

Archival Documents

Nantes Loire Atlantique



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Historical Context

Introduction

- 1791 - Haitian Revolution begins
- 1825 - French government agrees to recognize Haitian independence in exchange for indemnity payments
- Intervening period: tens of thousands of colonists flee Haiti as refugees (US, Cuba, France, etc.)
- What can the conversation surrounding indemnity teach us about how these refugees view themselves in relation to France/the Haitian Revolution?
- How do we situate this conversation in the broader context of French Antillean historiography?

Anne Pérotin-Dumon, “La grande question des Antilles françaises au début de leur historiographie moderne, 1840-1970”

Traces complex trajectory of the French-speaking Caribbean representation in historical discourse, from its colonialist origins to more Antilles-centered historiography beginning in the 1960s-70s.

Observes changing narratives surrounding Franco-Caribbean history, highlighting tensions between colonizer and colonized perspectives.

- 19th-early 20th: emphasis on pre-independence French involvement & economic expansion within the region, “imperial history” (106).
- Interwar years: period of revisionist history placing focus on everyday people -- “des humbles et des masses” (107), history treating the Antilles focused on former slaves’ involvement during the Haitian Revolution, championing guerilla warfare and self-determination above French militarism.

Anne Pérotin-Dumon, “La grande question des Antilles françaises au début de leur historiographie moderne, 1840-1970”

- **Post-WWII:** advocates for decolonization, such as Aimé Césaire, re-center the Haitian Revolution and the revisionist histories of the interwar years as exemplars in debates around decolonization. Attempts to decolonize Antilles history showcase localized tensions emerging from the unique circumstances of plantation society.
- **1960-70s & beyond:** historiographical lens largely pioneered by historian Gabriel Debien in the 1960s-70s, investigating the implications of French colonial institutions from the perspective of those affected, emphasizing internal hierarchies that run contrary to dominant Eurocentric binary narratives about gender, class, and race. To understand how plantation institutions manifested themselves on the islands themselves, Antilles Studies pulls evidence from demographic and social history (e.g., plantation inventory reports, marriage contracts, and indemnity files), treating everyday people as social and economic actors.

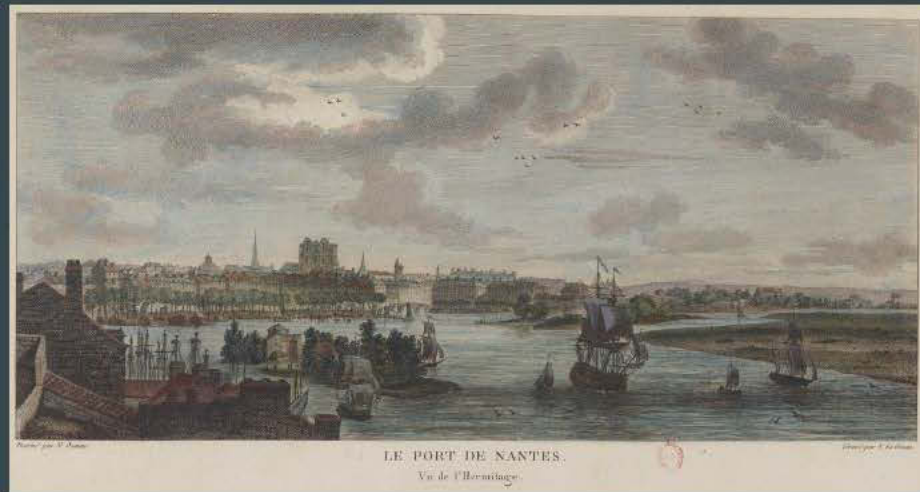
Anne Ulentin: “Garantir leur avenir: Les gens de couleur libres de Saint-Domingue et l’indemnité d’indépendance de 1825”

- Focuses on free people of color who sought reparations to compensate for financial losses sustained during Haitian Revolution
 - Identifies a fundamental similarity between the way the two groups responded to the Haitian Revolution that transcended distinctions of race, ethnicity, and class
 - Both expressed an unwavering allegiance to France in the wake of the Haitian Revolution
 - Both used juridical documents to make inventories of the assets in Saint Domingue
 - Both maintained expansive social networks that they used to communicate about developments related to government compensation after the Revolution
 - Cites racial discrimination as the main factor underlying the unequal compensation they received from the French government
- Free women of color as active participants in indemnification process

Our Research

Overview

- Data set information - Primary materials from Nantes Loire Atlantique Archives in France
 - Indemnity files
 - Correspondence
- Research questions
 - Independent variables: ethnicity, material possessions and class, national ties (Creoles vs. Metropolitans)
 - Dependent variable: reparations received from French govt.
- Analytical methods
 - Textual analysis
 - Translation
 - Paleography (verging on cryptology)



Primary Documents Part I:

Indemnity Files

Sophie

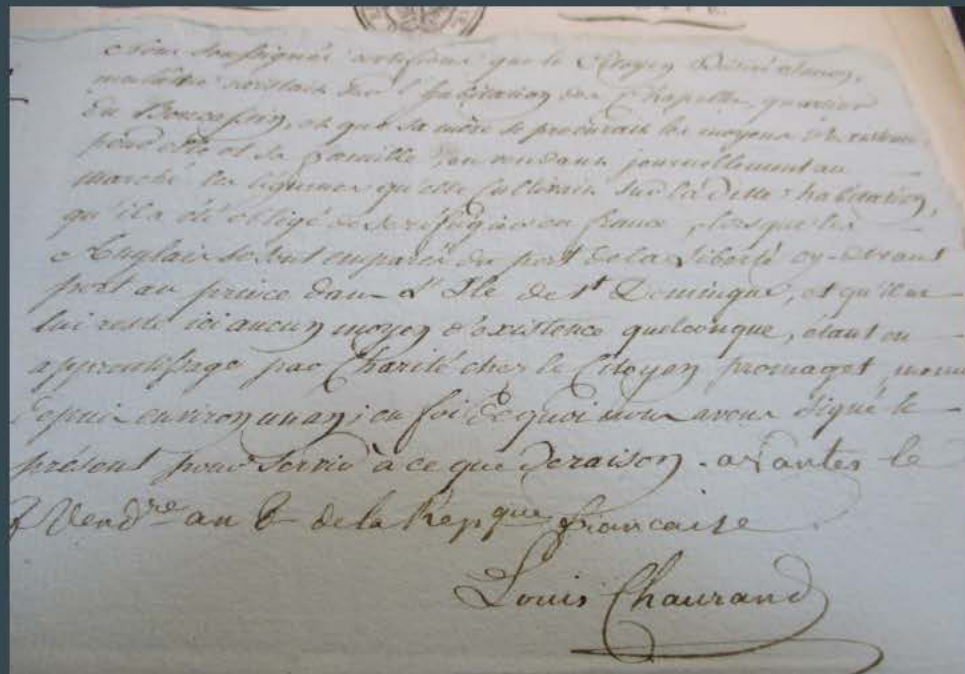
- Arrived in Bordeaux with la Citoyenne Vaugelade, January 1793
- Identified as “negresse,” arrived with “maitresse” - likely an enslaved person in Saint Domingue
- Immediately abandoned without resources:

“Elle a laissé cette négresse icy sans aucune autre ressource que celle quelle se procure par son travail journalier soit a laver ou a faire quelque commissions lesquels on trouve loccasion en quelle est en indigence”

N°47 Pour S^{te} Justine Certiffions que la Negresse Sophie En
 Venant du Cap Francois fle. St Domingue En France
 avec la Maitresse la Citoyenne Vaugelade quelle a débarqué
 avec elle a Bordeaux au Mois de Janvier 1793 en quelle est
 venue habiter cette femme au Mois de Novembre suivant
 que la Citoyenne Vaugelade ayant été Joindre son mary
 en Haiti elle a laissé cette Negresse icy sans aucune autre
 Ressource que celle quelle se procure par son travail
 Journalier soit a laver ou a faire quelque Commissions
 laquelle on trouve l'occasion en quelle est en indigence
 En qui nous luy avons Delivré le present pour
 Valoir en servir Ce que 'se Raisson'
 a Nantes le 24 Ventose au huit de la Republique
 Francois une indivisible *vaugelade*
deaux pere de la Citoyenne Vaugelade
Jamille
deux autres enfants

Désiré Sannom

- Arrived in Bordeaux June 20, 1797
- Identified as “mulatre”
- Refugee--fled after arrival of British
- Twelve years old; mother grew and sold vegetables at estate near Port-au-Prince
- No resources; worked as an apprentice by someone else’s “charity”
- Only person we found who received indemnity payment from the French government (6 Francs)



...c'est un homme âgé de 12 ans, qui le Citoyen Désiré Sannom,
mulâtre, né à Port-au-Prince, en l'an 1785, qu'on a
vu à Bordeaux, et qui se dit le procureur des moyens de subsistance
pour cette et la permission de venir dans le département au
marché les légumes qu'elle fait venir. Sur la dette habitation,
qu'il a été obligé de se réfugier en France, lorsque les
Anglais se sont emparés du port de la Liberté, et qu'il a
été au service d'un d'Ile de St. Domingue, et qu'il n'a
pas eu aucun moyen d'existence quelconque, étant en
apprentissage par charité chez le Citoyen promagot, sur
l'opinion environ un an, à la fin de quoi nous avons signé le
présent pour servir à ce que feraient. A l'autre le
Citoyen de la République Française
Louis Chaurand

Suzon

- Arrived at Nantes before January 21, 1800
- Identified as "mulâtresse libre" - "je suis peu moy libre puisque je ne suis point acheté"
- Writes to someone presumably in Haiti:
"Monsieur jay lhonneur de vous écrire [...] pour [vous prie de vouloir bien faire attention a la penible situation ou je me trouve noyant plus personne a qui je puisse avoir recours]"
- Claims land in the colony owned by father
- Destitute - father remarried and abandoned Suzon upon arrival in France

Suzon

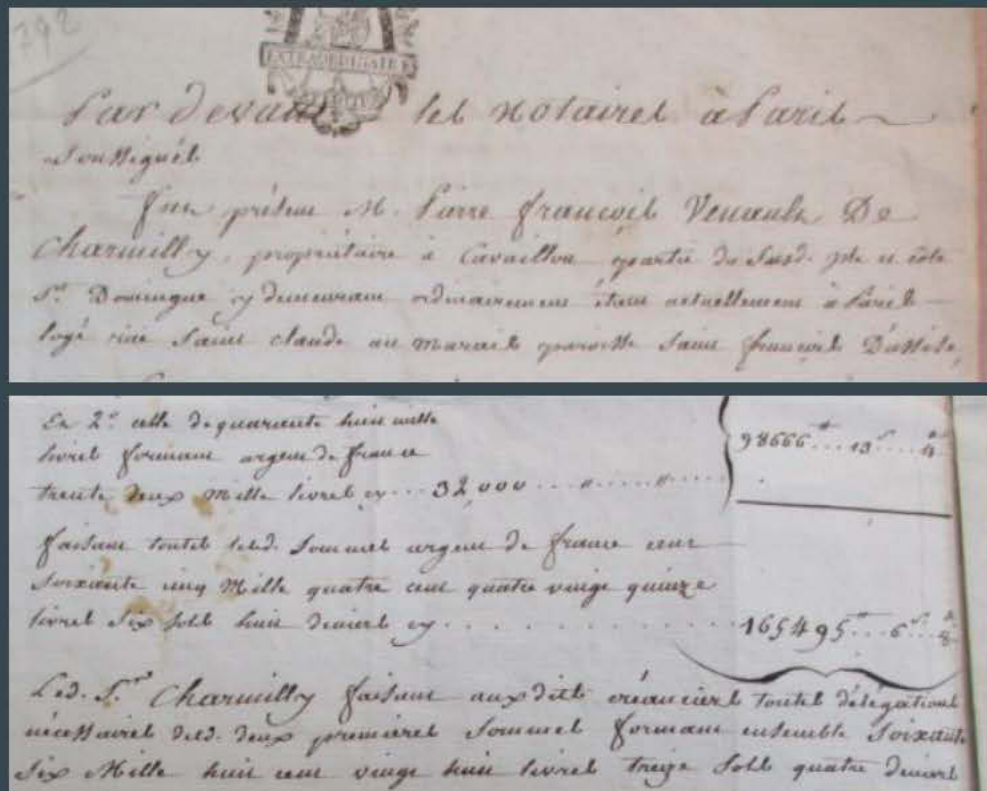
Monsieur jay lhonneur de vous écrire
cest ligne pour vous assure de mon profond
respect et vous prie de vouloir bien faire
attention a la penible situation ou je me trouve
noyant plus personne a qui je puisse avoir
recours je ne me connois aucun bien que sur
cette terre appelle les rembourgers situé dans
la paroisse de St paze si vous aviez la bonte
Monsieur de prendre connoissance de nos usages
americain de me faire remettre ce qui peut m'acquies
je une liberté affranchis qui est de nantes jétais
pas moy libre puisque je ne suis point acheté
je vous prie Monsieur de me croire tres respectueusement
votre humble servante Suzon m L

Primary Documents Part II:

Correspondence

Pierre François Venault de Charmilly

- Property owner in Northern Haiti.
- Appraisal of his estate in 1792, correspondence between two notaries in Paris.
- Claims both land and human labor (slaves) in the colony, value of which is to be reimbursed by 1798.
- Optimism at the beginning of the Revolutionary period. Hedging their bets.
- What were elites' perspectives at the beginning of the Revolution? How did that reflect in their material relationship to France?



Summary and Reflection

Key Findings

- Complexity of hierarchies
 - POC claiming property in Haiti
 - POC identifying themselves as victims of the Revolution
 - POC less likely to receive indemnity payments
 - Active participation of WOC in securing family's well being
- Status of child refugees of color
- Changing nature of class status - when a major material asset is lost, appeal to ideologies that still recognize such material assets
- Changing racial categories - Indemnity reinforces hierarchies

Reflection

- What worked well
 - Having secondary sources to guide our research
 - Excitement of piecing together a story
 - Interesting to observe orthographic, lexical changes from 18th century French
- What we learned
 - Features of the Napoleonic calendar
 - Unique challenges of archival research
 - Need for patience, flexibility, and collaboration