

TO KILL WHITES:  
THE 1811 LOUISIANA SLAVE INSURRECTION

A Thesis

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Nathan A. Buman  
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## ABSTRACT

Before January 1811, slave rebellion weighed heavily on the minds of white Louisianans. The colonial and territorial history of Louisiana challenged leaders with a diverse and complex social environment that required calculated decision-making and a fair hand to navigate. Racial and ethnic divisions forced officials to tread carefully in order to build a prosperous territory while maintaining control over the slave population. Many Louisianans used slave labor to produce indigo, cotton, and sugarcane along the rivers of south Louisiana, primarily between Baton Rouge and the mouth of the Mississippi River. For nearly a century, Louisianans avoided slave upheaval but after 1791 the colonial and territorial ties to Saint Domingue, the seat of the first successful slave revolution in world history, heightened the tension. Over the course of the next twenty years Spanish, French, and American leaders worked diligently to prevent slave rebellion in a territory that had slowly become a fertile breeding ground for slave insurrection. Eventually the strain overwhelmed territorial leaders when thousands of exiles from the Haitian Revolution arrived in Louisiana after a brief period in Cuba. Social tension, resulting from the exponential population growth and the increase of a dangerous ideology developed during their experiences with slave insurrection, that the Haitian refugees brought with them. The territory finally succumbed to attempted revolution when Charles Deslondes, a slave on the Manuel André plantation, called upon his fellow bondsmen and bondswomen to kill whites and demand their own freedom.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Since their introduction to Louisiana in the 1720s slaves labored in the hot, humid subtropical climate, toiling with their skillful hands to enrich their owners by raising cotton, indigo, and sugarcane. A complex territory with a checkered past, Louisiana challenged French, Spanish, and American officials respectively. Both internal and external challenges forced administrators to forge a cohesive society out of a populace fractured by ethnic and racial divisions.

French and Spanish officials always feared slave rebellion in Louisiana. The black to white population ratio frightened many whites while a tradition of runaways and unexplored geography that aided slaves in their clandestine ventures challenged white authority. Aiming to appease the hearts and minds of their chattel, French officials abided by the *Code Noir* which guaranteed slaves certain rights and living conditions. Unfortunately, the *Code* failed to guarantee anything. It usually resulted in token legislation that lacked genuine enforcement. During Spanish occupancy, although French denizens disliked Spanish colonial rule, Louisiana slaves and free people of color often benefited from Spain's liberal racial policies. Progressive when viewed in a relative perspective, Spain's looser interpretation of racial control altered the institution of slavery in Louisiana. Spanish administrators brought with them more forward-thinking ideas of how to handle slaves and free people of color. These more lenient notions included the use of free people of color in the militia for territorial defense and more social freedoms to slaves and free blacks.

The Spanish regime's relatively liberal treatment of Louisiana African-Americans unsettled many whites who feared that the extra freedom encouraged subterfuge and plotting

among the enslaved and free black populations. When the Haitian Revolution erupted in the Saint Domingue in 1791, it emitted shockwaves throughout the western world as many witnessed the effects of French revolutionary ideology put into practice by black slaves. Spanish colonial authorities in Louisiana rushed to prevent these influences from reaching the shores of the territory and did so effectively. Although the Spanish successfully fended off dangerous ideology, American officials quickly became overwhelmed by thousands of exiles. When the Saint Domingue refugees, black and white, enslaved and freed teemed into Louisiana in search of a home to start anew, they presented the fledgling American territory with tremendous difficulties.

The instability created by Louisiana's complicated past especially threatened Governor William Charles Cole Claiborne, the first American administrator in the territory. With Anglo-Americans outnumbered by a large French and Spanish majority, Claiborne scrambled to promote harmony while introducing American laws and government. All the while, he tread carefully to prevent racial upheaval, a constant concern in any slaveholding society. Aside from the factions, including Americans, French and Spanish Creoles, and free people of color grappling for social position, Governor Claiborne soon contended with a population growth that immensely increased the likelihood of open conflict. The Creole population received a numerical, ideological, and economic boost from the refugees and many of their slaves. Unfortunately for long-time Louisianans, among these refugees were some who possessed dangerous ideals founded in the French Revolution despite not participating in the Haitian Revolution. The tension between masters and slaves in Louisiana existed from the beginning of interracial contact but the revolutionary ideology necessary to transform the uneasiness into open rebellion did not arrive until after the summer of 1809 when the Haitian refugees landed.

My thesis will seek to examine the scholarship thus far concerning the 1811 slave rebellion, to establish the environment in Louisiana leading to the insurrection, to analyze certain catalysts that caused the rebellion in 1811, and finally to narrate, as accurately as possible, the attempted revolution. Despite the rebellion's glaring absence from the mainstream American historical narrative, much has been written in the two centuries since the revolt. Chapter Two focuses on the bulk of the scholarship surrounding the insurrection in an attempt to understand how historians have explained the rebellion. Most of the work lacks a wider scope needed to help determine the causes of the largest slave revolt in North American history. Taking into account the previous scholarship, I have attempted to move forward in the final three chapters, examining the rebellion as accurately as possible in a trans-national perspective and incorporating new sources and methods.

Chapter Three addresses the environment in Louisiana in which conditions made rebellion possible as, over time, the territory became a more fertile breeding ground for slave insurrection. Divided ethnic and racial factions forced administrators to grapple with constant internal discord. Policing the territory throughout the colonial and territorial periods challenged territorial leaders as they used militia to combat potential social disturbances including slave revolt. From 1791 on, the Haitian Revolution weighed heavily on the minds of Louisianans both white and black. Many blacks entertained thoughts of enacting their own revolution to overturn their masters' rule in the oppressive climate of the Lower Mississippi Valley. In contrast, whites feared blacks' interpretation of French revolutionary ideology in Saint Domingue and made every effort to prevent any politically contaminated persons from entering Louisiana.

Chapter Four focuses on the catalysts that finally overwhelmed territorial officials, causing the outbreak of January 1811. The presence of maroon communities and the expulsion



of Haitian refugees from Cuba after they had sought asylum on that island plagued Governor Claiborne's efforts to ensure peace. The maroon communities provided slaves in the river parishes above New Orleans with a medium for the transfer of information and an area of space where they acted outside their masters' influence. Slaves, free people of color, and maroons circumnavigated local authorities via these independent communities much as they had on Saint Domingue before the revolution of 1791. Additionally, the refugees pouring into Louisiana affected greatly the ability of Governor Claiborne to form a cohesive society. New cracks split along the lines of old divisions under the rapid increase of the black population.

Placing Louisiana squarely within the context of, first, the Caribbean and then the western world as a whole broadens the scope of the traditional historical understanding of the revolt. The fundamental forces behind the rebellion lay partially within the trans-national perspective including the French revolutionary ideology and its implementation in Saint Domingue. Initially slaves heard the details of the Haitian Revolution by word of mouth, even in their oppressive environment. After 1809 they began to learn first-hand from the refugees their experiences with slave revolution. Previous histories have not explain how the largest North American slave revolt occurred in Louisiana and why the insurrection finally took place in 1811. The final chapter addresses the rebellion. Although at times a bit murky, the details regarding the insurrection remain plentiful

By addressing the attempted revolution from a trans-national perspective, taking into account the Haitian Revolution in conjunction with a society torn asunder by racial and ethnic tensions, one can begin to explain the 1811 rebellion. By approaching previously examined sources from new angles, I can make better sense of the events that led to the outbreak and suppression of the revolt in January 1811. Broadening the chronological scope of the study

allows me to understand the evolution of slavery, colonial and territorial governments, and the mounting catalysts that led to a planned open rebellion. The slaves who participated in the revolt did so consciously, not in a spontaneous and unplanned grasp for freedom. Their attempt to achieve freedom in the face of great opposition, and the legacy of independent action that they left to the people along the Mississippi River in modern-day Louisiana deserve a fair and accurate hearing. I hope my thesis will help to serve that purpose.

## CHAPTER 2

### “DEMONIACAL GESTICULATIONS” TO “THE MEMORY OF THE 1811 MARTYRS”: EVOLVING HISTORIOGRAPHICAL EXAMINATIONS OF THE 1811 SLAVE INSURRECTION

The existing scholarship that analyzes the 1811 slave revolt along the German Coast in Louisiana presents an incomplete, inaccurate, and often racist picture of the actual events. Professional and amateur historians alike underplay the importance of the largest slave insurrection in United States history. Scholars have written specific case studies of most major slave revolts and conspiracies but continue to ignore the 1811 Louisiana insurrection. Nat Turner, Gabriel Prosser, and Denmark Vesey all receive a greater attention and exploration.<sup>1</sup>

Studying those few scholars who have written of the 1811 slave rebellion, one can begin to understand the language inherent in the various analyses and styles of interpretation spanning 150 years of Louisiana historiography from Charles Gayarré in the 1850s to Adam Rothman’s 2005 study of the American frontier during the antebellum period. In addition to Gayarré, François-Martin Xavier, Alcée Fortier, and John S. Kendall provide the foundation for what many historians know of the rebellion. Unfortunately, most scholars rely upon these earlier historians who suffered from racist social agendas that clouded their works with glaring inaccuracies as well as the language of a different era. One must understand early scholars in a different light, as men of their time with racial attitudes different from the modern historian.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For specific case studies of slave revolts and conspiracies consult William Styron, *Confessions of Nat Turner* (New York: Random House, 1967); Kenneth Greenberg, *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); David Robertson, *Denmark Vesey* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999); Robert Starobin, *Denmark Vesey: The Slave Conspiracy of 1822* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970); Douglas R. Egerton, *Gabriel’s Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Most historians consider Martin Gayarré, François-Xavier Martin, and Alcée Fortier to be the fathers of Louisiana history. Their early and wide-ranging histories of the state provide modern scholars with a starting point for their studies but fail to cite the origin of their information. Charles Gayarré, *History of Louisiana* [hereafter Gayarré] 1903 (New Orleans: F.F. Hansell & Bro., Ltd., 1867); François-Xavier Martin, *The History of Louisiana*

Born in New Orleans in 1805, Charles Gayarré, became the earliest recognized Louisiana historian. Despite the absence of citations and its unabashed white elitist perspective, Gayarré's four-volume history of Louisiana provides a starting point for an analysis the 1811 revolt. He noted that the insurrection occurred as Louisianans fought for statehood and admission into the United States.<sup>3</sup> Gayarré claimed that these congressional and territorial debates became secondary once the slaves in St. Charles Parish revolted. Initially published before the Civil War, Gayarré's coverage of the rebellion ultimately sought to legitimize the institution of slavery and the harsh treatment of Louisiana slaves.

Providing a few details of the rebellion, Gayarré suggested that the revolt began on the "left bank of the Mississippi, about thirty-six miles above the city of New Orleans."<sup>4</sup> He recounted the orderly manner with which the slaves advanced toward New Orleans, organizing into companies under the command of officers and marching to the beat of drums, in military fashion. With disdain for the rebelling slaves, he narrated the encounter between Jean-François Trépagnier, a planter, and the servile army. When the "Bacchanalian shouts" alerted the planter of their arrival, Trépagnier loaded his shotgun with buckshot and faced them from "a high circular gallery which belted his house." Upon noticing the planter's commanding position overlooking the approach to his house, the slaves "wavered, lacked self-sacrificing devotion to accomplish their end, and finally passed on, after having vented their disappointed wrath in fearful shrieks and demoniacal gesticulations."<sup>5</sup> Revealing himself as a man of his time, Gayarré suggested that the encounter on the Trépagnier plantation "shows how little that population is to

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*From the Earliest Period* 1963 (New Orleans: Pelican Publishing Company, 1882); Alcée Fortier, *A History of Louisiana* (New York: Manzi, Joyant & Co., Successors, 1904).

<sup>3</sup>Gayarré, 4: 264-66. Charles Gayarré was the grandson of the first mayor during American rule, Etienne de Boré, and was born on the de Boré plantation, present-day Audubon Park.

<sup>4</sup> Gayarré, 4:266.

<sup>5</sup> Gayarré, 4:266-67.

be dreaded, when confronted by the superior race whose care Providence has intrusted their protection and gradual civilization.”<sup>6</sup>

Gayarré’s social commentary, grating to the modern ear, continued as he declared the rebellion to be nothing more than a “foolish attempt at gaining a position in society, which, for the welfare of their own race, will ever be denied to it in the Southern States of North America.”<sup>7</sup> The early historian reported that the slaves suffered sixty-six dead on site, and sixteen prisoners taken to New Orleans for trial, but he falsely claimed that “most prisoners were hung on the spot.”<sup>8</sup> Gayarré believed the fugitive slaves who survived the revolt fled into surrounding swamps to avoid capture. Following the trial and execution of the slaves who participated, United States troops and a portion of the militia continued to regularly scour the area along the German Coast to ensure the planters’ tranquility.

In 1882, François-Xavier Martin wrote a sweeping survey of the entire course of Louisiana history from the moment European explorers first discovered its meandering bayous to its secession from the Union preceding the American Civil War. In a history so vast, Martin devoted only one paragraph to the slave 1811 insurrection. He had many details wrong, but Martin recounted the rebellion without the significant racial bias. According to Martin, as the rebels proceeded downriver, they met Major Homer Virgil Milton and General Wade Hampton who overwhelmed them. But Martin did not mention Colonel Manuel André’s participation in the rebellion and generally failed to detail the location of important phases during the revolt. He simply concluded his account by discussing the fate of the slaves. In addition to the sixty-six killed during the rebellion in Martin’s account, the captured rebels “were convicted and

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<sup>6</sup> Gayarré, 4: 267.

<sup>7</sup> Gayarré, 4:267.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 4:267.

executed. Their heads were placed on high poles, above and below the city, and along the river as far as the plantation on which the revolt began, and on those on which they had committed devastation.”<sup>9</sup> Unclouded with the racism inherent in Gayarré’s earlier or Kendall’s later essay, Martin’s history of the rebellion serves as a good early account of the insurrection.

Writing an early defining piece, often relied upon by historians studying the revolt, John S. Kendall, in 1939, discussed the rebellion and the pall that lay over New Orleans afterwards. Correctly drawing a parallel to the Haitian Revolution, Kendall declared “only by the narrowest of margins had the state escaped a repetition of the brutal and sanguinary scenes which had marked the servile revolt in Hayti.”<sup>10</sup> Kendall asserted that the slaves had acted out of mere savagery and that the white soldiers and militiamen had successfully performed their ultimate duty by saving Louisianans from eternal barbarism. Justifying increased racial control, he excused Americans who arrived in Louisiana after the insurrection for treating “the blacks with consideration, even with affection; [because] they had not been here when the blacks rose.”<sup>11</sup>

Kendall’s narrative of the slave revolt, littered with racial judgments and exaggerations, encourages the reader to identify with the plight of the white man, cast down before the “savages... [and] howling mob with the announced intention of murdering their masters and burning or laying waste property.”<sup>12</sup> In Kendall’s telling, white planters and their families fled toward New Orleans and sought refuge from nearly five hundred rebel slaves. Kendall correctly assumed that many of those who revolted had earlier participated in the Haitian Revolution.

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<sup>9</sup> Martin, 349. Essentially, Fortier tells the same, simplified story of the rebellion.

<sup>10</sup> John S. Kendall, “Shadow Over the City,” *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 22 (January 1939), 4.

<sup>11</sup> Kendall, 5.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

Their experience helped fuel the rebellion as the slaves marched downriver, gaining numerical strength at each plantation they passed and burning five planters' homes.<sup>13</sup>

Possessing a flair for the dramatic, Kendall wrote a momentous and celebratory account of Trépagnier's conflict with the rebel slaves. "One white man alone had the temerity to dispute their advance," Kendall declared, "let his name be remembered, for what he did was a gallant thing."<sup>14</sup> Twenty-five miles above New Orleans lay the Trépagnier plantation where the planter stood fast against the approaching slaves, successfully diverting them from his property by taking the point on his veranda with firearms loaded with buckshot. Trépagnier saved his plantation from the "growling and gesticulating" slaves, and Kendall suggested that "records of the South contain no finer example of calm courage."<sup>15</sup> Shortly thereafter, the rebel slaves, driven from the Trépagnier plantation, encountered organized resistance from militia newly-arrived from Baton Rouge under the command of Major Hilton. Additionally, Kendall claimed that General Wade Hampton had arrived from New Orleans with a detachment of militia, though he actually commanded United States regulars. The slave army, poorly armed and no match for its opponent, quickly broke in the face of stiff, organized resistance.

By Kendall's estimate, the slaves suffered sixty-six dead, sixteen taken prisoner, and an unknown number wounded. Transporting the captive slaves to New Orleans, authorities tried and executed the slaves for "the revolt of the slave against his lawful master," at the Place d'Armes in front of Saint Louis Cathedral. The remnants of the rebellion fled into nearby swamps and wooded areas, their wounded expiring without adequate medical attention. According to Kendall, "every day for a long time afterwards, additional bodies were discovered in these

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Kendall, 5-6.

<sup>15</sup> Kendall, 6.

gloomy retreats, where some badly injured black had gasped out his last breath in the still, dark solitudes.”<sup>16</sup>

In explaining the rebellion’s origins, John Kendall placed heavy blame on the Baratarian pirates operating in the swamps of south Louisiana because of their clandestine smuggling of slaves and goods including arms and ammunition.<sup>17</sup> The historian argued that Governor Claiborne wished to extirpate the pirates operating in the swamps who had allegedly sold stolen slaves to planters in Saint John the Baptist and Saint Charles Parishes. According to Kendall, however, the territorial council declined Claiborne’s request to attack the pirate stronghold, preferring to close its eyes to the matter. Kendall argued that it was in this manner that slaves who possessed the dangerous revolutionary ideology that inspired the 1811 insurrection had entered the German Coast. Thus began a period of harsher treatment of slaves by their masters because “one must hold the reins tight over the blacks. They must know who were their masters.”<sup>18</sup> Kendall’s analysis easily becomes a target for criticism. Serving as a justification for white superiority and the harsh treatment of Louisiana slaves during the antebellum period, Kendall did not really understand the 1811 insurrection.

Nearly four decades passed before James H. Dormon provided a model for any examination of the revolt, writing in 1977 the most influential study of the 1811 rebellion in the

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>The most famous of these pirates, Jean Lafitte stars in more than just another mythical story in Louisiana lore. In his recent study of the Lafitte pirates, William C. Davis refutes Kendall’s claim of Baratarian involvement, claiming that Kendall “says without citing any authority that slaves introduced into Louisiana by the Baratarians may have been behind the January 1811 uprising.” William C. Davis, *The Pirates Lafitte: The Treacherous World of the Corsairs of the Gulf* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Inc., 2005), 529.

<sup>18</sup> Kendall, 7.



context of Territorial Louisiana.<sup>19</sup> His efforts spearheaded a movement toward a more objective investigation of the revolt, seeking to counter and overturn the narratives provided by Gayarré, Martin, and Kendall. Dormon's study approached the insurrection from a closed territorial perspective, meaning he worked to understand the rebellion on a local level void of external influences. He hinted at potential outside catalysts, suggesting complex influences from foreign powers and Louisiana's factional history, but did not pursue them. Dormon succeeded in presenting the finest and most objective narrative of the 1811 slave rebellion to date.

In Louisiana, Dormon wrote, "clearly, then, the specter of black insurrection was a constant reality in the minds of whites."<sup>20</sup> He correctly argued that white fears ebbed and flowed throughout the colonial and territorial periods. Dormon agreed with earlier analyses when he stated that the rebellion began in the late evening of January 8, 1811, on or near the plantation of Colonel Manuel André, thirty-six miles northwest of New Orleans near present-day Norco. Led by Charles Deslondes, the insurgent slaves assaulted their owners, wounded Colonel André, murdered his son, Gilbert, and then fled downriver in the direction of New Orleans.<sup>21</sup> In his analysis, Dormon differed from earlier historians by suggesting that the slaves had calculated their movements carefully. Previously failing to grant the enslaved Africans the agency to plan such a grand scheme, scholars had suggested that the revolt began as a spontaneous riot that exploded into a full-scale rebellion.

Dormon suggested that Colonel André, wounded yet determined to suppress the slave rebellion, immediately gathered a force consisting of local militia and vigilantes to pursue the

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<sup>19</sup> James H. Dormon, "The Persistent Specter: Slave Rebellion in Territorial Louisiana," *Louisiana History* 18 (Fall 1977), 389-404.

<sup>20</sup> Dormon, 392.

<sup>21</sup> Dormon, 394

rebels as they proceeded downriver. At André's suggestion, Claiborne ordered regular United States Army troops under General Wade Hampton out of New Orleans toward the scene of the insurrection and "a company of dragoons and one of light artillery under command of Major Homer Virgil Milton," to meet them.<sup>22</sup> André's men met the rebels at François Bernard Bernoudi's plantation, and attacked Deslondes' force, which stood firm, contrary to previous narratives that had the slaves fleeing without much of a fight. As Dormon suggests, the slaves "were woefully deficient in firepower and in military organization," and soon realized the futility of their struggle. Many fled into the woods.<sup>23</sup> According to Dormon, Hampton and Milton joined forces at the Destrehan Plantation on the morning of January 11. By that evening the entire insurrection had been dispatched by the unified force of militia, vigilantes, and regular United States troops.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to providing an unbiased account of the revolt, Dormon uncovered vital primary documents in the St. Charles Parish Original Acts, court records from the trial for the captured slaves that detail the rebellion. The testimony within these court records provides the only opportunity for historians to piece together the role of individual slaves in the planning and carrying out of the 1811 uprising. These sources provide testimonial information that discusses individual slaves and their part in the rebellion, knowledge previously unavailable when earlier historians attempted to ascertain the African-American viewpoint.

In evaluating the cost of the rebellion, Dormon concluded that two whites died, Gilbert André and Jean-François Trépagnier, who according to previous historians' accounts, had valiantly and effectively driven the slaves from his plantation. The Territorial Legislature, at the

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 396.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 397.

behest of Governor Claiborne, reimbursed planters one-third of the appraised value of each house burned during the insurrection. The act for reimbursement also called upon the territory to pay \$300 for each slave lost to execution or conflict during the rebellion.

Dormon's analysis and his use of primary documents make his 1977 narrative an invaluable resource for understanding the 1811 rebellion. As historians move forward with more detailed analyses of the revolt, his work should serve as the foundation for their studies. Dormon called upon future historians to achieve a higher standard of scholarship, declaring that the details of the uprising "lend themselves to a new consideration of the subject, and hopefully, additional light on some, though by no means, all of the dark corners of the problem."<sup>25</sup>

In a 1986 master's thesis, Morris Lewis Witten examined the history of slave unrest in colonial and territorial Louisiana.<sup>26</sup> She states correctly that Louisiana slave historiography suffers from a reliance on the early narratives of Gayarré, Martin, Fortier, and Kendall. Since Witten, scholars including Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, Walter Johnson, and Richard Follett have made significant strides for a better understanding of Louisiana slavery, but a thorough and reliable analysis of slave dissent, specifically the 1811 rebellion, remains glaringly absent from the historiographical record.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Dormon, 391.

<sup>26</sup> Morris Lewis Witten, "Rumors, Runaways, Revolt!: An Overview of Slave Unrest in Colonial and Territorial Louisiana" (master's thesis, Louisiana State University, 1986).

<sup>27</sup> Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992) discusses slavery from a cultural perspective and helps to inform the conditions of slavery that aided in leading to the insurrection but does not address the 1811 rebellion. Dr. Hall is currently working on an upcoming publication that will shed some light on participants of the revolt. Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) examines the domestic slave trade, focusing heavily on activity in Louisiana but touches little on the resistance inherent in slavery. Richard Follett, *The Sugar Masters: Planters and Slaves in Louisiana's Cane World, 1820-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005) details the sugar empire that developed in the Lower Mississippi Valley. While outside of Follett's chronological scope, he still mentions the attempted revolution but does not detail the longer-lasting effects upon the planters' mentality that developed in reaction to the 1811 insurrection.

Witten provides a reliable account of the 1811 rebellion. Aiming to analyze the rebellion objectively, she overcomes the pitfalls of previous scholars. Witten thoughtfully examines the inconsistencies among early historians' works and more recent scholarship, interjecting evidence from her own new source material along the way. The result, a critical historiography of Louisiana slave unrest, provides a vital starting point for historians who wish to conduct a thorough examination of Louisiana slave history. Her narrative, while solid, lacks the sophistication of a broader analysis that takes into account the factors that caused the rebellion at the moment and place that it occurred.

Expanding the scope of Louisiana slave insurrection studies by researching the effect the 1811 slave revolt had on the country at large four years later, Thomas Thompson correctly proclaims a need to examine the insurrection within the context of the United States as a whole to determine its effect on the national mentality.<sup>28</sup> While reliable, his is a limited study. He draws chiefly from accounts appearing in newspapers throughout the United States. He fails to cite directly from the newspapers during his project, essentially paraphrasing the articles in his own words. Unfortunately, the way in which Thompson paraphrases his sources, makes the reader assume that the original documents give a much different story than that Thompson presents. For example, he writes, after vacating the André plantation, where the revolt began, the servile army stopped at the Fortier plantation where they "raided it, cooked, ate, and frolicked to the point of near riot."<sup>29</sup> Thompson notes that the slave army raided the liquor stores of the André plantation before setting off down the river road. Considering the sources he investigates

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<sup>28</sup> Thomas M. Thompson, "National Newspaper and Legislative Reactions to Louisiana's Deslondes Slave Revolt of 1811: A Thesis" (master's thesis, University of New Orleans, 1990).

<sup>29</sup> Thompson, 3; Differing sources and correspondence refer to Colonel Manuel André as Andry or André. For the purpose of this essay Andry will only be used when direct citations from primary documents dictate.

for his examination of the rebellion, reporting these accounts of the revolt as fact seems irresponsible.

Thompson expresses his belief that news of the rebellion helped the vast majority of white inhabitants in the path of the advancing rebels find asylum in New Orleans before the danger could reach them. Ignoring the death of Colonel André's son, Thompson incorrectly denoted Trépagnier as the lone white casualty during the rebellion. On the other hand, he spared the historiographical record from repeating the dramatic tale of Trépagnier's stand on his veranda. Thompson also reported three plantation houses burned but nothing else.<sup>30</sup> On both accounts, he differs from Kendall's and Gayarré's early narratives which gave entirely different stories of the Trépagnier conflict and both claimed a loss of five burned plantation homes.

According to Thompson, when the rebel slaves encountered the militia and regular troops on the Fortier plantation, the revolt broke up quickly. He reports sixty-six dead, sixteen captives, and seventeen unaccounted for but later suggests that the authorities held seventy-five slaves in captivity, many of whom the administrators returned to their owners. He presents these statistics without citing the source of his information.<sup>31</sup> Of particular interest, however, Thompson found published lists in New Orleans newspapers naming the slaves accused of rebellion and pleading for information concerning the slaves listed. Local authorities hoped to use this information during captives' trial.<sup>32</sup>

For the first time in any of the accounts of the rebellion, Thompson argues that the slaves spent a week of interrogation at the hands of the Saint Charles Parish district court while detained on the Jean Noel Destrehan plantation. The Destrehan plantation, near the point where

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

the rebellion fell apart, became the focal point of the interrogation and trial. Jean Noel Destrehan, president of the Louisiana territorial legislature in 1806 and 1811, was a well-respected planter with powerful connections in both the local and national governments.<sup>33</sup> The trial commenced on January 13, presided over by Judge Pierre Bauchet Saint Martin who appointed a tribunal of five plantation owners, some of whom had experienced property damage during the insurrection. After requiring only one day to decide the forgone fate of the captured slaves, Thompson claims the tribunal sentenced eighteen slaves to execution by being taken to the plantation of their owner and shot. Thompson agrees with early accounts that authorities placed the heads of the executed slaves on pikes along the river between New Orleans and the André plantation to serve as a grisly warning to those hoping to attempt a revolution of their own. Thompson also alludes to nine other slaves, three of whom the tribunal released, three executed, and three whose whereabouts have never been discovered. Thompson places the total of executed slaves at twenty-one, five more than suggested by any previous historian.<sup>34</sup>

Thompson's greatest contribution to the historiographical record is his use of the national newspapers that provide new avenues to study the 1811 revolt. The best accounts came from Louisianans writing to distant family members or sending letters to the editor of newspapers themselves. The first-hand narratives offer a better opportunity to examine the insurrection from the viewpoint of those in the path of the rebellion rather than white administrators who often left behind self-serving documents. Particularly beneficial in Thompson's findings were articles that appeared in the *Baltimore American and Commercial Daily Advertiser* and *Raleigh Star*

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<sup>33</sup> Additionally, Destrehan received an appointment to the United States Senate in 1812 but resigned the office before actually assuming the position.

<sup>34</sup> Thompson, 5.

discussing troop maneuvers and providing a detailed analysis of the actions taken by both sides during the conflict on the Fortier plantation.<sup>35</sup>

On occasion, news of the revolt transcended the insurrection itself, assuming an entirely new focus in different regions of the United States. Many northern and New England newspapers printed accounts of the event including scathing reviews of the treatment of Louisiana slaves and the harsh suppression of the rebellion. Thompson correctly concludes that the 1811 revolt exposed additional regions of the country to the horrors of slavery. According to Thompson, accounts of the rebellion helped fuel the fire of hatred for the institution of slavery by illustrating its illegitimacy in practice. Some northerners also used the insurrection to support their argument that Louisiana not be admitted into the United States, citing their fear that Louisiana posed an ideological and institutional threat to national stability and harmony. He suggests that the insurrection helped spur the abolitionist movement that would gain strength through the antebellum period but Thompson ultimately fails to prove this part of his argument.<sup>36</sup>

Providing one of the most recent investigations of the 1811 slave insurrection, Junius P. Rodriguez analyzes the effect that the rebellion had on Louisiana's mentality as the territory prepared for entrance into the Union. Rodriguez claims that the people of Louisiana acknowledged "the reality of their precarious situation, and living with the added burden of fear and paranoia engendered by it...victimized themselves by their own design."<sup>37</sup> Rodriguez means that, through discrimination and their desire to subjugate an entire race, white Louisianans subjected themselves to a fear so passionate that not even they enjoyed freedom.

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<sup>35</sup> Thompson, 9-12.

<sup>36</sup> Thompson, 11-12.

<sup>37</sup> Junius P. Rodriguez, "Ripe for Revolt: Louisiana and the Tradition of Slave Insurrection, 1803-1865" (PhD diss., Auburn University, 1992), 480.

Rodriguez presents a thought-provoking analysis of the militia's inability to protect the territory from lawlessness and disorder. He contends that the militia "existed for ceremonial rather than practical purposes" and that Claiborne "sidestepped the issue by turning to a more experienced [General Hampton] to command local forces and restore law and order."<sup>38</sup> While Claiborne called upon General Hampton to lead the thirty regular soldiers under his command and a hand-picked group of militia, his foresight and ongoing struggle to maintain an adequate militia helped to suppress the eventual insurrection.

The most lengthy and ambitious study of the 1811 revolt, Albert Thrasher's 1996 *On to New Orleans!: Louisiana's Heroic Slave Revolt* remains, to date, the only study focused solely on the 1811 slave rebellion.<sup>39</sup> At first glance, Thrasher's effort seems like an exciting work but the reader quickly encounters a problematic book. Published privately by Cypress Press, in conjunction with the African American History Alliance of Louisiana, the study obviously pursues an agenda. Tipping his hand and revealing his bias on one occasion, Thrasher described Louisiana historian Joe Gray Taylor as "another well known spokesman for the slaveowners and the present day capitalist class...[who] also admired the organization of the rebel slaves."<sup>40</sup> If Gayarré suffered from an overarching racist historical perspective seeking to legitimize whites' efforts to suppress blacks in Louisiana, Albert Thrasher hopes to justify the actions of the insurrectionary slaves and help Charles Deslondes ascend to martyr status.

Thrasher begins his examination in Africa where thousands of Africans found themselves wrested from their homelands and transported across the Atlantic to the New World. He

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<sup>38</sup> Rodriguez, 480.

<sup>39</sup> Albert Thrasher, *On to New Orleans!: Louisiana's Historic 1811 Slave Revolt* (New Orleans: Cypress Press, 1996).

<sup>40</sup> Thrasher, 50. Joe Taylor wrote one of the defining pieces on slavery in Louisiana, a text still relied upon by historians. Joe Gray Taylor, *Negro Slavery in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana Historical Association, 1963).



discusses the savagery of the international slave trade but subscribes to the theory that, while chattel, enslaved Africans generally maintained some semblance of their unique native culture, even if they created an amalgamation of diverse African cultures.<sup>41</sup> Turning his attention to the New World, Thrasher focuses his analysis on the systems of slavery in place on Saint Domingue and in Louisiana. Rapidly surveying the social history of slavery in both colonies, Thrasher sets the scene for the successful revolution in Saint Domingue, followed by the attempted revolution in Louisiana.

Drawing parallels to Saint Domingue, Thrasher argues that the 1811 revolt in Louisiana tied directly to the Haitian Revolution, resulting from the ideology and population entering Louisiana after 1791. Although he overstates the link, Thrasher successfully examines the revolt in a transnational context, the first scholar to do so. But attempting to understand the complexity of the factors acting to encourage the insurrection, he fails to push them far enough. Thrasher gets too caught up in identifying with his subjects to analyze adequately the political environment in territorial Louisiana on the eve of the rebellion.

After laying the groundwork for the 1811 insurrection, Thrasher offers a narration of the rebellion. He bases his account on an impressive array of sources including newspapers, city council minutes, and court and interrogation records, but often inserts his own conjecture as to what might have occurred, at times making up his own narrative. Historians may never know what happened during the planning stages of the revolt because of its secretive nature but Thrasher states, without citation, that the slaves likely “sealed the compact with a blood oath to

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<sup>41</sup> Thrasher, 21; Michael Gomez examines the degree to which African slaves maintained their native African culture while enslaved, discussing specifically Louisiana slaves throughout his book. Michael Angelo Gomez *Exchanging Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

gain freedom or die in the process.”<sup>42</sup> Valiantly attempting to raise the participants of the failed revolution to martyrdom, Thrasher often becomes a victim of over-dramatization. He concludes his analysis by calling upon the current generation to hearken to the days of the 1811 rebellion, hoping to instill in today’s youth a better understanding of their ancestors. “In our struggle today, we must have the same boldness, far reaching aims, courage, indefatigable determination and valor in approaching all the problems confronting the revolution,” Thrasher exclaimed, “To do less would be not to honor, but to degrade the memory of the 1811 martyrs.”<sup>43</sup>

For the first time in the historiographical record of the Louisiana slave revolt, Thrasher suggests an additional branch in the plot to overtake the entire region. Arguing for an entirely undiscovered and unsuccessful wing of the initial plan by the slaves, Thrasher suggests that slaves in New Orleans factored heavily into plans to capture the city, thus repeating the events of Saint Domingue. While Deslondes led his servile army toward New Orleans, slaves and willing free people of color within city limits would storm the armory at Fort St. Charles in search of arms and ammunition. Details remain sketchy, but Thrasher uncovered evidence in New Orleans’ newspapers that suggests an increase in runaways throughout Orleans Parish on the eve of the rebellion. Additionally, he found reliable concerns on the part of the garrison at Fort St. Charles pertaining to disturbances among the city’s population.<sup>44</sup> Unfortunately these disturbances, even if real, were not mentioned in Claiborne’s correspondence. The governor said nothing of revolt within the city, but his decision to withhold such knowledge may have been a calculated omission. Likely, Claiborne wished to present the impression that he maintained

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<sup>42</sup> Thrasher, 49.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 56-57. Fort St. Charles was located where the old United States Mint stands on the corner of Esplanade and Decatur Streets.

control over the fledgling territory as it progressed toward statehood. Thrasher presents a new direction for future historians who may succeed in uncovering new details that will expand the scope of the 1811 rebellion.

Thrasher's sources provide an excellent basis for further research and consideration, but he often fails to provide citations for information that he presents as factual. The language he employs prevents him from providing an objective picture as well. Constantly referring mockingly to "loyal slaves" who warned their masters of the rebellion, allowing them to flee to New Orleans, the author appears to hope the reader will feel spite for these men and women. Serious historians must ignore the tone of Thrasher's writing, which fills the audience with a sense of compassion for the slaves who found themselves "massacred" during the rebellion, and focus instead on the content and source material Thrasher has masterfully conducted.

Recently studying the settlement and foundation of plantation culture in the Deep South, Adam Rothman, dedicated a few pages to the 1811 rebellion and its influence on slavery and commerce in lower Louisiana. Declaring an examination of the 1811 insurrection crucial to his overarching thesis, Rothman shows that the event "expressed the deep discontent among enslaved people who endured the first phase of the sugar boom in lower Louisiana, and also because it starkly exposed the overwhelming military force that always buttressed slavery but was rarely apparent."<sup>45</sup> Rothman correctly concludes that the knowledge historians have produced thus far originates from sources influenced directly by the suppressors of the rebellion, asserting they "reveal more about how the rebellion ended than why it began."<sup>46</sup> Modern historians must seek both to understand the reason behind historical events and to provide the

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<sup>45</sup> Adam Rothman, *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 106.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

narrative of the event. This thesis attempts to fill, in partiality, the requirement for a better assessment behind the causes of the 1811 insurrection.

Following a brief summary of slavery along the German Coast on the eve of 1811 and a rapid analysis of potential external political factors, including Governor Claiborne's tribulations with the Spanish government, Rothman discusses the revolt itself. Objectively narrating the rebellion, he gives more detail than previous scholars. By actually naming slaves and their owners, Rothman takes a significant step closer to painting a clearer picture of the insurrection. Other historians used court records to draw conclusions about the slaves' movements but failed to name them, granting them individuality. Rothman's efforts fuel historians' hope of acquiring a potential narrative from the viewpoint of the enslaved participants, a picture earlier scholars ignored or thought hopeless.

Rothman concludes his examination of the 1811 rebellion stating that it illustrated the tenuous environment in Louisiana as it entered the antebellum period. As the bulk of the southern wilderness and southwestern frontier affirmed its dedication to cotton production, "the rise of a sugar plantation complex in lower Louisiana forced the United States to confront the contradictory legacies emanating from Saint Domingue."<sup>47</sup> Louisiana's close relationship to the site of the Haitian Revolution forced planters to grapple with a dangerous ideology and the ingredients for the replication of the events on that island on American soil.

Historians must necessarily rely on a transnational analysis and the willingness to look at the complex picture, crossing territorial borders to examine and understand Louisiana history, particularly the history of the 1811 revolt. No study discussed in this chapter has yet capitalized fully on the source material and methodology to understand thoroughly the insurrection, thus presenting the need and opportunity for such an ambitious historical project. The eventual revolt

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<sup>47</sup> Rothman, 117.

did not simply happen unabated and spontaneously. It resulted from years of uneasiness and various challenges that pressured local administrators in Louisiana immensely. The following three chapters will seek to use the historiographical record as a model and attain a progressive, fresh understanding of the 1811 slave rebellion in Louisiana.

## CHAPTER 3

### “IT REQUIRES ALL MY VIGILANCE TO PREVENT DISORDERS”

On the eve of 1791 the western world experienced a significant series of events that caused a real transformation. The French Enlightenment, characterized by men who “promoted and popularized new notions of individual and collective liberty, of political rights, of equality, and to a certain extent, of democracy,” surged through much of the Atlantic World.<sup>48</sup> During what Lester Langley designates the “Age of Revolutions,” French citizens became an example for the slaves and free people of color in Saint Domingue, France’s wealthiest colony during the eighteenth century, who adhered to the revolutionary ideology inherent in the French Enlightenment.<sup>49</sup> When the French National Assembly penned the Declaration of the Rights of Man in 1791, it declared as natural inalienable rights popular sovereignty and the right to determine one’s own status in society. As the ideology of the Enlightenment Era circumnavigated the Atlantic World, those who encountered it adapted the ideals to their own needs.

Early on, the revolutionary ideology found open arms and curious minds in Louisiana. Culturally dominated by France, though politically controlled by Spain since 1763, the territory of Louisiana became fertile ground for the ideas and practices of the French Enlightenment. When the slave insurrection in Saint Domingue provide another example, ever closer to Louisiana, whereby Enlightenment ideology sparked violent revolution and the casting aside of authoritative power, many Louisianans watched tensely, fearing the effect it might have on the

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<sup>48</sup> Franklin W. Knight, “The Disintegration of the Caribbean Slave Systems, 1772-1886,” in *The Slave Societies of the Caribbean*, ed. Franklin W. Knight (Hong Kong: UNESCO Publishing, 1997), 324-25.

<sup>49</sup> Lester D. Langley, *The Americas in the Age of Revolution, 1750-1850* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996).

colony. Ripples sent forth by the Haitian Revolution washed ashore and began to upset the social order within the Creole colony in ways that would only surface after it became an American territory.<sup>50</sup>

Initially settled by France during the eighteenth century, Louisiana never fully realized its potential until after the United States assumed control in 1803. A colony at the margin of empire, Louisiana lacked the stalwart support of initially French and later Spanish officials required to sustain a thriving colony. Plantation and small-scale agriculture dominated the Lower Mississippi Valley, capitalizing on the nutrient-rich sediment deposited annually by the Mississippi River. Founded in 1718, New Orleans became the epicenter for activity in Louisiana as it sat atop a high area in the vast swamps that surrounded Lake Ponchartrain and along a sharp bend in the Mississippi River. Planters spread out along the river, clearing swampland to begin growing indigo and cotton. In the hot Louisiana climate, planters turned to enslaved Africans to work their plantations. Necessary for the production of increasingly valuable cash crops, Africans soon outnumbered whites.

The inhabitants of Louisiana often found themselves pawns of European diplomacy between Spain and France. Distrust and uncertainty existed from the moment Louisiana came under Spanish control in 1763 following the Treaty of Paris<sup>51</sup> Reluctant subjects of Spain from the beginning, French Louisianans needed little motivation to oppose the Spanish administration between 1763 and 1800. They disliked the Spanish so much that they refused to allow the first

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<sup>50</sup> Creole is often a contested term and one which historians have used for many different peoples. For the purpose of this essay, it will designate those of French or Spanish descent born in the New World. Louisiana Studies in Historic Preservation defines Creole “as set for by the Council on Development of French in Louisiana...it means native-born Louisianans who are descended from continental European stock.” Louisiana Studies in Historic Preservation, “Glossary,” Department of Culture, Recreation, and Tourism, <http://www.laheritage.org/Glossary/C.html> (accessed February 1, 2008).

<sup>51</sup> The Treaty of Paris ended the Seven Years’ War, guaranteeing Spanish control of Louisiana. John Preston Moore, *Revolt in Louisiana: The Spanish Occupation, 1766-1770* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), 35-37.

Spanish governor, Antonio de Ulloa, to take control of Louisiana. In March 1766, the Spanish Crown sent de Ulloa to oversee the territory, but with only ninety soldiers accompanying him, he could not prevent the rioting that broke out. The French colonists forced him to leave, in what became known as the Rebellion of 1768. Determined to gain control of the colony, Spain sent General Alejandro O'Reilly and an army of occupation to Louisiana in 1769, ending the bloodless Rebellion of 1768. Political dissidence between French and Spanish Creoles continued to frustrate the Spanish governors, threatening them with open conflict.<sup>52</sup>

Immediately after assuming the governor-generalship of Louisiana in 1791, François Louis Hector, Baron de Carondelet, realized that "his subjects were entertaining a lively interest in the revolution in France." Carondelet noticed among the French already dissatisfied with Spanish rule "aphorisms and philosophies of the French Revolution [that] were being repeated on the streets of New Orleans" by its French citizens.<sup>53</sup> Survivors of the Haitian Revolution alerted friends and family in Louisiana of what had transpired on the island and some sought refuge in Louisiana. Disdain for Spanish governance on the part of the French Creoles, in addition to the slaves' dissatisfaction for their own plight, made the colony fertile ground for radical ideology.

Unbeknownst to Louisianans for two years, Napoleon regained control of the territory as a result of the 1800 Treaty of Ildefonso. The Haitian Revolution had disrupted Napoleon's plans to use Louisiana as a stronghold in the New World. Losing the revenue from Saint Domingue,

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<sup>52</sup> Charles Gayarré, *History of Louisiana* [hereafter Gayarré] (New Orleans: F.F. Hansell & Bro., Ltd., 1903), 2: 229-40. For an in-depth discussion of the Rebellion of 1768 consult Carl A. Brasseaux, "Excerpts From Denis-Nicolas Foucault and the New Orleans Rebellion of 1768," in *New Orleans and Urban Louisiana: Part A, Settlement to 1860*, ed. Samuel C. Shepherd, Jr, vol. 14 of *The Louisiana Purchase Bicentennial Series in Louisiana History*, [hereafter *LPBS*] ed. Glenn R. Conrad (Lafayette, LA: Center for Louisiana Studies, 2005), 142-65; John Preston Moore, *Revolt in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University, 1976).

<sup>53</sup> Ernest R. Liljergren, "Jacobinism in Spanish Louisiana, 1792-1797," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 22 (January 1939), 48.



and experiencing the decimation of the occupation army he had sent to retake the island, he made the decision to sell Louisiana. The financial gains from selling the colony and his failure to assert himself in the Western Hemisphere forced Napoleon to consider seriously a deal with the United States for the purchase of the territory. Negotiations reached a conclusion in 1803, and the United States purchased Louisiana for fifteen million dollars.<sup>54</sup> Control of the territory was publicly transferred from Spain to France on November 30, 1803, and three weeks later, on December 20, passed to America.<sup>55</sup> The takeover by the United States prompted a concerted effort to Americanize or Anglicize the Territory of Louisiana.

Pierre Clément de Laussat, a forty-six-year-old member of the French legislature received an appointment from Napoleon as envoy to oversee the transfer of Louisiana to American control. Explaining some of the issues his fellow Frenchmen had with the Spanish administration, he exclaimed, “what a detestable policy was that of the Spanish government! What dishonest manipulation! What corruption!”<sup>56</sup> Creoles resisted Spanish rule for quite some time, unfortunately, foreseeing little reprieve under American rule until after the War of 1812.

During the first year of his tenure, governor of American Louisiana, twenty-eight year-old William Charles Cole Claiborne described the territory’s complexity and the challenges he faced in attempting to introduce American government and laws. Particularly frustrating for

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<sup>54</sup> Florence M. Jumonville, “Frenchmen at Hearts: New Orleans Printers and Their Imprints, 1764-1803,” in *New Orleans and Urban Louisiana: Part A, Settlement to 1860*, LPBS, 14:177.

<sup>55</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to James Madison, New Orleans, 20 December 1803, in *Official Letter Books of W.C.C. Claiborne, 1801-1816*, [Hereafter OLB] ed. Dunbar Rowland (Jackson, MS: Mississippi State Department of Archives and History, 1917), 1:306-07. Quotations taken from primary sources will be cited literally as they appear in published works or manuscript. This includes misspellings, italics, and sentence format; Pierre-Louis Berquin-Duvallon, *Travels in Louisiana and the Floridas, in the Year 1802* (New York: I. Riley & Co., 1806), 14.

<sup>56</sup> Clément de Laussat, *Memoirs of My Life*, [hereafter Laussat] ed. Robert D. Bush (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 20.

him, Claiborne spoke of the “various and rapid rapid transitions and transfers which [had] taken place in [the] Territory.”<sup>57</sup> Although used to shifts in governance, the inhabitants of Louisiana had not yet adjusted to the monumental change of an entirely new central government ruling closer to home. Claiborne tackled the task of balancing prominent factions—including the French and Spanish, Americans, *gen des couleur libres* or free people of color, and enslaved Africans—all within a confined territory.<sup>58</sup>

Claiborne faced many concurrent internal and external obstacles as he attempted to forge a new American territory out of an old Creole colony. To his administration and political superior, Secretary of State Madison, he complained:

To conciliate public opinion, and to promote Harmony, have been my favorite objects:- but I have been less fortunate, than I had anticipated!-Unfortunate Divisions, certainly exist in Louisiana; but the seeds of discontent, were sown, previous to my arrival in the province, and they have deriv'd nourishment from causes, which I cou'd neither controul or counteract.<sup>59</sup>

Assuming control of Louisiana in December 1803, Claiborne entered into a volatile environment with many difficulties beyond his control. Social and political differences marked the territory. Claiborne understood the importance of a society working cooperatively toward statehood and hoped he could unify the inhabitants.

After its establishment as a colony, Louisiana experienced an influx of many peoples, including Germans who settled in the area that became known as the German Coast, the parishes

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<sup>57</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to James Madison, New Orleans, 26 October 1804, in *Official Letter Books of W.C.C. Claiborne, 1801-1816*, [Hereafter OLB] ed. Dunbar Rowland (Jackson, MS: Mississippi State Department of Archives and History, 1917), 2:376.

<sup>58</sup> When W.C.C. Claiborne becomes Governor-General of Louisiana, he took control over a large, sparsely-populated area. The majority of settlement historically occurred in New Orleans and along the Mississippi River toward Baton Rouge. Few citizens inhabited the area above Baton Rouge and beyond Point Coupee very little settlement occurred before Claiborne took his post.

<sup>59</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to James Madison, New Orleans, 16 October 1804, *OLB* 2:359.

along the Mississippi River just above New Orleans.<sup>60</sup> Additionally, in the 1750s following the Great Expulsion, when British officials forced French Acadians out of Nova Scotia, many chose to resettle in Louisiana.<sup>61</sup> Early in the nineteenth century, after Spain forced French exiles in Cuba to emigrate, Louisiana served as a refuge for those escaping the Haitian Revolution, continuing the pattern of French refugees seeking help in Louisiana.

Louisiana's history of immigrants, free and slave, arriving from Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean resulted in an unusually complex society, a fact Claiborne addressed early in his administration. A mere six weeks after assuming control of Louisiana, Claiborne observed in a letter to Secretary of State Madison that "the materials for a mob are abundant, and it requires all my vigilance to prevent disorders." Especially taxing to Claiborne were "American, French and Spanish Sailors, among whom there exist[ed] no cordiality...whose jealousies and resentments might easily be excited."<sup>62</sup> Claiborne pondered the task of finding a way to unite the splintered factions lest one gain the upper hand or weaken the territory's ability to suppress foreign designs or a potential slave insurrection. He wanted Louisiana to avoid the fate of Saint Domingue, where slaves had capitalized on the struggle between the opposing whites and free people of color. The free people of color, the one group he failed to note in this correspondence with Madison, gave him much cause for concern as well.

Claiborne often voiced his unease over the free people of color in New Orleans. The city possessed a large free black population, only approached in influence and size by that of

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<sup>60</sup> Ellen Merrill, *Germans of Louisiana* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing, 2005), 19-47. Over time the German immigrants intermarried with the French Creoles, essentially becoming Creole themselves.

<sup>61</sup> William Faulkner Ruston, *The Cajuns: From Acadia to Louisiana* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1979), 45-57.

<sup>62</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to James Madison, New Orleans, 4 February 1804, *OLB*, 1:359.

Charleston, South Carolina.<sup>63</sup> While Charleston County, South Carolina, contained 16,011 whites, 45,385 slaves, and 1,783 free people of color totaling 63,179 inhabitants, the Louisiana territorial census of 1806 reported a total population of 52,998, consisting of 23,574 slaves, 3,355 free people of color, and 26,069 whites.<sup>64</sup> The white population included 13,500 “natives of Louisiana, for the most part descendants of the French; about 3,500 natives of the United States, and the residue Europeans generally, including the native French, Spaniards, English, Germans, and Irish.”<sup>65</sup> A completely different caste within society, the free people of color presented Claiborne with unique challenges as he attempted to establish a stable society. The outcome of the Haitian Revolution, during which slaves and free blacks essentially eliminated the white population, remained ever-present in Claiborne’s correspondence.

In a comparative essay on the three-caste societies of Louisiana and Saint Domingue, historian Laura Foner discusses the uniqueness of racial lines in the British and French West Indies. Unlike in most regions of the United States, which denied social status to any non-white person, free blacks in the West Indies possessed the ability to claim a measure of status within the larger social system. The dissimilarities between American and French slave societies hinged upon manumission. While Americans preferred a hard and fast racial line in order to maintain control as the ruling society, Frenchmen chose to allow blacks to purchase their own freedom and enter into a third social caste between enslaved and total freedom. Louisiana’s

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<sup>63</sup> Laura Foner, “The Free People of Color in Louisiana and St. Domingue,” *Journal of Social History* 3 (Summer 1970): 407-11); Mary Gehman, *The Free People of Color of New Orleans: An Introduction* (New Orleans: Margaret Media, Inc., 1994).

<sup>64</sup> <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/php/county.php>, accessed 1 May 2008.

<sup>65</sup> Gayarré, 4:212.

French social legacy, predicated upon the existence of a three-caste society, gave Claiborne a unique challenge when he assumed the governor-generalship in 1803.<sup>66</sup>

Hoping to avoid major tension, Claiborne constantly sought to balance all three castes—whites, free people of color, and slaves. On July 12, 1804, he alerted Madison to a situation in the city wherein a white printer received a letter from a free person of color. The letter, meant to be distributed throughout the city, called for a meeting of the free people of color to discuss matters arising out of the American takeover of New Orleans. Whites immediately grew concerned at the prospect of a mass meeting and tensions rose. Claiborne worked quickly to prevent conflict, convincing a group of influential leaders within the free black community to cancel the meeting. Choosing not to discipline the letter-writer, Claiborne pointed out “the events which had Spread blood and desolation in St. Domingo, originated in a dispute between the white and Mulatto inhabitants, and that the too rigid treatment of the former, induced the Latter to seek the support & assistance of the Negroes.”<sup>67</sup> Throughout his governorship, Claiborne remained cognizant of the events that had transpired earlier in Saint Domingue, and he sought every possible solution to avoid a similar occurrence in Louisiana.

President Jefferson’s policy for the American frontier dictated that Claiborne use militia for defense.<sup>68</sup> In his correspondence to the secretaries of state and war, the governor complained that he had available, on the borders of Louisiana, very few United States soldiers who served to keep the Spanish forces in Texas and West Florida in check. Attempting to organize an effective militia in a diverse territory, Claiborne struggled to form a cohesive unit to defend against

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<sup>66</sup> For an in-depth comparison analysis of the three-caste societies in Louisiana and Saint Domingue, consult Foner, “The Free People of Color in Louisiana and Saint Domingue: A Comparative Portrait of Two Three-Caste Societies.”

<sup>67</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to James Madison, New Orleans, 12 July 1804, *OLB*, 2:244-46.

<sup>68</sup> George Dargo, *Jefferson’s Louisiana: Politics and the Clash of Legal Traditions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 142-45.

potential threats in New Orleans because of the difficulty of maintaining order among the high concentration of slaves. To do so, he often sought balance.

The Spanish tradition of arming the free people of color for militia duty unsettled the “ancient” French Creoles. Further, the Spanish had relied on free blacks in the militia during their colonial rule, a fact that caused an unusual predicament for Claiborne. Under Spanish colonial rule the free militia had remained unpopular, but Spanish custom and practice forced it upon Claiborne. Concerned, he wrote Secretary of War Henry Dearborn about “a great dislike between the white Natives of Louisiana, and the free men of colour.”<sup>69</sup> He desired a strong militia but feared the potential consequences of armed, free blacks. Claiborne cautiously expressed his concern that “to re-commission [the free people of color] might be considered as an outrage on the feelings of a part of the Nation, and as opposed to those principles of Policy which the Safety of the Southern States has necessarily established.”<sup>70</sup> On the other hand, frightened that disbanding the free black militia would simply release armed and disgruntled people of color into society, he hoped to protect the free people of color’s place in the militia. In an effort to maintain stability, Claiborne chose to maintain the system in place when he assumed control. While the militia problem challenged him, Claiborne’s determination and careful planning helped to form the force that quelled the rebellion in January, 1811.

In addition to the free people of color, Claiborne received challenges from the multi-ethnic white population in New Orleans. From the outset, Claiborne mulled over the options and obstacles in front of him. United States Adjutant General Henry Hopkins informed Claiborne that diversity challenged his ability to create an effective militia force. He blamed the “native Americans, native Louisianians, Frenchmen, Spaniards, Englishmen, Germans, Italians &c

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<sup>69</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to Henry Dearborn, New Orleans, 22 June 1804, *OLB*, 2:218.

<sup>70</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to James Madison, New Orleans, 27 December 1803, *OLB*, 1:314.

&c...[because] their manners are discordant as their Language, and their prejudices are often as various, as the Governments and Laws of t Country which gave them Birth.”<sup>71</sup> Frustrated over the communication barrier, Claiborne exclaimed, “Not one in fifty of the old inhabitants appear to me to understand the English Language.”<sup>72</sup> Ignorance of the English language posed significant problems as he worked to form a government, and confronted him when he attempted to form an effective militia force to patrol the city and surrounding countryside.

The first carnival after the American takeover made evident the deep-seated divisions inherent in the city. Writing Madison, Claiborne stated “It originated in a contest between some young Americans and Frenchmen, whether the American or French dances should have a preference.”<sup>73</sup> Opposing sides drew swords before calmer heads prevailed. The incident, however, confirmed the fundamental ethnic and nationalist differences that challenged Claiborne as he worked to unify the territory. At all times, French Louisianans remained cognizant of their French heritage, kept track of events in Europe, celebrated Bastille Day, and encouraged their fellow countrymen to seek refuge in Louisiana.<sup>74</sup>

The skeptical French and Spanish inhabitants of Louisiana maintained a sincerely critical perception of the American government, forcing Claiborne to labor to gather support. Claiborne warned Madison of “an impression [which] was received in some circles that Louisiana would

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<sup>71</sup>Henry Hopkins to W.C.C. Claiborne, New Orleans, 28 October 1809, in *The Territorial Papers of the United States* [hereafter *Territorial Papers*] ed. Clarence Edwin Carter (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1940), 9: 855.

<sup>72</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to James Madison, New Orleans, 2 January 1804, *OLB*, 1:328.

<sup>73</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to James Madison, New Orleans, 10 January 1804, *OLB*, 1:331; Laussat, 92-96. For an in-depth analysis of the Carnival incident and its connections to deeper social divisions consult Mitchell, Reid *All on a Mardi Gras Day: Episodes in the History of New Orleans Carnival* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard 1995), 10-37.

<sup>74</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to James Madison, New Orleans, 16 July 1804, *OLB*, 2:249-50.

revert to France, on the conclusion of the present European [Napoleonic] War.”<sup>75</sup> Claiborne believed that the Louisianans wished to bide their time until this reversion occurred, remaining uncommitted to his cause. To maintain a successful territory and move posthaste toward statehood, he needed to prevent further social fissures. Toward this end he sent a confidential agent, Doctor John Watkins, to ascertain the mood of the people along the Mississippi River between New Orleans and Baton Rouge, and to rally support for the American government.<sup>76</sup>

Visiting with long-time residents and reporting on the conditions he found, Watkins canvassed the region assigned him. Talking with French and Spanish settlers, Watkins assured them of the American government’s policies and intentions in the region. Watkins “impress[ed] upon their minds high and honourable ideas of the American Government,” promising them that “their liberty, property and religion would be protected.”<sup>77</sup> Although he failed to convince them entirely, Watkins successfully refuted any notion that Louisiana would ever revert to French control. At the end of his visit, Claiborne’s emissary declared himself “fully persuaded that a large majority of the most respectable people of the Country, are better satisfied with their present situations,” and would support the American government in the years ahead.<sup>78</sup>

Claiborne worried that one of the splintered factions might use the free people of color to their advantage. Manipulating the mullatoes, as Claiborne referred to the free people of color in the territory, the Spanish might be able to drive the wedge between the French Creoles and Americans even deeper. Claiborne assumed such a division would provide Spain with the opportunity to reassert itself in the territory. From the beginning, Claiborne wrestled with the

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<sup>75</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to James Madison, New Orleans, 6 February, 1804, *OLB*, 1:364.

<sup>76</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to John Watkins, New Orleans, 9 February 1804, *OLB*, 1:368; W.C.C. Claiborne to Beverly Chew, New Orleans, 2 March 1804, *OLB*, 2:3-13.

<sup>77</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to Beverly Chew, New Orleans, 2 March 1804, *OLB*, 2:8.

<sup>78</sup> Claiborne to Madison, 2:8.



Spanish administrators in New Orleans when, after the transfer to American ownership, they failed to promptly withdraw their soldiers from the territory. Once the remaining remnants of the Spanish military left Louisiana, they still continued to occupy the area just to the west of American territory, maintaining a threatening position in the eyes of territorial commandants on the borders including Edward Turner in Natchitoches, 250 miles northwest of New Orleans on the frontier facing Spanish territory. Surrounded by Spanish West Florida and Spanish Texas, Claiborne realized he had to act with calculated shrewdness to maintain control in Louisiana.

Reports surfaced that the Marquis de Casa Calvo in West Florida, possessed a decree promising that any slave who fled into Spanish territory would be given protection by the Crown.<sup>79</sup> The Marquis denied the reports in letters to Claiborne, citing his belief that the whole situation had been “some mistaken intelligence or some very awkward error [that] must have happened, on the part of that Commandant [Turner]”<sup>80</sup> in Natchitoches. No evidence has come to light that the decree actually existed, but the perception that the Spanish wished to weaken American authority in the territory remained very real to Americans in Louisiana.

One concern manifested itself in 1806 when word spread that a priest had plotted to incite racial conflict. Whites in New Orleans feared that Father Antoine, whom the Spanish authorities sent away during their rule, attempted to create instability. No evidence exists to suggest that his plan received official endorsement from Spain; however, Americans feared that by capitalizing on the resulting instability the Spanish forces on the borders of the Louisiana Territory would regain control of New Orleans and surrounding area, without official sanction from Spain.

Spanish territorial officials in West Florida and Texas denied Claiborne’s allegations that they

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<sup>79</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to Edward Turner, New Orleans, 10 August 1804, *OLB*, 2:303. The Marquis of Casa Calvo served as a brigadier in the Spanish army and appointed by the Madrid cabinet to Governor Salcedo, the last Spanish governor of Louisiana, to supervise the retrocession of territory. Laussat, 19, 28.

<sup>80</sup> Marquis of Casa Calvo to W.C.C. Claiborne, New Orleans, 4 September 1804, *OLB*, 2:320.

plotted to retake Louisiana. Claiborne informed the secretary of war that Father Antoine was “by some citizens esteemed an accomplished hypocrite, has some great influence with the people of color and, report says, embraces every opportunity to render them discontented under the American government.”<sup>81</sup> When the Spanish priest denied the allegations, Governor Claiborne required that he declare an oath of allegiance, and placed the priest under constant observation.

Claiborne remained justifiably suspicious throughout his administration, warning Commandant Turner in Natchitoches that the Spanish “have been very busy in circulating reports, that the Americans are mere Hogs, that they do not live like Christians... and that they make use of the meanest and most despicable means to sour the dispositions towards, and alienate the affections of the people of Louisiana.”<sup>82</sup> Whether or not Spanish officials outside of Louisiana’s borders actually sought to sway the planters one way or another against the United States, the fear of such a conspiracy remained preeminent among American officials until after the War of 1812 and the Battle of New Orleans.<sup>83</sup> Claiborne took the rumors very seriously, going so far as to suggest that “attempts had been made and will be made by the Partizans of Spain to alienate the affections of Louisianians from the American Government.”<sup>84</sup> When the slaves did revolt in 1811 and marched toward New Orleans, General Wade Hampton himself blamed the Spanish for inciting the insurrection but his sentiments proved unfounded.<sup>85</sup> Although false, Hampton’s accusation illustrates how seriously the administration viewed Spanish intentions.

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<sup>81</sup> Gayarré, 4: 154-55; W.C. C. Claiborne to Henry Dearborn, New Orleans, 8 October 1806, *OLB*, 4: 25-26; W.C.C. Claiborne to Henry Dearborn, New Orleans, 10 October 1806, *OLB*, 4: 28.

<sup>82</sup> Edward D. Turner to W.C. C. Claiborne, Natchitoches, 30 July 1804, *Territorial Papers*, 9:272.

<sup>83</sup> Lyle Saxon, *Old Louisiana* (New York: The Century Co., 1929), 124.

<sup>84</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to Edward D. Turner, New Orleans, 1 August 1804, *OLB*, 2:287.

<sup>85</sup> Wade Hampton to W.C.C. Claiborne, New Orleans, 10 January 1811, *Territorial Papers*, 9:915.

Many Creole planters became disenchanted by American rule and concerned about the influx of Americans into the territory. They worried that the new American government would threaten their social and economic status. Particularly frustrating for Creole planters, Claiborne's administration disallowed credit that Frenchmen had been granted by lenders under colonial rule. Additionally, as per American custom, the federal government planned to sell vacant territorial lands as a source of revenue. Jean Noel Destrehan, speaker of the House of Representatives in Louisiana, argued for the reinstatement of French and Spanish customs. He exclaimed that the previous colonial powers distributed lands for free "as a means of increasing the population of the country, encouraging its agriculture, and gaining the effects of its inhabitants."<sup>86</sup>

One month after assuming control of the territory, Claiborne alerted Madison to incessant French Creole attempts to foment a schism between themselves and the Americans in Louisiana. The French Creoles continued to exhibit a significant partiality for France, in their language, manners and habits. Claiborne planned to inform the Creoles how the American government operated in hopes of dispelling their fears that their rights would be cast aside and ignored under the new administration.<sup>87</sup> During his first year in office, Claiborne worked to introduce American governmental customs while continuing to respect the system that existed when he arrived. He strove to cultivate trust and commitment among the French citizens by teaching them about the American system. Incessant and unforeseen challenges, including the arrival of many refugees from Saint Domingue, threatened to strengthen French sentiments, causing Claiborne significant concern.

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<sup>86</sup> Walter Lowrie and Matthew St. Clair Clarke, eds. *Public Lands* Vol. 8 of *American State Papers* (Greenville, SC: Southern Historical Press, Inc., 1994), 250-51.

<sup>87</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to James Madison, New Orleans, 24 January 1804, *OLB*, 1:345-46.

Laussat, the French diplomat who oversaw the transition of Louisiana to the United States compared the habits and customs of his fellow countrymen to the newly-arrived Americans. He spoke uneasily about the Americans who “introduced the strictness of their laws and exactness of their customs.” Laussat remained concerned specifically over the enforcement of debt under American control. Traditionally the French Creoles incurred debts under vague terms lacking any strict enforcement for settlement while Americans typically borrowed money on predestined terms for repayment.<sup>88</sup>

Fearing that the transf of power would lead to their displacement from the socio-economic elite, the Creoles needed reassurance from Claiborne. In July 1804, he suggested that some of the difficulty in gaining the loyalties of the older Louisianans stemmed from “a considerable jealousy of their American Brothers, viewing themselves as a distinct and acquired Branch of our Family, they seem to think they are not Secure in the affections and confidence of the government of this circumstances also, designing men Avail themselves to excite fear and suspicion.”<sup>89</sup> The outcome of the battle and the actions of the American government saving the city from British invaders assured the inhabitants of American intentions.<sup>90</sup> The United States’ commitment to prevent the city from being taken showed the Creoles that the American government possessed the ability to protect its citizens from foreign invaders, and thus 1815 became a major turning point toward unity in Louisiana.

Examining the slave revolt on Saint Domingue provides a clue to the ideological spark that helped to cause the 1811 revolt in Louisiana. The ideology that led to the rebellion arrived in Louisiana from France via Saint Domingue. From the outset of the French Revolution, the

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<sup>88</sup> Laussat, 99-101.

<sup>89</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to James Madison, New Orleans, 7 July 1804, *OLB*, 2:239.

<sup>90</sup> Saxon, 124.

ideals of the French Enlightenment spread throughout the French colonial world. Slaves and free men adapted French ideas of liberty to their own environment. Political philosopher Susan Buck-Morss suggests “the black Jacobins of Saint Domingue surpassed the metropole in actively realizing the Enlightenment goal of human liberty, seeming to give proof that the French Revolution was not simply a European phenomenon, but world-historical in its implications.”<sup>91</sup> The Haitian Revolution was a manifestation of the French Enlightenment as interpreted by people of color in Saint Domingue. While they fled the violence of revolution, refugees, white and black, still possessed these ideals and a willingness to act upon them, bringing them to Louisiana where the environment proved fertile for further cultivation of revolutionary ideology.

Susan Buck-Morss further argues that “slavery became a problematic source of labor during the Enlightenment at a time when great thinkers argued that freedom existed as the ‘highest and universal political value.’”<sup>92</sup> The antithesis of Enlightenment ideology, slavery challenged the Frenchmen who had sought to overthrow oppressors denying their natural and inalienable rights during the French Revolution while remaining slaveholding societies. The slaves, and free people of color who maintained partial rights, absorbed the revolutionary ideology and the language of the French Enlightenment. These dangerous ideals became reality on the island of Saint Domingue when hundreds of thousands of free and enslaved blacks revolted, motivated by the same rhetoric found in France.<sup>93</sup>

Just as French Enlightenment ideology began circulating throughout the Atlantic World, parts of the Western World embraced the Industrial Revolution. Influenced by industrial developments, sugar production on Saint Domingue became even more exploitative of slaves

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<sup>91</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, “Hegel and Haiti,” *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 4 (Summer 2000): 835-36.

<sup>92</sup> Susan Buck-Morss., 821.

<sup>93</sup> Langley, 87-88.

due to the higher demand for raw materials.<sup>94</sup> Mortality rates remained high during the colonial period because the slave trade ensured a plentiful supply of fresh African slaves.<sup>95</sup> Although generally mortality rates remained catastrophic throughout the eighteenth century, Lester Langley argues that slaves on Saint Domingue experienced a less harsh form of slavery than those living in the British West Indies. Guaranteed a certain degree of care under the *Code Noir* (Black Codes,) the enslaved population possessed certain rights that slaves under British rule failed to obtain.<sup>96</sup> The *Code Noir*, guaranteeing certain rights, gave slaves a glimpse of freedom. Seemingly impossible to grasp under excessive oppression, slaves in the British West Indies had no sense of freedom. Langley argues that the hope of liberty, instilled in the slaves of French Saint Domingue by a less harsh slave regime, in addition to French Enlightenment ideology, caused the slaves in Saint Domingue to seek their Jubilee in a bid for freedom.<sup>97</sup>

The three-caste social system in Saint Domingue, similar to that of Louisiana, challenged the French Colonial leaders on the island. Approximately 28,000 to 37,000 free people of color and 30,000 to 40,000 whites controlled the island while as many as 500,000 slaves worked the plantations.<sup>98</sup> Under this system, society split more along class lines rather than race. The racial composition of Saint Domingue's population remained tremendously unbalanced as a select few

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<sup>94</sup> Thomas O. Ott, *The Haitian Revolution, 1789-1804* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1973), 15.

<sup>95</sup> Lester Langley argues that more than 500,000 of the 800,000 slaves brought to Saint Domingue in the century after 1680 perished; Lester, 104.

<sup>96</sup> Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *American Negro Slavery* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1966), 493-94. The *Code Noir* directly contradicts French Enlightenment thought as it makes slavery a right during a time when Enlightenment thinkers, like Rousseau declare humankind to possess inalienable rights. For more on this argument and the contradictions therein, consult Buck-Morss, 830-31.

<sup>97</sup> Langley, 87-101.

<sup>98</sup> Ned Sublette, *The World That Made New Orleans: From Spanish Silver to Congo Square* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2008), 143. Ned Sublette canvasses an extremely vast array of sources in his ambitious history of New Orleans in a transnational lens. He provides the estimates for the three-caste population of Saint Domingue on the eve of the Haitian Revolution.

masters managed a great many slaves on vast tracts of land.<sup>99</sup> Even in relation to the free people on Saint Domingue, whites still found themselves in the numerical minority.

Racial control heightened and tolerance decreased significantly when Saint Domingue began to experience greater economic success through a boom in sugar production. When sugar production mechanized, masters began pushing their slaves even harder, heightening racial control. The free people of color especially, found themselves placed under increasing restrictions as whites increasingly feared the freedoms enjoyed by free blacks.<sup>100</sup> By 1788, French law required free people of color to obtain a permit for any trade except farming. Although free blacks lacked full citizenship, they still possessed the right to own and cultivate land. The double standard of partial citizenship frustrated the free blacks on Saint Domingue to the point of rebellion in 1791.<sup>101</sup> Even as racial boundaries solidified, whites divided against one another, much as they did in Louisiana. Sugar planters clashed with coffee planters, and both clashed with merchants and businessmen in urban areas. Typically disagreements arose over their social status.<sup>102</sup>

The social upheaval of the French Revolution deeply affected Saint Domingue and, in turn, Louisiana. Many of the colonists on the island wished to avoid the turmoil in France, but its revolutionary ideology spread to the island despite their efforts. The *grand blancs*, described by Thomas Ott as “socially and economically resembling affluent Spanish American creoles, [who] were the planters, great merchants, and wealthy maritime agents,” drafted a proposal to

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<sup>99</sup> Ott, 9.

<sup>100</sup> Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 60-64; Ott, 12.

<sup>101</sup> Buck-Morss, 837.

<sup>102</sup> Langley, 107; Ott, 10-11.

gain greater political independence during the revolution in France.<sup>103</sup> Acting thus, they could hardly shield themselves, their slaves, or the free people of color from news of the revolution and the spirit embedded in its ideology.

Twenty years before the eventual revolt on American soil, Saint Domingue erupted in revolution. Rebellng against the uneven power structure, the free people of color hoped to assert their natural rights that they perceived to be guaranteed by the Declaration of the Rights of Man. The armed free people of color marched against Le Cap on the northern coast of Saint Domingue capturing and executing governmental officials. After this show of force the Constituent Assembly in France granted them political equality.<sup>104</sup> Vincent Ogé, a wealthy free man of color, led this revolt following a trip to Paris where he witnessed the promulgation of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the efforts of Frenchmen to assert their natural rights. He, like those around him who had traveled to France, taught others in Saint Domingue about the ideology of the French Enlightenment, seeking to obtain full political freedom for his fellow freed people on the island.<sup>105</sup>

An ambiguous ruling passed by the French Constituent Assembly, thought to give free people of color full citizenship, still forbade their right to vote. Responding, free blacks across parts of Saint Domingue began making plans to wage a full-scale civil war against the whites. As an unforeseen and unsolicited result, the slaves revolted, seeking to capitalize on the already volatile environment. The primary leader of the slave revolt, Boukman Dutty, who worked as an overseer on a plantation, understood the hostility between whites and the free people of color.

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<sup>103</sup> Thomas Ott, 9-14; Carolyn E. Fick, *Making Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 17-21. For a better understanding of the complexity of the ruling class and their strained relationship with France consult Langley, 108-109.

<sup>104</sup> Langley, 110; Ott, 37-38.

<sup>105</sup> For an account of Ogé's trip to Paris to meet with the General Assembly over the rights of the free people of color, consult Dubois, 80-81; Langley, 109-110.



He saw the tension between the French planters and the free people of color as an opportunity to be exploited. Intent on expelling the whites from the island, Dutty led a small-scale revolt 22 August 1791, which gathered force with each plantation it visited as slaves voted with their feet and hands, trampling and exterminating their masters, while advancing toward the coast.<sup>106</sup> Within a year the rebellion spread to all parts of the island. Completely losing control of the island, the legislature in France granted all free people civic equality regardless of color on 4 April, 1792, sending Léger-Félicité Sonthonax to lead a commission to ensure that colonial authorities complied with the ruling. The declaration of equality excluded enslaved Africans, however, and fighting continued until 1804 because the slaves saw their opportunity to capitalize, hoping to obtain their own independence as well.<sup>107</sup>

The slaves on Saint Domingue moved to strike a blow for their own freedom when their masters refused to abide by the natural laws of liberty that they themselves preached. Enslaved Africans forced their masters to recognize natural rights and abolish slavery, completing the only successful slave rebellion in world history.<sup>108</sup> Not long after, slaves on the German Coast in Louisiana attempted the same feat. As Susan Buck-Morss points out, “The Haitian Revolution was the crucible, the trial by fire for the ideals of the French Enlightenment,” and all of the Western World watched and waited to see the result.<sup>109</sup> The outcome had an immense impact, both positive and negative on Louisiana as ideology, innovative sugar technology, and the people to implement both flowed into the territory seeking refuge from that trial.

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<sup>106</sup> Langley, 111-12; Dubois, 94; Fick, 92-96.

<sup>107</sup> For four excellent accounts of the Haitian Revolution, consult Dubois, Fick, Ott, and C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint Louverture and the Saint Domingo Revolution* (New York: Dial Press, 1938).

<sup>108</sup> Buck-Morss, 835.

<sup>109</sup> Buck-Morss, 837.

## CHAPTER 4

### “AN ENCREASE OF POPULATION, WHICH MAY RETARD THE GROWTH OF TRUE AMERICAN PRINCIPLES”

William Charles Cole Claiborne faced situations that remained literally beyond his control. He understood the complexity of his task as he attempted to unify a society composed of three social castes, one of which, the whites, remained itself split.<sup>110</sup> The territory’s complex history, in conjunction with the variety of peoples in Louisiana, challenged Claiborne daily. Further, facing various waves of people entering the territory, he voiced his frustrations to the mayor that “the Intrigues of certain late Emigrants from France and some of the Satellites of the Spanish Government, have tended considerably to heighten the Discontent in this Quarter.”<sup>111</sup> Each non-American immigrant strengthened and reasserted the differences of those living in Louisiana, immensely challenging Claiborne. While frustrating, the challenges of Claiborne’s early tenure failed to provide the spark to ignite a disaster, such as slave insurrection, that would truly threaten the safety of the territory.

Increasingly Claiborne confronted mounting challenges to the stability of Louisiana which created an environment favorable to slave revolt. In addition to Claiborne’s efforts to balance disjointed social factions, discussed in the previous chapter, he also contended with an ancient and covert opponent, the swamps surrounding Lake Ponchartrain. Vincent Nolte, a merchant at the turn of the nineteenth century, described the area as “innumerable creeks called *bayous*, that communicate by manifold little branches, with each other... [that promoted]

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<sup>110</sup> James Mather to W.C.C. Claiborne, New Orleans, 18 July 1809, in *Official Letter Books of W.C.C. Claiborne, 1801-1816*, [Hereafter OLB] ed. Dunbar Rowland (Jackson, MS: Mississippi State Department of Archives and History, 1917), 4:387-89. Quotations taken from primary sources will be cited literally as they appear in published works or manuscript. This includes misspellings, italics, and sentence format.

<sup>111</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to James Madison, New Orleans, 19 October 1804, *OLB*, 2:368-69.

clandestine traffic.”<sup>112</sup> Louisiana’s geography included uninhabited and unexplored swamps and marshes that provided cover for slaves escaping their masters and fostered covert activity amongst both runaway and plantation-bound slaves. Maroon communities thrived in the swamps thought by many to be uninhabitable.

Maroon communities provided slaves with a unique outlet for resistance against the oppressive slaveholding regime. Although not physically harming their masters, escaped slaves withheld their bodies from labor and assumed responsibility for their own physical well-being. Herbert Aptheker became one of the first historians to overturn earlier scholarship that had portrayed slaves as contented workers on plantations run by benevolent masters. He studied various forms of resistance and argued that maroon communities affected slave societies both passively and actively when “they offered havens, served as bases for marauding expeditions against nearby plantations and, at times, supplied the nucleus for the leadership of planned uprisings.”<sup>113</sup> Aptheker failed to understand slaves on a unique level, continuing the historical tradition of treating the slaves as the objects by looking at them through their masters. Eugene Genovese became one of the first historians to treat enslaved Africans as free-willed entities who maintained their own characteristics outside of the master’s influence, even touching on maroon communities in his search for the origins of black nationalism.<sup>114</sup> Escaped slaves actively

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<sup>112</sup> Vincent Nolte, *Fifty Years in Both Hemispheres* (NY: Redfield, 1854), 189.

<sup>113</sup> Richard Price, *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1973), 151.

<sup>114</sup> Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976). For the foundation of slave resistance historiography, consult Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: International Publishers, 1963); Harvey Wish, “American Slave Insurrections before 1861.” *The Journal of Negro Slavery* 22 (July 1937). More recent scholarship that discusses slave resistance in a broad sense includes Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). For a brief but useful essay of the historiography of resistance amongst slaves consult Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619-1877* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003), 134-38.

participated in maroon communities throughout the Caribbean and American South, particularly Louisiana.

Maroons served as a nucleus for the leadership of potential slave insurrections. Having already proven their desire and adeptness to escape their masters, some runaways with leadership qualities asserted their authority among the maroons as leaders. They formed a cohesive and somewhat organized mass out of a scattered group who generally sought self-preservation first and foremost. Alvin O. Thompson closely examines the maroon communities in the Caribbean, devoting much space to a discussion of the ways in which maroon communities influenced the Haitian Revolution. He argues that whites and free people of color began their struggle to obtain more power from the ruling elite in France, but “it was the enslaved people, now transformed into insurgents, along with the Maroons who moved the struggle into its independence phase and created a revolution in the former colony.”<sup>115</sup> Essentially, the maroons aided in providing the knockout blow whereby the black population as a whole could grab freedom on Saint Domingue.

The maroon communities in Saint Domingue lay on the frontier between two competing European colonial powers, Spain and France, and they “were able to exploit the political antipathy of the neighboring powers to their own advantage.”<sup>116</sup> Because maroon communities in the Caribbean grew so large while the number of whites remained so few, the covert communities often assumed political status and, at times, negotiated treaties of peace or amnesty with local colonial authorities. Because of the extreme demographic imbalance, colonial powers typically chose to negotiate with the maroon communities instead of combating them. Thus,

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<sup>115</sup> Alvin O. Thompson, *Flight to Freedom: African Runaways and Maroons in the Americas* (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2006), 319-20. For further explanation of maroon communities' participation as political entities see Silvia W. de Groot, Catherine A. Christen, and Franklin W. Knight. “Maroon Communities in the Circum-Caribbean,” in *The Slave Societies of the Caribbean*, ed. Franklin W. Knight (London: MacMillan Education Ltd., 1997).

<sup>116</sup> de Groot, Christen, Knight, 179.

whites curbed the harassment from maroons and preserved life while independent maroon communities guaranteed their stability.<sup>117</sup>

Maroon communities in the Caribbean differed from those in the United States because of the demographic discrepancy. Throughout the Caribbean maroons attained a political status, becoming independent entities that forced white recognition. Although lacking the explicit political existence of their counterparts in the West Indies, maroons in Louisiana still maintained a desire to practice political ideology and participate in the political debate. Americans and Creoles in Louisiana possessed sufficient numerical superiority that they did not have to negotiate with the outlaw slaves. Although less politicized than maroon communities in the Caribbean, slaves hiding in the Louisiana swamps around New Orleans threatened the safety and viability of the white population nonetheless.<sup>118</sup> At their very core, maroons endangered the white establishment because they lay outside of its strict racial control. Declaring their bodies independent and organizing in communities allowed maroons to withdraw from the traditional white-black relationship that characterized southern society.<sup>119</sup>

Historians Stephanie Camp, David Cecelski and Thomas Buchanan discuss the role of geography in aiding runaway slaves, specifically those creating a maroon society, as they threatened to weaken the white power structure when they took control of their own actions.<sup>120</sup>

Stephanie Camp ascribed to the argument that Aptheke founded in terms of the important role

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<sup>117</sup> For a more detailed analysis at the ways in which maroon communities negotiated as political entities within a specific space, consult Thompson.

<sup>118</sup> The nature of maroon communities makes it nearly impossible for historians to estimate the population of these groups with existent sources. The numerous advertisements for runaway slaves appearing in Louisiana papers that mention maroon communities and nearby swamps indicated that these rebel communities weighed on whites' minds and challenged their authority. Alvin O. Thompson estimates many of the Caribbean maroon settlements to be in the 100s; they likely outnumbered the Louisiana communities in population. Thompson, 128-29.

<sup>119</sup> Thompson, 9.

<sup>120</sup> Thompson, 16.

passive resistance played throughout the antebellum South. She expands the terminology of resistance, giving the slaves credit for the world they carved out in the face of the strict plantation system and devoting a great deal of time to studying runaways. She argues that maroons wrested their bodies from the control of their masters and created an independent space, free from dominance. David Cecelski's examination of maritime North Carolina lends itself to the study of Louisiana because the geographies and climates. Additionally, the tradition of maroon communities, mirrors one another. Thomas Buchanan's study focuses more on the underground networks of information along the waterways of New Orleans than it does maroon communities. Studying the boat workers along the Mississippi River during the nineteenth century, Buchanan discovered an ingenious system for communication and trade among slaves living under incredible subjection. Difficult to observe from Claiborne's point of view because of the dense terrain they inhabited, maroon communities' very existence presented problems because they inspired potential participation in plots amongst Louisiana slaves along underground networks, made easier by the cover of Louisiana swamps.<sup>121</sup>

Maroons in Louisiana challenged Claiborne's ability to govern the territory and progress quickly toward statehood. With few soldiers at their disposal, local American officials often relied on impromptu patrols or militia excursions to weaken the maroon camps. Claiborne never possessed the strength and opportunity to concentrate his military to mount a formidable assault on the maroon camps and the bulk of his correspondence focuses on other matters, not generally addressing the maroons directly in his policies. The diverse challenges facing the governor

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<sup>121</sup> For unique new examinations of resistance through geography and the transference of information along underground networks, see Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); David Cecelski, *The Waterman's Song: Slavery and Freedom in Maritime North Carolina* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); and Thomas Buchanan, "The Slave Mississippi: African-American Steamboat Workers, Networks of Resistance, and the Commercial World of the Western Rivers 1811-1880" (Ph.D. Thesis, Carnegie-Mellon University, 1998).

prevented him from concentrating the military power he possessed against one point for too long. Richard Price, wrote a story that appeared in the New York *Evening Post* in “November 1827 [concerning] a Negro woman returned to her master in New Orleans after an absence of sixteen years. She told of a maroon settlement some eight miles north of the city containing about sixty people.”<sup>122</sup> Coincidentally the woman had been absent from her master since 1811, the year of the rebellion in St. John the Baptist Parish.

Whether or not Louisianan maroons possessed a clear understanding of the internal and external political tensions between Creoles and Americans or Louisianans and Spaniards remains difficult to ascertain. The outlaw communities benefited from conflict between the disjointed factions due to the resulting power vacuum and the many obstacles facing Claiborne early in his governorship.<sup>123</sup> His preoccupation with the Spanish in West Florida and Texas coupled with his efforts to address internal division between Americans and Creoles forced him to concentrate the bulk of his military elsewhere. While the maroons of Louisiana remained depoliticized, they continued to present a covert challenge to territorial safety and remained a nuisance for many years. Originally, the maroon communities threatened Louisianans but lacked the ideological threat necessary for an aggressive slave insurrection. But that spur arrived with the final wave of immigration of Haitian refugees in the summer of 1809.

Examining Louisiana in the context of the wider Caribbean world allows for better interpretation of the Creole tradition and the revolutionary ideology present in the territory that helped make Louisiana an American anomaly. The geography of Louisiana, consisting of vast

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<sup>122</sup> Price, 160.

<sup>123</sup> Governor Claiborne’s correspondence is littered with references to the disjointed factions and his desire to increase harmony within the territory between diverse groups. He devotes very little time and space to the treatment of maroon communities, however; runaway slave advertisements appearing in local newspapers denote that many Louisianans remained cognizant of the secret camps in the surrounding swamps.

water networks that enabled travel, commerce, and communication, coupled with the history of colonial rule, placed the territory in the historical context of the Caribbean.<sup>124</sup> A fledgling city on the southwestern frontier of the United States, New Orleans owed its status as a major port to favorable geography.<sup>125</sup> Foreign goods, ideology, and knowledge flowed through the gateway of New Orleans into the rest of the territory. For Claiborne, New Orleans's status as a major port served as both a blessing and a curse. He benefitted from the capital, labor, and innovative methods for agricultural production flowing into and out of the port while confronting the importation of radical, dangerous ideology.

Historically, Frenchmen moved back and forth between Louisiana and Saint Domingue. When the Haitian Revolution tore the island asunder, some refugees sought help from family members in Louisiana. Referring to the transfer of knowledge, revolutionary ideology, and people to Louisiana, Adam Rothman suggests that "events in the French Caribbean colony of Saint Domingue initiated a qualitative transformation in Louisiana's development."<sup>126</sup> Some refugees from the island brought with them a revolutionary ideology that provided the spark for rebellion in a territory that had slowly become an ideal breeding ground for racial violence over the course of its history.

Upon becoming governor, Claiborne initially fought emigration from Saint Domingue because he feared the possibly disharmonious result of allowing refugees of the Haitian Revolution into Louisiana without first examining their character. Four months after assuming office, he cautioned that the immigrants arriving from the West Indies "might interrupt the peace

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<sup>124</sup> Walter Turner, "The Spread of African Resistance From the Caribbean to North America" (master's thesis, Sonoma State College, 1978), 9.

<sup>125</sup> Pierre-Louis Berquin-Duvallon, *Travels in Louisiana and the Floridas, in the Year 1802* (New York: I. Riley & Co., 1806), 35-36.

<sup>126</sup> Adam Rothman, *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 75.



of our Society... [and that] some of these Emigrants are doubtless worthy men but I fear a majority of them will be useless, if not bad citizens.”<sup>127</sup> Claiborne diligently worked to encourage harmony between Americans and Creoles and the “re-creolization” threatened his initial gains. Despite Louisiana’s shared Creole heritage with Saint Domingue, Claiborne’s administration attempted to distance itself from the émigrés and their slaves. He wanted very much for the Americans to begin asserting themselves in Louisiana both demographically and politically. By becoming more evenly matched demographically, Americans could more easily manage the transition to their own system of governance from the old Creole Louisiana traditions. The *Moniteur de Louisiana*, edited by émigrés from the Haitian Revolution and printing articles directed toward the emigrants of Saint Domingue, fueled the detachment between French Creoles in the territory and the Americans in the territory.

Although some of the immigrants arrived as “unprincipled penniless men,” many brought resources, knowledge, and skilled labor.<sup>128</sup> Particularly influential, the French émigrés and their slaves arriving in Louisiana, carried with them better methods for sugar production. Prior to its revolution, Saint Domingue led the world in sugar production. Himself a refugee of the island, Pierre-Louis Berquin-Duvallon documented his travels through the Louisiana Territory observing the state of agriculture. He attributed the early success of the Louisiana sugar industry, a mere eight years old during his visit to “the calamities of St. Domingo, which raised the demand for sugar from Louisiana, and sent many of the planters and workmen of that unhappy island to seek a settlement on the Mississippi.”<sup>129</sup> Before long, Claiborne noted that

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<sup>127</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to James Madison, New Orleans, 14 April 1804, *OLB*, 2:95-96.

<sup>128</sup> Pierre Clément de Laussat, *Memoirs of My Life*, ed. Robert D. Bush (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 18.

<sup>129</sup> Berquin-Duvallon, 128.

many of the immigrants contributed to the “development of educational facilities, newspapers, and theatres; and distinguished themselves in government, law, literature, drama, and agriculture in the territory.”<sup>130</sup> While these contributions benefited the territory, the immigrants created social tensions that became manifest after the 1809 migration.

The greatest threat to Claiborne’s ability to maintain control and development in Louisiana surfaced in 1809. Spanish authorities in Cuba granted French exiles asylum following the Haitian Revolution beginning in 1791, but when Napoleon invaded Spain in 1808, placing his brother Joseph on the throne, Cuban Spaniards reacted bitterly, and understandably, by demanding that all French citizens leave Spanish Cuba.<sup>131</sup> The refugees had few options available to them when they found themselves exiled from Cuba, and many turned to Louisiana for help.<sup>132</sup> Eighteen months before the 1811 revolt, thousands of refugees who had first fled to Cuba to escape the Haitian Revolution, flowed into Louisiana and contributed the final missing piece for slave insurrection.

After 1803, Americans poured into Louisiana tipping the scales away from Creole domination in the territory. As the population balance shifted, Americans gained greater influence politically and socially. The increasing balance between Americans and Creoles helped Claiborne to introduce gradually American laws, social customs, and government policies. When the immigrants arrived from Cuba, however, they “re-creolize[d] a creole city that has been described as ‘perhaps the most seething ethnic melting pot that the nineteenth-

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<sup>130</sup> Rene R. Nicaud “The French Colonists from St. Domingue and, In Particular, Louis Moreau Lislet,” *New Orleans* 29 (Jan. 1990): 4.

<sup>131</sup> Nicaud, 4.

<sup>132</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to Robert Smith, New Orleans, 14 May 1809, *OLB*, 4:351-54.

century world could produce.”<sup>133</sup> In a private letter to President Jefferson, Claiborne expressed his concern over new challenges to Louisiana’s stability and prosperity, claiming “that the misfortunes of Spain and her Colonies will give to this *Territory* an encrease of population, which may retard the growth of the true American Principles.”<sup>134</sup> As a result, the American population in New Orleans and surrounding countryside failed to surpass the Creole population until the 1830s

With the major influx of people, both enslaved and free from Cuba in 1809 New Orleans experienced population growth unlike it had seen in its ninety year existence. Writing during the early phases of migration, Claiborne informed Secretary of State Robert Smith that he expected approximately 7,500 refugees. He proclaimed that “these unfortunate people are for the most part without resources, and must depend upon the Benevolence of this society for the means of present support.”<sup>135</sup> The refugees placed a strain on housing and resources in the territory as the population grew exponentially in a matter of months. While most Louisianans supported the decision to allow the refugees to stay, some citizens demanded that governmental officials halt further immigration from Cuba.<sup>136</sup>

Writing to William Savage, commercial agent for the United States in Jamaica, Claiborne suggested that the Cuban refugees find asylum elsewhere because of the burden they placed on Louisiana. He worried that those who had already arrived in Louisiana were “so numerous as to be embarrassing to our own Citizens,” and that “house Rent and Provisions are extravagantly

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<sup>133</sup> Keith Cartwright, “Re-Creolizing Swing: St. Domingue Refugees in the *Govi* of New Orleans,” *Reinterpreting the Haitian Revolution and its Cultural Aftershocks* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2006), 103.

<sup>134</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to Thomas Jefferson, New Orleans, 17 May 1809, *OLB*, 4:356-57.

<sup>135</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to Robert Smith, New Orleans, 14 May 1809, *OLB*, 4:352.

<sup>136</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to Robert Smith, New Orleans, 18 May 1809, *OLB*, 4:360-62.

high, families of limited resources find them soon exhausted, and the number of poor and distressed are daily augmenting.” Claiborne feared that the immigrants would soon dominate his attention and policy making, and thus render him unable to protect Louisiana from potential unrest including slave insurrections.<sup>137</sup>

Claiborne stressed that “motives of humanity induced [him] to receive the women and children,” and that Louisiana possessed, at that time, “a much greater proportion of [slaves] than comports with our interests.”<sup>138</sup> Two days later the governor wrote Smith concerning the refugees, particularly their slaves. He explained that “motives of humanity induced [him] to permit the Refugees from Cuba to land their slaves, but this indulgence [could not] be extended much farther.”<sup>139</sup> Claiborne, clearly unsettled over the shifting racial balance as the enslaved population and free people of color together began to outnumber the whites in Louisiana, hoped to limit the arrival of slaves.

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<sup>137</sup>W.C.C. Claiborne to William Savage, New Orleans, 10 November 1809, *OLB*, 5:4.

<sup>138</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>139</sup>W.C.C. Claiborne to Robert Smith, New Orleans, 12 November 1809, *OLB*, 5:1.

A report from the mayor's office in New Orleans illustrated the demographic effect from the 1809 wave of refugees from Saint Domingue via Cuba:

Age and Sex of Saint Domingue Refugees Immigrating from Cuba to New Orleans in 1809, by Racial Caste

	Men 15 years	+	Women 15 years + Children	Total	
Whites	1,373		703	655	2,731
FPC	428		1,377	1,297	3,102
Slaves	962		1,330	934	3,226
Total	2,763		3,410	2,886	9,059

Refugee Movement of 1809 Compared to the Population of Orleans Parish in 1806 and 1810, by Racial Caste

	Whites	FPC	Slaves	Total
Orleans Parish, 1806	6,311	2,312	8,378	17,001
Refugees, 1809	2,731	3,102	3,226	9,059
Orleans Parish, 1810	8,001	5,727	10,824	24,552

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Encompassing only a small period of immigration from Cuba, these numbers show the immediate impact that the incoming refugees had on New Orleans and the surrounding

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<sup>140</sup> Mayor's Report, New Orleans, 18 July 1809, *OLB*, 4:409 as cited in Paul F. Lachance, "The 1809 Immigration of Saint-Domingue Refugees To New Orleans: Reception, Integration, and Impact," in *The Louisiana Purchase and It's Aftermath, 1800-1830*, ed. Dolores Egger Labbe, (Lafayette, LA: Center for Louisiana Studies, 1998), 252-53.

countryside. Evenly split among the three factions, all three groups received a boost in their population, challenging the American authority within the territory.

While white immigrants arriving in Louisiana tested American authority in the territory, the slaves and free people of color arriving from Cuba threatened much more. Claiborne feared they carried the rhetoric of the Haitian Revolution, the desire to implement it in Louisiana, and that they would act on it if they saw the opportunity. Whites, slaves, and free blacks had coexisted in Louisiana for generations, but tensions had never resulted in widespread violence. Resident Louisianans worried that the newly-arrived free people of color and slaves possessed thoughts, instilled in them by the Haitian Revolution, of overthrowing their own masters if they saw an opportunity.

Claiborne diligently attempted to limit the importation of these elements from the Caribbean, informing Mayor Etienne de Boré of his plan to regulate the arrival of people in New Orleans “with the view of remedying the evils to be apprehended from the improper introduction of Slaves and other people of Colour from the Islands.” Claiborne wanted to determine whether or not the slaves and free blacks possessed any revolutionary proclivities and whether or not they had participated in the revolution on Saint Domingue. He wished to prohibit them from landing in Louisiana “until they obtained [his] permission to ascend the River.”<sup>141</sup> Claiborne directed Captain Nicoll, Commanding at Plaquemines to assume responsibility for examining those who wished to enter Louisiana, attempting to determine their suitability and the trustworthiness of their character.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to Mayor Bore, no date, *OLB*, 2:113.

<sup>142</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to Captain Nicoll, New Orleans, 25 July, *OLB*, 2: 262-63. Plaquemines served as an early military outpost near the mouth of the Mississippi River in Plaquemines Parish and should not be mistaken for present-day Plaquemines south of Baton Rouge.

The free people of color presented a sinister challenge for whites who desired to maintain racial control and stability. When free black immigrants arrived in Louisiana, they boosted the already-significant population in the territory. Their growing numbers did not increase social stability. Traditionally, free blacks occupied a higher status in Louisiana and Saint Domingue than in other areas of the American South. The free black population of New Orleans “possessed land and wealth in amounts and numbers well beyond the reach of any other black population in the United States.”<sup>143</sup> Making New Orleans unique, the influential free people of color created a separate social faction within the city and provided African Americans with unique access to certain benefits, including property ownership, freely intermingling with whites, and appearing openly in the streets of the city. Land and wealth provided free people of color with the opportunity to create a niche in society wherein they could test the boundaries of racial discrimination. While they remained free legally, whites attempted to limit that freedom because they feared the breakdown of racial control. Patricia Brady at the Historic New Orleans Collection suggests that “because of the French and the Spanish background, the free people of color [in New Orleans] had almost the same rights as whites.”<sup>144</sup>

Six years after the transfer of power into American hands, New Orleans’s francophone Creole and black population increased significantly following the immigration from Cuba.<sup>145</sup> From 1803-1811, the free African-American population nearly tripled in Louisiana, increasing from 1,335 to approximately 5,000, with 3,000 of the newly-arrived free blacks immigrating

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<sup>143</sup> Cartwright, 105.

<sup>144</sup> Historic New Orleans Collection, *Common Routes: St. Domingue—Louisiana: A Comprehensive Look at the History of St. Domingue (Haiti) and the impact of its Revolution on Louisiana* DVD. New Orleans: Dreamsight Productions, 2005.

<sup>145</sup> Cartwright, 104. Cartwright’s study shows the New Orleans population for the free people of color standing at 4,950 at the end of 1809.

between 1809 and 1810 alone.<sup>146</sup> The increasing free population threatened racial stability because it shifted the racial balance in the territory toward blacks. Finding themselves outnumbered and fearing for their safety, many inhabitants, both American and Creole worried that the free people of color cultivated a revolutionary ideology, seeking to challenge the racial boundaries as they had on Saint Domingue.<sup>147</sup>

In a letter to President Jefferson, Claiborne stated that “the number of free mulattoes [free people of color] is also considerable; on the change of Government, it is not impossible, but these people may be disposed to be riotous, and the organizing and arming the white Inhabitants,” into a more effective militia force.<sup>148</sup> Claiborne believed that by increasing the number of armed whites in the territory and maintaining the militia he could prevent potential social fissures from developing between free people of color and whites. The fear that free blacks might foment civic unrest created overwhelming challenges, but no solidified plans surfaced.

As free people of color poured into the Louisiana, the territorial legislature sought to enact firearms restrictions. The territorial legislature, perhaps rightfully, believed the Haitian Revolution resulted directly from the freedoms that the free people of color enjoyed in Saint Domingue. Members of the legislature began to push for the “banning of free men from carrying guns and the authorization of slaves to testify against free men, [thus the] differences in social

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<sup>146</sup> Mary Gehman, *The Free People of Color of New Orleans* (New Orleans: Margaret Media, 1994), 49-51.

<sup>147</sup> Many New Orleans residents feared free and enslaved blacks exhibited revolutionary ideals since immediately after the Haitian Revolution. Consult Ernest R. Liljergren, “Jacobinism in Spanish Louisiana, 1792-1797,” *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 22 (January 1939): 47-97 for an old but still well-respected analysis of this revolutionary ideology, ideology that renewed itself with the 1809 immigration. Additionally, the essay discusses radical French Creole discontent directed toward the Spanish authority while under its governance.

<sup>148</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to Thomas Jefferson, 29 September 1803, Clarence E. Carter, ed., *Territorial Papers of the United States: The Territory of Orleans, 1803-1812*. [hereafter *Territorial Papers*] (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1940), 9:58-59.



status between slaves and free men narrowed.”<sup>149</sup> Hoping to establish simultaneously a more concrete system of racial control while maintaining the distinct third social caste, white Louisianans walked a fine line between diminishing the gap dividing the free and servile black population and maintaining the barrier between the two groups in order to prevent full-blown alliances.

Despite their free status, free people of color still lacked certain liberties that whites around them possessed. In 1808 the New Orleans City Council learned that a free black man had been teaching fencing lessons to other men of color, and on its recommendation, the mayor prohibited the lessons from proceeding further. White Louisianans’ feared that “mullatoes have the insolence to challenge whites to a duel,” and feared the “very dangerous consequences” should the fencing lessons continue.<sup>150</sup> The thought of free people of color bearing arms frightened white Louisianans, and local laws generally prohibited freemen from carrying weapons under any conditions.

Free people of color in Louisiana could move much more freely than could slaves. Slaves occasionally left the plantation to fulfill their master’s lease to another planter or to complete other tasks, but they did so under strict guidelines. Requiring their slaves to carry passes that regulated their movements, planters and local authorities strictly enforced limitations on the hours that a slave could work off of the plantation. The fluid movement enjoyed by the free people of color particularly threatened whites because historical precedent forbade whites from legally regulating their movement. The possible knowledge passing among free blacks

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<sup>149</sup> Turner, 60.

<sup>150</sup> Rothman, 104.

along underground networks greatly frightened white Louisianans.<sup>151</sup> In New Orleans, between Dumaine and Saint Philip streets, near the French market, lay Café des Réfugiés, a European-style coffeehouse. Largely patronized by refugees from Saint Domingue, the cafe became a forum for the discussion and exchange of information among whites and free people of color, providing a space of interracial contact.<sup>152</sup>

Free black populations in cities throughout the American South preferred to separate themselves from the slaves. Ira Berlin suggests that free people of color understood the necessity of attaining acceptance by the slaveholding class. They desired to create schools, churches, and other institutions separate from the enslaved African-Americans around them, seeking to create an independent middling class.<sup>153</sup> As a result of new restrictive territorial legislation in Louisiana, however, many free people of color began to identify with the enslaved population along racial lines instead of splitting over the status of freed-enslaved. Claiborne, on the other hand, hoped to curb this trend. New Orleans's legacy of free people of color dictated that the governor permit the free people of color certain personal liberties including property ownership and looser civil restrictions. Louisianans, as a whole, used the free people of color as "a kind of buffer group in a struggle within a divided ruling class," for two reasons.<sup>154</sup> The distinct third social caste allowed whites, who remained divided amongst themselves, to ensure a degree of friction and tension between free people of color and slaves. Additionally, the whites hoped to maintain the buffer group because doing so made it more difficult for one white faction to gain

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<sup>151</sup> Thomas C. Buchanan, "The Slave Mississippi" (Ph.D. Thesis, Carnegie-Mellon University), 1998.

<sup>152</sup> William C. Davis mentions the Café des Réfugiés in his investigation of the Lafitte brothers' smuggling operations as a rough site that harbored significant clandestine activity. William C. Davis, *The Pirates Lafitte: The Treacherous World of the Corsairs of the Gulf* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Inc., 2005), 53.

<sup>153</sup> Berlin, 285-89,321-24.

<sup>154</sup> Laura Foner, "The Free People of Color in Louisiana and St. Domingue," *Journal of Social History* 3 (Summer 1970): 418.

allegiance from free blacks; essentially they sought to ensure the neutrality of the free people of color. Thus, whites strategically allowed the free people of color certain civil liberties to maintain the vital third social caste.

Even more than the whites and free people of color, slaves from Saint Domingue generated the greatest concern among white Louisianans. While white immigrants posed no direct threat for insurrection, they imported the ideology of the French Enlightenment. Additionally, whites brought slaves with them who undoubtedly desired their own freedom. To white Louisianans the slaves' experiences in Saint Domingue, where they witnessed other enslaved Africans revolt and slaughter their masters, made them more dangerous than native Louisiana slaves. These slaves either found themselves forced to emigrate from Saint Domingue by their masters or chose not to participate in the revolution itself at that time.

Claiborne tried to implement a system to limit strictly the importation of slaves with connections to Saint Domingue but his efforts ultimately failed. All incoming ships stopped at the Balize at Plaquemine below the river for inspection before proceeding to New Orleans.<sup>155</sup> Claiborne expressed his hope "to prevent the bringing in of Slaves that [had] been concerned in the insurrections of St. Domingo." The process was difficult to enforce, however, and soon the governor exclaimed that "many bad characters will be introduced. The citizens of Louisiana are greatly apprehensive of the West India Negroes but no effectual Stop can at present be put to their introduction."<sup>156</sup> Unfortunately for the governor, ship captains often circumvented the restrictions either by landing slaves below the Balize and sneaking them into New Orleans by

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<sup>155</sup> The Balize refers to the entry point where ships entering from the Gulf of Mexico stopped for inspection before proceeding to the port of New Orleans. Over time this simple checkpoint developed into a settlement, known during the nineteenth century as Pilottown, Louisiana.

<sup>156</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to James Madison, New Orleans, 12 July 1804, *OLB*, 2: 245-46.

land, passing the Balize under the cover of darkness, or answering questions customs questions falsely.<sup>157</sup>

Before long, it became clear that Claiborne's efforts to halt the importation of dangerous slaves were as effective as trying to hold back the river itself.<sup>158</sup> Dr. Watkins, Claiborne's confidential agent who travelled upriver to ascertain the views of Creoles in the area, recounted a story told to him by a planter. Twelve Africans, allegedly from Saint Domingue, ventured along the river threatening whites along their way. The slaves "spoke of eating human flesh, and in general, demonstrated great Savageness of Character, boasting of what they had been and done in the horrors of St. Domingo." They proved to be the exact element Claiborne hoped to prohibit from entering Louisiana.<sup>159</sup> Watkins failed to report the outcome of the episode and whether or not the local militia apprehended them, but the account did not bode well for local white inhabitants. Clearly the ingredients for white Louisianans' worst nightmare, a slave uprising, lay at their doorstep, and Claiborne seemed helpless to stop it.

Constitutionally, the importation of slaves became illegal in the United States after 1808. As a result, to allow foreign-born slaves into American territory would present Claiborne's administration with legal problems. The 1809 immigration pushed the limits of federal law when Spain exiled French slaves and their masters. While the émigrés did not bring their slaves with them for the explicit purpose of selling them to American slaveholders, the large-scale

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<sup>157</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to Colonel Freeman, New Orleans 17 July 1804, *OLB*, 2:254; Davis, 48. William C. Davis argues that the Baratarian pirates, headed by Jean Lafitte, benefited from increased illicit smuggling during the 1809 immigration. At the same time, Davis believes Lafitte turned to a more public and honorable form of business during the immigration as he focused increasingly on slave trading.

<sup>158</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to officer Commanding at Plaquemines, New Orleans, 16 May 1809, *OLB*, 4:355; W.C.C. Claiborne to Captain Many, New Orleans, 18 May 1809, *OLB*, 4:358; W.C.C. Claiborne to Captain Many, New Orleans, 22 May 1809, *OLB*, 4:366-67; W.C.C. Claiborne to Captain Many, New Orleans, 3 June 1809, *OLB*, 4:378.

<sup>159</sup> John Watkins to W.C.C. Claiborne, New Orleans, 2 February 1804, *OLB*, 2:5.

influx of slaves into American territory led to legal complications. Article 1, Section 9 of the United States Constitution declared: “The Migration or Importation of such Persons as any of the States now existing shall think proper to admit, shall not be prohibited by the Congress prior to the Year one thousand eight hundred and eight.”<sup>160</sup> Congress chose to prohibit the slave trade in 1808 but temporarily rescinded the decision for the relief of the refugees.<sup>161</sup> Considering the language of the Constitution, the slaves entering Louisiana in 1809 could have been legally prevented.

The planters arriving from Cuba brought their bondsmen and bondswomen with them, but they soon encountered local authorities who challenged their freedom to import their property. Following the major phases of immigration in June 1809, the “negroes, having been introduced in violation of law, were seized, but it was thought to be one of those hard cases when humanity required that the law should be permitted to sleep, or at least that it should not be strictly and rigorously enforced.”<sup>162</sup> The local population extended their efforts to allow slaves into Louisiana as they had done for the white émigrés and the free people of color.<sup>163</sup> Louisianans did not universally exhibit such goodwill, however, and some feared their graces would lead to regret; they may have been correct.<sup>164</sup>

Enslaved refugees unnerved white Louisianans, American and Creole. Many citizens, mostly Americans, urged Claiborne’s administration to prohibit the importation of slaves

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<sup>160</sup> United States Constitution, available at <http://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution/constitution.article1.html#section9>, accessed 10 March 2008.

<sup>161</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to Julian Poydras, New Orleans, 28 May 1809, *OLB*, 4:372; Robert Smith to W.C.C. Claiborne, Washington, D.C., no date, *Territorial Papers* 9:881-82.

<sup>162</sup> Charles Gayarré, *History of Louisiana* (New Orleans: F.F. Hansell & Bro., Ltd., 1903), 4: 214.

<sup>163</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to Robert Smith, New Orleans, 15 May 1809, *OLB*, 4:354; W.C.C. Claiborne to Julian Poydras, New Orleans, 23 July 1809, *Territorial Papers*, 9:843.

<sup>164</sup> Isaac Briggs to Thomas Jefferson, New Orleans, no date, *Territorial Papers*, 9:148.

entirely, but the humanitarian efforts and the need for labor in Louisiana outweighed whites' fears.<sup>165</sup> The knowledge and capital pouring into the vicinity of New Orleans helped to create a boom in sugar production.<sup>166</sup> Aided by the refugees, planters acquired the additional labor and skills necessary to establish the sugar empire that later dominated the Lower Mississippi River Valley.

Progressing toward statehood, Claiborne and Louisianans remained cognizant of the obstacles they faced. Initially they overcame the challenges before them, tempering their differences with patience and cooperation. When thousands fled the Haitian Revolution, arriving in Louisiana after a brief exodus in Cuba, the movement marked a massive transition. This overwhelming immigration pushed the social fissures beyond the breaking point and the territory finally erupted in insurrection in January 1811 as slaves attempted their own revolution, hoping to reproduce the outcome of the Haitian Revolution on American soil.

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<sup>165</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to Robert Smith, New Orleans, 29 July 1809, *OLB*, 4:392; W.C.C. Claiborne to Thomas Jefferson, New Orleans, no date, *Territorial Papers*, 9:340.

<sup>166</sup> Berquin-Duvallon, 40.

## CHAPTER 5

### “TO KILL WHITES”

Governor Claiborne tried desperately to stabilize Louisiana society by promoting harmony among divided social factions. Succeeding initially, Claiborne’s administration encountered too many challenges to its authority. In a territory already ripe for revolt when bought by the United States government, many catalysts began to act upon the territory, greatly affecting its inhabitants. The Haitian Revolution tore Saint Domingue asunder as blacks overwhelmed whites, pushing them from the island entirely. The immigrants fled to nearby Cuba but again found themselves exiled in 1809, relocating once again. On this occasion, many of the refugees ventured to Louisiana where they found both open arms and distrusting hearts and minds. The monumental influx of immigrants into the territory, which increased the population vastly, most notably among the blacks both enslaved and free, helped to produce the environment for revolution. The immigrants with their potentially dangerous ideology, remembrances of events in Saint Domingue, and the demographic instability they caused all effectively increased the likelihood for revolt in Louisiana.

Primary documents including Claiborne’s correspondence, the territorial papers, militia records, newspapers, and trial testimony all provide the necessary evidence to discuss the revolt. Although not entirely unbiased, the sources counter and complement one another, enabling me to produce a thorough account. The slaves’ viewpoint may never be fully understood. Because the 1811 insurrection failed as a revolution, the African American memory of the event likely succumbed to the same suppression that quelled the rebellion. Scholars of Louisiana’s past, and specifically of the 1811 rebellion, face distinct challenges that historians of the Haitian

Revolution do not encounter because the victors usually provide the bulk of the evidence for historical narratives.

The timing of the revolt resulted from the ability of the slaves to understand the changing seasons of the Louisiana sugar plantation complex. Louisiana slaves often received a break from heavy plantation work during the Christmas and New Years' period. Though the holidays provided some respite, this rest came on the heels of an excruciating sugar harvest during which the slaves worked through the night to ensure a successful crop. Because of periodic early frosts, Louisianans contended with shorter growing seasons than Caribbean sugar planters where the crop thrived. Louisiana planters necessarily waited until the last possible moment before beginning the annual harvest. As soon as the frost seemed imminent, the plantations exploded in activity as slaves cut and hauled the sugarcane out of the field for processing. The kettles, used for cooking the cane to extract the sugar, required constant attention and a great deal of skill. The sugar cooking often took place through the night as masters and slaves worked side by side to fuel the fires with wood, constantly skimming the kettles, to prepare the "white gold" for shipment.<sup>167</sup>

With the harvesting period over, masters typically granted their slaves limited freedom and rest while the planters enjoyed the holiday season by attending balls and other social galas in New Orleans. They constantly feared the slaves' ability to rise in open rebellion, but they lacked organized militant racial control. White Louisianans monitored slaves' movements closely, but lacked the organization to mobilize the systematic control that typified the antebellum period and entrenched fear in all slaves. In this way, the slaves led by Charles Deslondes exploited the gap

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<sup>167</sup> For more information on the sugar harvesting and making process, see Vernie Alton Moody, *Slavery on Louisiana Sugar Plantations* (New York: AMS Press, 1974); Richard Follett *Sugar Masters* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2005); and Glenn R. Conrad, *White Gold: A Brief History of the Louisiana Sugar Industry, 1795-1995* (Lafayette, LA: Center for Louisiana Studies, 1995).



in the whites' vigilance. They revolted at the time of year when white Louisianans let their guard down most, exposing their vulnerability.

Sometime during the night on Saturday, January 5, Deslondes met with his chosen lieutenants on the plantation of Colonel Manuel André. Owned by a nearby planter, the Widow Deslondes, the approximately 30-year-old slave worked for André to fulfill a loan contract between the two planters. His ability to move between the two plantations and his connections in the slave quarters of both presented him with the opportunity to cultivate a plan for a rebellion involving a broad range of potential rebels. The interrogation from the trial suggests that those attending the covert meeting with Deslondes on the André plantation included slaves named Charles, Harry, and Guam, and others unnamed.<sup>168</sup> To avoid exposure, Deslondes made only a small handful of trusted slaves privy to the details of his plans. Additionally, he and his co-conspirators snuck out during the night of January 7 to detain a slave suspected as a spy on the Elizabeth Trépagnier plantation, rendering him incapable of compromising the rebellion.<sup>169</sup>

With the plan for insurrection in place, runaway slaves inhabiting nearby maroon communities began to wage a campaign against the mail carriers along the German Coast to sever communication between New Orleans and Baton Rouge. In preparation for potential open conflict with Spain over territorial borders, Governor Claiborne had requested, with immediate urgency, a boost to the regular soldiers in his region.<sup>170</sup> General Wade Hampton arrived in New Orleans at the head of United States thirty Army regulars from Baton Rouge, only to receive

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<sup>168</sup> The records for the trial appear in Hahnville, Louisiana at the St. Charles Parish Court House. Additionally, a typed translation can be found at the Amistad Center at Tulane University and the New Orleans Police Headquarters at Broad and Tulane. *Louisiana St. Charles Parish, Original Acts* [hereafter *Original Acts*], Act 17, 13-14 January 1811; *Original Acts*, Act. 2 Book 1810-1811, 7-16. In these trial deliberations and testimonial, records indicate that Kenner and Henderson owned Harry while James Brown owned Guam.

<sup>169</sup> *Original Acts*, Act 20, 25 February. 1811, book 1810-1811.

<sup>170</sup> This conflict had festered since the Louisiana Purchase, challenging Claiborne's authority but inevitably led to his adequacy of available troops when the insurrection occurred.

startling news from Claiborne. The young official entreated Hampton to exhibit the “goodness to order an escort, for the Bearer who carries the Mail thro’ such part of the Territory, as you suppose may be infested by the Brigands.”<sup>171</sup> At this point, the governor failed to understand the imminent slave rebellion he soon had on his hands.

Just after sundown on January 8, 1811, as whites along the German Coast celebrated another fruitful harvest and the holiday season, the territory of Louisiana erupted in open slave insurrection. Approximately thirty-six miles upriver from New Orleans, near present-day Norco, on the plantation owned by Colonel Manuel André, slaves attacked their slave drivers and master. Charles Deslondes began the revolt with the plans he and his select group of “officers” had designed during the weeks preceding the rebellion.<sup>172</sup> Court cases suggest that Deslondes and his lieutenants planned the entire rebellion carefully, intending to eliminate the white authorities and assume control of the territory. The organization inherent in the insurrection countered directly a statement made by the *Louisiana Gazette* that “no mature plan had been arranged by the blacks, and the measures now adopted will ensure tranquility.”<sup>173</sup> On the contrary, evidence suggests that the complicated plot called for Deslondes to march toward New

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<sup>171</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to General Hampton, New Orleans, 7 January 1811, in *Official Letter Books of W.C.C. Claiborne, 1801-1816*, [Hereafter OLB] ed. Dunbar Rowland (Jackson, MS: Mississippi State Department of Archives and History, 1917), 5:94. Quotations taken from primary sources will be cited literally as they appear in published works or manuscript. This includes misspellings, italics, and sentence format.

<sup>172</sup> Historians have debated Deslondes’ origins, sometimes citing that he was a free man of color born in Saint Domingue who entered Louisiana during the 1809 immigration. In a project currently underway, yet unpublished, Gwendolyn Midlo Hall presents irrefutable evidence that Deslondes was a Louisiana-born slave.

<sup>173</sup> As part of the Works Progress Administration, many of the area militia records, including those of the 1811 slave rebellion were transcribed at Jefferson Barracks in New Orleans. Located in Hill Memorial Library at Louisiana State University, these militia records also include articles that appeared in local newspapers pertaining to the rebellion providing a useful collection of information relating to details of the insurrection. *W.P.A. Historical Military Data: Louisiana Militia, 1811-1814* [hereafter *Louisiana Militia*], 9.

Orleans while insurgents in the city attempted to overtake the arsenal.<sup>174</sup> Whether or not Deslonde planned the disturbances in New Orleans or even learned of them until later is difficult to determine given the evidence that exists.

During the initial assault Colonel André's son, Gilbert, fell victim to the rebellion. Reporting his experience to Claiborne, Gilbert's father described himself, remorsefully, as "one of the principal sufferers. An attempt was made to assassinate [André] by the stroke of an axe, and [his] poor son ha[d] been ferociously murdered by a hord of brigands."<sup>175</sup> The governor replied, sending his condolences to the colonel: "I sympathize with you, in the untimely and unfortunate death of your amiable Son. But our lamentations are useless. He is gone to a better and a happier world!"<sup>176</sup> The colonel, wounded, escaped to the west bank of the Mississippi River and sought assistance in forming an organized vigilante force consisting of local farmers and planters to put down the insurrection. After the 1795 Point Coupeé plot and the 1807 Aaron Burr conspiracy, local planters had stockpiled arms at the André plantation, a point the savvy Deslonde likely knew.<sup>177</sup> The stockpile of weapons on André's plantation probably resulted

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<sup>174</sup> In the National Archives, Albert Thrasher found references to disturbances in the city as reported by the occupants of St. Charles Fort on the defensive perimeter of New Orleans. Albert Thrasher, *On to New Orleans!: Louisiana's Historic 1811 Slave Revolt* (New Orleans: Cypress Press, 1996), 56-57.

<sup>175</sup> Manuel André to W.C.C. Claiborne, German Coast, 11 January 1811, in *The Territorial Papers of the United States* [hereafter *Territorial Papers*] ed. Clarence Edwin Carter (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1940), 9: 915-16.

<sup>176</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to Colonel André, New Orleans, 13 January 1811, *OLB*, 5:97.

<sup>177</sup> Former Vice President Aaron Burr allegedly plotted to form an independent state in southwestern United States and campaigned for support throughout Louisiana including meeting with foreign groups from Mexico in New Orleans. For an analysis of the conspiracy surrounding Burr see Buckner F. Melton, *Aaron Burr: Conspiracy to Treason* (New York: Wiley, 2001); Nancy Isenberg, *Fallen Founder: The Life of Aaron Burr* (New York: Viking, 2007). Much of Gwendolyn Midlo Hall's defining work *Africans in Colonial Louisiana* builds up to the 1795 Point Coupee Conspiracy whereby slaves on the Julien Poydras plantation plotted to rise up and abolish slavery. The slaves planned to begin a fire on the Poydras estate and slaughter his white neighbors when they arrived to assist in extinguishing the fire. Most assuredly, Hall claims these slaves were influenced by ideology inherent in the French Revolution and the Haitian Revolution. For a detailed analysis of the Conspiracy, consult Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 343-74.

from his service as the commanding officer for St. John the Baptist Parish. Unfortunately for Deslondes's followers, these weapons had been moved before January 1811, and his men and women found only a couple of muskets and sabers from the previously formidable André arsenal.<sup>178</sup> Lacking arms and ammunition, the rebel slaves gathered makeshift weapons, including agricultural tools, and marched downriver to gather support. As Jupiter, a Congolese slave from the André plantation, stated during his trial, they desired "to kill whites."<sup>179</sup> After the insurrection, Jupiter hid in the woods behind Jean Arnauld's farm until captured by officials on February 7. He had in his possession a gun, which he testified he "picked it up from one of the slaves killed during the encounter with the whites." After his testimony, the jury declared Jupiter a leader of the uprising and ordered "that he be hanged on the batture in front of Alesandre Labranche's farm," at 4 o'clock that afternoon.<sup>180</sup>

According to all contemporary accounts, the slaves marched downriver with calculation and organization. Most narratives written by previous scholars, both biased and unbiased, have noted the well-thought militaristic order prevalent in the slaves' movements. Deslondes and his lieutenants acquired horses from the André plantation and rode at the head of the rebel column, encouraging their followers onward.<sup>181</sup> The army soon reached the Deslondes plantation, Charles's home, along the Mississippi River in present-day LaPlace.<sup>182</sup> Pressing on to the plantation owned by Achille Trouard, they encountered Matherin, Trouard's slave, who rallied

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<sup>178</sup> It is difficult to ascertain reliably the gender makeup of the force that revolted initially on the André plantation but by all accounts both men and women did partake in the rebellion. Court records show that fifteen slaves were absent from the André plantation following the rebellion.

<sup>179</sup> *Original Acts*, Act 17, 20 Feb. 1811, book 1810-1811.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>181</sup> The Trial records give various instances as proof that the leaders of the rebellion rode on horseback. *Original Acts*, p. 12.

<sup>182</sup> *Louisiana Moniteur*, January 17, 1811.

his fellow bondsmen to join the rebellion and “fought with a saber in hand.”<sup>183</sup> His master fled with his two nieces into the surrounding cane fields, hiding until January 12.<sup>184</sup>

Gaining strength at every plantation it passed, the army continued to move pleading with and forcing slaves to join their ranks. Ten miles from the André plantation, they marched across the plantations of Jean Trépagnier and Francois Delhomme near present-day Montz. At the Trépagnier plantation they solicited the aid of Big Baptist, a slave leader on the plantation, to garner additional support for the rebellious army. Also, Hypolite, another slave, grabbed his master’s horse and fell in line alongside Deslondes at the head of the column marching against New Orleans. Arriving at the plantation owned by François Trépagnier, they captured and executed François.<sup>185</sup> An old Creole folktale details the death of Trépagnier, whereby his “loyal” slave, Gustave, rushed into his master’s personal chamber and “threw himself upon the man he hated, and others poured in after him. The story is that the body was hacked into many pieces and tossed into the river,” while his wife and children escaped to the nearby brush, hiding from the slave army.<sup>186</sup>

Reportedly, support for the uprising strengthened at each plantation along the German Coast. Additional participants joined the ranks at the plantations of Labranch, Bernoudi,

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<sup>183</sup> Court deposition indicated that seven slaves perished or went missing during the conclusion of the rebellion. *Original Acts*, Act 2, book 1810-1811. Achille Trouard held the distinction of being the judge in St. John the Baptist Parish. Henry Hopkins to W.C.C. Claiborne, New Orleans, 28 October 1809, in *The Territorial Papers of the United States* [hereafter *Territorial Papers*] ed. Clarence Edwin Carter (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1940), 9: 835.

<sup>184</sup> *Louisiana Moniteur*, January 19, 1811.

<sup>185</sup> John S. Kendall, “Shadow Over the City,” *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 22 (January 1939), 5; Charles Gayarré, *History of Louisiana* (New Orleans: F.F. Hansell & Bro., Ltd., 1903), 4: 266-67. Kendall and Gayarré both inaccurately maintain that Trépagnier escaped the clutches of the rebels but evidence, including folk tradition disagrees with their narrative.

<sup>186</sup> Harnett T. Kane, *Plantation Parade* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1945), 129. Additionally, according to the legend, Gustave, allegedly well treated by his master, Trépagnier, stole away in the middle of the night, only to return to murder his master during the rebellion.

Charbonnet, Butler, McCutcheon, Livaudais, and Arnould before marching on to the Destrehan plantation.<sup>187</sup> The slaves of the Destrehan Plantation willingly joined the rebellion, including Big Hyacinth, a slave who rode horseback. During their march, the rebel army razed a select number of plantation houses. The burned houses may have resulted from the actions of specific slaves on those plantations who chose to burn their masters' dwellings before joining the ranks of the rebellious army. Numbering approximately five hundred, the rebels arrived on the Jacques Fortier plantation, twenty-five miles from their starting point.<sup>188</sup> Here they planned to rest and fortify their spirits after the long, arduous trek downriver. The next day, they hoped to march to New Orleans.

Meanwhile, Colonel André's vigilante force had begun pursuit of the rebels. Reporting his actions during the revolt to Claiborne, André wrote that he had "been able to collect a detachment of about eighty men, and although wounded, [had] taken the command of [his] brave fellow planters."<sup>189</sup> His outnumbered but determined and better armed force crossed the river to the east bank, hoping to make contact with the rebels. André's company met the rebels who appeared "colors displayed and full of arrogance," near the Bernoudi plantation and the vigilante force "rushed upon [the slaves], of whom [they] made considerable slaughter."<sup>190</sup> Unable to cut the slaves off from the nearby woods, the white force allowed the servile army to "take to the woods, and the chiefs principally being on horseback, [had] made their escape with greater

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<sup>187</sup> Richard Butler and Samuel McCutcheon owned a large plantation, known today as Ormond Planation. At the time of the revolt, the Destrehan Plantation and its owner, Jean Noel Destrehan, held the distinction of being the largest plantation in the area and Destrehan himself one of the most important citizens of Territorial Louisiana.

<sup>188</sup> The Fortier plantation eventually gave way to the old downtown section of Kenner.

<sup>189</sup> Manuel André to W.C.C. Claiborne, German Coast, 11 January 1811, *Territorial Papers*, 9: 916.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 916.

facility.”<sup>191</sup> Understanding his position as a civilian, André informed Claiborne that “a detachment of regular troops would be very useful for the tranquility of our coast, because I am obliged to order many detachments of militia to meet and destroy the remaining of those brigands.” He further stated his belief that by capturing the chiefs, whom he knew, the rebellion would end quickly.<sup>192</sup>

As the rebel army marched onward, some slaves, whom Albert Thrasher mockingly refers to as “so-called ‘loyal slaves,’ namely some of the most malicious drivers and several house slaves,” alerted their masters of the plans and events occurring upriver.<sup>193</sup> Their warnings allowed many planters to evacuate before the danger reached them, helping white casualties to remain minimal. If not for the well-timed knowledge that a rebellion had taken place, German Coast inhabitants would have suffered on a scale that exceeded the Virginians’ during Nat Turner’s 1831 rebellion, the most deadly slave revolt in United States’ history.

Most slave owners fled toward Destrehan Plantation in an effort to lead an evacuation of the German Coast to New Orleans. Most assuredly, the planters experienced chaos and panic, but Albert Thrasher’s exaggerated description of the evacuation states “they were in a state of shock, bewilderment, complete desperation. All of their pompous, airs, “‘civilized behavior,’” and confidence that they bantered about and flung in the face of the slaves, now had completely evaporated.”<sup>194</sup> An article written by a New Orleans resident to the *New York Evening Post* declared that “the women and children flocked to the town for refuge, and every face wore the

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Thrasher, 55; Depositions made by families reported that several white families received word of the rebellion from slaves who refused to join the insurrection. *Original Acts*, Act 18, 20 February 1811.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 56.

marks of consternation.”<sup>195</sup> Their world under attack, the planters sent their women and children ahead to the city. Leaving their plantations to the approaching army, slaveowners hauled their weapons with them, denying the rebels additional firepower. Additionally, the information-starved residents and administrators received valuable details about events taking place upriver. With few exceptions, whites successfully fled the path of the insurrection, gaining asylum inside the walls of New Orleans.<sup>196</sup>

As news of the insurrection trickled inside the defensive fortifications of New Orleans, an alarmed Claiborne worked to mobilize his forces against the approaching slaves. Watching the planters’ families flood the city, a visitor to New Orleans wrote that “the women and children came pouring into the city from the upper suburbs, bringing the most terrible accounts.”<sup>197</sup> On January 9, the governor proclaimed that “the whole militia of the city and suburbs of New Orleans, are ordered into immediate service,” detailing each individual militia units’ orders.<sup>198</sup> The governor appointed Colonel F. Dutillet, Major M. Fortier, Captain G.W. Morgan, Messrs. Thomas Urquhart, John Clay, Lewis Serre, and Anthony Lamarlere as aides-de-camps to the commander-in-chief.<sup>199</sup> Claiborne assigned Major Bullingney to take over as Commandant of the Patrols in the area.<sup>200</sup> Claiborne and his administration expressed a strong desire for any information Bullingney could gather and ordered him to keep regular patrols throughout the

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<sup>195</sup> *New York Evening Post*, February, 20, 1811.

<sup>196</sup> At the time of the rebellion, New Orleans essentially consisted of the present-day French Quarter, bordered on three sides by Canal Street, Esplanade Avenue and Rampart Street, so-named for its initial purpose as the ramparts defending the old city.

<sup>197</sup> *New York Evening Post*, February 19, 1811.

<sup>198</sup> *Louisiana Militia*, 5-6.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>200</sup> *New York Evening Post*, February 19, 1811.



night.<sup>201</sup> Additionally, the governor declared optimistically that New Orleans remained in “perfect safety.”<sup>202</sup> On the same day, from his office at the Headquarters Government House, Claiborne ordered the immediate closure of all cabarets in the city and suburbs. He also forbade any black males from passing through the streets of New Orleans after 6 PM.<sup>203</sup>

Matching the atmosphere in and around New Orleans as news of the revolt spread to the city, Claiborne’s initial correspondence appeared decidedly confused. Louisianans’ historical ties to Saint Domingue foreshadowed the result of the rebellion should they fail to halt its advance toward the city. Inhabitants who had migrated to Louisiana following the Haitian Revolution and family members who had heard the tales of the chaos on the island understood the enormity of their situation. Gathering facts as the insurrection unfolded, Claiborne became increasingly focused.

Soon, Claiborne notified Secretary of State Robert Smith that his fears of a slave insurrection had finally become reality. The governor exclaimed that slaves along the German Coast had risen, reporting their numbers, he declared, varied from 180 to 500 participants. But he assured the secretary of state that “the most prompt and effectual measures, have been taken for the protection of the persons and property of the Citizens.”<sup>204</sup> Seeking a quick end to the rebellion, on the morning of the January 9, Claiborne ordered a detachment of United States troops and two companies of volunteer militia to march out of New Orleans to meet the rebels. Claiborne also raised the entire militia within New Orleans to combat potential insurgency

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<sup>201</sup> W.C. C. Claiborne to Major Billingney, 9 January 1811, *OLB*, 5:95.

<sup>202</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to Several Colonels of Regiments and several Parish Judges on the Coast, New Orleans, 10 January 1811, *OLB*, 5:96.

<sup>203</sup> *Louisiana Gazette*, 10 January 1811.

<sup>204</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to Robert Smith, New Orleans, 9 January 1811, *OLB*, 5:95.

within city limits, thus allaying the fears of its citizens.<sup>205</sup> He understood his responsibility to prevent the vital city from falling to the rebels. The entire central government for the territory lay within its boundaries, meaning New Orleans's ability to stave off the insurrection affected Louisiana as a whole. Should the city succumb to the rebels, the territory would likely fall under rebel control for a time as President Monroe scrambled all of his available militia and United States Army regulars and rushed them to Louisiana. Claiborne and General Wade Hampton steeled their determination, vowing to prevent that fate from overcoming the young American territory.

Claiborne directed his complete attention to the advancing African army. After commanding Bullingney to begin patrols along the German Coast, Claiborne ordered Hampton "to order, a Guard to the Bayou Bridge, with instructions to the Officer to permit no Negroes to pass or repass the same."<sup>206</sup> He wished to create chokepoints to check the advance of the rebels, preparing for an eventual counterattack.<sup>207</sup> In turn, the general ordered "down a Company of Lt Artillery & one of Dragoons to Descend from Baton Rouge & to touch at Every Settlement of Consequence," to assert American authority over the rebel slaves in the area. Without adequate evidence, Hampton laid the blame for the rebellion on the Spanish when he notified Claiborne that "the plan is unquestionably of Spanish Origin."<sup>208</sup> While local authorities, particularly Claiborne feared Spanish intentions since taking over Louisiana, and while concerns about Spanish plans led to increased instability in the territory, the 1811 insurrection almost certainly happened on its own accord, without European influences.

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<sup>205</sup> *Louisiana Gazette*, 10 January 1811.

<sup>206</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to Wade Hampton, New Orleans, 9 January 1811, *OLB*, 5:93.

<sup>207</sup> Bayou Bridge crossed Bayou Metarie creating the main route used to enter New Orleans from the German Coast.

<sup>208</sup> *Territorial Papers*, 9: 917.

Communicating through the *Louisiana Gazette* on January 10, Claiborne announced the halt of the rebellion at the Fortier plantation after “several of our fellow citizens have been massacred, some dwelling houses burnt and others pillaged,” although evidence suggests that only two whites succumbed to the rebel army. Further, he expressed his hope that the “inhabitants of New Orleans and its vicinity, will continue their vigilance, regular patrol service, by day and by night will be ordered and must be performed; it is considered essential to our safety.”<sup>209</sup> While the rebellion appeared to be quashed, Claiborne continued to take every possible precaution for the safety of property and citizens, extending the patrols longer.<sup>210</sup>

In a public letter written late on January 10 and appearing in the *Louisiana Gazette* on the same day, Claiborne warned his fellow Louisianans that “the persons and property of our fellow citizens are still menaced,”<sup>211</sup> To the secretary of state, Claiborne exclaimed proudly the suppression of the rebellion, informing Smith that “the insurgents were attacked on [January 10] by a part of armed Citizens, under the Command of Col: Andre; several were killed, and 18 or 20 taken.”<sup>212</sup> Understanding his tenuous position in Louisiana, Claiborne took a very gracious and congratulatory line following the suppression of the revolt. Writing congratulations to his militia leaders, Major St. Amand and Colonel André, the governor expressed his “sincere satisfaction to learn that the late atrocious Insurrection [had] been so early put down, nor can I too highly applaud the bravery activity and firmness of my fellow Citizens.”<sup>213</sup> Further, Claiborne argued that the rebellion had legitimized his long-time desire to better organize the local militia. Hoping

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<sup>209</sup> *Louisiana Militia*, 7.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11.

<sup>211</sup> *Louisiana Gazette*, January 10, 1811; *Louisiana Militia*, 8.

<sup>212</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to Robert Smith, New Orleans, 11 January 1811, *OLB*, 5:96.

<sup>213</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to Major St. Amand and Colonel Andry, New Orleans, 14 January 1811, *OLB*, 5:99.

to resolve the matter, Claiborne suggested that the territorial legislature, scheduled to meet in early January until the slave uprising interrupted its plans, vow not to adjourn until they addressed his demands for a stronger militia.<sup>214</sup>

The insurrection seemingly halted, Claiborne began scaling back the on-duty militia and phasing Dubourg's free black militia detachment out of service, but continued to keep vigilant patrols on night watch with other active units. Thanking him and his command for "their patriotism and bravery, accompanied with my best thanks for the Services they have rendered the Territory," Claiborne declared Dubourg's detachment no longer necessary.<sup>215</sup> Claiborne followed up his letter to Dubourg with his full report to the secretary of state. He declared the rebellion "quelled; and nearly the whole of the Insurgents either killed or taken," and praised General Hampton for "the prompt and judicious movement [that] contributed very much to the public safety."<sup>216</sup> Claiborne also credited the militia for making "an impression upon the Blacks that will not (I suspect) for a length of time be effaced."<sup>217</sup> As Louisiana continued to progress toward statehood, Claiborne hoped to assuage the fears of Louisianans and those in Washington, D.C., proving that he maintained control over his post and possessed the resources to suppress insurrection without external assistance. Claiborne's hope for a seamless transition toward statehood might explain, in part, the lack of reliable information. While the governor certainly did not campaign to eradicate sources that would slander his handling of the rebellion, he could have tempered his correspondence to minimize the perception that he required federal assistance to govern his territory.

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 5:99.

<sup>215</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to Mr. Dubourg, New Orleans, 14 January 1811, *OLB*, 5:99.

<sup>216</sup> W.C.C. Claiborne to Robert Smith, New Orleans, 14 January 1811, *OLB*, 5:100.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 5:100.

The Louisiana *Gazette* printed an article on Friday January 11, 1811, identifying the leader of the rebellion. Giving a fleeting account of the insurrection itself, the story continued: “several of [the fugitive slaves] soon after returned and surrendered amongst which is Charles, a yellow fellow, the property of Mr. Andre, who was the leader of the miscreants.”<sup>218</sup> Here, the public learned the identity of the mastermind behind the rebellion for the first time, but historians continue to debate the heritage and true origins of Charles Deslondes.

Nearly a week later, stories continued to appear in local newspapers, assuring the citizens of their safety and declaring the “brigands” and “banditti” suppressed. The *Gazette* informed its readers that soldiers and militiamen continued to kill and capture the escaped fugitives, “ten or twelve of whom were brought to town [January 12]; and in a few days the planters can, with safety, return to their farms.”<sup>219</sup> General Hampton publicly announced the “chiefs of the party” taken in hopes of allaying Louisianans’ fears of any further discontent or reorganization amongst the servile population.<sup>220</sup> The Louisiana *Gazette* released its calculations for the number of slave casualties, stating “Thursday last of the negroes killed and missing, from Mr. Fortier’s to Mr. Andry’s and is as follows,” sixty-six killed and executed, seventeen missing, and sixteen “sent to New Orleans for trial.” Estimating the slaves’ casualties at ninety-nine, the *Gazette* failed to take into account “those reported missing [who] are generally to be dead in the woods, as many bodies have been seen by the patrols.”<sup>221</sup> Only after the planters returned to the German Coast to begin reassembling their plantations and counting their misfortunes, did a full inspection of the loss in chattel property occur.

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<sup>218</sup> *Louisiana Militia*, page 9.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>220</sup> *Louisiana Militia*, 14.

<sup>221</sup> *Louisiana Gazette*, January 21, 1811.

The largest slave revolt in United States history ended after only two white casualties but the ramifications proved notable. How did nearly 500 slaves revolt unexpectedly against their masters only succeed in killing two white men? There are several reasons. An ironic paradox developed when Claiborne's militia proved its usefulness and resourcefulness in suppressing the attempted revolution although the uncertainty surrounding its maintenance early in Claiborne's tenure contributed to the likelihood for revolt in the first place. From the outset, Claiborne strove to balance the divided factions in the territory, in part, via the militia. Vowing to create an adequate militia system at the behest of Jefferson's national defense policy, the governor worked diligently. The very challenge to Claiborne's administration of disharmony, steeled his determination enough so that he advocated the change necessary to implement a useful territorial militia.

Another reason for the slaves' failure lay in their lack of firepower and the predictability of their movement. Although their plan called for a complex overtaking of the central structure that governed the territory, the rebel army lacked adequate arms and ammunition. Once they failed to get their hands on the weapons cache at the André plantation, they faced insurmountable odds. As if their failure to acquire firearms were not enough, the slaves faced challenges from the geography of Louisiana. General Hampton, himself referred to "roads half leg deep in Mud," which the slave army slogged through doggedly on their march downriver, slowing their advance.<sup>222</sup> The German Coast, a sliver of land along the Mississippi River, challenged the advancing army as well. Early in the settlement stages, as planters ventured into the wilderness surrounding New Orleans and Baton Rouge, they encountered vast swamps of cypress trees that they had to clear to begin their plantations. Planters settled along the river and began clearing the trees and draining the swamps away from the river. This, in effect, created a funnel through

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<sup>222</sup> *Territorial Papers*, 9:918.

which the rebellion flowed toward New Orleans. Nat Turner's rebellion, the deadliest in American history, enjoyed advantages from a white enemy that could not guess easily their movements. In contrast, Deslondes' followers essentially had to march along the river from plantation to plantation allowing, Claiborne and Hampton to create chokepoints to check the advance of the approaching army.

When the slaves failed to acquire the weapons they needed, the rebellion faced an uphill battle. Lacking both the unpredictability to surprise white inhabitants and the firepower to overcome such a handicap, Deslondes and his followers fell short of their goal. But if they failed to eliminate white authority in Louisiana, they still shook Louisianans to the core, frightening planters with a threat that lasted for many years. Despite the measures taken by Claiborne's administration and future leaders to tighten racial control, including increased patrols and a more vigilant militia, Louisianans never again felt complacent in their own safety. Deslondes's rebellion failed ultimately but it served as an example for later Louisiana slaves who sought to resist their masters' wills. The insurrection also served as an example for African American Louisianans for many years. Despite the gap in the official historical record as left by whites, "the old Negroes still relate[d] the story of the slave insurrection of 1811 as they heard it from their grandfathers, as late as 1923."<sup>223</sup> Although the slaves failed in the rebellion and the revolt has failed to break into the history books in a thorough and objective manner thus far, the insurrection had a long-standing effect.

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<sup>223</sup> Lubin F. Laurent, "A History of St. John the Baptist Parish," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 7 (1924), 324-25.

## CONCLUSION

The 1811 insurrection resulted from overwhelming social tensions and newly-arrived ideology that presented slaves with the tools and opportunity to strike against their masters. Whether or not the slaves understood fully the social tensions that complicated whites' ability to implement strict and consistent racial control over them would be difficult to ascertain, but they benefitted from the uneasy environment nonetheless. Governor William Charles Cole Claiborne worked deftly to create a harmonious unified society from divided populations that preferred to live under French or Spanish rule. An ethnic schism greeted Claiborne, the first American governor, when he assumed control of the Louisiana territory challenging his authority as rival factions jostled for their own respect and position in Louisianan society. Old customs, including a bi-racial militia forced the governor to maneuver carefully to promote American ideals while respecting the traditions of the long-standing European powers. The same militia, split along racial and ethnic lines, that so challenged Claiborne's diplomatic abilities, saved the territory from potential disaster when the slaves revolted above New Orleans. His attention, diligence, and determination in maintaining the militia provided the governor with a force that defended the territory from its intended target, slave insurrection. Essentially, while the confusion surrounding the militia often contributed to the social tension, the attention directed by territorial officials toward the militia led to the successful suppression of the rebellion.

The final straw that tipped Louisiana toward open slave revolt, the largest in North American history, arrived with the refugees of 1809. Exiled from Cuba after seeking asylum there after the Haitian Revolution, majority Creole whites, slaves, and free people of color contributed to the insurrection both directly and indirectly. Just as Claiborne began creating unity among divided peoples, the additional Creoles from Cuba steeled the position of old



French Louisianans. They reopened the ethnic schism and their numbers weighed heavily on the limited resources of the territory. The exponential population growth over the course of a few weeks presented Charles Deslondes and his followers with the opportunity to rebel while white Louisianans distracted themselves by working to assimilate the vast newly-arrived population. The coincidental timing between the arrival of thousands of refugees who had experienced first-hand slave rebellion that resulted from French revolutionary ideology and the outbreak of rebellion in Louisiana a mere eighteen months after their arrival proves significant. Although Louisiana had always proven to be a potential breeding ground for slave revolt, the major insurrection did not occur until the revolutionary ideology arrived. Essentially the 1811 rebellion in Louisiana continued the trans-national phenomenon of the Age of Revolutions. In 1789 slaves on Saint Domingue observed the French Revolution in continental Europe, later punishing their masters for the hypocrisy of their actions in 1791 with their own revolution. In turn, Louisiana slaves implemented their own interpretation of the previous revolutions by capitalizing on the tense situation that Governor Claiborne and the American authority occupied in the young territory.

Inevitably, the revolution failed but remained the largest slave revolt in North American history throughout the course of slavery. An attempted revolution, the 1811 insurrection proves vital to the understanding of slavery in Louisiana and the United States as a whole. Historically, Louisiana held the distinction as one of the most anomalous states in the union. Its rich unique history that provided an ideal setting for revolt certainly affected its future as the rich sugar empire developed in the Lower Mississippi Valley. Many questions remain unanswered and unexplored avenues for a better understanding still exist. Historians need to understand how the pall cast over south Louisiana by the revolt affected planters as they moved forward into the

antebellum period. Additionally a sense of why the rebellion continues to remain outside the mainstream historiography of American slave revolts and whether or not it holds a more prominent place in the oral or folk tradition of the white and/or black community of Louisiana is necessary. Once historians push the historiography further and more completeness is reached, maybe then Charles Deslondes and his fellow bondsmen and bondswomen will take their place in the historical record.

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## VITA

Born in October 1983 in Harlan, Iowa, Mr. Buman attended Harlan Community Schools there until 2002. In 2006 he received his Bachelor of Arts degree in history from Iowa State University.