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# Cane River: the archaeology of "free people of colour" in colonial Louisiana

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*The overseas dispersal and subsequent history of people of African descent – the African diaspora – has attracted much interest in recent decades from anthropologists, archaeologists and historians, particularly in the USA. But such studies have seldom been undertaken by archaeologists with experience of West Africa and its material culture. In a new project on the African heritage in colonial Louisiana, members of the Institute are collaborating with American colleagues to combine expertise on cultural contacts in the Americas between Native Americans, Africans and European colonists.*

A common theme in anthropological and archaeological studies of the African diaspora is the search for African cultural survivals and creolizations (mixtures) in the Americas. For several reasons, Louisiana is a particularly promising locale for archaeological investigation of the African heritage. First, most of the enslaved Africans who were imported into the colony during the eighteenth century came from the same part of Africa, Senegambia (the area between the Senegal and Gambia rivers). They were thus able to maintain a certain ethnic coherence, as is demonstrated by revolts and conspiracies by groups of West African Bambara slaves allied to Natchez Native Americans against French colonists between 1729 and 1731.[1] Secondly, the French and Spanish in their colonies in the Americas (and particularly in Louisiana) kept good records of the ethnic and geographical origins of enslaved individuals, so it is possible to document the range of African ethnicities present at individual plantations. Finally, more than any other colony or state in the Deep South, Louisiana had a strong tradition of manumission (granting freedom) to African or mixed-race peoples: by 1810 there were 7585 "free people of colour" in the state (i.e. 18 per cent of the total black population was free).[2] This resulted in the early creation of free-black communities, which even included slave owners, a phenomenon that raises tantalizing questions regarding the material culture of colonial free blacks and their relations with their own slaves.

*Figure 1 Western Louisiana, showing the location of Natchitoches and other sites mentioned in the text.*

One of the longest-settled areas in Louisiana is Natchitoches, with its hinterland along the Cane River in the west of the state (Fig. 1). The town of Natchitoches was founded by French colonists in 1714, and the 1766 census certifies that its population consisted then of 318 French colonists, 15 free individuals of mixed race, 229 African slaves, 15 mixed-race slaves, 2 free Native Americans and 30 Native American slaves.[3] In other words, almost half the adult population of Natchititoches at the height of the French colonial era was African in origin. Later Natchitoches and its hinterland would become remarkable for a flowering of cultural richness and economic prosperity among people who were descended from a mixture of different origins.[4] Indeed, Cane River has recently become a United States National Heritage Area for the interpretation of plantation life and the African-American experience. The area features historic farmsteads and townhouses, a reconstructed colonial fort, and extensive plantations administered by the United States National Park Service, the State of Louisiana, the Association for the Preservation of Historic Natchitoches, and the St Augustine Historical Foundation. Thus, an African diaspora archaeological project in this region seemed especially propitious.

## The Cane River archaeological project

The Cane River African diaspora archaeological project was initiated in 2001 as a collaboration between the UCL Institute of Archaeology and the Cultural Resource Office of the Northwestern State University of Louisiana (NSU). We collaborate closely with, and have received financial support from, the Cane River National Heritage Area and the National Park Service. Our aims are to explore changes in the relationships between Native Americans, African Americans, and colonial European communities in Louisiana during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, with particular reference to Cane River's early "free people of colour".

To undertake historical archaeology along the Cane River is especially challenging because it involves recovering data from a wide variety of living cultural groups, using a multidisciplinary combination of archival research, archaeological fieldwork, and, in due course, active interpretation to an interested public.[5] Indeed, we are strongly committed to public archaeology and hope to make a major contribution to the development of heritage tourism in the area, particularly through interpretive involvement in a visitor centre that is planned.

Increasing media interest in Natchitoches as a tourist destination has been fuelled by many factors. They include the establishment of the new Cane River National Heritage Area and the bestselling historical novel, *Cane River*, by Lalita Tademy,[6] which depicts the life struggles of four generations of African-American (Creole) women.[7] Such developments have refocused attention on Louisiana's "Creoles of Colour" – mixed-race communities highlighted in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fiction of George Cable and Lyle Saxon[8] but long since out of the national eye. Central to Cane River's Creole community is the almost mythic founder figure of Marie Thérèze Coincoin, an eighteenth-century African-American plantation owner and common ancestor to much of Cane River's present-day Creole community. Consequently, one of the central concerns of our project is the archival and archaeological investigation of the properties and slaves of Marie Thérèze Coincoin and her descendants.

## Marie Thérèze Coincoin and her descendants

It is through the historical research of Sister Frances Jerome Woods and Gary & Elizabeth Mills that we have a fairly extensive body of data on Marie Thérèze Coincoin and her descendants, even though the ancestry of Marie Thérèze herself has still to be satisfactorily resolved.[9] According to Gary Mills,[10] Marie Thérèze, who was called both Coincoin and Coin-Coin, was born in 1742, the fourth child of a first-generation slave couple baptised François

*Figure 2* *An early nineteenth-century portrait of a grand-daughter of Marie Thérèze Coincoin.*

and Marie Françoise. Mills goes on to assert that the etymology of the word Coin-Coin may be connected with the word Ko-Kwe in the West African Ewe language of Togo, meaning second daughter. However, a review of the evidence upon which these assertions are based leaves room for doubt. The baptismal record reputed to be of Marie Thérèze in the archives of the Catholic church of Natchitoches is dated 24 August 1742 and identifies the subject as "Marie Thérèse, negritte". No parents are named, nor is the native name "Coincoin" mentioned.[11] Given that Marie Thérèze (or Thérèse) was a common slave name in the Natchitoches colony, and that the stated owners (the St Denis family) were the largest slave owners in the colony, the baptismal record is hardly definitive. Furthermore, in her book on the oral traditions and sociology of the Creole Coincoin/ Metoyer family, Sister Woods quotes an informant as placing Marie Thérèze's birthplace in "Guinea".[12] Also, to add to the confusion, the database of African-American ethnic origins recently compiled by Gwendolyn Midlo Hall inexplicably opts for "Nago, Yoruba" as Marie Thérèze Coincoin's area of ethnic origin.[13] Thus, there is at present no consensus as to the birthplace or ethnic origin of Marie Thérèze Coincoin. Her date of birth also remains uncertain, although documents from her later life indicate that she was born in about 1740 (±5 years).

The history of Marie Thérèze becomes more apparent as we reach her mature years. She was originally owned by Louis Juchereau de St Denis, founder of Natchitoches, and subsequently by his heirs. She remained a slave until 1778, when she was purchased and freed by her lover, Claude Pierre Metoyer, a French bourgeois by whom she bore ten children (seven surviving to adulthood) between 1768 and 1784. Marie Thérèze remained his mistress until 1786, when he ended their alliance by gift of 68 acres of land astride the Cane River, south of Natchitoches. She built a house on this land, the location of which is clearly indicated on a property map of 1794, and began to cultivate tobacco. With the profits that accrued she bought the freedom of all of her children who remained in bondage. However, her own years of slavery did not prevent her from participating in the slave system. A church tax list of 1790 indicates that she owned no slaves then, but by the time of the settlement of her estate via property transfers to her children in 1816 she had at least 14 slaves (with a further two recorded in earlier baptismal records). According to the notarial records for 1816 in the Natchitiches parish courthouse, three of these slaves were natives of the "Kongo nation", one was of the "Quissay nation" (i.e. Kissy in Guinea) and the remainder were Louisiana born. It seems likely that those born in Louisiana were the offspring of the four born in Africa. Indeed, only four slave purchases by "Coincoin" are recorded in the index of French records: two in 1794 and two in 1800.

Marie Thérèze's children by Pierre Metoyer went on to prosper. By 1850 they owned 5667 acres of improved land worked by 436 slaves, making them one of the richest families in the ante-bellum Cane River region, despite their Creole ancestry (Fig. 2).[14] Most of the children took the surname of their natural father (Metoyer), but one prominent member of the family (Dominique) retained the name Coincoin as his surname into maturity.

The death of Marie Thérèze was initially thought to have occurred shortly after the settling of her estate in 1816. However, a recently found census record of 1820 for Coincoin indicates that she lived into the next decade, with a reduced household, somewhere along the Cane River.[15]

## Archaeological investigations at the Coincoin plantation

In the summer of 2001, we began geophysical investigations at two properties: the Whittington site (the 1786–1816 plantation of Marie Thérèze Coincoin) and the Melrose Plantation (the 1796–1847 plantation of Louis Metoyer, third child of Marie Thérèze and Pierre Metoyer, and his descendants). At both sites (Fig. 1) there are standing buildings steeped in folklore on which our enquiries first focused. Our immediate goals were to re-establish the historical layout of the original buildings of the plantations (most of which were no longer standing) in order to select for more extensive excavation the remains of such structures as slave cabins and kitchens. Resistivity and magnetometry surveys were carried out to identify promising subsurface anomalies at both sites,[16] and we then undertook test excavations at them in the summer of 2002.

The Whittington site (US no. 16Na241) was first tested archaeologically in 1978–79 by H. F. Gregory, Billy Shaw and J. H. Mathews.[17] The goal of their work was in part to confirm the age of the property for the purposes of having it placed on the National Register of Historic Places. A standing building on the Whittington (now Metoyer) property was believed to be Marie Thérèze Coincoin's home and they focused their investigations on it (Fig. 3). Their extensive subsurface examination of the area surrounding the building included some 19 test pits, each 1 $m^2$, and 29 shovel tests. The results were disappointing. No subsurface features were encountered, save for a possible brick walkway and extensive scatters of refuse. Out of 879 pot-sherds recovered, we found only 4 French faience (glazed earthenware) sherds, which are diagnostic of eighteenth-century occupation.[18] Likewise no Native American or Afro-colonware[19] pot-sherds

*Figure 3* *The building standing on the Whittington site previously thought to have been the house of Marie Thérèze Coincoin.*

– common accompaniments to European wares at many American colonial sites – were found. However, subsequent finds recovered while a flower bed was being dug near the house, and surface collections made around the property, produced a further 31 faience sherds. These finds were used in 1979 to help justify the listing of the property as the original dwelling place of Marie Thérèze Coincoin. The feeling was that somehow the main eighteenth-century refuse areas and outbuildings had been narrowly missed by the original test excavations.

In subsequent years the heritage importance of what was now termed the Maison de Marie Thérèze increased. It was listed in local tourist literature and it featured in the register of African American Historic Places.[20] However, in 2001 the Historic American Buildings Survey of the National Park Service carried out an architectural study of the house, the results of which dated it to the 1830s or 1840s, well after the time of Marie Thérèze. It was suggested that the building was likely to have been an overseer's house, which had been built as part of the adjoining Cedar Bend plantation, founded by the Prudhomme family in 1840. This announcement provoked a local furore – did the overseer's house perhaps rest on the footprint of Marie Thérèze's original home? It was suggested that a further archaeological investigation should be undertaken to settle the dispute, and our team from UCL and NSU, which was already working at Cane River, was invited to take on the task.

Our initial geophysical survey concentrated on the area test-excavated in the 1970s. There we encountered three anomalies southwest of the standing building. We test-excavated them in 2002, and also placed a trench near the flower bed which had been reported as having produced eighteenth-century ceramics in 1979. The results of our excavations followed the trend already established in the 1970s. Our anomalies turned out to be either twentieth-century areas of refuse-burning or mid-nineteenth-century scatters of refuse, and only a single small eighteenth-century sherd was found among hundreds from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Negative results of this kind can provoke a fieldwork crisis, and at such times one scrambles to regroup as quickly as possible. One of us (DM) had overlain a map of the original land survey of 1794 on a modern property map. We eyed with increasing suspicion the mismatch between the placement of the Marie Thérèze house on the 1794 survey and the position of the present standing building. What we had originally thought of as an acceptable error by the surveyor, given the methods of the time, now seemed significant: the 1794 map showed the Marie Thérèze house 50–100 m northeast of the present building. This area was just beyond the boundary of the modern Whittington/Metoyer property, so we appealed to the Bouser family, who own the adjoining land, and they graciously let us expand our study area. In the course of a week we undertook fieldwalking, shovel-testing, and eventually excavated three 1 m$^2$ test pits (Fig. 4: S, T, V) in the area indicated on the 1794 survey as the location of the original Marie Thérèze house. We should have had more respect for Pierre Maes, the 1794 surveyor – he had been spot on.

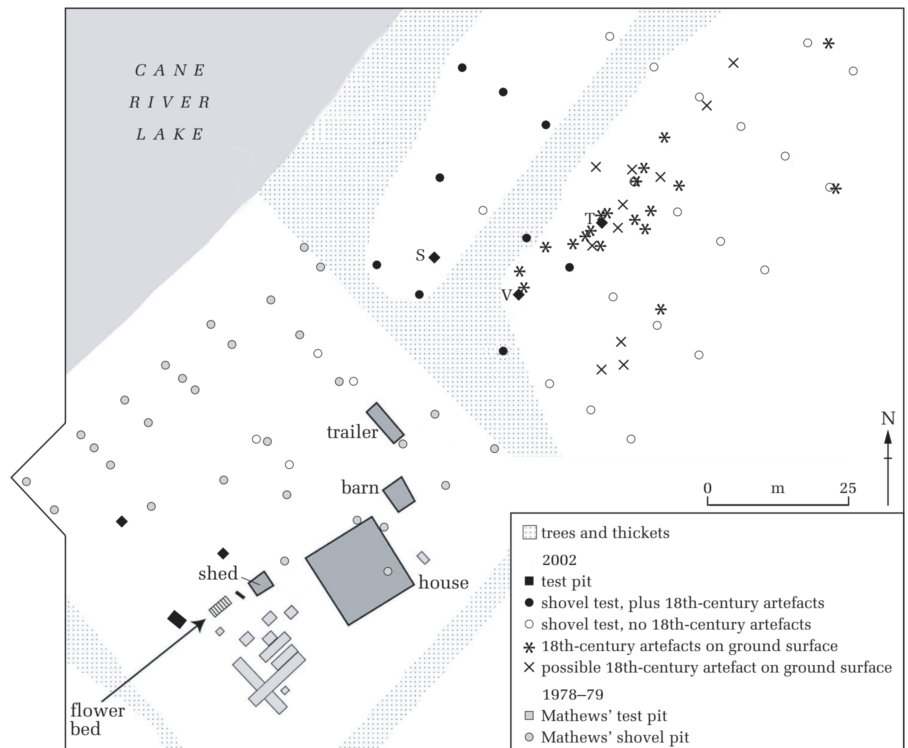


***Figure 4*** *Plan of the Whittington site, showing archaeological features investigated between 1978 and 2002, including the cluster of eighteenth-century artefacts found northeast of the present house.*

The dearth of eighteenth-century finds south of the property line now became a flood to the north of it (Fig. 4). Here we found three major categories of artefacts that are diagnostic of the eighteenth century: French faience wares (*faience brune* in the Rouen Plain style, dating to *c.* 1760–1800, was the most abundant type); Native American ceramics (i.e. Mississippi Plain wares) and Afro-colonowares (both being earthenwares fired at low temperatures, most of which were undecorated); and hand-wrought nails. We also found other probable eighteenth-century types of ceramics: hand-painted polychrome pearl wares, plain pearl wares, and possible cream wares. In contrast, we found few mid-nineteenth-century or modern artefacts. Miraculously, the vicissitudes of time had left this area relatively untouched since its abandonment. We had found, only 50 m northeast of the present standing building, a zone of approximately 40 m by 60 m with a high density of finds indicating a late eighteenth-century homestead – the missing Maison de Marie Thérèze.

The three test pits we excavated (Figs 4, 5: S, T, V) indicate that this zone still has archaeological stratigraphy to a depth of 50 cm, including surviving subsurface features. For example, in one of them we found the edge of a shallow refuse pit that contained pig bones combined with low-fired earthenwares. Such earthenwares merit extensive future investigation: were

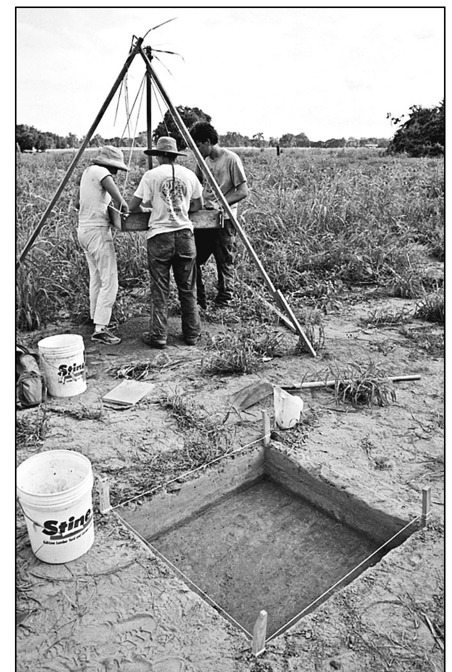

***Figure 5*** *Excavation in progress at test pit T (see Fig. 4) at the Whittington site, summer 2002.*

they made by the Kongo or Kissy slaves owned by Marie Thérèze, or do they reflect interaction with neighbouring Caddoan Native Americans? It is possible that these low-fired earthenwares reflect a variety of manufacturers, and potentially indicate shared technological expertise. The sherds await analysis in the coming months.

Our future plans are to excavate a large area in the zone at the Whittington site where eighteenth-century artefacts are concentrated, and to expand our survey into outlying areas. Additionally we plan a regional study of collections of low-fired earthenwares from plantations and contact-period Native American sites. After a frustrating start we have now found the tip of the iceberg in our investigation of the archaeology of Marie Thérèze Coincoin and the African diaspora along Cane River.[21]

## Notes

1. See G. M. Hall, *Africans in colonial Louisiana: the development of Afro-Creole culture in the eighteenth century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992).
2. See pp. 46–7 in I. Berlin, *Slaves without masters: the free negro in the antebellum South* (New York: The New Press, 1974).
3. See pp. 82–3 in L. R. Nardini Sr, *My historic Natchitoches, Louisiana, and its environment* (Natchitoches: Nardini Publishing, 1963).
4. See G. B. Mills, *The forgotten people: Cane River's Creoles of Color* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977).
5. To meet these challenges, the team members bring to the project a sound combination of qualifications and experiences. Kevin MacDonald (UCL) became interested in the Atlantic diaspora from Africa after working for over 12 years on the archaeology of West African complex societies and agricultural systems, primarily on the archaeology of the Mande peoples of Mali, Mauritania and Senegal – areas from which many of Louisiana's first generation of African Americans were enslaved. David Morgan (NSU) is an anthropologist interested expressly in the history and archaeology of cultural contact in the southeastern USA, and has previously investigated interaction between the Chickasaw Native Americans and European colonists, combining ethnohistorical documentary evidence with archaeological settlement-pattern data. Fiona Handley (UCL) is a research student working on theoretical approaches to the archaeological investigation of ethnic identity, and current issues in the presentation of African-American heritage to the public.
6. L. Tademy, *Cane River* (New York: Warner Books, 2001).
7. The word "creole" has many different usages, including "born in the New World" and "a mix of multiple cultural or linguistic elements". It is also a term used by various populations to refer to themselves. Thus, in Louisiana there are French Creoles (who differentiate themselves from the earlier refugees from French Canada known as Cajuns on the basis of their more recent arrival from France) and Creoles of Colour (people of mixed French, African and Native American heritage). In speaking of the Creoles of Cane River we imply the latter usage. See J. G. Tregle Jr, "On that word 'Creole' again: a note", *Louisiana History* **23**, 193–8, 1982.
8. See, for example, G. Cable, *Madame Delphine* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1881) and L. Saxon, *Children of strangers* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1937).
9. See F. J. Woods, *Marginality and identity: a colored Creole family through ten generations* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972).
10. See pp. 2–3 in G. B. Mills (1977: *n.* 4 above).
11. E. S. Mills, *Natchitoches: abstracts of the Catholic church registers of the French and Spanish Post of St Jean Baptiste des Natchitoches in Louisiana: 1729–1803* (New Orleans: Polyanthos, 1977).
12. See p. 32 in Woods (1972: *n.* 9 above).
13. Personal communication from J. Ravare Colson of the Louisiana Creole Heritage Center, NSU, referring to G. M. Hall, *Databases for the study of Afro-Louisiana history and genealogy, 1699–1860: computerized information from original manuscript sources*, CD-ROM (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 2000).
14. See p. 111 in G. B. Mills 1977 (*n.* 4 above).
15. Personal communication from R. Teal, a social sciences student at NSU.
16. Resistivity and magnetometry surveys work by sensing electric and magnetic fields respectively and are used to detect structures and other anomalies below the ground surface.
17. See J. H. Mathews, *Analysis of ceramics from three eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sites in the locale of Natchitoches, Louisiana* (MA thesis, Northwestern State University of Louisiana, 1983).
18. See pp. 23–31 and table 5 in Mathews (1983: *n.* 17 above).
19. The term Afro-colonware refers to low-temperature fired earthenware of the colonial period, which sometimes mimics European forms and was made cheaply by either Africans or Native Americans for sale to Europeans or for use by slaves.
20. B. L. Savage, *African-American historic places* (New York: The Preservation Press, 1994).
21. We wish to thank the Metoyer, Bouser and Roge families of Natchitoches parish and the Association for the Preservation of Historic Natchitoches for access to their land and the precious heritage resources located there. We also gratefully acknowledge financial support from the British Academy, the UCL Institute of Archaeology, the Cane River National Heritage Area and the United States National Park Service.