

“The Canelle Family of New Orleans: Creolization and Personal Alliances in a Family of Free People of Color, 1768-1874”

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In the midsummer heat of 1808, Louis Canelle lay dying. He was a very old man, though not probably as old as the priests at St. Louis Cathedral believed him to be when they recorded his age at burial as “more than 100 years.”<sup>1</sup> On July 26, Louis made his final declaration in the presence of several witnesses. One of the witnesses was Joseph Antoine Riaño, who Canelle referred to as “the dear master of two of my children.”<sup>2</sup> Pierre Ambroise Cuvillier, the testamentary executor of the estate, recorded Canelle’s words. “I do not sign [but] I have made my cross,” Cuvillier wrote, a reflection of the state of illiteracy in which the oppression of slavery forced its subjects.<sup>3</sup> The strictures of slavery oppressed Louis Canelle even as a free man. Even as he practiced the intensely personal art of dying, Canelle relied on asymmetrical alliances with Riaño, Cuvillier, and others to achieve his last wishes.

Louis Canelle’s personal alliances illustrate vividly a reality of life in the creole city of New Orleans – survival depended on cooperation between the diverse groups that inhabited the city.<sup>4</sup> New Orleans in 1808 had achieved a late stage of a creolization, a situational process through which collisions of disparate cultures fuse into a new, unique, creole culture.<sup>5</sup> The founding generations of French and Spanish colonists and the African and Native peoples they enslaved had, by 1808, crafted what has been termed a “Creole city.”<sup>6</sup> These groups shaped a new, creole culture through experimentation and application of old knowledge to the problems of a new landscape. As this history of the extended Canelle

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<sup>1</sup> Charles E. Nolan and Dupont, Dorenda, eds., *Sacramental Records of the Roman Catholic Church of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, Vol. 9, 1807-1809* (New Orleans: Archdiocese of New Orleans, 1994), 57

<sup>2</sup> *le cher Maitre de deux de mes enfans*. My translation. Last Will and Testament of Louis Canelle, Orleans Parish Court of Probates, Will Books, Vol. 1, 164-165. The other witnesses, Joseph de la Playa, Jean Baptiste Nora, and Pierre Moreau, all appear in colonial records as merchants, though their connection to Canelle is not clear beyond witnessing this will.

<sup>3</sup> *Ne pouvant signer j’ai fait ma croix*. My translation. Last Will of Louis Canelle.

<sup>4</sup> The spelling of proper names varies from document to document for each individual. For the sake of clarity, I always spell the surname “Canelle.”

<sup>5</sup> On creolization, see Charles Stewart, ed., *Creolization: History, Ethnography, Theory* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2007) and Jay D. Edwards, “Unheralded contributions across the Atlantic world,” in *New Orleans in the Atlantic World: Between Land and Sea*, ed. William Boelhower (New York: Routledge, 2013), 10-50.

<sup>6</sup> Lawrence N. Powell, *The Accidental City: Improvising New Orleans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), ch. 7.

family will make clear, cooperation between these groups required personal alliances between individuals. This paper explores the asymmetrical relationships that resulted from those personal alliances by members of the Canelle family and analyzes the strategies they employed in their performances of freedom. Alliances between free and enslaved people recur time and again in the history of the Canelle family. These microcoalitions transcended racial, social, and cultural categories, showing that the exigencies of survival required cooperation that upended otherwise hierarchical relationships. Within each personal alliance, individuals drew from their cultural vocabulary to perform the social role best suited to the occasion. The Canelles fought contests between slavery and freedom in the streets, waterways, and courtrooms of New Orleans and across Louisiana. Their story comprises the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade in Louisiana; imperial struggles contested in courtrooms, bedrooms, and battlefields; a desperate attempt by a free man of color to wrench an enslaved woman away from her mistress; and a criminal conspiracy between free and enslaved people of color. The story of the several members of the Canelle family of New Orleans, from the beginning of the eighteenth-century to the end of the nineteenth-century, comprises several microhistories of slavery and freedom. The Canelles navigated the unclear paths between freedom and slavery, legality and illegality, prosperity and poverty. Above all, the history of the Canelle family is a story about lives lived across the freedom line in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century New Orleans.

The members of the Canelle family discussed here do not constitute a single, immediate family grouping but, instead, a collection of cousins. Canelle, a French word for “cinnamon,” was not probably a surname when it first became applied to slaves but denoted, rather, a particular skin tone. While native French families with variants of the Canelle surname lived in colonial New Orleans, evidence does not support a theory that the African slaves and free people of color who adopted the surname had any relation to those early settlers. Where genealogical records allow, direct relationships between these Canelle cousins are noted. In other cases, blood relationships should not be presumed. In the small world of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century New Orleans, ultimately, those free and enslaved Canelles not related by bloodlines certainly occupied similar social and cultural spaces.

Even as the Last Will and Testament of Louis Canelle recalled his enslavement through a legal performance of the state of dependency into which slavery forced him, it also vividly illustrates the material world Canelle established with the sweat of his labor as a free man. Canelle’s revelations about materiality offer a glimpse into agricultural practice within the intimate alliance of his marriage to the enslaved woman, Rose LaChaise. Louis recited, “I declare that I have earned little of value since I was freed, and that everything belongs to me because I farmed separately from the said Rose when I was still a slave, as a result of her bad behavior.”<sup>7</sup> What “bad behavior” did Rose engage in that made Louis separate his personal plot from hers? Why did Canelle include this piece of information in his will? Was Rose still alive when her husband summoned the memory of her misdeeds? Whatever the spousal transgressions Louis recollected, the mere mention of them proved adequate to meet the test of legality in the Court of Probates, proving that the court did not require the details of the marital alliance between Canelle and LaChaise to enforce its edict.<sup>8</sup>

Louis’ personal inventory of his estate reveals something of the priorities of a former slave liberated near the end of his life. Canelle won emancipation after the death of his mistress, Madame Carmouche, nearly a quarter-century before his death. The details of his later life show that Canelle did not depend on any latent alliance with the Carmouche heirs in his life as a free man. Canelle claimed a plot of ground five leagues from the city, though he did not indicate whether the small farm lay upriver or downriver.<sup>9</sup> Significantly, Canelle did not claim ownership of the land, only over the crops and movable property upon it. He grew several acres of corn and vegetables and kept chickens on a small range. Canelle prayed that Cuvillier, the executor, would divide and distribute the small farm to Marie, Pierre, and Manette through the goodwill of their respective masters. Canelle wanted Cuvillier “to give to each of

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<sup>7</sup> *Je declare que le peu de bien que j’ai a été gagué par moi depuis que je suis libre, et que le tout m’appartient parce que je métais séparé de la dite Rose quand j’étais encore esclave à cause de sa mauvaise conduite.* My translation. Last Will of Louis Canelle.

<sup>8</sup> On marriage as an “Atlantic alliance,” see Emily Clark, “Atlantic Alliances: Marriage among People of African Descent in New Orleans,” in *Louisiana: Crossroads of the Atlantic World*, ed. Cecile Vidal, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 165-183

<sup>9</sup> A journey of five leagues (seventeen miles) downriver from the New Orleans levee takes one to the far side of present-day Braithwaite, Louisiana. Disembarking seventeen miles upriver, one would arrive in what is now River Ridge, Louisiana.

my children that which belongs to them, to their respective masters to ask if they will use it for the greater benefit of my children, whom God blesses, and their mistresses, too.”<sup>10</sup> Canelle continued agricultural practices he learned as a slave born in Louisiana with corn, a crop first domesticated by Native Americans and rice, a crop domesticated in Africa and introduced to Louisiana through the expertise and technology of slave laborers.<sup>11</sup> In pursuing agriculture on the banks of the Mississippi, Canelle’s lifestyle during the last years of his life reveals his individual creolization and shows that even emancipation did not totally sever the bonds of slavery.

Ultimately, though, materiality was an afterthought for Canelle. As Cuvillier closed the document, writing “Done and passed in New Orleans on July 26, 1808,” Canelle remembered the furniture.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps Cuvillier prodded the elderly Canelle, one last time, to remember all of his belongings or maybe Louis had not thought to include the furniture and tools in the inventory. “I declare also,” he wrote, “that I have on my property a large boiler, a good dresser, a bed outfitted with a good mosquito net, two shovels and a hatchet with three attachments, two small and one large.”<sup>13</sup> The items that filled Canelle’s interior world nearly did not make it into the will at all. Canelle prioritized the outdoor spaces in his world above the creature comforts of the home space. He also counted the yield of his agricultural labor along with the tools that produced that yield. The mosquito net indicates, though, that the insects of New Orleans and its environs did observe interior/exterior demarcations as strictly as the human inhabitants of the region may have wished.

In Canelle’s last days, he reflected, no doubt, on the “more than 100 years” (so the priests believed) he had lived in the Louisiana colony, two decades of freedom added to several decades he lived

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<sup>10</sup> *remettra ce qui revient à chacun de mes enfans, à leurs maitres respectifs et les pria d’en user pour le plus grand avantage-de mes chers enfans que Dieu Benisse et leurs boun maitren aussi.* Translation mine. Last Will of Louis Canelle.

<sup>11</sup> On the necessity of African expertise and technology on the rice crops of Louisiana, see Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 120-124. On agriculture in colonial Louisiana generally, see Richard Campanella, *Bienville’s Dilemma: A Historical Geography of New Orleans* (Lafayette, LA: Center for Louisiana Studies, 2008), 195-200.

<sup>12</sup> *Fait à la Nouvelle Orleans le vingt-six Juilliet mil huit cent huit.* Translation mine. Last Will of Louis Canelle.

<sup>13</sup> *Je déclare aussi avoir sur ma dite terre une grande chaudiere, un bonne armoire, un lit garni, et une bonne mousquitaire, deux pelles et une hache avec trois tableau, deux petites et une grande.* Translation mine. Last Will of Louis Canelle.

as a bondsperson. Canelle and others like him, men and women in Louisiana who had been born enslaved but died free, saw their social and political status change with the currents that carried imperial power struggles across the Atlantic Ocean. Louis Canelle, indeed, witnessed first-hand how the fortunes of slaves and free people of color rose and fell with the Atlantic and even Caribbean tides. We must reconcile the priest’s inscription that Louis Canelle was “more than 100 years [old]” at his death in 1808 with the simultaneous designation of Canelle as “creole.” The priest did not rely on his own knowledge of the decedent when entering sacraments but recorded information relayed by the family or friends of the individual. Whatever the source of the information, both statements cannot be true. If Canelle was older than 100 years, he was born prior to 1708, before the importation of the first African slaves into Louisiana. If he was a creole, then he was born in Louisiana. While the term “creole” has “a multiplicity of meanings” in the present, in eighteenth-century usage, “creole” meant a slave or a free person of color who had been born in the colony.<sup>14</sup> Louis Canelle, therefore could not have been born in Louisiana before African slaves had arrived in the colony. Let us presume, then, that the priest exaggerated somewhat in adding the inscription to the record of Canelle’s interment.

The sacristan of St. Louis Cathedral called Louis a “creole” because Louis was born in the colony as opposed to Africa. It is probably impossible to discover Louis Canelle’s parentage but we can rely on general knowledge of the spread of slavery to Louisiana to determine which Canelle generation was the first to make a trans-Atlantic journey. The first slave ships that arrived in Louisiana came in 1719. Many of those ships had on board pregnant women or women nursing their infant children.<sup>15</sup> It is possible that Louis Canelle was born shortly after his mother’s arrival in Louisiana or that he was even born on the trans-Atlantic voyage. The 22-year old male slave identified as “Canelle” in the Avarre estate inventory, taken in Natchitoches in 1746, could have been Louis Canelle, suggesting a birth year of 1724.<sup>16</sup> A

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<sup>14</sup> On evolving definitions of the term “creole,” see Carl A. Brasseaux, *French, Cajun, Creole, Houma: A Primer on Francophone Louisiana*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 85-116.

<sup>15</sup> Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 69-72.

<sup>16</sup> Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Afro-Louisiana History and Genealogy, 1718-1820*, online database. <http://www.ibiblio.org/laslave/individ.php?sid=4951>. Estate Number: 20-F-001-056-1746 , Document Date: 1746-10-29. Accessed July 24, 2017.

female slave, named Rosette, appeared in the same estate but her age, only five years old, decreases the likelihood that she was Louis Canelle’s wife, Rose LaChaise. One candidate who may be Louis Canelle’s wife is the slave Rosalie, inventoried with the Delachaise estate on December 5, 1768. The inventory lists her age as 60-years-old. The *Louisiana Slave Database* records her birthplace as “imputed African based on age.”<sup>17</sup> A drastic age difference need not totally disqualify either of these women as the wife of Louis Canelle. One historian shows age differences of as much as 55 years between husbands and wives in slave families.<sup>18</sup> That only three generations of African slaves came to Louisiana under French rule implies, furthermore, that Louis Canelle would have been a highly influential figure in the lives of his children and grandchildren.<sup>19</sup> The marital alliance between Louis and Rose impacted subsequent generations through continual evocations of memory in the intangible past.

Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century, slaves and the New Orleans ruling class negotiated a tenuous relationship. While all colonial governments exerted violent power over enslaved people, contemporaries recognized a marked difference between the respective legal approaches of the French and the Spanish to slavery. Under Spanish law, codified in *Las Siete Partidas* (the Law of the Seven Parts), slaves were entitled to a number of civil rights, among them the right of *coartación*, or self-purchase. A slow economy resulted in slaves with too little work to do and a plantocracy with too many slaves to care for. Slave owners eased their economic distress by allowing slaves to grow their own food and earn money selling goods and services. Slaves, in turn, saved enough money to eventually purchase freedom from their masters. Through this process, a society of free people of color coalesced within colonial New Orleans society. Relationships between male slave owners and female slaves often produced children whom some masters chose to emancipate, further enlarging the population of free people of color. Slave owners frequently, though by no means always, granted freedom to their slave mistresses, as well.

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<sup>17</sup> Hall, *Afro-Louisiana History and Genealogy*, online database.  
<http://www.ibiblio.org/laslave/individ.php?sid=7839>, Estate Number: 03-F-211-086-1768, Document Date: 1768-12-05. Accessed July 24, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 186-187.

<sup>19</sup> Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 186.

Louis Canelle was one of the enslaved people who exercised the right to self-purchase. The legal process of *coartación* required the enslaved person to form personal and legal alliances with the elites who controlled the levers of power. Despite the function of *coartación* to strengthen slavery as an institution, it provided the desire of individual slaves for freedom access to the legal power that made freedom possible. On November 19, 1784, Louis Canelle appeared before the Court of Alcalde Jean Etienne Boré to request permission to purchase his freedom.<sup>20</sup> Canelle’s owner, Maria Luisa Dubord, wife of Joseph Caramuche (Carmouche), had recently died, leaving her property to her heirs. Since none of the heirs had attained the age of majority, a curator, a man named Pedro Bertonière, represented their interests in court. Canelle himself would have felt the weight of the scales of justice placing the unfathomable burden of slavery squarely on his shoulders. Even while Spanish colonial society granted slaves the right to petition for their emancipation, the decision to actually grant freedom lay solely with the official power structure. Within that power structure, each individual had authority to halt the proceedings in their tracks, giving every white person involved the chance to deny Canelle his fervent wish to be freed. These realities placed the utmost importance on the delicate personal alliances between the enslaved and the free.

Once the court agreed to hear Canelle’s petition, it required him to submit to an appraisal in order for the court to set the price of his freedom. Canelle chose as appraiser Francisco Broutin, probably a friend or someone, at least, who could be counted on to keep the price low. Indeed, Broutin accepted the responsibility the same day, suggesting he expected to be named. The court, knowing that Canelle and Broutin had likely made such an arrangement, required Bertonière, the curator for the minor heirs, to appoint a second appraiser. Ideally, the two appraisers would agree on a price. At this stage of the proceeding, Bertonière had the authority to refuse his assent. Luckily for Canelle, Bertonière agreed, requesting the appointment of Antoino Dejan, “a person versed in such matters and who knows about

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<sup>20</sup> “Luis Canela petitions to be granted his freedom,” in *Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (April, 1942), 595. The original documents have been digitized and are available at <http://www.lacolonialdocs.org/document/15751>.

[Canelle’s] talents and capabilities.”<sup>21</sup> After Dejan confirmed his willingness to serve as an appraiser, Canelle requested the court to set a date for the appraisal.

On November 29, Alcalde Jean Etienne Boré convened Canelle, Bertonière, Broutin, and Dejan to the Hall of Audiences [probably in the Cabildo on the *Plaza d’Armas* or in Government House near the Levee] for the appraisal. After the appraisers “swore by God and the Cross...to proceed well and faithfully” in the matter, they “proceeded, most carefully, with the examination..., debating upon the talents and circumstances of [Canelle].”<sup>22</sup> The records do not specify how long Broutin and Dejan discussed Canelle’s price between themselves or the details of their debate, though we do know they were “in conference for a long while.”<sup>23</sup> How excruciating for Canelle to sit, waiting, trying to find out what price he had to pay for his freedom. When, at last, the court reconvened, Canelle heard the painful news that Broutin and Dejan could not agree on a price. Not only could they not agree but the prices each submitted varied widely. Broutin thought 800 pesos was a fair price but Dejan asserted 1500 pesos, nearly double what Canelle probably expected to pay. With the appraisers in disagreement, Boré dismissed the court so that a third appraiser could be named to break the stalemate.

Louis Canelle was not free, yet. Alcalde Boré ordered Francisco Blache, “a third in discord,” to re-examine Canelle and place a fair price on his freedom. On December 3, a full two weeks after Canelle’s initial petition, the court reconvened. Blache “saw and examined [Canelle] most carefully and minutely, and to the best of his knowledge and without injury,” decided that he would value Canelle right in the middle of the two previous estimates, at 1150 pesos.<sup>24</sup> Louis Canelle paid the price and walked out of the courtroom a free man, the burden of captivity no longer on his shoulders. Louis Canelle won his emancipation after many years of service to the Carmouche family. Afterwards, he remained in New Orleans, where he relied on existing relationships both for economic security but also to retain a circle of witnesses who could testify to the fact of his freedom if necessity required such testimony. Louis Canelle

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

also remained in the city to stay close to established kinship networks, specifically his three children, Pierre, Marie, and Mariette.

Now that Louis Canelle was a free man, he entered a different class in society. No longer a slave, he entered the ranks of free people of color. Despite their ostensible freedom, the Canelle family and other free people of color occupied a contentious space. As members of the community of free people of color, each would have been familiar with the myriad legal hoops they had to jump through to maintain their free status and avoid censure by the whites-only government. Under American rule, they carried proof of their freedom, passports permitting travel both to leave and to be guaranteed re-admittance to the state. Their civil rights under American rule were a legacy of the French and Spanish colonial eras. Unfortunately, the economic and demographic expansion of New Orleans did not bring with it a parallel expansion of rights for persons with African descent. From the beginning of the American period, territorial and state governments gradually tightened restrictions on free people of color. They faced new limits on their freedom of movement, were threatened with expulsion from the state, and lost the right to vote during the first decades of American possession.

While the biography of Louis Canelle illustrates the journey from slavery to freedom, other tales from the Canelle family history place the spotlight more directly on the status of free people of color. The case of Magdalena Canelle highlights several ways that imperial power struggles reached across the Atlantic to foster asymmetrical alliances in colonial courtrooms and bedrooms. Canelle, a free woman of color, sued Luis, Chevalier de Bearepos, a retired French military officer and the father of her two children, for possession of a slave named Adelaide.<sup>25</sup> In the proceedings, Bearepos attacked not just Canelle but Luis Liotau, an *escribano* and a rising member of the Spanish colonial bureaucracy, who succeeded Bearepos as Canelle’s lover.<sup>26</sup> Adelaide, the enslaved woman who was the subject of the lawsuit between Canelle and Bearepos, struggled for her own voice while others struggled over her body

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<sup>25</sup> For other accounts of the lawsuit between Canelle and Bearepos, see Jennifer M. Spear, *Race, Sex, and Social Order in Early New Orleans* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 152; Clark, “Atlantic Alliances,” 165-183.

<sup>26</sup> The proceedings are summarized in *LHQ* 12, no. 2 (April, 1929), 341-348. The original documents have been digitized and are available at <http://www.lacolonialdocs.org/document/14362>.

and mind. In the relationship between Adelaide and Canelle, we find yet another example of an alliance between free and enslaved people of color, this time two young women. Behind-the-scenes conflict between Beurepos and Liotau, reveals two Creole elites engaging in a legalistic battle to determine the fates of two African women, one free, one enslaved. Liotau was a trusted Spanish administrator who used inside knowledge to both assist his new lover and thwart the aging Frenchman, Beurepos. Through Adelaide, we see how the imperial struggle exerted its power over the body and mind of a young, enslaved woman. In the case as a whole, we find the opportunity to analyze how a free woman of color entered and exited social alliances with those above and beneath her in the social hierarchy of colonial New Orleans.

While the change in the written law from French to Spanish read like an ironclad dictate, the actual execution of the laws suffered from the conflict between legality and tradition. The resultant legal pluralism enabled challenges to the prevalent legal and social order from and between slaves and free people of color, as well as from and between Europeans and Creoles who occupied positions of power in the colony. These challenges reveal the differences between French and Spanish conceptions of social equality and show how social permissiveness in New Orleans enabled the social advancement of individuals from slavery to freedom. Most of all, *Canelle vs. Beurepos* demonstrates how the racial alliance between Magdalena Canelle, a femme de couleur libre, and Adelaide, a slave, readily welcomed the assistance of a white European, Luis Liotau, who possessed the legal power and knowledge useful to their cause. The nearly four decade saga exemplifies the ways in which colonial elites in New Orleans and Havana interacted with other layers in a society whose conceptions of race and gender were in a state of upheaval as a result of trans-Atlantic imperial contests.

Though the exact beginning of their relationship is not known, Magdalena Canelle and Luis Beurepos had definitely begun their romantic liaison by the beginning of 1768. In the proceedings of 1777, Magdalena claimed two children by Beurepos, named Felicidad and Roseta. Beurepos denied fathering either of the children when asked in court. The sacramental records of St. Louis Cathedral show that a priest baptized Marie Felicite [*sic*] Canelle [*sic*], the daughter of Magdelaine [*sic*], on September

17, 1768, suggesting that the relationship had definitely turned sexual by December 1767 or January 1768. The significance of the timing should not be understated. While the French in New Orleans held out hope that the transfer of the colony to Spain would be reversed, the end of 1767 saw those hopes dashed. Bearepos may have felt the imminence of his retirement and allowed himself to plan for a future under Spanish rule. Indeed, following the failed rebellion in 1768, Bearepos signed the “Oath of Allegiance of the Retired Officers Established in New Orleans and Vicinity to His Catholic Majesty [the King of Spain],” officially leaving the service of the French military and embarking on private life as a Spanish subject.

At his retirement, Bearepos (also called Bonrepos) enjoyed a measure of fame in Europe and in America, owing to the publication, in 1720, of his *Description du Mississippi*, one of the many first-hand accounts of exotic, colonial worlds that flooded the European book market during the age of conquest.<sup>27</sup> Another of those memoirs, *Nouveaux Voyages dans L’Amerique Septentrionale* (1771), relates the visit by Chevalier de Bossu to New Orleans right around the time Bearepos would have been in the midst of his liaisons with Canelle.<sup>28</sup> Bossu writes that he lodged with Bearepos while in New Orleans, though the account recites Bearepos’ martial escapades rather than his romantic ones. Even as Bearepos became well-known through his circum-Atlantic voyages, his home in New Orleans served as a stop on the Atlantic itinerary of other travelers.

Adelaide’s life is relatively well-documented for that of an enslaved woman in the middle of the eighteenth-century.<sup>29</sup> In the late 1750s, perhaps as late as 1760, an anonymous enslaved woman gave birth to a female child. In March 1770, that child, named Adelaide, appeared in a sale of seven slaves from Jean Baptiste Bobé to Guillaume Abraham Loison. Loison paid a handsome sum for the seven human beings, nearly 2900 livres, but he owed just over 2300 livres more, a sum he promised to pay within two months. Loison, apparently, failed to come up with the rest of the cash and, over the summer,

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<sup>27</sup> M. Chevalier de Bonrepos, *Description du Mississippi...* (Rouen, 1720).

<sup>28</sup> M. Bossu, *Nouveaux Voyages dans L’Amerique Septentrionale* (Amsterdam, 1777).

<sup>29</sup> On the slave trade in Spanish New Orleans, see Douglas B. Chambers, “Slave Trade Merchants of Spanish New Orleans, 1763-1803: Clarifying the Colonial Slave Trade to Louisiana in Atlantic Perspective,” in *New Orleans in the Atlantic World: Between Land and Sea*, ed. William Boelhower, (New York: Routledge, 2010), 180-191.

started selling off property to satisfy his creditors. As a matter of fact, Loison mortgaged his entire estate only three days later. Perhaps Loison saw his investment in the seven slaves as a last-ditch effort to reverse his fortunes. If so, the Hail Mary took practically no effect. On July 23, Adelaide, around ten years old, stood on the auction block at the sale of Loison’s effects. Luis, Chevalier de Beaurepos, made the high bid. Upon taking possession of Adelaide, Beaurepos sent her to live with his mistress, the *femme de couleur libre* Magdalena Canelle.

For the next seven years, Adelaide lived in Canelle’s home, with no outward evidence of unhappiness. Since most historical sources lack voices of daily life for enslaved women from their own perspective, especially in 1770s Louisiana, we must not make assumptions about what Adelaide thought or felt about the legal battle over her body and labor.<sup>30</sup> Adelaide moved in with Canelle around the age of ten, young enough to remain impressionable and, perhaps, impressed by her new mistress. Unfortunately, the little information we have of Canelle comes from the records of her suit against Beaurepos, meaning her past remains shrouded in mystery and speculation.

The records do not indicate how or why the relationship between Canelle and Beaurepos ended, only that Beaurepos withdrew his human chattel from Canelle along with his affections. As Beaurepos presented the events to the court, Adelaide had always been on loan to Canelle. He produced the act of sale proving his ownership of Adelaide and assured the court that her presence in Canelle’s household did not constitute a gift. Beaurepos, it seems, told Canelle in the presence of several witnesses that Adelaide did, indeed, belong to her. The chevalier dismissed the testimony of those witnesses as the claims of “mulattoes, libertines like herself [Canelle].” For seven years, Magdalena had been a perfectly suitable companion for Beaurepos. Only when the relationship ended did seem to take issue with her race or behavior. Canelle must have felt the sting of the sexual and material alliance gone wrong.

One of the interrogatories Canelle put before Beaurepos during the hearings concerned his alleged promise to bestow upon her a plantation on the West Bank of the Mississippi River. Canelle’s

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<sup>30</sup> On the selective availability of biographical information about enslaved people, see Walter Johnson, “Possible Pasts: Some Speculation on Time, Temporality, and the History of Atlantic Slavery,” *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, 45, no. 4 (2000): 491-492.

attorney asked, “Is it not true that [Beaurepos] has...given Magdalena [a] plantation that she owns on the other side of the river in front of the city?” The plantation Canelle claimed was not any ordinary plantation; it was the former plantation of the Company of the West Indies.<sup>31</sup> The tract was also known as “the King’s Plantation,” since its ownership reverted to the French Crown when the Company lost control of the colony. On February 3, 1770, though, Beaurepos had indeed purchased the prime riverfront property directly across from the city from the King of Spain. Unfortunately for any claim Magdalena may have had over the land, Beaurepos had sold it on December 12, 1770. Beaurepos purchased Adelaide from the sale of the effects of Guillermo Loison. He proved his ownership of her by showing the court the Act of Sale, dated July 23, 1770. The timeframe supports Magdalena’s story and suggests that Beaurepos made a lot of promises in 1770 that he did not end up keeping.

Beaurepos used his status as a white male and his knowledge of the law and bureaucratic procedure to take advantage of a black woman who probably lacked such knowledge as a result of her heritage of oppression. The evasiveness Beaurepos displayed in answering the questions asked of him in court suggests a haughtiness that might befit an adventurer of his reputation. His answers verge on vindictiveness, suggesting just how fatally Canelle miscalculated the benefit of her intimate alliance with Beaurepos. He promised her a plantation that he no longer owned. It seems likely that Magdalena learned of Beaurepos’ purchase of the plantation but not of the sale. Had Beaurepos promised her that he would give it to her but eventually forget to tell her that he no longer owned it? Beaurepos permitted Adelaide to live with Magdalena until it was no longer convenient for him. He held both black women in contempt, even as he fathered two children and engaged in a seven-year-long, intimate relationship with one of the women.

While the seizure of Adelaide prompted the initial suit, Canelle seems to have been very preoccupied with her claim to the plantation. Beaurepos’ ruse probably made a laughing stock of Canelle to anyone to whom she claimed ownership of the King’s Plantation. Of the six questions on which

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<sup>31</sup> For a detailed history of the plantation in question, see Samuel Wilson, Jr., “The Plantation of the Company of the Indies,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Spring, 1990), 161-191.

Canelle asked the court to examine Beaurepos, only one mentioned “the slave,” while two attempted to establish paternity of the children and three were queries on his actions respective to the alleged gift of property. Her persistence suggests the immense value she placed on the intimate alliance with Beaurepos; not only did she believe he loved her and would care for their children but she readily believed, wrongly, as it turned out, that he had done so materially.<sup>32</sup>

Beyond suffering the loss of Adelaide’s labor and the benefits it brought to her daily life, Canelle may also have feared Adelaide’s fate were she to return to Beaurepos’ care. Hindsight proves that Canelle would have been very much justified in her concern for Adelaide’s well-being. Proceedings from 1783 recount the cruelty Adelaide suffered in the six years after Beaurepos spirited her away from Canelle’s household.<sup>33</sup> Stripped of the natural alliances of her familiar bonds, taken away from Canelle in her teenage years, and shunted from master to master, Adelaide eventually refused to perform as a slave. As a result, the colonial legal system declared her insane and rendered her worthless as human property. Although a doctor testified that he treated her for three weeks only as a result of an intestinal ailment, the case suggests that Adelaide’s real “illness” was her refusal to work. When Adelaide stopped willfully performing the role of slave, her masters declared her insane.

Liotau likely encouraged Canelle to file the suit against Beaurepos and guided her through the judicial process. Beaurepos accused Liotau of covertly intervening in the suit. According to Beaurepos, the Spaniard saw to it that key documents disappeared from the case file or were delayed from arriving. Liotau engineered Canelle’s appeal to the court in Havana in contravention of the ruling of the New Orleans court. That an appeal from Canelle ever reached the authorities in Havana bears all the markings of the handiwork of Luis Liotau. The court in New Orleans explicitly denied Canelle the right to appeal. Who else but Liotau, a well-connected member of the Spanish colonial administration, would know how

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<sup>32</sup> The questions were: 1. “Is it not true that he has...given Magdalena her plantation that she owns on the other side of the river in front of the city?” 2. “At what time did he give her the plantation and let him declare who were the persons who witnessed this donation?” and 3. “Is it not true that he has said to various persons that he had given the plantation to recompense her for the concubinage the he had with her and for the advantages of their two children?” Translation in *LHQ* 12, no. 2, 342-343.

<sup>33</sup> *Maria Chauvin vs. Henrique Roche*, Suit for Redhibitory Action, July 21, 1783 in *LHQ* 21, No. 2 (April, 1938), 619-622. The original documents of the case have been digitized and are available at <http://www.lacolonialdocs.org/document/15715>.

to put Canelle’s case in front of the Governor of Spanish Cuba? The consequences, if any, of maneuvering around and above his superiors remain obscured in the official record. One need not stretch the imagination, though, to surmise that the judges in New Orleans received the unexpected orders from Havana with some mixture of surprise and outrage. Liotau risked his own position and rank within official circles to further the cause of his lover and, by extension, the well-being of Adelaide.

Liotau may have been motivated by animosity toward Beaurepos. On the surface, one can easily envision the Spanish *escribano* having mixed (at best) feelings toward the old French officer. Liotau’s actions as an ally of Canelle contrast sharply with those of Beaurepos, even when the Frenchman was an ostensible personal ally. On one hand, Beaurepos used his status and legal sophistication to reinforce his superiority *vis-à-vis* Canelle in the racial and social hierarchies of colonial New Orleans while pretending to do the opposite. Liotau, on the other hand, went to great lengths to level the legal playing field so that Canelle had a legitimate opportunity to protect her interest. Liotau did, eventually, provide materially for Canelle in the way she believe Beaurepos had done, though on a far more modest scale. He built a cottage on St. Louis Street, where he and Magdalena lived and which provided an inheritance for their children and grandchildren well into the nineteenth-century.

For every concession to tradition and common practice, Spanish law could deal heavy blows to slave society. The reverberations from those attacks effected free people of color, too, at a time when even the African families with the longest traditions of freedom still had very close ties to slavery. The Spanish system introduced after 1768 delivered a firm rebuke to the increasing strength of the family in enslaved communities.<sup>34</sup> The legal innovations led to the sale of slave children at a much younger age than before. Slave fathers saw their status diminished, a noticeable departure from the French policy that encouraged slaves to form familial bonds.<sup>35</sup> While French practice saw slave families often sold as a unit,

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<sup>34</sup> Lawrence N. Powell, *Accidental City*, 261. Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 304. Hans W. Baade, “The Law of Slavery in Spanish Louisiana,” in *Louisiana’s Legal Heritage*, ed. Edward F. Haas (Pensacola, 1983), 43-86; Ira F. Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 344-355.

<sup>35</sup> Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 168. Louis Canelle claimed paternity and bequeathed his estate to his three children, despite their enslaved status. Amazingly, the owner of two of the children (the will does

the Spanish innovations made no effort to maintain family bonds. Indeed, when Beaurepos purchased Adelaide in 1770, the rest of her family was sold to different buyers. The act of sale Beaurepos produced showing his ownership of Adelaide showed, as well, that her parents and brother were part of the sale, meaning that at least four of the seven slaves Bobé sold to Loison constituted a family group.<sup>36</sup> While the French Code Noir encouraged slave owners to allow slave families to flourish, one of the byproducts of the imposition of Spanish law was the disintegration of family groupings in enslaved communities.

Another alliance with an enslaved person resulted in a lawsuit against the free man of color Pierre Canelle I.<sup>37</sup> Pierre Canelle I was born around 1741, the son of Maria Canelle and an unknown, probably enslaved father. His father may have been Louis Canelle because Pierre named his only child Louis, although Louis Canelle’s 1808 will suggests that all of his children were still enslaved at the time of his death. The child, Louis, died in October 1780. Oddly, the funeral register makes no mention of the child’s mother. Were the mother enslaved, the child would have been the property of her owner; Pierre, the father, would have been completely disregarded.<sup>38</sup> How frequently did single fathers come to bury their children? Had the pregnancy been somehow concealed from the owners of the child’s mother? The priest who recorded the burial described both child and father as *negre* without designating either as free. Five months later, Pedro Canelle married a woman named Maria. Maria gave no last name, suggesting that she was enslaved, though her true condition remains unknown. By 1786, Pierre Canelle I was definitely a free man. His first appearance outside of the sacramental records occurred when Francisco Liotau sued him for 63 *piastres*.<sup>39</sup> The proceedings refer to Canelle throughout as “*negre libre*.” Canelle did not challenge Liotau but appeared in court to affirm the validity of the debt and to promise to pay what he owed. While

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not say which two) even signed his name as a witness to the 1808 document. Pierre Canelle I appeared as the sole parent at the burial of his son, Louis, in 1780.

<sup>36</sup> Louisiana State Museum Black Books (LSMBB), March 24, 1770. Doc. 10,637, Box 25, Sale of 7 Slaves, Jean Baptiste Bobé to Guillaume Abraham Loison. The original documents have been digitized and are available at <http://www.lacolonialdocs.org/document/13710>.

<sup>37</sup> The designation of Pierre Canelle as “I” is done only for the purposes of distinguishing the several men named Pierre Canelle in this paper.

<sup>38</sup> A discussion of slave mothers and fathers appears in Adam Rothman, *Beyond Freedom’s Reach: A Kidnapping in the Twilight of Slavery* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 12.

<sup>39</sup> LSMBB, May 22, 1786. Doc. 1297, Box 46. Don Francisco Liotau vs. Pedro Camelle [*sic*]. The original documents have been digitized and are available at <http://www.lacolonialdocs.org/document/15829>.

Pierre Canelle I may have been related in some way to Magdalena Canelle and thus may have been well-acquainted with Louis Liotau, no evidence other than the similar surname supports such a conclusion.

One year later, Pierre Canelle I stood accused of illegally renting out the labor of a slave, Antoine, owned by Leonardo Mazange.<sup>40</sup> Canelle piloted a boat owned by Bertrand Gravier, the same who subdivided his plantation immediately above Canal Street for the *Faubourg Ste. Marie*. In February 1787, Gravier hired Canelle to pilot a barge from New Orleans to Opelousas and back. Canelle hired Antoine, telling Gravier that Antoine belonged to Pierre Boulanger and that Boulanger had given permission for Antoine to make the 37-day voyage. The route would have taken them through back channel waterways to the Bayou Teche then north to Opelousas, about 70 miles west of Baton Rouge. Boulanger would have collected a share of what Antoine earned working with Canelle and Antoine would have kept the rest. Gravier agreed to pay Antoine 27 *piastres* and six *escalins* for thirty-seven days of work. After the voyage, Antoine arrived at Gravier’s house to collect, presenting a forged order from Boulanger for payment.

Paradoxically, one the enslaved people in Gravier’s household identified Antoine as a runaway, rendering the alliance between Canelle and Antoine moot. Gravier wrote to Mazange, “[Antoine,] having come this morning to my house, was recognized by one of my negroes as a *marron* [escaped slave], and [Antoine] took flight from the side of the river; and I made [my negroe] run after him.”<sup>41</sup> Gravier’s letter to Mazange gives a voice to Antoine, too, though we may rightly question the voice’s authenticity, given the circumstances. Antoine responded that “he had no subject but only Gravier’s happiness, that having gone for a walk did not merit fifty strokes of the whip, that this is the first moment in his life that he had taken flight, that he got along well with, was attentive to, and did not complain of [his master and

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<sup>40</sup> LSMBB, April 30, 1787. Doc. 1535, Box 48. Leonardo Mazange vs. Pedro Canelle. The original documents have been digitized and are available at <http://www.lacolonialdocs.org/document/15183>.

<sup>41</sup> *Etant venu ce matin dans mon habitation, un de me negres l’ayant reconnu pour marron, il a tout aussi tor pris la fuite du cote’ du fleuve ; je lui ai fait courir après*, Gravier to Mazange, April 8, 1787, letter in *Mazange v. Canelle* case file. My translation.

mistress].”<sup>42</sup> With certain punishment awaiting him, Antoine chose to take a conciliatory tone rather than one of defiance. Antoine expected little in the way of mercy from Gravier yet circumstances forced him to attempt a fleeting alliance to avoid corporal punishment.

Slave owners frequently rented the labor of their bondspersons. The strategy, more carrot than stick, encouraged slaves to work because they technically earned money. With the right amount of scrimping and saving, that money could be used to purchase freedom. Did Pierre Canelle expect an owners’ share of the money Antoine earned? Or did Canelle work only in the service of helping Antoine escape to freedom? Was Canelle part of a larger network of maroons along Bayou Teche? Did Antoine have relatives to whom he took money while on the journey? What amount of money made the potential reward outweigh the risk of being caught, both from Antoine’s and Canelle’s perspective? Unfortunately, these questions must remain unanswered in the present study.

This incident allows us to hone in on a unique moment during what one historian has termed “the struggle for mastery.”<sup>43</sup> Put simply, Pierre and Antoine conspired to subvert the very notion of mastery. The fourteen pages of formal legal documentation probably began with an informal conversation between Canelle and Antoine, one that would have been impossible to police. It was also impossible to police slaves at all times as they moved around within the urban environment.<sup>44</sup> Mazange’s testimony in one of his pleadings, that he had been away from the city during the entire incident, suggests that Antoine took advantage of Mazange’s absence to slip away, unnoticed, from the slave quarters. Antoine may well have always intended to return before Mazange but with extra, tax-free cash.

While Mazange allowed his human property to escape by his inattention, Gravier seems to have had better success imposing mastery over the enslaved people he owned. Antoine and Canelle may have evaded detection if not for the timely recognition of Antoine as a *marron* by one of the slaves in Gravier’s

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<sup>42</sup> *que voire economie lui avait fais donner mal à propos, et sans autre sujet de mé contentement, que celui d’avoir été se promener, cinquante coups de fouët ; que dans le prenrier moment de viva cité il avait pris le party de la fuitte, et qüil en était bien au reportiv, atten ou qüil ne se plaignait ny de vous ny de Madame Masanges.* Ibid. My translation.

<sup>43</sup> On “the struggle for mastery,” see Lawrence N. Powell, *The Accidental City*, ch. 8.

<sup>44</sup> On mobility of enslaved people in the urban environment, see Rashauna Johnson, *Slavery’s Metropolis: Unfree Labor in New Orleans during the Age of Revolutions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

household. What motivation did the enslaved have to perpetuate the system of enslavement? How did Gravier achieve that level of control while Mazange did not? One answer may lie in Gravier’s paternalism toward the slaves in his possession. Mazange received Gravier’s assurances that no harm had come to Antoine, only “a very strong moral to which [Antoine] seemed to be sensitive.”<sup>45</sup> Whereas Antoine expected 50 lashes from Mazange, Gravier only remonstrated with Antoine. Though legal prohibitions may have prevented Gravier from whipping a slave belonging to someone else, his claim of gentleness nonetheless contrasts with Mazange’s harsh tone throughout the proceedings.

Were Canelle and Antoine engaged in off-the-books trading to make extra cash? Illicit riverside commerce was so widespread in Louisiana that it earned a special denunciation in Carondelet’s 1795 promulgation of Spanish slave law.

*Any white person, free negroe, or mulatto, who shall...sell anything to slaves at the River side, shall be taken up by the Proprietor of the Plantation, and sent with all his effects, to the Syndic, who will examine his pass, and effects, and condemn him to a fine of Fifteen dollars, which if he cannot pay, he shall suffer Fifteen days confinement in the Prison of the District; where the Syndic will send him at the disposal of the Commandant.*<sup>46</sup>

Indeed, Mazange pressed charges against Canelle seeking to recover lost wages. The records do not indicate what punishment Antoine received from Mazange but it is very likely that Canelle paid the fine or served the requisite jail sentence. Canelle never testified in the case, so we do not even know his side of the story, although Gravier’s letter purports to tell the version of events told by Canelle.

Pierre Canelle I repurposed the mobility necessary for urban slavery for financial gain, both for himself and Antoine, in one of the precise locations identified as most opportune for such repurposing – on the water.<sup>47</sup> Canelle and Antoine, two black men, formed an alliance against two of the most powerful

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<sup>45</sup> *Je luy ai fait un très forte morale à la quelle il a paru être sensible.* Gravier to Mazange, April 8, 1787, letter in *Mazange v. Canelle* case file. My translation.

<sup>46</sup> Baron de Carondelet, *A Regulation Concerning the General Police; the Keeping of Bridges, Roads and Bridges and Causeys in Repair, and the Government of Slaves*, New Orleans, 1795, in *LHQ*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (July, 1937), 603.

<sup>47</sup> On the agency of enslaved people on determining their placement on the “urban frontier,” see Johnson, *Slavery’s Metropolis*, 14.

white men in the colony. They relied on a rival geography to exploit what one historian refers to as “compulsory mobility” and turned an exercise of the slaveholder’s power upside down.<sup>48</sup> Instead of performing as an interim master, as his free status and his position as the captain of the vessel could well have required and enabled him to do, Canelle reverted to comradery with a person with which he shared a common history. Canelle’s performance subverted the role of master through his adaptation of the role to benefit the slave. Antoine readily seized the opportunity to earn illicit money and find the opportunity to escape bondage. Canelle probably kept a smaller percentage of the proceeds than the master would have, thereby giving the enslaved people a quicker route to earning enough money to purchase their freedom.

Alliances between free people of color and slaves were not always thwarted by the authorities. Indeed, many of the examples we have of such alliances exist only because of the overreach of one or the other members of the covert alliance. The prevalence of such partnerships is, therefore, unclear, as the available evidence likely reveals only the tip of the iceberg. While Pierre Canelle I and Antoine failed in their enterprise only by the chance recognition of Antoine by one of Gravier’s slaves, the attempt by Pierre Canelle II to emancipate an enslaved woman probably had little chance of success from the outset.

On September 22, 1807, Pierre Canelle II, the son of Pierre Canelle I, sat in a prison cell in the back of the Cabildo, accused of defrauding a merchant in the city of \$400. The regrettable sequence of events that landed Canelle behind bars began with his desire to emancipate Adelaide, a 23-year-old woman enslaved by Madame De Monlion De La Chaise.<sup>49</sup> Canelle asked George Pollock, the merchant, to put up half of the money, \$400, and promised to mortgage a plantation he owned to secure the other \$400. Pollock held up his end of the deal. He appeared with Madame De La Chaise before Narcisse Broutin, a notary public, and paid \$400 to begin the process of emancipating Adelaide. Pollock did not implicate Canelle in the Act of Sale, meaning Pollock had agreed with De La Chaise to be on the hook for the entire bill. The agreement between Pollock and Canelle must have been strictly verbal; no written

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<sup>48</sup> Johnson, *Slavery’s Metropolis*, 14.

<sup>49</sup> That two members of the extended Canelle family became embroiled in legal proceedings over a slave named Adelaide is a remarkable but, apparently, meaningless coincidence.

record survives outside of the court records. Pollock kept it out of the record between himself and De La Chaise, revealing it only when his attempt to collect the money from Canelle went awry.

Pollock soon discovered, however, that Canelle’s security was a fiction; Canelle owned no such plantation. With no property to mortgage, Pollock realized he had little chance of ever seeing the other \$400 that he – not Canelle – had promised Madame De La Chaise. Pollock found legal recourse in the City Court of New Orleans, one of the new American courts that had been instituted since the sale of Louisiana to the United States four years previous. Pollock pled his case before Judge Louis Moreau Lislet and demanded Canelle’s arrest, which Judge Lislet directed the sheriff to do.<sup>50</sup> The record of the proceedings ends with Canelle in prison. Pollock and De La Chaise returned to Broutin’s office to sign an act to discharge Pollock from his obligations under the previous act. Adelaide remained the property of Madame De La Chaise.

The sources do not, unfortunately, open any window into the relationship between Canelle and Adelaide. The judicial and notarial records privilege only the relationships between Canelle and Pollock and De La Chaise and Pollock. Pierre Canelle II’s fraud came on the heels of the death of his father, Pierre I, who had himself defrauded Gravier and Mazange. The Canelles buried Pierre I on July 21, 1807, just over a month before Pierre II connived to secure Adelaide’s freedom. Were the two events in any way related? The Canelle family shared connections to the De La Chaise family slave community, raising the possibility that Pierre’s gambit may have been motivated by kinship ties to Adelaide.<sup>51</sup>

Pierre may have had a romantic interest in Adelaide, making his attempt to free her into a doomed gesture of chivalry. In spite of (or, perhaps, because of) Pierre’s ill-fated ploy, any such romantic union did not last. Adelaide shows up in later records as a free woman, notably, at the baptism her five-month-old daughter, Maria, on May 23, 1814. The baptismal record lists the father as Eduardo. Had Adelaida

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<sup>50</sup> Louis Moreau Lislet would go on to publish the first grand legal treatise of American Louisiana, *A General Digest of the Acts of the Legislature of Louisiana: Passed from the Year 1804 to 1827, inclusive...* (New Orleans, 1828).

<sup>51</sup> The ties between the Canelles and De La Chaise come to light in the Sacramental Registers of St. Louis Cathedral, the official records of the Archdiocese of New Orleans. The best example of interrelationship of the two surnames is the marriage of Louis Canelle and Rose LaChaise. The books containing the records of baptisms of slaves and free people of color list the birth of Maria Francisca LaChaise December 1, 1811 and identify her parents as Agustin LaChaise and Luisa Canoël. The published version of the sacramental records cross-references “Canel” and its variants with “Canoël,” lending credence to the supposition that the names were interchangeable.

been a slave at the baptism, Eduardo’s name would not have appeared in the register. Indeed, he would have had no paternal rights at all to the child of an enslaved woman.<sup>52</sup> Pierre recovered from the incident, too, marrying Augustina Fazende on March 2, 1809.

The marriage between Pierre and Augustina Fazende reveals another level of alliance between free and enslaved that transcended race. Among the witnesses of the Canelle-Fazende wedding was Manuel Noël Carrière, one of the most powerful *gens de couleur libre* in the entire colony. Carrière enjoyed a privileged position thanks, in part, to his role as the commander of one of the military companies of free men of color.<sup>53</sup> The Carrière family became allied with the white Beaugard clan through the relationship of Manuel Noël’s sister with Barthélemy Toutant Beaugard, a notable figure in white New Orleans society.<sup>54</sup> Barthélemy Beaugard was the grandfather of Pierre Gustave Toutant Beaugard, the native New Orleanian and general in the Confederate Army. Not only did Carrière witness the Canelle-Fazende wedding but the couple named him godfather of their first-born son, Manuel, in February 1813. Evidence points to Manuel Canelle as the only child of the union between Pierre and Augustina, meaning that Manuel must have been the name given at baptism to the child otherwise known as Pierre Canelle III. In an 1874 Freedmen’s Bank register, Pierre Canelle III listed his parents as Pierre and Augustina and claimed no siblings.

At the same time that the Canelles entered into these personal alliances, the civil authorities in New Orleans – French, Spanish, and American – wanted to stifle the commingling of free whites, free people of color, and enslaved people. The authorities feared that the free people of color would fight on the side of slaves in an uprising. Slave rebellions were, in fact, the primary fear of Louisiana’s slaveholders during most of the state’s history before the Civil War. As such, the ruling elite passed a series of increasingly harsh measures designed to discourage commingling and prevent an insurrection. While the authorities knew the impossibility of completely eradicating alliances between free people of

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<sup>52</sup> Rothman, *Beyond Freedom’s Reach*, 12.

<sup>53</sup> Powell, *Accidental City*, 302-303.

<sup>54</sup> Powell, *Accidental City*, 302-303.

color and slaves, the example offered by the Canelle family suggests that such measures had at least some of their intended effect.

These controls on free people of color came about, partly, as a result of whites’ fear of slave rebellions. Logic dictated that free people of color would ally with slaves in the event of open conflict between slaves and their owners. In fact, a great distance existed between emancipated slaves and free people of color, especially after the Civil War. One contemporary wrote, “Many free men of color had succumbed to the weakness of owning slaves themselves. They tended to separate their struggle from that of the Negroes; some believed that they would achieve their cause more quickly if they abandoned the black to his fate.”<sup>55</sup> The man who penned those words, Jean-Charles Houzeau, wrote in the aftermath of the Civil War but the sentiment prevailed, as well, during the antebellum period. Following Reconstruction, the distinctions based on color grew even harsher, with previously free people becoming lumped in with newly freed slaves, at least according to the white ruling class. A simple, bi-chromatic social order emerged as a replacement for the complexities of the pre-war years. Instead of entering post-war society with the full rights they had sought for so long, free people of color suffered the loss of their wealth and social prestige. The social position and political power of free people of color fell to its lowest ebb in the aftermath of the Civil War, when the abolition of slavery threw once clearly defined racial hierarchies into chaos. After Reconstruction ended, white supremacy emerged as the common goal of Redeemer governments throughout the state. In New Orleans, well into the twentieth-century, Confederate veterans and their families gained power in local government, implementing a host of measures that stripped African Americans of civil rights and attacked the sources of their social prestige and political power.

The records of the Freedmen’s Bank, instituted during Reconstruction to provide banking services to emancipated slaves and others turned away from existing banks, demonstrate the tragic fall of the Canelle family during the post-Civil War period. When the 63-year-old Pierre Canelle III registered

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<sup>55</sup> Jean-Charles Houzeau, *My Passage at the New Orleans Tribune*, trans. Gerard F. Denault, ed. David Rankin (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 81.

an account with the Freedmen’s Bank in 1874, he told the clerk that he was the only child of Pierre and Augustine, of whom only Augustine remained living. Whether or not Canelle was married or had any children, the clerk wrote “will not tell.” Canelle also refuted any siblings, a fact borne out by the sacramental records.<sup>56</sup> The most striking revelation from Pierre Canelle’s entry in the Freedman’s Bank records, though, is his signature. The signature bears remarkable resemblance to the autograph at the end of an 1836 act of sale by which Pierre Canelle III purchased land in *Faubourg Franklin* from Nicholas Noël Destrehan. The pen moved in the same directions, letters were crafted the same way. The signature in 1836 is larger, though, slightly erratic but nonetheless stylish. By 1874, the signature is smoother, the letters more evenly spaced. The evidence of the signature proving that the two men were, in fact, one and the same, compels an analysis of Pierre Canelle III at two very different moments in time.

The 1860 United States Census shows Pierre Canelle III at the peak of his prosperity.<sup>57</sup> He owned \$2000 worth of real estate and claimed a personal estate worth \$1000. The salary he earned as a cotton weigher supported a household of seven people. Even in the immediate aftermath of the war, Canelle joined the Universal Suffrage Party, a group advocating for the wholesale racial integration of local, state, and federal governments. The party held elections in September 1865 to send delegates to a national convention of leaders from the “population of color” that would select candidates to stand for official elections.<sup>58</sup> Canelle won a place on the New Orleans delegation as a representative of the Eighth Ward. The Universal Suffrage Party did not succeed in the end, the victim of reactionary politics and widespread confusion.<sup>59</sup> By 1870, Canelle reported no assets to his name.<sup>60</sup> The 1874 Freedmen’s Bank register lists his occupation as “laborer” in the Department of Improvements.

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<sup>56</sup> Pierre and Augustine Canelle baptized a child named Manuel on February 2, 1813. The parents probably honored the godfather of the child, Manuel Noel Carriere, in their choice of baptismal name but called the child Pierre, after his father. Charles E. Nolan and Dupont, Dorenda eds. *Sacramental Records of the Roman Catholic Church of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, Vol. 11, 1813-1815* (New Orleans: Archdiocese of New Orleans, 1996), 69.

<sup>57</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, “Schedule I, Free Inhabitants of the Eighth Ward in the City of New Orleans, State of Louisiana,” (1860), 72.

<sup>58</sup> *New Orleans Tribune*, September 17, 1865, 1.

<sup>59</sup> Charles Vincent, *Black Legislators in Louisiana during Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), 41.

<sup>60</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, “Schedule I, Free Inhabitants of the Eighth Ward in the City of New Orleans, State of Louisiana,” (1870), 153.

As opportunities for personal alliances to challenge the status quo of racism dwindled after the Civil War, the property rights of African Americans endured particularly heavy blows. The expanding urban footprint of the city placed high demand on long-vacant properties in the *faubourgs* of the city, especially in areas where free people of color had made significant investments during the first-half of the nineteenth-century. Due to lack of collective investment to improve the most rugged of these properties, they continued to lay fallow into the twentieth-century. Pierre Canelle III purchased Square 92 in Faubourg Franklin from Nicholas Noël Destrehan, on March 14, 1836, a square that contained nothing but cypress swamp at the time. When, at the turn of the twentieth-century, the City of New Orleans saw its population increasing and much of its habitable land undeveloped, it began an aggressive program to re-claim the land through the use of a provision in state law known as the “vacant estate.”

In 1907, a notary made a mistake in recording the chain-of-title of Square 92 in Faubourg Franklin, now known as Square 1213, Eighth Ward, Third Municipal District. When one traces the title for 2304 St. Roch Avenue (Lot 5 in Square 1213), the path leads to a notarial act passed in the office of James Boyd Grinage, Notary Public, on March 1, 1907. According to the title search Grinage conducted, Pierre Canelle was the last known owner of sixteen of the 24 lots in the square. Grinage cited Canelle’s 1836 purchase of the property from Destrehan, as required by law for a clear title. Grinage followed the law but, inexplicably, his title search missed four sales, in which Canelle sold the entirety of the property only a few months after his initial purchase.

James Boyd Grinage convened a small group of lawyers in his Magazine Street office to settle the “vacant estate” of Pierre Canelle. According to the paperwork Grinage prepared for the occasion, “Pierre Canelle...is absent from and resides out of the State of Louisiana[,] is possessed of immovable property within this State;...has not appointed anyone to take care of his estate, and there is no heir...present or represented...; and that it is necessary that a curator be appointed to administer same.”<sup>61</sup> Beyond the

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<sup>61</sup> James Boyd Grinage, Notary Public, “Inventory of Pierre Canelle,” March 1, 1907. New Orleans Notarial Archives.

boilerplate, the City of New Orleans was seizing Canelle’s property in order to sell it at auction to the highest bidder.

Though the chain-of-title seemed ordinary at first, something about the City of New Orleans declaring multiple estates of African Americans “vacant” at the height of Jim Crow warranted further investigation. Eventually, the truth came out, that Canelle had, in fact, sold the entirety of his allegedly “vacant estate” to four separate buyers, only months after he purchased the property. The covers had been peeled away, however, and a tale began to unravel from the recesses of history. The “vacant estate” law had been little used in New Orleans since the 1860s. Between the 1830s and the 1860s, about four dozen estates fit the definition of a “vacant estate.” Between 1868 and 1898, only one vacant estate came before the civil courts. Beginning in 1906, though, the City of New Orleans enlisted the statute to great effect, clearing property titles in nearly 100 estates and drawing hundreds of thousands of dollars into the city coffers. Many of the properties seized had been lots and squares purchased by free people of color in the *faubourgs* during the prosperous decades before the Civil War.

Canelle sold all of the lots in Square 92 in four separate sales. On May 13, fifty-nine days after he bought them, Canelle recouped his initial \$260 investment by selling five of the twenty-four lots in the square.<sup>62</sup> Canelle built up his profit on August 4, when he sold twenty lots (including Lot 5, on which now stands 2304-06 St. Roch Avenue) to Francois Leon and one lot to Francois Meunier, all free men of color. As it turns out, Francois Leon should have been identified as the owner of the property in 1907, not Pierre Canelle. An exhaustive search of notaries’ indices, purchasers’ and vendors’ indices in the New Orleans Conveyance Office, and mortgage books turns up no record of Leon selling Lot 5 between 1836 and 1907. Indeed, the inventory of Leon’s property included in his 1874 succession makes no reference to the *Faubourg Franklin* property. What happened? Did Francois Leon sell the land privately to someone without a notary? Did the byzantine methods employed by tax assessors in the city allow properties to disappear from the records? Canelle paid tax on an assessment of \$1500 for the square in 1837, the only year of his ownership. After 1838, however, neither Canelle nor Leon appear in the tax assessment

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<sup>62</sup> Hugues Pedesclaux, Notary Public, May 13, 1836, Vol. 18, Acts 261-263,

records as the owner of any lots in *Faubourg Franklin*. The property itself, Square 92, disappears from several volumes, though the assessor wrote “Unknown” in the “Owner” column for many years during the 1850s, 1860s, and 1870s.

It may not be entirely fair to blame James Boyd Grinage for the error in the chain-of-title. Indeed, the trouble may have all began with Pierre Canelle himself. When Canelle sold five of the lots on May 13, two of those lots were numbered “One” and “Twenty-Four,” the two lots that formed the corner of Spain and Force streets. On October 19, 1838, though, Canelle sold those same two lots to Marie Joseph Incarnacion.<sup>63</sup> Did Canelle game the system to profit doubly on the lots? The property was, after all, still a cypress swamp. There may be a legitimate reason, not revealed in the records, why it appears that Canelle III sold the same property two times. Whatever the justification in Canelle’s mind, the situation vexed Grinage. No Canelle heir came forward in 1907 to claim the property, despite the requisite legal advertisements placed in local newspapers.

The personal alliances of the extended Canelle family were, significantly, the working machinery of creolization, drawing New Orleans into the Atlantic World as surely as imperial rivalries or material forms of cultural amalgamation. At the most fundamental level, creolization is a strategy employed to cope with the threat of an uncertain future. The conditions of daily life in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century New Orleans forced individuals from all walks of life to cooperate on some level in order to survive. Successful partnerships enhanced the reputation of each partner while a failed alliance destroyed social capital for both partners. While the interracial alliance between Magdalena Canelle and Luis Liotau shows that hierarchies were not always as clearly defined in practice as they were on paper, the dependence of Louis Canelle on the goodwill of Joseph Riaño, his children’s “dear master,” proves that not even emancipation truly liberated one from a heritage of slavery. While Pierre Canelle I and his son, Pierre Canelle II, took on great personal risk to enlist personal alliances to further the cause of freedom, Magdalena Canelle went to great lengths to keep an enslaved woman in bondage. The journey of Pierre Canelle III from well-to-do real estate speculator to the registers of the Freedmen’s Bank demonstrates

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<sup>63</sup> Joseph Cuvillier, Notary Public, October 19, 1838, Act of Sale.

that, ultimately, overcoming a heritage of oppression in post-Reconstruction New Orleans was a tall order in the face of the strategies of domination employed by the local government at the peak of Jim Crow. The alliances engaged in by members of the Canelle family constitute discrete steps in the process of transforming New Orleans from an indistinct site on a river bank to a burgeoning outpost in the Atlantic World.

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