

SAN CHENN

SLAVE REBELLIONS IN LOUISIANA



Fall 2025



"On to New Orleans!"

Enslaved people resisted in a variety of means and ways, but among the most vivid and violent were rebellions. The shape and scope of a rebellion differed from time, place, and the people, but ultimately had similar goals: to achieve freedom.

Engaging in rebellion was never a light decision. Enslaved people most likely understood that their revolt would face incredibly long odds. Enslavers and white society controlled arms and ammunition, had large and regular armies and navies for support, and controlled courts and laws. These made large slave revolts immensely difficult to be successful.

Even though they likely knew a revolt would end unsuccessfully, enslaved people continued to fight against their condition. Spreading the word amongst themselves, they conspired to better their lives.

In Louisiana various forms of revolts occurred. In this newsletter, we will discuss three iterations: conspiracies that were never enacted, uprisings at sea, and full scale armed revolts. All three of these forms had different forms within them as well, for rebellions never were identical to one another. Many enslaved people heard about prior revolts and when they planned new ones, learned from the mistakes of prior failures.

Yet all slave uprisings in Louisiana had an ultimate goal: to escape slavery and attempt to make a better life for themselves.

ODO NNYEW FIE KWAN
(LOVE DOES NOT LOSE ITS WAY HOME)

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In this newsletter you can expect to learn:

How rumors of uprisings, real and imagined, instigated violent responses

How the high ratio of enslaved people to free people made revolts occasionally successful

How the largest slave uprising on U.S. soil began and who the principal players were

And more!

CONSPIRACIES

Across the U.S., white people were terrified of armed uprisings amongst enslaved people. Greatly outnumbered, particularly in places like the German Coast of Louisiana, this fear led to frequent overreactions to rumors of “uprisings” that often never materialized. However, there were a few credible conspiracies that were eventually put down.

Juan San Malo

During the Spanish colonial period several large communities of enslaved runaways, or maroons, began to form in the swampland around present day St. Bernard Parish. These communities created a system of communication between themselves and established plantations closer to the Mississippi, which allowed them to steal items when owners were gone and escape into the swamp upon return. Additionally, this was a heavily forested and swampy area, which made eradicating them using Spanish regular troops extremely difficult.

These communities were led by Juan San Malo, a formerly enslaved man who had run away from his owner Charles D'Arensborg. The plantation he was enslaved at was in the area of the current Waterford Entergy Power Station. San Malo and other maroons began to create permanent settlements in the swamps behind the plantations, two of which were Ville Gaillarde and Chef Menteur. According to Dr. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, “malo” while meaning bad in Spanish also refers to a charismatic leader who defies the social order amongst the Bambara people.

While Spanish authorities were focused on fighting the British around Baton Rouge during the American Revolution, Malo and his fellow maroons used the distraction to raid plantations for food and supplies. Large enslavers spread rumors that the maroons were forming a revolt that would take down the entire system of slavery. After repeated attempts to infiltrate the swamps to capture San Malo, it wasn't until the location of his hideout was revealed by an enslaved man named Bastien that he was captured by the Spanish in June 1784.

Juan San Malo and 3 of his principle men were hanged on June 19, 1784. Four others would be executed in the following months and nearly 40 other enslaved people sentenced to several hundred lashes for their resistance. Reportedly, San Malo's body was left on the noose to decompose and be a warning for other enslaved people.

Point Coupee Conspiracies

During the 1790s, the post at Pointe Coupee, located a few miles north of Baton Rouge, was the site of two conspiracies where enslaved Africans attempted to arm themselves and fight for their freedom. Pointe Coupee had a large number of enslaved black people compared to free white people living in the vicinity. The two events, which were similar in nature, reveal how coordinated enslaved Africans could be in Louisiana.

1791

A few days after the feast of Corpus Christi, an enslaved Mina named Jean-Louis hosted a dance at his cabin for other enslaved Mina men at Pointe Coupee. During the dance, sentiments of rebellion began to spread. Three of them were especially vocal in their sentiments: Caesar, an English Creole from Jamaica; Jaco, a Mina; and Jean-Louis himself. Caesar suggested that they attack the store to take hold of guns, powder, and ammunition before continuing their attack. Jaco had obtained all of these for himself already, purchasing his weapon and powder from other enslaved men. Jaco was adamant that Louisiana was not suitable for Minas and that they-as a lone group-could and should fight against the French. Jean-Louis echoed this saying "it was necessary to kill the whites then run away."

The night of the revolt was planned for July 7 but was postponed to July 9 due to bad weather. The revolt, from testimony of those captured, was well thought out and explicitly for the attempt for freedom. The revolutionaries were betrayed by two enslaved Ados, who revealed the plot to white militia members in the post. They did not want to be involved with the conspiracy due to disagreements between the Ados and Minas. The testimonies of the enslaved Africans reveal the possibility of tribal rivalries still remaining even across the Atlantic Ocean.

Seventeen enslaved men would be imprisoned and then interrogated for their part in the conspiracy, though one of them drowned on the way to the prison in New Orleans. However, the remainder were eventually returned to their enslavers in 1794, perhaps due to the failing indigo industry. This conspiracy was the prelude to the larger conspiracy that would occur a few years later.

Enslaved Men Imprisoned After 1791 Conspiracy

(From Manuscript 1792-1758 located in Pointe Coupee Parish Courthouse)

Jaco, Mina, 35, owner-Widow LeBlanc
Thomas, Mina, 26, owner-Widow LaTendresse
Joseph, Chamba, 19, owner-Petit George
Leveille, Mina, 40, owner-Widow Robillard
Cofi, Mina, 40, owner-Jean Francois Porche
Jacques, Mina, 30, owner-Michel Lejeune
Pedro, Mina, 20, owner-Gabriel Roufat
Joseph, Mina, 45, owner-Jean Baptiste Tournoir

Jaco, Mina, 25, owner-Jacques Fabre
Caesar, English Creole, 30, owner-Aimable Couvillion
Francois, Mina, 27, owner-George Bergeron
Jean-Louis, Mina, 40, owner-Widow Robillard
Leveille, Mina, 30, owner-Mayeux
Cofi, Mina, no age, owner-Hyacinthe Chustz
Ata, Mina, 30, owner-Colin LaCour

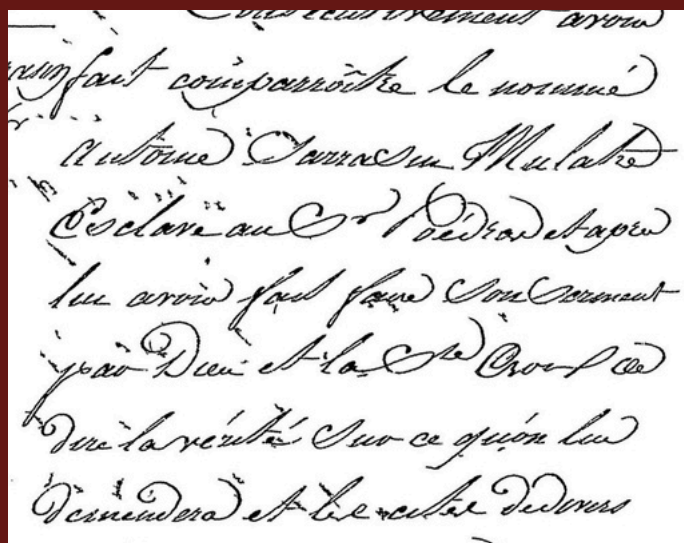
On the evening of April 9, 1795, rumors of a gathering of enslaved men on the plantation of Jacques Vignes was reported to the commandant. After corroborating evidence from other enslaved people, the arrests began. In a few short days, over 60 people, white and black, free and enslaved, would be implicated in this conspiracy.

Tension in Louisiana and across the Americas were much higher than 1791. The Haitian Revolution was in full swing and as part of the French Revolution, slavery was abolished in French colonies (to be revoked by Napoleon). Enslaved and free people had ideas about what liberty and equality meant. Within this revolutionary fervor, enslaved men around Pointe Coupee once again planned a revolt to fight for their freedom.

The plot was revealed to the Spanish authorities by other enslaved people along with a few people belonging to the native Tunicas people who also heard the rumors. It was largely organized by Antoine Sarrasin owned by Julien Poydras, a wealthy but absentee planter, along with several other enslaved men from that plantation. Sarrasin was the son of a white Pointe Coupee resident of the same name and Marie Jeanne, whose mother was a native and father was black. They conspired to obtain weapons and ammunition then fight for their freedom by uniting together across plantations to present a united front against enslavers.

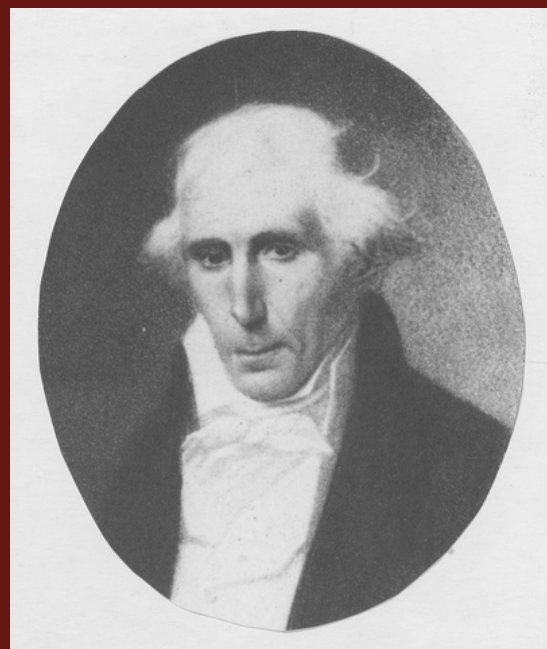
Spanish authorities swiftly interrogated the accused men. With the tensions being so high, Governor Carondelet wished the issue to be resolved as quickly as possible. At least 23 enslaved men were executed, 22 sentenced to ten years hard labor and 9 for five years, a white and black man each were banished, and two white men (reported to be leaders of the conspiracy) were sentenced to 6 years hard labor.

The Spanish galley Victoria was sent down the Mississippi to carry out the executions and post the heads of the enslaved men killed at various points along the way. Some 15 heads would be posted all the way to New Orleans, including stops in the First and Second German Coasts. Governor Carondelet offered enslavers roughly 200 pesos per executed man as recompense for lost labor.



manifesté comparié le nommé
 Antoine Sarrasin Mulâtre
 Esclave de M^{re} Poydras
 lui avoir fait faire son serment
 par Dieu et la Ste Croix
 de la vérité sur ce qu'on lui
 demandera et le culte de Dieu

Declaration of Antoine Sarrasin, May 11, 1795. Original Acts, Pointe Coupée Parish (OAPC)



Julien Poydras, Unidentified and undated, State Library of Louisiana

REVOLTS ABOARD SLAVE SHIPS

Enslaved people during both the international and domestic slave trades were transported to Louisiana mainly by ship. Slave ships were densely packed with human cargo to maximize profits for the ship owners as well as the sellers of the people chained in the hold. Outnumbering the crew by large numbers, revolts aboard these ships could be devastating if successful.

There were a number of ships that had revolts break out before or during their voyage to the slave market in New Orleans. Unfortunately many of these revolts would fail to break the enslaved people out of bondage. Even so they show that they often did not simply accept their condition without fighting back.

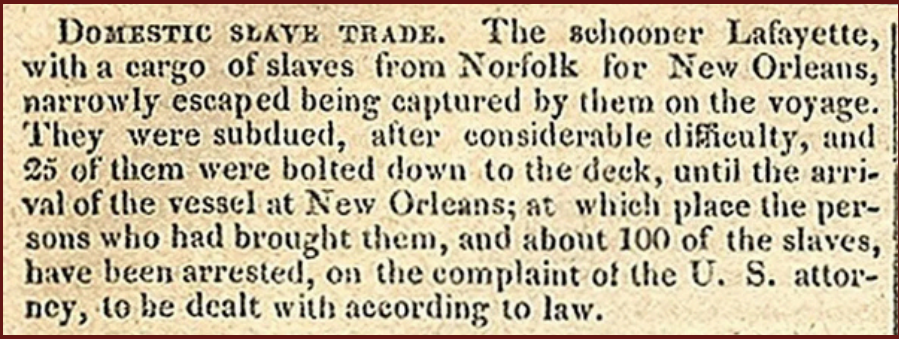
Lafayette Revolt

In November 1829 the schooner Lafayette left Norfolk, VA for New Orleans with nearly 200 people to be sold. Just three days into the voyage a group of roughly 25 enslaved people rose up to attempt the seizure of the ship from the crew. They were ultimately subdued and chained to the deck until arriving in Louisiana.

3 men would be sentenced for execution. Interrogations of the men reveal the revolt was planned with another group aboard a different ship, and they were attempting to go to a free port like New York or Haiti.

L'Annibal Revolt

In May 1729 the French ship L'Annibal had finished filling its hold with nearly 300 African captifs from Gambia and Senegal before leaving for Louisiana. At 2:00 AM on May 26 the Africans revolted, killing 2 sentries in the initial attack. They eventually obtained hatchets and hammers along with sabres and firearms. The Africans would be defeated by the crew, with 45 Africans missing or killed and another 47 wounded. The leaders of the revolt would be hanged from the top of the main mast as a warning for the remainder of the Africans. They had been able to kill 4 members of the white crew.



DOMESTIC SLAVE TRADE. The schooner Lafayette, with a cargo of slaves from Norfolk for New Orleans, narrowly escaped being captured by them on the voyage. They were subdued, after considerable difficulty, and 25 of them were bolted down to the deck, until the arrival of the vessel at New Orleans; at which place the persons who had brought them, and about 100 of the slaves, have been arrested, on the complaint of the U. S. attorney, to be dealt with according to law.

Niles Weekly Register, January 8, 1830

The Creole Revolt

Amongst the most famous and most successful ship revolts was aboard the ship *Creole*. After leaving Richmond in October 1841 with 135 enslaved men, women and children onboard, the ship began to make its journey to New Orleans. Alongside the enslaved people was a crew of roughly 20 people as well as a few passengers, including the captain's wife, newborn daughter and niece.

Roughly a week into the voyage, enslaved men Madison Washington, Elijah Morris, Doc Ruffin, and Ben Blacksmith spread the word to the other captives about their plans to revolt. When the ship weighed anchor for the night, they attacked members of the crew and released the enslaved men from the hold. The next few hours was a rush to find and secure the ship for both sides, and eventually it went to the enslaved people. The three ship officers fled to the mast to sleep overnight but were discovered the next morning. Only 1 person was killed in the revolt.

With the revolt successfully ended, what were the enslaved people to do next? They ordered the crew to sail for that Bahamas, where previous slave ships had escaped to. When they docked at Nassau representatives met with local authorities. The British had recognized emancipated black people as free persons, so the now free captives believed they could become free people here. After an attempt by the American consul to recapture the ship, and enslaved cargo, was foiled by efforts of local black residents, British and African soldiers finally declared everyone on the ship free and at liberty. Eventually all but 5 of the enslaved people who were aboard the *Creole* would go on to live free lives in the Caribbean islands.

Madison Washington's leadership in the revolt was critical for its success. He was a maroon himself, having escaped to Canada in 1839. He returned to Virginia in an attempt to find his wife where he was recaptured and enslaved again. During his time as a maroon, he would have heard of events like the *Amistad* and *Decatur* ship revolts, and of course the Haitian Revolution. His knowledge of what prior revolts had done helped direct the ship to freedom in the Bahamas.

THE 1811 GERMAN COAST UPRISING

The conclusion of the Haitian Revolution in 1804 did not lessen the fears of insurrection amongst white Louisiana residents. In some cases it increased anxiety about it as some saw the fleeing enslavers as bringing that “revolutionary” fever to the territory. In addition, Louisiana had applied for statehood, but there were many within the rest of the country that were not keen on allowing the territory into the union. And on January 8, 1811, the largest slave uprising on U.S. soil began in the midst of this charged environment.

On the evening of the 8th, a group of enslaved men led by Charles stormed the home of Manuel Andry, a local militia officer. Even though Andry himself escaped, his son was killed in the fighting. Now with access to guns, ammunition, drums and uniforms from Andry’s militia stores, the self-emancipated revolutionaries began heading to the levee. For Charles had planned the revolt with other enslaved people from nearby plantations, and they coordinated their attack against those who held them in bondage.

With leaders such as Kook and Quamana, both Akan people who most likely had military experience, the revolt slowly made its way down the east bank of the river, eventually gathering reportedly between 200 and 500 enslaved people total. They destroyed plantation homes, burned cane fields, and killed at least one other white man during their march.

The response of the white elites was swift. The morning after the uprising began, territorial governor William C. C. Claiborne ordered the militia to close off the back entrance to New Orleans. He then order General Wade Hampton to put down the uprising. Before the general could reach where the revolutionaries were located, however, Andry had gathered a group of roughly 80 white militia men and volunteers. He led them in an attack against the enslaved forces, and the superior weaponry and ammunition proved to be too much for the higher numbers of enslaved people.



Reports indicated that roughly 20 enslaved people were killed in the skirmish, though other reports claimed that bodies were still being found dead in the swamps. The uprising was over by the evening of the 11th. Over the course of the next week, a military tribunal interrogated the captured enslaved men. 45 enslaved people would be sentenced and executed. Leaders like Charles suffered a terrible fate: "his Hands chopped off then shot in one thigh & then the other until they were both broken--then shot in the Body and before he had expired was put in a bundle of straw and roasted!" The others, after being shot and killed, "cut off their ears, hands, and legs; then the head is severed from body, and stuck upon a pole passed through his mouth, and carried through the city of his black brethren. after this was done, his head was suck up at the upper gate of the city."

Charles and other leaders held important positions on plantations which helped them coordinate the revolt. Charles was a driver at Andry's plantation, even though he was enslaved by the Widow Deslondes. As the driver Charles' opinion was held in high esteem by many other enslaved workers. As Solomon Northup attested in his narrative "a word from me would have placed hundreds of my fellow-bondsmen in an attitude of defiance." The responsibility that drivers held also gave them more privileges than other enslaved people. Reportedly Charles frequently visited an enslaved woman on a different plantation, and it is likely these visits allowed Charles to spread word of the revolt plans. When looking at the various men who were killed during the uprising, many of them held positions such as carter, cook, ploughman, and sugar maker.



Illustration by L. J. Bridgman. M. Thompson The Story of Louisiana, M. Thompson, 1888

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