ Jacques Revel, “Micro-analyse et construction du social,” in *Jeux d'échelles*, 30.

environment, microhistories do not simply get closer to individual experiences: they also seek to answer larger questions by identifying patterns, ideas, or behaviors imperceptible at other scales of observation.⁹ Detailed investigations of enslaved lives therefore illuminate the same tension between individual agency and social structure explored by the founders of microhistory, for whom “all social action is seen to be the result of an individual’s constant negotiation, manipulation, choices and decisions in the face of a normative reality which, though pervasive, nevertheless offers many possibilities for personal interpretations of freedom.”¹⁰ Despite the fast-growing scholarship on Native slavery, however, the enslavement of Indigenous men, women, and children in colonial settlements remains understudied, which renders Baptiste and Marianne’s case particularly significant.

The Chickasaw orphans are among 144 fugitives—including eight Natives—whose names appear in Louisiana’s colonial archives between 1725 and 1769. As shown in Section 5.1, these cases represent only the tip of the iceberg, since *marronage* was rarely reported and publicly punished. The detailed evidence about Baptiste and Marianne’s flights provides a rare glimpse of that iceberg’s bottom, illuminating the daily, concrete operations of enslavers and fugitives. Both *marronage* and its suppression required the frequent participation of many: government officials, planters, merchants, and clerics—all slaveowners—as well as humble colonists, soldiers, and enslaved accomplices or adversaries. Runaways like Baptiste and Marianne had no permanent

⁹ Microhistories of enslaved lives include Randy J. Sparks, *The Two Princes of Calabar: An Eighteenth-Century Atlantic Odyssey* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Sensbach, *Rebecca’s Revival*; James H. Sweet, *Domingos Álvares, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Scott and Hébrard, *Freedom Papers*; Sue Peabody, *Madeleine’s Children: Family, Freedom, Secrets, and Lies in France’s Indian Ocean Colonies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). The two most recent studies of slavery in French New Orleans also adopt a microhistorical approach. See Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans*, 35-40; White, *Voices of the Enslaved*, 24-25.

¹⁰ Giovanni Levi, “On Microhistory,” in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke, (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 98-99.

maroon communities to join outside New Orleans, but there was nothing solitary about their movements, which required social connections and shared collective resources.

Fugitives like Baptiste and Marianne did not choose “family over freedom,” as historians have described slaves in the Antebellum South who gave up formal enfranchisement in a distant land for stolen moments of autonomy close to their loved ones. Although the siblings, like most runaway slaves in Louisiana, stayed around New Orleans during their *marronages*, they poignantly held on both to their kin and to the promise of manumission. Even if they lived practically free during their multiple absences, those interludes of informal freedom only consolidated their desire for emancipation. As Chickasaw youths orphaned in a French colony, their actions also reflected their Indigenous origins—much like the African background of Black runaways. The social network constructed through the siblings’ repeated *marronages* helped them maintain their symbolic ties with the Chickasaw community and escape the isolation of their enslavement. Rather than flee to Indian country, maroon communities, or another empire, the siblings pursued freedom as they envisioned it, within the cosmopolitan society where they belonged. For these orphaned youths as for numerous other enslaved people, illicit activities like stealing and running away served to protest their conditions, resist bondage, and strike back at enslavers, but also and perhaps foremost to survive traumatic experiences, physically and mentally, which was a political struggle in itself. “If one sees power as productive,” writes historian Vincent Brown, “and the fear of social death not as incapacity but as a generative force—a peril that motivated enslaved activity—a different image of slavery slides into view, one in which the object of slave politics is not simply the power of slaveholders, but the very terms and conditions of social existence.”¹¹

¹¹ Brown, “Social Death”: 1244.

7.1 A Chickasaw Family in French Colonial New Orleans

Baptiste and Marianne seldom left the streets of New Orleans and the surrounding plantations, where their indefatigable movements made them a familiar sight among a growing population of Afro-Creole slaves and European inhabitants reeling from the 1729 slaying of over 200 white men, women, and children in a surprise attack by Natchez Indian warriors. Following this so-called “Natchez massacre,” longstanding tensions between the English-allied Chickasaws and Louisianans, who had been buying their scalps and captives since 1721, escalated. Fearing a pan-Indian conspiracy, the French endeavored to exterminate the Natchez and the more powerful Chickasaws who sheltered them.¹² “Louisiana will never rest,” wrote its governor, “unless the Chickasaws are destroyed or removed.”¹³ While two successive campaigns (1736, 1739-1740) failed utterly, the French and their Native allies continued to carry Natchez and Chickasaw captives to New Orleans. Like Baptiste and Marianne’s mother Jeanneton, who arrived there before 1733, they discovered a strange new world inhabited by people they did not understand. The Chickasaws, whose villages were three hundred miles upriver, called the lower Mississippi—and by extension New Orleans—*Balbásha*’, “a place of foreign languages.”¹⁴

By the mid-eighteenth century, most of Louisiana remained Indian country. Even Lower Louisiana, from East Texas to the Mobile Bay and from Natchez to the Gulf of Mexico, where the colonial population was concentrated, counted about 31,500 Natives for 4,900 whites, and 4,300

¹² On the Natchez war, see Usner, *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves*, 65-87; Milne, *Natchez Country*, 159-177; Ellis, “The Natchez War Revisited.”

¹³ Périer to the Minister, 1 December 1731, C13, A14, fol. 154.

¹⁴ On *Balbásha*’, see William A. Read, *Louisiana Place Names of Indian Origin: A Collection of Words* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2008), 43; Dustin J. Mack, “The Chickasaws’ Place-World: The Mississippi River in Chickasaw History and Geography,” *Native South* 11 (2018): 16.

Black inhabitants.¹⁵ The New Orleans area, by contrast, was home to 3,000 Blacks for only 800 white male settlers. Adding women, children, soldiers, and other workers, most city dwellers were Europeans, but enslaved Africans dominated the plantations. A French report from 1746 failed to mention Indigenous slaves, listing only the male warriors from the “savage nations” who could defend or attack the colony, among them 600 Chickasaws.¹⁶ Nevertheless, Jeanneton and her children encountered other Natives daily. A 1737 census counted thirty-three Indigenous slaves around New Orleans.¹⁷ Over the next decade, Baptiste and Marianne lived with or next door to seven enslaved Natives and may have known many more, including at least three Chickasaws. Eighty percent of the twenty-seven Indigenous slaves I have identified in French colonial records between 1736 and 1748 were women and children, who would have been just as eager as Jeanneton’s offspring to recreate kinship networks with adopted relatives.

Baptiste, Marianne, and their mother could also interact with free Natives around the city. Like the “*sauvages* from several nations” depicted outside New Orleans in Alexandre de Batz’s famous 1735 drawing, Indigenous men and women made frequent trading or diplomatic trips to the capital (figure 25). The Choctaws and the neighboring *petites nations* supplied New Orleans with agricultural, fishing, hunting, and crafting products, as well as enslaved captives. Their warriors also worked for the French as mercenaries and runaway slave catchers.¹⁸ Although Indian visitors were generally hostile to the Chickasaws, Jeanneton and her children encountered many among them with cultural, commercial, and even kinship ties with their people.

¹⁵ Wood, “The Changing Population,” 59-61.

¹⁶ Memorandum on the state of the colony, 1746, C13, A30, fols. 244-57.

¹⁷ Summary of the general census of Louisiana, 1737, C13, C4, fol. 197.

¹⁸ On free Native visitors, see Ellis, “The Petite Nations,” 180; Daniel H. Usner, *American Indians in Early New Orleans: From Calumet to Raquette* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2018), 20-22; Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans*, 102-105.



Figure 25. “Drawing of *sauvages* from several nations, New Orleans,” ca. 1735. Watercolor by Alexandre De Batz (detail), Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University.

Baptiste and Marianne had both grown up in New Orleans, but their “savage” origins manifest in their speech and their dress marked them as outsiders. Fluent French speakers—a rare skill among Natives—the soon-to-be orphans could communicate with each other in their mother tongue and with other Natives, Africans, and some Europeans in the “Mobilier Jargon,” a Muskogean-based pidgin language used across the Lower Mississippi Valley easily intelligible to

Chickasaw speakers.¹⁹ A Louisiana settler claimed that all Native residents of the Lower Mississippi “speak the corrupted version of the Chickasaw language, which the French call Mobilian.”²⁰

As customary among Indigenous people and white travelers across Indian country, Baptiste and Marianne’s attire incorporated imported items into Native dress. Among the Chickasaws, Baptiste would have learned to hunt and fight in his early teens, earning ritual tattoos and shaving his long hair into a roach. In New Orleans, cut off from his nation, his village, and his clan, he had to forge a cultural personality from American and European elements available to him. Under the shirt and hooded coat that were staples of slave clothing, Baptiste wore a *braguet* (“loincloth”) rather than breeches, which the Chickasaws despised as constraining and unmanly. The silver ring in his ear, the knife in his belt, and his deerskin moccasins made him resemble the men he would have joined in his village. Although French traders and soldiers frequently adopted these Native objects as they traveled through Indian country, such frontier garb was rare around Louisiana’s capital, where Baptiste would have cut a striking figure.²¹

The younger and lighter skinned Marianne must have seemed more thoroughly assimilated or “Frenchified” than her brother, yet she was just as fully Native as he was.²² Since the Chickasaws, like most Southeastern Indians, followed a matrilineal kinship system, both siblings

¹⁹ Patricia Galloway, *Practicing Ethnohistory: Mining Archives, Hearing Testimony, Constructing Narrative* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 225–43; Emanuel J. Drechsel, “Mobilian Jargon in Historiography: An Exercise in the Ethnohistory of Speaking,” *Southern Anthropologist* 33 (2008): 24–36.

²⁰ Le Page du Pratz, *Histoire de la Louisiane*, 2:219.

²¹ Baudry des Lozières, *Second Voyage*, 209; John Francis McDermott, *A Glossary of Mississippi Valley French, 1673-1850* (Saint Louis: Washington University, 1941), 34; Sophie White, *Wild Frenchmen and Frenchified Indians Material Culture and Race in Colonial Louisiana* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 208–28; James Adair, *The History of the American Indians* (London: Edward & Charles Dilly, 1775), 7–8.

²² On “Frenchification,” see White, *Wild Frenchmen*, 12–14.

belonged to their mother's family regardless of their fathers' identities—as mixed-race children of enslaved women inherited their mothers' status in European colonies.²³ Marianne's daily attire consisted of a shirt, a bodice, and a petticoat, which she supplemented with other European garments taken from her mistress, including a woolen skirt, a fitted jacket of fine cotton, and a lace coif. She too wore moccasins, which her mother likely taught her to make for her and her brother as her female relatives did, and she repurposed the silver thimble she sewed them with in Chickasaw fashion, as a *tali kassa* ("tinkling rock"), a bell-like ornament worn as a pendant or drilled and fastened to her French clothes.²⁴ The siblings' appropriation of such specific items indicates that their deceased mother had shared some of their ancestors' culture with her children, who grew up as Chickasaws in *Balbásha*.

A generation after its foundation in 1718, New Orleans remained a small urban island amidst a sea of plantations. Like many elites, Péry occupied both a city house and a country estate. During the nine years he claimed Baptiste and Marianne as his slaves, their lives, labor, and *marronages* took place between the town and the plantations, within an area of roughly twelve square miles. Péry's urban residence was centrally located northeast of the *place d'armes* [today, Jackson Square], the capital's main square and its civic stage (figure 26).²⁵ Without even leaving their employer's house, the siblings could hear the drum rolls and clamor coming out of the plaza during public events, from markets, military drills, and religious festivals to slave auctions and

²³ James F. Barnett, *Mississippi's American Indians* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 99.

²⁴ On *thimbles*, see Pamela Munro and Catherine Willmond, *Chickasaw: An Analytical Dictionary* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 520; James R. Atkinson, "Death of a Chickasaw Leader: The Probable Grave of Piomingo," *Mississippi Archaeology* 35, no. 2 (2000): 152; Diana DiPaolo Loren, "Beyond the Visual: Considering the Archaeology of Colonial Sounds," *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 12, no. 4 (2008): 360-369.

²⁵ Péry occupied different lodgings on the same lot. See Will of Péry, 1739-07-10/1, Lease by Bimont, 1740-01-05/1, Petition of Gallot, 1743-09-28/8, Sale of Péry estate, 1743-12-08/1, RSC. A valuable historical database of real estate ownership in the French Quarter is Historic New Orleans Collection, *Collins C. Diboll Vieux Carré Digital Survey*, <https://www.hnoc.org/vcs/>

judicial executions.²⁶ And it was there, at the door of Saint-Louis church, that Baptiste and Marianne were eventually sold when they were eighteen and fourteen. As the siblings found themselves at the center of a scene they had witnessed numerous times, the buildings around them were as familiar as the faces in the crowd, yet neither brought them any solace.

In the distance, the slave-built levee that kept the Mississippi from flooding New Orleans disappeared behind two rows of army barracks flanking the weedy square. The sight of the military quarters would have reinforced the siblings' feeling of helplessness: not only had French troops attacked Chickasaw villages a decade earlier, but the soldiers, who frequently harassed slaves and hunted runaways, had captured Baptiste twice.²⁷ Just around the block sat the Superior Council, which oversaw all transfers of human property and prosecuted fugitive slaves, as the siblings knew through the slaves' grapevine and overheard conversations among Europeans, including the assiduous litigant Péry himself. As Saint-Louis church's ringing bells drowned the tinkling of Marianne's *tali kassa*, more reminders of their years of captivity stood behind her: to her left, next to Péry's house, the presbytery whose Capuchin residents had failed to help them become free, and to her right the prison where Baptiste was taken after his last *marronage*. Whether they called the jail *aatoksali* or *yoka' aa-asha*—both derived from Chickasaw words for slaves—the siblings probably used a similar term to describe their enslaver's residences.²⁸

²⁶ On the *place d'armes*, see Thomas N. Ingersoll, "A View from the Parish Jail: New Orleans," *Commonplace* 3, no. 4 (July 2003), <http://www.common-place-archives.org/vol-03/no-04/new-orleans/>; Rebecca Sheehan, "Negotiated Geographies of New Orleans's Place d'Armes, 1789-1852," *Historical Geography* 39 (2011): 223.

²⁷ On soldiers' violence against slaves, see Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans*, 176-179.

²⁸ Munro and Willmond, *Chickasaw*, 445, 7, 209, 484, 362, 346, 504.

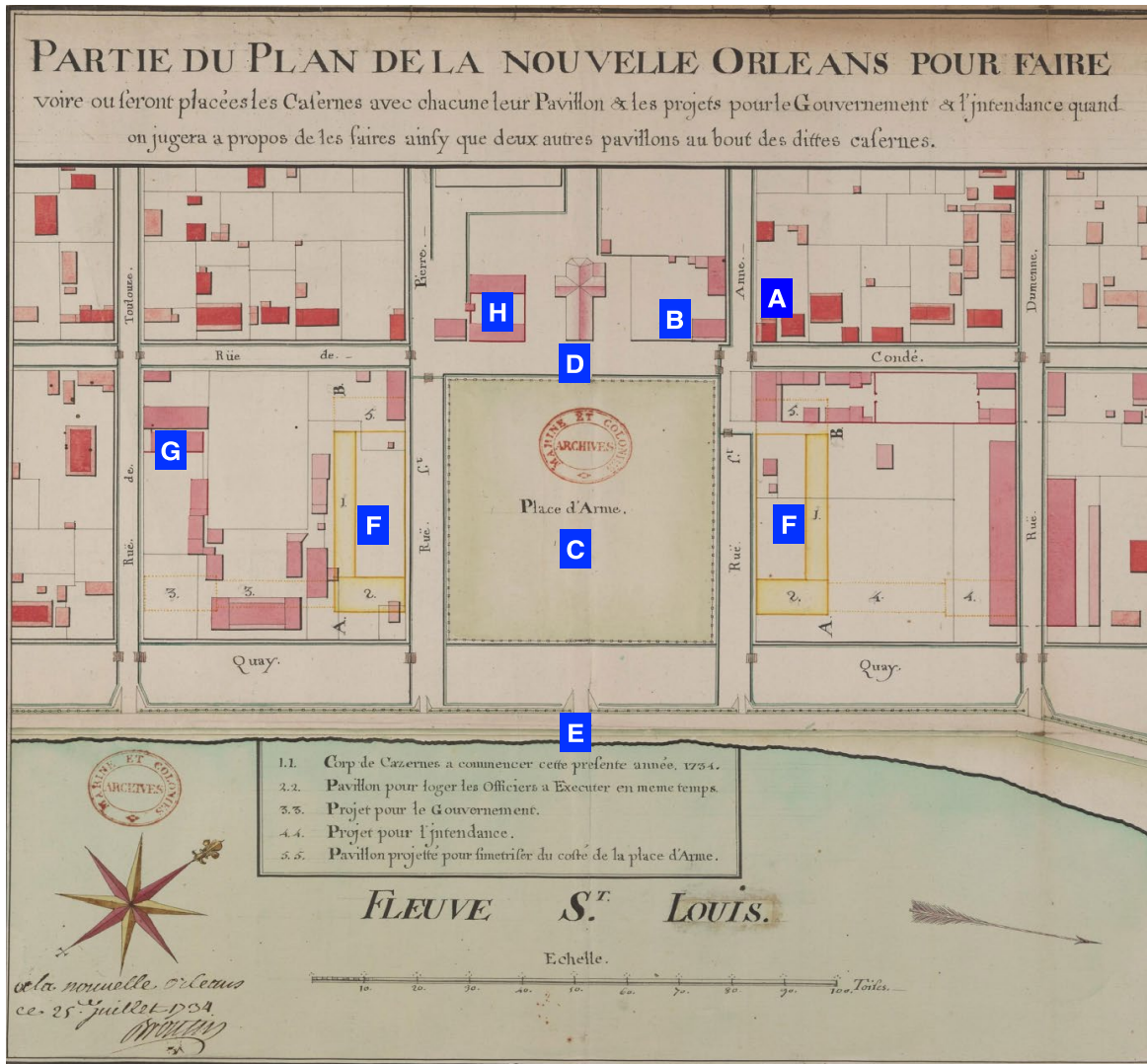


Figure 26. New Orleans's French Quarter, ca. 1734. Key: A—Péry's house, B—Presbytery (Capuchins), C—Place d'armes, D—Saint-Louis church, E—Levee, F—Barracks, G—Superior Council; H—Jail. Detail from "Partie du plan de la Nouvelle Orléans," DFC, 04DFC 95bsB.

The youths' other place of enslavement was a farm of fifty acres ten miles downriver, on the same side as the city, from which it was separated by a string of twenty plantations. Péry's homestead comprised fifty acres of cleared farmland and was laid out like the neighboring estates. Farm buildings clustered near the river around a modest dwelling—four small rooms across a single floor of 450 square feet making it a slightly larger version of his city home.²⁹ The nearby dovecote provided cheap meat and fertilizer as well as a status symbol, since raising pigeons was a prerogative of privileged classes in mainland France. In its rear were muddy woods known as the cypress swamp, where slaves could escape detection. Yet Péry was no planter. His household never owned more than four slaves, rendering him “unable to work his land for lack of Negroes,” specifically to cultivate staple crops like rice and indigo as on nearby plantations.³⁰ Péry's business often kept him in the city while his wife Françoise managed the farm, whose main activity was to raise cattle and poultry. Baptiste assisted older Black slaves in tending to animals, gardening, and woodworking. Along with frequent trips to New Orleans and neighboring plantations to sell meat, dairy, eggs, and produce, he would have carried water and firewood as his sister did in the city. Marianne indeed worked as a domestic servant in Péry's townhouse alongside another slave—certainly Silvie, a Native girl four years older of unidentified origin owned by Mrs. Péry. Beside cleaning, laundering, cooking, and serving meals, their daily tasks included dressing up their enslaver, fitting his wig, and emptying his chamber pot.³¹ The siblings' youth and proximity to the

²⁹ For Péry's farm, see Inventory of Jaffre, 1740-05-11/1 and Sale of Péry estate, 1744-01-04/4, RSC. On the layout of plantations, see Richard Campanella, *Time and Place in New Orleans: Past Geographies in the Present Day* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing, 2002), 84–88.

³⁰ Quotation from Inventory of Péry (continued), 1743-09-20/7, RSC.

³¹ For the Péroys' slaves and their labor, see Aufrere v. Péry, 1745-05-24/3, Declaration by Péry, 1741-03-23/1, and Inventory of Péry, 1743-09-19/1, RSC.

Pérys made them vulnerable to potential abuse, but their working conditions also allowed them some relative freedom of movement, which facilitated their frequent desertions.

Although Baptiste and Marianne had at least five successive employers, their early childhood took place within a stable multiracial environment that was the only family they knew. Between 1733 and 1738, when they reached respectively ten and six years old, the siblings lived with their Chickasaw mother Jeanneton on another farm downriver from New Orleans leased to Frenchman Calixte Descairac, who managed it with his nine slaves: seven African adults, namely four men and a couple with two children, and an elderly Natchez Indian woman.³² Jeanneton would have taught her children that all were family as members of the same household or *chokka'-chaffa'* ("house-one"), the primary social unit among the Chickasaws.³³ In Native fashion, she raised her daughter assisted by the aging Natchez woman, while Baptiste's education was the responsibility of a maternal uncle, a role probably fulfilled by Descairac or one of the African men. The siblings and their mother did not belong to Descairac but to his friend Jean Nebout, like him a Native of Southwestern France. Nebout had been employed at frontier settlements before relocating to New Orleans during the Natchez war (1730-1731).³⁴ It was certainly then that he acquired the Chickasaw mother and son he called Jeanneton and Baptiste.

Upon returning to France in 1733, Nebout left the pair and a newborn *métis* girl named Marianne with Descairac, who promised to free them as soon as their owner, or their labor, would

³² Inventory of Descairac, 1738-09-25/3, RSC.

³³ On Chickasaw households, see Barnett, *Mississippi's American Indians*, 99; Munro and Willmond, *Chickasaw*, 81; David Newhall, "Chickasaw," *Mississippi Encyclopedia*, <http://mississippiencyclopedia.org/entries/chickasaw/>.

³⁴ On Nebout's career, see Passenger list for the ship *L'Éléphant*, 10 August 1720, 5DPPC, 16, no. 21; Journal of Diron d'Artaguiette, 20 January 1723, C13, C2, fol. 229 and "Extraits du registre des délibérations," 7 April and 27 July 1725, C13, A9, fols. 89, 186-7; Nebout v. Delery, 1729-11-08/2, Nebout v. Bonnaud, 1731-04-22/1, RSC.

repay a debt of 500 *livres*—the value of a small house or an enslaved child.³⁵ For Louisiana slaveowners to grant such manumission, or individual freedom, to enslaved women they impregnated and their illegitimate offspring was forbidden and exceptional, but not unheard-of. According the Code Noir, enslaved women impregnated by their owners were to be confiscated and sold for the benefit of the Charity Hospital with their mixed-race children, but this clause was never enforced.³⁶ In practice, some slaveholders provided for them through donations, others let them live as *libres de fait* or practically free without formal emancipation, and a few privileged slaves managed to purchase their freedom, although those arrangements were illegal hence rarely recorded.³⁷ Likewise, Nebout probably wished to enfranchise the trio because he had fathered Marianne, who was conveniently omitted in some public documents as if to conceal this paternity. When Descairac died five years later, Jeanneton and her children still lived on his farm, legally enslaved yet ostensibly free members of their guardian's household. Descairac's will stated Nebout "made him promise he would *leave* [Jeanneton] *her freedom*, and accordingly he wants and instructs that she *remain free* as an asset that does not belong to him."³⁸ In the absence of a documented manumission, Jeanneton's legal and social status can only be speculated, but the record of her daughter's baptism hints at her special relationship with Nebout. Whereas the Capuchins unequivocally described slaves in sacramental records as "belonging to" their owner,

³⁵ For Nebout's debt, see IOU from Nebout to Jaffre, 1733-06-12/1, Petition of Descairac, 1737-11-11/2, Power of Attorney to Garic, 1749-06-09/1, RSC.

³⁶ "Code Noir," Article 6, A, 23, fol. 50.

³⁷ On manumissions of illegitimate children, see Spear, *Race, Sex, and Social Order*, 85-7, 89-90; Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans*, 273-278. For other examples of informal freedom, donations, and self-purchase, see Dumont de Montigny, *Mémoires historiques sur la Louisiane*, 1:243; Will of Huet, 1738-10-20/1 and Donation by Noyon to Jeannette, 1744-12-26/2, RSC. For slaves living practically free in other French colonies, see Bernard Moitt, "In the Shadow of the Plantation: Women of Color and the *libres de fait* of Martinique and Guadeloupe, 1685-1848," in *Beyond bondage: free women of color in the Americas*, ed. David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 37-59; Peabody, *Madeleine's Children*, 92.

³⁸ Will of Descairac, 1736-08-11/3, RSC.

they listed Marianne as the “mulatto child of the *sauvagesse* of Nebout.”³⁹ Beside the still flexible racial label “mulatto” signaling her mixed parentage, *sauvagesse* in this context plainly identified Marianne’s mother as the Frenchman’s “Indian woman,” his concubine rather his slave.

Historical scholarship and former slaves’ testimonies highlight the trauma endured by enslaved children who first realized that they were someone else’s property, through family separation, their entry into the workforce, or the first sale they experienced or witnessed.⁴⁰ For Baptiste and Marianne, this shocking recognition coincided with a succession of dramatic life changes, from the death of their guardian Descairac to the loss of their mother. Jeanneton’s demise left them alone in Péry’s unfamiliar household, where all three had been taken a year before, away from their home and adoptive relatives, when he was appointed curator of Descairac’s estate. The Chickasaws’ new custodian and de facto third enslaver denied their legal emancipation but also the informal quasi-freedom they enjoyed previously, treating them as disposable chattel instead. Six months later, Péry hired out Jeanneton and her male “mulatto [sic] child,” assuredly Baptiste, to a local planter.⁴¹ An ephemeral fourth employer, the lessee sent them back after only two months, and five before Péry reported the death of “an old *sauvagesse* named Jeanneton of about ____ [blank] years . . . after a long illness.”⁴² Péry exploited her children’s labor for eight more years without any title other than the court’s consent, until he finally settled Descairac’s succession and requested they be auctioned “to avoid expenses and the loss of the said slaves, well-known for

³⁹ “Marie mulatresse [sic],” 6 July 1733, Sacramental Records of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, Saint-Louis Cathedral (SLC), Baptisms, Book I, fol. 40.

⁴⁰ Rachael Pasierowska, “Up from Childhood: When African-American Enslaved Children Learned of Their Servile Status,” *Slavery and Abolition* 37, no. 1 (2015): 94-116; Daina Ramey Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved, from Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017), 35-41.

⁴¹ Lease to Darby, 1739-03-30/4, RSC.

⁴² Declaration by Péry 1739-10-07/5, RSC.

being prone to *marronage*.”⁴³ Shortly after their fifth and last known enslaver purchased Baptiste and Marianne for 2,100 *livres*, Péry shamelessly attempted to profit from them one last time. According to his petition, their *marronages* cost him 480 *livres* to reward the siblings’ escorts and reimburse the victims of their thefts. Adding 865 *livres* for their food, clothes, and medical care, legal fees brought his total claims to 1,532 *livres*, three-quarters of the proceeds from their sale.⁴⁴

7.2 Legal and Financial Context

Péry failed to obtain compensation from Nebout, but his claims were never questioned by the Superior Council, whose members were all elite slaveholders familiar with *marronage*.⁴⁵ During the preceding year only, they heard seven cases involving runaway slaves. Other cases involving slaves examined during that same period included two murders, a suicide, the manumission of a Black man by his owner, the re-enslavement of a freedwoman for theft and debts, and the shocking report by two fugitives returned from Havana that several runaway slaves from New Orleans had been living there for eight years. Louisiana’s governor and attorney general, who sat among them, both knew firsthand about Baptiste and Marianne because they had been arrested on their estates. Péry named twenty more witnesses of the siblings’ desertions:

⁴³ Péry v. Mathieu, 1748-99-99/1 (sic; undated, certainly July 1747), RSC.

⁴⁴ Based on a conservative estimate of 150 *livres* for the yearly value of their labor, Péry gained or saved about 1,200 *livres* despite their absences. Even if his expense account was truthful, the slaves’ upkeep, their desertions, and any damages they caused were part of the cost of retaining them. Slave hiring contracts, for instance, stated explicitly that lessees were responsible for those expenses in addition to rent. See for instance Leases by Larcheveque to Aufrere, 1737-03-18/3, Dame Bruslé to Brosset, 1739-01-16/1, Loubouey to Coutel, 1740-03-24/2, RSC.

⁴⁵ Jerry Micelle, “From Law Court to Local Government: Metamorphosis of the Superior Council of French Louisiana,” *Louisiana History* 9, no. 2 (1968): 85-107.

shopkeepers, merchants, planters, military officers, administrators, and religious figures, who nearly all had personal or business ties with him. Most, like the Capuchins, returned the fugitives to their enslaver. Others were robbed, or owned slaves robbed by the two serial runaways. Although the court recorded no other testimony than Péry's, the mere mention of this close-knit elite validated his account.

Péry's claims echoed other slaveholders' complaints that they hardly obtained any labor from slaves who repeatedly deserted or disobeyed them. The Superior Council even regarded such rebellious behavior as a legitimate motive to cancel a slave's purchase, exchange, or lease.⁴⁶ That Péry abstained from declaring Baptiste and Marianne's multiple absences for years was also not unusual (see Section 5.1). Yet Péry, like other slaveholders who viewed slave discipline as a private matter, eagerly turned to the state to protect their financial interests. Shortly after becoming Baptiste and Marianne's guardian, Péry informed the Superior Council that Pierrot, a Black man enslaved on the late Jacques de Coustilhas's plantation, had died after returning from one of his frequent *marronages* and being flogged by its tenant. As curator of the Coustilhas succession, Péry predictably claimed Pierrot was not "whipped inappropriately or unreasonably, nor did the lashes he received seem to have caused his death in any way, but rather the cold or hunger he suffered in the woods where he spent eight days, having the defect of running away without any reason."⁴⁷ The nine-year-old Baptiste, who had been Pierrot's neighbor for five years, probably heard this shocking death discussed among slaves, but it did not deter him from deserting for the first time

⁴⁶ For cancelled transactions involving runaways, see Exchange between Lionais and Coustilhas, 1730-10-19/1 and Petition of Larcheveque, 1737-02-20/3, RSC.

⁴⁷ Quotation from Declaration by Péry, 1738-12-12/1, RSC.

two months later. Péry, on the other hand, must have decided to monitor the boy's movements but not punish him too harshly, since he too belonged to a third party.

Although the siblings' chronic *marronages* cost Péry money, deprived him of their labor, and embarrassed him before other slaveholders, he likely thought Baptiste and Marianne too young and too easily recognizable to disappear permanently, and their absences a minimal loss. Péry and his associates shared a widespread prejudice among Europeans against Indigenous labor, which motivated their demands for Black slaves deemed less likely to escape and more productive field hands than enslaved Natives.⁴⁸ Péry indeed leased Jeanneton and Baptiste to planter Darby free of rent, "considering how little those kinds of slaves can work and produce on a plantation."⁴⁹ Darby owned rice fields and leased the indigo plantation of the late Coustilhas from Péry. Jeanneton and her offspring probably sustained the plantation's workforce through farming and cooking, so Péry would indirectly profit from their labor when exporting the crop while sparing their living expenses. This was familiar work for the Chickasaw mother, since Coustilhas was the landlord and neighbor of her former guardian Descairac.⁵⁰ Jeanneton may even have asked to be hired out to reconnect with old acquaintances. Darby desperately needed workers: the government had requisitioned his strongest slaves for another military expedition against the Chickasaws, leaving him too few hands to harvest crops on both plantations. Yet he returned Jeanneton after only six weeks, arguing she "does not produce the value of her food."⁵¹

⁴⁸ For evidence of prejudice against Indigenous labor, see Hubert to the Minister, 16 October 1717, NAF, 9303, fol. 101; Périer to Raguet, 12 May 1728, C13, A11, fol. 7. See also above, Section 4.1.

⁴⁹ Lease to Darby, 1739-03-30/4, RSC.

⁵⁰ For Coustilhas's plantation and his tenant farmer Descairac, see Will of Descairac, 1736-08-11/3, Will of Coustilhas, 1738-08-26/3; Darby v. Péry and Mathieu, 1739-03-30/1-3, RSC.

⁵¹ For Jeanneton's death, see Declaration by Péry, 1739-10-07/5, RSC.

While Baptiste and Marianne were not as valuable laborers as Black adults, their work still benefitted Péry. His petition asserted he “raised them until they were old enough to be sold with some profit,” but that self-serving argument was deceitful.⁵² The Code Noir implicitly defined slave adulthood by forbidding the sale of prepubescent children apart from their parents and the seizure for debt of workers aged fourteen or more.⁵³ Yet its provisions only concerned Africans, not Natives—even though the code shaped the social context all enslavers and enslaved people lived in. Furthermore, slaveholders in labor-starved Louisiana proved eager to acquire children employed as farm hands or house servants from an early age like their Antebellum counterparts.⁵⁴ During the siblings’ lifetime, at least forty-eight underaged slaves were purchased or estimated individually in New Orleans, their prices surging as they grew older and increasingly productive workers rather than mere capital investments—or both in the case of adolescent girls made especially valuable by reproductive labor and sexual exploitation.⁵⁵ Even accounting for the lower demand for Indigenous slaves, Marianne and Baptiste were already worth much more than their owner’s debt by the time they lost their mother in 1739. Péry could have sold them at any point had he not profited from them.

When Péry sold the Chickasaw youths for 2,100 *livres* in 1747, he claimed that Baptiste and Marianne cost him a total of 1,345 *livres*, a sum he had reason to exaggerate. The slaves’ upkeep, their desertions, and any damages they caused were part of the cost of retaining them.

⁵² Quotation from Péry v. Mathieu, 1748-99-99/1, RSC.

⁵³ Code Noir, Articles 63-64; Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 169.

⁵⁴ For enslaved children’s work, see Inventory of Coustilhas, 1739-03-02/1, Legal proceedings against Marie-Jeanne, 1748-07-15/01, Interrogation of Babette, 1765-10-10/1, RSC. For their Antebellum counterparts, see Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 71-106.

⁵⁵ For examples of children sold individually, see Sale of Bruslé estate, 1738-12-03/2, Inventory of Trudeau, 1739-11-12/2, Sale of Trudeau estate, 1739-10-26/3, RSC.

Slave hiring contracts, for instance, stated explicitly that lessees were responsible for those expenses in addition to rent.⁵⁶ Employers of slave labor did not hesitate to cover such costs, for labor shortages made it difficult to acquire the few slaves available for purchase even for those who could afford them. Péry was well aware of the difficulty of procuring captive workers, since he arranged a slave trading voyage to West Africa as the shipowner's legal agent in 1737, which failed after the captain died en route in Martinique.⁵⁷

Beside his commercial activities, the merchant Péry worked as a probate attorney for various estates, a frequent situation in French Louisiana where professional lawyers were banned to curb political dissent.⁵⁸ This bold attempt at social engineering had backfired. Financial troubles and the rigidity of procedures under the legal regime known as the *coutume de Paris* generated a stream of civil suits in New Orleans. As cases like the Descairac succession dragged on for decades, elites self-fashioned as attorneys enriched themselves and consolidated their domination of local affairs through “probate racketeering.”⁵⁹ This litigation business was a welcome bounty for Péry, whose fortune declined through the 1740s as he lost suits against other merchants, clients, and relatives. By 1743, when his wife filed for separation of property shortly after bringing a large dowry of 20,000 *livres* into their marriage, his capital mostly belonged to his spouse and his creditors.⁶⁰ Three years after Baptiste and Marianne were sold, Louisiana officials wrote that Péry

⁵⁶ For examples of slave hiring costs, see leasing contracts by Larcheveque to Aufrere, 1737-03-18/3, Thommelin to Harant, 1737-10-01-01, Ferrandon to Baron, 1739-01-13/4, Dame Bruslé to Brosset, 1739-01-16/1, Louboey to Coutel, 1740-03-24/2, Petition of Attorney for vacant estates Dauseville, 1739-07-17/2, RSC.

⁵⁷ Memorandum for Coustilhas heirs v. Péry, 1739-09-27/2, RSC.

⁵⁸ On lawyers, see Dawdy, *Building the Devil's Empire*, 145, 205.

⁵⁹ Hardy, “Probate Racketeering”: 109–21.

⁶⁰ For Péry's financial difficulties, see Péry v. Meyere, 1743-11-09/1, Françoise v. Gérard Péry, 1743-09-27/2, Petition of Aufrere, 1747-04-08/2, RSC.

had accumulated debts the couple was unlikely to repay as they lived “in utter misery.”⁶¹ Péry, once the owner of several Black men, now only employed his wife’s four slaves: two African men, an African woman, and the teenaged Native girl Silvie.⁶² Baptiste and Marianne did not belong to him, but for all the trouble they caused him the siblings were the only servants Péry could count upon, which explains why he went through considerable trouble to retrieve them.

Colonists of all ways of life, or more often their slaves, participated in the suppression of *marronage* by returning the footloose siblings. Local elites—planters, merchants, administrators, and religious—performed this service for a fellow slaveholder free of charge. Conversely, Péry gave cash awards to lower-class whites and enslaved Africans, including two women, who brought back his truants, for a total of 255 *livres* over nine years. The pattern of those payments follows an informal pay scale according to the escorts’ race, the distance they covered, and the duration of the *marronages* they terminated. For each *conduite* (“escort”)—the same word used to describe transports of French convicts—Péry paid ten *livres* on average: usually five to ten to slaves, fifteen to white soldiers and an overseer. These were no trifling amounts. Ten *livres* were equivalent to the monthly wages of an unskilled worker or the lease of a slave’s labor for the same period, when soldiers received less than five *livres* after deduction of their supplies.⁶³ The cash awards therefore allowed enlisted men and enslaved laborers to improve the mediocre diet and dress provided by their employers. Péry did not indicate whether he paid enslaved slave catchers or their owners, but the former probably kept the rewards as the price of their cooperation. Whereas a local innkeeper

⁶¹ Vaudreuil and Michel to the Minister, 29 September 1750, C13, A34, fols. 366-368.

⁶² Inventory of Péry (continued), 1743-09-20/7, RSC.

⁶³ For soldiers’ wages, see “État des fonds,” 9 February 1744, C13, A28, fol. 134. For examples of slave hiring costs, see Promissory note from Manade, 1736-08-19/1, Lease by Thomelin to Harant, 1737-10-01/1, Lease by Guyot to Dalcourt, 1739-01-13/3, Petition of Judice, 1748-03-29/1, RSC.

returned Baptiste twice at no cost, his slave received an exceptionally high reward of twenty *livres* for bringing the boy back after a *marronage* of nearly two months. The Péry's own Black slaves must have been rewarded as well, for they retrieved Marianne and her brother seven times from various locations. The three Africans lived in close proximity with the Chickasaw youths and were old enough to have been their parents, but the nature of their relationship can only be guessed at. Their respective roles in the siblings' recurring *marronages* would have been a source of tension, or perhaps of hidden complicity if they colluded to split the gains generated by their movements.

7.3 Mapping *Marronages* and Social Relations

Like runaways in slave societies and deserters around the world, Baptiste and Marianne ran away from adverse conditions but also toward potential havens and allies in search of freedom, safety, and overall well-being. I determined the approximate locations of the siblings' arrests by linking the names in Péry's account, biographical information, and contemporary cadastral maps. Mapping those sites where Baptiste and Marianne were retrieved reveals that most of their desertions ended surprisingly close to Péry's residences. Their *marronages* took them to a two dozen locations, half within a few urban blocks and the other along a ten-mile strip of plantations downriver, along the Mississippi's eastern bank (figures 27-28). There is no evidence of how long Baptiste and Marianne's stayed there, what other places they visited, what paths they followed, or why and how the runaways were found at those locations after weeks of absence. Yet whether they were caught hiding or surrendered themselves after tiring of running away, they had chosen sites they felt safe, where they would find people they trusted assist them. The Chickasaw youths could

hardly have hidden so long, so often, and so close without Péry learning of their whereabouts unless they received extensive support.

The spatial distribution of the Baptiste and Marianne's *marronages* shows a distinct pattern for each sibling. Whereas seventy-five percent of Baptiste's flights ended in the city rather than on a nearby plantation, the proportion is exactly the same in reverse for his sister. Held separately ten miles from each other, they ran away to be together again. After escaping from her enslaver's townhouse to reunite with her brother, Marianne was retrieved from every other plantation on the way to Péry's farm, which Baptiste left with a similar purpose before reappearing in the city. The chronology of their desertions reveals an astonishing level of coordination and confirms their intentions. While they never absconded together, there is almost no overlap between Baptiste and Marianne's respective *marronages*: when one ran away, the other stayed put so they could find and support each other (figure 23). The siblings' paths also converged the only three times their absences coincided. When the fifteen-year-old Baptiste deserted Péry's farm on December 4, 1744, for instance, his sister had been missing for nearly a month. Marianne, then eleven, was caught a week later on the estate adjacent to Péry's, where Baptiste lived and labored. The young man's *marronage* lasted until Christmas, when he was found next to Péry's city home and probably returned to the farm, prompting Marianne to abscond again the next day. The runaways may have synchronized their movements using moon cycles or calendar days, but it seems more likely, and more impressive, that they stayed informed of each other's whereabouts via word of mouth and cooperation.



Figure 27. Locations where Baptiste and Marianne were retrieved outside the city. All but one of Baptiste's (B) and Marianne's (M) *marronages* outside of New Orleans ended between the city and Péry's farm. After "Plan de la Nouvelle Orleans [...]," 1753, DFC, 04DFC59A.

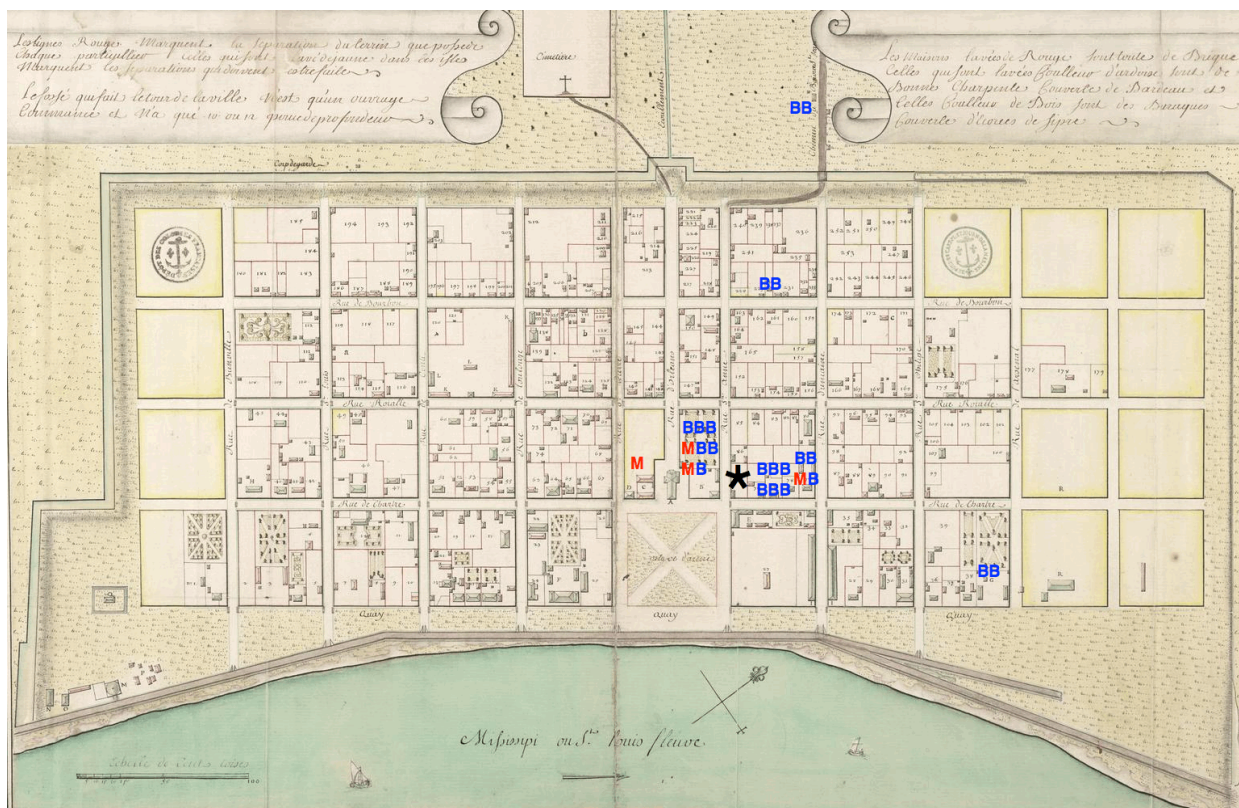


Figure 28. Urban locations where Baptiste and Marianne were retrieved. Most of Baptiste's (B) and Marianne's (M) *marronages* ended close to Péry's townhouse (★). After "Plan de la Nouvelle Orléans," 1731, DFC, 04DFC89B.

To sustain themselves during their *marronages*, the Chickasaw youths must have obtained food, shelter, and employment from neighboring slaves and even white colonists. Beside their numerous visits to the presbytery across the street from their employer's townhouse, the youths were retrieved ten times from adjacent lots and six from the plantation bordering Péry's farm, whose owner Michel Brosset had no qualms about hiring runaway slaves.⁶⁴ By contrast, neither Baptiste nor Marianne was found at his neighboring Joseph Chaperon's, who also employed fugitives.⁶⁵ Because Chaperon was a notoriously vicious slaveholder—he reportedly burnt a slave alive in an oven—the siblings purposefully avoided his plantation despite its proximity.⁶⁶

The physical environment of the Chickasaw siblings facilitated their desertions too. Heavily wooded, sparsely populated, and surrounded by swamps, mid-eighteenth-century New Orleans provided a propitious setting for runaways who could feed on the wildlife on the wetlands. Traveling between Péry's farm and the city, the siblings learned to navigate the marshy woods behind the plantations, where they could hide, work, circulate, and meet other slaves, including runaways who lingered around the city for months without being arrested. One small band even featured a Black man owned by Péry.⁶⁷ While the siblings did not join those fugitives, they learned important skills from them. The runaways' knowledge of the region, in particular, supplemented what Baptiste and Marianne had been taught by their mother, whose people had lived off the land for generations in a slightly different environment. The Chickasaw orphans thus developed a deep

⁶⁴ Sale by Boisson to Brosset, 1739-07-22/1, Agreement between Brosset and La Gautrais, 1747-05-03/1, RSC.

⁶⁵ Gonzalle v. Chaperon, 1739-06-20/1, Petition of Chaperon, 1741-01-10/2, RSC. For examples involving both Brosset and Chaperon, see Section 4.1.

⁶⁶ Declaration by Larcheveque, 1736-09-18/1, RSC. Spear, *Race, Sex, and Social Order*, 52-53.

⁶⁷ Interrogation of Pierrot, 1741-01-11/1, Fazende to X, 1745-02-17/2, Declaration by Cantrelle, 1745-03-15/1, RSC.

knowledge of their environment, what historian Stephanie Camp called a “rival geography,” which challenged the spatial control of slaveholders.⁶⁸

In New Orleans, the siblings’ interactions with other slaves would have centered on public gathering places like markets, the hospital, or the levee. Anonymity, entertainment, and work opportunities drew runaways to cities across the Americas, and Baptiste and Marianne could take advantage of chronic labor shortages to gain some temporary employment. However, Louisiana’s capital was too small and the Chickasaw youths too conspicuous to hide among free Blacks, as African American fugitives did in many other port cities.⁶⁹ Instead, Baptiste and his sister cultivated the support of urban residents as they demanded their freedom. Many colonists and slaves responded by assisting or at least turning a blind eye to their desertions.

The siblings’ primary motivation for running away was to cement social connections, which partly reflected Indigenous perceptions of space, kinship, and captivity transmitted by their Chickasaw mother, other enslaved Natives, and free Indian visitors. Rare maps drawn by Southeastern Indians show that they valued their social environment as much as their physical surroundings and imagined themselves as members of interdependent communities linked by numerous paths (figure 29). Unlike the French, whose maps emphasized individual property lines, their mental geography privileged circulation between connected groups.⁷⁰ Baptiste and Marianne’s shared spatial imagination would have guided their crisscrossing movements across legal boundaries to maintain the network of their relations.

⁶⁸ Quotation from Camp, *Closer to Freedom*: 6–7.

⁶⁹ Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 131–136; Martin, *Divided Mastery*, 161–187; Amani Marshall, “‘They Will Endeavor to Pass for Free’: Enslaved Runaways’: Performances of Freedom in Antebellum South Carolina,” *Slavery and Abolition* 31, no. 2 (2010): 161–80.

⁷⁰ Gregory A. Waselkov, “Indian Maps of the Colonial Southeast,” in *Powhatan’s Mantle*, 442–447, 484–486.

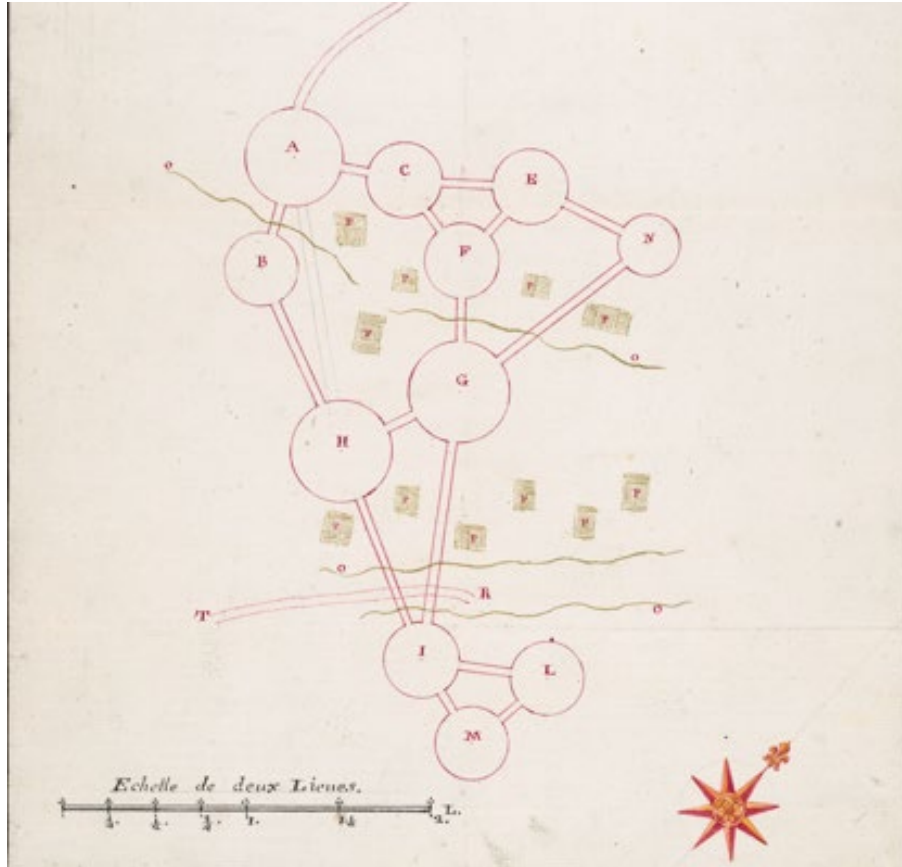


Figure 29. “Map and location of the Chickasaw villages,” 1737. Originally drawn on deerskin by an Alabama Native who scouted the Chickasaw villages, this map prominently features circled settlements and the paths connecting them, across streams and cultivated fields. It provides a glimpse of the mental geography of Southeastern Indians. C13, A22, fol. 68.

The siblings learned from their mother that their primordial ties were to her household and her clan. Rather than nuclear families, those matrilineal kinship structures were the most important groups Chickasaw men and women belonged to. Each clan had its own origin story and animal totem (e.g. Deer, Panther, Raccoon), protected its members, and ensured their place in the spiritual

realm and their community.⁷¹ Conversely, to be *yoka* (captive, enslaved) was to lack connections and the support of relatives, resulting in mistreatment, exclusion from social life, and the risk of being sold away.⁷² This conception of slavery as “an institution of marginality” contrasted with European understandings of bondage as the opposite of freedom, defined as personal independence from social bonds. For the Chickasaws, as for most African societies, “the antithesis of ‘slavery’ [was] not ‘freedom’ qua autonomy but rather ‘belonging.’”⁷³ As Baptiste and Marianne were tossed between different enslavers in a slave society that marginalized them, this Indigenous understanding of servility encouraged them to recreate a kinship network in *Balbàsha*. Despite having never lived in Chickasaw country, Marianne remained her brother’s sole link to their clan after their mother’s death, and Baptiste in turn would have been responsible for the education of the male children borne by his sister. Beyond the universal link between siblings, staying together therefore preserved their political bonds to their people and their symbolic place in the world. Whether Péry realized the significance of the relationship he severed by separating Baptiste and Marianne, he may have done it as a punishment and unwittingly encouraged further escapes.

Chattel slavery as practiced in New Orleans undermined Native understandings of captivity as a temporary form of domination embedded in kinship ties. The siblings’ mother must have witnessed people captured in war, tortured, held in bondage, sold, and executed long before living among the French, because the Chickasaws were active slave traders. Yet Natives also adopted

⁷¹ On clans, see Barnett, *Mississippi’s American Indians*, 99; Dustin Mack, “A River of Continuity, Tributaries of Change: The Chickasaws and the Mississippi River, 1735-1795” (Ph.D. diss., University of Oklahoma, 2015), 43-44; Newhall, “Chickasaw.”

⁷² On *yoka* status, see Wendy St. Jean, “Trading Paths: Chickasaw Diplomacy in the Greater Southeast, 1690s-1790s” (Ph.D. diss., University of Connecticut, 2004), 50-51.

⁷³ Igor Kopyto and Suzanne Miers, “African ‘Slavery’ as an Institution of Marginality,” in *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Igor Kopyto and Suzanne Miers (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977), 17. On contrasted understandings of freedom, belonging, and kinship between Europeans and others, see also David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 21-22.

prisoners, especially women and children, into their communities. Although slaveholding progressively shifted toward the colonial model of racial exclusion among Southeastern Indians, they still conceived of bondage as an inclusive and mutable social relation in the mid-eighteenth century. Their “captives could enhance their status or even assume new identities,” explains historian Christina Snyder, through “sexual relationships, adoption, hard work, military service, or escape.”⁷⁴ For Jeanneton and her children, being mortgaged, rented, and purchased by the likes of Péry clashed with this cultural perception of what slavery entailed, but also with the quasi-freedom they had experienced for years. In life and death, the Chickasaw mother probably urged her children to run away to seek support and challenge the terms of their enslavement.

Through their *marronages*, the Chickasaw youths reclaimed their mobility to connect with a motley collection of Indigenous, African, and even European friends and adopted kin. Clans provided kinship across different towns and even different nations. Chickasaw members of the Deer clan traveling through Creek and Cherokee towns, for instance, would find clan relatives ready to host and assist them. These networks facilitated Native commerce and diplomacy but also the adoption of newcomers, including Europeans—after marrying a Chickasaw woman, an Englishman reportedly gained “relations in each village from Charlestown to the Mississippi.”⁷⁵ Although Baptiste and Marianne’s clan affiliations are unknown, they undoubtedly sought and conceivably found clan relatives among the Chickasaw, Natchez, and *Balbasha*’ other Indigenous captives and visitors around them. Most of the siblings’ associates, however, were Afro-Creoles.

⁷⁴ Christina Snyder, *Slavery in Indian Country: The Changing Face of Captivity in Early America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 6. On Native understandings of slavery, see also Alan Gallay, ed., *Indian Slavery in Colonial America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009); Brett Rushforth, *Bonds of Alliance; Ethnohistory* 64, no. 1 (2017), Special issue, “Native American Slavery in the Seventeenth Century,” ed. Arne Bialuschewski.

⁷⁵ Thomas Nairne, *Nairne’s Muskhogean Journals: The 1708 Expedition to the Mississippi River*, ed. Alexander Moore (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1988), 61.

Out of the eight Black slaves of their first guardian Descairac who had shared quarters with them, a couple was sold with their two children after their owner's death while the four remaining African men were scattered between three different buyers.⁷⁶ Remarkably, each of those colonists later returned Baptiste and Marianne after some *marronage*, assuredly after they visited their adoptive African kin. The innkeeper to whom Baptiste ran away three times, for instance, had purchased Descairac's former slave Hector, who may have acted as his uncle-like mentor.

The only instance when either sibling was found far from New Orleans illuminates their efforts to maintain ties with Native and African relations. In September 1742, French soldiers returned the thirteen-year-old Baptiste from Pointe à la Hache, a marshy site fifty miles downriver. Having absconded less than a week earlier, for the third time that summer, Baptiste traveled this considerable distance aboard a stolen canoe with another Indigenous man—the only time the Chickasaw youths deserted with a companion. Pointe à la Hache was unsettled except for a cattle ranch operated by a half-dozen Black slaves, who belonged to the aforementioned Coustilhas.⁷⁷ As their neighbors of five years from the time Descairac was Coustilhas's tenant, Baptiste and Marianne knew most of the latter's slaves, including some employed as cowherds at Pointe à la Hache long after their owner's death. By escaping to this remote location, Baptiste and his Native companion were reconnecting with old friends who could shelter them. His unnamed accomplice was a longstanding associate too: five years later, both Marianne and her brother were caught on his owner's plantation, one day apart from each other.

⁷⁶ Inventory of Descairac, 1738-09-25/3, Declaration by Péry, 1738-10-22/3, Sale of Descairac's estate, 1739-03-03/2, RSC.

⁷⁷ Inventory of Coustilhas, 1739-03-02/1, Petition of Louis, 1739-12-26/5, RSC.

The siblings' social network was not limited to slaves and their search for white allies was particularly evident in the city. Of the twelve urban residents who returned them to Péry, ten were close associates of his or powerful men able to intercede on their behalf. Along with religious orders and secular authorities, the list comprised three of Péry's business partners, four neighbors, and the surgeon who treated his slaves and family. Baptiste was most frequently escorted by Barthélemy Bimont, whom the boy knew as Péry's landlord and a colleague of his two previous enslavers. Like Bimont, several New Orleanians brought Baptiste back in person, either because they owned no slave or because of their personal relationship with him. A Miss Millon escorted the seventeen-year-old runaway by herself when he was seventeen, an unusual role for an unmarried woman that hints at a special link between them. Millon's family owned property on Bayou Road north of the city, near a brickyard leased to Péry whose manager also returned Baptiste once.⁷⁸ While Bayou Road was located beyond the usual range of his *marronages*, Baptiste may have become familiar with the area after working at the brickyard. He and his sister befriended another white woman, Marie-Jeanne Caron, another orphan of Marianne's age and her neighbor in the city. Years after the death of Marie-Jeanne's father, her tutor's slaves took both siblings back to Péry, doubtless after they sought the girl's company or assistance.⁷⁹

Baptiste and Marianne used their mobility and social network to commit robberies that facilitated their *marronages*. According to Péry, their larcenies amounted to 225 *livres*, almost as much as a year's worth of both their labor or all the rewards paid for their return. Some of Baptiste's loot was listed but not estimated, probably because it was recovered: a silver ring, a

⁷⁸ For the Millon estate on Bayou Road, see Petition of Desruisseaux, 1752-06-01/1, RSC. For the brickyard's manager, see Interrogation of Lamoureux, 1743-03-15/1, RSC.

⁷⁹ For Marie-Jeanne Caron, see Petition of Tesson, 1746-04-02/1, Desgoutin-Caron marriage contract, 1747-07-29/1, Tesson v. Barbin, 1747-12-02/6, RSC; "Marie-Jeanne Caron," 18 November 1731, SLC, Baptisms, Book I, fol. 14.

knife, a turkey, and two dozen eggs—all of it pilfered, along with some petty cash, from African slaves owned by neighbors or associates of his enslaver. Marianne, who had access to the Péry's bedroom as a domestic servant, exclusively stole precious or elegant items from them: a new skirt, a caraco, a handkerchief, three laced headbands, two pairs of male stockings, a silver thimble, and a piece of garnet and pearl jewelry. The siblings could sell or barter their loot for cash, food, clothes, and other necessities. How they proceeded to fence the goods is undocumented, but they encountered many potential trading partners during their *marronages*. The stolen garments would be easily disposed of, since they were the most widely robbed, pawned, recycled, and traded objects within New Orleans' informal economy.⁸⁰ While Péry and other merchants-planters-attorneys operated their shady businesses in broad daylight, the small-scale, underground commerce between slaves, soldiers, poor whites, and their Indigenous neighbors took place at the swampy edges of plantations.

Beside retaliating against their enslaver and increasing their purchasing power, Baptiste and Marianne's thefts also allowed them to acquire elements of Native dress. Together, they took from Péry two deerskins—one of Louisiana's most valuable exports. Like the thimble, the knife, or the silver ring, the hides carried symbolic and trading value among the Chickasaws. Just as Baptiste insisted to wear a loincloth rather than trousers, he and Marianne would have fashioned clothes and especially moccasins from the stolen deerskins, using skills learned from their mother. Their appropriation of such specific items confirms that they inherited some of their ancestors' culture from her and held on to it under slavery.

⁸⁰ White, "Geographies of Slave Consumption."

By contrast, the siblings' repeated visits to priests and nuns suggest that they assimilated some essential aspects of French culture. Whether those contacts resulted from personal connections, religious sentiments, or both, Baptiste and Marianne's clearly sought some support from the Catholic Church. Unlike Jesuit missions in Indian country, pastoral care for New Orleans and other colonial settlements belonged to the Capuchins. Unable or unwilling to interfere between enslaved people and their owners, the religious nevertheless worked diligently to baptize enslaved newborns like Marianne and groups of adult slaves. During the siblings' lifetime, about sixty percent of all those baptized in New Orleans parish were enslaved.⁸¹ Some even received religious instruction from the Capuchins, the Ursulines, and especially the Ladies Congregation of the Children of Mary, a laywomen's confraternity dedicated to catechizing children and slaves. Baptiste and Marianne may have attended their classes, wished to, or at least expected benevolence from those pious white women, some of whom they knew well. The confraternity's membership reached over a third of New Orleans's free women, including several of Péry's neighbors and his mother-in-law.⁸² While the Europeans listed in Péry's account for having returned the orphans were almost all men, their mothers, wives, and daughters were probably often the ones they ran to.

Baptiste and Marianne's religious beliefs are undocumented, but slaves around them attended Sunday mass in Saint-Louis church, served as godparents, were married and buried by priests, and even invoked their Catholic faith in court.⁸³ Notwithstanding negative interpretations

⁸¹ Mary Veronica Miceli, "The Influence of the Roman Catholic Church" (Ph.D. diss., Tulane University, 1979), 167-171, 107-143.

⁸² Emily Clark, "'By All the Conduct of their Lives': A Laywomen's Confraternity in New Orleans, 1730-1744," *William and Mary Quarterly* 54, no. 4 (1997): 769-794.

⁸³ Miceli, "The Roman Catholic Church," 95-97, 139-140; Emily Clark and Virginia Meacham Gould, "The Feminine Face of Afro-Catholicism in New Orleans, 1727-1852," *William and Mary Quarterly* 59, no. 2 (2002): 413-425; White, *Voices of the Enslaved*, 77-83, 122-123.

of such practices as superficial or reinforcing racial hierarchies, enslaved people found spiritual and social empowerment through Christianization.⁸⁴ Like Afro-Catholics, the Chickasaw siblings probably combined Catholic and Native cosmologies, and they used the liturgical calendar for their own purposes. Baptiste was always missing for much of December between 1739 and 1746, and every year but one he reappeared or absconded again within two days of Christmas, doubtless because he expected to be pardoned as customary during the holiday. Marianne and her brother could look up to clerics for defending the slaves' right to Sunday rest and proper Christian burials, or for caring for the orphans and the sick. Admittedly, the Catholic Church's influence on slaves was limited beyond the ones owned by religious orders and those living near the city, but this was the very environment in which the siblings grew up.

Baptiste and Marianne's circumstances likely drew sympathy from their Indigenous, African, and European neighbors, many of whom were orphans themselves. Beside their youth, their racial status must also have helped them navigate Louisiana's colonial society. While seventeenth-century architects of New France had once imagined an empire where French settlers and Christianized Indians would blend into one people, *métissage* ("miscegenation") between European men and Native women was largely taboo in New Orleans.⁸⁵ Yet Louisiana officials, clerics, and colonists still sought to convert and civilize the Natives in their midst. For instance, the Pérys deemed their Indigenous slave Silvie "well Frenchified," hence well-suited for domestic service in the city alongside the *métis* Marianne.⁸⁶ Another *métis* woman, born of a Frenchman and his free Illinois wife, would soon become the first Creole-born to join the Ursulines as a

⁸⁴ For critical assessments of slave christianization, see Ingersoll, *Mammon and Manon*, 111-113; Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans*, 159-161.

⁸⁵ Spear, *Race, Sex, and Social Order*, 26, 37-42; Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans*, 244-8, 268-270.

⁸⁶ *Aufrere v. Péry*, 1745-05-24/3, RSC.

converse nun.⁸⁷ Historian James Merrell has shown how “those smaller Indian groups situated in the midst of colonial settlements” he calls “neighboring Indians” struggled to maintain a distinctly Native identity while mimicking aspects of European culture.⁸⁸

The colonists who assisted Baptiste and Marianne may also have acted out of personal animosity toward their enslaver, castigated by a local official as dishonest and “money-grubbing like those eager to strike rich at once.”⁸⁹ Péry evidently exaggerated the impact of his financial misfortunes when he lamented an “honest shame prevented him from appearing in public,” but his troublesome wards could capitalize on his social disgrace in a small community that cherished individual reputations.⁹⁰ Within a year of the siblings joining his household, four slaves died in his care, including their mother and the runaway Pierrot, who had perished after—and perhaps from—a whipping. While Péry may not have been personally responsible for these, he would have become more infamous still among the enslaved after a Black carpenter leased to him “cut his throat in despair, from ill-treatment or other causes.”⁹¹

⁸⁷ The case of the métis nun is examined at length in White, *Wild Frenchmen*, 149-175.

⁸⁸ James Merrell, “The Customes of Our Countrey: Indians and Colonists in Early America,” in *Strangers within the Realm: Cultural Margins of the First British Empire*, ed. Bernard Bailyn and Philip D. Morgan (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 154

⁸⁹ Petition of D’Auseville, 1739-06-06/2, RSC.

⁹⁰ Péry v. Mathieu, 1748-99-99/1, RSC. On honor and reputations, see Dawdy, *Building the Devil’s Empire*, 169-175.

⁹¹ Declaration by Viel, 1741-10-06/1, RSC.

7.4 Petitioning with their Feet: Enslavement, Manumission, and Freedom

Some free and enslaved residents of New Orleans's likely felt compassion for Baptiste and Marianne—and antipathy toward their employer—because Péry denied their promised manumission. By running away from the first man to actively enslave them, the orphans resumed the informal freedom they had enjoyed during their childhood and maintained a network of social connections that enabled them not to be *yoka'*—vulnerable, isolated captives without kin. Yet the Chickasaw youths also deserted to strike back against Péry and demand their emancipation, proving they were no strangers to French legal definitions of freedom.

Manumissions were difficult and rare in French Louisiana—scholarly estimates for the whole colony vary between 53 and 119 freed individuals over a half-century, often after their owners' death.⁹² From a panoramic perspective, those discretionary gifts of freedom appear statistically negligible and fully assimilated by the institution of slavery, much like *marronages*. Far from threatening slaveholders, manumissions reinforced their structural power and served their interests by demonstrating their total control over their chattel and mandating submission from freedpeople, especially to their former owners.⁹³ The process of being manumitted also required onerous and protracted negotiations with slaveowners, their heirs, and the authorities, which frequently failed without the support of free sponsors. Yet precisely because those freedom struggles remained exceptional, yielded uncertain outcomes, and mobilized many participants, their impact on the enslaved was much more significant than the recorded numbers suggest.

⁹² Ingersoll, "Free Blacks," 178–79; de la Fuente and Gross, "Manumission and freedom," 26–29; Spear, *Race, Sex, and Social Order*, 85–90; Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans*, 208–10, 277–80.

⁹³ For a global overview of the manumission process, see Robin Blackburn, "Introduction," in *Paths to Freedom: Manumission in the Atlantic World*, ed. Rosemary Brana-Shute and Randy J. Sparks (Charleston: University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 1–14.

Focusing a microhistorical lens on Baptiste and Marianne's social environment reveals their connections to various cases that inspired slaves like them to seek their liberation.

Though probably illiterate, the Chickasaw siblings developed their own understanding of slave law and manumission. Through their own experience and others who pursued, secured, and lost their freedom, they quickly learned "that a piece of paper could turn a human being into a person with a price, and that other pieces of paper could restore freedom and standing."⁹⁴ The free-soil principle that there were "no slaves in France," which drove metropolitan judges to free over 150 enslaved petitioners before the Revolution, did not extend overseas.⁹⁵ As in the Caribbean, enslaved people had almost no access to courts in Louisiana, where the Code Noir disqualified them as litigants, witnesses, or parties in a contract.⁹⁶ Freedom suits would only multiply in New Orleans several decades later, after Spain took over the colony, allowed slaves to purchase their freedom, and banned the Indian slave trade, which encouraged mixed-race descendants of Native women to demand their emancipation.⁹⁷ Those paths to freedom were nonexistent for Baptiste and Marianne, but slave petitions were not entirely unknown in the French empire. Between 1738 and 1740, a Black cook gained his liberty in a well-publicized trial in Paris, a *métis* woman filed another freedom suit in Quebec, and the desertion of an Indigenous slave in Martinique prompted a royal decree outlawing the enslavement of "Caribs and Indians" in the French Antilles.⁹⁸ How

⁹⁴ Scott and Hébrard, *Freedom Papers*, 171.

⁹⁵ Peabody, *No Slaves in France*, 55; *Slavery and Abolition* 32, no. 3 (2011), Special issue, "Free Soil," ed. Sue Peabody and Keila Grinberg.

⁹⁶ Code Noir, Articles 24-25.

⁹⁷ Judith Kelleher Schafer, *Slavery, the Civil Law, and the Supreme Court of Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 2-3; Webre, "Indian Slavery": 125-27; Hanger, *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places*, 25-26; Spear, *Race, Sex, and Social Order*, 109-177.

⁹⁸ Peabody, "No Slaves in France," 23-56; Sue Peabody, "La Question Raciale et Le 'sol Libre de France': L'affaire Furcy," *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 64, no. 6 (2009): 1320-1321; Rushforth, *Bonds of Alliance*, 347-349, 356-358.

much slaves in New Orleans knew about these events is impossible to ascertain. Nevertheless, Baptiste and Marianne could have heard them discussed among avid consumers of transatlantic news like the merchants, planters, clerics, and bureaucrats encountered through their labor and their movements. Most importantly, historians have demonstrated how the enslaved circulated such exhilarating news through their own informal networks of communication.⁹⁹

With friends and acquaintances, Baptiste and Marianne would have traded local stories of liberation, from daring maritime escapes to precarious manumissions. In 1739—the year the siblings lost their mother—the innkeeper who owned Baptiste’s old companion Hector went looking for a fugitive mulatto sailor belonging to his brother. After working for the planter Chaperon near Péry’s farm, the runaway absconded by boat with three of Chaperon’s slaves.¹⁰⁰ Only weeks later, Péry’s future father-in-law reported that six slaves had escaped from his tar manufacture on the northern shore of Lake Pontchartrain, thirty miles away from New Orleans, by joining four deserting soldiers aboard a dugout and sailing away toward the Gulf of Mexico. Neither the soldiers nor the enslaved were heard of again until eight years later, when other runaways returned from Cuba declared that the latter were living among Havana’s free Blacks, along with Chaperon’s escapees.¹⁰¹

Compared to such spectacular incidents of maritime desertion, Baptiste and Marianne’s *marronages* may have seemed harmless had they not emulated another type of freedom seeker. Soon after their guardian Descairac’s passing, his landlord and neighbor Coustillas also died,

⁹⁹ Peabody, *No Slaves in France*, 46–48, 92; Franklin and Schweninger, *In Search of the Promised Land*, 60; Megginson, *African American Life in South Carolina’s Upper Piedmont, 1780-1900*, 135–36; Scott, *The Common Wind*, 76–117.

¹⁰⁰ Power of Attorney to Gonzalle, 1739-06-07/1, Petition of Gonzalle, 1739-06-15/5, Declaration by Chaperon, 1739-11-07/2, RSC.

¹⁰¹ Declaration by Aufrere and Jahan, 1739-10-16/1, Declaration by Manuel and Jean, 1748-03-22/1, RSC.

having manumitted six of his sixty-two slaves in his will: a Black man called Louis Connard and his wife, who probably earned their freedom by managing his plantation, along with their four children.¹⁰² “Conforming to their masters daily promises,” the Connard couple petitioned Louisiana’s administrators to emancipate them, their offspring, as well as two mulatto girls and a five-year-old *métis* boy named Pierre.¹⁰³ Yet the aspiring freedpeople must soon have learned that Coustilhas’s testament did not free Pierre and the girls, for they soon submitted another plea restricted to their nuclear family.¹⁰⁴ This discrepancy between the Connards’ two petitions reveals that they expected their owner to manumit the only mixed-race youths among his chattel because he had fathered them, as slaveholders commonly did. An earlier draft of Coustilhas’s indeed freed the two mulatto girls along with the Connards, to whom it also granted the land occupied by Descairac—and his slaves including the Chickasaw Jeanneton and her children.¹⁰⁵

Baptiste and Marianne would have taken a keen interest in the Connards’ case and the fate of the *métis* Pierre, whose situation was akin to Marianne’s, because they were connected in one way or another to all the protagonists. The experience of the freedpeople, who managed to secure their emancipation but failed to liberate Pierre, must have impressed her and Baptiste, who had grown up around them. Remarkably, Baptiste’s longest *marronage* ended at the same Frenchman’s who had drafted the freedpeople’s emotional petitions, perhaps to urge him do the same for them. The death of Coustilhas, which brought on the Connards’ manumission, would also have resonated

¹⁰² Ingersoll, “Slave Codes,” 39. Louis might have been nicknamed “Connard,” a common French surname but also an insult, to belittle the freedman’s family. For such derogatory nicknames, see Peabody, *Madeleine’s Children*, 75–76.

¹⁰³ Petition of the Connards, 1739-03-04/3, RSC. Pierre was probably the boy mentioned in “Pierre Indien,” 12 August 1732, SLC, Baptisms, Book I, fol. 27.

¹⁰⁴ Second will of Coustilhas, 1739-03-04/4 and Petition of the Connards, 1739-03-06/2, RSC.

¹⁰⁵ First will of Coustilhas, 1738-08-26/3, RSC.

with Baptiste and Marianne because it occurred during a military expedition against the Chickasaws. Not only was this campaign a complete strategic failure, but the lasting resistance of their nation against the French—once the source of their capture—offered the siblings a delayed reprisal and vicarious victory by triggering the liberation of an enslaved family close to them.¹⁰⁶

Another manumission indirectly affected the Chickasaw youths after they lost their mother. Like Coustilhas, the deceased settler Bertrand Jaffre alias “La Liberté” freed some slaves in his will: a Black woman also named Jeanneton and her ten-year-old daughter Marie-Jeanne, whom he probably fathered.¹⁰⁷ This striking similitude with the names and circumstances of Baptiste’s mother and sister was the least disturbing aspect of the case for the Indigenous orphans, who literally took the freedwomen’s place. Not only did the omnipresent Péry, acting as Jaffre’s testamentary executor, validate the other Jeanneton’s emancipation, but he also bought her late owner’s farm, where Baptiste would live, labor, and rebel for many years.¹⁰⁸

Promised then denied freedom, the Chickasaw youths knew firsthand that any granted freedom was fragile, conditional, and reversible. Baptiste and Marianne notably followed the drawn-out legal battle successfully fought by Marie-Charlotte (alias Marion), a mixed-race girl freed and placed as a boarder at the Ursuline convent by her dying owner and probable father in 1735.¹⁰⁹ After a local official wrongfully dismissed Marie-Charlotte’s manumission and bought her for himself, she was re-enslaved for six more years until he too passed away. Marie-Charlotte then pressed the King’s attorney “repeatedly with sundry oral and written requests” to demand her

¹⁰⁶ James R. Atkinson, *Splendid Land, Splendid People: The Chickasaw Indians to Removal* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 62–73.

¹⁰⁷ Manumission of Jeanneton and Marie-Jeanne, 1740-08-24/1, RSC.

¹⁰⁸ Sale of Jaffre estate, 1740-08-20/2, RSC.

¹⁰⁹ For Marie-Charlotte’s initial manumission, see Manumission of Louise and Marie-Charlotte, 1735-10-09/1; Petition of the Ursulines, 1737-07-29/2, RSC.

freedom.¹¹⁰ Officially emancipated at last fourteen months later but forced to repay her purchase price, the freedwoman managed to borrow the money and sued her late owner's estate for years of unpaid wages. "It would be unjust for him," Marie-Charlotte argued, "to have been served without pay by a free person he only kept enslaved through a petty trick."¹¹¹ Perhaps Baptiste knew her, since he stole cash from a woman enslaved on the same plantation, close to Péry's farm on the way to the city. Regardless, he and Marianne would have learned Marie-Charlotte's case discussed among around them, if only because Péry and his father-in-law were the estate curators sentenced to compensate the freedwoman in 1745. When the siblings ran away to clerics and administrators, they probably felt inspired by slaves like Marie-Charlotte and the Connards to petition local authorities in person or in writing through some literate colonist's assistance.¹¹² Baptiste and Marianne's resolve to seek redress from Louisiana's government would have been comforted by an amnesty for runaway slaves they issued in 1743,¹¹³ shortly before freeing an enslaved woman in exchange for years of unpaid labor from her and her free Black husband at the Charity Hospital. Their emancipation was requested by the hospital director, the Capuchin Father Charles, from whom Baptiste extracted a less formal appeal before reappearing at Péry's.¹¹⁴

Other freedpeople were less fortunate and the siblings witnessed their freedom being rescinded. A few years after the Connards' emancipation, the Superior Council sentenced both of

¹¹⁰ Petition of King's Attorney Fleuriau, 1743-11-23/2, RSC.

¹¹¹ Petition of Marion (sic), 1745-02-06/5, RSC.

¹¹² For other slaves seeking justice from colonial authorities, see Declaration by Pierre Garsont (sic), 1737-06-29/1, Interrogation of Scipion, 1751-06-21/1, Interrogations of Cimba and others, 1764-01-25/1, RSC.

¹¹³ "Ordonnance de Messrs. Bienville et Salmon du 5 janvier 1743 portant amnistie en faveur des nègres marrons," 5 January 1743, A, 23, fol. 130.

¹¹⁴ Petition of Father Charles, 1744-03-06/3, RSC.

their children to re-enslavement, ostensibly for thefts and unpaid debts.¹¹⁵ Yet this cruel and unusual punishment probably resulted from a legal scheme to settle the succession of the Connard children's late owner, as hinted by an outstanding creditor's request to be paid from the product of their sale.¹¹⁶ While never formally manumitted, Baptiste and Marianne too had once lived practically free and expected their emancipation, before being kept in bondage for years under false pretexts and eventually sold to satisfy financial claims. They would have felt fully justified in stealing their own labor and demanding their overdue liberation.

7.5 Conclusion

In October 1747, Baptiste and Marianne's new owner, the wealthy merchant Jean-Baptiste Bancio-Piémont, reported the young man had already run away twice more since he purchased the siblings three months earlier.¹¹⁷ Their subsequent fate is unknown, but Bancio-Piémont may have taken them to Saint-Domingue where his family moved a few years later.¹¹⁸ The Chickasaw orphans would have joined other enslaved Natives transported from Louisiana to the sugar island, including scores of Natchez prisoners.¹¹⁹ Despite their relentless efforts, the two serial runaways apparently neither escaped to freedom nor obtained their emancipation in New Orleans. Yet their

¹¹⁵ Prosecution of Baptiste, 1743-09-14/3 and 1747-04-08/1; Adjudication of Jeannette, 1747-04-11/1, RSC.

¹¹⁶ For the creditor's request, see Petition of Jaureguyberry, 1747-04-27/1, RSC. On a possible scheme, see Dawdy, *Building the Devil's Empire*, 298n39.

¹¹⁷ Declaration by Bancio-Piémont, 1747-10-10/1, RSC.

¹¹⁸ The last document mentioning Bancio-Piémont in Louisiana is "Jean-Baptiste Bancio-Piémont [Jr.]," 5 April 1749, SLC, Baptisms, Book II, fol. 148. He and one of his sons later served as local administrators in Port-au-Prince. See Montandre-Lonchamps and Montandre, *État militaire de France: pour l'année 1761* (Paris: 1761), 364; Dossier Thibodeau, 1786, E, 378.

¹¹⁹ Smyth, "The Natchez Diaspora," 54-80.

movements transformed their own lives and those of others. Over nine years in Péry's service, Baptiste and Marianne took their labor away from Péry for 1,259 days, during which they experienced periods of informal freedom and developed old and new social ties. From their perspective, the main achievement of their *marronages* was to break the isolation caused by their enslavement.

Baptiste and Marianne could desert as often as they did because they acquired the necessary skills and resources to take advantage of unusual circumstances. Belonging to a third party protected them from the worst abuse by their acting enslaver, whose limited means of supervision offered them frequent opportunities to abscond. Their young age combined with the prejudice against Indigenous workers also gave the siblings more latitude to move around than the adult Black slaves around them. Yet the Chickasaw youths, who rarely left New Orleans and the nearby plantations, were too conspicuous to hide. Like other runaways in the area, they had to master their geographical environment, but their knowledge of the city was just as critical to their movements as their ability to navigate the wooded swamps.

The sibling's labor and their desertions rendered them increasingly familiar with a wide array of places and people, out of which they forged a network of Native, African, and European relations—friends, allies, and adopted kin—that aided further escapes. Even seemingly isolated acts of slave resistance like *marronage* were truly collective affairs since they relied on common resources and the cooperation of multiple actors. The relationships Baptiste and Marianne sustained by running away helped them grow up as frenchified Chickasaws. Their dress, the items they appropriated, and the company they kept prove the two siblings held on to their Native roots, undeterred by their bondage in *Balbásha*'. Nevertheless, they were remarkably integrated in and knowledgeable about Louisiana's colonial society. While the Superior Council decided who was

entitled to govern them and benefit from their labor, the youths sought the support of other institutions and individuals—the Church, state officials, their free and enslaved neighbors—to demand the formal freedom once promised to them. For runaways like Baptiste and Marianne, small-scale *marronage* was not simply a pause in their enslavement but a path toward their emancipation and a social world of their own.

8.0 Conclusion. “They Have Been Together Since”

Late in 1765, a Black couple enslaved in New Orleans ran away to Mobile, 150 miles east along the Gulf Coast, where they found temporary refuge. Jean-Baptiste, a carter, and his female companion, a field hand named Kenet, were respectively about 30 and 40 years old. Both were Creoles, and they had long been living as husband and wife without being formally married. Yet they belonged to two different wealthy colonists and were enslaved on separate plantations at Bayou Saint John between the city of New Orleans and Lake Pontchartrain.¹ When Kenet’s owner Joseph Desruisseaux exiled her to his “island,” another property on the lake’s remote Northern shore, for having fought with other slaves, Jean-Baptiste deserted to join the woman he considered his wife (figure 1). Once reunited, the pair escaped together by paddling a stolen canoe for several days until they reached Mobile, where Kenet had lived before and likely retained social connections.² From Lake Pontchartrain to Mobile Bay, they navigated a treacherous coastal route

¹ Interrogation of Jean-Baptiste, 1767-06-10/1, Interrogation of Kenet, 1767-06-10/2, Interrogation of Jean-Baptiste Brazilier, 1767-07-04/1, Second interrogation of Kenet, 1767-08-13/3, RSC. As with many early modern records, the information regarding their age, their race, and their names, including their spelling, is inconsistent. Jean-Baptiste used his full name in all his interactions with the court, but everyone else including Kenet called him Baptiste. Her own name, probably of Western African origin, was also spelled Quenette and Quenet. Jean-Baptiste alternatively said he was 25 and 30, Kenet 35 and 45. Second interrogation of Jean-Baptiste, 1767-08-13/1, Second interrogation of Kenet, 1767-08-13/3, RSC. Both were usually described as Black and once as mulatto. See Declaration of Moudion in Investigation at the request of Brazilier, 1767-07-11/1, Interrogation of Brazilier, 1767-07-04/1, RSC. For another analysis of this case, see White, *Voices of the Enslaved*, 172-202.

² Interrogation of Brazilier, 1767-07-04/1, Second interrogation of Kenet, 1767-08-13/3, RSC. Kenet claimed they had “taken a pirogue from the Indians,” which Sophie White interprets as a hint that local Natives facilitated the fugitives’ hazardous journey. But Kenet may simply have provided this vague answer to avoid being accused of stealing from whites or having to name free and enslaved accomplices. In an earlier case involving another pair of runaways, one similarly claimed they escaped aboard “an Indian canoe they found near the water,” although his companion said it belonged to a white trader (implicit in the term *voyageur*). Interrogation of Kenet, 1767-06-10/2, Interrogations of Bayou and Mamourou, 1748-06-11/1 and 1748-06-11/2, RSC. Kenet’s owner Joseph Desruisseaux had purchased the so-called island from the Biloxi Natives and obtained from Louisiana’s administrators to confirm his title. See Esteban (Étienne) Roquigny, husband of Maria Isabel (Marie Elizabeth) Desruisseaux v. Vicente (Vincent) Rillieux, 25 May 1791, 1791-05-25/3, SJR, esp. fols. 17-19, 20, 25; Frederick S. Ellis, *St. Tammany Parish:*

long followed by fugitives toward Spanish Florida.³ But Mobile was also a strategic destination because it was no longer under French jurisdiction after 1763, when Britain incorporated it into its new colony of West Florida at the end of the Seven Year War, along with land east of the Mississippi New Orleans except.⁴ Enough runaway slaves from Louisiana sought to take advantage of this geopolitical change for its French governor to request the assistance of his British counterpart in returning them in June 1766. Attached was a list—now lost—of “the inhabitants of this country having fugitive slaves in Mobile,” but the only colonist cited in the letter itself was Jean-Baptiste’s owner, the Frenchman Brazilier (also named Jean-Baptiste).⁵ Brazilier evidently knew his slave’s whereabouts and the governor’s support soon proved decisive in helping him recover his chattel. Jean-Baptiste and Kenet, who had remained at large more than seven months, were arrested shortly afterwards and taken back to New Orleans, despite the former’s vow that “he would rather die than return to his owner.”⁶

L’Autre Cote du Lac (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 1998), 40; Anita R. Campeau and Donald J. Sharp, “From Ile Perrot, Canada to Pearl Island, Louisiana,” *New Orleans Genesis* 42, no. 169 (2004): 1-18.

³ Beside the numerous examples of military deserters and enslaved runaways cited in chapters 3.0, 5.0, and 6.0, see the cases of other fugitives in Declaration of Ignace Petit, 1744-01-26-01/1, Petition of Nicolas Forstall, 1745-05-29/1, RSC.

⁴ Recent studies of runaway slaves crossing Southern and Caribbean borders or jurisdictions include Linda Rupert, “‘Seeking the Water of Baptism’: Fugitive Slaves and Imperial Jurisdiction in the Early Modern Caribbean,” in *Legal Pluralism and Empires, 1500–1850*, ed. Lauren Benton and Richard J. Ross (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 199–231; Matthew J. Clavin, *Aiming for Pensacola: Fugitive Slaves on the Atlantic and Southern Frontiers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015); Mekala Audain, “‘Design His Course to Mexico’: The Fugitive Slave Experience in the Texas-Mexico Borderlands, 1850-1853,” in *Fugitive Slaves and Spaces of Freedom in North America*, ed. Damian A. Pargas, (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2018), 232-250.

⁵ Charles-Philippe Aubry to George Johnston, 3 June 1766, *Mississippi Provincial Archives, English Dominion*, ed. Dunbar Rowland (Nashville: Press of Brandon Printing Co., 1911), 1: 314. Aubry’s predecessor had already asked for British cooperation in returning runaway slaves from Mobile two years earlier. Jean-Jacques Blaise D’Abbadie to Robert Farmar, 28 April 1764, C13, A44, fol. 78.

⁶ Interrogation of Brazilier, 1767-07-04/1, RSC. For a similar statement made by another runaway in the Illinois country, see Petition of Louis Metivier, 3 March 1741, KM, Private papers I-II (1722-1748) (digitized microfilm copy, <https://www.familysearch.org/search/film/008203158?cat=58291>, frames 110-111).

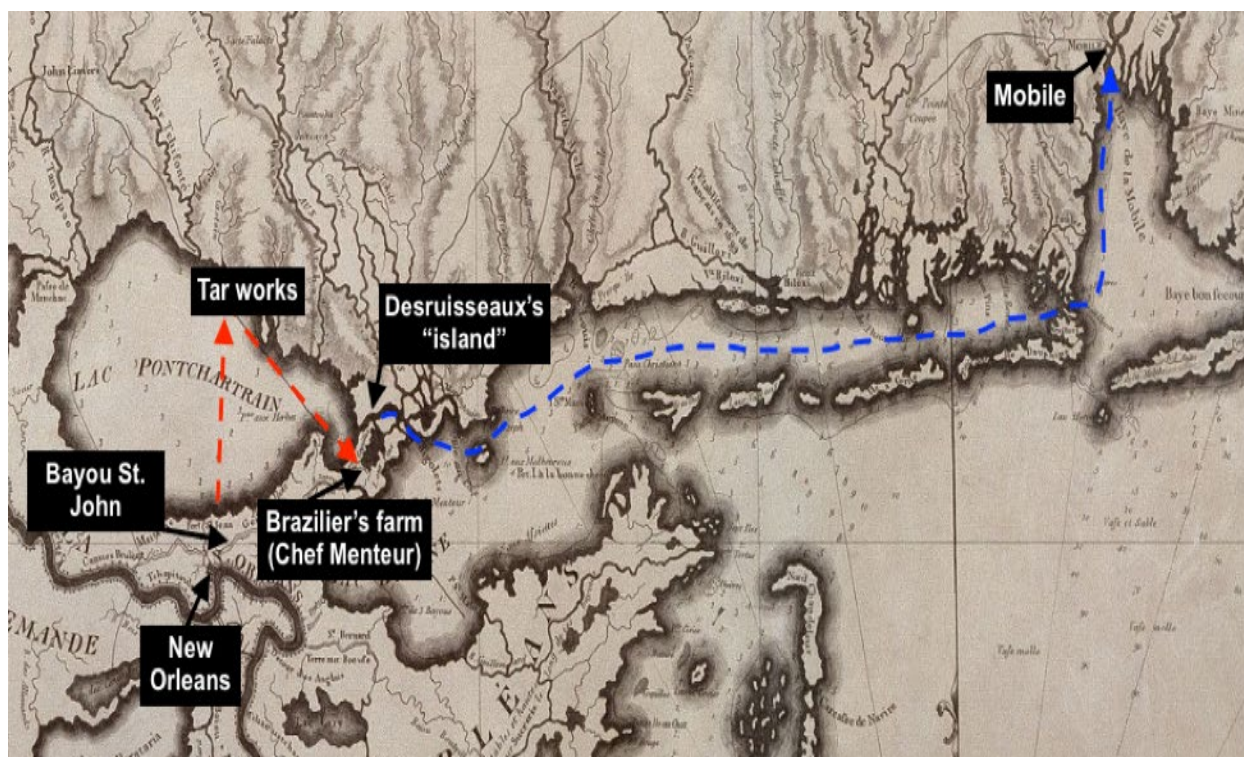


Figure 30. Approximative route followed by Kenet during her *marronages*. The contrast between her first (blue) and second (red) desertions illustrates some of the strategic decisions of enslaved runaways. After Barthélemy Lafon, “Carte Générale du Territoire D’Orléans Comprenant aussi la Floride Occidentale et une Portion du Territoire du Mississipi,” 1806, Département Cartes et plans, BNF-R.

The couple’s escape to and return from Mobile is known only because Kenet and Jean-Baptiste were prosecuted a year later for another instance of desertion. This time, Kenet had been missing for almost a year when a civilian search party led by the stepson of her recently deceased owner finally caught her living with Jean-Baptiste, on a secluded cattle farm belonging to Brazilier near Chef Menteur pass, which connects Lake Pontchartrain to Lake Borgne. Jean-Baptiste readily admitted carrying Kenet away and harboring her, but he claimed to have acted on the order of

Brazilier, who “promised to buy her for him.”⁷ Beside his New Orleans plantation and the Chef Menteur farm, Brazilier operated a third business, one of several tar manufactures producing naval stores on the northern shore of Lake Pontchartrain, where Jean-Baptiste refused to work without his lover.⁸ “It was not his fault,” Jean-Baptiste told his captors, “but truly that of his master, who had told him to take her away; that when they went to make tar he had told his master that he could not leave without this negress, to whom he was attached, and that his master had told him ‘then bring her along but be very careful that no one sees her.’”⁹ Kenet had hidden in the boat that took Jean-Baptiste to the tar works and worked there alongside him and other enslaved laborers for seven weeks, although she was still recovering from leg injuries that left her “in very poor condition,” perhaps from being beaten after she returned from Mobile.¹⁰ Tar making, which required burning local pinewood in kilns, was arduous and hazardous, but Kenet may have been familiar with it as her owner hired out slaves to tar manufacturers and had previously exiled her to his land “across the lake” as a punishment.¹¹ Concerned that frequent visitors might identify the fugitive, Brazilier eventually reassigned the couple to the more isolated Chef Menteur farm, where he continued to employ and feed them until their arrest. While their captors planned to take only Kenet to the city jail, Jean-Baptiste once again refused to abandon her. “Sirs,” he pleaded, “do not

⁷ Interrogation of Jean-Baptiste, 1767-06-10/1, RSC.

⁸ On tar manufactures, see Jack D. L. Holmes, “Naval Stores in Colonial Louisiana and the Floridas” *Louisiana Studies* 7 (Winter 1968): 295-309; Ellis, *St. Tammany Parish*, 34-37. The northern shore of Lake Pontchartrain was also part of British West Florida since 1763, but manufacturers continued to transport naval stores to French New Orleans. See “Journal of Captain H. Gordon,” in *The New Regime, 1765-1767*, ed. Clarence W. Alvord and Clarence E. Carter (Springfield: Illinois State Historical Library, 1916), 306.

⁹ Declaration of Vincent Rillieux in Investigation against Brazilier, 1767-06-15/1, RSC.

¹⁰ Certificate of Montegut, 1767-08-06/4, RSC.

¹¹ On tar and pitch making, see Dumont de Montigny, *Mémoires historiques*, 1: 66-69. For slaves hired out to the tar works by Kenet’s owner, see Declaration of François Hery alias Duplanty in Investigation for Joseph Desruisseaux, 1766-05-28/1, RSC. For his lands “across the lake,” see Inventory for partition of Desruisseaux estate, 1769-01-12/2, RSC. For Kenet’s exile, see Second interrogation of Kenet, 1767-08-13/3, RSC.

tie me up, my intention is to follow you to town whether you want it or not,” probably so he could help defend Kenet before the authorities.¹²

The Superior Council of Louisiana, acting as the district court of the New Orleans area, initially investigated the matter as a civil case brought by Kenet’s owners against Brazilier for depriving them of their slave’s labor.¹³ Along with the enslaved couple, the court heard several white witnesses for both parties, who offered indirect but unmistakable evidence of Brazilier’s involvement.¹⁴ But the judges dropped the charges against the rich and powerful slaveowner Brazilier altogether, after he denied having assisted the woman’s desertion, knowing of her whereabouts, or attempting to purchase her.¹⁵ As the court shifted all the blame on Jean-Baptiste and his partner, a complex dispute between slaveholders turned into a simple prosecution of slave crime. Finding Kenet guilty of long *marronage*, or slave desertion lasting over a month, the Superior Council condemned her to a vicious public punishment. She was dragged around town in a tumbril, whipped at crossroads, and taken to the main square (today, Jackson Square), where she was branded with a hot iron in the shape of a fleur-de-lys, the symbol of the French monarchy. Kenet was the twentieth and last runaway slave to suffer a public physical punishment in French

¹² Declaration of Rillieux, 1767-06-15/1, RSC.

¹³ The complaint itself is lost but it is referred to in Declaration of Rillieux, 1767-06-15/1 and Interrogation of Brazilier, 1767-07-04/1, RSC.

¹⁴ Kenet and Jean-Baptiste were interrogated twice, once in court and once in the prison itself on the *sellette*, a tiny stool where accused criminals were seated to augment their submission as they heard their indictment, underwent their last examination, and received their sentence. On this procedure, see Eric Wenzel, “La sellette... sur la sellette, ou les vicissitudes d’un séculaire instrument de la justice criminelle au temps des Lumières,” in *Gens de robe et gibier de potence en France du Moyen Age à nos jours* (Marseille: Images en manœuvre Editions, 2007), 247-259. Brazilier’s business associate La Ronde was certainly involved as well: he provided the boat for Jean-Baptiste and Kenet’s transportation across Lake Pontchartrain, managed the tar factory for weeks in Brazilier’s absence, and failed to appear in court when he was summoned to testify on this affair. First interrogation of Kenet, 1767-06-10/2, Declaration of Antonin Jung, 1767-06-15/1, Summons to Charles Delaronde and others, 1767-06-27/1, Interrogation of Brazilier, 1767-07-04/1, Declaration of François Chenet in Investigation on the request of Brazilier, 1767-07-11/1, RSC.

¹⁵ Interrogation of Brazilier, 1767-07-04/1, RSC. A relative of Kenet’s owner reported Brazilier had tried to enlist his help in buying her or selling Jean-Baptiste. Declaration of Louis Duvernay, 1767-06-27/1, RSC.

Louisiana, and only the second woman. Tied to the tumbril, Jean-Baptiste had no choice but to follow her entire ordeal: for “taking her away from her master,” his sentence was to watch her punishment.¹⁶ Though cruel and unusual, his condemnation was nevertheless lenient for a slave convicted of aiding and abetting a runaway, as if the court wanted to punish the loving bond behind Jean-Baptiste’s crime while recognizing the part played by Brazilier as an extenuating circumstance. Kenet and her companion had both stressed the point during their interrogations. Pressed to confess how long she had been missing and when she had run away before, Kenet barely acknowledged the questions and presented her successive movements as the result of decisions made by her owner and Brazilier instead.¹⁷ Jean-Baptiste also downplayed her responsibility by stressing his own agency, in a failed attempt to protect her.¹⁸

Was this a permanent defeat for the enslaved couple? Fragmentary records make it impossible to know if Kenet and Jean-Baptiste’s relationship outlasted this trial, if they remained in New Orleans, if they ran away again, or even whether they died free or in bondage.¹⁹ Yet this case reveals that, despite their legal status as property, some enslaved men and women in French

¹⁶ Judgment against Kenet and Jean-Baptiste, 1767-08-13/4, RSC. The same day, a white man was condemned to a similar punishment plus five years of forced labor for theft. Judgment against André Roze and Guillaume Jaisant, RSC. Jean-Baptiste’s sentence to attend Kenet’s punishment was not an isolated case either. See for instance the court’s judgment against Louison and Comba in Judgment against Louis alias Foÿ, 1764-09-10/02, RSC.

¹⁷ “Asked if she had run away [before], she said she had not, that having had some difficulties with the negroes her master sent her to the other side of the lake to punish her. Asked how long she had been missing from her master’s, she said that at the time she came back from Mobile Mr. Brazilier had her taken in her kitchen, and that she was brought to the other side.” Second interrogation of Kenet, 1767-08-13/3, RSC. In her previous interrogation, Kenet also declared “Brazilier had her abducted a second time” on her return from Mobile, although Jean-Baptiste’s owner had apparently played no part in their first *marronage*.

¹⁸ “Asked if he had taken the negress Kenet with him in the boat, he said it was really true and that it was he who convinced her to board it. Asked how long she had stayed with him and what he fed her, he said he kept her for eight months and that it was her master who gave him provisions for him and the negress. Asked if he does not know that negroes are forbidden to abduct negresses to harbor them, he said yes, but that it was his master who had sent him to abduct her and who provided for her.” Second interrogation of Jean-Baptiste, 1767-08-13/1, RSC.

¹⁹ Kenet appears, as “Quenette,” among the 25 slaves of her late owner’s wife in 1769, but not among the 20 from the same estate leased out nearly two years later. Succession of Desruisseaux, 1769-01-28/2, RSC; Lease of the estate of Francesca (Françoise) Girardy, widow Desruisseaux, to Francisco (Francois) Hery alias Duplanty, 1770-12-04/1, SJR.

Louisiana could exercise a surprising amount of control over their own lives. Kenet's judges acknowledged as much when they asked, "if she wanted to stay with the said negro" who facilitated her desertion, an otherwise inexplicable question in the context of a runaway's interrogation—to which she answered "yes and that they have been together since M. de Vaudreuil," the former governor whose tenure had ended fourteen years earlier.²⁰ Brazilier was not the only slaveholder to poach labor by harboring a fugitive, but his own slave largely determined his decision. Jean-Baptiste's refusal to go work at the tar factory without Kenet carried a thinly veiled threat that the two would desert together again rather than be separated. This leverage enabled them to live as an almost independent couple for months at Chef Menteur, as they had in Mobile.²¹

For runaways like the Black couple Kenet and Jean-Baptiste, as for the Chickasaw siblings Baptiste and Marianne, freedom could mean different things beyond escape or emancipation. Claiming the ability to live with a spouse, to maintain a family, to work by or for themselves, was often not only more realistic but arguably more desirable than fleeing toward an uncertain liberty. How and where enslaved people ran away was a tactical decision, and the same individuals could pursue similar objectives through different strategies depending on changing circumstances and opportunities—as evident in the contrast between Kenet's first and second *marronages*, or in the various people and places Baptiste visited around New Orleans by himself before traveling 50

²⁰ Second interrogation of Kenet, 1767-08-13/3, RSC.

²¹ Asked "if she worked" at Chef Menteur, Kenet stated "she did nothing, that she sometimes busied herself at a garden plot the negro had cleared, without Brazilier having ever ordered her to do anything." Interrogation of Kenet, 1767-06-10/2, RSC. As Sophie White points out, Kenet's daily life during her second *marronage* was far from leisurely, but it contrasted with her exploitation as a field hand on her owner's plantation. Beside her initial participation in tar production, she must have "busied herself" not only with gardening, but also with domestic labor and tending to the numerous livestock on Brazilier's farm. This life of relatively autonomous work enabled her and Jean-Baptiste to recreate the gendered division of labor favored by free couples, whether of Western African or European descent. White, *Voices of the Enslaved*, 202-204. Although Kenet described her occupation as *piocheuse*, or field worker, she said Jean-Baptiste took her at night "in her kitchen," where she was probably preparing meals for enslaved men. Three decades earlier, another female runaway had mentioned the fact that "she was only there to feed the negroes" of her new master as one of the motives of her *marronage*. See Declaration of Jacques Larcheveque, 1736-09-18/1, RSC.

miles downriver with an Indigenous companion. A common theme running through this study is that struggles over labor and mobility helped to shape the meaning of freedom, which was not a simple binary status granted or refused by those with political, economic, or cultural power. Most strikingly perhaps, ordinary humans in France, Senegal, *Balbésha*, and Martinique did not have to resist together, against the same enemies, or even to be aware of each other's culture to pursue some of the same goals. The Parisian mobs who rioted against the deportation of relatives, friends, and neighbors, for instance, did not need to know the Chickasaw concept being *yoka* (captive, enslaved due to being without kin or relations) to understand that orphans, vagrants, and galley convicts were vulnerable to state violence because they lacked social protection. This struggle over mobility was strongly determined by age and gender, in fact, because women, children, and older folks were far less likely to be portrayed as unattached drifters that authorities on both sides of the Atlantic regarded as ideal targets for removal and exploitation.

Enslaved Afro-Creoles and European soldiers joining forces to escape their exile in Louisiana, as Soquoy's and La Pigeonnière's bands did when they sailed away from Lake Pontchartrain in 1739, produced stories of cooperation across racial, ethnic, and legal divisions that we recognize as remarkable because they were exceptional. For runaways of any origin to cooperate in high-risk situations required a high level of trust, which was easier to secure among individuals sharing the same linguistic and cultural background. Given the efforts of colonial authorities to divide and conquer, that any such collaborations occurred at all required a combination of uncommon circumstances, individual choices, and interpersonal connections. All desertions, however, possessed a strong collective dimension because even individual, temporary, short-range movements relied on shared material resources, technical skills, and information. The most valuable asset for both military and enslaved fugitives was arguably the knowledge they

gathered about their physical and social environment. Another critical resource for almost anyone traveling any distance within and especially away from Louisiana was a boat and the ability to navigate, row, and sail. Not only was the Gulf Coast the quickest way out the colony, but even traveling overland across the Mississippi Valley was extremely dependent on riverine transportation.

Long before Indigenous removal and the domestic slave trade fueled US expansion and the economy of the Antebellum South, the European colonization of the Mississippi Valley required the forced transportation of migrants from three continents, generating resistance and rebellion on both sides of the Atlantic. My objective has been to show that those enlisted workers were not just passive victims forced into exile by the combined forces of war, slavery, and imperialism, but that they also reclaimed their mobility to preserve their autonomy and their interests, shaping the colonial project in turn through their own actions. The central argument here is that the circulation and movement of workers required for the development of the colony generated tensions and conflicts that paradoxically hindered its development. As the efforts of authorities to mobilize workers and soldiers clashed with the resistance of those laborers in France, Africa, and America, the reclaimed movements of laborers, notably through desertion, represented a form of protest and resistance against forced migration and enslavement. As they refused to enlist, embark, serve, or stay in Louisiana, the actions of unfree workers highlighted and increased the limitations of France's rule of the Mississippi Valley, contributing to the demise of its North American empire at the end of the Seven Year War.

Yet "Exiles and Fugitives" is not merely another story of imperial failure. That French colonial settlements survived for almost three quarters of a century in such a vast territory with so few people, in the face of so much resistance, in fact, testifies to the relative efficacy of imperial

strategies and administrations. From the perspective of transported convicts, soldiers forced into service, enslaved Africans, and Indigenous captives, the French empire in Louisiana was powerful and capable of an enormous control. This dissertation has therefore been concerned not only with the organization of the French empire or the existence of a French Atlantic, but with what life looked like on the ground of a colony connected to continental North America and the West Indies as well as Europe and West Africa. By studying the resistance of enslaved men and women alongside the actions of other unfree workers, it highlights the similarities and interrogates the differences among their strategies. It also emphasizes the changes and continuities in policing by local, colonial, and imperial authorities toward groups of laborers of different racial and legal status.

My primary goal in studying captives, exiles, and runaways has been to recover, “from below,” individual experiences that would illuminate an imperial history of early Louisiana. I have therefore followed across multiple archives any and all traces of the workers’ actions, voices, thoughts, and feelings, in order to create a textured narrative of colonization. To emphasize the impact of those laborers, I have counted, mapped, and charted their movements, in an effort to supplement the biographical evidence and render their presence visible. An enduring lesson from this work is that it has impossible to write about any of those lives in isolation—from larger structures but also from each other. Because most absconders were never recorded at all, it is also worth remembering that there was always vastly more resistance than meets the archival eye.

Appendix A Interrogation of the Runaway Pierre, 2 August 1764

“Asked his name, age, occupation, residence, nation, and religion.”

who put him in jail.”

where [...] had him arrested.”

why he is in jail.”

how long he was a runaway.”

where he stayed during his *marronage*.”

where he stayed at his master’s and what he ate.”

if he did not go elsewhere.”

what he ate and who fed him.”

if he stole something [from a slave who hosted him].”

if there were not others with him.”

if he did not have some weapons whether guns or knives or other.”

if during his *marronage* he had not come to the city.”

if he is not the one who stole Mrs. [...] laundry and if does not know that some other Negroes committed this theft.”

if he never stopped anyone in his path.”

if he is not the one who stole aboard the boat [...].”

if he had not killed cattle and stolen pigs, turkeys, and other poultry.”

if he has not known the Negro [...] belonging to [...].”

if he does not know the Negro [...] from the Illinois formerly owned by [...].”

if he does not know the Negro [...] of [...] who is a runaway.”

if he does not know four Negroes who have run away to the cypress swamp of [...].”

if he has not killed cattle and stolen at the bayou.”

if he did not steal in the city or know Negroes who stole there.”

why he ran away.”

if during his *marronage* [...] he has not been [...] to see his mistress.”

if during his *marronage* he has not seen the Negro [...] belonging to [...].”

if he did not drink rum when he came to the city.”

where he took the money to buy rum.”

if [a colonist] did not serve rum to other Negroes.”

if instead of money he did not give her goods, handkerchiefs or other things.”

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ABBREVIATIONS

4JJ. Journaux de bord, MAR

A. Actes du pouvoir souverain, ANOM

ANOM. Archives nationales d'outre mer

B. Correspondance au départ, ANOM

B1. Decisions du Conseil de Marine, MAR

B3. Lettres recues, MAR

Bastille. Archives de la Bastille, BNF, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal

BNF. Bibliothèque Nationale de France

BNF-R. Site Richelieu

BNF-M. Site François Mitterrand

C8. Correspondance au départ en provenance de la Martinique, ANOM

C11. Correspondance au départ en provenance du Canada, ANOM

C13. Correspondance au départ en provenance de la Louisiane, ANOM

CARAN. Centre des Archives Nationales

D2C. Troupes et personnel civil, ANOM

DFC. Dépôt des fortifications des colonies, ANOM

DPPC. Dépôt des papiers publics des colonies, ANOM

E. Personnel colonial ancien, ANOM

F3. Collection Moreau de Saint-Méry, ANOM

G7. Archives du contrôle général des finances

KM. Kaskaskia Manuscripts

LARC. Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University

MAR. Fonds de la Marine, CARAN

MD. Mémoires et documents, Centre des Archives Diplomatiques

NAF. Nouvelles Acquisitions Françaises, BNF-R

NONA. New Orleans Notarial Archives

RSC. Records of the Superior Council, Louisiana State Museum,

SHD. Service Historique de la Défense

SHD-R. Site de Rochefort

SHD-V. Site de Vincennes

SLC. Saint Louis Cathedral, Sacramental Records of the Archdiocese of New Orleans

SJR. Spanish Judicial Records, Louisiana State Museum

TSTD. Slave Voyages: The Transatlantic Slave Trade Database

VP. Vaudreuil Papers, Huntington Library

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