

SLAVE LABOR IN THE BUILDING OF BIENVILLE'S BEAU CROISSANT

Celine Ugolini

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the role of African slaves in the construction of the French colonial city of La Nouvelle Orléans, later known as New Orleans, Louisiana, as well as the part these slaves, along with other forced immigrants, had in the reconstruction of the city following the numerous disasters it encountered in its early days. The contribution of slaves in the making of the local culture and economy will be reviewed. The paper will also examine the response to disasters during the Spanish period, with a particular focus on slave labor. Part of the sources used as to write this paper comes from archive materials found in New Orleans.

KEYWORDS

New Orleans, Slavery, Colonial History, Building and Rebuilding, Disasters

1. INTRODUCTION

Slavery provided the colony of Louisiana with a larger population, which was dramatically needed, and contributed to making use of the inhospitable conditions the pioneers faced. The use of slavery also played a part in the resilient character of the city of New Orleans and in creating its unique culture. Slave labor was widely used as part of the recovery efforts after each disaster. First and foremost, colonists saw slavery as a way to tame the difficult natural environment.

2. ARRIVAL OF AFRICAN SLAVES AND INITIAL CONSTRUCTION

Bienville brought the first two slaves (not from Africa, but from the West Indies) in 1708 and quickly realized slaves would become a necessity for the colony to prosper, if not to survive, due to the harsh farming conditions. The French colonists therefore made arrangements with their Indian allies for them to deliver Indian women used as slaves to help grow food (Johnson, 1992).

Moreover, with the building of the new city, more and more settlers became attracted to New Orleans. They moved out of the rural areas and took residency in the city. This took manpower away from local plantations and other agricultural businesses that were originally located out of the city. In order to remedy this lack of laborers, a new and large workforce had to be brought in. Consequently, starting in 1719, slaves started arriving to the colony in huge numbers when two French ships, the Du Maine and the Aurore arrived in New Orleans with over five hundred black slaves coming from Africa onboard. According to historian Lawrence N. Powell, “the town’s early infrastructure, its network of streets and drainage canals, was built by slaves from Africa. They shoveled the dirt that raised the levees Bienville threw up hurriedly after the 1719 overflow nearly led to the official abandonment of his site” (Powell, 2012). Slave labor became a solution to improve the colony’s prosperity. Most households in the city had slaves, and this was not limited to residents of high social status. Whether a laborer or a high official, most New Orleanians were slave owners (Powell, 2012). By the end of 1721, New Orleans counted 1256 inhabitants of which about half were slaves (Siegel, 1975). By 1724 there were twice as many

blacks as whites in New Orleans. Then, by way of natural reproduction, slaves contributed to maintaining the colony populated. They also actively took part in the reconstruction efforts that the numerous disasters generated. Considerable rebuilding efforts actually started to become more visible in the city during the Spanish period since the Spaniards were much better planners than the French, but also because the population had increased to the point where water could somewhat be tamed. New Orleanians of African origin, or slaves, were the ones cultivating the crops and building the levees. They also built houses throughout the city and acted as repairmen for anything that needed their attention. They fashioned their own tools to complete their repairs, and built storage for the crops (Powell, 2012). After having settled in the colony for a long enough period, slaves, who were also the cooks in their masters' kitchens, gained the ability to know how to mix local food ingredients with what they knew from their own culture and country as well as adding items their masters' would recommend from their culture. This led to the birth of New Orleans' unique Creole cuisine (Powell, 2012).

A few years after the introduction of African slaves, Indian women began to marry these newly arrived slaves (Johnson, 1992). This enabled the growth of the slave population in the city and was an asset for its masters as well as for the slave community as a whole, which would keep on growing. Slaves had become the largest portion of New Orleans' inhabitants. Thus it gave that community a certain power. The large amount of Indian women within colony also meant that there were more and more intermarriages not only between them and African slaves, but also between Indian women and colonists who seemingly preferred them to French women, according to Governor Antoine de Cadillac (Johnson, 1992). At that time, police official Martin d'Artaquette also recommended the use of slave labor as a way to solve agricultural difficulties. The local residents would have had to face very difficult conditions in laboring the land and therefore turned towards the use of slavery.

A vast majority of the African slaves sent to Louisiana during the French period reached the colony within a twelve-year period, directly following the initial foundation of the city of New Orleans in 1718 (Midlo Hall, 1992). According to Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, deporting people to Louisiana was a convenient way to get rid of undesirables at home. A continuous use of slaves proceeded as the economic situation of the colony in the early 1740's became extremely harsh, when numerous wars with Indians, decreasing financial help from the mother country and very little local production favored the expansion of slavery in order to accomplish the difficult tasks colonists faced. As a result, by 1740 the population of the city of New Orleans alone was 1,100, the vast majority of which was made of slaves. Meanwhile, the whole colony of Louisiana counted about 5,200 inhabitants of whom about four-thousand were African slaves. Slaves largely contributed to building and maintaining levees around the city for decades. They repaired those levees after each disaster, and physically built the city of New Orleans. "France may have founded Louisiana as we know it, but it was slaves from Senegal and Congo who laid the foundation" (Powell, 2012).

Most of the slaves reaching Louisiana at the time were described as from: Juda (or Whydah), a town in Benin, on the west coast of Africa; Cabinde (or Angola), a country on the Atlantic coast of southern Africa, between Namibia and Gabon; and Senegal (also from Goree, an island off of the coast of Dakar, the capital of Senegal), a northern Africa country located on the west coast, between Mauritania and Guinea (Midlo Hall, 1995).

3. CODE NOIR

In 1724, perhaps in an effort to maintain a peaceful colony, the large amount of African slaves within the colony generated the implementation of Louis XV's "*Code Noir*" (Black Code) in Louisiana. Louis XIV's original "*Code Noir*" dates back to the late seventeenth century. In

appearance, the code had the purpose of protecting African slaves. Slaves were becoming more and more numerous and the white population of colonists was very small and scattered inside the huge territory that Louisiana represented. A way to avoid dangerous riots and uprisings was by granting slaves more freedom and enabling them to remain together as a family while serving a master. The Code's main positive point was to forbid the separation of family members, especially the separation of children from their parents by the mean of selling one of them to another master. However, a young person was considered an adult by the age of thirteen and therefore after that age, separation from one's family was acceptable. Masters relied on slave labor for cultivation of their land and could not afford to spark off rebellions that may have turned into violence or escapes from runaway slaves called maroons. The word "maroon" comes from the French "marron" which itself comes from the Spanish "cimarrón" and means feral or fugitive (OED Online, 2012).

Fear of revolts was particularly palpable, especially after France freed all their slaves in the Caribbean in 1794 (Johnson, 1992). The French First Republic temporarily abolished slavery in all French colonies in 1794 after adding an amendment to the first constitution of 1791 stating that all men were born free and equal in rights. Consequently, according to the website of the French Embassy in the UK, "all men, irrespective of colour, living in the colonies [were declared] French citizens and [became entitled to] enjoy all the rights provided by the Constitution." Although these events took place during the Spanish colonial period, New Orleans' residents were mostly French speaking at the time. The Spanish government in charge then worried about possible impact on the colony since many former French Caribbean slaves decided to settle in the region of New Orleans and to tell their story to the Louisiana slaves. Slaves in New Orleans felt that had they still been officially French, they may have had a chance to benefit from the initial abolishment of slavery. This event could have influenced them into rebelling and claiming their own freedom.

On April 9, 1795, rumors of a possible plot from slaves to organize a rebellion against their masters came to light and to the attention of Captain Don Guillermo DuParc (Holmes, 1979), the commandant of the Pointe Coupée settlement. The presumed large size of the slave congregation pushed the latter to immediately report his discovery to Francisco Luis Héctor de Carondelet, the then governor, who decided to use forceful ways in order to reinstate masters' authority towards their slaves. The authorities hanged as many as twenty-three slaves suspected of plotting in order to frighten the remaining slaves and discourage them from organizing further riots. Following this event, the slave trade with the West Indies almost immediately became illegal to prevent the number of slaves in the colony from growing to an amount that would become unmanageable by the masters and the government in charge. The ban remained in place for two years, was repealed, and finally became permanent in 1803 (Johnson, 1992).

The *Code Noir* also had the purpose of freeing slaves from work on Sundays (Louisiana's Code Noir, 1724), in order for them to be able to practice religious activities of the Catholic Church, to which they were mandatorily converted, since that was their only day off of hard labor. According to the Article II of the *Code Noir* of 1724, masters had the duty to provide their slaves with religious education (Louisiana's Code Noir, 1724). Slaves' days off were also beneficial to their masters who, during the 1740s crisis had more and more trouble feeding them. Slaves were therefore expected to feed themselves and look after themselves on these days. This practice had another effect, which was to give more power to the slaves, who started cultivating their own gardens and crafting their own items in order to sell them. In such a way they actively participated in the economic development of the colony while at the same time they increased their independence and self-subsistence. Bienville, who put the *Code Noir* into effect, also included a section banning all Jews from the colony and forbidding Protestant worship, which

completely cut any kind of religious freedom and obligated all Louisiana people to convert to Catholicism if they had not already done so.

In addition, The Code forbade intermarriage between white colonists and black slaves (Siegel, 1975). If the Code did have some limited advantages for the slaves, its main concern, however, was for masters to ensure that slaves would not run away and create revolts, thus they were allowed some degree of freedom and rights. The Code enabled families to remain together to a certain extent, and allowed slaves to own property. The Code was, however, on balance much more profitable for the masters than the slaves.

4. CUSTOMS AND LEGACY

Slaves were so numerous in the colony that slavery became an essential part of its development. As the plantation economy grew, the colony needed more manpower. Slavery therefore became such a common and widely used practice that the whole economy of the south depended upon it. Until the Civil War, and therefore the abolishment of slavery, the main crops in Louisiana were cotton and sugar for which slave labor was predominantly used. Further, slavery developed elsewhere on the continent and in Europe and was considered common practice. Most people in the colony were pro-slavery. Very few masters provided their slaves with access to education, especially at a time when colonists were not themselves educated. One of the rare masters to enable this was John McDonogh. McDonogh freed all his slaves by the end of his life in 1850.

As late as towards the early nineteenth century, there were still no universities or colleges, or even a library other than the scarce private ones that some rare wealthy colonists may have owned. There was no place in town where to purchase books. Had there been a bookstore, and considering that probably only about two percent of the 8,000 New Orleanians could read and write, there would not have been much use for it. Needless to say that in the case of slaves, if their masters were not educated, the likelihood of them becoming educated was next to nothing. As a consequence of this lack of literacy, a vast majority of slaves were unable to leave a written account of their customs, religious practices or lives. Slaves mostly passed on their traditions and habits orally from one generation to the next, in the same way that it had been the case for centuries with their ancestors in Africa. This also means that written records from slaves on their role in the development of the colony and the rebuilding efforts cannot be found.

5. RECONSTRUCTION FOLLOWING DISASTERS

To face the recurring issues with water and underpopulation, flood after flood, disaster after disaster, colonists also used slave labor to rebuild the city. According to the Louisiana Historical Quarterly, in 1771, reports detailed how “when the river rose to an extraordinary height th[at] year, it caused many cracked and breaks to appear, in the levee, which kept the negroes continually occupied to close them up” (Louisiana Historical Quarterly, 1771), at an indigo plantation site. The slaves were therefore not able to work on the plantation as they had to repair the damaged levees. This was a common phenomenon.

After yet another flood, the Cabildo recorded use of slave labor in 1789 on the levees when, according to its Acts and Deliberations:

after considering the importance of this work, as well as the tranquility of these, safety for their property, and guard against the risk of the public health in this vicinity, of the damage caused by the ravages of floods, and sickness that in the past year caused considerable mortality, knowing the hardships suffered by the inhabitants of this coast, by repairing the levee twice on the McCarty lands [McCarty lands in New Orleans had been abandoned by their owner and presented

a problem to the city due to their location by the levee. Since individuals were responsible for maintaining the levees on their -098654312 VBN9land, after abandonment, there was a need to protect the existing levee], having to employ in said work the best slaves on different occasions, at the time they needed them more for their own work, losing thereby part of their crops, it is not just according to these damages suffered they should again pay for this work (Cabildo, 1789).

Here again the fragility of the city is apparent when simply abandoning land meant that it threatened the rest of the city. Yet, in the face of this apparent fragility, the necessity for the city to remain at its original location prevailed. Such rebuilding was never questioned and was always carried out. The permanent reconstruction was also enabled by the use of slave labor. When slaves were sent to work on the levees as opposed to their masters' land, frictions between the government and the slave owners who saw their own land lacking men to work on them emerged. The McCarty lands were particularly problematic as they were abandoned and situated by the river. Again, in 1790, another flood, according to the Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo: destroyed the newly repaired levee, which was strongly rebuilt on the lands of His Majesty abandoned by Don Juan Bautista McCarty and Don Leonardo Mazange caused by the extraordinary and unexpected flood of the river endangering the health if the inhabitants of this City, flooding, as at other times and causing great damages as in former years, experiencing the same misfortune with reference to the lands of the inhabitants in the country, damaging their crops and live-stock, and although the Commissioners unanimously agreed as the only means to stop the mentioned imminent risks, was to use all possible efforts to close the break, and for this purpose it was necessary to employ besides the negro workers furnished by each one of the inhabitants of the outskirts, to assist as on other occasions with their negroes and free mulattoes of the City, or slaves which their respective masters wish to rent, there was the great difficulty of not having in the City Treasury any funds with which to pay the laborers, due to the fact the funds of said treasury were exhausted on account of constant extraordinary expenses due to previous resolutions to which expenses caused by the fire were added notwithstanding this fact, the said Commissioners finding that there was no other way to procure funds [referring to the great fire of 1788, two years prior to the report] (Cabildo, 1790).

The issue lasted for so long and was so important that numerous inhabitants also had to take part in the reconstruction process. The workforce provided by slave labor was not sufficient to take care of this major problem. The issue gave birth to new guidelines for abandoned land. The Cabildo Council reported on February 19, 1790, that to remedy the break in the levee (...) on the property of the inhabitants Don Juan Bautista McCarty and Don Leonardo Massange, which happened very frequently. It is expected if the lands abandoned by them are not taken over by other owners, who would take care of the said levee, as all other citizens maintain them in good condition, said levee would decay and destroy those which have just been repaired, thus causing floods, which the Cabildo had proposed to avoid at the meeting of October 30th of last year [1789], taking into consideration such imminent risk, which exacts prompt action as the high water season is approaching, this causing the ravages experienced in former years, this Cabildo has decided that once the formalities of placing Edicts in public places and through a public crier, for the purpose of auctioning said lands in the presence of the annual Commissaries, they be auctioned to the highest bidder, who would be obligated not to abandon them, in the future, without a levee as solid as the one which was on the land at the time he took charge (Cabildo, 1790).

The abandonment of the McCarty land constituted such a problem that the Cabildo considered giving the land away as long as the person who would take charge of it could commit to maintaining the levee in good condition (Cabildo, 1790). Two years after this resolution, it appears that the land had still not found an owner, as it was documented in another report that

“the river having carried away the levee on the lands abandoned by Don Juan Bautista McCarty and Don Leonardo Mazange, it is his opinion that it is indispensable to proceed with its repair” (Cabildo, 1792). These numerous issues may have led to Governor Carondelet’s Levee Ordinance of 1792 in which he wrote that each person would be responsible for maintaining landowners’ levees. Furthermore, the same ordinance called for:

As soon as there will be a break [in the levee] the responsible authority of the district will order that each inhabitant of the said district to send the amount of Negroes it will judge necessary (...) If the Negroes of the district cannot suffice the authority will inform the Government which will send more without delay (...) The members of this authority will also inform the government of the names of the inhabitants who are unable to maintain their levees by lack of Negroes and means, and it will be requested that they surrender their land at the end of the harvest season (Carondelet, 1792).

6. CONCLUSION

Issues of underpopulation, lack of means, and water, were, however, not restricted to the New Orleans area and could be felt throughout the colony. The abundance of floodwater required manpower to be tamed. The original lack of population therefore presented a considerable challenge. Since very few individuals voluntarily traveled to Louisiana, the early settlers used forced immigration and slavery in order to palliate this lack of workforce. These forced Louisianians, whether slaves or criminals sent from the home country, played a large part in building New Orleans. They had no choice but to stay in the colony and therefore they had to invest in the only place they could live in. It was only after slavery developed on a large scale that the colony started to become prosperous and thus it favored the continuous use of this practice within the harsh Louisiana land as slaves took active part in the construction of the city and in its numerous reconstructions following disasters.

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Author

Celine Ugolini is a French native from Corsica, France who spent five years living in New Orleans. In 2006, she obtained her bachelor's degree in English and American studies from Michel de Montaigne Bordeaux 3 University in France. She went on to graduate with a master's degree in Anglophone studies from that same university in 2008. Celine then completed a dual Ph.D. from Bordeaux 3 in Anglophone Studies and from the University of New Orleans in Urban History in 2014, focusing on disasters in New Orleans during the colonial period (1718-1803).

