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“Mes dernières volontés”: *Testaments to the Life of Marie Couvent, a Former Slave in New Orleans*

Elizabeth C. Neidenbach

- ¹ In her last will and testament, recorded on November 12, 1832, Marie Justine Cirnaire, *Veuve Couvent* left specific instructions about how her estate should be divided. After three decades in New Orleans this free woman of color had accumulated a sizeable amount of property, including slaves and land. With her will Couvent claimed a lasting legacy as a patron of African American education when she declared that a school be established on her property. That this French-speaking former slave could not sign her own name makes such an act remarkable. In fact, Couvent made two wills in New Orleans, the first dated twenty years earlier on October 26, 1812. Through a close reading of Couvent’s wills, this article will explore the life of a woman who was born in Africa, enslaved in Saint-Domingue, and died a free and wealthy slave owner in New Orleans.
- ² As catalogs of material accumulation, acts of autobiography, and maps of social networks, these legal documents suggest the ways Couvent and other former slaves created identities as free people through property ownership and personal relationships. The differences between Couvent’s two wills are significant, revealing traces of her experiences from a slave in Saint-Domingue to a free woman in Louisiana. These discrepancies also reflect broader transformations in New Orleans. Placing the wills in their historical context not only allows me to fill the gaps in her life story, but reveals a complicated picture of how free people of color sustained their community as the center of slavery shifted into the Deep South. Together, Marie Couvent’s wills provide a rare glimpse into a life, in and out of slavery, that otherwise would have remained obscure.
- ³ Although retained within New Orleans public memory, little scholarly attention has been paid to Couvent. Often brief references to her appear in broader works on the city’s free people of color in the context of the school created through her bequest.¹ One of the most commonly cited sources remains Rodolphe Desdunes’ *Nos Hommes et Notre Histoire*, in

which he praises Couvent's philanthropy. Discussing the importance of her vision for a school, Desdunes found it "a grave error on the part of her contemporaries to have neglected transmitting to us the precise details in the life story of this generous person" (105). If her peers failed to compose a comprehensive biography of this "black African woman [who] was perhaps a slave in her youth," Couvent left her own paper trail in public documents (Desdunes, 1973, 101). Various notary ledgers detail exchanges of property by Couvent, including the same two pieces of land and ten different slaves that she listed in both wills.

- 4 Such accumulation of property justified the creation of a testament—the legal instrument designed to dispose of an individual's property after death (Upton and Jennings, 1838, 238-39; hereafter, *Civil Code*). Couvent was not alone among free people of color in creating more than one testament in a lifetime. What makes her two testaments extraordinary, in part, are the noticeable differences between the documents. Variances in the personal information and people named as well as the addition of a philanthropic bequest reveal changes over Couvent's lifetime.
- 5 Unlike property transactions, testaments contain personal details about the subject's birthplace, family, and social relationships. More importantly, wills, even when recorded by a notary, are in the testators' own words. Since Couvent could not write, her wills are the closest thing we have to personal papers such as letters or diaries. Following the standard structure of notarial testaments, each will begins with Couvent's name, age, birthplace, marital status, and the names of her children. Formally, these "vital statistics" establish the identity of the testator and delineate any lawful heirs. For the historian, this information is critical to reconstruct a past life. But for Marie Couvent, these personal details recited to the notary and preserved in his records can be considered her autobiography.
- 6 Testaments also reveal a network of family members, friends, business associates, and other social relationships forged in the testator's lifetime. Among the most important contacts named in any will are the beneficiaries who receive bequeathed property and executors who manage the testator's estate (*Civil Code*, 131, 253). Each of Marie Couvent's testaments includes an executor and several beneficiaries. Perhaps the most striking difference between the two documents is the distinct set of individuals named for these roles. Some of the adjustments relate to events beyond her control such as the death of an associate. Yet, viewed as a whole, the alterations made to Couvent's will indicate changes to the social networks that she found most important in her daily life.
- 7 Couvent dictated her first will to notary Narcisse Broutin on October 26, 1812 while sick in bed. She began by identifying herself: "My name is Marie Justine Sirnir dite Esther" (Acts of Broutin, 1812, 27, 199; hereafter, *Testament*, 1812).² It is unclear exactly how she came to use either name, although it can be surmised that one was her slave name and the other a name she received at baptism or chose for herself. Because enslaved Africans were renamed by their masters, the opportunity to provide a name in an official capacity, such as a testament, could be an empowering experience for formerly enslaved individuals.³ That Couvent gave multiple names, however, was not unusual. In both Louisiana and Saint-Domingue, many people, including slaves, had a "dit/e name" or nickname. Perhaps to commemorate her free identity, Couvent took a second name similar to the use of dit/e names in French colonial Louisiana, which Shannon Dawdy argues "could be a significant means of self-fashioning" (Dawdy, 2008, 165). Over time it seems that she stopped using the name "Esther" in official documents. When she

identified herself to Louis T. Caire, the notary who recorded her will in 1832, she referred to herself only as "Marie Justine Cirnaire" (Acts of Caire, 1832, 23A:1048; hereafter, *Testament*, 1832). The origin of the surname "Sirnir/Cirnaire" is still a mystery. Other than to refer to herself, she does not mention that name in either will. She may have adopted it from a former master, claimed it herself when she gained her freedom, or had it bestowed upon her at the time of her emancipation.⁴

- 8 Although her names leave much to speculation, Couvent provided other details that allow us to begin to reconstruct both a timeline and geography of her life. In 1812 she declared, "I am about fifty-five years old and of the Nation Arada" (*Testament*, 1812). In 1832 she explained, "I was born in Guinea[.] [A]t the age of about seven years I was carried to St. Domingue. I am consequently ignorant of the name of my father and of my mother. I am equally ignorant of my age" (*Testament*, 1832). Couvent's estimated age in 1812 corresponds with the age of "about eighty" recorded on her death certificate in 1837, suggesting a birth year of 1757 and shipment to Saint-Domingue around 1764 (Succession Records, 1837).
- 9 While "Guinea" was often used as a generic term for the western coast of Africa, "Arada" narrows the geographic possibilities for Couvent's birthplace or, at the very least, specifies her point of embarkation (Hall, 2005, 80-81). It is significant that Couvent identified herself as "Arada," but determining how she understood the label is difficult.⁵ "Arada" was a common rendering of "Allada," the name of "the most powerful of the Slave Coast states in the mid-seventeenth century" until it was conquered by neighboring Dahomey in 1724 (Law, 1991, 22, 229-30). Couvent may have been born in the area formerly ruled by the Allada, or she may have been born further inland, captured, and sold through one of the slaving ports located on the Bight of Benin (known as the Slave Coast). Regardless of their true origin, many slaves who embarked from trading outlets along the Slave Coast such as Ouidah were dubbed "Arada" by European slave traders (Hall, 2005, 17, 111-17; Law, 1991, 22). The blanket term extended to Saint Domingue, where the majority of enslaved individuals brought to the island in the early eighteenth century arrived from the Bight of Benin region (Dubois, 2004, 40). As a child, Couvent may have been raised by other enslaved women and men who claimed the "Nation Arada" and instilled this identity in her at a young age.
- 10 For reasons unclear, Couvent never directly mentioned Saint-Domingue in her 1812 will, but the document provides some insight into her life there. She stated, "I have never been married. I have a natural child named Celestin Moreau *mulâtre* about thirty years old, slave of Mr. François Moreau" (*Testament*, 1812). Couvent would have been about twenty-five when she had Celestin in 1782 and still enslaved at that time. Later in the will she named François Moreau's brother, "*Sieur* Jean Moreau, *marchand* in [New Orleans]" as her "universal legatee in all the surplus of [her] [...] property" (*Testament*, 1812). Couvent placed this legacy "under the condition that as soon as the heirs of Mr. François Moreau make themselves known, [Jean Maurau]⁶ will buy my son Celestin and give him his freedom in accordance with the laws in use in the country where my son is found[;] it has been twenty years since I have heard from him" (*Testament*, 1812).
- 11 This heartbreaking plea hints at a traumatic separation between Couvent and her son. She would have lost contact with Celestin around 1792, not long after the Haitian Revolution began. Between the large-scale slave insurrection on the northern plain in 1791 and the burning of Cap Français in 1793, over 10,000 residents fled the island. Refugees, including whites, free people of color, and slaves resettled in the Caribbean,

North America, and France throughout the Revolution (Dessens, 2007, 12, 15-16). The exact route Couvent traveled to end up in New Orleans is uncertain. Most of the refugees of the Revolution came to Louisiana as a secondary destination. The largest wave migrated to New Orleans in 1809-1810 after expulsion from Cuba (Dessens, 2007, 15-16, 23-29). Property records, however, place Couvent in the city by 1806. It seems likely that she came with Jean Maurau, in which case, she may have arrived as early as 1804 when Maurau and his wife relocated to New Orleans from Cap Français (Acts of P. Pedesclaux, 1804, 48:1081; Acts of Lafitte, 1818, 12:328; 1819, 15:3D and 15:57A). In 1809 Maurau's niece, Marie Emelie Moreau, *Veuve Monet*, also from Cap Français, joined him in New Orleans via Cuba (Acts of Pollock, 1823, 10:146; 1828, 23:514; Acts of H. Pedesclaux, 1834, 12:205). Couvent's connection with this white family may have represented her old life, but the Moreaus also provided her with the best chance to be reunited with her son, Celestin.

- 12 In addition to naming Maurau as her universal legatee in 1812, Couvent established him as her testamentary executor. The choice of executor implies that the testator trusts that person to fulfill the intentions laid out in the testament. With the condition that Maurau must find and free her son Couvent made a difficult request of her executor and universal legatee. This could be read as a sign of great faith in Maurau or as an act of desperation to locate her son. To some degree, it was probably both. To name Jean Maurau as both executor and beneficiary, Marie Couvent relied on ties that stretched back to Saint-Domingue and most likely came about because of her enslavement.
- 13 Exactly when she gained her freedom is still unclear, but in 1806 Couvent purchased two lots of land, a legal right reserved only for free persons. Much like recording her testament, Couvent laid claim to her freedom through the formal exchange of titles registered by the notary when she bought her property. On May 13, 1806 Couvent purchased a parcel located on the corner of Grands Hommes (now Dauphine) and Union (Touro) streets in the newly created Faubourg Marigny. She bought the lot for 500 *piastres*, promising to pay the total amount to Bernard Marigny in eighteen months (Acts of Broutin, 1806, 12:256). With this purchase she joined numerous free blacks who took advantage of the easy credit offered by Marigny to settle this new neighborhood (Evans, 1974, 27). If not needed to pay her debts in 1812, the still-undeveloped Faubourg Marigny lot would have belonged to her universal legatee after her death.
- 14 On June 18, 1806, Couvent purchased another piece of land with buildings on Barracks street between Royal and Condé (Chartres) streets (Acts of Broutin, 1806, 13:59). Located about six blocks from her Faubourg Marigny property, this half lot sat at the edge of the city (in an area today considered the French Quarter). In the 1812 will, Couvent divided the property, leaving a house to each of two beneficiaries. She gave one house situated near the street along with a four-foot passageway in the courtyard to "*Demoiselle Leonice*, natural daughter of Emelite Moreau *Veuve Monet*" (Testament, 1812). This beneficiary, in other words, was the granddaughter of Celestin's master, François Moreau, and the grandniece of Couvent's executor, Jean Maurau.
- 15 Couvent left the other house "that I presently inhabit with the portion of land on which it is built" to Seraphine "for her to enjoy from the day of my death" (*Testament*, 1812). This is not an overly generous bequest in that it did not give Seraphine full ownership of the property; rather, this legacy was "in usufruct only" during Seraphine's lifetime. Individuals granted usufruct have rights of ownership for only a designated period (*Civil Code*, 79). When Seraphine died possession of the house would pass to Maurau, as

Couvent's universal legatee. Although this bequest would take care of Seraphine for the rest of her life, it ultimately kept the entire lot in the Maurau family since the other portion was left to his grandniece.

- 16 Not only a legatee, Seraphine was one of five slaves Couvent listed as her property in 1812. Because slave societies conflate human beings and property, social relationships and material accumulation become entangled in wills. It is undeniable that Couvent considered owning slaves a legitimate financial investment. Throughout her thirty years in New Orleans, she bought, sold, or acquired by birth (by enslaved mothers), at least twenty-three slaves (*Testament*, 1812; *Testament*, 1832; Acts of Broutin, 1810, 22:169; 1811, 25:46; 1815, 32:5; 1816, 34:39; 1818, 37:360; Acts of de Armas, 1811, 6:433; Acts of Lafitte, 1818; 12:205; 1823, 24:356; Acts of Caire, 1829, 6:34; Acts of Pollock, 1837, 56:71). Couvent's instructions for the fate of her slaves after her death reveal an intricate set of personal relationships between master and slave that highlights the complicated link between property ownership and kinship. Couvent's treatment of Seraphine and Seraphine's children indicates that this enslaved woman had a special relationship with her mistress.
- 17 In 1812 Couvent owned Seraphine and her ten-month-old son, Noel; Sophie and her young daughter, Simonette; and a fifty-six-year-old man named Bernard (*Testament*, 1812). She did not leave specific instructions for Sophie or Simonette in her 1812 will, again leaving them to Jean Maurau by default. Couvent owned Sophie until January 12, 1829 when she sold the fifty-year-old woman to Francisco Brunetti (Acts of Caire, 1829, 6:32). While the full dynamics of their long relationship cannot be known, Couvent's testament plans and later sale of Sophie suggests an economic relationship bereft of sentimental attachment.
- 18 Her intentions for the other three slaves in the 1812 will imply a different relationship. Couvent proclaimed that on the day of her death Seraphine, Noel, and Bernard would be freed for their "good and loyal service" (*Testament*, 1812). She gave common reasons for their emancipations, but additional evidence reveals that Couvent and these three slaves eventually shared both biological and matrimonial bonds of kinship.
- 19 Couvent purchased Bernard on February 14, 1811 from Mary Wheaton for 868 *piastres* (Acts of Broutin, 1811, 25:46). Based on his name and age, it seems likely that this Bernard is the free man of color whom Marie Justine, using the name Esther, married on October 27, 1812. The day after she recorded her will, a "gravely ill" Esther received the last rites from the priest at St. Louis Cathedral before he joined her in marriage to Bernard, "the legitimate son of Simon and Maria Juana, former slaves of the Ursuline nuns." The witnesses to the ceremony included "Maria Antoinetta Moreau," Jean Maurau's wife and his niece, "the widow Moné" (*Saint Louis Cathedral: Marriages of Slaves and Free People of Color*, 1812, 1:45).
- 20 In the marriage record Bernard claimed that Esther had purchased his freedom. Manumission laws in 1812 required proof of the slave's good behavior for four years, public proclamation of intent to emancipate, and a forty-day waiting period; all overseen by the parish judiciary and officially notarized (Sterkx, 1972, 118; Schafer, 2003, 4). No documents have been located that indicate Marie Justine had begun the manumission process for Bernard. It seems likely that Bernard understood his purchase as procurement of his freedom and that he lived with her as a free man.
- 21 Serious illness, inspiring actions like drafting a will and receiving the last rites, would also put people of uncertain freedom in a mind to secure their future. If Bernard lived

with de facto freedom while Marie Justine was alive, then providing for his liberty in her will would protect his freedom legally following her death. Furthermore, the marriage record declaring his free status gave Bernard another form of documentation that he was no longer considered a slave. He may have chosen the surname “Couvent” to further indicate his free status while referencing his family’s connection to the Ursuline nuns.⁷ The 1822 city directory lists Bernard Couvent as a carpenter residing at “28 Barrack [street] below Condé [street]” (Paxton, 1822).

- 22 Although the 1812 will did not go into effect, both Seraphine and Noel eventually received their freedom. On May 17, 1814, the assistant priest at St. Louis Cathedral baptized Noel as free at the request of his mistress (*Saint Louis Cathedral Baptisms of Slaves and Free People of Color*, 1814, 14:24-25). Baptizing enslaved children as free did not guarantee that they would remain safe from re-enslavement, but it did invoke the authority of the Catholic Church and provided evidence of intended freedom. Couvent did not emancipate Seraphine until 1831, but she did take the proper legal channels to do so. After Couvent’s petition to the parish court met with approval, Seraphine officially received her freedom on October 5, 1831 (Acts of Pollock, 1831, 36:392).
- 23 Judging by the severity of her illness in October 1812, it may have surprised Marie Couvent that she not only survived but continued to live for another quarter century. At the age of seventy-five, the now-widowed Couvent again became ill and requested the presence of a notary. For “fear of being surprised by death, she wanted to put her affairs in order” and asked that Louis T. Caire record her “act of last wishes” on November 12, 1832 (*Testament*, 1832).
- 24 As in 1812, Couvent had no lawful heirs in 1832. Celestin Moreau was presumably never located, and the second will contains no reference to her enslaved son, or anyone with the name Moreau. Describing her marital status and children, she said, “I was married to Bernard Couvent, free negro, whose widow I now am and with whom I never had any children” (*Testament*, 1832). No longer is she “dite Esther” but rather “la Veuve Couvent.” In the twenty years that passed between the two documents Couvent gained new relationships while old ones grew distant or ended. For example, in her 1832 will she left \$100 each to Louis Chesnau and Phrosine Ballon, both free people of color (*Testament*, 1832). The reason for these bequests is unclear, but they indicate that Couvent’s interactions involved a new group of people. These shifting relationships allow us to map a transition from Couvent’s previous life as a slave in Saint-Domingue to that of a free woman of color in New Orleans.
- 25 Bernard passed away on May 22, 1829, and Jean Maurau died a few months later (Christian, 1938; Nolan, 2003, 18:272). Seraphine, too, did not survive her former mistress, succumbing to cholera on November 3, 1832 (*Saint Louis Cathedral Funerals of Slaves and Free People of Color*, 1831, 9:359; Orleans Parish Probate Court Records, 1839, n°1322). These deaths required Couvent to modify her will, but they do not fully explain the new choices she made. If her 1812 will revealed a social network that spanned class and color, Couvent’s 1832 testament reflects a more homogenous set of relationships. Her executor and five legatees are all free men and women of African descent. Even the three required witnesses to the recording of the document are free men of color. Read in the context of antebellum New Orleans, Couvent’s 1832 testament illustrates not only the ways she formed a network of people of color around her but how a free people of color community insulated itself through property ownership and institution-building.

- 26 Anglo-American officials taking charge of New Orleans in 1803 encountered a free black population “with unusual rights and powers but also with a peculiar assertiveness and self-confidence” (Logsdon and Bell, 1992, 204). While they attempted to curb the rights and size of the free black population through restrictive legislation, the population was bolstered by timely waves of Saint-Domingue refugees. The influx of white, free people of color, and enslaved refugees more than doubled the total population of the city, while the number of free people of color increased from 1,566 in 1805 to 4,950 in 1810—almost 29% of the total population (Logsdon and Bell, 1992, 205-6). Economic and agricultural developments around this time, however, converged with the availability of fresh soil from the Louisiana Purchase, strengthening slavery’s hold in the region. Even as the demand for slaves in the lower South grew, federal legislation closed the international slave trade in 1808. This accelerated the interstate trade in slaves from the Upper South where exhausted tobacco land diminished their necessity. By the 1820s, New Orleans contained the largest slave market in the United States (Rothman, 2005, 73, 79, 83-84; Johnson, 1999, 4-6).
- 27 As slavery expanded in the Deep South, free blacks “encountered increasing discrimination and legal restrictions that would draw them together and more clearly define their position in New Orleans society” (Hanger, 1997, 163). Institution-building, including benevolent associations, schools, religious orders, and literary societies, was one response to these restrictions (Bell, 1997, 6-8, 40). The development of free black organizations was accompanied by a greater identification with and reliance on one another. The social network and philanthropic bequest in Couvent’s 1832 testament illustrate these protective strategies.
- 28 Couvent chose Henry Fletcher, a free carpenter of color who lived in the Faubourg Marigny, for her testamentary executor in 1832 (*Testament*, 1832). Fletcher and his wife, a free woman of color from Cap Français, were of a younger generation from that of Marie and Bernard Couvent, and it is possible that they took care of the older couple (*St. Louis Cathedral Marriages of Persons of Color*, 1822, 1:229). It is also probable that the husbands’ carpentry work brought them in regular contact while the wives may have known each other through Saint-Domingue refugee networks. Couvent was not only familiar with Fletcher but found him trustworthy, similar to her former executor Maurau. The will indicates that it was, in fact, Fletcher who requested the notary’s presence at Couvent’s house to record her will (*Testament*, 1832).
- 29 Couvent also named Fletcher as her universal legatee. Additionally, she left him one of her slaves, a fourteen-year-old boy named Sylvain but doing so “under the express condition that he will free him at the death of said Fletcher and that his estate will pay the cost of his emancipation” (*Testament*, 1832). Couvent specified that her three other slaves—“Pierre, about fourteen years old; Redisse, about thirteen years old; and Silvanie, about eight years old”—be sold to pay for her debts (*Testament*, 1832). She likely considered giving Sylvain to Fletcher a better fate for that child.
- 30 When listing her properties in 1832 Couvent named only four slaves but referred to a fifth slave later in the document. Couvent declared, “I bequeath to Noel a young slave named Jules and child of Seraphine of whom he is the godfather” (*Testament*, 1832). Noel, also the son of Seraphine, was Jules’ half-brother. Although it may have been a mistake to have left Jules out of her list of properties, this slip marked his position in the household as distinct from that of the other slaves. While she did not liberate Jules outright, Couvent did the next best thing by leaving him to his brother and godfather.⁸

- 31 Noel also inherited Couvent's property on Barracks street, together with his siblings, Sanon and Ezaline. All three legatees are described as the "natural children of Seraphine now deceased" (*Testament*, 1832). It is clear from her first testament that Couvent treated Seraphine differently from her other slaves. Taking care of Seraphine's children after her death would be one way Couvent could honor their relationship.
- 32 The children likely grew up in the Couvents' household and conceivably were treated like family. In fact, at least one of the siblings was quite literally family. In addition to the property he inherited with Noel and Ezaline, Couvent left "a sum of 200 *piastres* to Sanon Bernard Couvent, natural son of my late husband" (*Testament*, 1832). With Celestin only a memory by 1832, Marie Justine chose to pass on her property to her next of kin—the surviving members of the family she created with Bernard, Seraphine, and their children. Traversing the lives of both free and enslaved blacks, these relationships expose how kinship and property ownership complicated one another. In slavery, family could also be property. But in some instances, as Dylan Penningroth argues, "property helped 'make' family" (Penningroth, 2003, 86). Couvent reinforced her family ties to the children with her bequests to Noel, Sanon, and Ezaline.
- 33 If Couvent's donation of the Barracks street lot to Seraphine's children provided for their future, her instructions for the Faubourg Marigny property provided an education to future generations of black children in New Orleans. In the most significant and unique passage of her 1832 will, Couvent said "I wish and ordain that my land at the corner of Grands Hommes and Union streets will be forever dedicated and employed for the establishment of a free school for the orphans of color of the Faubourg Marigny" (*Testament*, 1832). Almost a decade after her death, Couvent's last wishes finally came true when *L'Institution Catholique des Orphelins Indigents* opened in 1848 (Mitchell, 2001, 28-29; Bell, 1997, 124-25).
- 34 Her desire to create a school contained both personal meaning and broader significance given Couvent's experience in and out of slavery. Specifying the school for orphans was perhaps a reflection of Couvent's own experience of separation from her parents when enslaved as a child, but also of the son she lost during the Haitian Revolution. Successful in buying and selling property, yet illiterate, Couvent certainly understood the importance of being able to read, write, and make calculations. Beyond the practical advantages of an education, there were psychological benefits as well. Education was "central to the meaning of freedom" for African Americans across the South (Foner, 1990, 43). Both whites and blacks recognized the potential liberating effects of knowledge from the subordination blacks experienced on a daily basis. In his narrative, Frederick Douglass famously explained, "From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom... I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost or trouble, to learn how to read" (Douglass, 2003, 64). Couvent's bold bequest proclaimed her own identity as a free woman of color and as a member of a community that valued education.
- 35 In her will Couvent requested that the school be placed under the supervision of Father Constantine Maenhaut or his successors. It is likely she believed the Catholic Church could provide the support and protection the school would need to endure. Due to a combination of "fear" and "negligence," the school was not formed until 1847 when Maenhaut enlisted the help of several prominent free men of color (Devore and Logsdon, 1991, 42). These men created an incorporated society to administer the school, which opened the following year. Connected to the Catholic Church, the school was staffed and managed by educated free men and women of color (Bell, 1997, 124-25).

- 36 The Catholic Institution quickly became a success and was considered the center of education for the Francophone free people of color community during the turbulent 1850s. As the debates over slavery intensified, a growing fear of a free black population led to a rash of repressive legislation (Mitchell, 2001, 16; Sterkx, 1972, 311; Logsdon and Bell, 1992, 208). The Catholic Institution's students not only gained a practical education but, as Mary Mitchell argues, were inculcated with a political and racial consciousness as well (Mitchell, 2000, 126). The lessons learned at the Catholic Institution continued after the Civil War when several of its teachers, board members, and former students became involved in Reconstruction politics. These activists helped pass a new state constitution that included integrated public schools. Through Marie Couvent's legacy, "New Orleans' free blacks sought both the survival of their community and the promise of a different future" (Mitchell, 2001, 28).
- 37 Wills are statements about the future. For an eighty-year-old woman who was born in Africa, enslaved as a child, lived through a revolution, and died free and wealthy in New Orleans, Couvent made a powerful statement with her bequest for the school. Thinking beyond her own death, Couvent endowed future generations in the Faubourg Marigny with an education. She made this explicit when she demanded that her property "forever" be used for the school and "that the said land and buildings will never be sold" but rather money be raised by other means to keep the school on the lot (*Testament*, 1832). Technically, several schools have existed on Couvent's property, but for over 150 years it remained a space for African American education in New Orleans (Medley).
- 38 Couvent's wills obscure as much as they reveal, and at times create more questions than answers. As I continue to reconstruct her life, pursuing the silences will be as important as investigating the information disclosed in her testaments. My larger project on the life and legacy of Marie Couvent takes this act of her last will and testament as clue, inspiration, and metaphor. Not only does her bequest signify the power wills gave former slaves as an act of self-making, it also illustrates the enduring legacies of the documents as valuable resources to recover their voices and reconstruct their lives, fragment by fragment.

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NOTES

1. See for example, Caryn Cossé Bell, *Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana, 1718-1868*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1997; Leonard P. Curry, *The Free Black in Urban America, 1800-1850*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1981; Nathalie Dessens, *From Saint-Domingue to New Orleans: Migration and Influences*, Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 2007; Joseph Logsdon and Caryn Cossé Bell, "The Americanization of Black New Orleans," in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, eds. Arnold Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1992, 201-61; Mary Niall Mitchell, "Raising Freedom's Child: Race, Nation, and the Lives of Black Children in Nineteenth-Century Louisiana" (PhD dissertation, New York University, 2001); Betty Porter, "The History of Negro Education in Louisiana," *The Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, 25, 1942, 728-821; Loren Schweninger, *Black Property Owners in the South, 1790-1915*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1990; H. E. Sterkx, *The Free Negro in Ante-bellum Louisiana*, Rutherford, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1972.
2. All quotes from notary records are translated from French by the author. Throughout the notary records, Couvent can be found under various combinations of names and spellings, including "Ester" and "Marie Justine Esther." After her marriage to Bernard Couvent, records also refer to her as "Marie Couvent," "Marie Bernard Couvent," or "Marie Bernard." Based on how the notary heard it, the surname "Sirnir" is rendered in various ways including Surnaïre, Cirnaïre, Chirnaïre, Sirney, Cirnay, Soiphairre and even Firmin. Research in New Orleans has produced no plausible source for the name so it seems likely that she brought it with her from Saint-Domingue.
3. Stewart King found examples of newly freed individuals taking new names in Saint-Domingue. King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig: Free People of Color in Pre-Revolutionary Saint Domingue*, Athens, University of Georgia Press, 2001, 166. Gary Nash discusses the importance of self-renaming for freed African Americans in Early Republic Philadelphia: "Upon gaining freedom, Afro-Americans took complete possession of the naming process." Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1988, 79-88, quote on 83.
4. According to a 1773 law in Saint-Domingue, all emancipated slaves were to be given "African"-derived surnames, although historians Dominique Rogers and Stewart King point out that this regulation was not strictly followed. King, 10, 166-68; Rogers, "On the Road to Citizenship: The Complex Route to Integration of the Free People of Color in the Two Capitals of Saint-Domingue," in *The World of the Haitian Revolution*, eds. David Geggus and Norman Fiering, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2009, 71-72. In her study of free women of color in Saint-Domingue notary records, Susan Socolow found numerous examples of former masters changing the names of freed slaves in the emancipation documents. See Socolow, "Economic Roles of the Free Women of Color of Cap Français," in *More than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas*, eds. David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1996, 290.
5. Scholars debate the reliability of such "ethnic" monikers, not only because their definitions shifted over time and place, but because they are thought to have been determined by whites rather than by enslaved Africans. Hall, however, argues that "specific ethnic designations recorded in American documents were often self-identifications." Such is the case in Couvent's will, which was dictated to the notary. Hall, 23, 37-39, quote on 38.
6. Jean Moreau signed his name "Maurau" in notary records but the notaries often wrote it as "Moreau." Throughout the article, I will use "Maurau," except in quotes which utilize an alternative spelling. I do not have signature samples for the other family members mentioned in the article so I will use "Moreau" as it is written in the notary documents that refer to them.

7. Because the Ursulines insisted that their slaves be baptized and married and strove to keep families together, a large kinship network formed among their slaves that stretched several generations. By maintaining an association with the convent, Bernard Couvent laid claim to this Ursuline community of slaves, former slaves, and their families. See Emily Clark, *Masterless Mistresses: The New Orleans Ursulines and the Development of a New World Society, 1727-1834*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2007, 170-76, Appendix 2.

8. In 1832 manumission required a \$1,000 bond which could explain why Couvent bequeathed rather than freed Jules (Schafer, 2003, 6).

RÉSUMÉS

Dans son testament enregistré le 12 novembre 1832, Marie Justine Cirnaire, veuve Couvent, s'attribuait durablement un rôle-clé dans le soutien à l'éducation des Afro-Américains à la Nouvelle-Orléans en émettant le vœu qu'une école soit établie pour eux sur sa propriété. Ce que l'on sait moins, c'est qu'elle écrivit en fait deux testaments, puisqu'un premier avait été enregistré 20 ans auparavant. À travers une analyse précise de ces deux testaments, cet article examine la vie d'une femme née en Afrique, réduite en esclavage à Saint-Domingue, et qui mourut libre, riche propriétaire d'esclave à la Nouvelle-Orléans. En tant que catalogues de ses biens matériels accumulés, mais aussi comme fragments d'autobiographie et cartographies de réseaux sociaux, ces testaments révèlent comment Mme Couvent et d'autres anciens esclaves se sont créés une identité de personnes libres grâce à la propriété et à leurs relations personnelles.

In her last will and testament recorded on November 12, 1832, Marie Justine Cirnaire, *Veuve Couvent* claimed a lasting legacy as a patron of African American education in New Orleans when she declared that a school be established on her property. It is little known, however, that Couvent, in fact, made two wills, the first dated twenty years earlier. Through a close reading of Couvent's testaments, this article will explore the life of a woman who was born in Africa, enslaved in Saint-Domingue, and died a free and wealthy slave owner in New Orleans. As catalogs of material accumulation, acts of autobiography, and maps of social networks these wills suggest the ways Couvent and other former slaves created identities as free people through property ownership and personal relationships.

INDEX

Keywords : Marie Couvent, Marie Justine Cirnaire, free people of color, New Orleans, Saint-Domingue, testaments, property ownership, education, slavery, L'Institution Catholique des Orphelins Indigents

Mots-clés : gens de couleur libres, la Nouvelle-Orléans, propriété, esclavage

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