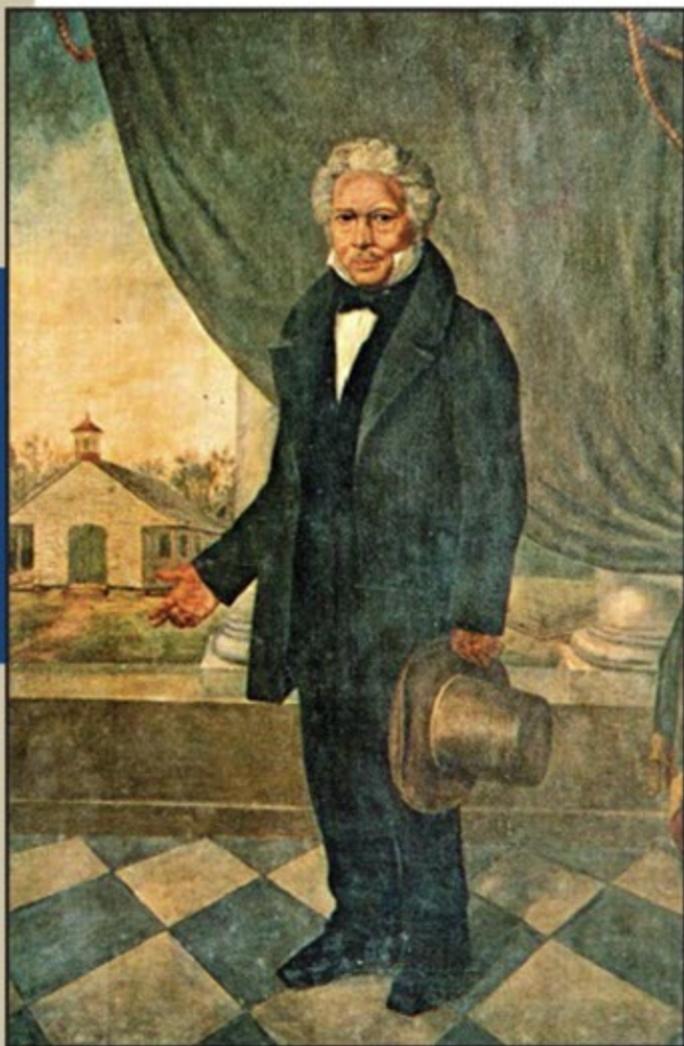


# LOUISIANA HISTORY

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# *Laying a Legend to Rest: Marie Thérèse Coincoin and Archaeological Sites 16NA785 and 16NA789*

By ELIZABETH SHOWN MILLS\*

Few Black women in Louisiana have been as studied, lauded, sensationalized, or shamed as Cane River's Marie Thérèse Coincoin. Those who follow history know her as a persecuted concubine, a slave and enslaver, a tobacco planter and *médecine*, a marketer of bear oil, pelts, and wild game. With sound entrepreneurial instincts, she became the most-proprieted self-made woman on Louisiana's frontier. Yet, as a woman, she was foremost a mother—rejecting society's tokens of affluence to invest her harvests into the future of her fifteen children and five dozen grandchildren, many of whom were still enslaved at her death.<sup>1</sup>

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As a result of Coincoin's focus on her offspring, rather than the pursuit of personal wealth, her story still has no closure. Archaeologists, architectural historians, and the tourist industry struggle to identify a physical place that defines her—a place where they can portray her and the lives of other women of her class. The cabin that stands on her homestead, about ten miles below the town of Natchitoches (archaeological site LDA 16NA241) has been academically rejected as a later construction.<sup>2</sup> Her death

<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive account of Coincoin's life, see Elizabeth Shown Mills, "Marie Thérèse Coincoin (1742–1816): Cane River Slave, Slave Owner, and Paradox," *Louisiana Women: Their Lives and Times*, ed. Janet Allured and Judith F. Gentry (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 10–29. For her offspring, see Gary B. Mills and Elizabeth Shown Mills, *Forgotten People: Cane River's Creoles of Color*, rev. ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013), tables, 16–17, 32–35.

<sup>2</sup> Archaeological work conducted 2005–7 found evidence of an earlier plank-walled dwelling whose GPS coordinates correspond to the crude sketch of "Maison de Marie Thérèse" appearing on the land's 1794 Spanish survey, prompting a conclusion that "the Coincoin property presents us with a *building sequence* for the 1787–1816 plantation"; Kevin C. MacDonald and David W. Morgan, "African Earthen Structures in Colonial Louisiana: Architecture from the Coincoin Plantation (1787–1816)," *Antiquity* 96 (2012): 161–77, particularly 165, 167, and 175, emphasis added. The most recent evaluation of all past archaeological studies at the site concludes that the standing structure "probably was an overseer's house on the later Prudhomme Plantation"; Jeffrey S. Girard, "Archaeology in the Cane River National Heritage Area: Inventory of Recorded Sites and Investigations in the Rivière aux Cannes Region" (unpublished manuscript for the Cane River National Heritage Area, May 2016), 16. Also see Historic American Buildings Survey, "Coincoin-Prudhomme House (Maison de Marie Therese)," HABS No. LA-1295, *National Park Service* (website), accessed 20 July 2020, <http://www.nps.gov/hdp/samples/HABS/coincoin/history.pdf>. The HABS report is undated but its content suggests it was created after 2004. Some problems with this account's identification of Coincoin's properties are addressed in Elizabeth Shown Mills, "Demythologizing History: Marie Thérèse Coincoin, Tourism, and the National Historical Landmarks Program," *Louisiana History* 53 (Fall 2012): 402–37.

goes unrecorded in surviving church and civil records, prompting one major study to propose that she died in ignominy, purposefully forgotten by her progeny.<sup>3</sup> One vague tradition counters this: a family elder in the 1970s reported that, before Coincoin's death, her son Augustin Metoyer moved her "downriver," where most of her offspring had settled, so they could more easily care for her.<sup>4</sup>

None of these attempts to connect a specific dwelling site to Coincoin address the fact that her farmstead also would have provided housing for those she enslaved: a family consisting of one to fifteen members who resided on the land from c1793 until c1813. The authors of all three reports also seem unaware that Coincoin's land had previously (in the early 1780s) been claimed and occupied by a French immigrant from Bourgogne, Jean Baptiste DeLouche, who was paid to abandon his settlement in favor of Coincoin. See Claim Papers of Marie Thérèse Coincoin, "Louisiana Miscellany Collection, 1724–1837," Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress; available as LC microfilm 17495 (5 reels), reel 4, frames 1688–89. The present paper's proposal that Coincoin's ownership ended in 1813 rather than 1816 and that she likely vacated the property as early as 1807 further narrows the time frame for her possible residence in any structure that replaced her 1787–94 home.

<sup>3</sup> Frances Jerome Woods, *Marginality and Identity: A Colored Creole Family through Ten Generations* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), 45: "Another indication that Marie's children did not intend to perpetuate her memory is their failure to have her buried in the cemetery beside the church which they built for their own ethnic group. Even if Marie died prior to the erection of the church, her burial place must have been known to her children. With the great emphasis Creoles placed upon ancestry and reverence for the dead, the failure to have her remains rest with those of her children can only be interpreted as deliberate." The chapel on Augustin's plantation was erected in February 1829, a dozen years after Coincoin's death; for the blessing of the chapel, see St. François Parish (now Immaculate Conception, Natchitoches), Register 6:116; parish rectory, Natchitoches. The first burial occurred on July 20, 1829; see St. François Register 15, section "Enterments des personnes de Couleur Libres et Esclaves, au 1827," entry 1829:7.

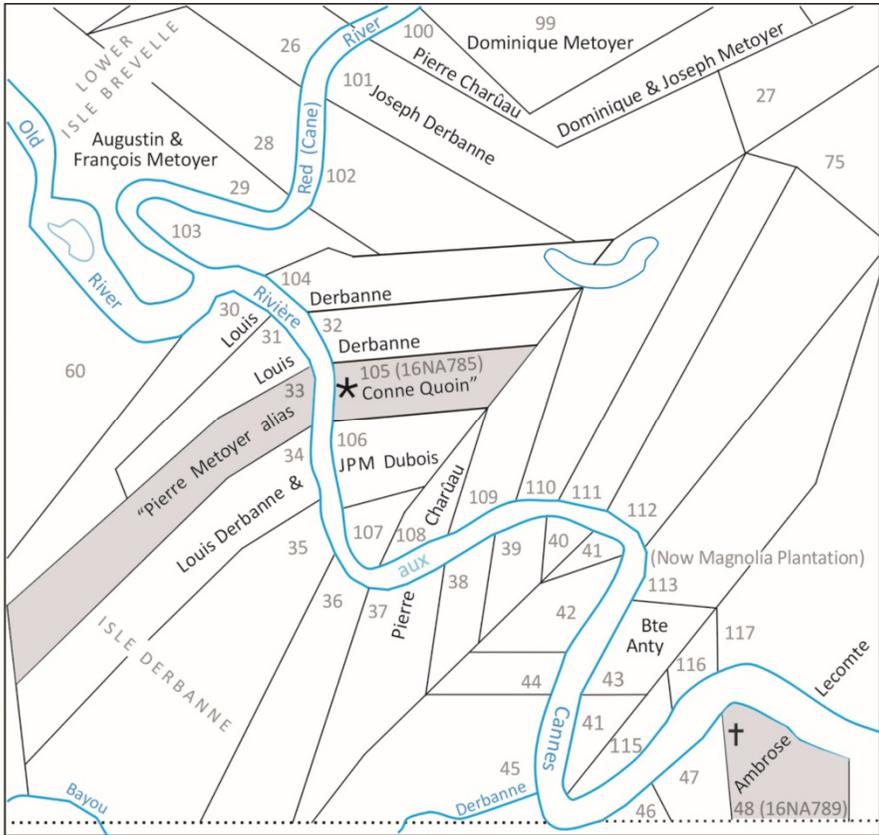
<sup>4</sup> Lee Etta Vaccarini Coutii, interview by Gary B. Mills and Elizabeth Shown Mills, Isle Brevelle, 20 March 1972.

Across six decades of academic research by many scholars, all relevant records seem to have been mined for Coincoin. No new record is known to have been found for her in fifteen years.<sup>5</sup> However, far more insight can be gleaned by probing those known records more deeply and by mining the records created by other settlers along the river. That effort adds the needed closure by answering four questions:

- **Where did Coincoin spend the last years of her life?** The evidence presented in this paper places her at Rivière aux Cannes in lower Natchitoches Parish, specifically Section 105, Township 7 North, Range 6 West (S105 T7N R6W), the archaeological site designated 16NA785 by the Louisiana Division of Archaeology. (See Map 1)
- **When did she settle at this site?** Before 1813, but likely 1807 when she and her sons made several shifts in the operation of their lands.
- **When did she die?** The evidence points to early March 1817.
- **Where does she lie buried?** Beyond all doubt: at the now-abandoned Shallow Lake Cemetery (LDA site 16NA789) roughly three miles, as the crow flies, from her proposed last home.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The last-discovered records for Coincoin are the original land documents from c1785–95 in the previously cited “Louisiana Miscellany Collection, 1724–1837,” reported 2013 in Mills and Mills, *Forgotten People*, 31, 36, 296.

<sup>6</sup> Girard, “Archaeology in the Cane River National Heritage Area,” 35–37.



Map One: Lower Isle Brevelle & Upper Rivière aux Cannes S105 (16NA785) and S48 (16NA789), With Locations of Coincoin’s Witnesses Baptiste Anty & Pierre Charûau. The author’s rendering is an adaptation of Office of State Lands’ plat map for T7N R6W, Northwestern Land District.

This examination of Coincoin's last years places her into a community that remains, for the most part, unstudied. It was a community far more accepting of the situations and values that Coincoin's life represents. Rivière aux Cannes had been settled in the 1760s by families who appreciated the personal autonomy made possible by their isolation from the Natchitoches post. While prosperous white Créoles dominated, complex bi- and tri-racial kinships became commonplace. The social cohesiveness and interdependence of all ethnicities at Rivière aux Cannes is demonstrated by the events that indirectly document her passing.<sup>7</sup>

### Background

At Coincoin's birth, the outpost of Natchitoches was a settlement struggling to survive. Its commandant, Louis Juchereau de St. Denis, was a man famed for silk surtouts that impressed Native Americans and mammoth debts from efforts to buy peace along the Louisiana-Texas borderlands. When, in August 1742, an enslaved African couple added another child to his balance sheet, that child was the forty-sixth identifiable person St. Denis held in slavery.<sup>8</sup> Yet the

<sup>7</sup> This perspective on Rivière aux Cannes was introduced in the considerably expanded chapter 4 of Mills and Mills, *Forgotten People*. Coincoin's participation in the community was not then known. Nascent studies of Rivière aux Cannes focus upon Magnolia Plantation, founded by the LeComte family. For example, Ann Patton Malone, "The Magnolia Plantation Overview" (unpublished manuscript for the Cane River Creole National Historical Park, 1996); and Christina Elizabeth Miller, "Slavery and Its Aftermath: The Archeological and Historical Record at Magnolia Plantation" (PhD diss., Florida State University, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> For Coincoin's birth and parentage, see 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 (December 2008):

master's own home was scarcely more than a hovel. The paradoxical values of St. Denis's world would influence that child throughout her own life.

Orphaned at sixteen by an epidemic that took both her parents and her widowed mistress, Coincoin began a new family. Between 1759 and 1766 she bore five children;<sup>9</sup> all were labeled *nègre* or *negresse* throughout their lifetime, rather than multiracial, and no record identifies a father for any of them.<sup>10</sup> While nursing her fifth child, Coincoin drew the attention of a new arrival at the post, Claude Thomas Pierre Metoyer, a French-born bachelor whose plan to make a fortune in frontier trade included the operation of a tavern for which he needed domestic help.<sup>11</sup> With or without Coincoin's consent, her services were rented from

245–66. The number of St. Denis' slaves prior to 1742 has been calculated by the author from church and civil records of the post.

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Shown Mills and Gary B. Mills, "Slaves and Masters: The Louisiana Metoyers," *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 70 (September 1982): 163–89, especially 168–72 for Coincoin's offspring.

<sup>10</sup> Coincoin's second child, Thérèse, born about the time that Coincoin was passed to St. Denis's daughter Marie des Neiges and her Spanish husband Manuel Antonio Bermudez y de Soto, enjoyed favored treatment from the de Sotos and called herself Thérèse *Don Manuel* after her manumission as an adult—suggesting a possibility that she may have been the daughter of "Don Manuel" as he was commonly known. For the daughter's use of that surname, see (among other records) Sheriff's sale of property of Théophile Louis Metoyer, 22 March 1847, Conveyance Book 33: 133–34, referencing Thérèse Don Manuel's ownership of one share of Coincoin's vacherie; Office of the Clerk of Court, Natchitoches. All notarial-type documents referenced in this paper come from this courthouse office unless cited to another archive.

<sup>11</sup> For Metoyer as a tavern keeper, see Metoyer, Prudhomme, et al., bond, June 13, 1772, doc. 739, Natchitoches Colonial Archives (NCA), being the bond posted by sixteen owners of taverns, cabarets, and others selling alcoholic beverages.

her mistress and would include sharing her master's bed as well as keeping his premises and tending his patrons.

Ten years into the relationship—with six brown children to attest their affair—criminal charges were levied against Coincoin's owner and Metoyer by another new arrival at the post, a Spanish priest who insisted that the couple marry or suffer his wrath.<sup>12</sup> Louisiana's *Code Noir* did not permit the marriage of a white master to a Black slave, and Coincoin suffered the wrath.<sup>13</sup> Amid the contretemps, Metoyer purchased her and the newest infant, privately freed her,<sup>14</sup> and (after a thwarted effort to settle at Opelousas with the De Sotos),<sup>15</sup> set up a planting operation ten miles downriver to escape the prying eyes of the priest. Their relationship would continue until 1787. As their twentieth anniversary loomed, the by-then wealthy Metoyer ended the relationship and took a legal wife—a local widow who, coincidentally, was also named Marie Thérèse.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> The criminal case is filed as Rex vs. DeSoto, 1777, doc. 1227, NCA.

<sup>13</sup> Under the terms of the Black Ordinance issued January 1770 by the Natchitoches commandant Athanase de Mézières, Coincoin's punishment was to include a day of shame "riding the wooden horse," followed by a public lashing—with the added threat of being sold away to New Orleans for the benefit of the church; doc. 652, NCA. For other actions of the priest that provide context for this case, see Elizabeth Shown Mills, "Quintanilla's Crusade, 1775–1783: 'Moral Reform' and Its Consequences on the Natchitoches Frontier," *Louisiana History* 42 (Summer 2001): 277–302.

<sup>14</sup> Marie de St. Denis to Metoyer, April 7, 1780, doc. 1473, NCA. Metoyer had already purchased his older children from Mme. de Soto, July 29, 1778, doc. 1312, NCA. The private manumission is reported by Metoyer in his unprobated will of February 26, 1783, Acts of Leonardo Mazange, No. 7 (January 2–April 7, 1783), 188–91, New Orleans Notarial Archives, New Orleans.

<sup>15</sup> Mills and Mills, *Forgotten People*, 28–29.

<sup>16</sup> St. François Parish, Register 3, unnumbered page, chronological entries,

Coincoin was then forty-five, her body physically broken by fifteen childbearings. Her first five children, still enslaved, were scattered from South Louisiana to North Texas. Her last four children by Metoyer were born free. The oldest five of her Metoyer children would eventually be manumitted by their father, at various points between the ages of twenty-four and forty-five. For the support of the free-born children, Metoyer helped Coincoin acquire settlement rights to 80 *arpents* (68 acres) adjacent to his own plantation and promised an annuity of 120 *piasters* per year. In 1802, as a contingency for his freeing the last of their sons and for granting *statu liber* status to their daughter Susanne, Coincoin agreed to forfeit the annuity—but not her land.<sup>17</sup>

That land, Coincoin's farmstead, has been the lens through which most scholars have studied her. Little attention has been given to two other tracts she acquired on her own. (Map Two) In April 1793, after down payments toward the purchase of freedom for her two eldest Black daughters, Coincoin expanded her enterprises.<sup>18</sup> Even

for Claude Thomas Pierre Metoyer to Thérèse Buard, widow of Étienne Pavie, October 13, 1788.

<sup>17</sup> For the 1802 transaction, see Metoyer to Coincoin, "Donation," Miscellaneous Book 2:206–7. Clerically mislabeled, the document is actually an annulment of the 1787 donation. Mills and Mills, *Forgotten People*, chapter 2, extensively documents this phase of Coincoin's life

<sup>18</sup> Affidavit of Commissioners Garrard, Wailes, and Fitz, December 15, 1812, Claim B2146, T8N R7W, Northwestern District, stating that the *requête* of "Maria Theresa" was filed April 4, 1793; *Louisiana Office of State Lands* (website), accessed 20 July 2020, [www.slodms.doa.la.gov/WebForms/DocumentViewer.aspx?docId=510.00078&category=H#990](http://www.slodms.doa.la.gov/WebForms/DocumentViewer.aspx?docId=510.00078&category=H#990). Also Pierre Dolet to Marie Thérèse, sale of Marie Louise on three-years' credit, September 9, 1786, "Old Natchitoches Data," 2:289; Melrose Collection, Cammie G. Henry Research Center, Northwestern State

though the grant process for her 68-acre farmstead was not complete, she petitioned the post commandant for an additional and much larger tract, 800 arpents of pine land on the west bank of what is now Old River, about five miles west of her homestead. (Map Two) The commandant granted her request and she established a *vacherie* there, hiring a Spaniard to live on the premises and oversee her livestock. In 1807 that Spaniard died, she shut down the *vacherie*, and purchased a third tract adjacent to her homestead to expand that farm.<sup>19</sup>

Records for Coincoin go silent at this point, at least for another seven years. In the fall of 1814, aged seventy-two, she transferred that 1807 acquisition to her son Pierre-Toussaint.<sup>20</sup> Then in March 1816, in a spate of actions common to aged property-holders who anticipate death, she created nine documents dividing her enslaved men, women, and children among her offspring. In a tenth document, recorded consecutively with the slave conveyances by the parish judge, who also dated it “March 1816” when he

University (NSU), Natchitoches. The series titled “Old Natchitoches Data” is a WPA-era transcription of colonial notarial documents removed from the courthouse. Also St. Denis to Coincoin, sale of Thérèse and son José Mauricio, September 28, 1790, doc. 2804, NCA.

<sup>19</sup> “Pierre Coinquin, *mulâtre libre*,” affidavit (undated but datable at December 26, 1806, via a companion document), Claim of “Marie Theresa, a free Negress,” File “OPEL: May 1794,” Opelousas Notarial Records Collection, Louisiana State Archives, Baton Rouge. Also affidavit of Gaspard Bodin, December 14, 1812, Claim of “Maria Theresa, free Negress,” Claim B2146, S55 T8N R7W; imaged at *Louisiana Office of State Lands*, accessed 20 July 2020, [www.slodms.doa.la.gov/WebForms/DocumentViewer.aspx?docId=510.00078](http://www.slodms.doa.la.gov/WebForms/DocumentViewer.aspx?docId=510.00078). Also Jean LaLande to Marie Thérèse Coincoin, June 5, 1807, “Original Conveyance Acts,” Book 42, doc. 501; and Jean LeLand to Toussaint Metoyer, confirmation of 1807 sale, April 21, 1821, Conveyance Book 10:41.

<sup>20</sup> Marie Thérèse Coincoin to Toussaint Metoyer, September 14, 1814, Conveyance Book 3:308–9.

copied the document into his office's official conveyance book, she sold her farmstead to a neighbor.<sup>21</sup>

Records, however, can be misleading—especially when researchers rely on “record copies” instead of originals, as they sometimes must. Conversely, those records, when their details are correlated and analyzed for patterns, can reveal much more than the words contained in each individual document. Close analysis of Coincoin's deeds attributed to 1816 reveals a clerical error that significantly affects historical interpretations of her life and property, as well as evidence that points to where she lived out her last years and where she now lies buried.

### A Significant Clerical Error

Table One provides basic details for ten documents that Judge P. D. Cailleau Lafontaine transcribed into his record book in the spring of 1816. Superficially, one can see that the records were all recorded consecutively in Book 3. Taking each record at face value, the natural conclusion is that Coincoin disposed of her homestead on March 9, 1816, that she convened her children sixteen days later to distribute her chattel among them, and then on April 20 took all the documents to the office of the parish judge to acknowledge their validity and have them recorded.

However, Coincoin's sale of her homestead did not occur in March 1816. That sale—and, consequently, the abandonment of those premises by Coincoin and her sons—occurred three years earlier, in March 1813.

Identifying the error requires understanding the system by which conveyances were created and recorded at Natchitoches. In the colonial era, the commandant served

<sup>21</sup> Marie Thérèse Coincoin to Ailhaud Ste. Anne and sundry offspring, March 27, 1816, Conveyance Book 3:522–37.

Table One  
Conveyances by Marie Thérèse Coincoin Attributed to  
March 1816

Date of Document	Date "Proved" at Courthouse	Property	Purchaser	Witnesses (All White)	Record Book & Page
9 March 1816	20 April 1816*	Land	Ailhaud Ste. Anne	P <sup>re</sup> Charúau & Jean Baptiste Antÿ	3:522-3
27 March 1816	20 April 1816	Jean Baptiste, 22 Creole Nègre	Suzanne Metoyer	B <sup>min</sup> Metoyer, Prudhomme <i>fi</i> ls, & Narcisse Prudhomme	3:524-5
27 March 1816	20 April 1816	Harry, 50 a Quissay Marguerite, 45 Congo M <sup>e</sup> Jeanne, 4, Créole	Joseph Metoyer	Prudhomme <i>fi</i> ls & Narcisse Prudhomme	3:525-7
27 March 1816	20 April 1816	Constance, 10 or 11, Créole Negresse	Pierre Metoyer	Narcisse Prudhomme & B <sup>min</sup> Metoyer	3:527-9
27 March 1816	20 April 1816	Louis, 35, Congo	Pierre Metoyer	B <sup>min</sup> Metoyer, Narcisse Prudhomme & Prudhomme <i>fi</i> ls	3:529-30
* Coincoin's two witnesses, Charúau and Antÿ, accompanied her to the judge's office to acknowledge witnessing the sale. For the nine other documents, Coincoin made the acknowledgment alone. Her witnesses did not go with her.					

Table One, continued

Date of Document	Date "Proved" at Courthouse	Property	Purchaser	Witnesses (All White)	Record Book & Page
27 March 1816	20 April 1816	Froisine, 10 or 12, Créole Negresse	Jn Bte Metoyer, <i>fi</i> ls Augustin	B <sup>min</sup> Metoyer, Prudhomme <i>fi</i> ls & Narcisse Prudhomme	3:530-2
27 March 1816	20 April 1816	Marianne, 19, Créole, with Marcelline, 2	Louis Metoyer	Prudhomme <i>fi</i> ls & Narcisse Prudhomme	3:532-3
27 March 1816	20 April 1816	Jean Noel, 13 Créole Nègre	Augustin Metoyer	B <sup>min</sup> Metoyer, Prudhomme <i>fi</i> ls & Narcisse Prudhomme	5:533-5
27 March 1816	20 April 1816	Marie Becca, 15 Créole Negresse	Jean Baptiste Florentin [Conant]	Prudhomme <i>fi</i> ls, Narcisse Prudhomme & B <sup>min</sup> Metoyer	3:535-6
27 March 1916	20 April 1816	Hillaire, 16 Créole Nègre	Pierre Metoyer	Prudhomme <i>fi</i> ls, Narcisse Prudhomme & B <sup>min</sup> Metoyer	5:536-7**

\*\* Lafontaine made another clerical error in recording Coincoin's documents in the volume's index : he omitted this sale to Pierre entirely.

as a notary and justice but sometimes appointed a notary to assist him. All legal documents—contracts, civil and criminal suits, deeds, mortgages, and succession (probate) records—were drawn up and maintained in the commandant's office. Each was folded into a packet and then assigned a file number that was penned on the outside of

the packet, along with a label identifying the parties and the type of legal action. Following this system, the notarial packet numbers at Natchitoches run consecutively from the year 1732 through 1819: nos. 1 through 5,200. A semi-alphabetical register exists, citing the year of each document, the parties involved, the nature of the document, and the packet number.<sup>22</sup>

After the transfer of Louisiana to the United States, those notarial files were transferred (1805) to the office of the newly appointed “county” judge. As American practices were phased in, the men who filled that post began to keep official record books as called for by the new system, but they did so haphazardly. Some documents were recorded (i.e., transcribed from the original paper into the official record books) at the time they were filed; typically, these were the documents created by the judge himself. Others might not be recorded for years.

Justices of the peace, serving also as notaries authorized to draft legal documents, were appointed in outlying judicial districts. Some notaries periodically brought their copies of documents into the courthouse for filing, at which time the judge would assign each a notarial file number, following the traditional practice. As time or inclination allowed, the judge or his clerk copied the document into the record books, while retaining the original document among the numbered packets. Other outlying notaries maintained their own files and just submitted a list of documents to the

<sup>22</sup> “Index, 1738 [1732]–1819,” NCA. The series covered by this index has been imaged and most (but not all) volumes are available online in the “Louisiana, Wills and Probate Records, 1756–1984” collection at *Ancestry.com*. Despite the 1738 date assigned by the label on the Index, the first record is from 1732. Whereabouts of Natchitoches’ pre-1732 records are unknown; they are presumed to have been taken back to France when Louisiana’s government changed regimes that year.

parish judge; when or if copied into an official record book, the notation lacked essential details for each transaction.

Gaps exist in both sets of records at Natchitoches: the originals and the record copies. Many originals over the years have vanished from the courthouse. Some were never legally recorded. Each record volume's label carries a time frame for the records therein, but the time frames overlap. Documents for the year 1816, for example, appear in all of the first eight deed volumes and several succession books.

The dating error for Coincoin's land sale is discovered by consulting the register for the 5,200 documents in the 1732–1819 notarial series. The "C" section of the register (p. 224) contains the following entries in chronological and numerical sequence. To demonstrate the pattern, the extract below begins with the last few of the 1812 entries:

Table Two

Year	Parties	Action	Doc. No.
1812	Cortes, John, to Jacob Black	Sale of slave	4123
"	Same of William Mulholland	do. [ditto] slaves	4128
"	Chamard, André to Walter H. Overton	do. land	4129
"	Same to Benj. Bullitt	do. do.	4129
<b>1813</b>	<b>Coincoin, Marie Thérèse to Ailhaud Ste. Anne</b>	<b>do. do.</b>	<b>4132</b>
"	Conrad, John, to Henry Burghard	do. do.	4134
"	Cloutier, Alexis, to V <sup>ve</sup> Pierre Dupré	do. do.	4137
"	Same, of Athanase fmc	do. do.	4138
"	Same, of Pierre Labombarde	do. improvement	4140
"	Same, of Nicholas Baudin	do. do.	4145
"	Same, of François Davion	Exchange of lands	4146
"	Compère, Piere Sebastian to Marie L. Rachal	Marriage contract	4147
"	Same, of Julien Rachal	Sale of land	4148

The gaps in the sequence of numbers represent documents by individuals whose surname places them in a different alphabetical section of the register. A cross-check for the buyer Ste. Anne in the "S" section of the register (p. 197) confirms the 1813 date. There, we find this sequence:

Table Three

Year	Parties	Action	Doc. No.
1812	Sibley, John, to Robert Henry Sibley	Don. of lots	4130
"	Sibley, Robert Henry, of John Sibley	do. do.	"
1813	Spicer, Francis, of Henry Webb	Sale of land	4131
"	<b>Ste. Anne, Ailhaud, of Marie Thérèse Coincoin</b>	<b>do. do.</b>	<b>4132</b>
"	Sibley, John, J.P., of François Maynez	Decl. of domicile	4155

As a third check to confirm the error, an examination of 1816 entries in the register yields the following sequence for Coincoin's documents of that year (p. 227):

Table Four

Year	Parties	Action	Doc. No.
1816	Chamart, Pierre, of Succ. Remy Lambre	Sale of slaves	4561
"	Conan, Florentin, of Same	Sale of slaves	4562
"	Compère, Sebastian, of Same	Sale of slave	4568
"	Cotonmaïs, Antoine, to P. D. Cailleau Lafontaine	do. land	4597
"	Cloutier, Alexis, of Nolasco Deporcuna	do. slave	4612
"	<b>Coincoin, Marie Thérèse to Susanne Metoyer</b>	<b>do. do.</b>	<b>4613</b>
"	Same, to Joseph do.	do. do.	<b>4614</b>
"	Same, to Pierre do.	do. do.	<b>4615</b>
"	Same, to Pierre do.	do. do.	<b>4616</b>
"	Same, to Jean B <sup>te</sup> do.	do. do.	<b>4617</b>
"	Same, to Jean B. Florentin do.	do. do.	<b>4618</b>
"	Same, to Augustin do.	do. do.	<b>4619</b>
"	Same, to Louis do.	do. do.	<b>4620</b>
"	Same, to Pierre do.	do. do.	<b>4621</b>
"	Same, to Jean B <sup>te</sup> do.	do. do.	<b>4622</b>
"	Compère, Sebastian, to F <sup>s</sup> Roubieu	do. do.	4624

The numbering system used for the original documents clearly places Coincoin's sale to Ste. Anne near the beginning of the year 1813—likely the March date given in the recorded copy. The document itself (no. 4132) is missing from the original series; in fact, all documents from

4131 through 4244 are missing.<sup>23</sup>

Both copying errors and record gaps are common to courthouse record books. In this case, no conveyance book was maintained at the time Coincoin made her land sale in early 1813. Conveyance Book 2 shows that Judge John C. Carr recorded his last document on September 10, 1812.<sup>24</sup> The new parish judge, Lafontaine, then began Book 3 on May 17, 1813. Those eight months in which there were no legal recordings surround the period in which document 4132 was deposited at the courthouse. All points considered, it is clear that Coincoin's document was filed and numbered in early 1813, but went unrecorded until 1816, when she brought in a slew of new conveyances. All were then recorded together, with the inattentive judge or clerk not noticing that one of the ten records was dated in March 1813 rather than March 1816.

Coincoin's disposal of her homestead in 1813—three years before she distributed her enslaved family among her offspring—raises questions about her whereabouts for the remainder of her life and the usage of those she held in bondage. The answers to those questions develop when we consider another difference between the 1813 and 1816 documents: the identities of the witnesses.

<sup>23</sup> In the mid-1900s, this series of packets was flattened and bound into volumes. Some of the missing documents can be found in the Melrose Collection at NSU and in two collections held by Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge: Natchitoches Parish Papers, 1732–1920, MS 2917; and Natchitoches Parish Records, 1734–1916, MSS 480, 876, 929, 940, 961. Coincoin's doc. 4132 has not been found in either offsite location.

<sup>24</sup> In the blank pages that remained in the record book after Carr's last entry, some unidentified person penned four documents randomly dated 1805, 1808, 1808, and April 1812.

## Extracting Evidence from Witnesses

Cane River settlers typically took one of two approaches when they needed a legal document drafted. Those closest to town were likely to visit the judge's office at the courthouse. Downriver settlers occasionally did, when they had other business to conduct in town. Witnesses in all these cases were usually the office clerk, others doing business in the office, or an adjacent shopkeeper. More commonly, settlers above and below the town used a community notary or an educated neighbor, or occasionally penned their own document; in these cases, witnesses were typically family members or neighbors.

As seen in Table One, Coincoin's witnesses for the 1813 sale of her farmstead were significantly different from those used in 1816. Those of 1816 fit logically into the set of information known for Coincoin; those of 1813 do not:

- **1816.** When Coincoin divided her enslaved family among her offspring on 27 March 1816, the gathering she convened was clearly held in the vicinity of her former home. Her son Pierre-Toussaint then farmed her adjacent 1807 land and an addition purchased by her son Pierre;<sup>25</sup> and the 1810 census had attributed Coincoin's slaves to Pierre's household.<sup>26</sup> All

<sup>25</sup> In addition to the tract Coincoin purchased in 1807 (deeded 1814 to son Pierre-Toussaint), her son Pierre Jr. bought an adjacent arpent of frontage in 1808; Barthélemy Rachal to Pierre Metoyer fmc, [no date] 1808, doc. 3668, NCA. The original document is missing and no record copy was made; but basic details are entered into "Index, 1738–1819," under 1808. A reconstruction of land titles in the vicinity, along with the deed by which Pierre sold this small triangle to Pierre-Toussaint in 1821 ("Original Conveyance Acts, Book 42," doc. 503), places Pierre's 1808 purchase in the southwest corner of the much-larger S92 T8N R6W tract confirmed to Miguel Hernandez. (Map Two)

<sup>26</sup> 1810 U.S. census, Natchitoches Parish, La., p. 214, line 18.

three witnesses of 1816 were from neighboring families. Benjamin Metoyer was the white half-brother of Coincoin's children. Narcisse Prudhomme was married to Benjamin's sister Elisabeth.<sup>27</sup> The third witness, who routinely signed his name as *Prudhomme fils*, was Narcisse's brother Jean Baptiste, whose father-in-law Ailhaud Ste. Anne had purchased Coincoin's farmstead.<sup>28</sup> The 1816 scribe could have been any of the witnesses. All were well-educated and legally astute.<sup>29</sup>

A related anomaly is found in the legal process by which Coincoin's March 1816 documents were "proved" at the courthouse as a prerequisite to recording. Contemporary legal practice required that all deeds drafted privately be brought to the courthouse by the witnesses or the grantor and witnesses. Yet, for the nine slave sales of March 1816, presented to the judge on April 20, 1816, Coincoin went alone to the courthouse to validate her documents. None of the three witnesses accompanied her—although two of them would go into the judge's office just days later, for a different transaction.<sup>30</sup> By contrast, the witnesses to the 1813 sale of

<sup>27</sup> 1801 will of Claude Thomas Pierre Metoyer, folder 728, Melrose Collection. Also Metoyer-Prudhomme marriage contract, September 22, 1806, doc. 3560, NCA.

<sup>28</sup> St. François Parish, Register 5, no.1805:360, Prudhomme–Ste. Anne marriage.

<sup>29</sup> Emanuel Prudhomme, for example, had been the parish representative to the Louisiana constitutional convention in New Orleans; and Benjamin Metoyer would serve six years as the parish's state representative. For Prudhomme, see History Associates Incorporated, "CARI 0003: Oakland Plantation Records and Prud'homme Family Papers, 1809–1993" (unpublished manuscript prepared for National Park Service, 2013), 1. For Metoyer, see David R. Poynter Legislative Research Library, "Membership in the Louisiana House of Representatives, 1812–2024," at *Louisiana House of Representatives* (website), accessed 1 November 2020, docs/HouseMembership\_History\_CURRENT.pdf.

<sup>30</sup> On April 17, 1816, Benjamin Metoyer, Narcisse Prudhomme, and Baptiste

her homestead did accompany her into town to attest the validity of that sale, presumably at the time she deposited the document in 1813.

- **1813.** If one were to assume that Coincoin still occupied her homestead at the time she sold it, the identities of the witnesses to that sale pose a conundrum. Superficially, *Jean Baptiste Antÿ* is easily identified. Although his personal life has never been reconstructed in historical literature, he is well known locally as the twice-widowed white Créole consort of Coincoin's half-French daughter Susanne Metoyer.<sup>31</sup> *Pierre Charúau*, the first-named witness, has gone unidentified and unexplored by those who have published Cane River history. The conundrum presented by these two witnesses is that neither man was a known resident of the Joyous Coast, the site of Coincoin's homestead.<sup>32</sup> To

Armant went to the judge's office to prove a deed by which Prudhomme bought a tract of land with Metoyer and Armant as witnesses; see Fort to Prudhomme, Conveyance Book 3:519–21.

<sup>31</sup> Mills and Mills, *Forgotten People*, 90–91, 314. With regard to the spelling of Antÿ's name used in this paper, specifically the now-unconventional tréma over the "y," this usage also appears in the signatures of his immigrant father, a native of Marseilles. When Baptiste came to adulthood at Natchitoches in 1773 and for a quarter-century thereafter, he signed his name in his father's fashion. Beginning in 1798, but not consistently thereafter, Baptiste dropped the tréma and wrote his name simply as "Anty." This paper uses the original family spelling to preserve that cultural artifact. As an example of the father's usage, see Ignace Antÿ, widower, and Thérèse Lamalaty, marriage contract, 5 August 1763, doc. 344, NCA.

<sup>32</sup> Below the town of Natchitoches, Cane River settlements were divided into three districts: The *Joyous Coast District* (Côte Joyeuse aka Grand Coast) stretched below the town for about fifteen river miles. *Isle Brevelle District* began at the point that Bayou Brevelle flowed into Cane River and stretched for another thirty river miles to the point where Cane River merged with Old River. *Rivière aux Cannes District* began there at the foot of Isle Brevelle and ran south another thirty or so river miles to the point that Cane River merged with Rigolet de Bon Dieu (now

the contrary, the first and last census taken of Antÿ's household, 1787 and 1810, both place him at Rivière aux Cannes (Map One)<sup>33</sup> some thirty to forty river miles from the land Coincoin sold in that misdated document.

Coincoin's choice of Antÿ and Charûau as witnesses for her sale of her farmstead would not have been happenstance. As an illiterate freedwoman negotiating with a politically prominent French-born neighbor (Ailhaud Ste. Anne), Coincoin needed a literate, trustworthy, friend or family member to witness the terms of the sale and review the text of the document.<sup>34</sup> Both she and the purchaser needed someone well enough versed in Louisiana's new American laws to draft the document. Logically, Antÿ and Charûau filled those needs.

Coincoin's choice of witnesses for her farmstead sale becomes even more relevant when that document is

Red River). Roads in this era were extremely rudimentary and pirogues would remain a common mode of travel into the early-twentieth century.

<sup>33</sup> The August 1787 Spanish census places Baptiste Antÿ at Rivière aux Cannes, where he held five arpents of land; see leg. 201, Papeles Procedentes de Cuba, Archivo General de Indias, Seville, Spain; translated in Elizabeth Shown Mills and Ellie Lennon, *Natchitoches Colonials, A Source Book: Censuses, Military Rolls & Tax Lists, 1722–1803* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2018), 112–13.

The last census taken in Antÿ's lifetime, the 1810 U.S. census, Natchitoches Parish, La., p. 212, line 17, places then-landless "Anty père" in lower Rivière aux Cannes District, below present Cloutierville. That census enumerates white households and landowners in sequential order, descending the river from Natchitoches; "Anty père" is enumerated amid a cluster of neighbors whose lands lay in T6N R4W.

<sup>34</sup> As a corollary, Coincoin's sister Marie Louise Mariotte had made an unwise decision some years before to negotiate with a French planter who was a near neighbor. Badly abused in that transaction, she took him to court. See Protest of Marie Louise dit Mariot against Bertrand Mailloche, October 1794, frames 486–87; "Miscellaneous Archive Records, 1733–1820," Natchitoches microfilm F.T. 565, Louisiana State Archives, Baton Rouge. Also petition of Bertrand Mailloche against Mariotte, 10 October 1794, folder 710, Melrose Collection.

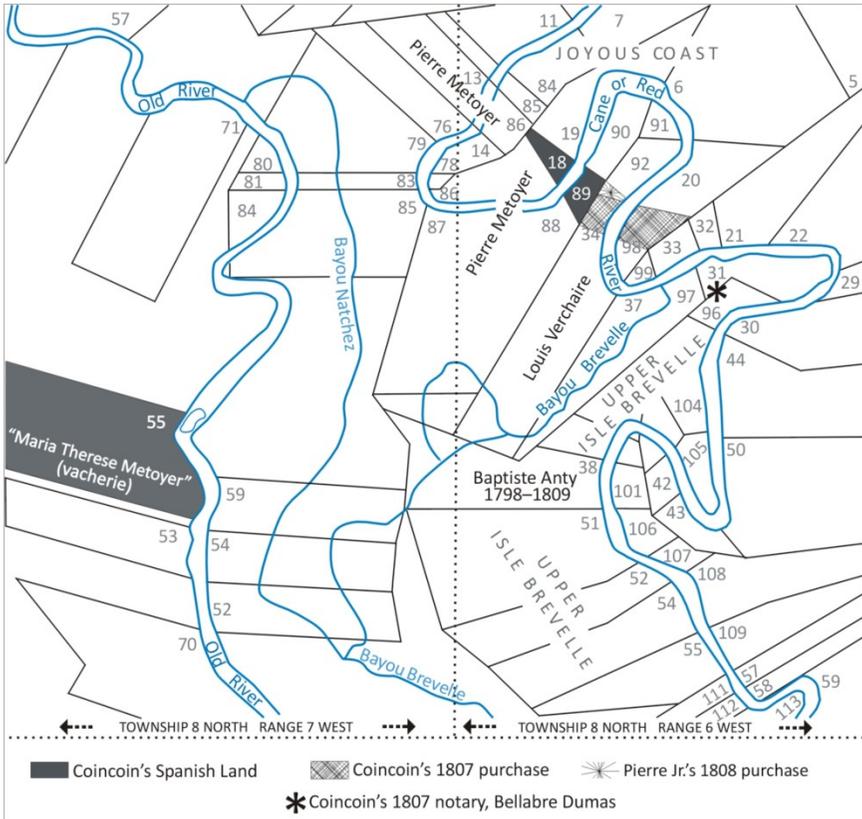
evaluated in the context of the *pattern* of choices she made each time she needed to create a legal record. On two other occasions in that last decade of her life, she executed a legal document that she subsequently filed with the parish judge.

- **June 5 1807.** Coincoin purchased a tract of land adjacent to her farmstead from her neighbor Jean LaLande (who had acquired it from his father-in-law, Louis Verchaire). For the drafting of that document, she met LaLande at the office of a justice of the peace, François Bellabre Dumas. Her use of Dumas is an obvious choice: he was the nearest official, a man who operated his law office and mercantile store on the Upper Isle plantation of Antoine Prudhomme,<sup>35</sup> a short horseback ride south of Coincoin's farmstead. The document Dumas drafted was witnessed by Baptiste Antÿ (who was surely there to protect Coincoin's interests) and one Roger McPeake, an apparent friend of Antÿ.<sup>36</sup> (See Map Two for 1807 locations of Coincoin, Verchaire, Antÿ, and Dumas—all within a one-to-two-mile radius.)
- **September 14 1814.** Coincoin sold to her son Pierre-Toussaint the land she had purchased from LaLande. She and Pierre-Toussaint did not go to Dumas's successor. This document, like the homestead sale now dated at March 1813,

<sup>35</sup> Dumas died three months after drafting the land purchase for Coincoin. His location is revealed by his succession file which shows that the parish judge inventoried his extensive property on the "Isle à Brevelle" plantation of Antoine Prudhomme, with Baptiste Antÿ as official witness; see September 17, 1807, doc. 3547, NCA. The Isle portion of Prudhomme's plantation lay in S31&96 T8N R6W. The rest of his plantation lay across the river on the Joyous Coast.

<sup>36</sup> Natchitoches civil and church records offer meager information on McPeake. However, two years later, when Baptiste Antÿ penned a short acknowledgement that he had sold his Rivière aux Cannes land to his sister-in-law, McPeake also witnessed that note, June 14, 1809, doc. 3700, NCA.

carried no identification of its scribe. Like that homestead sale, it too was witnessed by Baptiste Antÿ and Pierre Charûau.



Map Two: Upper Isle Brevelle, Joyous Coast, and Old River, Showing Coincoin’s Land and the 1807 Locations of Her Witness Baptiste Antÿ and her Notary Bellabre Dumas. This rendering by the author is an adaptation of Louisiana Office of State Lands’ plat maps for T8N R7W and T8N R6W, Northwestern Land District.

These facts pose a question and justify an hypothesis. The question is *why* Coincoin chose these two particular men for her documents in March 1813 and September 1814. The hypothesis is this: Her choice of Antÿ and Charûau, on two separate occasions across eighteen months, attest that they (like Dumas of 1807) resided near her. Thus, determining the whereabouts of Antÿ and Charûau in 1813 and 1814 should identify the community to which Coincoin had moved before the 1813 sale of her farmstead.

### **Baptiste Antÿ**

Although the first and last censuses for Antÿ's life place him at Rivière aux Cannes, he lived off and on in several districts within the jurisdiction of Natchitoches. As the son of a merchant and shoemaker in the colonial post, he moved down to Rivière aux Cannes after his first marriage in 1778, to settle amid his Gallien in-laws. The marriage was short-lived; the 1787 census recorded him with two children but no wife. In 1788, he remarried, choosing a girl whose parents lived above the post of Natchitoches—some fifty river miles to the north. He sold his Rivière aux Cannes land on credit and bought a new tract adjacent to the post, to be near the new wife's parents, the Levasseurs. Within two years of that relocation, the new wife died. In the wake of her death, Antÿ's credit sale of his Rivière aux Cannes land fell through; then, for want of that cash, his credit purchase of the tract on the outskirts of Natchitoches was cancelled. He next entered into a partnership with a Natchitoches merchant, to operate a billiard hall within the town, but that partnership was also short-lived.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>37</sup> For transcripts and abstracts of the several dozen civil and church records discovered for Antÿ, see Elizabeth Shown Mills, "Jean Baptiste Antÿ Sr.,

In the meanwhile, the twice-widowed Antÿ had begun a new relationship: this time with Coincoin's daughter Susanne Metoyer, who was still enslaved by her father. After Susanne gave birth to their first child in 1797, Antÿ moved to her neighborhood. From Dominique Rachal, in 1799, he purchased two arpents frontage on both sides of the river in Sections 38 and 100 of T8N R6W, three or so miles overland from Coincoin's farmstead and Susanne's father's plantation.<sup>38</sup> (Map 2) That move placed him near the upper tip of Isle Brevelle, just a couple of farms from the notary Dumas, to whom he took Coincoin for the drafting of her 1807 deed.

Antÿ's residence on the Upper Isle ended soon after. In 1809, his newly adult and newly wed son Valery sued him, apparently for his inheritance from his deceased mother.<sup>39</sup> Antÿ then sold his two arpents on the Isle to a friend and neighbor, Remy Lambre, after which he moved back downriver to Rivière aux Cannes. However, he did not return to the five arpents he had first settled. He had sold

Natchitoches Parish, LA (1752–c1816): Research Notes," June 14, 2020; at Mills, *Historic Pathways* (website), <https://www.historicpathways.com/download/BaptisteAntyresearchnotes>.

<sup>38</sup> The document is missing but is registered in "Index, 1738–1819," as "1799, doc. 2891." Rachal had previously bought the land from Antoine Lemoine (doc. 2892), wherein Lemoine stated that it came to him from his father Charles Sr. That provenance, supplemented by claim papers filed by Lemoine, Antÿ, and Remy Lambre with the U.S. Land Office, allows us to identify the tract of land. For the Land Office records, see *American State Papers: Documents Legislative and Executive of the Congress of the United States*, Public Lands Series, 8 vols. (Washington: Gales and Seaton, 1834), 2:848 (for Charles "Lemain" and Remy "Lamber") and 3:78–79 (for J. B. Anty and Remy "Lambert").

<sup>39</sup> Anty vs. Anty (1809), Parish Court files, microfilm PC.4; the filers disassembled the files and rearranged them alphabetically under the year of each document.

that land to his brother Louis in 1794.<sup>40</sup> Now landless, he took up unoccupied land at lower Rivière aux Cannes, where the census taker of 1810 cited him.<sup>41</sup>

In short: when Baptiste Anty served as witness for Coincoin in 1813 and 1814, his residence was forty or so river miles from her farmstead on the Joyous Coast. Beyond reasonable doubt, she had relocated also. A reconstruction of the life of her second witness of 1813 and 1814 reinforces that conclusion.

### Pierre Charûau

The French-born Charûau first appeared in Cane River's civil records in 1808, when he purchased the billiard table operated by Pierre Michel Zarichi at the lower end of Isle Brevelle. About the same time, while no priest resided in the parish, Charûau informally married a young woman from Rivière aux Cannes, Marguerite Rabalais.<sup>42</sup> The 1810 census taker enumerated the couple and their new son on the land of Coincoin's son Dominique Metoyer—Dominique's B2104 claim for supplemental land, which Charûau apparently leased.<sup>43</sup> (Map One, Section 100) In

<sup>40</sup> Anty to Anty, sale of land, 10 March 1794, doc. 2519, NCA.

<sup>41</sup> 1810 U.S. census, Natchitoches Parish, La., p. 212, line 7.

<sup>42</sup> For transcripts and abstracts of some three dozen known civil and church records created by Pierre Charûau along Cane River, see Elizabeth Shown Mills, "Pierre Charûau, Natchitoches Parish, LA, 1808–1821: Research Notes," June 29, 2020; at Mills, *Historic Pathways*, <https://www.historicpathways.com/download/PierreCharuauresearchnotes>. In record copies of his documents, Charûau's name is variously miscopied as Charnau, Chariau, Charriau, Chariaux, and Charrio. On the surviving originals, he always wrote and signed his name as Charûau.

<sup>43</sup> 1810 U.S. census, Natchitoches Parish, La., p. 211, line 5. Charûau's exact location can be determined by tracking the enumerator's path downriver against

1811, when Charûau made an ill-fated land purchase at Rivière aux Cannes, a couple of miles below the Isle, he styled himself “planter.” However, his credit purchase was overly ambitious. After his first harvest, he sold the land to pay off the debt, and apparently returned to Dominique’s land above the foot of Isle Brevelle.

From that point forward, many records created by Charûau placed him in the company of the multiracial Metoyers. While he created very few records in which he was a principal party (a requirement for being indexed in the parish conveyances), a page-by-page reading of all courthouse and church records created along the river in this period yielded dozens of appearances for Charûau in the records of other men. In most cases, he functioned in the same role as in Coincoin’s two documents—as a

plat maps for U.S. confirmed claims provided by the Louisiana Office of State Lands. Charûau’s neighborhood is platted in T7N R6W. The first householder on Charûau’s census page, François Roubieux, owned S91. The next man, François Lavespère, owned S92. Sections 93–96 were owned by Coincoin’s sons Augustin and Louis Metoyer, who are not enumerated on this page because all free people of color are relegated to the end of the census. The next two neighbors, Jean Bte. and François Lattier, owned S97 and 98 (purchased from Pierre Michel Zarichi). The census taker then visited Pierre “Chariou” on the land of Coincoin’s son Dominique Metoyer, who owned S99 and 100. Charûau’s first two neighbors after him, Joseph Derbanne and Derbanne’s mother-in-law “Madame Brosset,” owned S101; their neighbor, Charles LeMoine [Jr.] owned S102. François Metoyer, Coincoin’s youngest son, owned the last tract on the Isle, S103; but, like his brothers, he was not listed there. The enumerator then moved down Rivière aux Cannes, beginning with Louis Derbanne, S104.

Charûau’s occupancy of land owned by Dominique Metoyer stems from the fact that Dominique bought rights to the land from Charûau’s father-in-law, Joseph Rabalaïs. See affidavit of Jacques Lacasse, November 16, 1811, stating that Dominique’s land had been cultivated by “the grantee [Rabalaïs] and those under him for this last preceding thirteen years,” Claim Papers, B2017, S25&100 T7N R6W; imaged at *Louisiana Office of State Lands*, accessed 20 July 2020, <https://wwwslodms.doa.la.gov/WebForms/DocumentViewer.aspx?docId=510.00062&category=H#183>.

witness and probable scribe. Explicitly in September 1813, December 1814, May and June 1815, and February 1816, the documents identified him as “Justice of the Peace” and “Justice of the Peace at Isle Brevelle.”<sup>44</sup> Charûau’s service area in that critical period also included Rivière aux Cannes, as evidenced by two documents he drafted on September 9, 1813.<sup>45</sup>

In 1807, when Coincoin purchased land adjacent to her farmstead, she and Antÿ had gone to the nearest justice of the peace, Dumas, whose office was less than two miles from her home. If she held to that pattern in 1813 and 1814, then her residence should have been in the jurisdiction of Pierre Charûau—i.e., lower Isle Brevelle or upper Rivière aux Cannes.

### Coincoin’s Final Residence

Coincoin made no land purchases in either district. Her claims with the U.S. Land Office included no tract on Isle Brevelle or Rivière aux Cannes. Nonetheless, a study of all land titles in both districts—tracking each parcel of land through Spanish concessions, U.S. claims, and local sales recorded in deeds and succession documents—pinpoints one location for the aging, now-retired freedwoman: Section 105 T7N R6W, at Rivière aux Cannes, about two miles below the Isle, the archaeological site known as LDA 16NA785. (Map One)

<sup>44</sup> Conveyance Book 3:129–31; Succession Book 1:266–67, 305–7, 326–28, 413–26.

<sup>45</sup> Deeds by Jacques Valery and Jean Baptiste Morin, Conveyance Book 3:129–31. Both men appear on the plat map for T7N R5W, just below present Cloutierville. Both deeds state that they were selling their land at Rivière aux Cannes and both begin with the words, “Before Pierre Charûau, justice of the peace.”

The earliest Metoyer record for this tract was created December 26, 1806. The U. S. Land Office opened, that month, a board through which local landowners could file “claims” for the land they had held under the French and Spanish regimes. Coincoin’s son Pierre Metoyer Jr. (under the name “Pierre Quoin Quoin”) lodged his claim for “six acres of frontage on each side of Red River to the depth of forty acres.” The only proof of title he could offer was his affidavit that he held it “by virtue of Exchange with Augustin Quoin Quoin (brother to the present claimant) who purchased from Antoin Berge[r]on, who purchased from Pierre Boudouin, to whom the said tract of Land was originally granted by Concession dated 5<sup>th</sup> March 1798.”<sup>46</sup>

A lack of legal deeds was not uncommon for the early years of settlement at Rivière aux Cannes. While hundreds of deeds exist; many others were never created due to a lack of literacy among most first settlers and the distance from officials at the post of Natchitoches. In the claim filed by Antoine Coindet (consort of Coincoin’s crippled Black daughter Marie Louise), witness François Davion asserted: “He does not believe that any other than a verbal sale passed between the parties which at that date was customary in the transfer of lands.”<sup>47</sup>

The involvement of Coincoin’s family with Bergeron and

<sup>46</sup> Affidavit of Pierre Quoin Quoin (signed Pierre Coinquin, *mulâtre libre*), Claim Papers B1841, S33&105 T7N R6W; imaged at *Louisiana Office of State Lands*, accessed 20 July 2020, <https://wwwslodms.doa.la.gov/WebForms/DocumentViewer.aspx?docId=510.00062>.

<sup>47</sup> Testimony of François Davyon [Davion], Claim of Antoine Coindet, B1859, T6N R5W; imaged at *Louisiana Office of State Lands*, accessed 20 July 2020, <https://wwwslodms.doa.la.gov/WebForms/DocumentViewer.aspx?docId=510.00060>. For the Coindet relationship to Coincoin, see Mills and Mills, *Forgotten People*, 65, 307.

the S33&105 community can be back dated to 1798. On October 6 of that year, Antoine Bergeron swore before witnesses that he had conveyed to Marie Louise Mariotte a portion of his land at Rivière aux Cannes, two arpents on each side of the river,” in exchange for her washing his clothes for a year.<sup>48</sup> Mariotte was Coincoin’s sister.<sup>49</sup> Contemporary deeds place her in S107, with one farm intervening between her and 105.<sup>50</sup> She, too, filed a claim with the U.S. Land Office for confirmation of her title. In January 1816, eight months after her death and a year before Coincoin’s passing, Mariotte’s claim was denied for insufficient proof.<sup>51</sup> In the meanwhile, Mariotte’s nephew Pierre Metoyer Jr. was confirmed for Bergeron’s land nearby.

No evidence has been found to physically place Pierre Jr. on this tract of land prior to the date he sold it. He did not legally acquire a title to the land until September 28, 1811, when he and Augustin went before the parish judge to create a deed.<sup>52</sup> In the meanwhile, Pierre formally acquired two other pieces of land. On March 5, 1798, while Pierre was still enslaved, the Spanish commandant at Natchitoches conceded him ten arpents on Isle Brevelle, both

<sup>48</sup> Bergeron to Mariotte, October 6, 1798, doc. 2877, NCA; the seller’s name is also variously spelled as Brejon and Crézon in this document.

<sup>49</sup> See Elizabeth Shown Mills, “Which Marie Louise Is *Mariotte*? Sorting Slaves with Common Names,” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 94 (September 2006): 183–204; online at Mills, *Historic Pathways*, under the “Articles” tab.

<sup>50</sup> That intervening tract (S34&106 T7N R6W), which plat maps assign to Louis Derbanne as claimant, was sold by Derbanne to Rivière aux Cannes’ occasional notary and justice of the peace Jean Pierre Marie Dubois, on June 11, 1811, in a deed that cited Mariotte as the adjacent landowner on the *lower* side, when descending the river from Natchitoches; doc. 3977, NCA.

<sup>51</sup> *American State Papers: Public Lands*, 3:78, 84.

<sup>52</sup> Augustin Metoyer to Pierre Metoyer, September 28, 1811, doc. 4006, NCA.

sides of the river (Claim B1952, S18&95 T7N R6W) adjacent to land conceded three years earlier to his brother Augustin Metoyer.<sup>53</sup> When Augustin filed his claim for Pierre's concession in November 1811, after the two had legalized the informal exchange claimed by Pierre five years earlier, Augustin's witnesses testified that Pierre's land had been cultivated continuously since 1798.<sup>54</sup> Parish church records attest that Pierre was still on that property in November 1804, when the Natchitoches priest travelled downriver to baptize children living distant from the post. On November 15, 1804, at the home of "Michel Jarri" [Pierre Michel Zarichi] on lower Isle Brevelle, he baptized a child born to Pierre Jr. (whose concession lay immediately above Zarichi), as well a child of Soulange Bossier whose land lay immediately below Zarichi, adjacent to Pierre Jr.'s brother Dominique.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Under Spanish land law policy, a settler petitioned his or her local commandant; if approved, the commandant issued an order of survey and settlement, which was considered a "concession." After the survey was approved and returned to the provincial land office, if the improvement requirements were met, the patent would be issued, thereby completing the grant process. Most Natchitoches claimants failed to complete this process, in part because the Spanish-era surveyor went blind.

<sup>54</sup> Affidavit of Nicolas Gallien, November 16, 1811, Claim Papers, B1951, S18&95 T7N R6W, *Louisiana Office of State Lands*, accessed 20 July 2020, <https://www.slodms.doa.la.gov/WebForms/DocumentViewer.aspx?docId=510.00062>.

<sup>55</sup> 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: Polyanthos, 1980), entries 109–13. For Zarichi's location, see *American State Papers: Public Lands*, 2:857, attesting that "Pierre Michel" sold his land to Augustin Metoyer, who filed for it as Claim B1956. For Soulange Bossier, see Claim Papers, François Lattier from Soulange Bossier, B2016, S23&98 T7N R6W; imaged at *Louisiana Office of State Lands*, accessed 20 July 2020, <https://www.slodms.doa.la.gov/WebForms/DocumentViewer.aspx?docId=510.00062>.

By 1808, Pierre had moved up to his mother's homestead on the Joyous Coast—a move likely made in 1807 when Coincoin shut down her vacherie and invested in the second tract adjacent to her farm. Those two tracts were then operated by the married Pierre and his bachelor brother Pierre-Toussaint. In 1808, Pierre extended their property lines with the purchase of an adjacent one-arpent triangle from the Miguel Hernandez claim.<sup>56</sup> (Map Two) In February 1810, when a neighbor of Coincoin's farmstead sold part of his grant, that neighbor (Louis Verchaire) cited "Pierre Metoyer Jr." as the owner or proprietor of Coincoin's land.<sup>57</sup> Six months later, when the United States took its first census of Natchitoches, it credited Pierre with the twelve-person enslaved family owned by his mother.<sup>58</sup> Clearly he and Pierre-Toussaint were using that labor force on the family's three adjacent tracts: Coincoin's homestead and the 1807–8 expansions.

The two brothers continued farming together for a year or so after Coincoin's 1813 sale of her homestead; but their partnership dissolved. In September 1814, Coincoin sold Pierre-Toussaint the land she had purchased in 1807. Nine months later, June 1815, Pierre bought seven *arpents* frontage along the river, mid-range of Isle Brevelle, from the original Jean Pomier grant (S5&82 T7N R6W).<sup>59</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Doc. 2891, NCA. Pierre sold Pierre-Toussaint this one-arpent triangle on April 21, 1821 ("Original Conveyance Acts," Book 42, doc. 503) on the same day Pierre-Toussaint sold both tracts to Prudhomme; Conveyance Books 2:522–23, 10:41–43.

<sup>57</sup> Verchere to Dominique Rachal, 12 February 1810, doc. 3768, NCA.

<sup>58</sup> 1810 U.S. census, Natchitoches Parish, La., p. 214, line 19.

<sup>59</sup> Marie Thérèse Coincoin to Toussaint Metoyer, Conveyance Book 3:308–9; Pierre Michel [Zarichi] to Pierre Metoyer, March 31, 1814, Conveyance Book 3:403–4.

Pierre-Toussaint remained alone on the 1807–8 tracts. In January 1816, when the U.S. finally sent a surveyor to mark the metes and bounds of Coincoin’s farmstead, that surveyor identified the claimant as “Pierre Metoyer, a man of Colour,” even though the claim had been filed in the name “Marie Theresa, free Negress” and the patent would eventually be issued in her name.<sup>60</sup>

Pierre Jr.’s consistent absence from Rivière aux Cannes, from the time S33&105 was purchased from Bergeron about 1806, is documentable in yet another way. That Rivière aux Cannes community was a hub of activity among intricately connected families. The first notary, justice of the peace, and auctioneer appointed to Rivière aux Cannes by the American regime was Louis Derbanne, who not only lived adjacent to S33&105 but owned the land above and below it. Thousands of surviving civil and church records chronicle the activities of that neighborhood: baptisms, marriages and burials, deeds and mortgages; mortuaries, succession inventories, family meetings to deliberate the interests of minors when a parent died, and community auctions of the goods each deceased person left. Pierre’s brothers appear frequently in these records, particularly the estate sales. Charûau and Antÿ appear time and again during their residency there.<sup>61</sup> But

<sup>60</sup> Surveyor’s note on January 1, 1816 survey, Claim Papers, A16779, S18&89 T8N R6W, imaged at *Louisiana Office of State Lands*, accessed 20 July 2020, <https://www.slodms.doa.la.gov/WebForms/DocumentViewer.aspx?docId=510.00064>. By this time, Coincoin had sold her interest in the land to Ailhaud Ste. Anne. However, local sales made after a claim was filed were not reported to the U.S. Land Office. Hundreds of such claims along Cane River were reconciled and patents issued under the name of the claimant, even though the land (or the claim to the land) had been sold during the years-long adjudication process.

<sup>61</sup> As an example, the August 11, 1813, estate sale of the half-Native *griffe* J. B.

Pierre Metoyer has not been found in any Rivière aux Cannes documents—not once—from the time he filed a claim for the land in December 1806 until March 1817 when he sold it. He does, however, appear in records of that same ilk that were created by planters of the Joyous Coast.<sup>62</sup>

The facts extracted from these records raise a significant question: Why did Augustin Metoyer purchase the land from Antoine Bergeron in the first place—land too far from his own plantation to feasibly farm it?

Augustin Metoyer (Figure One) was Coincoin's eldest half-French son. He is known to history as the family patriarch. More than a century after his death, descendants described him as the man who governed the family's conduct there on the Isle, reining in risky behavior and keeping the family out of debt, lest they lose the precarious legal status and measure of respect they had earned as free people of color in a slave regime.<sup>63</sup> Documents Augustin created throughout his life show him moving his family members across sections of the parish plat maps, like pawns on a chessboard. That 1806 exchange with his

Baltasar, of Rivière aux Cannes (husband of Louis Metoyer's daughter Rose), was attended by Augustin, Louis, Dominique, Joseph, and François Metoyer—but not Pierre or Pierre-Toussaint; see Succession Book 1:49–54. From another perspective, when the white Créole Antoine Rachal died in 1817 at his home below Cloutierville, the inventory of his property included notes held by him on Cane River planters of all hues, including the white Ambroise LeComte, Charûau, and Antÿ, along with several of Coincoin's sons and their in-law, the multiracial Joseph LaVigne—but not Pierre; see inventory of succession of Antoine Rachal, 27 January 1817, Succession Book 2:143–52.

<sup>62</sup> For example, see Sale of Movable of Widow Monginot, 20 October 1814, Succession Book 1:221–25, particularly 223, showing "Pierre Metoyer *filz*" attending with his half-brother "Mr. Victorin Metoyer" and their father "P<sup>re</sup> Metoyer père."

<sup>63</sup> Mills and Mills, *Forgotten People*, 190, reporting details of an interview with Mrs. Coutii, March 24, 1974.

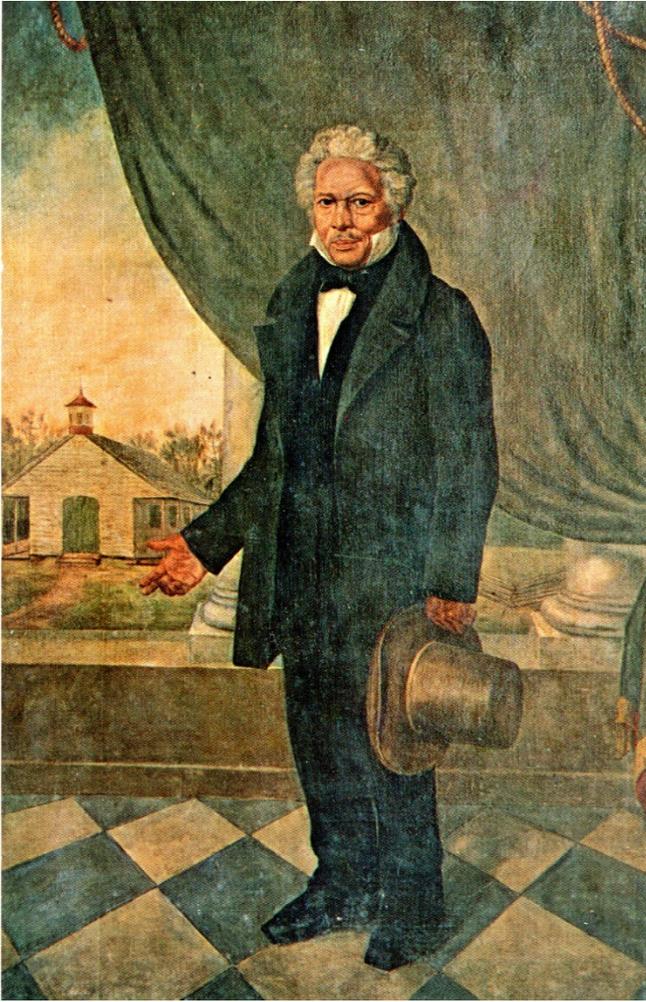


Figure One: Sieur Nicolas Augustin Metoyer (1768–1856), Patriarch of Isle Brevelle. Portrait by J. Feuille, 1836. Photo courtesy of Northwestern State University of Louisiana, Watson Memorial Library, Cammie G. Henry Research Center; made by NSU in 1975 from an unidentified postcard. The original portrait hangs today in St. Augustine Church on Isle Brevelle, the church Metoyer founded in 1829.

younger brother, promising Pierre title to a tract on which Pierre clearly never lived, was only the first such move. That same year, Augustin bought land at the bottom of the Isle, halfway between himself and the plat newly given to Pierre; there, he installed their youngest brother François Metoyer, although he did not deed the land to François until 1814 (the same day that Coincoin deeded her 1807 land to Pierre-Toussaint).<sup>64</sup> About 1811, Augustin bought an even more distant tract above the town of Natchitoches, confirmed to him at 697.55 acres (S39&41 T10N R7W). On that land, he settled his Black half-brother Nicolas Coincoin<sup>65</sup>—in exchange for which Nicolas gave Augustin his own claim for land on the backside of Augustin’s plantation (Claim R&R 307, S68 T7N R6W).<sup>66</sup> In May 1815, after their sister Susanne Metoyer—a *statu liber* since 1802—finally became free, Augustin arranged another land

<sup>64</sup> Metoyer to Metoyer, September 14, 1814, doc. 4364, NCA. The handwriting on this original document is that of Charûau, who also signed as witness.

<sup>65</sup> For the ramifications of this exchange, see Elizabeth Shown Mills, “QuickLesson 16: Speculation, Hypothesis, Interpretation & Proof,” *Evidence Explained: Historical Analysis, Citation & Source Usage* (website), posted 21 March 2013, <https://www.evidenceexplained.com/content/quicklesson-16-speculation-hypothesis-interpretation-proof>, for “Case at Point,” particularly discussion under “Test 4.”

<sup>66</sup> Claim Papers, R&R 307, S68 T8N R6W, *Louisiana Office of State Lands*, accessed 20 July 2020, <https://wwwslodms.doa.la.gov/WebForms/DocumentViewer.aspx?docId=510.0078>; also Claim Papers, R&R51, B1955, S39&41 T10N R7W, <https://wwwslodms.doa.la.gov/WebForms/DocumentViewer.aspx?docId=510.00244>. This pair of lands would embroil Augustin in legal suits for decades. The white Créole Roubieu brothers contested Augustin’s right to the backwater tract between Cane River and River Attaho. Meanwhile, Augustin’s Black half-brother who occupied the land above Natchitoches negligently allowed other parties to settle part of the land, resulting in the legal suit Augustin Metoyer f.m.c. vs. Alexander Deblieux, Natchitoches District Court bundle no. B-159, case no. 1232, which stayed on the docket through much of the 1830s.

exchange within the family. Their brother Louis agreed to convey to Susanne a tract of five arpents he owned along Augustin's upper line. In return, Augustin compensated Louis by deeding over to him the original concession of their brother Pierre.<sup>67</sup>

Augustin's pattern of actions clearly supports the family tradition that, in Coincoin's old age, he moved her downriver so he could better care for her. When pre-1820 activities on all the family lands are analyzed, the only otherwise-unoccupied tract of family land on which Augustin could have put his mother was S33&105, just below the Isle at upper Rivière aux Cannes. (Map One) Two farms below her was the land owned in 1811 and 1812 by the notary Pierre Charûau. Two farms above her was her son François. Six farms above her was the land of her sons Dominique and Joseph Metoyer, where the census taker found Charûau in 1810—and where Charûau returned after the failed purchase of a plantation of his own. The census of 1810, which names only heads of household and moved all free people of color out of their neighborhoods to create a special end-of-census list, in that process dropped the households of both Coincoin and the other occupant of her land, her grandson-in-law François Milon.<sup>68</sup>

### Coincoin's Death and the Sale of S33&105

No surviving record marks Coincoin's death. Her last appearance on record is the trip she made to the Natchitoches courthouse in April 1816 to acknowledge the documents by which she transferred her enslaved people

<sup>67</sup> Docs. 4449 and 4450, NCA.

<sup>68</sup> 1810 U.S. census, Natchitoches Parish, La., p. 214.

to her offspring. In December 1817, Coincoin's widowed son Pierre Jr. took a new wife; he began his marriage contract with the identification of himself as son of "deceased Marie Thérèse Coincoin."<sup>69</sup> During that time frame defined for Coincoin's death, burial records for slaves and free people of color are destroyed for four and a half months: from November 29, 1816, to May 11, 1817.<sup>70</sup>

A flurry of family activity in mid-March 1817 points to the probable time of Coincoin's death:

- **March 13:** Pierre Jr. made a rare appearance on the lower Isle—his first documentable appearance there since his child's baptism in 1804. At the home of his brother Augustin Metoyer and in the presence of François Lavespère (Augustin's neighbor) and Louis Derbanne (whose plantation lay adjacent to S33&105), Pierre Jr. executed two sales. To François Milon, who had married a granddaughter Coincoin had reared from infancy,<sup>71</sup> Pierre sold the west half

<sup>69</sup> Metoyer and Henriette, Marriage Contract, Books 2 & 3: Marriage & Miscellaneous, 1816–1819," folio 122.

<sup>70</sup> E. S. Mills, *Natchitoches, 1800–1826*, documents the gap between 29 November 1816 and 11 May 1817 (see entries 1761 and 1762). The principal register of this decade suffered considerable fire damage when the church went up in flames on March 29, 1823. White burials are also missing from January 1816 through mid-July 1818; and white baptismal records are destroyed between March 1816 and May 1818. The top "half" of marriage pages for 1816 and 1817 (including dates and details on grooms and brides) are charred away.

<sup>71</sup> The granddaughter Marie Louise Catherine "Catiche" Metoyer, was the natural child of Louis Metoyer by Françoise, an enslaved woman belonging to Widow Jean Baptiste LeComte. In 1794, the widow sold the five-year-old Catiche to Coincoin for manumission stating that the infant had been "entrusted" to Coincoin at the age of two. See Marguerite LeRoy, Widow LeComte, to Coincoin and Coincoin to Catiche, August 27, 1794, docs. 2550 and 2552, NCA. Catiche wed François Maurice Milon on August 26, 1806; see St. François Parish, Register 5, entry 366.

of that tract, S33, where the Milons had already settled. He then sold the east half, S105, to Pierre Charûau, who apparently drafted both documents. Milon paid cash for the purchase, \$500. Charûau asked for five years of credit.<sup>72</sup>

- **March 15:** Two days later, Pierre was still at Rivière aux Cannes when he, Augustin, and Milon attended the estate sale of Louis Gallien, Antÿ's brother-in-law; Pierre bought one bar of steel.<sup>73</sup> At that point, Pierre left Rivière aux Cannes and returned home—after which he has not been found in any recorded community activity at Rivière aux Cannes.

Stepping back to view the whole week and its sequel, one sees a larger pattern in the family activities:

- **March 12:** Pierre-Toussaint and his white half-brother Benjamin Metoyer, from the Joyous Coast, appeared together on the Lower Isle at the estate auction of Jean Louis Hopoke. Flush with cash or expectations, Pierre-Toussaint bought the plantation for \$2,070—more than twice the sum at which the property had been estimated. Benjamin bought one “old pot” and two tubs.<sup>74</sup>
- **March 12:** Toussaint's brother Joseph, a resident of the Lower Isle, also attended the Hopoke sale and bought a 35-year-old enslaved man, Dominique, paying \$500.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Metoyer to Milon, March 13, 1817, Conveyance Bk 6:159–60; Metoyer to Charûau, March 13, 1817, “Book 2 & 3, Marriage & Miscellaneous, 1816–1819,” folio 44.

<sup>73</sup> Estate sale, succession of Louis Gallien, March 15, 1817, Conveyance Book 6:159–60, purchase by Augustin Metoyer; procès verbal, succession of Louis Gallien, March 15, 1817, Succession Book 2:180, purchase by Metoyer and Milon.

<sup>74</sup> Inventory and procès verbal, estate of Jean Louis Hopoke, deceased, Succession Book 2:156, 178–79.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

- **March 13:** Augustin Metoyer, at the Rivière aux Cannes study of Louis Derbanne, paid \$525 to his neighbor François Lavespère for the freedom of a “petite mulâtre Créol” named Manuel.<sup>76</sup>
- **March 15:** Augustin Metoyer—back again at Derbanne’s Rivière aux Cannes home with his half-brother Benjamin—paid \$650 cash to Derbanne’s neighbor Jacques Verchère for an enslaved woman of Guinea birth.<sup>77</sup>
- **March 15:** the brothers Dominique and Joseph Metoyer, also meeting in Louis Derbanne’s study, exchanged two tracts of land. Their white half-brother Benjamin was still with them and witnessed their exchange.<sup>78</sup> Joseph’s land was the eastern half of S100, the western half of which had been farmed by Pierre Charûau.
- **April 8:** Dominique Metoyer also had sudden cash. His oldest son and daughter had recently married the multiracial daughter and son of the white Créole Jean Baptiste Louis Rachal of Rivière aux Cannes. Rachal, on March 1, 1817, had given land to his son two days before that son’s marriage contract with Dominique’s daughter. Dominique had promised the same, months before, when his son wed Rachal’s daughter. The two parental grants were to be adjacent tracts. However, Dominique had lacked the funds to pay for his promise. Three weeks after the events of March 13–15, Dominique had \$1,300 cash in hand to finalize the title.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Lavespère to Metoyer, March 13, 1817, Conveyance Book 6:160–61.

<sup>77</sup> Verchère to Metoyer, March 15, 1817, Conveyance Book 6:167–68.

<sup>78</sup> Metoyer to Metoyer, March 15, 1817, Conveyance Book 6:168–69.

<sup>79</sup> Compère, agent for the estate of Owens, to Metoyer, Conveyance Book 6:179–

- **April 10:** Louis Metoyer also bought new land, paying \$300 cash to the freedman Pierre *dit* Bayonne for a tract of three *arpents* frontage at lower Rivière aux Cannes adjacent to Louis' newly widowed, teenaged daughter Rose.<sup>80</sup>

The pattern of activities by Coincoin's sons that month is striking in both number and nature: Within twenty-eight days, five sons of Coincoin made two sales and six acquisitions—a pattern found at no other point in their lives. Son Pierre disposed of the land on which he never lived. Son Toussaint purchased a well-developed plantation. Son Joseph bought a male laborer. Son Augustin purchased the freedom of a probable kinsman and bought another enslaved woman. Sons Joseph and Dominique swapped lands, while Dominique bought other new land for a newly married child. Son Louis, closed out the month by buying a distant tract for a daughter in need. Most were cash transactions.

The presence of the white Benjamin Metoyer amid the family activities of March 12–15 poses another anomaly. Like his half-brother Pierre-Toussaint, Benjamin lived on the Joyous Coast where he appeared often in the records of his neighbors and in-laws (Lambres, Prudhommes, Rouquiers, and Ailhaud Ste. Anne). Like Pierre and Pierre-Toussaint, he did not frequent community events on the lower Isle or Rivière aux Cannes. Benjamin, too, went back

80. Also "Books 2 & 3, Marriage & Miscellaneous, 1816–19," folio 23, J. B. D. Metoyer to Adelaïde Françoise [Rachal], marriage contract, June 17, 1816; folio 95, J. B. Rachal to "J. B. Carteron" [J. B. Rachal *fi*ls, a *cuarteron*, aka *quadroon*], donation of land, March 1, 1817; and folio 43, J. B. Rachal [*fi*ls] to Marie S. Metoyer, marriage contract, March 3, 1817.

<sup>80</sup> Bayonne to Metoyer, April 10, 1817, Conveyance Book 6:182–83.

home after that three-day flurry of activity.<sup>81</sup> No record states the purpose for his extended visit with his half-siblings. But Benjamin, who Coincoin had called in the year before to witness the distribution of her slaves among her children, was especially close to his siblings of color. Benjamin had, in fact, been wet-nursed by his sister Susanne, when his own mother was ill.<sup>82</sup>

Clearly, some significant event occurred at Rivière aux Cannes that brought together this set of siblings—Coincoin's sons and their white half-brother—between 12 and 15 March 1817: an event that prompted them to reshuffle family lands, sell the tract that was no longer needed, buy additional land, pay for the freedom of a child, and purchase two laborers. That event, beyond reasonable doubt, was the death of their mother Coincoin on the land she likely had occupied since 1807—the land Pierre now sold—S33&105 T7N R6W, including LDA site 16NA785.

This premise lays the foundation for one other conclusion. By logic and family patterns, Coincoin's burial—the event that brought the family together that March—would not have been in the town of Natchitoches, some thirty miles overland (forty by pirogue) from her last home. Two burial grounds existed then for Catholics along Cane River. In addition to the town site that had been used since 1734,<sup>83</sup> a second cemetery had been consecrated at Rivière aux Cannes in 1794, when Baptiste Anty's first

<sup>81</sup> Adlé to Metoyer, March 17, 1817, Conveyance Book 6:170–71, places Benjamin that day in the town of Natchitoches, where he executed his purchase in the office of the parish judge.

<sup>82</sup> Susanne's role as wet-nurse to her half-brother Benjamin is explicitly stated in the 1801 will of Claude Thomas Pierre Metoyer, folder 728, Melrose Collection.

<sup>83</sup> *American State Papers: Public Lands*, 3:195, affidavit of Louis Buard, October 8, 1814, on behalf of St. François Church, R&R Claim 260–873.

mother-in-law and the mother of Pierre Charûau's future wife, were both interred there by a passing priest.<sup>84</sup>

There, at the now-abandoned site historically known as Shallow Lake (LDA site 16NA789; Map One), is where the legendary Marie Thérèse Coincoin would have been laid to rest—in a forgotten grave within a long-abandoned cemetery. When her daughter-in-law Marie Perine LeComte (wife of Pierre Metoyer Jr.) died in July 1815, the priest had noted that the body was taken to “the cemetery at Riviera Ocan,” which stood on the land of Perine's white Créole father, Ambrose LeComte I. When Dominique Metoyer's son Joseph died in May 1816, that lad was also buried “in the cemetery at Rivière aux Cannes.”<sup>85</sup> Beyond reasonable doubt, Rivière aux Cannes is where Pierre and Dominique, Augustin and his twin Susanne, Joseph, Pierre-Toussaint, and François—all now residents of the Isle<sup>86</sup>—would have buried their mother also.

<sup>84</sup> St. François Parish, Register 15, unpaginated entries in chronological order, November 15 (“wife of Pedro Charpentier”) and 20 (“wife of Joseph Rabalais”), 1794. It is probable that the Rivière aux Cannes cemetery dates to the mid-1760s when the community was first settled and that the 1794 burials represent the first time that deaths occurred while a priest happened to be present.

<sup>85</sup> E. S. Mills, *Natchitoches, 1800–1826*, entries 940 (Perine's entry in white register), 1754 (Perine's entry in f.p.c. register), and 1758 (Joseph Metoyer).

<sup>86</sup> At the time of Coincoin's death, Pierre-Toussaint still resided on the Joyous Coast. After purchasing the Hopoke plantation amid the flurry of actions in March 1817, he settled mid-Isle among his siblings. See Metoyer to Prudhomme, April 21, 1821, Conveyance Book 2:522–23; LeLand [LaLande] to Metoyer, confirmation of sale to Coincoin, April 21, 1821, Conveyance Book 10:41–43; and Metoyer to Metoyer, conveyance of one arpent, April 21, 1821, “Original Conveyance Acts,” Book 42, doc. 503.



Figure Two: Shallow Lake Cemetery, S48 T7N R6W, LDA 16MA 789. Photo courtesy of Joseph Balthazar Milon, descendant of Marie Thérèse Coincoin and François Milon (aka Mullon).

### Coincoin's Final Legacy

Coincoin's historical narrative has centered upon two locales: the Joyous Coast, where she petitioned for land when Pierre Metoyer cut her free; and Melrose on Isle Brevelle, the landmark plantation built by her son Louis but widely attributed to Coincoin by a mid-twentieth-century folklorist-in-residence.<sup>87</sup> The first locale is a valid part of Coincoin's narrative. The second locale is not. The closure of Coincoin's narrative now enables archaeologists to study the last years of her life through material remains

<sup>87</sup> The evolution of these tales is tracked in E. S. Mills, "Demythicalizing History," 405–9.

that may define her domestically and more intimately than has been possible from the historical record.

A “substantial occupation” of 16NA785 during the last years of Coincoin’s life has already been established by preliminary studies made in 2014 and 2015. Jeffrey Girard (Northwestern State University) and Dustin Fuqua (National Park Service), under the State of Louisiana’s Regional Archaeology Program and a grant from the Cane River National Heritage Area, found pieces of creamware and pearlware ceramic vessels—including banded, hand-painted, edged, and transfer-printed wares—that date the principal occupation of the site between 1780 and 1830.<sup>88</sup> However, Girard notes “an almost complete lack of tin-enameled faience suggesting that initial occupation of the site post-dates the eighteenth century.”<sup>89</sup> Similarly, Girard and Fuqua found fragments of shell-tempered, unrefined, earthenware vessels known as colonoware, typically made locally by American Indians; colonoware was widely traded throughout the region but disappears from the archaeological record by the 1830s.<sup>90</sup> One well-

<sup>88</sup> Girard, “Archaeology in the Cane River National Heritage Area... Rivière aux Cannes Region,” 61.

<sup>89</sup> Girard to present author, 14 July 2020.

<sup>90</sup> David W. Morgan and Kevin C. MacDonald, “Colonoware in Western Colonial Louisiana: Makers and Meaning,” *French Colonial Archaeology in the Southeast and Caribbean*, ed. by Kenneth G. Kelly and Meredith D. Hardy (Tallahassee: University of Florida Press, 2011), 117–51. Regarding the possible production of Native American wares at Rivière aux Cannes, no Native American tribe lived there during the period of this study. The few such individuals in that region are traceable to Caddo and Canneci captives enslaved by the founder of the Rivière aux Cannes settlement, the retired military officer Louis Mathias LeCourt de Presle. The plantation on which he kept these individuals (today, S51&54 T6N R5W, known as Hidden Hill) was a French grant LeCourt secured for his mistress,

preserved machine-cut nail is of a form used primarily between 1809 and 1834.<sup>91</sup> A posthole and fired clay lumps suggest the presence of a *poteaux en terre* structure. Personal artifacts range from buttons to buckles, to a brass thimble and fragments of a kaolin pipe stem, as well as bone fragments that suggest the diet of the site's occupants.<sup>92</sup> Coincoin's proposed occupancy between 1807 and 1817 fits well with the recovered material remains.

This placement of Coincoin at Rivière aux Cannes also opens a new pathway for scholars to develop a richer interpretation of her life. As a Black entrepreneur in a white-controlled society, she is already an icon—even though little is known of her personal life. Further archaeological work at 16NA785 and 16NA789 should provide a more-intimate understanding of her daily life, choices, and values. It should, as well, lay a broader foundation for the study of the intersection and integration of three cultures that distinguishes Rivière aux Cannes.

Jeanne LeRoy, prior to their marriage. At her death in 1777, the inventory of her succession itemizes, as slaves, one Native American couple and two females who were heads-of-family, despite the fact that Indian slavery had been outlawed by the Spanish some years before. Between that inventory and LeCourt's own death c1785, those enslaved Native Americans were released. The married couple, Pierre *dit* Capitaine and his wife Magdeleine, moved with their children to Upper Rivière aux Cannes where Capitaine bought part of Baptiste Anty's S43 in 1792. (Map Two) This chapter of Rivière aux Cannes history is explored in Elizabeth Shown Mills, "Louis Monet's Daughters Dorothée and Dorothée: Sorting Tri-Racial Roots of Two Same-named, Previously-merged, Colonial-born Freedwomen," *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 109 (June 2021): 85–110.

<sup>91</sup> Tom Wells, "Nail Chronology: The Use of Technologically Derived Features," *Historical Archaeology*, 32:2 (1998): 78–99, particularly 95.

<sup>92</sup> Preliminary findings are substantially detailed in Girard, "Archaeology in the Cane River National Heritage Area," 60–84; and Jeffrey S. Girard, *Regional Archaeology Program Management Unit 1: Twenty-sixth Annual Report* (Natchitoches, LA, 2015).