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# ***Demythcizing History: Marie Thérèse Coincoin, Tourism, and the National Historical Landmarks Program***

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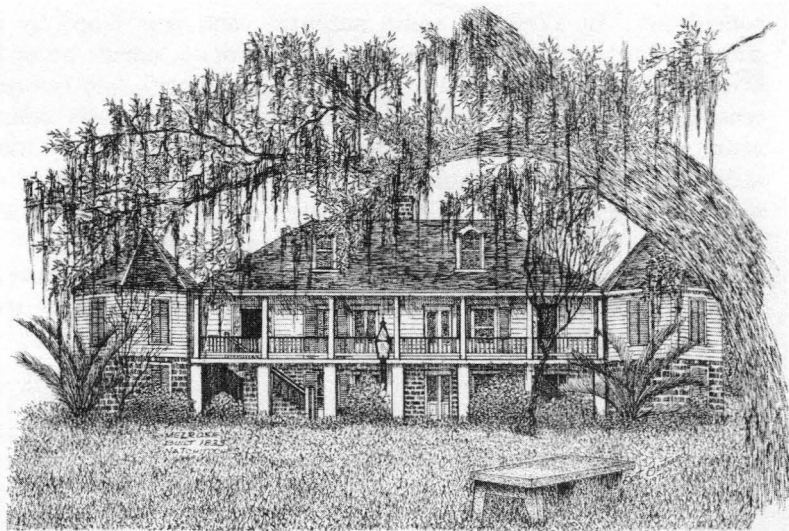
Oral history plays a complicated role in scholarly disciplines. Bits and shards of mythos can bridge gaps in the documentary trail and suggest insight into matters that time obscures. Lore, legend, and family tradition, however, are also tricksters that betray those who trust them. Within different branches of a culture or a family, stories often wear starkly different guises. Many accounts spring from a core of truth, but pride, prejudice, ideology, and financial interests—as well as faulty memories—can morph oral accounts into a caricature of reality. Moreover, many so-called traditions, when tracked to their roots, prove to be of quite-modern invention.

Colonial Louisiana's legendary freedwoman Marie Thérèse dite Coincoin provides a case in point. She demonstrates how legend is born, how lore is nourished, and how well-documented facts can be ignored when they conflict with an appealing story. This article examines the historical evidence created by and about a black matriarch celebrated on Cane River for six decades. It reexamines the lore that has re-imagined her life, character, and

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cultural contributions; the historical chaos created by writers who theorize without adequate research; and the claims that credit Coincoin with founding two historical landmarks in the Cane River Creole National Historic Park—the humble farmstead cottage now called "Coincoin-Prudhomme House" and the moss-draped plantation known as "Melrose." The surviving evidence, unusually abundant, begs for rewriting both tourism literature and official narratives of the National Historical Landmarks Program.<sup>1</sup>

#### Melrose Plantation



Melrose, Home of Jean-Baptiste Louis Metoyer, built 1832. Image courtesy of Bert Bertrand.

<sup>1</sup>This position is also advocated by an archaeological team studying Cane River since 2000. See, particularly, David W. Morgan, Kevin C. MacDonald, and Fiona J. L. Handley, "Economics and Authenticity: A Collision of Interpretations in Cane River National Heritage Area, Louisiana," *George Wright Forum*, 23 (2006): 44-61, archived online, <http://www.georgewright.org/231morgan.pdf>, note particularly the addendum attached to the online edition. Also MacDonald, et al., "The Archaeology of Local Myths and Heritage Tourism," in Robert Layton and Peter G. Stone, *A Future for Archaeology: The Past in the Present* (New York, 2006), 123-44, and MacDonald, et al., "The Cane River African Diaspora Archaeological Project: Prospectus and Initial Results," in Jay B. Haviser and Kevin C. MacDonald, eds., *African Re-Genesis: Confronting Social Issues in the Diaspora* (London, 2006), 123-44.

In 1972, the local preservation society commissioned the first historical documentation of the Melrose Plantation.<sup>2</sup> Much had been written already on the site by journalists and an occasional scholar, all of whom declared they were reporting "family tradition" or "local lore." Depending on which writer one consulted, Coincoin was a Native American born at the outpost of Natchitoches, or an African child captured in the Congo, or a woman brought from Guinea. Her father was a king in Africa, a medicine man from Hispaniola, or the local French commandant. On the other hand, she may have been that commandant's concubine. In 1750, by some accounts, she was freed by the commandant, or perhaps his heirs. Thereupon, either he or the king gave her a vast tract of land on Cane River's Isle Brevelle, where she had built a "fine mansion" in 1743. As a free woman, some accounts averred, she owned fifty-eight slaves. Others inflated the figure to a hundred, while still others contended she never owned slaves at all; rather, she built her plantation with "coworkers," after she bought their freedom.<sup>3</sup>

The lore continues, presenting its own dilemma: Considering all the variations in the genesis legend for this site, most

<sup>2</sup>The 1972 researchers were the present writer and her husband, both then history students. The National Park Service and its Historic Landmarks Program variously call the site "Melrose" and "Yucca," asserting "Yucca" to be an earlier name. Both names are modern inventions. Prior to the 1930s, records give the land no name at all; thereafter it was consistently called "Melrose." Naming plantations was not a custom practiced by Creole settlers of Natchitoches.

For a current official account of Melrose's origin, still perpetuating the myths, see National Park Service, *National Historic Landmarks Program*, <http://tps.cr.nps.gov/nhl/detail.cfm?ResourceId=1231&ResourceType=District>. See also the announcement, "Melrose Plantation Becomes National Historic Landmark," *Louisiana History*, 17 (1976): 68; that text, drawn from Park Service materials, asserts nine errors of historical fact in its first six sentences. All points will be addressed herein.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, D. Garber, "History of Melrose Plantation Like Turning Pages of Novel," *Dallas Morning News*, October 21, 1951, 8; "Melrose: Home of Famous Louisiana Authors," *Louisiana REA News* (July 1953), 11; Cedric Dover, *American Negro Art* (New York, 1960), text at plate 3; "Sale of Plantation Biggest in History," *Alexandria Daily Town Talk*, April 21, 1970; "Cluster of Treasures Along Cane River: Melrose Makes BIG List," *New Orleans Times Picayune*, July 2, 1972; and other "traditions" reported only by Sister Frances J. Woods in *Marginality and Identity: A Colored Creole Family through Ten Generations* (Baton Rouge, 1972), 32.

promulgated by professional writers and scholars who attribute them to "tradition," how can any of it be considered history?

### TRACKING THE LEGENDS

A core principle of historical investigation dictates that derivative sources be tracked back to their origin while seeking out other original sources independently created. Doing so for Coincoin and the lands associated with her is instructive. The earliest known recording of so-called traditions about Melrose dates to 1927. From then until 1950, the accounts credit not a *female* founder, but rather a "Santo Domingan" named Louis Metoyer.<sup>4</sup>

The so-called legend that Melrose Plantation was begun in the mid-1700s by an extraordinary freed-slave woman was itself born in the mid-twentieth century from the imagination of François Mignon, a man who also invented his own identity.<sup>5</sup> By the time

<sup>4</sup>William Spratling, *Old Plantation Houses in Louisiana* (New York, 1927), and Spratling, "Cane River Portraits," *Scribner's Magazine*, 83 (1928), 404-09; "Melrose Manor on Cane River Stands as Relic of World's Strangest Empire," *Hammond (La.) Progress*, March 25, 1938; Herman de B. Seebold, *Old Louisiana Plantation Homes and Family Trees*, 2 vols. (Baton Rouge, 1941), 1:361-63; Harnett T. Kane, *Plantation Parade: The Grand Manner in Louisiana* (New York, 1945), 265-67. A spate of accounts two decades later confused the identity of that male founder, variously citing him as "Thomas Metoyer," a Frenchman from Paris or Lyon; as "Augustin Metoyer," a multiracial son of Coincoin and "Thomas"; and as "Peter Victorin Coin-coin," a black male from Saint-Domingue. See, for example, the *Times Picayune*, June 4, 1970, sect. 6, 8, calling the founder "a Frenchman, Augustin Metoyer," and the *New Orleans Clarion Herald* of two weeks later, June 18, 1970, sect. 1, 1, asserting, "The French father of Augustin Metoyer built 'Yucca house' in the late 1700's and then the African house to remind his wife of her native lands."

An even stranger variant in the new Louisiana Digital Library, for which the origin of the attributed data cannot be verified, is a description attached to a photograph said to be taken "circa 1920s" (should be 1930s) in the "Library at Melrose Plantation in Lyle Saxon's Cabin." The photograph depicts the portrait of Coincoin's son Nicolas Augustin Metoyer (posing alone) and cites him as "former owner, *Spanish nobleman*, Nicholas Augustin Metoyer, and his negro son." See "Louisiana Historical Photographs Collection of the State Library," *Louisiana Digital Library*, <http://louisdl.louislibraries.org>.

<sup>5</sup>François Mignon grew up as Frank VerNooy Mineah, in Cortland, New York. The standard biography is that of Oliver Ford, "François Mignon: The Man Who Would Be French," *Southern Studies*, N.S. 2 (1991): 51-9. This biography rests heavily on third-party accounts rather than the many primary-source records created by Mignon himself and leaves unaddressed conflicting issues regarding

he arrived on Cane River, Melrose had been owned for nearly a century by white planters.<sup>6</sup> Its chatelaine was a widow who had created her own identity as a patroness of the arts.<sup>7</sup> Mignon spun new narratives for Melrose, creating a black matriarchal founder to serve point-counterpoint with the modern white matriarch who had regenerated Melrose as a cultural center.<sup>8</sup> In the community around him, families of color told intriguing tales of how the whole Isle had belonged to them before the Civil War.<sup>9</sup> Portraits survived to attest their past wealth and culture. From the parish priest, Mignon learned of genealogical tables compiled by a nineteenth-century pastor, tracing the family to a freed black woman named "Marie Thérèse."<sup>10</sup>

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his birth. Coincoin's promotion by Mignon, who spent his last three decades at Melrose under the sponsorship of the plantation's owners, may be explained by a local belief that his father was a prominent local planter and his mother a young girl descended many times from Coincoin. These points are being explored in a forthcoming paper.

<sup>6</sup>In 1847, the property was auctioned to pay the debts of its young owner, Théophile Louis Metoyer who, as a teen, inherited the lands of his grandfather, Coincoin's son Louis. The white purchasers, Henry and Hypolite Hertzog, bought the land for their widowed sister, Jeanne Françoise "Fanny" (Mme. Dassize) Bossier. In 1879, Fanny also lost the property at a creditor's auction. The creditor who bought it, F. R. Cauranneau, sold the land in 1884 to the Irish immigrant Joseph Henry, from whom it was inherited by son John H. Henry, whose family remained in possession until 1970. Henry heirs then sold the plantation to an agribusiness, who donated the estate grounds to the local preservation society. For the records documenting this chain of title, see Sheriff to Hertzog, Natchitoches Conv. Book 33:133; Hertzog to Bossier, Conv. Books 61:54 and 74:1; Cauranneau vs. Herzog et al., Conv. Book 77:205; Cauranneau to Henry, Conv. Book 82:141; Eugenie Henry to District Court, Petition for Probate of Will, Succ. Book 41:203; Heirs of Jos. Henry to John. H. Henry, Deed Book 98:687; and Succession of John H. Henry, no. 2978½, all in the Clerk of Court's Office, Natchitoches, La.

<sup>7</sup>For a contemporary account of Leudevine Carmelite "Cammie" Garrett, widow of John H. Henry, see Kane, *Plantation Parade*, 265-84.

<sup>8</sup>See, for example, Garber, "History of Melrose Plantation" and "Melrose: Home of Famous Louisiana Authors," 11.

<sup>9</sup>Several such stories are spun in François Mignon, *Plantation Memo: Plantation Life in Louisiana, 1750-1970, and Other Matter* (Baton Rouge, 1972), a collection of weekly newspaper columns.

<sup>10</sup>Father A. Dupré's manuscript is undated but apparently was compiled soon after his 1878 arrival. Dupré's tables do not use Marie Thérèse's African name, Coincoin. However, a successor in the 1930s wrote a brief account of the parish, identifying the family's matriarch phonetically as *Cuancan*. (See J. A.

With these random shards of history, the legally blind Mignon did what story tellers—not researchers—do: He spun tales.<sup>11</sup> By the time historical site documentation began in 1972 his fancies had taken on the cloak of "tradition." Mignon's patroness had died, and the estate grounds had been given to the local preservation society, the Association of Natchitoches Women for the Preservation of Historic Natchitoches. Considering the organization's name, it is not surprising that Mignon's mythos of a fabled plantation bookended by two phenomenal women, became the official narrative. From that point on, the association was vested financially and emotionally in the "Coincoin Myth."

Historical records tell a different story. Part of that story is reported in a tourist booklet published by the society in 1973, an edited version of the report submitted at the completion of the historical study.<sup>12</sup> More of that story, with appropriate

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Baumgartner, untitled typescript, 4 pp.; copy provided by the late Arthur C. Watson, attorney for the local preservation society). The fact that this spelling has not been found for her in any earlier document suggests that Fr. Baumgartner was not working from documentary evidence but was writing about matters he heard orally in the community. This indication that Coincoin's offspring retained oral knowledge of her identity well into the twentieth century contradicts Sister Woods's contention that "Marie's children did not intend to perpetuate her memory" and "her children ... desire[d] to obliterate her memory," *Marginality and Identity*, 45.

<sup>11</sup> Reporters of the 1950s, quoting Mignon, gave varying accounts. Garber attributed Melrose to "Marie Therese" (but not "Coincoin"), asserting that the freedwoman "clear[ed] some of the forests of her grant and sold the timber to the West Indies," that she bore eight children by Metoyer, gave plantations to seven of them, "and to the eighth, Louis Metoyer, she willed Melrose." (Louis was actually the third of ten Metoyer children; and no will or succession exists for Coincoin.) Two years later, the *REA News* reporter (citing Mignon as his sole source of information) spun an account of "a black lass from the Congo" named "Marie," who passed the plantation to her son Augustin, who then left it to his son Louis, the 1833 builder of the manor house. (Louis was Augustin's brother.) That *REA News* account presented "Marie" as the concubine of Comdt. Louis Juchereau de St. Denis, asserting that he freed her and their eight children. In 1958, Mignon personally wrote that the "first mistress of Melrose" was "Marie Therese Coin-Coin, a Congo-born slave girl" who built Melrose's older structures in 1750; see *Natchitoches: Oldest Settlement in the Louisiana Purchase* (Natchitoches, La., 1958), 48-52. By 1971, however, he had backdated Coincoin's construction activity to 1743; François Mignon, "Cane River Memo: Melrose Highlights," *Natchitoches Times*, December 19, 1971. Mignon presents yet other variations in a recorded interview, undated, that is archived in Tulane University Special Collections Department as "A Visit to Melrose Plantation with François Mignon."

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth S. Mills and Gary B. Mills, *Melrose* (Natchitoches, 1973).

corrections by one of the authors, followed in a 1974 doctoral study of the larger community, later published by Louisiana State University Press as *The Forgotten People*.<sup>13</sup> Still more was published thereafter in many peer-reviewed forums, as the same researchers continued their study of Cane River history.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup>Gary B. Mills, *The Forgotten People: Cane River's Creoles of Color* (Baton Rouge, 1977).

<sup>14</sup>All subsequent publications in which the Millses explored various aspects of Coincoin's family and legacy (cited below) credit Melrose and other Isle Breville plantations to Louis Metoyer and his siblings. None portray Coincoin as a mistress of her children's lands or as founder of their enterprises.

By Gary B. Mills: "A Portrait of Achievement: Nicolas Augustin Metoyer, f.m.c.," *Red River Valley Historical Review*, 2 (1975): 332-48; "Coincoin: An Eighteenth-Century 'Liberated' Woman," *Journal of Southern History*, 42 (1976): 203-22, reprinted in Darlene Clark Hine, ed., *Black Women in United States History* (Brooklyn, 1990); "Patriotism Frustrated: The 'Native Guards' of Confederate Natchitoches," *Louisiana History*, 18 (1977): 37-51; "Piety and Prejudice: A Colored Catholic Community in the Antebellum South," in Jon L. Wakelyn and Randall M. Miller, eds., *Catholics in the Old South: Essays on Church and Culture* (Macon, Ga., 1983), 171-94; "Liberté, Fraternité, and Everything but Egalité: Cane River's *Citoyens de Couleur*," in *North Louisiana to 1865: Essays on the Region and Its History* (Ruston, La., 1984), 93-112; "Marie Thérèse ditte Coincoin" and "Louis Metoyer," *Dictionary of Louisiana Biography*, Glenn R. Conrad, ed. (Baton Rouge, 1989), 1: 189-90, 565; and "Coincoin (1792-1816)," in Darlene Clark Hine, ed., *Black Women in America: A Historical Encyclopedia*, 2 vols. (Brooklyn, 1993), 1:258-60.

By Elizabeth Shown Mills and Gary B. Mills: "Slaves and Masters: The Louisiana Metoyers," *National Genealogical Society (NGS) Quarterly*, 70 (1982): 163-89. Also in non-juried media: "Luxury on the Cane," *Mid-South* (November 27, 1977), 10-11; "The Forgotten People," *Family Heritage*, 2 (1979), 78-81; and "The Louisiana Metoyers: Melrose's Story of Land and Masters," *American Visions* (June 2000).

By Elizabeth Shown Mills: "Quintanilla's Crusade, 1775-1783: 'Moral Reform' and Its Consequences on the Natchitoches Frontier," *Louisiana History*, 52 (2001): 277-302; "Breathing Life into Shadowy Women from the Past," cover story, *Solander: The Magazine of the Historical Novel Society*, 9 (2005): 21-24, for the methodology used to reconstruct Coincoin's life; "Isle of Canes and Issues of Conscience: Master-Slave Sexual Dynamics and Slaveholding by Free People of Color," *Southern Quarterly*, 43 (2006): 158-75, archived online, [http://find-articles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa4074/is\\_200601/ai\\_n17180350/pg\\_1?tag=artBody;coll1](http://find-articles.com/p/articles/mi_qa4074/is_200601/ai_n17180350/pg_1?tag=artBody;coll1); "Which Marie Louise Is 'Mariotte'? Sorting Slaves with Common Names," *NGS Quarterly*, 94 (2006): 183-204, a biography of Coincoin's manumitted sister, separating her identity from that of Coincoin's same-named daughter with whom historians have confused her, archived online <http://www.bcgcertification.org/skillbuilders/MariotteNGSQv94-183-204.pdf>; "Documenting a Slave's Birth, Parentage, and Origins (Marie Thérèse Coincoin, 1742-1816): A Test of 'Oral History,'" *NGS Quarterly*, 96 (2008): 245-66; and "Marie Thérèse Coincoin (1742-1816): Cane River Slave, Slave Owner, and Paradox," in Janet Allured and



Unfortunately, across the decades both the tourism industry and many scholars have debated Melrose mostly from the stump of the preservation society's 1973 tourist booklet, rather than the juried works of subsequent decades.

Ongoing archaeological studies within the Cane River Creole National Historical Park need a summation of the results of those thirty-nine years of historical research. Material findings and the documentary trail are consistent. However, the narratives being used to historically ground the region need significant foundational corrections.

### COINCOIN: THE REALITY

Indisputably, Coincoin was born at Natchitoches in August 1742. Her parents were African-born slaves belonging to the post commandant.<sup>15</sup> The tribal origins of her parents are unknown, but clues exist in the African names discovered for at least five of their eleven children.<sup>16</sup> Coincoin herself, at sixteen to twenty-four, bore five children in a slave union.<sup>17</sup> Her mistress then

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Judith F. Gentry, *Louisiana Women: Their Lives and Times* (Athens, Ga., 2009), 10-29. Also in non-juried media: "Marie Therese dite Coincoin: A Cultural Transfer Agent," *Four Women of Cane River: Their Contributions to the Cultural Life of the Area* (Natchitoches, 1980), 1-14, a publication of symposium papers; "Forgotten People of America," *Ancestry Magazine*, 22 (2004), 17-22; and *Isle of Canes* (Provo, Utah, 2004), a four-generation historical novel based on the author's research in the archives of six nations.

<sup>15</sup>Supporting evidence is detailed in Elizabeth Shown Mills, "Documenting a Slave's Birth, Parentage, and Origins (Marie Thérèse Coincoin, 1742-1816): A Test of Oral History," *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*, 96 (2008): 245-66. The landmark announcement ("Melrose Plantation," 68) presents Coincoin as Congo-born.

<sup>16</sup>The African names given to four of Coincoin's siblings were discovered by the present writer while reconstructing the life of each sibling. In birth order: Dgimby (female, *var.* Chimba, Dhimby, Goinbeau, Gombeau, Jinby), Choera (male, *var.* Kiokera, Quiquiria), Chocras (male, *var.* Chucha), and Yancdon (female, *var.* Yancdose). Documented variations of Coincoin's name are Coinquin, Coincuoin, Coinquoin, Connequoin, Couancan, GrandCoin, KeKouen, QuandCoin, Qucouan, QuenQuen, and QuoinQuoin. All these are variations in original documents, not in transcribed records or secondary sources that could represent a misreading of original script.

<sup>17</sup>Mills writings on Coincoin in the 1970s speak of four children born of her slave union, making for her a known total of fourteen children. Their discovery of a fifteenth child, Coincoin's first-born son, was presented in their 1982 article,

rented her out to a bachelor merchant from France, Claude Thomas Pierre Metoyer.<sup>18</sup> Coincoin remained with Metoyer for two decades and bore him ten children. Midway through their relationship, they were criminally prosecuted by a new priest.<sup>19</sup> To avoid the penalty imposed upon masters who fathered children by their slaves,<sup>20</sup> Metoyer privately freed Coincoin.<sup>21</sup> She then remained with him for another decade, until he took a legal wife.

Prior to his marriage, Metoyer filed a copy of a donation made to the woman he had put aside. Therein, he made two promises: First, he pledged an annuity to help rear their younger, freeborn children; second, he quitclaimed to her a tract of eighty arpents (roughly sixty-eight acres), next door to his own plantation.<sup>22</sup>

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"Slaves and Masters," 171-72. Most current scholars continue to attribute only fourteen children to Coincoin, apparently drawing only from the publications of the 1970s.

<sup>18</sup>Recent archaeological accounts erroneously identify Metoyer as "an officer of the fort" and "a French soldier stationed at the post"; see Laura S. Gates, "Frankly, Scarlett, We Do Give a Damn: The Making of a New National Park," *George Wright Forum*, 19 (2002): 32-43; and National Park Service, *Cane River National Heritage Area I*, <http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/travel/caneriver/-creole-culture.htm>, para. 3. To the contrary, officers and soldiers "stationed at the post" (or fort) were career military personnel who could be (and often were) dispatched to any other part of the king's domain. The merchant Metoyer, like all able-bodied adult male settlers in every community, was part of the local militia. A 1780 muster roll identifies him as that year's *marechal de logis*, the equivalent of a modern staff-sergeant. See Papeles Procedentes de Cuba, Archivo General de Indias, Seville, leg. 193-A; translated and published in Elizabeth Shown Mills, *Natchitoches Colonials: Censuses, Military Rolls and Tax Lists, 1722-1803* (Chicago, 1981), 37-9.

<sup>19</sup>*Rex vs. DeSoto*, Doc. 1227, Natchitoches Colonial Archives, Clerk of Court's Office, Natchitoches, La., hereafter cited as NCA.

<sup>20</sup>Under the "black code" then in force at Natchitoches, black women convicted of "scandalous libertinage" were to "ride the wooden horse" in the public square, then receive one hundred lashes; see Doc. 652, NCA. Additionally, Louisiana's *Code Noir* decreed that males who fathered children by their slave women should suffer having the women and their children seized and sold at New Orleans for the benefit of the hospital; see *Code Noir ou Loi Municipale Servant de Reglement* (New Orleans, 1777), art. 10, 3.

<sup>21</sup>Coincoin was freed by a "private paper," unrecorded but acknowledged in Metoyer's unprobated will of February 26, 1783; see Acts of Leonardo Mazange, vol. 7 (Jan. 2-Apr. 7, 1783), 188-91, New Orleans Notarial Archives.

<sup>22</sup>Details of this commitment appear amid this paper's development of the history of Coincoin's farmstead.

There, at what is now called Cedar Bend on the Côte Joyeuse, a ten-mile stretch of Red River (now Cane River) that linked Natchitoches on the north to Isle Brevelle on the south, Coincoin planted tobacco.<sup>23</sup> She trapped bears and turkeys, selling their by-products at Natchitoches and New Orleans.<sup>24</sup> Tradition also asserts that she manufactured medicine. That profession is documentable for her one free sister, adding some likelihood to the belief that Coincoin herself was a *médicine*.<sup>25</sup> With her profits, she set out to buy the freedom of her first set of children, who were by then scattered from Opelousas to Nacogdoches. In time, she also bought the freedom of some of her grandchildren.<sup>26</sup>

Six years into her independence, late in 1793 or early 1794, Coincoin petitioned the local commandant for a larger concession.

<sup>23</sup>Writers frequently assert that Coincoin planted indigo—another Mignon invention. No known evidence suggests that she planted any income-producing crop other than tobacco. Indigo was grown by some Natchitoches planters, including her neighbor Jean Baptiste Ailhaud Ste. Anne, whose 1794 survey marks the site of his *indigoterie*; see Maës plat for S90 T8N R6W, Natchitoches District, State Land Office, Baton Rouge, La., hereafter cited as SLO. For the apparent origin of the tale that Coincoin herself grew indigo, see Mignon, "The Story of Melrose," in *Natchitoches: Oldest Settlement in the Louisiana Purchase* (Natchitoches, 1958), 48-52, particularly 49.

<sup>24</sup>In 1792, Coincoin and Pierre Metoyer together sent a *gabarre* and a *bateau* to New Orleans, laden with skins, barrels of oil, and tobacco; see "État de la Cargaison d'un Bateau .... et d'un gabarre a Marie Thérèse, Negresse libre," Natchitoches, April 20, 1792, Jack D. L. Holmes Collection (filmed documents from Papeles de Estado, Archivo Historico Nacional de Seville), reel 1, unnumbered frames, Northwestern State University. In his 1801 will, Metoyer noted a debt to Coincoin for turkeys (wild game, not domesticated fowls); see "Court Record Book" [1799-1804], unpaginated, Melrose Collection, Cammie G. Henry Research Center, Northwestern State University, hereafter cited as Melrose Collection.

<sup>25</sup>*Rex vs. Joseph LaCosta (var. De Acosta)*, Doc. 1788, NCA, and the continuation of this case at New Orleans, for which a translation of those higher court records appear in Laura Porteous, "Index to Spanish Judicial Records of Louisiana," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, 26 (1943): 897-906; also Elizabeth Shown Mills, "Which Marie Louise is 'Mariotte?' Sorting Slaves with Common Names," *National Society Quarterly*, 94 (2006): 183-204.

<sup>26</sup>Dolet to Coincoin, September 9, 1786, "Old Natchitoches Data," 2:289, Melrose Collection; Coinquin to Marie Louise, January 29, 1795, Doc. 2596, NCA; De Soto to Marie Thérèse, September 28, 1790, Doc. 2804, NCA; Coincoin to Catiche, August 30, 1794, Doc. 2552, NCA; and Gil y Barbo to Metoyer, 1793, *Translations of Statistical and Census Reports of Texas, 1782-1836, and Sources Documenting the Black in Texas, 1603-1803*, 3 rolls (San Antonio, Tx., 1979), 3:826-29.

Her application was forwarded to New Orleans and approved for the standard size: 800 arpents.<sup>27</sup> She did not seek alluvial farmland to expand her planting operation; instead, she sought piney woods for a *vacherie*, where cattle would be able to graze. This and other business dealings offer a glimpse into her economic strategies. Farming was labor intensive, beyond her physical capabilities after fifteen childbirths; but cattle was a resource that multiplied itself with a minimum of oversight. Also in this decade, that of her fifties, she acquired one African-born slave woman. Over the next fifteen years, she would add two more African-born males. This trio also became a self-expanding investment.<sup>28</sup>

By 1807, Coincoin retired from farming. She closed down her Old River *vacherie*, although she continued to pay taxes on the

<sup>27</sup>U. S. Serial Patent file 437,269, Maria Therese Metoyer, General Land Office Records, RG 49, National Archives, and Affidavit of Pierre Coinquin for Marie Therese, *négresse libre* (undated but elsewhere set at December 1806), file "OPEL: February 1794," Opelousas Notarial Records Collection, Louisiana State Archives, Baton Rouge, La., hereafter cited as ONRC. (The dates under which these Opelousas documents are filed represent the earliest date that appears on a document—a date frequently different from the one on which a record was created).

<sup>28</sup>For an examination of Coincoin's role as a planter and slave owner, see Elizabeth Shown Mills, "Marie Thérèse Coincoin: Cane River Slave, Slave Owner, and Paradox," in Janet Allured and Judith Gentry, eds., *Louisiana Women: Their Lives and Times* (Athens, Ga., 2009): 10-29. One thin thread of evidence (not discussed there or in any prior work) suggests that Coincoin, in the wake of Pierre's remarriage, considered leaving her lands and relocating to Opelousas, where her former mistress had moved with two of Coincoin's children. The Natchitoches index to colonial records has an entry for yet another missing document: "1790, Le petite Qucouan to Bernarde, fwc, sale of land, [Doc.] 2239." No other individual at Natchitoches carried that peculiar "Q" name or anything phonetically similar—only Coincoin who appears in one other contemporary record as "le petite Coincoin." Ursulle Bernarde was a neighbor of Coincoin on the Joyous Coast, but no subsequent record treats her as a landowner. Meanwhile, on September 28, 1790, Coincoin was in Opelousas where she paid a small sum down toward the purchase of a daughter and grandson and bought cows for them to raise to meet future payments; Doc. 2804, NCA (not filed until 1796). The Qucouan document is filed sequentially at Natchitoches with several created by Coincoin's former owner and that woman's son and son-in-law. All things considered, Coincoin might have conveyed her farmstead to Bernarde on credit, before leaving for Opelousas, after which the land reverted back to her for nonpayment or other cause. Coincoin's whereabouts between the tax rolls of March 1, 1790, and April 20, 1792, are unaccounted for, except for the Opelousas document.

land. She turned her Cedar Bend farmstead over to a newly freed son, Pierre Metoyer Jr. She then poured her savings into one final investment, paying cash for a hundred or so acres next door to that farmstead.<sup>29</sup> Again, that land was not to enlarge her own planting operation; rather, it was a stake for another son, Pierre Toussaint, who had grown to adulthood too late to get free land from the Spanish Crown. From that point until her death nine years later,<sup>30</sup> Coincoin created only one other set of records—a rash of them in March and April 1816, by which she disposed of all her marketable goods. She sold the farmstead at Cedar Bend to a neighbor; her son Pierre Jr., who had taken it over by then, had moved downriver to the Isle. She sold the land next door to the son who still farmed it, Pierre Toussaint. She distributed her slaves among her offspring.<sup>31</sup> Recent works by archaeologist Laura Gates and historian Betje Black Klier, asserting that Coincoin died owning "12,000 acres and (at least) ninety-nine slaves," cannot be reconciled with the actual records.<sup>32</sup>

This vignette in no way does justice to Coincoin's character or the belief system that shaped her actions. Those points were recently explored elsewhere.<sup>33</sup> What remains to be done here is to analyze the historical evidence against the myths and narratives published for the two historical landmarks dedicated to her, both

<sup>29</sup>This series of transactions, central to the history of Coincoin-Prudhomme House, are misreported in the site's official narratives, thereby altering the history of the site. They will be examined at length in this paper.

<sup>30</sup>A recent archaeological essay asserts that Coincoin was still alive in 1820 and enumerated on that year's census at Cedar Bend. To the contrary, the householder of that document was a male (her eldest black son, Nicolas Coincoin *dit* Chiquito), living at Cedar Bluff, north of Natchitoches on land that his half-brother Augustin Metoyer had claimed (Private Land Claim B1955, S39&75 T10N R7W) before exchanging it for Nicolas's claim (R&R no. 307, S68 & 114 T8N R6W). The physical location of the male "Coincoin" of 1820 is verified by reconstructing the landholdings of his census neighbors. For the archaeological study in question, see MacDonald, et al., "The Archaeology of Local Myths," 133.

<sup>31</sup>Coincoin to Suzanne Metoyer, Joseph Metoyer, Pierre Metoyer (three documents), Jean Baptiste Metoyer (grandson), Louis Metoyer, Augustin Metoyer, and Jean Baptiste Florentine (also a grandson whose surname, Conant, is omitted), Natchitoches Conv. Book 3: 524-38.

<sup>32</sup>Gates, "Frankly, Scarlett, We Do Give a Damn," 32-43; and Betje Black Klier, *Pavie in the Borderlands* (Baton Rouge, 2000), 15.

<sup>33</sup>Mills, "Marie Thérèse Coincoin."

of which serve as linchpins for the Cane River Creole National Historical Park.

### HISTORIC SITE 1: THE COINCOIN-PRUDHOMME HOUSE

This two-room, one-and-a-half-story Creole cabin, considered a "rare surviving example of a basic Norman-plan Creole plantation house," stands on Coincoin's farmstead. According to the National Parks Service, "*Local tradition* holds that the Maison de Marie Thérèse is the house where Coincoin lived while she was managing her plantation."<sup>34</sup> That so-called tradition, however, is of totally modern vintage, born of opposing ideologies served by a common cause.

Amid heated debate in the 1970s over Coincoin's contribution to local history, a son of the last private owners of Melrose tore siding off a standing building at Coincoin's farmstead. Finding a construction of *bousillage* (a mud- and deer-hair compound used by Creoles well into the 1800s), he penned a lengthy feature in the local newspaper, arguing this proved Coincoin never lived in Melrose, his childhood home. Because the cabin stood on land that the 1972 study had identified as her donation from Metoyer, and because its material and construction methods were in use during her lifetime, Joseph Henry contended that the cabin was Coincoin's sole residence. Nowhere in his two full newspaper pages, however, did he—a lifelong resident of the region—mention any tradition that supported his argument.<sup>35</sup> Nor was any such tradition reported by any inhabitants of the river during the 1970s-era interviews conducted by the Millses or the earlier interviews of sociologist Frances Jerome Woods, a Roman Catholic nun who served the Isle in the 1960s.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup>National Park Service, *Cane River National Heritage Area* <http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/travel/caneriver/mai.htm>, "Maison de Marie Therese," italics added; see also Historic American Buildings Survey, in cooperation with Cane River National Heritage Area et al., "Coincoin-Prudhomme House (Maison de Marie Therese)," HABS No. LA-1295, *National Park Service*, <http://www.nps.gov/hdp/samples/-HABS/coincoin/history.pdf>; the report is undated but its content suggests it was created after 2004.

<sup>35</sup>Joseph H. Henry, "Discovery of Bousillage Cabin Substantiates True Story," *Natchitoches Times*, April 16, 1978, sect. A, 8-9.

<sup>36</sup>Woods, *Marginality and Identity*.

Henry's assertion, nonetheless, quickly assumed the mantle of "lore." By 1983, two factions had developed among both Cane River preservationists and Coincoin's own descendants. In both groups were those convinced that she founded Melrose (after abandoning the farmstead cabin) and those who felt the newly dubbed "Maison de Marie Thérèse" was a more meaningful portrayal of her (and Cane River's) African American roots. By 2006, the latest team of archaeologists at the site was sufficiently influenced by the latter stance to report, "*For many years it was generally accepted* by the Creoles that the extant house on this property was the original and only dwelling associated with Marie-Thérèse."<sup>37</sup>

This pseudo-tradition is challenged by HABS's architectural analysis that places the cabin's construction at 1828-1847, well after Coincoin's death.<sup>38</sup> However, the HABS narrative garbles the historical record of Coincoin's landownership, shrinking the twelve thousand acres alleged by Gates and Klier to a mere sixty-seven. As a starting point in its own attempt to correct myths, HABS asserts:<sup>39</sup>

According to Gary Mills, the tract was given to Marie Therese as a gift from Pierre Metoyer at some point between 1786 and 1793, and ... her 1794 Spanish land grant was the tract of land directly to the southwest of the plot given to her by Metoyer.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup>Morgan, MacDonald, et al., "Economics and Authenticity," 50-1, italics added. Morgan, MacDonald, et al. date the tradition only to 1983, citing Billy W. Shaw, "A Ceramic Chronology for the Whittington House Site: 1780-Present" (M.A. thesis, Northwestern State University, 1983), 6. While both studies present one Creole view, the opposing Creole view is regularly enacted at Melrose, in costume, and was chronicled by Ken Wringle, "Up from Slavery," *Washington Post*, May 12, 2002, sect. F, 1-2, archived online at [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com).

<sup>38</sup>"Coincoin-Prudhomme House (Maison de Marie Therese)," HABS No. LA1295, 1.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., "Historical Context," 5.

<sup>40</sup>HABS's citation here is to G. Mills, *Forgotten People*, 28-34. However, the "conclusions" HABS attributes to this source do not appear therein. Mills's account of the gift from Metoyer to Coincoin appears on his p. 26, as follows: "In November of that year [1786] he [Metoyer] gave to her the land that he had bequeathed to her children in the will of 1783. Marie Thérèse promptly petitioned the Spanish government for full title, and on January 18, 1787, the concession was confirmed in her name." Mills's account of Coincoin's 1794 grant/concession appears on p. 32, where he concludes: "By 1793 Marie Thérèse had succeeded in

A closer inspection of the Spanish land-grant maps shows that the original eighty-arpent [ca. 67 acres] tract was indeed the Spanish land grant awarded to Coincoin, and additionally, the tract to the southwest of the land grant was awarded to Louis Verchaire also in 1794, not to Marie Therese.

The HABS account merges three separate tracts of land acquired by Coincoin across two decades of industry, reducing to a mere sixty-seven acres the thousand or so she actually owned.

A trail of evidence from Natchitoches to Baton Rouge to Washington, all in the form of original, contemporary documents, chronicles Coincoin's acquisition of those three separate properties: the farmstead she settled in the 1780s; the concession applied for in 1793 and awarded in 1794; and the tract adjacent to her farm that she purchased in 1807.

*Property No. 1: Coincoin's Farmstead (the Coincoin-Prudhomme House Site), Sections 18 & 89, T8N R6W*

The prosecution of Coincoin and Metoyer for concubinage persuaded the merchant Metoyer to move beyond the punitive eye of the village priest. He first obtained land at Opelousas, where Coincoin's former mistress (Marie des Neiges de St. Denis de Soto) concurrently moved with several of Coincoin's children. There, he established a home and vacherie. However, in September 1780, he changed his mind, sold his Opelousas tract, and on the same day petitioned the Natchitoches commandant for vacant land on Red River (now Cane River Lake) about four leagues below the village. His petition stated that he already owned twelve slaves, had a corral of horned cattle and horses, and planned to create a habitation and vacherie. He had marked off two wooded tracts conveniently across from each other; they stretched about fifteen arpents along either side of the river. He proposed to cultivate the land on the right descending bank and

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establishing an efficient plantation operation on her small tract and . . . probably in late 1793 . . . petitioned for a grant of land; on May 14, 1794, that petition was answered with the grant of [800 arpents] *on the west bank of the Old River branch of Red River* [about five miles distant from her farmstead]." Italics added.



to place his animals on the left. The petition was approved.<sup>41</sup> (See Fig. 1, sects. 13, 86, p. 436.)

By April 1782, Metoyer and Coincoin were sufficiently established there for Metoyer to request a second concession. This larger, adjacent tract would become his principle plantation. That request was approved for twenty arpents frontage, to whatever depth it was able to carry.<sup>42</sup> (See Fig. 1, sects. 17, 88) By February 1783, Metoyer had taken possession of a third tract adjoining both his concessions, apparently intending it as a small farm for Coincoin and their children. In a will drawn that month at New Orleans, he ordered that Coincoin's six "mulâtre" children still in his custody were to be freed immediately at his death. Moreover, he decreed, "I give and legate in the best possible form [to all of Coincoin's multiracial children], to help them support the burdens of liberty, five arpents of land of frontage on both sides of the Red River . . . below the twenty arpents that have been given to me by the government of this province."<sup>43</sup> (See Fig. 1, sects. 18, 89) Given that Metoyer had not received a concession for this five-arpent tract, there would not have been anything for him to bequeath to Coincoin's children had they not already begun an improvement on the land—at least a rudimentary amount of clearing, planting, and building.

The New Orleans will was never probated, and the preemption right Metoyer and Coincoin held to the small tract was soon clouded. On July 6, 1785, a new arrival at the post, Jean Baptiste Délouche, petitioned the Natchitoches commandant for a concession on which he would place "animals of all species." Specifically, he requested six arpents of frontage on both sides of

<sup>41</sup>Metoyer to LeDoux, Doc. 1500, and Metoyer to Commandant Vaugine, Doc. 1501, both dated September 20, 1780, NCA. While the standard grant of that era was ten arpents frontage on both sides of the river, to a depth of forty (a total of 800 superficial arpents), actual sizes and configurations varied according to the bends of the river and proximity of other waterways and landowners. Metoyer asked for fifteen arpents frontage, noting that the depth was limited; the tract eventually was surveyed as 298 acres (roughly 450 superficial arpents).

<sup>42</sup>For the dates of the petition and order, see the Natchitoches District Tract Books, Township 8N, Range 6W, 17-18, SLO. For the final acreage and the configuration of his land in relation to that of Coincoin, see survey by [Pierre Joseph] Maës for "M[r.] Pre Metoyer, February 9, 1794, file "OPEL: February 1794," ONRC.

<sup>43</sup>Acts of Leonardo Mazange, No. 7, 188-91, New Orleans Notarial Archives.

the river, bounded "on the *upper* by the Sieur Pierre Metoyer and on the lower by His Majesty's domain.<sup>44</sup> Délouche's description of the desired tract is ambiguous on its face, considering that Metoyer held two separate tracts in that location. As Figure 1 illustrates, Metoyer's two tracts adjoined each other on their backsides; but, due to multiple bends of the river, the river frontage for each of his tracts were positioned some twenty arpents apart. As a consequence, Délouche's *requête* seemingly leaves open the possibility that he intended the tract to be immediately below Metoyer's *upper* concession, rather than the one immediately below Metoyer's *lower* concession. That possibility is eliminated by reconstructing the settlement of the neighborhood. The land immediately below Metoyer's upper tract had already been conceded at least three years earlier, to Philippe Frederic.<sup>45</sup>

Commandant Louis DeBlanc granted Délouche the requested concession on July 12, 1785.<sup>46</sup> However, a concession was only the first step of the grant process. The paperwork for an

<sup>44</sup>"Requête de Concession de J. Bapte Délouche," July 6, 1785, Louisiana Miscellany Collection, 1724-1837, Manuscript Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C., viewed as LOC microfilm 17,495, reel 3, frames 371-72, hereafter cited as LOC Miscellany Collection. Italics added.

<sup>45</sup>Philippe "Frederique," Private Land Claim based on Spanish patent, U. S. Serial Patent file 1242396, General Land Office Records. Two documents approximate the date of Frederic's settlement. (1) An inventory of goods belonging to the marriage of Barbe Cheletre, decd., and husb. Philippe Frederic, Dec. 14, 1793, describes the Frederic concession as "bounded on upper by Pierre Metoyer and on lower by Jacques Fort" and states that the concession papers had been burnt in a house fire four years earlier; by extrapolation, the concession occurred before Dec. 14, 1789; see Succ. 2490, NCA. (2) The Louisiana State Land Office register "Spanish Patents SW District of Louisiana, Surveyor General's Office, Louisiana," gives Sept. 7, 1782, as the date of the concession made to Fort (*var.* Fauré), with patent issued March 27, 1795, and indicates that Frederic's concession was already in operation before Fort's request. For a print publication of the land office register, see Ory G. Poret, *Spanish Land-Grants in Louisiana, 1757-1802* (Ville Platte, La., 1999), 114. Also see Natchitoches Parish Land Entry Book 2: 43-47 (Township 8N R7W) and U. S. plat map of confirmed private land claims, "T8N R7W North Western District, Louisiana . . . Nov. 23, 1848," both of which place Philippe Frederic (*var.* "Frederique") in sects. 76, 77, immediately below and adjacent to, Metoyer's upper tract (sect. 75), with Jacques Fort (Fauré) holding the patent to sects. 78, 79, immediately below Frederic.

<sup>46</sup>De Blanc certification, July 12, 1785, appended to "Requête de Concession de J. Bapte Délouche," LOC Miscellany Collection.

approved concession was to be forwarded to the office of the governor, who would issue the order of survey. A final title (i.e., a patent or grant) required the fulfillment of certain improvements, a completion of the survey, and the surveyor's return of the plat to the governor's office. The order of survey was issued by the governor on March 28, 1787, but Délouche's process stalled at that point. It would end on March 1794 with an affidavit by DeBlanc, attesting that the land "belonged to and was actually developed by Marie Thérèse, free *negresse*."<sup>47</sup>

Extant records created in the interim do little to clarify the muddled title to the land. In November 1786, Coincoin petitioned Commandant DeBlanc for a concession and on January 18, 1787, she received an order of survey and settlement.<sup>48</sup> The actual petition, stating the location of the land, has not been found, but all subsequent records of local, state, and federal land offices place the land immediately adjacent to and below Metoyer. (See Fig. 1, sects. 18, 89)

A census taken of the post in August 1787 tells a somewhat different story. Commandant DeBlanc began his census in the town of Natchitoches on a Sunday; he counted not only townspeople but some outlying planters who apparently were in town for services. There, he enumerated Metoyer and included Coincoin and her free children in his household; he also reported, for Coincoin, one tract of land, with six arpents of frontage.<sup>49</sup> After canvassing outlying farms to the north of Natchitoches, DeBlanc began winding his way down the west side of the Red River, visiting households in an order that corresponds to the

<sup>47</sup>Order of Survey by Estevan Miró, March 28, 1787 appended to "Requête de Concession de J. Bapte Délouche," LOC Miscellany Collection.

<sup>48</sup>For the dates of the petition and order of survey and settlement, see Natchitoches District Tract Books, T8N R6W, 17-18, SLO.

<sup>49</sup>1787 census of Natchitoches, leg. 201, Cuban Papers, translated in Mills, *Natchitoches Colonialists*, 45-65. This document credits Metoyer with three tracts totaling forty arpents frontage; local conveyance records identify the third parcel as the property he still owned within the bounds of the village and did not sell until 1790 (Metoyer to DeMézières, Doc. 2202, NCA). The census reports Coincoin's landholdings to be six arpents of frontage, rather than the five cited in Metoyer's 1783 will; that discrepancy exists because (as evident from Fig. 1), the frontage on the right descending bank was greater than that on the left. When eventually surveyed, it measured out as six arpents on the left side and seven on the right.

recorded land concessions. In that process, he skipped the residences of a larger planters—Metoyer, included—whom he had already enumerated in town after Sunday Mass. The sequence of habitations that he visited on his southward ride down Red River clearly places Délouche on the land conceded earlier that year to Coincoin.<sup>50</sup>

The contested title would soon be settled. Two months later, in mid-October 1787, Metoyer married a local widow. On the brink of his marriage, he filed two documents: first, a copy of a "donation" agreement he had previously made with Coincoin, and second, a nuptial contract in which he reserved the right to free "at his pleasure" Coincoin's six multiracial children whom he still held in slavery. By the terms of the Metoyer-Coincoin agreement, which no longer survives but is reiterated in a later document, Metoyer quitted to Coincoin the interest he held in that tract of land adjacent to his plantation and promised her an annuity of 125 *piasters*, to help support her freeborn "mulâtres."<sup>51</sup>

None of these land transactions would be supported by a Crown patent for years to come. Early in 1794, Pierre Joseph Maës was authorized to begin surveying concessions along Red River. His

<sup>50</sup>The order of visitation in 1787, matched to the corresponding section number on the U. S. Plat Map for T8N R6W, is this: Pierre Cheletre, sect. 12; [Metoyer's upper tract], sect. 13; Philippe Frederic, sect. 14; Jacques Fort, sect. 15; Antoine Hymel, sect. 16; [Metoyer's lower tract], sects. 17, 88; Bte. Delouche, sects. 18, 89; Louis Thomassino, sect. 90; [Nicolas Docla, f.m.c., sect. 91, not enumerated]; Michel Hernandez, sect. 92; Fçois Poulido, and Louis Verchair, sects. 34, 98. (The intervening sects. 93, 97 are placed elsewhere, out of sequence, on the final U. S. plat of T8N R6W). For the August 12 enumeration, see 1787 census of Natchitoches, in Mills, *Natchitoches Colonials*, 45-6, 54.

<sup>51</sup>The "donation" agreement by which Metoyer set aside Coincoin and his contract of marriage with the widow of a friend both disappeared before the series was bound in the 1900s. His agreement with Coincoin is cited as Doc. 2119 in the colonial "Index to French Archives." His marriage contract with Marie Thérèse Buard is cited as Doc. 2121. Apparently they were not filed together, because an unrelated record was submitted between them. A photocopy of Metoyer's personal copy of his marriage contract is in the Mills Collection, Henry Research Center. The document passed down in his family to a great-great-grandson, Valery Gaiennie Metoyer, whose remarried widow is said to have thrown it out with a parcel of old papers in the 1950s. A teenaged employee, Bob Martin, salvaged the papers; his brother, Wayne C. Martin of Houston, provided a photocopy to the Millses in 1991. The details of Metoyer's agreement with Coincoin are recounted in an abrogation of part of their agreement that they executed on May 28, 1802, Natchitoches Misc. Book 2:206-07.

February 1794 plats of Metoyer and Coincoin's adjoining tracts, together with a host of documents later created by the United States General Land Office, clearly identify the location, the boundaries, and the neighbors of each property. Her farmstead of eighty arpents—bounded on the upper by Metoyer, on the lower by Jean Baptiste Ailhaud Ste. Anne (sects. 19, 90), and on the back by Louis Verchaire (sects. 34, 98)—would be patented to Coincoin by Governor Carondelet on May 20, 1794.<sup>52</sup> In the interim between the survey and the patent, on March 1, 1794, DeBlanc attached to Jean Délouche's concession papers his affidavit attesting that the land "belonged to and was actually developed by Marie Thérèse, free *negresse*."<sup>53</sup>

The HABS account correctly identifies the location of this farmstead and its neighbors. However, it misidentifies both the origin and the disposition of the historic property—problems that would also affect the archaeological interpretation of artifacts found there.

#### Origins:

HABS's assertion that the tract was not a 1780s gift from Metoyer, but a grant made directly to Coincoin and one she did not receive until 1794, delays the settlement of the farmstead by some twelve years. This proposition appears not to consider two of the above documents—Metoyer's unprobated 1783 will filed at New Orleans and the concession data recorded in the state-level tract books at Baton Rouge—as well as an even more critical document filed at Natchitoches. On May 22, 1802, as a condition for manumitting three of their still-enslaved children, Metoyer took two neighbors to Coincoin's home to witness her renunciation of benefits he had bestowed upon them in the 1780s donation. She duly relinquished any claim to future annuities,

<sup>52</sup>Under the American regime, this tract would be known as Private Land Claim A1679. For the plats, see Maës surveys for Metoyer, February 9, 1794, and for "Marie Thérèse, *négresse libre*," February 10, 1794, both in file "OPEL: February 1794," ONRC. For the dates of the petitions, orders of survey and settlement, and Carondelet's signing of the patents, see Natchitoches District Tract Books, T8N, R6W, 17-18, SLO.

<sup>53</sup>Affidavit by Louis DeBlanc, March 1, 1794, appended to "Requête de Concession de J. Bapte Délouche," LOC Miscellany Collection.

but she specifically declared that her renunciation did not apply to what she already had, neither the monies she had already received nor the land on which she lived.<sup>54</sup>

The evidence is clear as to the origin of her farmstead and the time frame in which its development began. Documents bracket that initial effort between 1780, when Metoyer moved her and their children down to Cedar Bend, and February 1783, when he bequeathed to her and her children the improvement they had already begun on the five-arpent tract "below" his plantation. However, the apparent 1785-1787 occupancy of the property by the French-born, newly-wed Délouche could cloud the interpretations archaeologists derive from artifacts found at the site.

#### Disposition:

In accounting for the disposition of Coincoin's homestead, HABS conflates it with land she later purchased, stating that she sold half ("the right descending side") of her homestead to Ailhaud Ste. Anne in 1816 and that her son Toussaint, in 1821, sold the "remainder" of the tract to Ailhaud's son-in-law, Prudhomme. This report does not account for how the "remaining half" of the landmark site could have been the sole property of Toussaint, when he was merely one of ten heirs surviving the intestate Coincoin. In reality, no part of the Coincoin-Prudhomme farmstead was ever in the possession or ownership of Coincoin's son Toussaint; and the entire tract was sold by Coincoin herself to Ailhaud in March 1816.

While Coincoin's homestead remained in her legal possession until 1816, evidence attests that she turned its operation over to her son Pierre in her retirement. This son filed the U. S. land claim for the property on her behalf in 1806.<sup>55</sup> In February 1810, when her neighbor Louis Verchaire sold part of his grant to his son-in-law Dominique Rachal, he cited "Pierre Metoyer Jr." as the proprietor of Coincoin's adjacent farmstead.<sup>56</sup> Six months later,

<sup>54</sup>Coincoin to Metoyer, Abrogation of Agreement, May 28, 1802, Natchitoches Misc. Book 2:206-07.

<sup>55</sup>Affidavit by "Pierre Coinquin, mulâtre libre," undated [but datable, via a companion document, at December 26, 1806], Claim of "Marie Theresa, a free Negress," File "OPEL: May 1794," ONRC.

<sup>56</sup>Doc. 3768, NCA.

when the census marshal enumerated heads of households and tabulated their members, he treated Pierre Jr. as the proprietor of that farm; that enumeration of his household as six free and twelve enslaved people apparently includes both Coincoin and those she held in bondage.<sup>57</sup> Yet again on New Year's Day 1816, that same association was made when Joseph Irwin conducted the official U. S. survey of the property just two months before Coincoin's sale to Ailhaud. Irwin stated that the Spanish patent had been issued to "Marie Theresa, free Negress," but that the land was "claimed at present by Pierre Metoyer, a man of Colour."<sup>58</sup>

The document by which Coincoin relinquished the property to Ailhaud Ste. Anne in March 1816 explicitly identifies the tract as being the entire parcel, lying on both sides of the river. Moreover, the arpentage of the land in that 1816 deed ("seven arpents and one perche on the right bank . . . and six arpents of frontage opposite on the left side") is an exact match to the surveyor details shown on Maës's 1794 plat of Coincoin's homestead (seventy-one perches on the right bank ascending and sixty perches on the left).<sup>59</sup>

*Property No. 2: Coincoin's Vacherie on Old River, Section 55,  
T8N R7W*

Contrary to the HABS narrative, the concession awarded

<sup>57</sup>1810 U. S. Census, Natchitoches, 214; National Archives microfilm publication M252, roll 10, frame 114. Pierre Jr.'s own family at that time consisted of five individuals: he, his wife, and their three children (Marie Susanne, b. June 15, 1804; Pierre III, born about October 1806; and Athanase Vienne, b. July 7, 1813). Pierre's mother Coincoin would account for the sixth free person in the household and cannot be placed in the enumerated households of any of her other free kin, when their household data is compared to their known family composition. For the identity and ages of Pierre's children, see Mills, *Natchitoches, 1800-1826*, nos. 112 (Marie Susanne), 2029 (Pierre), and 2128 (Athanasite).

<sup>58</sup>January 1, 1816, survey, "Marie Theresa, free Negress," claim A1679 (S18&89, T8N R6W), SLO.

<sup>59</sup>Natchitoches Conv. Book 3: 522, doc. 350; survey by Maës for "Marie Therese, *négresse libre*," February 10, 1794, claim A1679, SLO. While various measures were in use in this era, colonial New Orleans surveyors favored the Paris system under which one *arpent de Paris* equaled ten *perches de Paris*.

Coincoin in 1794 was a tract separate and apart from her farmstead and it was not "directly to the southwest of the plot given to her by Metoyer" (an assertion the narrative erroneously attributes to the 1970s-era studies). On May 14, 1794, three months after Coincoin's farmstead was surveyed and six days before Carondelet signed the patent to it, Commandant DeBlanc granted Coincoin an order of survey and settlement for a second concession. (See Fig. 1, sect. 55.)

Coincoin's first and second properties were radically different in size, location, and quality. Her eighty-arpent farmstead at Cedar Bend on Red (now Cane) River was rich alluvial bottom land, fertile for crops. The site chosen for her second tract was piney woods where her cattle could roam, feeding off the mast that blanketed the roots of a virgin stand of timber. This concession, ten times the size of her homestead, lay on Old River (i.e., the oldest recorded bed of Red River), some five miles to the west of her residence. Before Coincoin could raise the funds for a Spanish survey of this tract, Surveyor Maës went blind, no replacement was sent to Natchitoches, and her Spanish title remained unfinalized.<sup>60</sup>

When new U. S. Land Office commissioners began accepting claims from Louisiana's Western District, Coincoin's son Pierre filed for confirmation of her ownership of both tracts—the farmstead, which the U. S. deemed a Class A claim (A1679) because it was fully patented, and the vacherie that it designated a Class B claim (B2146) because the final Spanish patent had not been issued.<sup>61</sup> By that time, the Spaniard that Coincoin had

<sup>60</sup>Regarding this tract, the "land entry" book held by the local Clerk of Court (a cobbled together and much-corrected register) makes an erroneous assertion that also has confused some researchers. Citing "Vol. 2, Am. State Papers, 441," the entry for "Maria T. Metoyer, B2146" seems to assert that Coincoin's title to her Old River land was "Confirmed by Act of Congress March 3, 1807." The cited book and page has nothing to do with Coincoin, and the act was not one that confirmed her title. Rather, that act was the one under which commissioners were authorized to adjudicate claims. The "Maria Theresa Metoyer" entry in *American State Papers* appears in vol. 29, 866 (being vol. 2 of a subset of ASP), and it lists her among the claims to whom the commissioners issued a certificate dated December 15, 1821 (not March 3, 1807). See the Gales & Seaton edition of *American State Papers: Documents Legislative and Executive of the Congress of the United States*, 38 vols. (Washington, D. C., 1832-1861), vol. 29 (being vol. 2 of Class 8, *Public Lands*, 8 vols.), 866.

<sup>61</sup>Affidavit of Pierre Coinquin for Marie Thérèse, file "OPEL: May 1794,"



hired to live on the land and oversee her cattle operation had died, and she had ceased to use the land; yet she still prosecuted the claim. In December 1812, she employed a local French Creole, Gasparite Bodin, to file an affidavit on her behalf with the land board at Opelousas, attesting to community knowledge of her claim.<sup>62</sup> The Board confirmed her title three days later and the property was surveyed on March 29, 1814.<sup>63</sup> At her death two years later, the piney-woods land fell to her ten surviving children. When Coincoin's great-grandson, the young spendthrift Théophile Louis Metoyer, was sued by his creditors in 1844, the auction of his property included his grandfather Louis's two-arpent share of Coincoin's vacherie.<sup>64</sup> As with many of Louisiana's "private land claims" adjudicated by the U. S. Land Office, the federal patent would not be issued until the twentieth century. The impetus for action was a series of 1914-1919 petitions by a South Louisiana descendant of Coincoin's black daughter Thérèse Don Manuel, who claimed to be heir to the full tract.<sup>65</sup>

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ONRC.

<sup>62</sup>Affidavit of Gaspard Bodin, December 14, 1812, Claim of "Maria Theresa, free Negress," no. 2146 (S55 T8N R7W), SLO; also Joseph Irwin (Natchitoches surveyor) to Levin Wailes (commissioner), December 9, 1812, Joseph Irwin Correspondence, folder 1806-1849; box 1, Chaplin, Breazeale, and Chaplin Collection, Louisiana State University Archives, Baton Rouge.

<sup>63</sup>Asst. Commr., General Land Office, to Messrs. Smith & Rusca, Natchitoches, April 9, 1919, filed in "Maria Theresa Metoyer," Serial Patent 437,269, General Land Office Records, National Archives. This file is the only instance in which the Metoyer surname is assigned to Coincoin. It was an erroneous assumption made by the U. S. Land Office when the local documents gave her no surname but were attached to records for her Metoyer sons.

<sup>64</sup>The tract was described in that auction sale as "two arpents front on the right bank of Old River with the depth thereunto belonging, bounded above by lands of Thérèse Don Manuel and below by lands of Joseph Metoyer." Thérèse (a child of Coincoin's slave union), Joseph, and Louis were three of Coincoin's ten surviving children among whom the tract of twenty arpents frontage tract was divided. For the auction deed, see Natchitoches Conv. Book 33:133-34.

<sup>65</sup>As commonly happens, the descendant who claimed her land proffered a highly flawed genealogical account to "prove" his heirship. His affidavit not only merged two separate women into one (Marie Thérèse Coincoin of Natchitoches and her daughter Marie Thérèse Don Manuel of Opelousas), but created for the first Marie Thérèse a fictitious husband named "Coin Coin Victorian" and totally omitted all lines of descent other than his own. See Affidavit of Dennis J. Victorian, Lake Charles, June 30, 1914, in Maria Therese Metoyer, Serial Patent

*Property No. 3: Former land of Louis Verchaire, Sections 34  
(Partial) & 98, T8N R6W*

The HABS narrative also conflates this tract, which Coincoin purchased in 1807, with her farmstead, erroneously asserting, "Shortly before her death in 1816, Marie Therese sold the section of her land where the house was located (on the *right* side descending down the Cane River), to Ailhaud St. Anne . . . Jean Baptiste (John B.) Prudhomme, who had married Ailhaud's daughter . . . purchased the remainder of the Coincoin land from her son, Toussaint Metoyer, in 1821."<sup>66</sup> As its evidence, HABS cites Conveyance Books 2:522-23 and 10:42. Apparently, its investigation missed three other critical documents that would have clarified obvious disparities between its conclusion and the two cited records.

Coincoin's third tract was part of the 1794 grant shown for her neighbor Louis Verchaire. (See Fig. 1, patterned parcel.) On June 5, 1807, she bought one hundred or so acres from Verchaire's son-in-law, Jean Baptiste LaLande, who specifically identified the tract as part of Verchaire's grant.<sup>67</sup> She sold the land to Toussaint, the son who had apparently worked it in the intervening years, on September 14, 1814.<sup>68</sup> Toussaint had been born too late to qualify for free land during the colonial era.<sup>69</sup> Had it not been for Coincoin's 1807 purchase of this prime farmland, Toussaint, without a skill or trade other than farming,

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437,269. The papers sent by that office to the Natchitoches attorneys Smith & Rusca regarding Victorian's claim were the likely root of the above-discussed Natchitoches "legend" crediting a "Peter Victorin Coin-coin" as the founder of Melrose.

<sup>66</sup>"Coincoin-Prudhomme House (Maison de Marie Therese)," HABS No. LA 1295, 1-2.

<sup>67</sup>LaLande to Marie Thérèse, Natchitoches "Original Conveyance Acts," Book 42, doc. 501.

<sup>68</sup>Coincoin to Toussaint Metoyer, Natchitoches Conv. Book 3:308-09.

<sup>69</sup>Although Toussaint was too young to receive land from the Spanish Crown, that did not deter him from claiming backwater land after the U. S. land offices opened in Louisiana; see Register & Receiver Report no. 310, Pierre Toussaint Metoyer, surveyed by Joseph Irwin, June 3, 1822, as S48 T8N R6W; General Land Office Records.

would have had no means to advance in the new American regime that had already begun to restrict Louisiana's free men of color.

On April 21, 1821, the same day that Toussaint sold this property to Prudhomme, LaLande provided Toussaint (in a separate document not cited by HABS) a deposition reiterating his sale of that tract to Coincoin. Both documents explicitly state that the land lay on both sides of the river, not simply the left half as described in the HABS report. Moreover, the identification in the deed of neighbors to Prudhomme (the purchaser being on the upper side; and Dominique Rachal, LaLande's brother-in-law, on the lower) and the description of its arpentage (five arpents frontage on the right descending bank and four arpents on the left), align with that of the LaLande-Verchaire purchase, not that of Coincoin's farmstead (six arpents frontage on one side and seven arpents, one perche on the other).<sup>70</sup>

## HISTORIC SITE 2: MELROSE ON ISLE BREVELLE

Just months before Coincoin's 1794 petition for her piney-woods vacherie five miles to the west of her homestead, her Metoyer sons began submitting their own petitions for land on Isle

<sup>70</sup> LaLande to Toussaint Metoyer, April 21, 1821, confirmation of sale to Coincoin, Conv. Book 10:41 (clerical copy) and "Original Conveyance Acts," Book 42, doc. 502 (original document). The LaLande sale to Coincoin consisted of four arpents on each side of the river; however, on the same day in 1821 that Toussaint sold the tract to Prudhomme, he first purchased one arpent of land adjacent on the right descending bank of the river ("adjoining Mr. Jn. Baptiste Prudhomme on the upper") from his brother Pierre Metoyer Jr. This tract, the small triangle whose approximate location is marked with an asterisk on Fig. 1, was then added to the LaLande-Verchaire tract, to make up the "five arpents on the right" and "four arpents on the left" that Toussaint sold to Prudhomme. For Toussaint's purchase from his brother Pierre, see "Original Conveyance Acts," Book 42, doc. 503.

A record of Pierre's acquisition of this one-arpent triangle has not been found. That land apparently was the residence of his first wife, Perine LeComte, from whom he was estranged several years before her 1815 death. On November 20, 1841, Prudhomme's brother Narcisse deposed, in a land claim Pierre had filed on Perine's behalf, that Perine lived and died on land that was (in 1841) part of the Jean Baptiste Prudhomme plantation; see R&R no. 309, Marie Perine Metoyer (unnumbered claim to S50 T7N R6&7W), General Land Office Records. It should also be observed that one acre (or arpent) tracts conveyed in this era were often burial grounds.

Brevelle, ten or so miles south of her. Their petitions were successful and they would expand that land through many additional purchases. By the 1830s, Coincoin's offspring owned some eighteen thousand acres on the Isle and nearly five hundred slaves.<sup>71</sup> They did, indeed, establish a "plantation empire," but the founders were Coincoin's offspring, not the aging freedwoman herself.

When, in 1805-1806, the U. S. Land Office set up means by which Louisiana's landowners could file for confirmation of their titles, four adult sons of Coincoin and Metoyer immediately submitted their evidence for the following tracts:

Claimant	Date of Petition	Date of Order	Acreage Survey & Settlement
Augustin	1794	May 6, 1795	395 <sup>72</sup>
Dominique	Dec. 20, 1795	May 18, 1796	577 <sup>73</sup>
Louis	Dec. 20, 1795	May 18, 1796	911 <sup>74</sup>
Pierre	n.d.	March 5, 1798	128 <sup>75</sup>

Louis's 1796 concession of 911 acres is the land now called Melrose. Controversy about his identity as Melrose's founder rests upon one issue: In 1795-1796, Louis was still a slave, ineligible for any grant. Six years would pass before his father

<sup>71</sup>Calculations for land personally made by Elizabeth and Gary Mills from the cumulative body of all deeds, land grants, and approved claims for the family. Calculations for slaves personally made by them from the U. S. census returns, conveyances, marriage contracts, and property inventories.

<sup>72</sup>Augustin Metoyer, Claim B1960 (S26&93, T7N R6W), SLO.

<sup>73</sup>Dominique Metoyer claim [unnumbered], Survey no. 1242 by Pierre Joseph Maës, April 15, 1799, File "OPEL: April 1799," ONRC; and Claim B1833 (S24&99 T7N R6W), SLO.

<sup>74</sup>Louis Metoyer claim B1853, "OPEL: May 1796" (undated affidavit created ca. December 1806 by [Jean Baptiste] Paillette and endorsed ca. 1811 by Louis's attorney W[illiam] Murray), ONRC.

<sup>75</sup>For Pierre's 1798 concession, which he exchanged to Augustin for another tract prior to filing a claim, see documents submitted by Augustin, December 28, 1806, and affidavit of Nicolas Gallien, November 16, 1811, in Augustin Metoyer, Claim B1952 (S18&95 T7N R6W), SLO. Coincoin's offspring also filed a number of other land claims with the U. S. Land Office that are not discussed in this paper.

legally freed him in May 1802. At that time, Metoyer explicitly stated he had "verbally" given Louis his freedom on January 1, 1801—not 1795, when someone petitioned for Louis's land, and not 1796, when the order of survey and settlement was issued, but in January 1801, six weeks before his marriage.<sup>76</sup> It was, as a point of fact, Metoyer's practice to manumit his enslaved sons immediately before their marriage. That marriage, not the need for a land grant, was the trigger for Louis's manumission.<sup>77</sup>

Several Mills publications of the 1970s explore part of this point, noting three circumstances under which the law might have been circumvented.<sup>78</sup>

1. The 1795 commandant, whose family had once owned Coincoin, could have approved the concession illegally, perhaps on an assertion by Metoyer that he had indeed granted Louis his freedom.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>76</sup>P. Metoyer to "Louis," Natchitoches Misc. Book 2:208. Louis married on Monday, February 9, 1801, after the publication of three bans on consecutive Sundays (placing the first ban at January 25, 1801). For the marriage, see Elizabeth Shown Mills, *Natchitoches, 1729-1803: Abstracts of the Catholic Church Registers of the French and Spanish Post of St. Jean Baptiste des Natchitoches in Louisiana* (New Orleans, 1977), entry 3448.

<sup>77</sup>Dominique was manumitted on January 15, 1795, four days before his marriage; see P. Metoyer to "Dominique," doc. 2584, NCA, and Mills, *Natchitoches, 1729-1803*, entry 3401. Similarly, Dominique's older brother Augustin was manumitted on August 1, 1792, twenty-one days before his marriage; see P. Metoyer to "Nicolas Augustin," doc. 2409, NCA, and Mills, *Natchitoches, 1729-1803*, entry 3389. The fourth enslaved son, Pierre Jr., was manumitted with Louis on May 28, 1802, and his partially destroyed marriage record indicates a marriage on or shortly before September 22, 1802; see P. Metoyer to "Pierre," Natchitoches Misc. Book 2: 210, and Elizabeth Shown Mills, *Natchitoches, 1800-1826: Translated Abstracts of Register Number Five of the Catholic Church Parish of St. François des Natchitoches in Louisiana* (New Orleans, 1980), entry 946.

<sup>78</sup>For example, see Mills and Mills, *Melrose*, 39-46, and G. Mills, *Forgotten People*, 53-6.

<sup>79</sup>That 1795 commandant, Louis Charles de Blanc, was the grandson of Coincoin's first owner, St. Denis. By the time Louis Metoyer was freed, De Blanc had left Natchitoches for Attakapas. When land office hearings were held in Natchitoches on Dec. 28, 1806, at which Louis submitted his first proofs of title, he presented a letter De Blanc had written from Attakapas on his behalf, attesting that he had indeed granted Louis the land. See affidavit of Louis Metoyer, drawn by his attorney Paillette and referencing DeBlanc's letter; Paillette's undated document is archived with other December 28, 1806, documents, in file "OPEL:

2. After the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, documents could have been illegally backdated, so that Louis could claim free Spanish land under the new American regime. However, Natchitoches had a new commandant at that time, one who was not likely to backdate records, as the prior commandant might have done for an old friend.<sup>80</sup>

3. The only possibility by which the concession could have been made *legally* would have been for Coincoin to apply for yet another concession and then turn it over to her son. Multiple grants were allowed under Spanish land laws, so long as settlers met conditions of occupancy and improvement.<sup>81</sup> No documentary evidence supports a proposition that Coincoin was the Melrose *cessionnaire*, only a tenuous thread of lore—that is, an account by some offspring that she spent her final days on Isle Brevelle with her son Louis or her son Augustin.<sup>82</sup>

The weight of the evidence lies strongly in favor of the first possibility: that the Melrose concession was indeed made at the time alleged, 1796, illegal though it was. However, the third possibility was the one preferred by the preservation society, whose restoration architect, Samuel Wilson Jr. of New Orleans, submitted the application for Melrose's landmark status in April 1972, two weeks *before* the study was commissioned. In that

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May 1796," ONRC. DeBlanc's actual letter is not in this file. However, it surfaced in the 1980s, advertised by an auction house, at which time it was purchased by a DeBlanc descendant, Joseph Darby of Natchitoches, who shared a copy with the present writer. The letter attributes the Melrose tract entirely to Louis Metoyer, makes no mention of the fact that he was still enslaved at the time, and does not involve either Coincoin or Metoyer in the transaction.

<sup>80</sup>In the wake of the Louisiana Purchase, U. S. officials suspected much backdating of land grants. No record has been found alleging such by the commandant who oversaw the transition at Natchitoches, Felix Trudeau. Trudeau could have done so easier than most commandants, given that his brother Carlos Trudeau was then Surveyor General of the colony; but the point is rendered moot here by the substance of DeBlanc's letter.

<sup>81</sup>See particularly Art. 13 of the codification of Spanish Louisiana land laws issued on July 17, 1799, by Intendant ad Interim Bonaventure Morales, in Francis P. Burns, "The Spanish Land Laws of Louisiana," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, 11 (1928): 557-81.

<sup>82</sup>Mills and Mills, *Melrose*, 39-46; G. Mills, *Forgotten People*, 53-6.

application, Coincoin was explicitly identified as the Melrose founder.<sup>83</sup>

In addition to the findings presented in the 1972-1973 study, four issues not debated then (nor by any known researcher since then) provide germane evidence:

1. Two petitions—not just one—were jointly filed in December 1795 and two concessions were granted on May 18, 1796: one for Louis; the other for his brother Dominique, who was newly freed and newly wed. That was the logical time for Dominique to apply for a grant, as his older brother Augustin had done after his own manumission and marriage. It cannot be argued that Dominique's claim was also a post-1803 claim, illegally backdated, because Dominique's land was officially surveyed for him in 1799.<sup>84</sup> The implication here is that Louis's petition, filed with that of his free brother, simply sailed through unquestioned.

2. Louis was not the only enslaved son who petitioned for land and got a concession. The claim file of his brother Pierre Jr. reveals that an order of survey and settlement was issued to him on March 5, 1798—four years before his manumission.<sup>85</sup> If one argues that the

<sup>83</sup>The myth-based narrative Wilson supplied was not subsequently corrected by the society after the historical investigation was completed. As a consequence, many subsequent documents prepared by landmark agencies have repeated the many inaccuracies of that form. For example, see Marcia M. Greenlee (Historical Projects Director, Afro-American Bicentennial Corporation), "National Register of Historic Places Inventory–Nomination Form: Melrose Plantation–Yucca Plantation," undated (<http://pdfhost.focus.nps.gov/docs/NHLS/Text/72000556.pdf>), extracting her historical narrative from Wilson's Form 10-300 of April 13, 1972. Also Susan McCown (HABS Architectural Historian), "Melrose Plantation (Yucca Plantation). . .Written Historical and Architectural Data," HABS No. LA-2-69, dated September 18, 1985, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/pnp/habshaer/la/la0100/la0105/-data/la0105data.pdf>.

<sup>84</sup>Maës Survey no. 1242, April 15, 1799, Dominique Metoyer claim [unnumbered], File "OPEL: April 1799," ONRC. That document also carries the colonial land office's notation that the order of survey and settlement was issued on May 18, 1796, and the final decree (patent) was issued to him on June 8, 1799.

<sup>85</sup>For Pierre's 1798 concession, which he exchanged to Augustin for another tract prior to the filing of U. S. claims, see documents submitted by Augustin Metoyer, December 28, 1806, and affidavit of Nicolas Gallien, November 16, 1811, in Augustin Metoyer, Claim B1952 ((S18&95 T7N R6W), SLO.

Melrose concession must have been made to Coincoin, because Louis was not free, then one would have to extend that argument to the grant of Pierre Jr. Given the conditions that existed for securing grants and the fact that it had taken Coincoin seven years to develop her sixty-seven-acre concession sufficiently enough to qualify for the 1794 vacherie, it begs disbelief to suggest that she soon thereafter successfully applied for two additional tracts of prime farmland totaling more than a thousand acres.

3. For a decade prior to Louis's manumission, various local records identified him and his enslaved brothers as free. The surviving 1792 passport authorizing his parents to send a *bateau* and a *gabarre* of trade goods to New Orleans stated they would be manned by two "mulâtres libres." The boatmen were not named, but identification and study of the very few freedmen then at the post leave no doubt that these two "mulâtres libres" were their sons—reasonably, the two adult sons Augustin and Louis.<sup>86</sup> In 1794, the tax assessor at Natchitoches charged Coincoin with tax, together with "Pierre, her free mulatto son," then crossed through Pierre's entry, apparently after someone informed him that Pierre was not free.<sup>87</sup> In 1801, at Louis's marriage, the priest identified him in the official record of his marriage as a "free man of color," even though another sixteen months would pass before his manumission.<sup>88</sup>

4. When Louis filed his claim to Melrose with the land office, he contended that he could not obtain a Spanish survey for his 1796 concession because the only surveyor went blind. However, Maës (who surveyed Coincoin and Metoyer's land in 1794) still had sufficient sight in 1799 to survey the land of Louis's brother Dominique, as well as that of numerous other planters along the river. The more probable reason for Louis's failure to have his

<sup>86</sup>"État de la Cargaison d'un Bateau ...." April 20, 1792, Holmes Collection.

<sup>87</sup>"1793 Tax Roll of Natchitoches," dated February 3, 1794, Folder 703, Melrose Collection.

<sup>88</sup>Mills, *Natchitoches, 1729-1803*, entry 3448.



concession surveyed—and the grant formalized—was the fact that he was still a slave. The best strategy for Louis in the 1790s was to not call attention to himself by bringing a land-office official to the land he could not legally possess, especially not a surveyor who was his father's neighbor and well knew Louis's status.<sup>89</sup>

### SUMMATION

The accounts of Melrose recorded before Mignon's arrival on the Isle—those being the "purest" form of tradition—consistently identify the founder as Louis Metoyer, a man of color from Santo Domingo. That tradition is correct as to his identity and his color, but it errs about his origin—a mistake tradition often makes.<sup>90</sup> Those earliest accounts, as tradition also tends to do, offered no specific dates. The dates later alleged for Melrose, 1743-1750, were injected as part of the Coincoin myths created by the Henry family "folk historian," François Mignon—myths that would be vehemently rejected by Joseph Henry in the next generation. At the time the historical investigation was launched in 1972, the oldest buildings were being restored by the architectural historian Samuel Wilson Jr., who offered one corrective to the lore: Their construction, he felt, represented the very late 1700s.<sup>91</sup> The Mills dating of the Melrose concession to 1796 was then considered confirmation of Wilson's architectural judgment.

That new dating, however, presented its own problem. As the 1973 tourist booklet plainly states<sup>92</sup> (but most subsequent

<sup>89</sup>"W. Murray [attorney] for Louis Metoyer," to "The honourable Board of Land Commissioners," undated letter, ca. 1811, judging by content and related documents; in File: OPEL May 1796, ONRC. Also Dominique Metoyer claim [unnumbered], Survey no. 1242 by Pierre Joseph Maës, April 15, 1799, File "OPEL: April 1799," ONRC. Maës plantation is marked on Fig. 1 as sects. 11, 84.

<sup>90</sup>A possible origin for the lore associating Louis Metoyer with the Caribbean might be the fact that the New Orleans *Métayer* family, also *Creoles de couleur*, came there from the islands.

<sup>91</sup>Samuel Wilson Jr. to Gary B. Mills, letter, July 31, 1973.

<sup>92</sup>Mills and Mills, *Melrose*, 45. The point was also explicitly made by the present writer at a 1980 symposium sponsored by the preservation society, in a paper later published as part of the previously cited *Four Women of Cane River*. As noted there, pp. 6 and 16 (n. 10), Coincoin "cannot be given credit" for any of the

literature ignores), the documentary evidence tells a different story. The Mills investigation had turned up three separate surveys in the files of the state land office, made in 1813 and 1814, that place Louis's residence on the opposite side of Cane River from the site of the surviving structures.<sup>93</sup> It also reported, from the records of the Louisiana Supreme Court, lengthy litigation between Louis and a prominent white male who also claimed ownership of the tract. Louis ultimately won that suit in 1818, after a costly twelve-year battle.<sup>94</sup> That court ruling, logically, marks the point at which he would have begun to invest seriously in building on the contested property.<sup>95</sup>

The value of the Coincoin narrative to local tourism is obvious. As a historical site, Melrose illuminates a little-known aspect of the African American experience, and the placement of Coincoin at its head provides an icon of black female self-determination for a culture that had done little to preserve its black heritage. Yet there is another reason why that narrative has endured: the sense of empowerment and pride that Coincoin's own offspring have derived from this model of a strong, entrepreneurial black female. After the completion of the 1972 Mills study for the preservation society, one Coincoin descendant wrote from the Isle: "I know you proved that Coincoin did not build Melrose, but when I take people there, I still tell them that she did because I want them to be proud of her."<sup>96</sup> Thereafter, in a classic demonstration of myth displacement and replacement, Coincoin's offspring who felt the Melrose research left them with no shrine at which to commemorate her memory enthusiastically embraced

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houses associated with her. This finding from the documentary trail, however, did not align with the preferred Coincoin narrative.

<sup>93</sup>Specifically, see the March 15, 1813, survey by Joseph Irwin, Louis Metoyer claim B1953; the March 14, 1813, survey by Irwin, in Augustin Metoyer claim B1960, whereon Irwin marked bearings for the dwelling house on Louis's adjacent property; and the October 19, 1814, survey by Irwin, Augustin Metoyer claim B1952, on which Irwin again marked bearings for Louis's dwelling.

<sup>94</sup>*Boissier et al. v. Metayer*, 5 Martin (O.S.) 678, September Term 1818.

<sup>95</sup>Studies by MacDonald, Morgan, et al. at Melrose have confirmed this later dating of the older structures at Melrose, correcting Samuel Wilson's earlier assessment that the buildings were constructed by Coincoin in the late-eighteenth century; see "The Archaeology of Local Myths and Heritage tourism," 132-34.

<sup>96</sup>Lee Etta Vaccarini Coutii to Elizabeth and Gary Mills, October 23, 1974.

the "new myth" created in 1978 when Joseph Henry asserted a new home for her. Subsequent archaeological proof that this cabin, the "Coincoin-Prudhomme House," does not date to Coincoin's era still meets considerable local resistance.

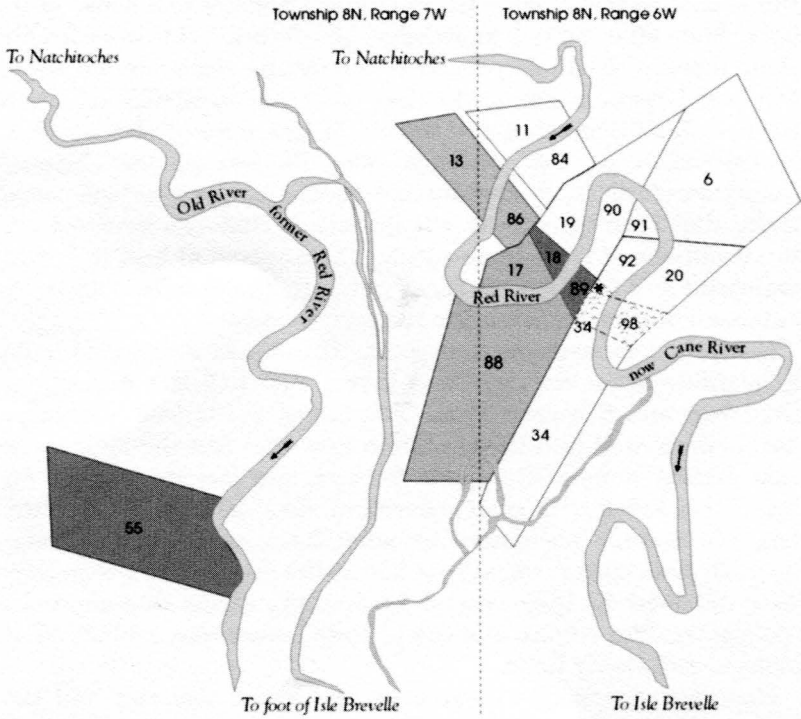
Community legends and family lore serve needs fundamental to the human psyche. They tie society emotionally to a sense of its past, long after actual knowledge has faded. However fragile their threads, traditions weave a comforting cloak around those who need reassurance as to their personal identities or social roles. Traditions that are meant to live beyond the world of reality, such as the trickster tales of African and Native-American cultures, teach valuable lessons by personifying social traits that reap benefits or wreak harm. History's nemeses are the traditions of more common ilk: those rooted at best in fading memories and family pride or, at worst, in a storyteller's desire to entertain or someone's need to promote a cause.

Coincoin demonstrates that point. Her family did indeed build a "plantation empire" on Cane River, one they lost during the Civil War and Reconstruction. Her family did indeed hold on to her memory well into the twentieth century. But the memory of that distant woman who made freedom and fortune possible for her family faded with each generation, until Mignon came to the Isle and became enchanted by what he misconstrued. Under those circumstances, respect for her as the ancestor to whom they were indebted for their success became the myths that she built their plantation empire and the historic homes that still stand at Melrose and Cedar Bend.

Historical documents created by and about Coincoin and the historical properties associated with her are abundant, varied, and generally explicit. They provide compelling evidence of her role in Cane River history and speak to the odds she battled as an uneducated black freedwoman. Those documented facts trump theories that are rooted in myth, legend, lore, or so-called tradition. With Coincoin, all these contradictions and disproved claims attest a different reality not popular with proponents of "popular" history: One cannot accept putative traditions because of their appeal or the support they may lend to preferred hypotheses. Tradition has a place in the researcher's tool kit, but it is not fact. Accepting it without supporting evidence—or, as this paper also shows, forming conclusions before all relevant historical materials are studied—leads history astray.

Figure 1

Landholdings of Coincoin & Pierre Metoyer  
Old River & Red River (now Cane River)



Notes for Figure 1

Section	Date	Note
13 & 86	1780	Pierre's first concession
17 & 88	1782	Pierre's second concession; his principle plantation
18 & 89	1783-86	Preemptive settlement by Metoyer and Coincoin; title requested by Coincoin in 1786, awarded 1787, patented 1794, sold by her in 1816 in its entirety to Ailhaud Ste. Anne, who conveyed to son-in-law J. B. Prudhomme

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|---------|---------|---|
| 19 & 90 | 1786-87 | Ailhaud Ste. Anne's concession, patented 1795   |
| 34 & 98 | 1785-87 | Louis Verchaire's concession, patented 1795; northern part (patterned area approximates the bounds) sold to son-in-law Jean LaLande, who sold to Coincoin in 1807; Coincoin sold to son Toussaint in 1814, who sold to J. B. Prudhomme in 1821  |
| 6 & 91  | c1800   | Nicolas Docla (f.m.c.) preemptive claim, approved by U. S., sold 1816 to J. B. Prudhomme  |
| 20 & 92 | 1787    | Michel Hernandez concession, patented 1795, cited as upper neighbor of Coincoin in 1807 deed from LaLande   |
| 11 & 84 | 1794    | Concession & patent to Pierre Joseph Maës; because Maës, the only available surveyor at Natchitoches, was the immediate neighbor of Louis Metoyer's mother and father, and would have known his slave status, Louis could not have his illegal 1796 Melrose concession surveyed; therefore his Spanish title remained incomplete. |
| *       | 1821    | 1 arpent/acre tract adjoining J. B. Prudhomme, sold by Pierre Jr. to brother Toussaint 1821, who sold (same day) to Prudhomme   |