

Naneta St. Marc Frees Her Brother, Juan Pedro

Various manumission precedents set by 18th-century Spanish law, such as *coartación*, developed an unstable network of legal identities around free and enslaved peoples in colonial Louisiana.ⁱ These liminal legal spaces were continuously interrogated, developed, and employed by individuals and extended kinship networks in actions designed to secure the freedom of themselves and of others. This was especially true for Naneta St. Marc, *negra libre*, from Attakapas Post, the sister of Juan Pedro *alias* Bonhomme. In this 1793 case, we see Naneta calling for the emancipation of her brother. Naneta comes to court having procured both a lawyer to represent her case and an appraiser to estimate the cost of securing his freedom from *Don* Salomon Prevot. She builds her legal case around the fact that Juan Pedro sustained injuries while on Prevot's property when a *choza*, or small shack, fell on him during a hurricane.ⁱⁱ However, Prevot's legal challenge to this suit includes his named appraiser, *Don* Juan Bautista Mercier, valuing Juan Pedro at the amount of 700 *pesos*, which is double the amount that Naneta's appraiser verified before the court. In response, Naneta returns to the *cabildo* and begs the judge to appoint a third appraiser in dissension, *Don* Antonio Ramis, to complete the *coartación* proceedings. This third estimate matches the sum already presented on behalf of Naneta, 350 *pesos*, and the judge, therefore, orders a Deed of Freedom be issued as soon as Naneta pays this price.

This exchange provides a snapshot of the complex legal architecture on which freedom suits rested in colonial Louisiana. In the tenuous overlap between French and Spanish colonial regimes, precedent was consistently tested and established through the legal actions of free and enslaved Black and Indigenous individuals. In the context of Spanish colonial Louisiana, where a shortage of labor and resources meant that enslaved people were "sold at the price of gold," an enslavers' ability to make a financial return on their "investments" required that an enslaved individual's physical and mental abilities became a site for contestation. As a potential financial liability, disability, or the perception of it, led to a legal system wherein individual and systemic investments into the institution of slavery were valued more strongly than the lives and even the freedom prices of enslaved persons.ⁱⁱⁱ Here, we see Naneta deftly navigate this complex set of legal impediments to argue that her brother, Juan Pedro, should be given a fair valuation in his *coartación* proceedings due to his enslaver's immovable property, the *choza*, having done excessive harm to Juan Pedro's person, thus rendering a lack of physical capacity which decreased his *calidad*.^{iv} Building from this, Naneta's case articulates a challenge to *Don* Salomon Prevot's attempt at denying Juan Pedro justice.

Naneta uses Juan Pedro's hurricane-induced injury as grounds for legal action and successfully takes advantage of the loopholes within Spanish colonial property law that had been designed, instead, to protect the financial liabilities and interests of enslavers. Naneta successfully argues that it is both fair and just that her brother be set free at a more reasonable price. Her case offers a vivid example of the vast set of strategies employed by enslaved people and their kin in pursuing freedom, prompting compelling questions about the overlaps between wellness, disability justice, climate justice, property law, environmental protections, and the right to liberty in Louisiana across time.

ENDNOTES

i. See Steven Mintz, "Historical Context: American Slavery in Comparative Perspective," *Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History*, accessed August 2, 2024, <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/teacher-resources/historical-context-american-slavery-comparative-perspective>.

ii. In 1793, there was an unnamed storm or hurricane that affected Louisiana - and New Orleans - specifically. The weather event is referenced in several documents at the Archivo General de Indias, in Seville, Spain. See Ricard García-Herrera, Luis Gimeno, Pedro Ribera, Emiliano Hernández, "New Records of Atlantic."

iii. For more see Erwan Yevan Terrien, *Exiles and Fugitives: Labor, Mobility and Power in French Colonial Louisiana, 1699-1769*. PhD Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh (2020).

iv. "*Calidad*" implied the overall presumed quality of the person in question based upon factors such as class, lineage, and religion.

FURTHER RESOURCES



Fig. 1. This map from the Battle of New Orleans shows the property of Salomon (Santiago) Prevost, enslaver of Juan Pedro *alias* Bonhomme. Though Naneta was a resident of the Attakapas District, Prevost owned properties in the Vieux Carré (on the 500 block of Decatur, later owned by the husband of the Baroness de Pontalba Michaela de Almonester, Joseph-Xavier Célestin Delfau de Pontalba) and plantations (indigo and dairy) in the present-day areas of Holy Cross and Chalmette. In the Lower 9, his neighbors included none other than Roberto Montreuil, enslaver of Roseta and her son Domingo *alias* Lubin, as well as the infamous Macarty family, amongst others. **Source:** Arsene Lacarriere Latour, *Map Shewing [sic] The Landing of the British Army its several Encampments and Fortifications on the Mississippi* (Philadelphia, 1815).

Saturday, May 3rd 1783

Record Source: Unknown Record Type: donation
 Authority: F. Rodriguez (Notary)
 Authority Date: Not Given

From: Andres Almonester y Roxas **To:** Luisa de Laronde Almonester

Brief Description: By Act of Donation. A main two-story house fronting the Levee, bounded by houses owned by Estevan Miro and by Theresa de Grandpre. The house measures 150' front, built of brick with front and rear galleries, six warehouses or cellars fronting the river and two more fronting the yard, with fourteen rooms on the upper floor, seven facing the river and seven facing the patio, all of them provided with brick chimneys, doors and glass windows, two brick stairways, one at either end of the house, with a paved wine cellars at the end of the stairs. There are two houses in the patio, one of brick and one of wood; four large doors fronting the street, and one carriage door, a two story coach house 60' long, all built of brick with wooden floors and shingled (or tiled) roof. Mother and daughter accepted the donation.

Friday, April 19th 1782

Record Source: Original Act Record Type: [sale?]
 Volume: 5 Authority: L. Mazange (Notary)
 Page: 397 Authority Date: Friday, April 19th 1782

From: Narciso de Alva **To:** Andres Almonester y Roxas

Brief Description: One house, on a lot of ground, bounded on one side by the house of Estevan Miro and on the other side by that of Theresa Grandpre. The house, built of brick, has 150' of front, having galleries in the front and rear, with six wine vaults, some facing the river and others on the patio. Fourteen upper rooms, seven of which face the river and seven facing the patio, having brick chimneys and six ordinary doors and windows of glass. Two stairways with a paved wine cellar at the extremity of the stairs. Two houses in patio, one of brick and one of wood. Four large doors to the street and a high coach house 60' long and built of brick, floored with planks and ceiled, roofed with tiles [sic]. This property was owned by the heirs of Juan Bautista Prevost, former Agent of the "Compañia de Indias" in this colony, as certified in the inventory before Garic, July 20, 1769.

Tuesday, November 14th 1780

Record Source: Original Act Record Type: [sale?]
 Page: 491 Authority: Andres Almonester y Roxas
 Authority Date: Tuesday, November 14th 1780

From: Juan Prevost **To:** Narciso de Alva

Brief Description: Power of Attorney granted to Santiago Prevost, December 19, 1771, as assignee to the Prevost heirs, by Juan Prevost, residing in Paris, France. Two story house, owned by Juan Prevost, situated fronting the river, and bounded by houses of Estevan Miro and Theresa de Grandpre. As described above. House inherited at the death of his father, Juan Bautista Prevost, former agent of the "Compañia de Indias" in this Colony, as certified by the inventory before Juan Bautista Garic, July 16, 1769.

Sunday, July 16th 1769

Record Source: Unknown Record Type: inventory
 Authority: Jean Baptiste Garic (Notary)
 Authority Date: Not Given

Agent/Single Party Act/Other: Juan Bautista Prevost

Brief Description: Inventory of the Succession of Juan Bautista Prevost not found.

Fig. 2. Records of the Prevost family's Decatur St. property as recorded by the Collins C. Diboll Vieux Carré Digital Survey.