



PORTRAIT: PAULINE, AN ENSLAVED WOMAN IN THE CONVENT OF THE BENEDICTINE NUNS OF CALVARY

Krystel Gualdé

The presence of people living in slavery on French soil had been a legal quandary since the 17th century and was often a source of tensions between the parliaments and the Crown. According to the principle of French customary law: “all persons are free in this kingdom, and as soon as a slave steps foot on it, and is baptized, they are free.” This principle was decreed by Louis X in July 1315 with regard to the serfs of the royal domain. However, in the early 18th century, this provision was seen as incompatible with the ever-increasing numbers of slaves arriving in France. Furthermore, the colonists openly opposed it. Despite several attempts at clarification, generally in favour of the colonists, emancipation remained a possibility, but only after a trial or when certain formalities had not been duly completed. One case illustrates this more than any other: that of Pauline.

Admission to the convent and independence

Pauline, aged eighteen years, arrived in Nantes in January 1714, aboard the *Généreux*, which had left Guadeloupe a few weeks earlier. Pauline was a slave. For this voyage, she accompanied her owner, Madame Villeneuve, who placed her in boarding at the Convent of the Benedictines of Calvary as soon as she arrived in the city. Madame Villeneuve’s intention was to place Pauline here for a period of one year and to take her out again at the end of her stay in Paris. This practice was rare. Most enslaved people remained in the service of their owner when they were not placed with an apprentice master. At the convent, the young Pauline discovered a way of life that she enjoyed and therefore, applied to enter the order. Madame Villeneuve was then presented with Pauline’s application, which was supported by the congregation and a benefactor by the name of René Darquistade (1680-1754), himself a trader and shipowner practicing the slave trade. On 26 January 1715, the young girl’s application to enter the order was approved under the name Pauline Villeneuve: the Benedictine nuns had taken the liberty of attributing to Pauline her former owner’s surname.



A lawsuit was then initiated by the latter. The case was brought before a court in Nantes. After an investigation carried out over the course of 1715, it was concluded that the young woman was now independent as a prior declaration indicating that Madame Villeneuve had taken Pauline to France with the intention of bringing her back to the colonies had not been established.

Thus, in January 1716, Pauline, now in her twenties, presented herself before the Benedictines, in order to be received at first profession. She was admitted “by a majority of votes” in a secret ballot carried out by the nuns. The new recruit signed the charter by which she committed herself to “the conversion of her morals, to perpetual enclosure, to poverty, chastity, and obedience”. Six months later, she pronounced her vows on 7 July 1716, adopting the name of Sister Pauline Rose of Saint Teresa.

From then on, her daily life was punctuated by religious services, “mental prayers”, spiritual readings, manual or intellectual work, and meals. The day that began at two in the morning ended around seven in the evening, with the examining of her conscience and the Mother Prioress’s blessing. This was her life until her death on the morning of 3 November 1765, at the age of sixty-nine.

The convent logs mention that at that time, Pauline was referred to as “Venerable Mother,” testifying to her progress within the congregation. As was the case when she entered the novitiate fifty years earlier, nothing in the handwritten lines that refer to her reveal her particular story. All that is said of her past is: “She was a native of Guadeloupe in the Americas.”

A unique life story

Although her story has now been forgotten, her experience sealed the fate of the men, women, and children living in slavery, who came to France after her. As soon as the judgment of her trial was pronounced, the Royal Council of the Navy published a text in order to avoid other appeals. In October 1716, the situation was clarified by the *Édit du roi concernant les esclaves nègres des colonies* (King’s Edict concerning Black enslaved people in the Colonies), which established two new dimensions to French law by returning to the principle of *jus soli* and creating a category of individuals in the kingdom whose status did not previously exist: people living in slavery. These two aspects divided lawyers. While the Parliament of Paris refused to register the royal decision on the grounds that it implied the recognition of slavery in France, the Parliament of Rennes did not hesitate to record the edict in its registers as of 24 December 1716.



The main measures found in this text have their origin in a report drafted by Gérard Mellier (1674-1729), future mayor of Nantes, and then sub-delegate of the intendant of Brittany. Seeking to legitimize the practices of the Atlantic slave trade and colonial slavery, his aim was to preserve the interests of the colonists and the colonies, in an unequivocal text, which managed to make Pauline's experience an exceptional case.

About the author

Krystel Gualdé is the Director of Research at the Nantes History Museum – Castle of the Dukes of Brittany, and of the Memorial to the Abolition of Slavery. She is the curator of the exhibition *The Abyss. Nantes's Role in the Slave Trade and Colonial Slavery 1707-1830* and the *Decolonial Expressions* biennial.

Bibliography

Pierre H. Boule & Sue Peabody. *Le droit des Noirs en France au temps de l'esclavage, textes choisis et commentés*. Paris: L'Harmattan, coll. "Autrement mêmes", 2014, p. 291

Krystel Gualdé. 1716. *Pauline, une esclave au couvent*. Portet-sur-Garonne: Éditions Midi-Pyrénéennes, coll. "Cette année-là à Nantes", 2021, p. 48

Philippe Le Pichon. "Mellier et la traite négrière: le mémoire de 1716 sur le statut juridique des Noirs esclaves en France" in Gérard Mellier, *maire de Nantes et subdélégué de l'intendant de Bretagne (1709-1729)*. Nantes: Société d'histoire et d'archéologie de Nantes et de Loire-Atlantique, 2010, p. 121-150

Erick Noël. *Être Noir en France au XVIIIe siècle*. Paris: Tallandier, 2006, p. 256

*The term "Negro" is used here as a direct translation of the title of the French edict dating from the 18th century.



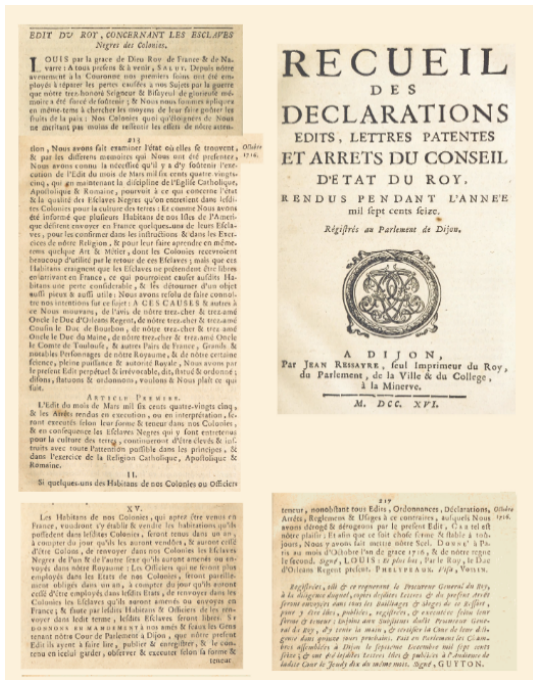
Illustrations



The port of Nantes seen from the île Feydeau, Nicolas Ozanne, engraving, 1776, © manioc.



The cloisters of the Visitation, Nantes, watercolour, anonymous, c. 1900, © Musée d'arts de Nantes, Nantes Patrimonia.



Louis XV - Edict of the King, concerning the Black Slaves of the Colonies, October 1716 published in "Collection of declarations, edicts, letters patent, and judgments of the Council of State of the King, registered in the Parliament of Dijon", 1716, © Wikimedia commons.