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The University of Southern Mississippi

SLAVERY AND EMPIRE: THE DEVELOPMENT OF SLAVERY

IN THE NATCHEZ DISTRICT, 1720-1820

by

Christian Pinnen

Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

May 2012

ABSTRACT

SLAVERY AND EMPIRE: THE DEVELOPMENT OF SLAVERY

IN THE NATCHEZ DISTRICT, 1720-1820

by Christian Pinnen

May 2012

“Slavery and Empire: The Development of Slavery in the Natchez District, 1720-1820,” examines how slaves and colonists weathered the economic and political upheavals that rocked the Lower Mississippi Valley. The study focuses on the fitful—and often futile—efforts of the French, the English, the Spanish, and the Americans to establish plantation agriculture in Natchez and its environs, a district that emerged as the heart of the “Cotton Kingdom” in the decades following the American Revolution. Before American planters established their hegemony over Natchez, the town was a struggling outpost that changed hands three times over the course of the century. “Slavery and Empire” explores how enslaved Africans struggled to find their footing on this unstable ground. Slaves seized upon many weapons to claim their freedom. Some cast their lots with Indians hostile to their colonial masters, while others tested their chains in the courts. Slaveowners often found the field tilted against them; wars, regime changes, and an unstable economy conspired to place their mastery—not to mention their titles to land and slaves—on unsound footings. The pitched battles between slaves and their owners, along with the contests between colonial subjects and their countries, had a profound effect on a region that became the heart of the Deep South.

As the French began to settle the Natchez District in the early 1720s, only seventy slaves worked in the fertile Natchez fields for their European masters. Sixty-four of these slaves were African, the rest were bound Native Americans. Over the next century, the slave numbers increased gradually and when Mississippi became a state in 1817, the first census taken shows a slave majority in all counties that the Americans carved out of the Natchez District. Yet Natchez experienced a very uneven development over the course of the century that bridged the first French attempt and American success in creating a slave society in the district. Although slave numbers multiplied, planters, imperial officials, and the enslaved sought every means to contest one another over measures of control and power in Natchez. These constant conflicts, coupled with economic crisis and imperial strife in the lower Mississippi Valley, made for a bumpy road to the pinnacle of planter power and the uncontested reign of King Cotton in the 1820s.

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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I am fortunate to have many mentors at The University of Southern Mississippi. From the beginning of my tenure there were Kyle Zelner and William Scarborough. Professor Scarborough relentlessly forced me to become a better historian by insisting that I was wrong more often than right regarding my assumptions of southern history. He was indispensable in my training as a historian, in learning to meticulously document my research, and insisting I stay on path to finish on time. He taught me these things, and so much more, about what it means to be a dedicated historian and teacher. Dr. Zelner likewise provided me with many lessons in improving my writing in English that I so desperately needed. I will always remember an early course for which he read a draft of every paper. He was diligent in teaching me the complex ins and outs of a foreign language and setting me on the right path.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The late 1920s saw the creation of a new idea to attract tourists to Natchez, Mississippi. The small town on the Mississippi River had struggled with deteriorating finances and population since the Civil War, and the members of the Women's Club of Natchez decided in 1927 to form the Natchez Garden Club to "promote and foster the beautification of the City of Natchez, its houses, gardens, public buildings." To bring a new stream of revenue to empty city coffers, the club decided to "perpetuate the history of the Natchez Territory and to keep alive the memory of the lives, traditions and accomplishments of the people who made that history." The past these well-meaning ladies set out to preserve, however, was a story, literally a fairytale, of an idyllic antebellum South.¹ The heiresses of wealthy antebellum families focused their preservation efforts on white planters and the imposing edifices they had left behind. They ignored Natchez's black population, enslaved and free, but black people had been a part of Natchez's history from the beginning of the European settlement in 1719. The town's history was older, much older, than the era between 1820 and 1861, and it included thousands of black slaves and free people who all shaped what would later become antebellum Natchez. The history of Natchez reached a full two centuries beyond what the ladies of the town decreed as their heritage in 1927. Perhaps Natchez's first hundred years were not as glamorous as the Garden Club would have liked. Nevertheless, it was the century preceding the "flush times" in the district, beginning in the 1720s, that

¹ As cited in Steven Hoelscher, "The White-Pillard Past: Landscapes of Memory and Race in the American South," in *Landscape and Race in the United States*, ed. Richard H. Schein (New York: Routledge, 2006), 51-52.

was instrumental in shaping the domain of King Cotton. The century that foreshadowed the glory days of elegant plantation homes in Natchez holds a complex history that presents a marked contrast to the simple fabled story reimagined by the Garden Club. What the women of the Garden Club tried to preserve was a portrait rooted in dreams of cotton and wealth, rather than the realities of the violent and rough frontier in the lower Mississippi Valley.

The story of colonial Natchez has to be grounded in the district's dark fertile soil and Africans who toiled under the merciless sun. Planters sought to control their slaves and a steadily growing number of free people of color, hoping to duplicate the success of slave societies across the Americas. While planters tried to control the swelling number of black people, the European empires governing the district sought to contain the planters' independence and exact imperial dominance over all races in the region. The tensions created in this process sometimes allowed slaves to resist their masters, and legal changes brought by every new empire stipulated the boundaries of slave agency in the district. Over its first century as an infant slave society, people in Natchez faced a complicated web of imperial rules that both black and white tried to either use or circumvent to achieve their goals.

Natchez's pre-antebellum history deserves more attention. The first century of Natchez's history was marked by conflicts that could have easily ended the hopes of Europeans to create a successful plantation society. These conflicts among empires, settlers, Native Americans, and African slaves drove change. Changes in empires and staple crops, as well as wavering loyalties, all influenced the complex historical record of the Natchez District, but they did not produce the antebellum Natchez portrayed by the

ladies of the Garden Club. Each time a power struggle in Natchez occurred, the population of the district rebounded, more determined to survive and flourish. Eventually the planters of Natchez succeeded in creating the antebellum Natchez District through the exploitation of their African slaves. Yet the history of black people in Natchez was, and remains, absent from the story told by the Garden Club.² The most honest portrayal of the historical Natchez District was an equation that required a continuous and strenuous effort of both African slaves and the planters who exploited them. Without examining that effort and its complex history, the story of antebellum Natchez is a hollow façade and remains a fairytale.

Natchez's European settlement began in the early seventeenth century. The first Europeans to set foot in the lower Mississippi Valley were led by the Spaniard Hernando de Soto on his expedition across southeast North America between 1539 and 1542. Unsuccessful in their search for gold, and discouraged by de Soto's death in 1542, the Spanish empire did not return to the valley until the eighteenth century. It was another European empire that created a lasting settlement along the lower Mississippi in the seventeenth century. The French, led by Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville, arrived at the Gulf Coast in 1699 and established posts at Biloxi and Mobile. Their goal was to counter Spanish attempts to assert their dominance over the valley, as the Iberian empire had founded Pensacola a year earlier.³ After 1702, Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville—d'Iberville's younger brother—assumed the task of governing the struggling French colony. It was Bienville who established the city of New Orleans in 1717. In

² Ibid.

³ Pensacola was first settled by Spanish settlers in 1559, but the settlement was quickly deserted. In 1698, Spain renewed its efforts to settle the North American coast of the Gulf of Mexico.

1719, he made New Orleans the capital of the colony. The first European structure in Natchez, a seemingly inconsequential backwater 130 miles north of New Orleans, was Fort Rosalie, built in 1716 to protect a trading post that had been erected in the area in 1714 to facilitate commerce with Native Americans and to shore up defenses against the British Empire, whose traders had made progress in luring Native American trade toward the Eastern Seaboard. The Natchez Indians were the most powerful nation in the area and they would soon lend their name to the French district.

The French were unsure about the basis of the economy in Louisiana. Trade with Indians for fur, as established in French Canada, was the main objective in the lower Mississippi Valley early on. Driven by mercantilist principles, the French were primarily interested in making Louisiana a profitable enterprise through the fur trade. When these profits failed to materialize by 1719, the newly established French Company of the Indies, under the leadership of John Law, searched for any kind of profit that would benefit the shareholders in France.⁴ The company changed tactics, and began increasing their efforts to send large numbers of African slaves to Louisiana, hoping to use their labor to create a profitable plantation economy. The French chose Natchez as the location for their own tobacco production, attempting to replicate the success of the British in Virginia. The French Indies Company brought the first African slaves to Louisiana, and although their numbers did not increase fast enough to ensure the creation of a profitable plantation society in the short-term, the slowly growing number of Africans in Louisiana

⁴ Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 9.

did lead to the adoption of the *Code Noir* in 1724.⁵ After two decades of failure in Louisiana, French officials were certain that slave labor would lead them to success.

Although the slave code often heralded the creation of a plantation society, Louisiana as a whole would not develop such a social order until the 1770s, after France had left the lower Mississippi Valley.⁶ The Natchez District itself was on the verge of becoming a plantation society in 1729 as the tobacco crop harvested that year promised profits for the first time, but a rebellion of slaves and Natchez Indians that November ended all hopes of the French to duplicate the successes of Virginia. The deaths of most French Natchez settlers, and the loss of almost all the outpost's slaves, tipped the fragile Louisiana economy into a depression.⁷ The French succeeded in forcing the Natchez entirely out of the area, but they never again attempted to settle the district.

It was not until 1765 that Europeans once again attempted to make Natchez a plantation district. The British gained the territory in 1763 as a part of West Florida in the Treaty of Paris after the Seven Years' War. For fourteen years, the British Empire struggled to increase the necessary number of settlers and slaves in the district by circulating descriptions of Natchez as "a most delightful country of great extent." An

⁵ Jean-Baptiste Colbert, Minister of Finance under Louis XIV of France, had designed the code in 1685 to control slaves and free people of color in the French colonies, and Louisiana was one of many French possessions to adopt it. Starting in 1709, the French began in earnest to import slaves and succeeded in shipping over 6,000 Africans across the Atlantic in the next fifteen years. See Jennifer M. Spear, *Race, Sex, and Social Order in Early New Orleans* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 55.

⁶ James T. McGowan, "Creation of a Slave Society: Louisiana Plantations in the Eighteenth Century" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Rochester, 1976), 182-83; Spear, *Race, Sex, and Social Order in Early New Orleans*, 55; Daniel H. Usner, *Indians, Settlers & Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley before 1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 47.

⁷ Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 182-83; Spear, *Race, Sex, and Social Order in Early New Orleans*, 55.

account by traveler Philip Pittman depicts a scene of “little hills and fine meadows, separated by small copses, the trees of which are mostly walnut and oak.” In addition, the area was “well watered, hops grow wild, and all kinds of European fruits come to great perfection.”⁸ Despite these glowing reports, settlers and slaves simply did not arrive in large enough numbers to support a plantation economy in British Natchez. Slaves imported into West Florida from the Caribbean were sold before they reached Natchez, and planters were reluctant to risk their possessions on West Florida’s frontier.

Spain was the next European power that tried to govern the Natchez District. After fourteen years of British rule, Spain acquired Natchez when Bernardo de Gálvez conquered Baton Rouge as part of his military campaign to take West Florida. In accordance with the capitulation agreement of Baton Rouge, Natchez once again changed hands in 1779. Daily life, however, hardly changed for the area’s European settlers. The Spanish only manned the fort with a small detachment of soldiers while they fought the British in Mobile and Pensacola. It was only after some of Natchez’s citizens rebelled in 1781, and Spain finally announced victory in Pensacola, that the Iberians fully asserted themselves in Natchez with a succession of evenhanded governors. Spain quickly gained the favor of the white population because it provided the planters with substantial subsidies to plant tobacco, a move that guaranteed planters’ economic success and promised the Spanish the tentative loyalty of the settlers. But the relationship between planters and dons soured in the 1790s when Spain withdrew its tobacco subsidies, resulting in a depression in Natchez. Planters eventually recovered when they began planting cotton and adopted Eli Whitney’s cotton gin in 1795.

⁸ Philip Pittman, *The Present State of the European Settlements on the Mississippi; with a Geographical Description of That River* (London: J. Nourse, 1770), 37.

Although the Natchez economy started to improve and the cotton market showed promise, the declining Spanish Empire yielded to the demands of the burgeoning United States and transferred the Natchez District to the American republic in the 1795 Treaty of San Lorenzo. However, the Natchez District remained in limbo for three more years, as the United States was unable to send a mission to the district until 1797. Even then, diplomatic entanglements delayed transfer another year, until Spain finally relinquished the district and Natchez became the capital of the newly established Mississippi Territory.

The United States was the final power that held sway over Natchez and the surrounding area. In a line of empires, the United States was the only power that established true control over both slaves and settlers in this rural and frequently lawless outpost on the father of waters. Yet even the rapidly expanding American republic had its share of problems in the region. The United States fought off the British during the War of 1812 and struggled to maintain a presence of federal power in Natchez until Mississippi became a state in 1817. At that time, a century of uncertainty came to an end.

During the first century of European colonization, Natchez existed on the outskirts of various empires. Following the model of Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, Natchez survived under French control as a borderless land—a true frontier—in which “intercultural relations produced mixing and accommodation as opposed to unambiguous triumph.” Then, through the successive possession of the British and Spanish empires, Natchez became a vaguely defined borderland, in which the district’s edges were “contested boundaries between colonial domains.” France, Great Britain, Spain, and after 1795, the United States, all had competing interests in the Natchez District and Louisiana.

It was not until the United States created the Mississippi Territory in 1798 that the district converted to a bordered land, defined by international coexistence, rather than imperial struggle. Secure state control with “exclusive dominions over all territories within their borders” defined the end of this process.⁹ Control over the territory and its inhabitants, then, was never certain until the United States bought Louisiana from France in 1803 and finally incorporated Natchez into the republic as part of the state of Mississippi in 1817.¹⁰

The fight for domination of the lower Mississippi Valley between empires was not the only skirmish over control in Natchez. The continuous effort to control enslaved and free Africans was the essential struggle that would define the Natchez District throughout the eighteenth century and beyond. To achieve prosperity in the district, planters relied on slave labor. Only if planters controlled the black people of Natchez could the plantation society succeed. When, on occasion, black people challenged the dominance of the planters, the locus of power in Natchez was tested, and imperial officials struggled to control the slaves and please the planters.

The imperial rule of France, Great Britain, and Spain over the Natchez District was ever tenuous. Colonists in Natchez sought to remain as self-governing as possible,

⁹ Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, "From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in between in North America," *American Historical Review* 104, no. 3 (1999): 816.

¹⁰ The model by Adelman and Aron is heavily Eurocentric and at times relegates the power of Indian nations to the sidelines of the frontier conflicts. Historians like Angela Hudson, writing on the Creek nation, have already shown that the Native American nations did have a political structure allowing them to offer organized state power against European intruders. In Natchez, however, the Natchez Indian nation had been eradicated by the French and the territory was largely borderless, even though the Choctaw and Chickasaw maintained a threatening presence on the fringes of the district. However, both confederacies had their own slave societies, employing black slaves for labor, during the last two decades of the eighteenth century. Therefore, they did not challenge white supremacy over Natchez's slaves, and Adelman and Aron's model of transition and state power works well in Natchez. See Angela Pulley Hudson, *Creek Paths and Federal Roads: Indians, Settlers, and Slaves and the Making of the American South*, 1st ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Christina Snyder, *Slavery in Indian Country: The Changing Face of Captivity in Early America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

free from imperial intervention. They appreciated assistance in subduing their slaves, but any additional attempt to regulate the town was frowned upon. The settlers understood what it meant to live on the fringes of empire. They were willing to face sickness, warfare, and death, yet were reluctant to accept an overbearing colonial government. Planters enjoyed their freedom and happily acquiesced to the “colonial shell” of empires that allowed them easy access to markets, to slaves from the Caribbean or Africa, and to military protection. However, planters in Natchez and in the Caribbean were swift to challenge imperial control if an empire over-regulated or over-taxed plantation commerce.¹¹ All in all, the settlers were not strongly policed by any empire and they preferred it that way, yet they still demanded that each empire vigorously supported their quest to contain their slave population. In that respect, they resembled the inhabitants of early colonial New Orleans, described by Shannon Lee Dawdy in *Building the Devil’s Empire: French Colonial New Orleans*.¹² Dawdy’s concept of *rogue colonialism* proves especially apt in describing the settlers of Natchez, even through the changes in colonial empires. This special kind of colonialism, according to Dawdy, stemmed from two different sources:

The first was formal and abstract planning initiatives in Europe that mobilized people and resources on an ambitious scale in a deliberate effort to engineer landscapes, economies, and even societies through colonialism. The second impulse toward experimentation was local, arising from what James C. Scott calls *metis*, or the practical knowledge and flexible survival strategies the colonial frontier necessitated. The two factors helped create an environment that encouraged many

¹¹ Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776-1848* (London: Verso, 1988), 3.

¹² Shannon Lee Dawdy, *Building the Devil’s Empire: French Colonial New Orleans* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

actors to individually refashion themselves and to collectively invent new definitions.¹³

Rogue colonialism perfectly fits the development of the Natchez District and the experiences of its inhabitants. The people of Natchez tried to refashion slavery in a way that fit both their demand for labor and the empires' demands of slave control. In the process, they developed a system of slave control that helped to sustain a growing slave society through the unstable colonial era.

At times, however, as the people of Natchez would experience, the European empires followed their own designs and cared little about their colonists, rogue or loyal. To illustrate, when Spain attempted to entice tobacco growers from Kentucky to become part of the Spanish empire in the early 1790s, they readily assigned the majority of Natchez's export quota to the Kentucky planters. Tobacco growers in Natchez were helpless, and the Spanish desire to exert control over a larger part of the lower Mississippi Valley trumped the need to keep Natchez's planters pleased and under control.¹⁴ Consequently, the people of Natchez experienced grave economic decline, and over a period of five years the previously booming slave society almost faltered. In that moment, Spain lost a measure of influence over the people of Natchez, and not long thereafter Natchez became part of the United States. The interest of empire and planters

¹³ Ibid., 5. The people of Natchez, both black and white, who resettled the region under the British regime, formed a special community. It became quickly apparent that they formed what Benedict Anderson calls *Creole Pioneers*. Although the term creole usually denotes a person who was born in or was native to a certain place, the people of Natchez first formed a creole community under the British and twice faced a new power that threatened their communal integrity as Natchez changed hands in the latter half of the eighteenth century. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Rev. ed. (New York: Verso, 2006), 47-65.

¹⁴ D. Clayton James, *Antebellum Natchez* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), 48-49.

worked at cross-purposes in this case, causing mounting tension between the planters and the state.

Every new empire brought new law codes and unfamiliar legal traditions. The shifting legal framework shaped the limits of control at every level and exacerbated this tension. Definitions of rights for people of color changed constantly, and as result planters had to engage each empire in different ways to maintain control over their property. Especially under Spanish governance, the planters were confronted with a legal tradition alien to their Anglo-American legal culture. The Iberian policies stimulated Natchez's economy and growth, but were chained to a law code that bore possibilities of freedom and even equality for black people that were vastly different from the British tradition.¹⁵

The extent of planter control within that shifting framework, in turn, circumscribed the scope of slave agency. Throughout the shifts in the legal framework, planters wanted to remain in control of the African population because they depended on black labor. Yet the legal changes in Natchez limited or enhanced the ability of planters to rule the black population in the district. Depending on which empire was in power, black people were able to challenge white control on occasion in varying ways. Notably, black women were able to use kinship networks established with white men to exercise agency over their families. These frontier families often allowed black women to gain access to courts and to succeed with their claims, especially under the Spanish regime. At the same time, however, black members of outlying plantation communities rarely appear

¹⁵ See Frank Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen, the Negro in the Americas* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1947).

in the records. Close connections to a white family and proximity to the courthouse defined a black person's chance to gain freedom and to obtain rights in the face of a hostile plantation society.

Only when all instruments of control were aligned could planters rest easier with their authority. Yet the backcountry along the Mississippi river did not lend itself to an effortless control of all these factors. Natchez remained an uneasy district for any empire to command. Slavery remained the driving force of the district, as enslaved Africans continued to be significant historical actors. Using kinship networks, families, and legal changes, free and enslaved black people sought to challenge planter control where possible. Wherever these challenges occurred, the legal and political culture of the current empire more often than not determined the outcome for slaves and free people of color alike.

The legal boundaries set by each empire to govern slaves often decided the success or failure of Natchez. The first slave code introduced in Natchez was the *Code Noir*. The proprietors of Louisiana adopted this slave code in 1724, which originated in seventeenth-century France and was designed by Jean-Baptiste Colbert. He intended the code as an instrument of control over not only slaves, but also the slave trade and all inhabitants of French colonies. The Catholic Church heavily influenced the *Code*, and it decreed several rules for marriages between races. Married slaves (with the consent of their masters) could not be sold separately; neither could children be separated from their parents. The status of children followed the status of the mother, similar to the British American colonies. The slave code prohibited work on Sundays and on religious holidays. Once freed, a black person had the same rights as any other free colonist. The

Code was not always followed to the letter, but it provided a critical tool for officials in Louisiana to govern an increasingly diverse racial population, including Europeans, Africans, and Native Americans. The *Code Noir* was employed in the Natchez District until the combined revolt of slaves and Native Americans ended the French dominion in Natchez.¹⁶

After the Natchez District fell to the British in 1763, His Majesty's governors in the province of West Florida lost no time in creating their own slave laws intended to offer planters ideal circumstances to create a plantation society that could rival Virginia or the Carolinas. In 1766, the West Florida assembly passed an "Act for the Regulation and Government of Negroes and Slaves." This slave code marked the beginning of British control in Natchez and brought a markedly different stance on slavery to the district. Driven by a capitalist system, British laws supported and enforced an absolute notion of property, including slaves. Planters received complete control over their human chattel, and free blacks were subjected to stringent white control as "custom has prevailed to distinguish their color for the badge of slavery."¹⁷ With this bourgeois notion of absolute property British lawmakers hoped to clear an easy path to the creation of a plantation society in West Florida, but their plan did not come to fruition in the province as Spain captured Natchez in 1779 and all of West Florida in 1781.

With the new Iberian rulers came a new legal code that shared little with its British predecessor, except for the European desire to control enslaved Africans. The

¹⁶ Spear, *Race, Sex, and Social Order in Early New Orleans*, 52-78.

¹⁷ An "Act for the Regulation and Government of Negroes and Slaves," Pensacola, December 24, 1766, as reproduced in Lee Davis Smith, "A Settlement of Great Consequence: The Development of the Natchez District, 1763 - 1860" (Master's Thesis, Louisiana State University, 2004), 104.

Spanish based their slave codes on the tradition of the thirteenth-century code of the *Siete Partidas*. Rooted in what historian Eugene Genovese termed seigneurialism—meaning a feudal mode of production in a mercantilist society—the code was designed in the tradition of Roman law and emanated through the Spanish colonies in the Atlantic world.¹⁸ Property, in this case slaves, was not absolute, and the Spanish state had an interest (in theory) in the treatment of Spanish slaves. The code remained intact over the centuries and guided the policies of the Spanish crown; it was only altered in 1789 and 1845 in response to increasingly commercialized plantation agriculture. Despite these changes throughout the Spanish empire, “the Siete Partidas’ juridical framework continued to shape interactions in Spain and its colonies among slaves, their owners, and the state.”¹⁹ For almost two decades, slaves in Natchez had theoretical opportunities to sue their master for ill-treatment, for their freedom, and to enter into court officiated contracts for self-purchase. Free people of color had equal protection under the law and exercised their rights accordingly.

These rights quickly evaporated in 1798 when Natchez became part of the United States as the Mississippi Territory. Although the district entered the United States under the Northwest Ordinance, which theoretically outlawed slavery, Natchez planters ignored the provision completely. Instead, they quickly introduced legislation to shore up jurisdiction of their human property. Based again on the Anglo-American notion of property in absolute terms, white Mississippians introduced several acts that were similar

¹⁸ Eugene D. Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made: Two Essays in Interpretation* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), 16.

¹⁹ See Evelyn P. Jennings, "Paths to Freedom: Imperial Defense and Manumission in Havana, 1762-1800," in *Paths to Freedom: Manumission in the Atlantic World*, ed. Rosemary Brana-Shute and Randy J. Sparks (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 123.

to the British slave code of 1766. By 1805, the territorial legislature had created an “Act to prevent the Liberation of slaves.” This law was followed by a flurry of similar acts, all aimed at limiting the movement and rights of slaves and free people of color. Natchez, from the 1800s onward, came closest to the plantation fairytale espoused by the Garden Club. However, even as the American legal system tried to banish black people to the bottom of society, the black people of Natchez found increasingly creative ways to circumvent the laws of slavery.

Historiography

The development of the Natchez District presents an opportunity to investigate the ways slave societies were connected, not just how they differed. Throughout North America, few slaveholding societies underwent the dramatic imperial changes in their governance and slave systems that Natchez experienced. The comparisons of the slave systems in these societies allows for conclusions about the specific characteristics of the individual slave systems. For example, New Amsterdam faced the transition from Dutch authority to the British. The city’s inhabitants not only had to endure a transition in their name to New York, but they also experienced a change in culture. That adjustment was especially harsh for slaves and free people of color. The Dutch did employ slave labor in New Amsterdam but had no codified laws to prevent slaves from becoming free. Under Dutch auspices, slaves regularly and successfully sued for freedom, often citing their Christianity as a reason to be freed.²⁰ With the transition to the English in 1664, these

²⁰ See Joyce D. Goodfriend, *Before the Melting Pot: Society and Culture in Colonial New York City, 1664-1730* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 111; Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 23-26.

opportunities changed drastically. Black people under English common law were only seen as slaves—again pointing at the British notion of property as absolute—and within the “first decade of the eighteenth century, the British had affirmed in law hereditary African slavery in the New York colony.”²¹ The passage from Dutch to British government altered the entire legal structure for slaves, heralding a new era of unknown hardships for black people, free and enslaved.²²

Havana and St. Augustine are also key examples of the effect of imperial change on slave systems. In Cuba, the nine months of British occupation of Havana during the Seven Years’ War in 1762 led to an increase in agriculture that would ultimately create the largest sugar-producing island in the Caribbean. The British opened the slave market of Cuba to all merchants, and the number of slaves on the island increased dramatically by more than ten thousand.²³ When Britain returned Havana to Spain after only a few months, the Cuban planters successfully demanded that they retain their free trade in slaves. In 1791 Haiti’s slave population rose in rebellion and the sugar production of the French island came to a halt. The Haitian revolution stimulated Cuba’s sugar production, and the Spanish island began to fulfill the increasing demands of the world market. In St. Augustine, originally a Spanish colony, change was forthcoming in 1763 when the Treaty of Paris ceded the colony to Great Britain in exchange for Havana. Under the British the

²¹ Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery*, 28.

²² For additional information on people of color in colonial New York City see: Thelma Wills Foote, *Black and White Manhattan: The History of Racial Formation in Colonial New York City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Joyce D. Goodfriend, "Burghers and Blacks: The Evolution of a Slave Society at New Amsterdam.," *New York History: Quarterly Journal of the New York State Historical Association* 59, no. 2 (1978); Joyce D. Goodfriend, "Black Families in New Netherland," *Journal of the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society* 5, no. 3/4 (1984).

²³ Franklin W. Knight, *Slave Society in Cuba During the Nineteenth Century* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1970), 7.

black inhabitants in St. Augustine lost their Spanish rights, until the Iberian empire returned after the American Revolution through the 1783 Treaty of Paris.²⁴ Natchez was connected to slave societies throughout the Americas by trade and shared legal tradition, and its history becomes a fertile ground to investigate and compare those connections.

The Natchez District also offers an opportunity to study several diverse slave societies found in the southern borderlands. Historians like Juliana Barr call for a new perspective on the south with a capital “S” (South), one that is not driven by a model of European westward migration grounded in Manifest Destiny, but one that incorporates the colonial southwest, in this case French and Spanish Louisiana.²⁵ Historians have recently begun to investigate critically the relationship of slavery to the formation of the borderland societies from colonial Florida to New Mexico and beyond to the Pacific. Spearheaded by James Brooks and Alan Galloway, these historians closely examine how European concepts of slavery affected the powerful Native American cultures throughout the South and vice versa. By scrutinizing the cultural connections both Native American and colonial European societies forged at the outskirts of empires, these historians significantly contribute to an understanding of slavery.²⁶ They also complicate the narrative of colonial slavery, as slavery was no longer a solely African dilemma. Native

²⁴ Jane Landers, *Black Society in Spanish Florida* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 1-2.

²⁵ Juliana Barr, "How Do You Get from Jamestown to Santa Fe? A Colonial Sun Belt," *Journal of Southern History* 73, no. 3 (2007): 556-57.

²⁶ James Brooks, *Captives & Cousins: Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest Borderlands* (Chapel Hill, NC: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Robbie Franklyn Ethridge, *From Chicaza to Chickasaw: The European Invasion and the Transformation of the Mississippian World, 1540-1715* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Alan Galloway, *The Indian Slave Trade: The Rise of the English Empire in the American South, 1670-1717* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); Snyder, *Slavery in Indian Country: The Changing Face of Captivity in Early America*; Juliana Barr, *Peace Came in the Form of a Woman: Indians and Spaniards in the Texas Borderlands* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

Americans and their conceptions of slavery as part of kinship networks confound previous analysis, and this relationship calls for further investigation. In addition, the slave societies in the southwest were predominantly Spanish or French, not Anglo-American, and therefore had an entirely different heritage and culture. Understanding of the issues are further complicated by the different legal slave systems overlaying the cultural legacies of these slave societies, as historians seek to come to terms with the various faces of forced labor. Natchez, a formerly understudied district of Louisiana, provides an ideal canvas for such an investigation.

Natchez can also serve as a backdrop to examine the Tannenbaum thesis as it relates to the changing slave system in the district. In 1949, Frank Tannenbaum postulated that slavery in Iberian colonies was significantly milder than in the Anglo-American colonies, which eventually led to different race relations in the United States and Brazil during the 1930s and 1940s. Tannenbaum's thesis is central to this dissertation. The imperial instability of the Natchez District allows for an assessment of his thesis that the American slave system differed markedly from its Spanish or Portuguese counterparts.²⁷ Tannenbaum built his case on the differences between the legal systems in both slave systems. He argued that the Spanish legal system "was regulated by a well-established body of ancient law and by social mores that endowed slaves with a legal and moral personality."²⁸ Slaves in Iberian colonies could call on the courts to regulate their right to self-purchase (*coartación*), to own property, and to seek

²⁷ Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen, the Negro in the Americas*.

²⁸ Alejandro de la Fuente, "From Slave to Citizens? Tannenbaum and the Debates on Slavery, Emancipation, and Race Relations in Latin America," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 77, Spring, 2010: 156.

recourse against cruel masters.²⁹ In contrast, the English rooted their slave laws, as Sidney Mintz argues, in a “maximum local authority.”³⁰ Planters could thereby circumvent any imperial concern that might have existed for the well-being of the slaves, and as a result, slavery tended to be crueler in the British colonies. In short, Tannenbaum argued that the laws promulgated by the Spanish central authority in Madrid offered a degree of protection to slaves in Spanish America.

Over the last decade, a historiographical debate has ensued about the usefulness of the Tannenbaum thesis. Some historians argue that Tannenbaum’s thesis still is a valuable tool and should be expanded and utilized to understand slave societies in Latin America. Others maintain that it is time to move “beyond Tannenbaum” and his antithetical approach to slave societies in North and South America.³¹ Tannenbaum’s leading supporters are Sidney Mintz and Herbert Klein, both of whom examined the real effect laws passed by metropolitan authorities in Madrid or London had on the daily interactions of slaves and masters. They evaluated to what degree, if any, these laws were transferred from Madrid to New Orleans, Havana, or Minas Gerais. By and large, both historians refined and sharpened Tannenbaum’s thesis, again emphasizing the importance

²⁹ Alejandro de la Fuente, "Slave Law and Claims-Making in Cuba: The Tannenbaum Debate Revisited," *Law and History Review* 22, no. 2 (2004).

³⁰ Sidney Wilfred Mintz, *Caribbean Transformations* (Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co., 1974), 69.

³¹ See: Fuente, "From Slave to Citizens? Tannenbaum and the Debates on Slavery, Emancipation, and Race Relations in Latin America."; Fuente, "Slave Law and Claims-Making in Cuba: The Tannenbaum Debate Revisited;" María Elena Díaz, "Beyond Tannenbaum," *Law and History Review* Summer (2004), http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/lhr/22.2/comment_diaz.html. 2 February 2011

of the “center of power.”³² Spain’s centralized government, they found, did influence laws and regulations concerning slavery throughout the empire.

Furthermore, Tannenbaum’s supporters suggest that the slaves had to attach a social meaning to laws, not, as Tannenbaum asserts, the other way around. Slaves in Iberian colonies had to fight for their rights in court, yet they could still do so, unlike slaves in the British colonies. Slaves in Spanish America had a right to self-purchase and to buy property, and they could seek protection from the courts for cruel treatment. Therefore laws did not provide slaves with a “moral personality,” but rather slaves themselves utilized these laws often to the chagrin of their owners. Slaves also relied on colonial officials and authorities to support their rights, to which local authorities frequently responded positively. Regional officials played an important role in the quest of slaves to receive legal recognition for their rights. In addition, local Spanish officials tended to grant slaves justice through the court system to prevent possible slave rebellion.³³

Expanding on Tannenbaum, historian Alejandro de la Fuente calls for a critical and close examination of these local conditions. He asserts “in fact, local regulations were invariably harsher in defining the social activities of slaves and free persons of color. But this does not render colonial legislation meaningless to slave regimes in

³² Herbert S. Klein, *Slavery in the Americas: A Comparative Study of Virginia and Cuba* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967); Mintz, *Caribbean Transformations*. Other examples that support the Tannenbaum thesis, especially on the North American continent are: Kimberly S. Hanger, *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places: Free Black Society in Colonial New Orleans, 1769-1803* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); Landers, *Black Society*; Stuart B. Schwartz, *Sugar Plantations in the Formation of Brazilian Society - Bahia, 1550-1835* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

³³ Fuente, "Slave Law and Claims-Making in Cuba: The Tannenbaum Debate Revisited."

colonies.”³⁴ The question remains: did local conditions, for example in Natchez or Matanzas, Cuba, support the Tannenbaum thesis, or did local interests to keep slaves in bondage triumph over the central authority of Madrid?

Subsequent studies have questioned the usefulness of the legal focus. Historians critical of Tannenbaum have questioned whether the study of legal systems would advance knowledge of slave culture and slave societies. They also doubted that the legal institutions offered slaves any true redress in plantation societies.³⁵ Historians like María Elena Díaz believe that it does not serve comparative slave studies well to present two antagonistic systems, with one being “good” (South America), and the other one being “bad” (United States). She asserts that the Spanish legal system was not as superior as Tannenbaum and other historians after him have made it out to be.³⁶ Therefore, she contends that the Tannenbaum thesis has served its purpose. Despite her criticism, the Tannenbaum thesis still has traction in the historiographical debate, especially if it is viewed in the context of the frontier slave society of Natchez. Whereas the Tannenbaum thesis is predicated on which empire governed a region, the Natchez District offers a possibility to observe the experiences of four empires in one place. Consequently, the Natchez District serves to illustrate the benefits and limitations of the historiographical

³⁴ Ibid., 22.

³⁵ See, for example: David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y.,: Cornell University Press, 1966), 223-43; Carl N. Degler, *Neither Black nor White: Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1971); Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made: Two Essays in Interpretation*; Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Social Control in Slave Plantation Societies: A Comparison of St. Domingue and Cuba* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971); Marvin Harris, *Patterns of Race in the Americas* (New York: Walker, 1964); Thomas N. Ingersoll, *Mammon and Manon in Early New Orleans: The First Slave Society in the Deep South, 1718-1819* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999).

³⁶ Díaz, "Beyond Tannenbaum."

paradigm that is the first part of the Tannenbaum thesis for interpreting slave cultures in the Americas.

The concomitant expansion of the American Republic beyond the thirteen original states and the spread of slavery have recently experienced a revival of interest among scholars. Several studies published in the last decade explain how slavery contributed to the westward growth of the young nation.³⁷ Slaves provided the muscle for American expansion in the lower Mississippi Valley. The development of slavery in Natchez, one of the more remote settlements of the United States, is therefore crucial to understanding America's westward march.³⁸

Four empires transplanted their slave systems to the Gulf South, and each used slave labor to establish settlements in Natchez, New Orleans, and St. Augustine. All four empires used a variation of slavery, with different legal codes, different religions, and different avenues for slaves to claim freedom. By examining how these slave regimes interacted in Natchez over the course of the century—and by considering how Natchez differed from neighboring outposts—"Slavery and Empire" illuminates not only the differences between slave systems, but how they jostled, mingled, and merged.

³⁷ John Craig Hammond, *Slavery, Freedom, and Expansion in the Early American West* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007); Adam Rothman, *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

³⁸ Two recent dissertations have addressed slavery in Natchez. In 2000, Todd Ashley Herring completed his account of the Natchez District from 1795 to 1830. Herring focuses on many valuable issues in Natchez, but he does not address much of the Spanish period in Natchez. See Todd Ashley Herring, "Natchez, 1795-1830: Life and Death on the Slavery Frontier" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Mississippi State University, 2000). Timothy Buckner's 2005 dissertation focuses on the Natchez genesis from the earliest British settlement until the eve of the Civil War. However, he utilized only a few published and translated sources that the Spanish left. He ignored the vast treasure of Spanish original sources in Natchez, at the University of Texas at Austin, in Seville, Spain, and other repositories. See Timothy Buckner, "Constructing Identities on the Frontier of Slavery, Natchez Mississippi, 1760-1860" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Texas, 2005).

The Natchez District presents an important example of how slavery expanded in the United States. War, the growth of cotton plantations, and the fitful but relentless expansion of the United States after 1814 spawned a multitude of new backcountry towns and settlements in Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida. Yet slavery developed differently in newer villages like Tallahassee or Vicksburg, which did not have the same long-standing traditions of slavery that characterized Natchez. Although historians argue that the transition for planters and slaves from the East Coast to the Deep South was never smooth, and that slaves were often able to renegotiate certain terms of slavery, there was not as much change in the basic system of slavery elsewhere as there was in the tumultuous Natchez District.³⁹

Part of the transition of slave systems was the development of certain new staple crops and the corresponding rise in the need for an ever-expanding population of forced labor. Ira Berlin notes that the slave systems in North America usually progressed from societies with slaves to slave societies. In societies with slaves, the bound Africans or Native Americans “were only marginal to the central productive processes.” In slave societies, on the other hand, slavery was central to the economy and the master-slave relationship went well beyond the plantation. Slavery permeated society on every level, from the household to the schoolhouse.⁴⁰ Louisiana and Natchez, however, moved from a society with few slaves to almost a slave society, and then dramatically returned to a

³⁹ Edward E. Baptist, *Creating an Old South: Middle Florida's Plantation Frontier before the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Daniel S. Dupre, *Transforming the Cotton Frontier: Madison County, Alabama, 1800-1840* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997); Christopher Morris, *Becoming Southern: The Evolution of a Way of Life, Warren County and Vicksburg, Mississippi, 1770-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁴⁰ Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 8.

society with slaves again throughout the rise and fall of the French regime from 1720 to 1729.⁴¹ The imperial instability in Natchez was also accompanied by a steady change in slave systems with different rules, choices, and possibilities for the enslaved. These changes offer a perfect platform to test the Tannenbaum thesis in conjunction with Berlin's premise of changing slave societies. Although the Natchez District experienced an influx of American slaves as well, their owners had to adapt to an existing system of slavery that was different from what they had previously known. Spanish law left some roads to freedom open for slaves that were closed in other societies, and the influence of the Catholic Church—which guaranteed some of these freedom routes—clashed with Anglo-American traditions. In addition, slaves transported into the district by the interstate slave trade added yet another social dimension to the already cosmopolitan slave population in Natchez.

Slavery and Empire

This dissertation is arranged chronologically. The chapters lead the reader through the changes in the Natchez District and highlight the reverberations wrought by the continuing transformations in colonial overlords. A special emphasis is placed on the transitional periods from empire to empire. These chapters highlight the change in slave systems instituted by each new empire and the resulting transnational character of the Natchez District.

The first chapter, "A Southern Middle Ground," analyzes the Natchez District's first sixty years under European hegemony. The French unsuccessfully tried to establish a slave society in Natchez, trying to emulate the successful labor regimes of the Caribbean,

⁴¹Ibid. See chapter 1 and 2.

Virginia, and South Carolina. However, the French warred with Native Americans and eventually abandoned their expansionary plans in 1729 after a revolt of Natchez Indians and slaves had destroyed the fledgeling settlement in Natchez. For the next two decades, the Natchez District remained unsettled by Europeans.

It is important to note that Natchez's slaves were not exclusively African. During the first decades of the settlement, seven out of seventy were American Indians. By enslaving both peoples, the French had to engage in three different cultures of slavery: African, Native American, and European. The French underestimated the explosive nature of the relationships among the various people living in the Natchez area, and this misjudgment led to the downfall of French rule. They were unable to prevent an alliance between African slaves and Natchez Indians, and their attempt to envelope the Indian nations of the lower Mississippi Valley in binding treaties or intertribal warfare was ultimately unsuccessful. In their desire to expand, greed overruled caution.

In analyzing the district's transition from France to Great Britain, I will examine British efforts beginning in 1763 to turn Natchez into a profitable part of their American empire in the West Florida province. When the French lost Louisiana to Spain and Great Britain as a result of the Seven Years' War, the Natchez District became a part of the British empire. Understanding the previous problems of the French, the British were much more careful and hesitant to create a permanent settlement in this area. Natchez did experience a slow rebirth, but incoming settlers still relied on slavery for their livelihood. Among the first to arrive with slaves were the so-called Jersey settlers in 1772, a group of Loyalists from the East Coast. Although the British could build upon almost a century of experience with Indians, slaves, and the plantation economy they had created among the

Atlantic colonies, the Natchez District still presented a tremendous challenge to the new settlers. The Natchez Indians had been expelled from their homeland by the French in 1729, but the Choctaw and Chickasaws quickly moved in to assume the role of powerbrokers in the backcountry. To keep the plantation district afloat, English settlers had to walk a thin line between imperial British policies of trade with Indians and foreign empires, the colonial struggles between Spain and the British crown, and the constant threat of shifting Indian alliances. Although separated by great distance and time, the British colonies of the East Coast also influenced the Natchez District by providing the core of settlers and slaves that would eventually call Natchez home. This relationship now grew ever more intimate. Against these long odds, however, the British were able to establish firmly their hold on the Mississippi frontier, and a plantation society began to take shape. The newly enacted 1766 slave code of British West Florida ostensibly supplied the settlers with the legal means to control their province, but challenges nevertheless arose.

The American Revolution not only deprived the British of their thirteen seaboard colonies, but they also lost the Natchez District, which was ceded to the Spanish in 1781. The dissertation's second chapter, "Masters of Empire: Loyalists, Patriots, and Opportunists in the Colonial Backcountry," evaluates the Spanish assimilation of the Natchez District. The Spanish built on the previous British attempts to develop Natchez and offered favorable conditions for the growing and marketing of tobacco to secure the loyalty of the area's planters. Marshaling their vast colonial resources in South America and the experience they had gained in managing these possessions, the Spanish quickly revitalized the Natchez District by providing subsidies for tobacco exports and, most

notably, by eliminating import duties on slaves for all planters in Louisiana, including Natchez. Simultaneously, the adjacent and struggling United States quickly began to expand westward, and the rich soil of Natchez beckoned the upstart republic with its immense potential for future riches, causing Spain to propose very favorable conditions to American settlers willing to move to Spanish Natchez.

Once the Spanish established military control over the Natchez District in 1781 and successfully introduced tobacco subsidies and trade regulations, they realized that the inhabitants of the district were an unruly and opportunistic lot. African slaves and European settlers alike challenged the Spanish empire and sought to create opportunities to advance their personal fortunes. Anglo-American settlers demanded more slaves and better conditions to market their crop, while slaves tried to undermine this effort. Spain had to contend not only with an array of forces from within, but also with external foes. Threats from the surrounding Indian nations persisted, and groups within the United States government increased pressure on Spain to cede the Natchez District and its supposed riches to the new nation. These efforts did not go unnoticed by the people of Natchez and caused Spanish officials constant worry. Soon, events of the wider Atlantic World would once again be echoed in the Natchez District, and changes would come to influence the lives of its inhabitants, whether red, black, or white.

The third chapter closely examines the Spanish legal system and explores how it enabled Africans in Natchez to challenge their masters. Several legal cases demonstrate that the power of the master in Spanish Natchez was far from total. Anglo planters had to come to terms with a legal culture that maintained control over the slave population yet did not relegate slaves entirely to the status of property. Grounded in kinship networks

and often with the support of family members, enslaved and free blacks openly challenged planter control.

Ultimately unable to maintain control in the district, the Spanish grudgingly released it and its unruly inhabitants to the Americans in 1795 with the treaty of San Lorenzo. Cotton blossomed in 1796, and henceforth it never relinquished the Natchez District from its clutches until the Civil War. The development of cotton farming, however, relied on Spanish policies and incentives, and—like most everything in Natchez—was quite tumultuous in its genesis. Chapter four investigates what drove the planters to cultivate cotton exclusively and explores the role Spain and slavery played in the ultimate switch to the royal crop. The legal change to the more stringent U.S. slave laws will be examined in the light of the transfer of Natchez from Spain to the United States. This last change in legal systems doomed many slaves to permanent servitude with little hope for freedom.

“Mississippi Fever” investigates the years under American auspices when “King Cotton” rose to absolute economic supremacy. Again, slavery stood at the center of the effort to connect the district to an expanding imperial power, this time the United States. Tapping into the domestic slave trade and quickly attracting planters from the East Coast, the Natchez District began its crucial period of growth and development. The Louisiana Purchase of 1803 brought New Orleans and its vital harbor to the United States, and American planters consequently viewed the district as increasingly attractive. The Choctaw signed a treaty with the United States in 1801 at Fort Adams, and subsequently relocated further to the north. Andrew Jackson’s victory against the Creeks in 1814 further opened up the lower Mississippi Valley and the Natchez District to an increasing

flow of planters and yeoman farmers. For African Americans in Natchez, American expansion heralded the closing of courts and severely diminished chances for freedom and justice in Mississippi. Yet still they fought in court to receive their rights, although their voices quickly disappeared from the records since they had to rely on white beneficiaries to fight their battles.

Three colonial powers held sway for a time over Natchez, each adding its influence to the existing slave society. Under Spanish and French control, slaves often found greater opportunities for freedom than slaves would in the Anglo-American slave system. The Spanish and French were more likely to grant slaves extended “rights,” such as the right to own property or to sue their master for ill treatment—at least in theory—than the English. Slavery in Natchez developed at the intersection of competing slave systems, and the ultimate success of Natchez’s planters stemmed in part from the insights they gained at this trans-Atlantic crossroad. It did matter which empire was in power in Natchez. Officials had to carefully impose their new regimes on planters who were determined to become wealthy, and whose wealth was dependent on slave labor. By examining how the various slave systems interacted, and how a competing series of empires sought to convince generations of Natchez settlers that their system was the most promising, “Slavery and Empire” adds an important chapter to the history of New World slavery.

CHAPTER II

A SOUTHERN MIDDLE GROUND: FRANCE AND BRITAIN TRY THEIR LUCK IN COLONIAL NATCHEZ

The lack of negroes disgusting the inhabitants who are all asking to return to France, it is necessary to send some if we wish to retain them. The Country will produce indigo and tobacco as soon as there are men to cultivate them, the inhabitants asking for nothing else than to be put in a condition to work. . . . The plantation of the Company would succeed well if there were good negroes. . . . Negroes are needed for the establishment of the manufacture and cultivation of tobacco at the Natchez.

—Council of Louisiana to the Directors of the Company of the Indies, New Orleans, August 28, 1725⁴²

The French began settling Louisiana in 1699, and for the following five decades French colonists tried to establish a foothold in the lower Mississippi Valley. In their pursuit of a stable and successful North American empire, the French needed outposts to lay claim to the valley and to check British and Spanish expansion. One of those outposts was Natchez. Despite these ambitious goals, French development of Louisiana was sluggish. Settlers were difficult to obtain, as it was difficult to foster an economic climate that would lure them.⁴³ What was needed, according to most French officials, was a commodity that could yield financial gains for prospective settlers and investors.

The French quickly tried to turn Natchez into a profitable district in their Louisiana possession. After the founding of New Orleans in 1718, French settlers began to move to Natchez and by 1722 about two hundred settlers and slaves called Natchez their home. Slowly but surely, the French were building a slave society among the people

⁴² Council of Louisiana to the Directors of the Company of the Indies, New Orleans, August 28, 1725, in Mississippi. Dept. of Archives and History., Dunbar Rowland, and A. G. Sanders, *Mississippi Provincial Archives [1701-1743] French Dominion* (New York: AMS Press, 1973), vol. 2, 492.

⁴³ On early Louisiana and slavery, see Dawdy, *Building the Devil's Empire: French Colonial New Orleans*, 120-21; Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*; Usner, *Indians, Settlers & Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy*.

of the Natchez nation. Their goal was to harvest tobacco on the shores of the Mississippi River. Like the British in Virginia, the French needed slaves to harvest their crops.⁴⁴ This attempt to create a slave society, and the way they went about it, were ill advised. On November 28, 1729, Indians and African slaves combined to defeat the French garrison at Natchez and oust the French planters from the district forever. The French ultimately abandoned the Natchez District despite having defeated the Natchez Indians, driven them off their ancestral lands, and enslaved most of the survivors. The Louisiana economy never recovered from the blow that was dealt to them by Indians and slaves that winter day, and so France neglected Louisiana until Louis XVI was able to pawn it off to his Spanish cousin Charles III in 1763.⁴⁵

It was not until Great Britain received Natchez at the end of French and Indian War in 1763 that the now unpopulated lands around Natchez again fired the interest of an European empire. The fertile soil and the promise of profit lured some new settlers brave enough to venture to the frontier of British settlement in North America. To clear their fields, these settlers began importing African slaves into Natchez in an attempt to revive the plantation society that had been destroyed by the Natchez Indians more than three decades earlier. Although these settlers endured multiple dangers of the frontier, they

⁴⁴ Perier to Maurepas, New Orleans, August 15, 1729, *Mississippi Provincial Archives - French Dominion, 1701-1729, Vol. 2*, ed. Rowland Dunbar (Jackson: Press of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 1927 - 1932), 657-58.

⁴⁵ See H. Sophie Burton and F. Todd Smith, *Colonial Natchitoches: A Creole Community on the Louisiana-Texas Frontier* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008); Spear, *Race, Sex, and Social Order in Early New Orleans*, 55. The authors correctly argue that the French never recovered from the blow in Natchez, even though they held on to Louisiana until 1763. Kathleen DuVal describes the French fear of an Indian-African alliance and finds that the French stopped slave imports after 1729 almost completely, thereby dooming any further plantation development and hopes for profit in Louisiana. See Kathleen DuVal, "Indian Intermarriage and Metissage in Colonial Louisiana," *William and Mary Quarterly* 65, no. 2 (2008): 274.

were unable to forge a plantation society that could equal the wealth of colonies like Virginia, the Carolinas, Jamaica, or Barbados. The British Empire failed to establish lasting control over Natchez and its people before Spain conquered the district in 1779 during the American Revolution. Still, the British laid the groundwork for the plantation society to come.

This chapter examines the first decades of Natchez history under two rival empires. Control of Natchez during these early decades hinged upon the supply of a profitable staple crop and slaves. It will highlight the role of slavery in creating and re-creating the Natchez District in the image of colonial efforts across the Atlantic world. Both the British and the French tried to duplicate their success with slavery elsewhere in Natchez, but both of them failed to achieve their goal: a stable and profitable outpost in the lower Mississippi Valley.

Establishing a Foundation for French Success in Natchez

The French interest in colonies in the New World hinged upon the idea of turning these colonies into profitable enterprises, either based on the fur trade or slave labor. King Louis XIV of France and his financial advisor, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, envisioned French colonies as profitable operations that would benefit the mercantilist agenda of the French state. The Sun King wanted to channel the wealth of colonies like Saint-Domingue back to the motherland, and Louisiana was supposed to be another successful operation. Unfortunately, French settlement efforts in the lower Mississippi Valley came at a bad time. The War of the Spanish Succession from 1701-1713 swallowed most of France's resources, and left almost nothing to support the struggling colony. The king directed most of the resources that France could spare toward the established Caribbean

colonies, which already proved profitable for the empty French coffers.⁴⁶ Louisiana was left to its own devices, to struggle against the loss of settlers, the insufficient fur trade, and the woefully inadequate number of slaves to establish a slave society. Despite Louisiana's struggles, the colony survived and remained part of France's imperial strategy in the New World.

France's hopes rested on the creation of a slave society in Louisiana that would rival the king's Caribbean possessions. French officials had always been cautious about race relations in French colonies, and therefore Colbert also developed the *Code Noir* along with his mercantilist trade policies. Written in 1685, the code not only regulated slavery, but also included other social reforms to oversee the new colonies. It was designed to "regulate the relationships between slaves and their masters, the enslaved and the free, and those of African and European descent."⁴⁷ These new regulations had a significant impact on Louisiana and the Natchez District. The *Code Noir* defined non-white as inferior, and merged both Africans and Indians in a racially subordinate group.⁴⁸

Although the *Code Noir* was created in 1685, it was not adopted in Louisiana until 1724. In 1713, before the French founded either New Orleans or Natchez, Louisiana Governor Antoine Laumet de La Mothe, sieur de Cadillac, relayed to France "that traders and soldiers 'who are not married ha[d] female Indian slaves' and used them for reasons

⁴⁶ Spear, *Race, Sex, and Social Order in Early New Orleans*, 19; Usner, *Indians, Settlers & Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy*.

⁴⁷ Spear, *Race, Sex, and Social Order in Early New Orleans*, 53.

⁴⁸ Ingersoll, *Mammon and Manon in Early New Orleans: The First Slave Society in the Deep South, 1718-1819*; George Edward Milne, "Rising Suns, Fallen Forts, and Impudent Immigrants: Race, Power, and War in the Lower Mississippi Valley" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Oklahoma, 2006), 1-28.

that kept them ‘from going to confessional.’”⁴⁹ The commissioner Jean-Baptist Dubois Duclos, in a lengthy report, also noted in 1715 as one of many points:

The fourth is the adulteration that such marriages will cause in the whiteness and purity of the blood in the children, for whatever Mr. De La Vente may say, experience shows every day that children that come from such marriages are of an extremely dark complexion, so that in the course of time, if no Frenchmen come to Louisiana, the colony would become a colony of half breeds who are naturally idlers, libertines and even more rascals as those of Peru, Mexico and other Spanish colonies give evidence.⁵⁰

The French officials clearly warned their superiors about a developing racially-mixed population. Duclos sought to compare Louisiana to the older colonies in Spanish America, but decided against mentioning France’s premier slave colony in the Americas, Saint-Domingue. The French officials, then, were worried about racial mixture, but also about the possible result of cross-racial unions between female slaves—both Indian and African—and French men. Another curious point in Duclos’ memo was the fear of a population with an “extremely dark complexion.” Aside from the racial stereotypes he assigned to skin color and the fact that the French certainly exploited the labor of these “libertines and idlers,” Duclos never specified whether he meant Africans or Native Americans.

According to historian Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, only 10 Africans resided in all of Louisiana by 1712, and the census of 1721 showed only 670 in New Orleans and Mobile combined.⁵¹ Although the growth of the African slave population was significant, it does not explain Duclos’s fears. He was probably referring to Native Americans, because the

⁴⁹ As quoted in DuVal, "Indian Intermarriage and Metissage in Colonial Louisiana," 275.

⁵⁰ Jean-Baptist Dubois Duclos to Ponchatrain, Dauphine Island, December 25, 1715, in Mississippi. Dept. of Archives and History., Rowland, and Sanders, *Mississippi Provincial Archives [1701-1743] French Dominion*, Vol. 2, page 208.

⁵¹ Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 58.

French equated phenotype with race. They were very concerned about control over the new society they created, and it made them uneasy to see a growing mixed population develop in the struggling colony. The male French settlers did not share these concerns and continued to father mixed racial offspring with their slave women, Indian or African. Although the French disdained interracial marriages, they officially tolerated Indian-French marriages. African and French marriages, however, were illegal.⁵²

French officials grew increasingly weary about a “fear that these [interracial] marriages mix good blood with bad and will produce a colony only of children of a hard and idle character.”⁵³ When John Law’s Company of the Indies began to import more Africans to Louisiana in the early 1720s and it became clear that the company wanted to establish a slave society, the metropol reacted by adopting a version of the *Code Noir* specifically designed for Louisiana in 1724. As historian Jennifer Spears argues, “the 1724 *Code Noir* reflected a transition from a status-based hierarchy to one rooted in race.” As the *Code Noir* arrived in Louisiana, the establishment of a slave society was backed for the first time by a legal framework that sought to control race relations. The *Code Noir* served to control white and Indian, as well as white and African relations. However, the colonial officials in Louisiana “were selective about which aspects of the *Code Noir* they chose to enforce and which to ignore, as they adapted metropolitan-authored laws to conditions in the colony.”⁵⁴ The effects of the code and its implementation were felt in Natchez almost immediately. The combination of African

⁵² DuVal, "Indian Intermarriage and Metissage in Colonial Louisiana," 278-80.

⁵³ Procès-verbal du Conseil [de Marine], September 1, 1716. As quoted in Spear, *Race, Sex, and Social Order in Early New Orleans*, 33.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

slaves, Native Americans, and white settlers in Natchez caused outbreaks of violence that the code could not prevent. Quite to the contrary, hierarchical change from status to race in the colony would haunt the settlers in Natchez and eventually cause the demise of the settlement.

Growth of the Colony

Since 1701, the French had known that Natchez's soil was extremely fertile, but their meager economic and military resources prevented them from exploiting the district.⁵⁵ The Natchez Indians were not a cohesive, monolithic nation. They absorbed parts of other nations who had been displaced by the English Indian slave trade throughout the Southeast.⁵⁶ While these dislodged Indians took root among the Natchez, factions developed that were located in the different villages comprising the Natchez nation. Depending on their geographic position and cultural origin, these factions would trade with the French or with the English. The Natchez leader, the Great Sun, was head of the pro-French faction of his nation, but this did not mean that the entire nation would follow his example, as the French were to discover.

Warfare and misunderstanding marked the growth of the Natchez District. The year after Duclos sent his warning about exogamous sexual relations to France, Antoine Crozat, whose company had taken control of Louisiana in 1712, ordered construction of Fort Rosalie in Natchez in 1716, after the Natchez nation had attacked the local

⁵⁵ See Report of Mr. De Sauvole, unknown, August 4, 1701, in Dunbar Rowland, A. G. Sanders, and Patricia Kay Galloway, *Mississippi Provincial Archives, [1701]-1763. French Dominion*, 5 vols. (Jackson, Miss.: Press of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 1927), vol 2, page 13.

⁵⁶ For the British Indian Slave Trade see Alan Galloway, *Indian Slavery in Colonial America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009); Snyder, *Slavery in Indian Country: The Changing Face of Captivity in Early America*.

merchants during the first Natchez war.⁵⁷ A pro-British faction of Natchez Indians executed four Frenchmen, which provoked the short war with the French empire. Ultimately, punishment of the culprits and diplomacy resolved the issue. However, the French still did not understand how the Natchez interpreted their hierarchical structure, and vice versa. Although four men were executed for the murder of the four Frenchmen, the French leaders kept negotiating with the headman of one village and assumed that he had control over the others, as Louis XV had over the French colonies. The Natchez Sun, however, had no “absolute” power over his subjects, as the French suspected. As historian George Milne points out, both the French and Natchez fell victim in their interpretation of each other to “the illusion of similarity.”⁵⁸ The French were satisfied with the “punishment” they exacted and they believed that they had reigned in the Great Sun of the Natchez, whereas the Natchez Indians understood the exchange of prisoners and later execution of the murderers as part of a ritual common among the Natchez and part of their ancestral lore.⁵⁹ What the French perceived as a resolved situation would fester for several years. It was not until 1718 that settlers began to arrive in Louisiana in larger numbers, and it took until 1722 to bring roughly two hundred of these people to Natchez, this time under John Law’s newly created *Compagnie des Indes*. These new settlers brought African slaves with them, designated to work the tobacco fields of St. Catherine’s Creek, a short distance north of Natchez.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Usner, *Indians, Settlers & Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy*, 27-28.

⁵⁸ Milne, "Rising Suns, Fallen Forts, and Impudent Immigrants: Race, Power, and War in the Lower Mississippi Valley," 97.

⁵⁹ See *ibid.*, 62-103.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 10; For the common cultural traits created by trade networks see Usner, *Indians, Settlers & Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy*.

Following the creation of a foothold in Natchez after the first Natchez war, the French tried to employ both African and Indian slave labor and to fashion a dynamic and profitable colony alongside the Natchez Nation. The European settlement itself developed slowly for several years, and progress was interrupted by numerous wars with the surrounding Indian nations. Although the French and Natchez often found common cultural traits in their respective societies while they established a working relationship in the lower Mississippi Valley, their co-habitation was not without its problems.⁶¹ Patricia Seed has pointed out that the French custom of establishing contact and relations with native people across the Americas was dependent on the cooperation of the natives in a ceremony of subordination.⁶² In the lower Mississippi Valley, they continued this practice but were frequently frustrated by their misjudgment of circumstances. Although the situation was not promising, the French remained determined to expand into the heart of the Natchez nation. The *Compagnie des Indes* was keen on establishing plantations there, but the Natchez Indians presented a powerful obstacle to this endeavor.

Despite the complicated circumstances in Natchez, French officials were under great pressure to turn a profit from the beginning. The wealth garnered by Virginia tobacco planters drove the French to create a competing plantation economy in Louisiana, yet that goal kept eluding the colonists. Although France held title to much of the lower Mississippi Valley on European maps, reality was different. By the 1720s, New

⁶¹ See Edward Milne's dissertation for a comparative look of Louis XIV's French and Natchez societies. Milne argues that in both societies family and state play significant roles, and that both societies were governed by a clear hierarchical system, which eased the cultural understanding between Europeans and Indians. Milne, "Rising Suns, Fallen Forts, and Impudent Immigrants: Race, Power, and War in the Lower Mississippi Valley," 19-61; Gordon Sayers, "Plotting the Natchez Massacre: Le Page Du Pratz, Dumont De Montingy, Chateaubriand," *Early American Literature* 37, no. 3 (2002): 391.

⁶² Patricia Seed, *Ceremonies of Possession in Europe's Conquest of the New World, 1492-1640* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 41-68.

Orleans, Mobile, and Natchez existed as tiny pockets of European life in the vast landscape of Indian nations, and they were struggling mightily, as French officials let their superiors know frequently. French official Tivas de Gourville proclaimed in 1712 that “in the fourteen years since we began to send [people] to this country it can be said that no progress has been made except several small discoveries by which we have not put ourselves in a position of profit. . . I have been assured that indigo grows in the woods there without being cultivated but neither Indians nor the few Frenchmen who are established in this country understand its preparation.”⁶³ The settlers in Louisiana produced barely enough food for themselves and were unable to develop a staple crop. The excuse almost always came down to an inadequate number of slaves and was accompanied by pleas for more shipments of enslaved Africans. In 1725, the Council of Louisiana pleaded with the company in France:

The lack of negroes [is] disgusting the inhabitants who are all asking to return to France, it is necessary to send some if we wish to retain them. The Country will produce indigo and tobacco as soon as there are men to cultivate them, the inhabitants asking for nothing else than to be put in a condition to work. . . . The plantation of the Company would succeed well if there were good negroes. . . . Negroes are needed for the establishment of the manufacture and cultivation of tobacco at the Natchez.⁶⁴

The remedy for Louisiana’s problems had been known for over a decade: produce a profitable crop with slave labor.

⁶³ See for example Tivas de Gourville to Ponchartrain, Rochefort, June 1712, *Mississippi Provincial Archives - French Dominion, 1701-1729, Vol. 2*, ed. Rowland Dunbar (Jackson: Press of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 1927 - 1932), 67-72.

⁶⁴ Council of Louisiana to Directors of the Company of the Indies, New Orleans, August 28, 1725, in Mississippi. Dept. of Archives and History., Rowland, and Sanders, *Mississippi Provincial Archives [1701-1743] French Dominion*, Vol. 2, 492.

Labor was always scarce in French Natchez. Slaves were not numerous and therefore were extremely valuable in early eighteenth-century Louisiana. The only surviving census shows that in 1726, seventy slaves lived in Natchez.⁶⁵ Yet French planters could not hope for any labor force other than enslaved Africans or Indians, since indentured servants (*engagés*) from Europe were wary of Louisiana. Only forced immigration, or what came to be known as *emigration force* brought settlers to Louisiana. The involuntary immigrants were convicted criminals from France and young women from the poor houses, but they were better than no immigrants at all. Immigrants—even the dregs of French society—could offset the danger of British conquest, and that was something the French wanted to avoid at all cost. After three years of service, these immigrants would then become yeomen farmers if they survived. The colony was not conducive to a healthy lifestyle, and hard physical labor significantly shortened life expectancy in the hot, humid, and disease ridden environment. In addition, the roughly one thousand forced immigrants who came across the Atlantic were not very loyal subjects, and the colony remained under populated and starved for labor.⁶⁶ Only a few Native American slaves were part of the small group of bound laborers that were recorded in Natchez by the French in 1726. The census of that year shows a total of seventy slaves in Natchez, sixty-three of whom were African, and the rest Indian.⁶⁷ The relatively small labor force of 1726 more than doubled over the next three years.

⁶⁵ See Milne, "Rising Suns, Fallen Forts, and Impudent Immigrants: Race, Power, and War in the Lower Mississippi Valley," 168.

⁶⁶ Glenn R. Conrad, "Emigration Forceé: A French Attempt to Populate Louisiana 1716-1720," *The French experience in Louisiana*, no. 1 (1995): 125-35.

⁶⁷ Milne, "Rising Suns, Fallen Forts, and Impudent Immigrants: Race, Power, and War in the Lower Mississippi Valley," 168.

Although few slaves had arrived by this time, slavery remained vital to France's plans for Natchez and Louisiana. Forced white labor proved worthless, and slaves, at least until the late 1720s, were scarce. However, the French remained interested in establishing a productive plantation economy in Louisiana. They did not consider, or rather misjudged, how the Natchez would react to French encroachments.

The Natchez Indians

The creation of a French settlement and the already established commerce with British traders brought change to the Natchez Indians. Natchez leaders, like the Great Sun, had used the traditional "system of commodity redistribution, conspicuous display, and religious ceremony" of the old Mississippi cultures to stabilize and unify the different Natchez villages under their command. In this system, the chief was empowered by his ability to redistribute articles that he had either procured by trade or warfare. His status and power was based on the availability of these articles and his generosity in distributing them. The French traded with the Great Sun, but not exclusively. Consequently, they began to undermine some of his power, because now other leaders might be in possession of the cherished trade items as well. At the same time, some of the outlying villages traded directly with the British, further undermining the power of the Great Sun. Thus, the Grand Village of the Natchez and its chief no longer held sway over the entire Natchez nation at the time the French began to settle the district.⁶⁸

The Natchez experienced an additional cultural change as they adjusted to African slaves in their midst. In the first years after the founding of the small outpost, the Natchez

⁶⁸ Ibid., 8; James F. Barnett, *The Natchez Indians: A History to 1735* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 26-62.

and the African slaves developed a relationship that evidently escaped the attention of most Frenchmen and settlers. In 1722, during the first large wave of European settlement, Natchez fired on a group of slaves and subsequently killed one of them.⁶⁹ This skirmish was part of the second Natchez war, which erupted because of the direct competition over land control between the company plantation of the French, and the “White Apple Village” of the Natchez. The war lasted two years and consisted of small attacks by Natchez against French settlers. The attacks were largely directed at leaders of the St. Catherine’s Creek settlement, not against the people around the fort.⁷⁰ The victims in one case were a group of six slaves working a field in proximity to the French settlement. One of the slaves, Bougou, was mortally wounded; another slave received a shot in the leg. According to Edward Milne, the slaves under attack were breaking ground in an area that might have been a holy site to the Natchez. On other occasions, the slaves’ work for their French masters also put them in harm’s way. Over time, however, a relationship between the Natchez and Africans grew into an alliance that would end French plantation agriculture in Natchez.⁷¹

The arrival of European and African settlers shattered the social cohesion of the Natchez nation, as French and British traders sought to increase their influence among the Natchez. The competing European interest split the nation. The tension among the

⁶⁹ Le Page M. du Pratz, *The History of Louisiana; Translated from the French of M. Le Page Du Pratz*, Louisiana Bicentennial Reprint Series (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1975), 26-27.

⁷⁰ Milne, "Rising Suns, Fallen Forts, and Impudent Immigrants: Race, Power, and War in the Lower Mississippi Valley," 120-21.

⁷¹ Bienville to Council of the Indies, New Orleans, August 3, 1723, in Mississippi. Dept. of Archives and History., Rowland, and Sanders, *Mississippi Provincial Archives [1701-1743] French Dominion*, Vol. 3, 360-71. Also see David J. Libby, *Slavery and Frontier Mississippi, 1720-1835* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 8.

Natchez grew palpable throughout 1722. The pro-British faction of the nation had lost some of its leaders to French executions in 1716. Yet the main economic incentive that divided the Indian factions, trade in superior British goods, was not eliminated. In addition, French settlers, backed by John Law's *Compagnie des Indes*, began to settle in the Natchez District in earnest, and unfortunately they chose St. Catherine's Creek as the location of their settlement, which quickly put them at odds with a rapidly expanding Natchez village in the vicinity. The "White Apple Village" was part of the pro-British faction and had no love for the new French immigrants. Law's company pushed hard to establish a profitable Louisiana company to compete with the British colonies on the East Coast and to bolster the depleted wealth of the French royal coffers.⁷² In essence, French and British interests competed on a global and local scale in the Natchez District, and unfortunately neither the French nor the Natchez fully understood the significance of their actions.⁷³

As historian James F. Barnett points out in his recent monograph on the Natchez, the French made several critical mistakes in judging the group. First, the French believed that the village where they decided to settle, modern-day Natchez, was the main village and that the chief of this village was in command of the whole nation. They were mistaken.⁷⁴ The nation did not have a central political authority and was divided between British and French factions. George Milne explains that the outlying towns were relatively new and consisted of recent arrivals, which, through either the slave trade or

⁷² Milne, "Rising Suns, Fallen Forts, and Impudent Immigrants: Race, Power, and War in the Lower Mississippi Valley," 108-11.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 112-14.

⁷⁴ Barnett, *The Natchez Indians*, 93-94.

warfare, had been in contact with the British. These members of the Natchez nation were not fully assimilated into the group and therefore represented a constant threat to the political unity of the nation, a threat only increased by the haphazard actions of the French.⁷⁵ By ignoring or misinterpreting the situation among the Natchez, the French unknowingly stepped into the minefield of Indian factions, tribes, and competing European empires.

Establishing a Plantation Society in French Natchez

In 1723, war broke out for the third time between the French and the Natchez. This time, an African man played a key role, and it appears the French were keenly aware of the part slavery played in the backcountry of their empire. On November 23, 1723, the minutes of the Superior Council of Louisiana reported that “they [Natchez Indians] bring in dead or alive a negro who has taken refuge among them for a long time and makes them [sic] seditious speeches against the French nation and who has followed them on occasions against our Indian allies.”⁷⁶ This mysterious African whose name is lost to history still symbolizes the fateful connection between African slavery and the expansion of the French empire in Louisiana. It seems the African consciously chose to live in the anti-French “White Apple Village,” knowing that he could achieve assimilation there more easily and with less risk than in the main village, which was pro-French. His “seditious speeches” also fell on open ears there.

⁷⁵ George Edward Milne, "Picking up the Pieces: Natchez Coalescence in the Shatter Zone," in *Mapping the Mississippian Shatter Zone: The Colonial Indian Slave Trade and Regional Instability in the American South*, ed. Sheri M. Shuck-Hall Robbie Ethridge (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 394.

⁷⁶ Minutes of the Superior Council of Louisiana, November 23, 1723, in Mississippi. Dept. of Archives and History., Rowland, and Sanders, *Mississippi Provincial Archives [1701-1743] French Dominion*, Vol. 3, 385-87.

The French arrested and executed the unnamed African in 1723, but it has been impossible to trace the origins of the man who endangered the French colony through his position as a black leader among Native Americans. Barnett believes he was a free African, possibly a former soldier for the French empire, who had risen to the rank of war chief within the Natchez nation.⁷⁷ He might just as well have been a runaway slave, but the key was that he threatened the French position in the Natchez District. The African's presence countered the divide-and-conquer strategy the French often employed in Indian relations and forced them to widen that strategy to keep slaves and American Indians divided as well. An alliance between Africans, enslaved or free, and Indians was rightfully perceived as a fatal combination. In 1729, this combination would spell disaster for the French colony at Natchez.⁷⁸

The "negro" the French wanted dead remains in many ways a mystery. However, there are clues as to how he could have achieved the position of war leader in the Natchez Nation. Gordon Sayre describes the society of the Natchez as matrilineal and hierarchical.⁷⁹ Milne adds that this system then required the Natchez to adopt refugees of other tribes, often displaced by the Indian slave trade to the east, into their nation to replenish the available partners for noble women.⁸⁰ The female members of the royal families chose mates from the lower classes, and in all likelihood the Natchez leader at the time of the massacre in 1729 was the descendant of a French priest and an Indian

⁷⁷ Barnett, *The Natchez Indians*, 93.

⁷⁸ Milne, "Rising Suns, Fallen Forts, and Impudent Immigrants: Race, Power, and War in the Lower Mississippi Valley," 112-14.

⁷⁹ Sayers, "Plotting the Natchez Massacre: Le Page Du Pratz, Dumont De Montingy, Chateaubriand," 399-400.

⁸⁰ Milne, "Picking up the Pieces: Natchez Coalescence in the Shatter Zone," 394.

noble woman.⁸¹ The black man, then, might have been the chosen mate of another female of royal lineage, and therefore had risen to the position of war chief.

Although the threat of the one black African rebel had been eliminated, the role of slaves in the constant negotiations between people of all races in the district remained essential. French settlers were upset since, for about a decade, they had asked for more slaves but had not received them in nearly sufficient numbers. In 1725, France's Council of the Indies received the following plea from Louisiana:

The crops of Louisiana give the finest hopes in the world and only negroes are wanting to set them going. The orders given about tobacco have caused the inhabitants great pleasure, but they can do nothing without negroes, and the hopes that they have been given for three years that some would be sent to them, without their receiving any, keep them always in inactivity. They are in despair at learning that the Company is furnishing them to the islands in preference to them and there are many honest and very industrious people who will wait again this year and if they do not see any coming they will return to France.⁸²

So far, the tobacco harvests were promising, but not enough slave labor was available to expand the operation in Natchez to a scale seen in Virginia. Yet this was what the company in France and the settlers in the Natchez District wanted: a large, successful, and profitable plantation economy based on forced black labor.

Despite glowing descriptions of the area by colonists in Natchez, the colony did not experience a population explosion. In 1729, a maximum of 280 black slaves were in Natchez, and 432 French settlers barely outnumbered them.⁸³ In no way did early

⁸¹ Ibid., 388-90.

⁸² De la Chaise to Council Company of the Indies, New Orleans, April 26, 1725, in du Pratz, *The History of Louisiana*, 34-35.

⁸³ Mississippi. Dept. of Archives and History., Rowland, and Sanders, *Mississippi Provincial Archives [1701-1743] French Dominion*, 1: 76; In his recent work, Edward Milne has even estimate a very conservative number of a minimum of just 126 slaves in Natchez in 1729. The actual number remains unclear, because no census of Natchez in 1729 exists. Milne, "Rising Suns, Fallen Forts, and Impudent Immigrants: Race, Power, and War in the Lower Mississippi Valley," 168.

Natchez rival or resemble the plantation societies and districts of Virginia, South Carolina, or Saint-Domingue. It was only in 1729 that the district approached a profitable tobacco harvest for the first time in its short history. The profit gained would have been spent almost completely on more slaves, accelerating the transition from a society with slaves to a slave society. But both the Indians and slaves resisted this expansion.

Several factors hastened the demise of the Natchez colony. Settlers and authorities were not clear on the nature of their relationship with the Natchez. An increased and ongoing threat of Indian alliances with the British left the settlers in the area with an uneasy feeling and further destabilized an already unstable backcountry. The authorities in Paris saw no positive development of the colony in Natchez and feared losing their investment. Thus, they began to increase the pressure on their officials in Louisiana. Settlers, who accused Council members of unequal distributions of slaves, duplicated this pressure.⁸⁴

Leading up to the revolt of 1729, slaves and Indians in the district appeared to remain passive, but the French were aware of some of the activity of other Indian nations in the area. They trusted that the Natchez would not betray them, and African slaves had not demonstrated irregular behavior since the 1722 beheading of the African rebel. Nevertheless, the end of the year 1729 would show that the increasing frustrations of the colonists and colonial authorities had created a situation that the Natchez Indians and their slave allies used to their advantage. On November 28, 1729, the Natchez surprised the French garrison and killed 138 men, 35 women and 56 children. There were only 6

⁸⁴ Council of Louisiana to Directors of the Company of the Indies, August 28, 1725, in Mississippi. Dept. of Archives and History., Rowland, and Sanders, *Mississippi Provincial Archives [1701-1743] French Dominion*, 2: 492-503.

black casualties that day.⁸⁵ Although the recorded numbers of survivors and captives varies, the Natchez captured about 280 African slaves and led them to their settlement. A decade of fear came suddenly true for the French, who had not been able to prevent a biracial alliance. Even earlier conflicts never witnessed as much aggression by the Natchez as did that early winter day in 1729.

Most contemporaries (and historians) believed that the new commandant of Fort Rosalie, Sieur de Chepart, was to blame. Chepart had been in Louisiana for about a decade. Like everyone else, he probably expected to reap a handsome profit. His frustration led to mistreatment of the French settlers, and he was subsequently relieved of his post. Unfortunately, the new governor, Étienne Perier, returned him to his position. As du Pratz put it: “And thus he [Chepart] obtained the command from M. Perier, who was unacquainted with his character.”⁸⁶ Perier did not know Chepart, nor did he fully appreciate the gravity of his decision.

Chepart immediately returned to the district and made a grave mistake. He arrived with a number of slaves he had purchased in New Orleans and began to scout out land that suited him for a plantation. Fatefully, he chose the location of the “White Apple Village.” The Natchez population in this village had been pro-British, or neutral at best, and Chepart’s intention to remove the Indians from the village so he could establish his plantation completely alienated them and the rest of the Natchez from the French.⁸⁷ The “White Apple Village” had been the hotbed of anti-French activities in the early 1720s, and it was in this village that the African recruited a following as a war chief. It appears

⁸⁵ Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 100.

⁸⁶ du Pratz, *The History of Louisiana*, 73.

⁸⁷ Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 100-01.

reasonable that his story had lived on among the tribesmen in tales that now compelled the Natchez to unite and finally fight the French invaders. Chepart's disregard of boundaries led many Indians to believe that resistance was appropriate, and the memory of the black man likely reassured them in their plan to take on the French empire, as he had urged them to do years ago.

To ensure their victory, the Natchez had to reduce the number of possible opponents, and they turned to the roughly 280 slaves in the district. Beginning in the contested village, they began to recruit slaves to their cause and found success. Only 6 slaves, presumably loyal to the French, escaped to New Orleans to tell the tale. At least one of them, Diocou, received his freedom for fighting against the Natchez in 1730.⁸⁸ The rest supported the cause of the Natchez's fight for freedom.⁸⁹

The Natchez also had a thorough appreciation of what kind of slavery they could be subjugated to, and of what was at risk. Judging by du Pratz's account, Indians and slaves were able to connect through a theme of resistance and slavery. The Indians, according to du Pratz, argued that "we walk like slaves, which we shall soon be, since the French already treat us as if we were such. When they are sufficiently strong, they will no longer dissemble."⁹⁰ Slaves easily related to this message, and since slaves made up roughly one-third of the non-Indian population in the district, the scales now tipped overwhelmingly toward the side of the Indians and slaves. Although it is unclear how

⁸⁸ G. Douglas Inglis, "Searching for Free People of Color in Colonial Natchez," *Southern Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (2006): 99.

⁸⁹ Barnett, *The Natchez Indians*, 101-02.

⁹⁰ Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 100-01.

many slaves actively took part in the fighting on that fateful November day in 1729, they did not come to the aid of their masters.⁹¹

The Natchez had slowly but surely gleaned the meaning of slavery from the French settlers. The Indian slave trade that drove members of other Indian people into the fold of the Natchez nation was in full swing throughout the early eighteenth century. Therefore, these refugees understood the concept of European slavery well.⁹² Though the Natchez held slaves themselves, these slaves were war captives and could often be integrated into society via kinship ties, as demonstrated by the black war leader in 1723.⁹³ Once the number of African slaves began to grow in 1726, the French employed the full weight of the *Code Noir* in Natchez, and all of the Indians began to understand how and why African slaves were subjugated to labor. Worse, the growing number of planters in the district began to treat the Natchez as racially inferior, by law and in custom. Up until the late 1720s, the Natchez still believed that they would be able to assimilate the European newcomers into their culture.⁹⁴ Not any more. Once the Natchez found out that black slaves were clearly separated from white society, their daily experiences with the French in their “villages gave them perfect venues to observe the French dominate Africans in ways that they had not seen when the European settlers were few in number and slaves were scarce.” The *Code Noir*, through newly introduced legislation specific to

⁹¹ Milne, "Rising Suns, Fallen Forts, and Impudent Immigrants: Race, Power, and War in the Lower Mississippi Valley," 202.

⁹² See Gally, *The Indian Slave Trade: The Rise of the English Empire in the American South, 1670-1717*.

⁹³ On the importance of kinship ties in the Indian community and how it enabled slaves to become free and equal members of the Natchez see Snyder, *Slavery in Indian Country: The Changing Face of Captivity in Early America*, 1-45. However, sometimes prisoners of war were also sacrificed.

⁹⁴ Milne, "Rising Suns, Fallen Forts, and Impudent Immigrants: Race, Power, and War in the Lower Mississippi Valley," 8-9.

Louisiana, now also treated “Indians, free as well as captive, [as] an inferior social and legal category.” As Milne concludes, “by the late 1720s, France’s racial policies had arrived in Natchez Country with a vengeance, ready to swallow the People of the Sun [Natchez].”⁹⁵

Once the French relegated both the Natchez and Africans to a position of social inferiority, they created a logical union between the two. French claims to Natchez lands, and their efforts to define and treat the Natchez as distinctively unequal, proved too much for the frail relationship between the two peoples. When Sieur de Chepart threatened to take away the land of the Natchez, the Indians could come to no other conclusion than that their attempt to absorb and welcome the French into their midst had failed. The French, on the other hand, were driven by their search for profit and a sense of superiority and control. The “savages,” as their slaves, should not be an obstacle to the exploitation of the riches of the Natchez District’s soil, but rather, they were tools to be used to gain access to the wealth hidden in the ground. Unfortunately for all people involved, their initial assessment of the situation developing in 1729 was wrong.

The violence that shook Natchez in 1729 was unprecedented. Nations associated with the Natchez also went on the warpath, and the governor in New Orleans ordered the defenses of the city restored and mended by slaves. He also ordered a group of slaves to attack a small Indian band south of New Orleans. He hoped this divide and conquer strategy would introduce a general animosity between Africans and American Indians outside of the Natchez District and diminish the threat to New Orleans.⁹⁶ The French

⁹⁵ Ibid., 173.

⁹⁶ du Pratz, *The History of Louisiana*, 76.

clearly feared that the Indian population of the whole colony was about to rise against them.

Frustration among the Natchez and Europeans led to this outbreak of violence. Africans and American Indians, in the tradition of the first African rebel leader, made it evident that they would not suffer further French encroachment. The role of the slaves, however, is not quite clear. No accounts of either Natchez or slaves remains, and French chroniclers were unsure of what to make of the situation. According to Milne, the Natchez still treated a majority of the Africans as an inferior group within their society. A number of Africans had to perform physical labor, but so did the white prisoners who survived the initial outbreak of violence. A majority of slaves joined forces with the Natchez to fight the French, or they at least went hunting to supply the beleaguered nation. Yet not all slaves followed that model, and some even ran away to unite with their former French masters.⁹⁷

After the December 1729 attack, the French enlisted the aid of their Choctaw allies and laid siege to the Grand Village of the Natchez. During the siege, many of the slaves were adamant about whose side they were supporting. Far from remaining neutral, slaves took up weapons and instructed the Natchez warriors how to defend the town and ostensibly their freedom.⁹⁸ At least five of the slaves who supported the Natchez were trained as gunners by the French, and were successful in returning artillery fire on the French troops and their Indian allies. Unfortunately for the besieged, the French and their

⁹⁷ Milne, "Rising Suns, Fallen Forts, and Impudent Immigrants: Race, Power, and War in the Lower Mississippi Valley," 197-203.

⁹⁸ See Usner, *Indians, Settlers & Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy*, 74-75; Daniel H. Usner, Jr., "American Indians on the Cotton Frontier: Changing Economic Relations with Citizens and Slaves in the Mississippi Territory," *Journal of American History* 72, no. 2 (1985).

allies overpowered the Natchez and drove them from their homeland. Just like the first African rebel, the slaves were unsuccessful in opposing the French. The surviving gunners were taken captive by the French and burned in New Orleans, together with two other slaves who had killed the Jesuit priest of Natchez and were wearing his clothes when they were captured.⁹⁹

France's Failure in the Natchez District

In the end, the Choctaw and Chickasaws retained control of the region at the expense of the Natchez Indians and African slaves. Settlers never returned to Natchez in the French period, and the beachhead that the French Empire had established in the lower Mississippi Valley was reduced. The French empire never recovered and would eventually lose its North American colonies in 1763 after the French and Indian War. Africans had helped deliver this decisive blow. Ultimately, the role of the slaves was diminished by history, but it was the slaves who tipped the scales and played a decisive role in the development and destruction of the Natchez District under French rule.

Slavery haunted the French in Natchez. The growing plantation society increased the pressure to define people by race, and the French saw no fault in doing so. Many slaves, with few exceptions like Samba Bambara, had no option but to accept their subordination and their status at the bottom of society.¹⁰⁰ Far from their homeland and brutalized by the Middle Passage and seasoning, the Africans were obliged to submit to French control. The Natchez Indians, however, did not internalize the French idea of a

⁹⁹ Caillot Manuscript, MSS596, Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection, 166-167. Translation from French by author.

¹⁰⁰ For the story of Samba Bambara see Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 109-12. Bambara was a slave in Louisiana who used his language skills to work as an interpreter for French courts. He used his position to sway the scales of justice as he intended, and also led an alleged slave conspiracy.

racially structured plantation society. The measure of control the French believed they held over the Natchez proved to be a fatal delusion. When the Natchez rose against the French colonial empire, the slaves certainly did not help their masters and thereby contributed to the demise of the French plantation operation in Natchez.¹⁰¹ For a short time, the Natchez even turned the French plantation society on its head when they forced captured Europeans to do physical labor and did not integrate them into their society, as they would have done with European captives before 1726. It would take another three decades for Europeans to reestablish a plantation foothold in the district.

The Natchez never recovered from their attempt to repulse the French from their settlements. Some of the Africans who had remained with the Indians—and whose status was still in limbo—were once again forced to accept the unchanging reality of slavery. Yet the Natchez showed some measure of compassion toward the Africans. When the French besieged them and demanded that both African and European prisoners be released, the Natchez promised to do so if they were granted one day to prepare. During the night, the Natchez and some Africans slipped away from the fortifications and melted into the darkness. The French could not pursue them.¹⁰² Some of the former slaves, then, had somehow managed to strike up friendships with the Natchez. Although on the losing side of the war, they still clung to their freedom in a strange land. While their villages were destroyed, the Natchez and their African allies continued to fight the French where they could, only to find that they could not win. If the Natchez lost a battle, their

¹⁰¹ On the important concept of what and how Native Americans perceived their ancestral homeland see Kathleen DuVal, *The Native Ground: Indians and Colonists in the Heart of the Continent* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

¹⁰² Milne, "Rising Suns, Fallen Forts, and Impudent Immigrants: Race, Power, and War in the Lower Mississippi Valley," 220.

prisoners faced slavery at the hands of the French—some in Louisiana, but most in the dreadful sugar colony of Saint-Domingue.¹⁰³ Some survivors united with the Chickasaw in 1731, but the Choctaw by then had become allies of the French again and the Natchez found no rest from their enemies. By that point, the Natchez had ceased to function as a distinct group.¹⁰⁴

The Natchez continued to attract runaway slaves even after they had been expelled from their native ground.¹⁰⁵ One runaway slave, David George, ran away from his “very severe” master in Virginia in 1742. First hiding in South Carolina, and later somewhere on the Savannah River (probably Augusta), he fled his master’s persistent pursuit to a safe harbor with the Creek Indians. His master’s son was not deterred easily, because George had to make another escape, from the Creeks this time, only to flee to “the Nantchee or Natchez Indians,” where he “got to live with their king Jack.” Eventually he was discovered again and lived the rest of his life as a slave in Augusta, Georgia. David George’s story survived because he eventually became a Baptist, and his congregation recorded his remarkable story. Not only did he choose to run away from his master, but he involuntarily traversed a route that would be taken by several thousand victims of the internal slave trade in years to come. The survivors of the Natchez Indians, probably living as a distinctive group among the Chickasaws, still seemed to have an

¹⁰³ Ibid., 229-32.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 234.

¹⁰⁵ On the concept of native ground see DuVal, *The Native Ground: Indians and Colonists in the Heart of the Continent*, 8-12.

affinity for African runaway slaves, since they established a bond with David George in the backcountry of the British colonies.¹⁰⁶

The last mention in the records of Louisiana of the Natchez as a people is again related to slavery. In 1794, several of them came forward to protest their status as Indian slaves, which had been outlawed in the then Spanish colony in 1763 when the Iberian empire took control of Louisiana.¹⁰⁷ The Spanish described the members of the Natchez nation who came forward to claim their freedom in detail. Apparently, the friendship between Natchez and African slaves had extended beyond the rebellion. According to a Spanish official, these slaves were almost all at least part black, and they were all descendants of the Indians that “revolted and committed cruel atrocities” under the regime of the French.¹⁰⁸ Spain clearly remembered the scars that revolt had left more than six decades before. Yet the Spanish were more concerned with the present than with the past. The slaves who claimed their freedom mostly belonged to indigo planters. Although indigo was a profitable crop, in recent years “insects, floods, war and famine” had caused these planters in Louisiana to sustain painful losses. Now their slaves were suing for their freedom based on their ancestry.¹⁰⁹

Based on their law against Indian slavery, the Spanish should have immediately set the slaves free. However, circumstances in the case of the Natchez were different. The 1729 rebellion had earned them a reputation that not even their descendants could escape.

¹⁰⁶ David Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America, and Other Parts of the World*, 2 vols. (Boston: Printed by Lincoln & Edmands, no. 53, Cornhill, 1813), 287-89.

¹⁰⁷ Indian slavery had been outlawed in Spanish possessions since the sixteenth century.

¹⁰⁸ Letter to Madrid, New Orleans, February 28, 1794, in legajo 2532, Archivo General de Indias: Audiencia de Santo Domingo, Williams Research Center, Historic New Orleans Collection, New Orleans, Louisiana

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

Spanish officials in Louisiana did their best to circumvent this. They alleged that the slaves were scheming with people of color in New Orleans to incite a rebellion in the city. The officials called the owners who had already freed their Indian slaves “idiots.” They reminded the government in Spain that the king had enforced slavery on “Chilean Indians for their perfidy and cruelty” in 1608 and 1625 to circumvent the same legal problems in that part of the Spanish empire.¹¹⁰ The Louisianans tried to establish similar circumstances to what had happened in Chile in order to allow for a legal exception in the case of the slaves of Natchez ancestry. What happened sixty years earlier echoed through time and cost Natchez slaves a chance for freedom. Spain was not about to set slaves free—Indian or not—that had a history of violent resistance against colonial masters. All empires feared slave revolts, and Indian allies could not be expected to be treated with compassion, even after several decades.

Rebuilding an Empire: Virginia in the Lower Mississippi Valley?

After the French plantation colony in the Natchez District failed, French settlers never returned. Following the French and Indian War, France relinquished its Louisiana colony west of the Mississippi to Spain in the Treaty of Fontainebleau in 1762, and the eastern part south of the 31st parallel became the newly established British province of West Florida with the Treaty of Paris in 1763.¹¹¹ Once more, the map of the lower Mississippi Valley had been redrawn in Europe, but it remained to be seen if the tiny pockets of European settlers strewn along the Gulf Coast could actually claim the lands their rulers in Europe called part of their empires.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 12.

Britain faced the same problems that made the French settlement at Natchez such a daunting task. The British capital was located in Pensacola, and outposts were re-established in Mobile, and along the Mississippi River in Manchac, Baton Rouge, Point Coupée, and Natchez. To encourage settlers to move to the newly founded province, the British King authorized Governor George Johnston to present newly arriving settlers with very generous land grants. Given the frontier character of Natchez and the other posts, Johnston evidently tried, with some success, to attract former soldiers to Natchez. The land grants for soldiers who had fought the French were especially large. Depending on rank, former imperial soldiers would be granted anywhere from 100 to 5,000 acres. West Florida was also the only territory available after the British curtailed further westward movement beyond the Blue Ridge Mountains and into the Ohio Valley after the French and Indian War. Therefore settlers had little choice but to come to West Florida if they intended to move west.¹¹² In the 1760s, the first Loyalists who fled the mounting tensions between the Americans and the British Crown targeted West Florida as a new region to settle and quickly swelled the ranks of the former soldiers.¹¹³ These new arrivals also received large land grants from the British Crown. Governor Johnston's order from Great Britain allowed "one hundred Acres of Land [to] be granted to every Person being Master or Mistress of a Family, for himself or herself, and fifty Acres for every white or black Man, Woman, or Child, of which such Person's Family shall consist."¹¹⁴ Those Loyalists

¹¹² Morris, *Becoming Southern*, 6.

¹¹³ J. F. H. Claiborne and C. M. Lagrone, *Mississippi, as a Province, Territory and State, with Biographical Notices of Eminent Citizens* (Jackson, Miss.: Power & Barksdale, 1880), 102-03; Margaret Fisher Dalrymple, *The Merchant of Manchac: The Letterbooks of John Fitzpatrick, 1768-1790* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 18.

¹¹⁴ Instructions of Board of Trade, quoted in Usner, *Indians, Settlers & Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy*, 111.

coming from the Carolinas or other slaveholding societies brought not only their families but also their “households” with them. These households contained slaves.¹¹⁵

Slaves were vital to the British schemes. They provided the labor that would secure not only Natchez, but also the other outposts on the Mississippi River. For example, in 1763, the British dispatched Lieutenant James Campbell and a small number of soldiers to open a channel from the Mississippi River to Bayou Manchac. Although soldiers of the British Empire were certainly not incapable of doing ditch work, 50 slaves to labor in the swamp accompanied the soldiers.¹¹⁶ Natchez had only a few merchants in 1766. One was John Bradly, who operated the lone trading post with Henry Fairchild.¹¹⁷ Despite its isolation, Natchez’s soil still beckoned. Beginning in 1765, the British began to import slaves from Jamaica to West Florida. The African captives were shipped to Pensacola and eventually to Manchac, where they were theoretically available for purchase by planters of the Natchez District. Unfortunately for the colonists in Natchez and Manchac, planters around New Orleans purchased most of these slaves, which caused Anglo-Spanish relations in the lower Mississippi Valley to sour quickly.¹¹⁸ The inability of Spain to supply slaves to Louisiana forced planters from New Orleans to buy from British traders, and those traders were happy to sell slaves before they made the

¹¹⁵ See Claiborne and Lagrone, *Mississippi*, 103. Claiborne, writing in the late nineteenth century, proclaims that these men were not Tories. He deems this characterization unjust, because “rather than stain their hands with kindred blood, [they] renounced home, comfort, society and position for an asylum in the wilderness.” Claiborne certainly was correct in describing the outpost as wilderness, but the settlers were not without their own motives. The French knew very early on that Natchez soil was extremely fertile, and there is no reason to suspect that the British did not know it as well. Although in the wilderness, Natchez certainly offered very good chances for the prospective settlers to put their slaves to profitable work.

¹¹⁶ Dalrymple, *The Merchant of Manchac: The Letterbooks of John Fitzpatrick, 1768-1790*, 12.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 13; James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 15-16; Joseph Barton Starr, *Tories, Dons, and Rebels: The American Revolution in British West Florida* (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1976).

¹¹⁸ Claiborne and Lagrone, *Mississippi*, 105-06.

arduous journey to Manchac, leaving the slave supply available to Natchez extremely low.

Although the Natchez Indians were no longer in the region, other Indian nations dominated the landscape around Natchez. The Tunica, for example, who had long been the staunchest—if not necessarily the most powerful—French allies in the area, attacked a detachment of British soldiers in 1764.¹¹⁹ These soldiers were on their way up the Mississippi River to take possession of the French forts in Illinois when an African slave hid in one of the barges to seek refuge, and the British commander, Major Loftus, refused to return him to his French master. Although the French eventually had to respect the major's military power and let the slave go, in response the Tunica Indians ambushed the detachment and killed several soldiers.¹²⁰ The region was still a frontier, and slaves were an investment that planters protected rather than risked on adventures into backcountry plantation districts. The Choctaw and Chickasaw nations were also far from happy with letting the European empire expand into their native lands. Discontented with the British and the trading relations they were forced to accept, thirty Choctaw warriors “broke into the storehouse at Natchez and took away all of the merchandise and horses from the fort” in 1770.¹²¹ These raids occurred despite the peace treaty negotiated between the Choctaw, Chickasaw, Upper Creek, and Great Britain in 1765.¹²² Great Britain was also forced to sign a treaty with the Choctaw that same year which finalized the 31st parallel as the border of West Florida.

¹¹⁹ James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 13.

¹²⁰ Claiborne and Lagrone, *Mississippi*, 104.

¹²¹ Usner, *Indians, Settlers & Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy*, 128.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 124.

Natchez was far from secure. British soldiers were scarce in the province, and the district was always under-garrisoned. In 1764, fifty soldiers were supposed to be dispatched to the area, but not until 1766 did the governor of Pensacola sent forty-eight soldiers to Natchez, and they only stayed for two years.¹²³ Due to high costs, the detachments to the posts were recalled to Pensacola, and in exchange the settlers received a few weapons and munitions to defend themselves.¹²⁴ The situation in the 1760s was so bad that Major Robert Farmar did not have enough British flags to fly over all outposts signaling the presence of the mighty British Empire in the lower Mississippi Valley.¹²⁵

Although Britain had gained West Florida from France, control eluded His Majesty's governors just as much as it had the French. The British had to maintain cordial relations with the Spanish, the surviving French population in their new province, and the surrounding powerful Indian nations. The main goal for the post commanders was to establish good relations with the Indians and minimize the influence of their "late Masters."¹²⁶ Settlers had to be kept under control as well, once they could be attracted to the new outposts. Great Britain had no doubt what would guarantee the success of their operations in West Florida. Major Robert Farmar, West Florida's military commander, ordered his subordinate post commanders to keep a close eye on the agricultural

¹²³ Major Robert Farmar to Secretary of War, Mobile, January 24, 1764 in Dunbar Rowland, *Mississippi Provincial Archives: English Dominion, 1763-1766, Letters and Enclosures to the Secretary of State from Major Robert Farmar and Governor George Johnstone* (Nashville, Tenn.: Press of Brandon printing company, 1911), 9; Jack D. Elliott, *The Fort of Natchez and the Colonial Origins of Mississippi* (Fort Washington, PA: Eastern National, 1998), 19-20. Elliot shows that Governor Johnston was nervous about letting any of his soldiers leave Pensacola to go to Natchez, due to the threat of Indian attacks; James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 13.

¹²⁴ James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 14.

¹²⁵ Major Robert Farmar, List of Appointments needed at Mobile, January 24, 1764, in Rowland, *Mississippi Provincial Archives: English Dominion*, 64.

¹²⁶ Major Robert Farmar's Instructions to Officers, Mobile, October 24, 1763, in *ibid.*, 93.

development of each post. Commandants were to pay careful “attention to the nature of the Soil” and report back to headquarters. In addition, Farmar urged his officers to forward any observation as to “what Implements in Husbandry is necessary, and actually wanted to Cultivate the Country.” The major tried his best to discover what the soil in outposts like Natchez was “capable of producing,” and what was needed to improve the settlements throughout West Florida.¹²⁷

At least for Natchez, there was no doubt among British officials that it merited every effort to settle. The first British governor of West Florida, Montfort Brown, described the Natchez District as one of “the most charming prospects in the world.” The soil was “exceeding fertile; consisting of black mould, at least three feet deep in the hills and much deeper in the bottoms.”¹²⁸ Other travelers corroborated the euphoric view of the governor, also highlighting the nature of the soil and the numerous possibilities for agriculture in their glowing report of the Natchez District, praising the soil and declaring that “the like of which [soil] is certainly not to be seen any where else, in all the southern parts of North America.”¹²⁹ The promising soil would attract settlers to Natchez, but as soon as the first crops were sold in the Empire, British traveler John H. Wynne advised planters “to purchase negroes, and to enlarge the British plantations, beyond what they are otherwise capable of. Such plantations would be more profitable than even sugar-

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Montfort Brown to Lord Hillsborough, Pensacola?, July 6, 1768, as quoted in Robert V. Haynes, *The Natchez District and the American Revolution* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1976), 7.

¹²⁹ See for example Pittman, *The Present State of the European Settlements on the Mississippi; with a Geographical Description of That River*, 37-39; John Huddleston Wynne, *A General History of the British Empire in America: Containing an Historical, Political, and Commercial View of the English Settlements; Including All the Countries in North-America, and the West-Indies, Ceded by the Peace of Paris*, 2 vols. (London: W. Richardson and L. Urquhart, 1770), 401-07, quote from 405.

colonies and supply the nation with more valuable and necessary articles. If we compare this with the barren deserts of Canada and Florida, what a wide difference is there!”¹³⁰

British Slave Codes in West Florida

Settlers and slaves trickled in slowly, despite the blooming descriptions and the generous land grants. But they came. To preempt any ideas about the legal standing of slaves in West Florida and Natchez, the British government published its first slave act in 1766. This “Act for the Regulation and Government of Negroes and Slaves” laid the basis for the prospective slave society that would eventually come to Natchez, and it regulated every aspect of slavery in the new province.¹³¹ Most notably, it established firm control over people of color, free or enslaved. Based on race, the British code clearly degraded the black population of West Florida. To the government, it was clear that their province needed “to employ a great many Negroes” and that “custom has prevailed to distinguish their color for the badge of slavery.”¹³² Lumped in with the Africans were Native Americans, who could also be held in bondage. The code further stipulated that the child would follow the status of the mother, and that once enslaved, only manumission by the master could free them from the status of “personal chattel.”¹³³

The British took no chances in governing their slaves by enacting a very stringent code based on those of the thirteen eastern colonies. Although they included “mulattos” and “mustees” as racial categories for slaves and free people, the provisions in the code

¹³⁰ Wynne, *A General History of the British Empire in America*, 407.

¹³¹ See Inglis, “Searching for Free People of Color in Colonial Natchez,” 100.

¹³² An “Act for the Regulation and Government of Negroes and Slaves,” Pensacola, December 24, 1766, as reproduced in Smith, “A Settlement of Great Consequence: The Development of the Natchez District, 1763 - 1860,” 104.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

were aimed at discouraging miscegenation and followed the French *Code Noir* that had previously governed Natchez in the racialized degradation of seemingly non-white individuals. When the law was enacted in early 1767, a person of color had to either prove his freedom or face re-enslavement. Manumissions were legal, but there were stipulations that tremendously complicated the process. A master who wanted to manumit his slave needed to provide a security payment to the secretary's office "in the sum of £100 sterling that such a slave or slaves so emancipated shall not at any time become a burden to the province."¹³⁴ This part of the slave act provided almost no chance for a slave to receive liberty from a British master because the people of West Florida were cash poor and the sum of one hundred pounds therefore was a very successful tool to prevent manumissions across the province.¹³⁵ In 1764, the future governor of West Florida, George Johnston, reported:

By the Report of sundry persons who have come from Pensacola the Inhabitants are in a deplorable Situation, being in the utmost want of every [thing] necessary, and no Cash circulating amongst them, in so much that the Officers are forced to pass Paper from one to the other, while the Goods of the Merchants are rotting in the Stores.¹³⁶

The second provision that had to be fulfilled for successful manumission was even more prohibitive. People living in Pensacola, where the secretary's office was located, might free their slaves if they could procure the necessary funds. A slaveowner in Natchez, facing several days of travel across Indian country and through swampy terrain away from Pensacola, would have certainly thought twice before he undertook the journey to

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Inglis, "Searching for Free People of Color in Colonial Natchez," 100.

¹³⁶ George Johnstone to John Pownall, Jamaica, Kingston, September 25, 1764, in Rowland, *Mississippi Provincial Archives: English Dominion*, 170-71.

free even the most faithful African servant. It is no surprise then that historian Robin Fabel only found a total of eleven manumissions in a survey of sources pertaining to West Florida.¹³⁷

Taken as a whole, the code narrowly circumscribed the lives of Africans. Slaves were limited in their movement to the outposts or their plantations. If they were caught abroad without a pass from their master they would be whipped. If a white person confronted a slave outside of a two-mile radius of his home, that slave had to submit to a search and could be “moderately” corrected by the investigator if the slave resisted. Since every black person was suspected to be a slave, this provision also limited the freedom of movement for any free black person in West Florida. Resistance of a black person against any white person led to severe punishment as well. The third offense against a European immediately resulted in a death penalty for a person of color.¹³⁸ If, on the other hand, a white person killed or injured a black person, free or enslaved, he had to pay a fine but suffered no further consequences. Slaves were also prohibited from owning property, or any dealings or transactions in their own name, and they were especially forbidden to own any firearms (without the consent of their master).¹³⁹ Any felony committed by a person of color, free or enslaved, including Native Americans, immediately drew the death penalty.¹⁴⁰ Nowhere does the act mention the right of a person of color to serve as

¹³⁷ See Appendix 4 in Robin F. A. Fabel, *The Economy of British West Florida, 1763-1783* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1988), 214-36.

¹³⁸ See Articles II, IV, and VI of “An Act for the Regulation and Government of Negroes and Slaves” in Smith, “A Settlement of Great Consequence: The Development of the Natchez District, 1763 - 1860,” 104-06.

¹³⁹ See Articles XV, XVIII and XXXI of “An Act for the Regulation and Government of Negroes and Slaves” in *ibid.*, 111, 12, 17.

¹⁴⁰ See Article XXIV of “An Act for the Regulation and Government of Negroes and Slaves” in *ibid.*, 115.

witness against a white person. Based on this fact and the custom across British North American against slave testimony, it is logical to suspect that people of color were denied this right in West Florida as well. Still, the white settlers tried to sharpen the slave code even further by including even more stringent laws, but no substantial new laws were added.¹⁴¹

The success of these measures of the Pensacola government against liberating slaves is readily apparent. Although no census was taken for West Florida, historians estimate that no more than fifty to sixty free people of color lived in British West Florida at any given time.¹⁴² In the absence of a census, tracing any free people of color becomes extremely difficult. According to one traveler's account, twenty free people of color lived in Mobile in the 1770s, but the exact number in the other outposts remains a mystery. An additional problem in locating free people of color is their absence from the admittedly sketchy court proceedings. When the province was established, a superior court was created in Pensacola "whose jurisdiction extended over the whole province, and where it administered justice under the common law of England."¹⁴³ The people in the outlying posts had to rely on magistrates to settle their disputes; only capital cases such as those concerning murder were tried in Pensacola. These magistrates certainly provided the necessary skill in governing the Natchez District, but they were miserable record keepers. Aside from some personal accounts of settlers in the region, no source material survives that indicates that free blacks resided in Natchez. Spanish censuses would later list the number of black and mulatto slaves, but they neglected to categorize free people of color,

¹⁴¹ See Fabel, *The Economy of British West Florida, 1763-1783*, 25.

¹⁴² Compare *ibid.*, 42-43; Inglis, "Searching for Free People of Color in Colonial Natchez," 100.

¹⁴³ Claiborne and Lagrone, *Mississippi*, 102-03.

perhaps indicating that there simply were not enough freed Africans to be counted or Spanish officials did not deem them important enough to be noted.

The lot of free blacks in West Florida was not an easy one. European legal codes narrowly confined their presence to either laborers or free people with little to no rights, and chances to advance at all in the frontier society were slim at best. John Fitzpatrick, who came to be known as the merchant of Manchac, had several encounters with the only free person of color in Natchez that is discoverable through the merchant's letter book. Nelly Price was a free person of color who dealt with the frontier merchant on multiple occasions, incurred debts, and continuously squabbled with the merchant. Although their business relationship did not end on good terms, Price established some measure of independence for herself, which extended well into the Spanish period. She did so even though the code of 1766 granted almost no rights to people of color that would protect her from a lawsuit. Nevertheless, Fitzpatrick had his share of trouble with the independent and headstrong black woman.¹⁴⁴ No matter the odds, African people sought to retain their independence, either in court, or outside of the legal system.

Runaway Slaves on the Edge of Empires

The new legal codes introduced in the 1760 left flight as the only option for slaves to achieve liberty. Since Natchez became an increasingly appealing destination for planters and their bound laborers, the number of runaways also increased¹⁴⁵ Given the proximity of Spanish Louisiana and the extensive Indian country surrounding the pockets

¹⁴⁴ See Inglis, "Searching for Free People of Color in Colonial Natchez," 101-02.

¹⁴⁵ For a discussion of slaves introduced into British West Florida, see Fabel, *The Economy of British West Florida, 1763-1783*, 22-48. The numbers Fabel is able to supply are for all of West Florida, and there is no breakdown available for the Natchez District.

of European settlement, slaves often tried to run away from their masters. How many succeeded is unknown. Once captured, however, these runaways were often returned to their masters, and that return left behind a paper trail. Interestingly, both British and Spanish slaves sought to escape slavery by fleeing across the Mississippi. The slave that hid on the boat of Major Loftus was not the only slave who tried to run from one empire to the next and escape bondage.

The clearest sign of the value the British attached to their slaves in West Florida was reflected in the slave act that they passed so quickly after they carved the province out of the lower Mississippi Valley. Paragraph eight of the code stated:

That if any person shall inveigle, steal, or carry away such Negro, other slave or slaves or shall employ any person or persons to inveigle, steal, or carry away any such Negro or other slave or slaves so as the owner or employer of such slave or slaves shall be deprived of the use and benefit of such Negro or other slave or slaves in running away or departing from his or her master or employer shall be and he and they upon due proof and conviction of any such offense hereby declared to be guilty of felony and suffer death.¹⁴⁶

The next paragraphs stipulated monetary punishments for harboring, aiding, and concealing runaway slaves that had to be paid to the respective owners for loss of work.¹⁴⁷ However, the threat of punishment for white citizens of West Florida did not deter the African slaves of the province from taking to the woods and swamps to try to escape their deplorable condition.

¹⁴⁶ See Article VIII of “An Act for the Regulation and Government of Negroes and Slaves” in Smith, “A Settlement of Great Consequence: The Development of the Natchez District, 1763 - 1860,” 107.

¹⁴⁷ See Article IX and X of “An Act for the Regulation and Government of Negroes and Slaves,” *ibid.*, 107-08.

The governors of Louisiana and West Florida were in constant contact and succeeded in establishing a reciprocal agreement to return runaway slaves.¹⁴⁸ This collaboration between authorities on both sides of the imperial borders in the lower Mississippi Valley severely reduced the chances that Africans could claim their freedom. Some certainly considered running to Indian country and disappearing into the wilderness surrounding their plantations, but both Great Britain and Spain successfully employed the surrounding Indian nations as slave catchers. As Daniel Usner notes, “the return of runaway slaves was a customary obligation in these Indian nations’ relationship with colonies, reciprocated with bounty payments.”¹⁴⁹ The governors did not fear that the Native American nations would absorb runaways. The Indian nations surrounding the Europeans were in a process of change, brought on by their contact with, and reinterpretation of, European slave culture. As seen with the Natchez Indians, Choctaw, Chickasaw and Creeks began to think “of themselves as a race of people separate from whites and blacks.” Unlike the Seminoles, the three major nations in the lower Mississippi Valley did not absorb African slaves in large numbers into their societies.¹⁵⁰

Violence was another factor in deterring slaves from running away. Black persons caught in the wilderness had no recourse if a white person wanted to detain them, other than violence. While this was certainly a viable option to escape slavery, slaves also became the victims of violence. In 1771, for example, Peter Chester accused the Upper Creek of attacking plantations with no other goal than to steal slaves. He argued that

¹⁴⁸ Governor Johnston to M. Aubry, Pensacola, July 2, 1766, in Rowland, *Mississippi Provincial Archives: English Dominion*, 316-18.

¹⁴⁹ Usner, *Indians, Settlers & Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy*, 139.

¹⁵⁰ Snyder, *Slavery in Indian Country: The Changing Face of Captivity in Early America*, 208, 12.

“these [slaves] cannot be enemies of yours nor can honor redound to you as warriors, from killing poor defenseless slaves, yet your parties frequently insult plantations in search of such people.”¹⁵¹ White outlaw bands roamed the woods around the villages and plantations as well and made life on the run dangerous for the slaves. In 1773 a band of outlaws attacked three French traders and their slaves on the Mississippi River, killing them all. The people of West Florida reacted with outrage and requested help. Even the Spanish governor Luis de Unzaga inquired about the violence in West Florida, as he reported that several dead bodies had recently floated down the Mississippi River and washed up in New Orleans.¹⁵² Yet despite these obstacles, slaves were not dissuaded from escaping their bonds.¹⁵³

Natchez’s Growing Pains

Despite the obstacles faced by newly arriving settlers in the wilderness of colonial Mississippi, by the early 1770s the governor of West Florida could report some success in populating Natchez. Natchez, in conjunction with Mobile, drew considerable numbers of settlers to West Florida, since its soil and the prospective wealth that could be derived from it held great allure for planters from the east. Governor Chester reported in 1773 that “we have also a considerable number of Families lately arrived on the Mississippi, who came from the Northern colonies, by the way of the Ohio; and if we may judge from present appearances, we have exceeding flattering prospects that this valuable part of the

¹⁵¹ Proceedings at a Congress of the Principal Chiefs and Warriors of the Upper Creek Nation, Pensacola, October 29 and November 3, 1771, in Mississippi Provincial Archives, British Dominion, Correspondence of Governor Peter Chester, 1772 Series 688, Vol. 11, 34, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

¹⁵² Chester to Unzaga, Pensacola, August 28, 1773, in Mississippi Provincial Archives, British Dominion, Correspondence of Governor Peter Chester, 1772-1773 Series 688, Vol 12, 56, Mississippi Department for Archives and History (MDAH), Jackson, Mississippi

¹⁵³ Usner, *Indians, Settlers & Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy*, 138.

country, will in a short time, be inhabited by a number of useful settlers.”¹⁵⁴ Three months later, Chester had even better news for the British prospects in Natchez. In August of 1773 he relayed to his superiors “that there are numbers among the new settlers, who are orderly and industrious, and well inclined to assist the civil power, many of them have considerable property some have from ten to forty and fifty negroes, and one gentleman who has lately arrived at the Natchez, has brought upwards of Eighty slaves his own property.”¹⁵⁵

The largest group that settled on the British land grants were the Jersey Settlers. The latter bought their land from a large tract that was originally granted to Amos Ogden in 1768. Ogden had difficulty selling his land to prospective settlers, but he did manage to sell a large tract to the Reverend Samuel Swayze and some of his flock. Governor Peter Chester describes the group that arrived under the leadership of Samuel Swayze in 1773 as follows:

A Clergyman from the Province of New Jersey has this Spring also brought with him a number of Parishoners, who are gone to form an Establishment near the Natchez, they intend to Build Houses, and to plant their lands, and prepare the way in order to receive a considerable number of families in the next year: This clergyman has also applied for a reserve of lands for a township, upon which he assures me he will bring one hundred families.¹⁵⁶

Reverend Swayze, however, led not only his family and slaves, but also large parts of his congregation to the Natchez District. As one early historian of Natchez put it fittingly, “the faithful sheppard, as soon as he had provided a shelter for his wife and children, and

¹⁵⁴ Peter Chester to the Earl of Dartmouth, Pensacola, May 16, 1773, in Mississippi Provincial Archives, British Dominion, Correspondence of Governor Peter Chester, 1772-1773 Series 688, Vol 12, 43-44, MDAH.

¹⁵⁵ Chester to Dartmouth, Pensacola, August 27, 1773, *ibid.*, 53-54.

¹⁵⁶ Peter Chester to the Earl of Dartmouth, Pensacola, May 16, 1773, *ibid.*, 43-44.

planted corn for their bread, gathered up his fold and organized his society, undoubtedly the first Protestant pastor and congregation in the Natchez District.” Out of the nucleus of this settlement established in 1772 grew one faction of the Natchez planter elite that would dominate the district and the state of Mississippi throughout the antebellum period.¹⁵⁷ Other settlers followed and thus the Natchez District grew slowly.

The British hoped that their liberal land grants would yield a flourishing plantation society—and the accompanying revenues—and that the new settlers would thwart Spanish designs on the lower Mississippi Valley. However, this policy did not actually bring a large number of people to West Florida or Natchez. The British Crown dispersed the grants among its loyal supporters, as long as they could supply the necessary settlers. Few succeeded in providing prospective settlers to populate even a fraction of the land granted to them. While failing to entice enough settlers, they still owned the land and accumulated a large acreage along the Mississippi River and its tributaries throughout the Natchez District. Chester bitterly complained about this situation in 1773. He warned his superiors that he needed and aspired to lay out several towns on the Mississippi and the Natchez District. Yet his plans were unfruitful.

According to him,

a measure [townships] I thought would be very advisable both for the Protection and Convenience of the Inhabitants, but that the injudicious method of granting large tracts of land in those parts to persons, many of whom, were utterly unable and others unwilling to cultivate them, who had been allowed to take up the greatest part of the Front of the River Mississippi, would prevent my laying out townships in several places upon the river.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ Claiborne and Lagrone, *Mississippi*, 107.

¹⁵⁸ Chester to Dartmouth, Pensacola, May 18, 1773, in Mississippi Provincial Archives, British Dominion, Correspondence of Governor Peter Chester, 1772-1773 Series 688, Vol 12, 46-49, MDAH.

Thus, an organized layout of the colony at Natchez was difficult if not impossible.

Moreover, the frontier defense was severely threatened, and not just because the British could not afford to station troops in Natchez.

To protect Natchez from Spanish attacks, the British allied with the Choctaw, who still dominated the area north and east of Natchez along the Mississippi River. The British managed to convince at least parts of the Choctaw confederacy to patrol the Mississippi and monitor any threat, especially after the thirteen colonies had entered into a revolt in 1775.¹⁵⁹ The royal governor grew even more alarmed when Captain George Gibson, an American officer who was on his way to procure supplies in New Orleans, stopped in Natchez and “audaciously hauled down the British colors, and raised the American flag.”¹⁶⁰ Given the scarcity of British flags in West Florida, this action added insult to injury. Nevertheless, the prospects of Natchez were not stalled by this episode.

After Chester’s report on the land grant issues, the British government soon curtailed their land grant policy, but soon after the American Revolution began they changed it again to accommodate Loyalist settlers who fled the war zones to the east.¹⁶¹ In 1775, Chester cheerily reported to his superiors that their measures of altering the land grant regulations to attract more settlers had achieved further success:

It gives me great pleasure to find that his majesty permits me to grant lands to those people who have made settlements, and improvements; and whose circumstances will not enable them to purchase, in which I shall be very careful not to exceed his majesty’s gracious intentions, but that it shall be attended with

¹⁵⁹ Greg O'Brien, "'We Are Behind You:' The Choctaw Occupation of Natchez in 1778," *Journal of Mississippi History*, no. 64 (2002): 109. The Choctaw had no unified hierarchical structure, and although some Choctaw leaders supported the British, other villages sided with the Spanish or remained neutral, depending on the circumstances and conditions of a possible treaty.

¹⁶⁰ James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 22.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

such restrictions as shall correspond with the spirit and intention of the Instruction.¹⁶²

Two years later, Chester himself asked his superiors if they would follow tradition and grant him, as they had his predecessors, land in West Florida. By all appearances, Chester saw potential in the wayward colony.¹⁶³

The growth of population in the Natchez District continued. In 1774 roughly 2,500 white settlers lived between the confluence of the Yazoo and the Mississippi Rivers and Manchac, and approximately 600 slaves toiled under the mercilessly burning sun. The numbers of both black and white colonists in that area more than doubled by 1778, but Natchez grew relatively slowly. No census has yet been uncovered, but one historian estimates the number of families in Natchez at seventy-eight in 1776. How many slaves lived in Natchez is unknown, but the first Spanish census from 1784 puts the number of slaves in the Natchez District at roughly 1,300.¹⁶⁴ Therefore, the number of slaves continued to increase, as the number of slaves in Spanish Natchez alone rivaled the number of slaves that were present in the area from the Yazoo River to Manchac in 1778.

Yet the growth of Natchez and the other outposts in West Florida could only mask, but not overcome, the deficiencies of the British province. Militarily vulnerable, financially unstable, and geographically remote, the Natchez District never became what

¹⁶² Chester to Dartmouth, Pensacola, June 9, 1775, Mississippi Provincial Archives, British Dominion, Correspondence of Governor Peter Chester, 1774-1776 Series 688, Vol 13, MDAH, 27.

¹⁶³ Chester to George Germain, Pensacola, August 24, 1777, *ibid.*, 84.

¹⁶⁴ See Natchez Census, 1784, in Archivo General de Indias: Papeles de Cuba, legajo 116, Williams Research Center, Historic New Orleans Collection (HNOC), New Orleans, Louisiana. Unfortunately, the Census is incomplete and the last page severely damaged. In addition, no heading for the different columns survived, making this not more than an estimate based on the format of subsequent census records.

the British intended: a stronghold against foreign designs on British power in the lower Mississippi Valley.

Raiders, Slaves, and Revolutions

British fears of an American attempt on West Florida were realized in 1778 when James Willing brought the American Revolution to Natchez.¹⁶⁵ Willing's attack proved to everyone that the British were unable to protect the fledgling plantation society in Natchez from external threats. It shook the confidence of the inhabitants in the British Empire to the core and illustrated how fragile the planter's security was on the Mississippi. Willing struck at an opportune moment. The Choctaw, who had agreed to patrol the river and curtail American movement on it, had left their posts to return home. The Indians had done their duty and controlled shipping on the Mississippi River. Yet after several months on duty, the warriors became "concerned about the possibility of contracting diseases along the mosquito-infested river banks, and they insisted on returning to their villages to see about recently deceased relatives," argues Greg O'Brien.¹⁶⁶

Willing had followed a long, somewhat tortuous path to the Revolution. He had arrived in Natchez in 1772 with the goal of establishing a trading post with the help of his brother Thomas, a senior partner in the Philadelphia firm Morris and Willing. By 1775, his dreams were evaporating and he was becoming increasingly unpopular with the loyal British inhabitants because he frequently made boisterous declarations for the cause of

¹⁶⁵ For a detailed analysis of the Willing raid see John Caughey, "The Natchez Rebellion of 1781 and Its Aftermath," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 16 (1933); John Walton Caughey, *Bernardo De Gálvez in Louisiana, 1776-1783* (Gretna [La.]: Pelican Pub. Co., 1972); Haynes, *The Natchez District and the American Revolution*, 53-75; Starr, *Tories, Dons, and Rebels: The American Revolution in British West Florida*, 78-121.

¹⁶⁶ O'Brien, "'We Are Behind You:' The Choctaw Occupation of Natchez in 1778," 109.

the American Revolution and was unable to pay his gambling debts. He left Natchez heavily indebted. Willing was convinced that the inhabitants were not staunchly Loyalists, but rather opportunistic. Given American protection, he believed they would happily support the American Revolution.¹⁶⁷ Outfitted by the Americans with thirty men and supplies, Willing sailed down the Mississippi, picking up more men along the way.

Arriving in Natchez, Willing surprised the unsuspecting townspeople and had no problem eliciting a peace treaty. However, this did not stop him from going after old enemies.¹⁶⁸ His personal vendetta was best described by John Hutchins, who witnessed Willing's raid on his father's plantation. Reporting about the raid in his diary, Hutchins described Captain Willing as the leader of "a band of robbers . . . under a forged commission from the government of the United States."¹⁶⁹ In addition to capturing Natchez, Willing was also supposed to establish contact with Spanish New Orleans and arrange for supply shipments.¹⁷⁰

Willing himself, however, had two objectives: conquering Natchez for the Americans and settling personal scores. First on his list was Hutchins; a close second was Alexander McIntosh. Both were perceived as staunch and unwavering Loyalists, and Willing partially blamed both for his failure in Natchez.¹⁷¹ Both Loyalists were stripped of their slaves, which, according to Hutchins, caused his family considerable misery and

¹⁶⁷ Claiborne and Lagrone, *Mississippi*, 102-03.

¹⁶⁸ Haynes, *The Natchez District and the American Revolution*, 57.

¹⁶⁹ The Diary of John Hutchins, 6, Typescript, Hutchins Papers, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi. Hutchins was not entirely correct in his claim that Willing had a forged commission. The Captain's commission was real, but not given by Congress. Rather, the Captain had received his commission from the Commerce Committee, a subordinate agency, because the mission had an almost undercover character.

¹⁷⁰ Haynes, *The Natchez District and the American Revolution*.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 58.

forced the children to assist their mother in running the plantation.¹⁷² John Hutchins and the other victims condemned the raid, but many inhabitants begrudgingly complied with Willing's demands, bound by their word. Matthew Phelps also condemned the raid and stated: "At length running short of means to support himself in his wild career, he began to display the real vilianess [sic] of his character, by the execution of a most detestable business."¹⁷³ However, Willing eventually agreed not to seize any more property, including slaves.¹⁷⁴ The planters had to agree to terms because they could not foresee the possibility that Great Britain would send soldiers to Natchez. Left alone by His Majesty's forces, the people in Natchez relented to Willing's demands to protect their lives and livelihoods.

Willing knew the area and its inhabitants well, and he used that knowledge to the detriment of people who had crossed him while he was a frontier merchant in Natchez. While in Natchez, he took not only Hutchins's slaves, but also those on "Cuming's Plantation."¹⁷⁵ The planters further down the river, the scientist and explorer William Dunbar among them, were immediately alarmed. The planter, and at least one of his fellow pioneers moved all of their slaves "for protection to the Spanish side, which was effected before the sun rising next morning." Willing valued African laborers so much that he followed some planters to the Spanish side to capture their slaves. Dunbar only avoided the same fate because his slaves "had been sent a considerable distance from the

¹⁷² The Diary of John Hutchinson, 7.

¹⁷³ Haynes, *The Natchez District and the American Revolution*, 63-64.

¹⁷⁴ Anthony Haswell, ed. *Memoirs and Adventures of Captain Matthew Phelps; Formerly of Harwington in Connecticut* (Bennington, Vt: Anthony Haswell 1802), 35.

¹⁷⁵ William Dunbar, In the Accadian Country, May 1, 1778, in Eron Rowland, ed. *Life, Letters, and Papers of William Dunbar of Elgin, Morayshire, Scotland, and Natchez, Mississippi: Pioneer Scientist of the Southern United States* (Jackson, Miss.: Press of the Mississippi Historical Society, 1930), 61.

river side by which means they cou'd [sic] not discover them."¹⁷⁶ All in all, Willing captured about 500 slaves for sale in New Orleans. Judging by the estimated number of all slaves in the region along the river, he captured about forty percent of all slaves in the area. This presented a heavy loss to the planters and retarded the growth of a plantation economy in the Natchez District and the surrounding areas.¹⁷⁷

Willing left no garrison in Natchez, and after he had departed to execute raids on the plantations down river, the British convinced the Choctaw to defend Natchez and protect it from subsequent American attacks. The Choctaw, under the leadership of Franchimastabé, supplied 155 warriors in three rotating shifts to garrison the old French fort and to make repairs. They stayed in Natchez for about a month and finally insisted on returning home because a British relief-force had recently arrived at the post and yellow fever had also struck. The warriors understood the ramifications of a yellow fever epidemic and wanted to leave as fast as possible to avoid the disease. Before the Choctaw left, however, their leader ominously warned the people of Natchez that they were behind the town folk. The meaning of his words was certainly clear to the people of Natchez, who had not always had an easy relationship with all of the Choctaw bands. Franchimastabé reminded them that the Choctaw quite literally stood behind them in war, but he also implied that the Choctaw would not tolerate a pro-American stance of Natchez's inhabitants.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁶ William Dunbar, In the Accadian Country, May 1st, 1778, in *ibid.*, 62.

¹⁷⁷ Haynes, *The Natchez District and the American Revolution*, 62-66. One has to be careful about the estimated numbers of slaves in Natchez. Most historians, in absence of a census, base their estimates on a letter written by the Governor of West Florida, who reports the staggering number of 2,500 white settlers and 600 slaves, but he refers to the entire western district of West Florida, which includes, but is not limited to, Natchez. Baton Rouge, Manchac, and Point Coupe also held a number of slaves and settlers.

¹⁷⁸ O'Brien, "'We Are Behind You:' The Choctaw Occupation of Natchez in 1778," 110-17.

The British garrison that was supposed to provide security to Natchez did nothing of the sort. John Campbell, the British military commander-in-chief in West Florida, informed his superior in May 1779 about serious problems between the settlers and the British garrison.

To be brief, their general line of conduct has thrown the credit of government into such Disrespect, that the inhabitants at the Natchez will not furnish cattle for fresh Provisions for the troops there, unless they are paid in ready cash, and will neither take bills nor give credit-In short their management creates discontent, distrust, confusion and misrule.¹⁷⁹

The settlers of Natchez, who had just suffered the loss of a good part of their valuable workforce, were not inclined to feed British soldiers without compensation. The financial instability and lack of any funds in West Florida, in combination with the military ineptitude to defend the settlers, left the people of Natchez to question the value of the British forces in the district, especially when the people who had just suffered through an American raid had to feed the British without pay. The British, on the other hand, were not oblivious to these problems, but there was little they could do. They valued the Natchez District highly (at least as far as the province of West Florida went), and sought to protect it if possible. Peter Chester, the British governor, realized that value and reported in 1779 that “the Natchez District on the Mississippi appears to be the settlement the most deserving of protection and encouragement in that quarter I have not only sent a garrison to Fort Panmure, but have distributed the works to be strengthened and repaired.”¹⁸⁰ This force, however, could not protect Natchez from the Spanish. When

¹⁷⁹ John Campbell to Sir Henry Clinton, Pensacola, May 31, 1779, in Administrative Papers and Land Grant Records, Military Dispatches, MF 3497, Series 682, MDAH.

¹⁸⁰ Peter Chester to George Germain, Pensacola, July 14, 1779, in Administrative Papers and Land Grant Records, Correspondence, MF 3497, Series 682, MDAH.

Baton Rouge surrendered in the fall of 1779, Natchez fell to the Spanish invaders without spilling a drop of blood.

British military power was unable to keep Natchez's planters and slaves secure. Although the planters knew the risk of a frontier plantation society and many had been soldiers, they certainly did not appreciate the ease with which first the Americans and then the Spanish wrested British control from the district. The British had missed the opportunity to command a decisive loyalty among the villagers, and although some of them remained loyal to Britain for a while longer, the majority of Natchez's citizens welcomed Spain and the changes that came with the new Iberian rulers.

Conclusion

French and British dominance in the lower Mississippi Valley ended officially in 1781 with the surrender of British Pensacola. Yet in Natchez, British governance had been under attack since Willing's raid, and only a force of Choctaw allies secured the small, but important outpost for a time. The British Empire did not exude confidence to its colonists in Natchez and, as the next chapter will show, the British turned Natchez over to the Spanish without much resistance. After almost half a century (during which Europeans had control of Natchez for maybe half the time), a third European empire would try its luck in the Natchez District. The recipe for success was well-known by now, even though both the French and the British had failed to bring the ingredients together in the proper quantities.

The most important ingredient was slavery, closely followed by the availability of, and easy access to, land. Rounding out the process, and ultimately guaranteeing

the success of the Natchez District, was the measure of control the colonial power could exercise over the area. The French failed miserably in their attempt. During the first years, when slavery was in its infancy in the Natchez District, the *Code Noir* did not affect relations between the French and the Natchez Indians. To exercise control over a growing slave population, the French developed the *Code Noir* further and eventually included the Natchez as an inferior people in their legal framework. This became problematic when the legal and cultural degradation of Native Americans led to an uprising that successfully ended French expansion in the lower Mississippi Valley. The *Code Noir* presented guidelines for the newly arriving settlers that were not based on the actual circumstances in the Natchez District, and an ignorant French plantation population led to a loss of control over the racially subordinate people in the area and forced Louisiana into a severe depression from which it never recovered.

The British, just as the French, were also overwhelmed by the circumstances in Natchez. The isolated district was difficult to administer, and the British government was running out of money. Although the British tried to provide slaves by importing them from the Caribbean, and enacted a slave code that made it easy to control human chattels, they lacked a strong military presence. They had to rely on the Choctaw to defend Natchez, the very confederacy that had helped the French to destroy the Natchez nation in the early 1730s. There were a couple of striking similarities that led to the demise of both powers in Natchez. Both lacked the financial and military means to support the inchoate plantation society. Both empires were eventually able to supply some slaves to the district, yet never enough to sate the appetite of planters. Most importantly, both empires underestimated the forces around them. The French thought the Natchez to be

docile and the British did not think the Natchez District important enough to protect it—or any other outposts along the Mississippi—with sufficient troops. All these mishaps led to the ascent of Spain as the primary colonial power in the lower Mississippi Valley. Natchez planters, however, were not too perturbed. Spain provided, for the most part, what neither the British nor French could: strong support in the form of land grants, slaves, and markets.

CHAPTER III

MASTERS OF EMPIRE: LOYALISTS, PATRIOTS, AND OPPORTUNISTS IN THE COLONIAL BACKCOUNTRY

As this country, because of its situation and because of the enemies which menace it from above, will demand sooner or later that there be established here either the capital of the province, or the center of its greatest force, I believe it would be advisable gradually to place it in a respectably strong state. This alone would cause the ideas and pretensions of the Americans, which they claim aloud, to disappear, and would serve as basis and as an aid to a numerous increase of population, a necessary and important object in placing this vast country, open on all sides, under protection from attacks.

—Francisco Bouligny to Esteban Miró, Natchez, August 22, 1785¹⁸¹

The progress of our settlement being thus unhappily disturbed, and the frequency of alarms rendering the usual course of industry unproductive, and the situation of the farmer on the frontier so peculiarly situated as ours, dangerous, I determined to quit it and join the garrison, in some station or other, and began to think seriously what measures to adopt, at once to serve the public and secure myself from personal loss.

—Memoirs and Adventures of Captain Matthew Phelps, Natchez, Spring 1779¹⁸²

Spain's conquest of Natchez in 1779 raised several issues for the Iberians. The Spanish governors had to find ways to control Anglo-American settlers on the edge of Spanish power in North America, they had to establish the laws of Spanish Louisiana in the formerly British district, and they had to defend its borders from foreign invasion. Controlling the settlers proved to be the most difficult task, as the Anglo population tested Spanish determination to institute a system of government based on the long tradition of Spanish colonies in the Americas. Spain convinced Natchez planters during the first years of the 1780s that it would be wise to remain loyal to the new rulers, as they

¹⁸¹ Francisco Bouligny to Esteban Miro, Natchez, August 22, 1785, in Lawrence Kinnaird, ed. *Spain in the Mississippi Valley, 1765-1794*, 4 vols., vol. III, Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1945 (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1949), 142.

¹⁸² Haswell, ed. *Memoirs and Adventures of Captain Matthew Phelps; Formerly of Harwington in Connecticut*, 37 (emphasis added).

instituted new commercial regulations that opened Spanish markets to the planters and sent African slaves to Spanish Natchez in unprecedented numbers.

Spanish success was not instantaneous. The first six years of Spanish control between 1779 and 1785 were marked by constant conflict between imperial officials and Anglo planters. Spanish administrators struggled to block attempts of Natchez's planters to wrest control of the district away from them, as they had to find ways to communicate with their new subjects who rarely spoke Spanish. Eventually, they opted for a language that everyone on the frontier understood: profit. Louisiana's governor Bernardo de Gálvez and his successor Esteban Rodríguez Miró y Sabater utilized new Spanish imperial policies and instituted a royal tobacco subsidy for Natchez. Meanwhile, King Charles III of Spain allowed tariff-free importations of African slaves to Louisiana and thereby significantly increased the number of slaves in Natchez. Following these developments, this chapter will illuminate the switch from British to Spanish government and highlight Spanish policies to keep planters loyal.

Natchez's settlers strove to create a plantation society. Spain wholeheartedly supported that notion, and the African slaves provided by Spain increased the planters' ability to do so quickly. People like Matthew Phelps, the upstart American planter, or Francisco Bouligny, the troubled Spanish governor, essentially worked toward the same goal. Both wanted Natchez to become a successful enterprise. Phelps wanted to become wealthy, and Bouligny wanted to succeed in the name of the Spanish king to secure royal favor. In the process, both planters and Spanish officials created a flexible society that could bend, but not break, under imperial, social, and economic hardships. Changes in the legal system often exemplified the transformations that officials, planters, and slaves

endured. The latter two often saw the nature of power shaped by other people and both were occasionally helpless to resist. Anglo-American planters tried to navigate Spanish law, and Spanish governors tried to relay the meaning of Iberian law to Anglo planters.

The enslaved played a decisive role in these struggles. Planters and officials both were mostly silent on how slaves contributed to the short but decisive struggle between the whites of Natchez and their new Spanish overlords, yet slaves were most certainly present and weighed on the mind of all involved. Under the British regime, the role of slavery had already begun to evolve. Following Ira Berlin's model, society in Natchez was once again turning from a society with slaves to a slave society.¹⁸³ Plantation agriculture began to expand in the 1780s, and settlers used slave labor to produce an export crop. Tobacco soon became the leading crop in the Natchez District. Reports of families dependent upon their slaves had already appeared during Willing's Raid, and when the American captain took slaves away, the consequences for the kidnapped slaves and their helpless owners were often dramatic. The uncertain situation in Natchez between the raid and the final takeover by the Spanish did its part to further destabilize the frontier community.

Spain remained eager to claim and pacify the district. The main goal of the Spanish empire was to keep the Natchez District in a state of tranquility between 1781 and 1785. The easiest way to do so was to guarantee a steady supply of slaves to satisfy the ever-growing demand of newly arriving settlers. Although the Spanish went out of their way to accept settlers from all backgrounds, even Anglo-American Protestants, the issue at the heart of all problems was always connected to slavery. To control Natchez,

¹⁸³ See Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*.

planters had to be convinced that they could benefit from the Spanish administration. The economy, in turn, evolved around slavery. To stabilize the economy, then, the Iberian officials had to manage slavery and the myriad transactions related to enslaved Africans and their owners. Spanish courts were soon overloaded with Anglo-American petitions to recover debts, to record bills of sale, or to establish legally binding mortgages. Often, slaves were at the center of the court proceedings. They were used as collateral for mortgages, and doubled as workforce and credit line.¹⁸⁴ Planters took advantage of the African laborers, ignoring the fact that they risked not just their livelihood, but also the family lives of the slaves they pawned in risky schemes to become rich.

Perpetual Uncertainty in the Natchez District

The recent struggles in the Atlantic world—the Seven Years War and the American Revolution—and the ensuing confusion about the claims to Natchez caused concern among current and prospective settlers between 1779 and 1783. This uncertainty often bred insecurity for the aspiring planters. A change in empire also meant that land titles granted by the preceding empire were now in jeopardy. Planters had to resolve this daunting problem before they could venture to the Natchez District with their slaves and families. Imperial officials were left with an equally difficult decision: were they to trust newcomers, and if so, what were the criteria for trust. The dominant criterion for any official was the capability of the prospective settlers to provide a labor force for the granted land. Officials hoped that an increased number of settlers and slaves would automatically lead to more stability and in turn security in the Natchez District.

¹⁸⁴ On slave mortgages see Bonnie Martin, "Slavery's Invisible Engine: Mortgaging Human Property," *Journal of Southern History* 76, no. 4 (2010).

Before Spain took possession of Natchez, people were unsure about which empire was in power between 1778 and 1779. Frontier planters had invested all their capital in slaves and the unstable political situation threatened their existence. In the quickly changing circumstances of the lower Mississippi Valley, planters were often forced to make decisions that put them, and by extension their slaves, in danger. One of those occasions is described by Captain Matthew Phelps, himself a new settler and aspiring planter, who encountered a group of settlers on a reconnaissance mission from British Natchez in 1779.¹⁸⁵ On first sighting, he observed: “lying on the Spanish side of the river, three very large floats, and an equal number of large bateaux, from which they had landed a great number of people, supposed by us to be near a thousand.”¹⁸⁶ Phelps reported back to his British captain that he had seen the group, but secretly committed to his diary that he hoped the new arrivals in the region were Americans. “At beholding the sight I was much rejoiced, not doubting but that they were the advance of the expected American army, of whom I confidently expected, that the propriety of their conduct would correct the errors of Willing’s banditti, and remove the stigma from the character of my countrymen.” Although Phelps clearly identifies himself as an American, he nevertheless understood that his duties lay with the British, since Natchez was still under British military control.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ Haswell, ed. *Memoirs and Adventures of Captain Matthew Phelps; Formerly of Harwington in Connecticut*, 38. Phelps had come to Natchez to become a planter, yet he was unable to do so. He claimed it was not because he was “destitute of property,” but because he could not turn anything into cash. He therefore enlisted as a corporal, and tried to gain some capital through smaller business ventures.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

As it turned out, the people Phelps had spotted were American, yet they were not military men. Instead, they were planters with their slaves who sought to relocate their plantations from Manchac to Natchez under the leadership of a Colonel Gilyar and Dr. Farrow.¹⁸⁸ The prospective settlers had cautiously stopped on the Spanish side of the Mississippi because they were not sure how they would be received in Natchez and because they did not know who was in control in the district. The Spanish, who were then friendly with the Americans, offered them safety and extended a generally warm welcome to prospective settlers.¹⁸⁹

This example clearly shows how confusing and risky the situation truly was for prospective and current residents of the Natchez District. The rich soil beckoned planters, their families, and their human property toward the district. But transportation on the frontier was not easily obtained, even on the Mississippi River. In addition, the political situation was so unstable, and so many empires vied for Natchez, that the families of Colonel Gilyar and Doctor Farrow, as well as their slaves, were caught in a very precarious position. On the one hand, British West Florida faced the serious threat of a Spanish invasion. The American Revolution raged in the East and consumed British military power, and the governor in Pensacola would have certainly objected to “American” settlers entering his territory. On the other hand, the newcomers would swell the ranks of the militia of the district, and a more densely populated area could stall

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 45.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid; Sylvia L. Hilton, "Loyalty and Patriotism on North American Frontiers: Being and Becoming Spanish in the Mississippi Valley, 1776-1803," in *Nexus of Empire: Negotiating Loyalty and Identity in the Revolutionary Borderlands, 1760s-1820s*, ed. Gene Allen Smith and Sylvia L. Hilton (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010), 9-11.

Spanish designs to attack the British, just as governor Chester had predicted in 1773.¹⁹⁰ Therefore Captain Michael Jackson, presently in command at Natchez, “immediately dispatched a second flag to them, with the most solemn assurances that they should be safe in passing our fort and settlement, and that every necessary act of friendship should be extended to them that the situation of the garrison would admit.”¹⁹¹ Despite the boost in manpower, British control in Natchez did not last much longer.

Spanish Control and its Legacy

Willing’s 1778 raid had plunged the district into turmoil, but Natchez had managed to stay largely removed from the greater conflict. This was about to change. Worried that the Spanish might enter the fray on the side of the Americans and the French, the British dispatched twelve hundred German mercenaries and Loyalists from Pennsylvania and Maryland to West Florida under the command of Brigadier General John Campbell. They arrived in Pensacola via Jamaica in 1779. The troops, according to historian Robert Haynes, were inexperienced, ill-trained, and not necessarily loyal.¹⁹²

On the Spanish side Bernardo de Gálvez, who became Governor of Louisiana in 1777, had already begun preparing for military action and had significantly aided Captain Willing, stretching the neutrality with England to the seams. The main goal of the Spanish governor was the capture of Pensacola, the British capital, yet Natchez was never far from his mind. On June 21, 1779, Spain declared war against England, which caught British officials in West Florida and Iberian authorities in Louisiana by surprise. Spain

¹⁹⁰ Chester to Dartmouth, Pensacola, May 18, 1773, in Mississippi Provincial Archives, British Dominion, Correspondence of Governor Peter Chester, 1772-1773 Series 688, Vol 12, 46-49, MDAH.

¹⁹¹ Haswell, ed. *Memoirs and Adventures of Captain Matthew Phelps; Formerly of Harwington in Connecticut*, 45.

¹⁹² Haynes, *The Natchez District and the American Revolution*, 105-07.

entered the war to advance Spanish interests in Europe, not in Louisiana, yet the declaration of war immediately extended the struggle to the American South.¹⁹³ The lower Mississippi Valley had now been drawn completely into the vortex of the war, a war that would greatly change the Atlantic World and would leave a lasting footprint on the Natchez District.

The Spanish governor singled out Baton Rouge for his first strike. The British forts at Manchac, Baton Rouge, and Natchez were generally in poor repair. Gálvez knew the location of the British positions and he moved quickly against the weakly constructed and defended outposts in the fall of 1779.¹⁹⁴ Fighting heat, humidity, and the swampy Louisiana backcountry, Gálvez advanced toward Baton Rouge. He marshaled parts of the large population of African descent that lived in New Orleans to his support instead of waiting for reinforcements from Cuba that might never come. Among the Spanish troops were units of the free black militia of New Orleans, as well as slaves used to row the boats up the Mississippi River.¹⁹⁵ Governor Gálvez forced Baton Rouge to surrender after barely a day of fighting, and he did not accept surrender until the commanding British officer, Lieutenant Colonel Dickson, also surrendered the fort at Natchez, which was smaller but easier to defend.¹⁹⁶ In one stroke, Gálvez had eliminated the British presence on the Mississippi River and captured all of their forts.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 111.

¹⁹⁴ Elliott, *The Fort of Natchez*, 11,19; Haynes, *The Natchez District and the American Revolution*, 109-10; James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 24.

¹⁹⁵ Gilbert C. Din, *Spaniards, Planters, and Slaves: The Spanish Regulation of Slavery in Louisiana, 1763-1803* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999), 82-83. For more information on free black militia in New Orleans see: Hanger, *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places*.

¹⁹⁶ Haynes, *The Natchez District and the American Revolution*, 119-23.

Gálvez knew from experience that slavery was essential to Louisiana colonists of all backgrounds. Shortly after he arrived in Louisiana and took office on January 1, 1777, Gálvez had begun fraternizing with the New Orleans planter elite. Consisting of French creoles, they quickly began to court Gálvez and convinced him to maintain, and even expand, the French *Code Noir*.¹⁹⁷ As Ira Berlin notes, “the Louisiana *Code* was weighted against manumission and discouraged self purchase. It required manumitted slaves to defer to their former owners, punished free black people more severely than white ones, and barred interracial marriages.”¹⁹⁸ However, free people of color retained the right to petition and many other legal rights of white settlers. Spanish slave law, by comparison, allowed bondspople significant freedoms that the French elites considered dangerous to their plantation regime. Most importantly, it allowed the enslaved to obtain freedom through self-purchase or a simple deed of manumission.¹⁹⁹

In 1769 Governor Alejandro O’Reilly had implemented the Spanish slave law in Louisiana. Fearing that the Spanish code would undermine their authority, the French creoles wanted to retain as much of the *Code Noir* as possible in the 1770s—a cause that they hoped Gálvez would champion. Gálvez, unlike his predecessors, had married a French Creole woman in 1777, and historian Gilbert Din argues that he therefore came under the influence of his father-in-law, Gilbert Antoine de St. Marxent. As one of the

¹⁹⁷ Din, *Spaniards, Planters, and Slaves*, 74.

¹⁹⁸ Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 42. Also see: Thomas N. Ingersoll, “Slave Codes and Judicial Practice in New Orleans, 1718-1807,” *Law and History Review* 13, no. 1 (1995).

¹⁹⁹ Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 89-93. After the rebellion of the Natchez Indians in 1729, the plantation society of Louisiana quickly reverted to a society with slaves, and even the *Code* was enforced less. With the advent of the Spanish regime, and the restoration of a plantation society, French planters were eager to revive the *Code* and the control it presented.

largest slaveholders in New Orleans, Marxent had a vested interest in retaining the harsher *Code Noir* introduced in 1724 by the French, rather than the more lenient Spanish laws concerning slaves. However, Din goes on to explain that somehow the relationship between Gálvez and the planters soured in late 1778. Instead of backing the statutes drawn up by the planters, Gálvez now stuck to Spanish law.²⁰⁰

Gálvez marched against the British outposts with a thorough understanding of how much demand there was for slaves on the frontier. He also realized he had to appease the planters in the conquered territories. He needed them to be a productive part of the colonial society, helping make Louisiana a successful colony and him an effective manager. Gálvez's career depended on the productivity of the colony, and he had to make sure that Louisiana continued to grow and prosper, even if there were short interruptions through warfare. African slaves were the key, as they planted the fields, hunted the woods, and logged trees in the backcountry of the Spanish empire.²⁰¹ Therefore, Gálvez released all settlers and their slaves as part of the surrender of Baton Rouge.

New Empire, New Law

Gálvez understood that he had to maintain a good relationship with both French Creoles and the Anglos from British West Florida. He hoped to earn their allegiance by

²⁰⁰ Din, *Spaniards, Planters, and Slaves*, 77-78. Gilbert Din is not the only historian who argues that the French Creole planters were trying to maintain not only their culture, but also the French legal system and thereby the French colonial society. However, Din uses New Orleans as the base for his thesis, and only sources related to New Orleans. Natchitoches, as described in H. Sophie Burton and F. Todd Smith's *Colonial Natchitoches* shows the same inclination of the Creole planters to retain the old system, yet they even prevailed under Spanish law, which New Orleans did not, according to Din. Natchez, as I will show, is an entirely different case. Din is generalizing for all of Louisiana, based on his meticulous research on New Orleans and the vicinity of the city. Din argues mainly against Gwendolyn Hall's contention that the French *Code Noir* overrode every Spanish law in Louisiana in Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*; Burton and Smith, *Colonial Natchitoches: A Creole Community on the Louisiana-Texas Frontier*.

²⁰¹ Haynes, *The Natchez District and the American Revolution*, 122.

providing them with slaves. His plan bore fruit, as many of the planters thrived under the Spanish government. One of the people owning property in the Baton Rouge and Manchac area was the Scotsman William Dunbar. Dunbar, who would become instrumental in the Spanish effort to settle the Natchez District, had just begun to recover from the property damage inflicted by Willing's Raid when Spain declared war on Great Britain. He had weathered the raid fairly well, since he had secured his slaves in Spanish territory, and Willing had only a limited opportunity to plunder his other possessions.

Displaying foresight and a strain of *rogue colonialism*, the Scotsman "secured a grant of land from the Spanish west of the Mississippi River and moved his slaves to the new holdings after Willing's raid in 1778. He even moved a small house from his land in the east to the new estate on the Spanish side." Dunbar was not alone in his effort, as other settlers began to move into the area as well.²⁰² Planters like Dunbar understood the risks of their actions, and in the unstable times between 1778 and 1781, many of them, including Dunbar, Gilyar and Farrow, were caught in the maelstrom of the Atlantic World as it pummeled the Natchez District.

Dunbar, however, had yet to learn how to steer clear of all the obstacles in the Natchez District. When the British began to introduce a few soldiers into the district, Dunbar once again relocated to the British side. Shortly after he decamped, Spain declared war on the British and once again Dunbar realized that his move was ill advised, and potentially costly. He heard the bad news while in New Orleans trying to sell some of the goods produced on his plantations. The Spanish authorities subsequently detained and

²⁰² Arthur H. DeRosier, *William Dunbar: Scientific Pioneer of the Old Southwest* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 42.

imprisoned him and promised to release the planter as soon as Gálvez's campaign against Manchac, Baton Rouge, and Natchez was successful. When Baton Rouge capitulated on September 21, 1779, and Gálvez returned to New Orleans, Dunbar was released, but on his return he found his plantation sacked once more.²⁰³ Dunbar lamented that "[I] found my house had been plundered by the Indians or others during the Siege of Effects to the value of 6 to 700 Dollars."²⁰⁴

Dunbar lost more than his money in the confusion of war. Without his supervision, many of his slaves had taken their chances and escaped into the wilderness.²⁰⁵ Dunbar, who was a British subject yet not necessarily sympathetic to the British cause in the American Revolution, experienced the quickly changing torrents of the backcountry frontier. This experience consequently tainted his opinion about his loyalties. Whereas he had neither the luxury nor the time to contemplate the philosophical reasons that led American settlers on the East Coast to declare independence, Dunbar might or might not have entertained sympathies for their cause. Willing's Raid had reinforced his loyalist leanings, since it threatened his property.²⁰⁶ But unfortunately for Dunbar, the American Revolution was not simply a conflict between Loyalists and patriots, especially not in the lower Mississippi Valley. Spain had long coveted the rich soil of the Natchez District and the other settlements on the riverbank. Once again, Dunbar could not escape the quickly changing tide of the Atlantic world and had to accept the fact that his life depended as much on his skill to navigate the slave frontier, as

²⁰³ Ibid., 43.

²⁰⁴ Rowland, ed. *Life, Letters, and Papers of William Dunbar of Elgin, Morayshire, Scotland, and Natchez, Mississippi: Pioneer Scientist of the Southern United States*, 70.

²⁰⁵ DeRosier, *William Dunbar: Scientific Pioneer of the Old Southwest*, 45.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 40.

it did on his skill to deal with ever-changing empires in the Valley. While some of his fellow planters decided to give up and leave the District, Dunbar remained and would not regret the decision.²⁰⁷

On January 3, 1780, only three months after the Spanish took control of the British territory along the river, Dunbar reported in his diary:

The women commenced to day cutting Canes in preparation of clearing a new field for Tobacco.

The men chiefly employed in clearing a small field by the swamp side for provisions & getting some lumber for the Commandant as also finishing a fine new House for the Negroes.²⁰⁸

Obviously, he had recovered some slaves and had renewed his efforts to establish a profitable plantation. The Spanish would soon welcome his experimentation with tobacco, and it would serve him well in the future. Whereas before he had manufactured staves for export to the Caribbean, he started to focus on planting in the 1780s. It would make him a rich and powerful man under the Spanish and American regimes. In his quest to find better soil he soon relocated to Natchez, where he planted tobacco (and later cotton) in the heart of the Natchez District. It was no problem for him to replace slaves he had lost with newly imported Africans.²⁰⁹

Other people living in the newly conquered parts of Spanish Louisiana did not profit from the change. For example, Molly Glass, a free woman of color, was accused of murder, prosecuted, and executed in Baton Rouge under British, not Spanish law in 1781.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 45.

²⁰⁸ Rowland, ed. *Life, Letters, and Papers of William Dunbar of Elgin, Morayshire, Scotland, and Natchez, Mississippi: Pioneer Scientist of the Southern United States*, 70.

²⁰⁹ DeRosier, *William Dunbar: Scientific Pioneer of the Old Southwest*, 46.

²¹⁰ Her fate stands as an example of the transitional period in which the newly conquered territory was under Spanish control, but planters still exercised British law. The shift from British to Spanish law was gradual, rather than sudden. Molly Glass's fate exemplifies the difficulties of the transitional period on all sides, and it also highlights the intricacies for people of color in navigating the ever-changing Atlantic world. The court case against her signaled the beginnings of a transitional phase that at its end would see an uneasy balance between Spanish law rooted in the century old doctrine of the *Siete Partidas* and British common law. Both white and black settlers anxiously awaited what these challenging times would bring.

Dunbar made only a cursory note in his diary about the case. On Sunday, March 19, 1780, he wrote: "On Thursday last we held a Court at the fort for the tryal of Molly Glass for the murder of a white girl—Emilia—and brought her in guilty, sentencing her to have her hand cut off and afterwards hanged until she is dead."²¹¹ He further noted that "this Tryal [sic] was made agreeable to the English laws under the Capitulation of Baton Rouge 21 Sept. last."²¹² At least for the moment, then, the British settlers could control

²¹⁰ Lyle Saxon, *Father Mississippi* (New York: The Century Co., 1927), 142-46; Harris Downey, "The Hand and Head of Molly Glass," *The Kenyon Review* 23, no. 2 (1961). Both sources are of literary nature, however, both agree that Molly Glass was a free person of color, married to a deserter of the British Army (possible a German), and being exceptionally strong in physique and character. Both sources also note that she posed a threat to society, either by being a strong free black woman (Downey), or by being a cruel quadroon who enslaved white people (Saxon). Yet another take on the story, one of cruelty on the side of slaveowners' hands against women, is found in Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 312. Hall gives her name as Marie Glass, but the rest of the literature uses the name Molly.

²¹¹ Rowland, ed. *Life, Letters, and Papers of William Dunbar of Elgin, Morayshire, Scotland, and Natchez, Mississippi: Pioneer Scientist of the Southern United States*, 72.

²¹² *Ibid.* Molly Glass was quickly judged and condemned by her British peers. In other cases throughout the Spanish period in the lower Mississippi Valley, free people of color accused of murder received a fair trial overseen by Spanish authorities. Witness for example the trial of Juan Boquin. He allegedly killed his employer Daniel Exompe in 1797. Although a person of color, Boquin was granted all protection of the law until his guilt or innocence was proven. See Trial of Juan Boquin, September 13, 1797, St. Stephen, in legajo 172-B, Archivo General de Indias: Papeles de Cuba (AGI: PC), Seville, Spain.

the black population under their traditional law, and the British law was clear: if a person of color killed a white person, the punishment was death.²¹³ The authorities sentenced Molly Glass and sent her to New Orleans for execution, which was duly undertaken by the Spanish authorities. During the transitional period then, the Spanish authorities had decided to let the planters control people of color as it was customary for them.

The Eye of the Storm: Natchez Rejects Spanish Supremacy

Despite Spanish efforts, the people in Natchez were not happy with the change in empire that occurred after Dickson surrendered the territory to Gálvez in 1779. The inhabitants were thunderstruck that the mighty British Empire and its army had surrendered Natchez without a fight, and the people made their disgust known. Isaac Johnson wrote: “In the mighty battle between Governor Gálvez and Colonel Dickson the Spaniards only lost one man and some say not one, the English about twenty-five and the commanding officer wounded in his head by his tea table.”²¹⁴ The leaders of Natchez were quite obviously not amused to be part of the Spanish empire, especially since most had an Anglo-American background.

By October 6, 1779, Natchez had become Spanish and the last British troops had left for New Orleans.²¹⁵ For the slaves, this initial change in colonial overlords changed very little. Natchez remained a town of imprisonment. British law still ruled Natchez as it

²¹³ See Article VI of “An Act for the Regulation and Government of Negroes and Slaves” in Smith, “A Settlement of Great Consequence: The Development of the Natchez District, 1763 - 1860,” 106.

²¹⁴ Isaac Johnson to Anthony Hutchins, October 5, 1779, quoted in Haynes, *The Natchez District and the American Revolution*, 124.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 125.

did Baton Rouge, and slave sales continued apace.²¹⁶ Enslaved Africans remained the planters' most valuable possession, and with an increase in plantation agriculture under the Spanish regime, their importance would expand even more. For the masters, however, the situation was unclear. They now were alien subjects of the Spanish crown, but the British were still in Pensacola, fighting the lower Mississippi Valley extension of the American Revolution. Although some settlers considered leaving the district, in the end many signed the required oath of allegiance to the Spanish crown, making them legally Spanish citizens. Silently, many were hoping for a victory of the British in Pensacola and a reoccupation of Natchez by the British.²¹⁷

Some settlers were unwilling to wait. A handful of Natchez settlers were veterans of the British army, and they had served in the British campaign against Havana in 1762. Therefore, upon receiving information that a British fleet was on its way to the Gulf Coast to support the British troops and expel the Spaniards, these veterans took it upon themselves to oust the Spanish garrison in Natchez on April 22, 1781. Through deceit and the forging of a letter announcing that the fort was undermined and about to be blown up, the Spanish surrendered and left the district. While being escorted down the river, they encountered a large Spanish force and immediately returned to Natchez. Before Natchez's citizens and Spanish soldiers could engage in battle, the people of Natchez

²¹⁶ Bill of Sale, ? Winfree to Philip Winfree, Natchez, April 6, 1780, Natchez Trace Collection: Provincial and Territorial Records (NTC:PTR), Dolph Brisco Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin. For the year of 1780, Natchez Court Records are thin. They become substantial in 1781, when more recorded slave sales and court cases survived. However, slaves were always in demand in Natchez, and there is no indication that the sales slowed down in 1780. That year the Spanish slave market in New Orleans became available to Natchez planters, many of whom sought to purchase slave there.

²¹⁷ Haynes, *The Natchez District and the American Revolution*, 124-25; Claiborne and Lagrone, *Mississippi*, 127.

received word that Pensacola had surrendered and that Spain was now in possession of British West Florida.²¹⁸

For the people of Natchez, especially the ones who had just betrayed their oath of allegiance, the lower Mississippi Valley had just proven again its treacherous nature. The leaders of the revolt saw no option other than to flee Natchez, leaving many of their possessions behind. Slaves constituted a moveable property, and they participated in their masters' flight. In 1880, J.F.H. Claiborne described the desperate situation of some families as follows:

Leaving their homes which they had made comfortable by severe toil, their property which had been accumulated by patient industry; with no transportation but a few pack-horses, with no luggage but blankets and some scanty stores, they gathered their wives and children, and struck into the wilderness. Fearful of pursuit, fearful of ambush, dogged by famine, tortured by thirst, exposed to every vicissitude of weather, weakened by disease, more than decimated by death, the women and children dying every day, this terrible journey makes the darkest page of our record.²¹⁹

Planters knew what a flight through the wilderness might mean to their families and property, and at least some opted to spare their loved ones the arduous track back east.

Despite the threat of Spanish retaliation against leaders of the revolt, some planters showed remarkable skill in utilizing the cultural difference between Spanish and British society. Claiborne refers to the case of Anthony Hutchins, the planter who also had been struck by Willing's Raid in 1778. Hutchins was one of the (alleged) prominent leaders of the 1781 revolt and now had to make his escape to avoid capture and

²¹⁸ Claiborne and Lagrone, *Mississippi*, 127-29.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 129-30.

punishment.²²⁰ Instead of taking his family, his slaves, and other moveable property with him, he employed a different strategy; he left his wife behind. In his absence, his wife took over the plantation and all their property, including the slaves. The Spanish, upon hearing about the situation, allowed Mrs. Hutchins to remain on her land and keep most of her property.²²¹ Hutchins barely escaped the search party, which took their frustration out on his black servant, whom they attempted to hang. However, Hutchins's wife saved the suffocating slave.²²² The Spanish, in the meantime, accepted that Hutchins' wife would manage the plantation, and she remained in charge of her property. Nevertheless, the Spaniards did not let the Hutchins family escape completely unscathed. Twelve slaves were sent to New Orleans by the order of acting governor Pedro Piernas.²²³ Although Hutchins had to flee from punishment, his family and most of his property remained untouched.

John Alston employed a variation of Hutchins's strategy while on the run from the Spanish. An entry in the Spanish court records in Natchez reports his case, because his wife Elizabeth died due to the rigor and stress of the situation, and his children had to be placed under court supervision while Alston was at large:

²²⁰ There are contrasting interpretations of his involvement. See: Caughey, "The Natchez Rebellion of 1781 and Its Aftermath."; Ethan A. Grant, "The Natchez Revolt of 1781: A Reconsideration," *The Journal of Mississippi History* 57, no. 4 (1994); Ethan A. Grant, "Anthony Hutchins: A Pioneer of the Old Southwest," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 74, no. 4 (1996); Haynes, *The Natchez District and the American Revolution*.

²²¹ Claiborne and Lagrone, *Mississippi*, 133. Hutchins' wife fearlessly faced Willing during the raid. Instead of delivering her gold, as the Captain demanded, Mrs. Hutchins gave up only a bag of lead. The Spanish knew about Mrs. Hutchins's role in the Willing raid, and even referenced it in their decision to spare most of her property.

²²² *Ibid.*, 131.

²²³ Orders, Natchez, March 23, 1782, May Wilson McBee, *The Natchez Court Records, 1767-1805: Abstracts of Early Records* (Baltimore: Genealogical Pub. Co., 1979), 12.

On information received on the death of Elizabeth Alston, late wife of John Alston, a fugitive Rebel of this District of Natchez, at present with the nation of Indians, called “Chitis” [Chittimaches], where he has taken refuge with most of his property, consisting of slaves, cattle and money, leaving his wife and children in the District, with a part of his slaves for their support, as also cattle, horses, hogs and sheep and a few articles of furniture . . .²²⁴

Counting on the Spanish generosity toward women, Alston also entrusted his wife and some of his property to the Spanish authorities and fled to Indian country.²²⁵ His plan would have worked if his wife Elizabeth had not died of an unnamed illness.²²⁶

Elizabeth Alston’s death derailed her husband’s scheme and caused the family great misery. His goods and plantation were appraised for auction and sold together with his remaining slaves. Alston was a relatively wealthy planter by the standards of the Spanish Natchez District. His inventory shows, among other things, land “with tobacco House and 15 negro cabins.”²²⁷ Alston’s wealth could not keep his family from suffering once he became a fugitive. Over the next six months Alexander McIntosh, the court appointed guardian of the children, continued to sell off the property of the Alston

²²⁴ Appointment of Guardian, Natchez, July 29, 1781, *ibid.*, 1.

²²⁵ Apparently it was a longstanding and cherished tradition among Natchez inhabitants to flee to Indian country to avoid capture or to avoid paying debts. In the following chapters, cases like Alston’s will occur time and again. See McIntosh’s complaint about settlers constantly evading debt: Appointment of Guardian, Natchez, August 11, 1781, in: *ibid.*, 2.

²²⁶ Tropical diseases frequently ravaged Natchez. Yellow fever, for example, continued to plague the population every summer even past the mid nineteenth century, causing many to abandon the town for the outlying plantations or other, healthier climates. William Scarborough calls yellow fever “the most dreaded scourge of the nineteenth-century South. See: Terry Alford, *Prince among Slaves: The True Story of an African Prince Sold into Slavery in the American South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 143; William Kauffman Scarborough, *Masters of the Big House: Elite Slaveholders of the Mid-Nineteenth-Century South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 149.

²²⁷ Appointment of Guardian, Natchez, July 31, 1781, McBee, *Natchez Court Records*, 1.

family.²²⁸ In addition, one of Alston's sons, Henry, died on August 3, 1781. The other children were sent to school in New Orleans.²²⁹

Alston realized that there was a price to pay for disobeying Spain. His fellow rebels did not fair any differently. Several of them were captured and taken to New Orleans for trial. Their property was confiscated and then disposed of to net the Spanish the sum of 15,000 pesos. Friendly Indians under Charles de Gran-Pré's command eventually captured Alston together with ten slaves and one of his sons. Gran Pré had hitherto shown relative restraint in punishing the rebels, except for the ringleaders such as Alston. Alston's son was released and the slaves confiscated, his father sent to prison in New Orleans and ultimately released to the British in 1783.²³⁰ It is not clear what happened to the slaves. Under the British legal system, they would have been sold to the highest bidder. The Spanish state, however, routinely owned slaves for public works, and the Natchez slaves could have been put to work in projects in New Orleans or Baton Rouge.²³¹

Natchez would not experience peace for another year. The Spanish tried to handle the situation as best as they could, yet a strong Anglo-American resentment persisted. Alston and his fellow rebels remained in custody until the American Revolution ended in

²²⁸ Appointment of Guardian, Natchez, September 12, 15, 1781; March 29, 1782, *ibid.*, 3.

²²⁹ Appointment of Guardian, Natchez, August 11, 1781, *ibid.*, 2.

²³⁰ Haynes, *The Natchez District and the American Revolution*, 142-53; McBee, *Natchez Court Records*, 3-5.

²³¹ See for example: María Elena Díaz, *The Virgin, the King, and the Royal Slaves of El Cobre: Negotiating Freedom in Colonial Cuba, 1670-1780* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000). ask Dr. Franklin for additional works that mention that.

1783. In April the governor in New Orleans released them to Jamaica and they had to promise not to return to Natchez.²³²

After the rocky start to the Spanish regime in Natchez, planters and the colonial governors slowly came to appreciate each other during the mid 1780s. Although the rebellion had ousted several planters, more than enough remained to build a strong and growing plantation economy. There was no animosity between the planters who rebelled and those who had remained neutral. The Spanish did not contest property bought under the British regime and even encouraged the Anglo-Americans to continue growing tobacco. The once unruly group had become a peaceful, thriving community once more. As long as their property remained untouched, tranquility could be achieved.²³³ Spanish governors understood that and tried their best to rule the district through control of property, particularly slaves.

Governing Opportunists, Governing Empires

Even though Spain had subdued the rebels, the Iberian empire still needed to bolster Natchez's population. Time and again, a growing number of settlers reinforced the claim of each empire, and any increase in the population also augmented the military defenses of the district. Grand Pré understood that he needed to encourage settlement by Americans, but he also realized that many of them were opportunists, or worse, criminals on the run. For example, shortly after the arrest or flight of the rebel leaders, a small

²³² Haynes, *The Natchez District and the American Revolution*, 147-56. Bernardo de Gálvez to Prince William, Duke of Lancaster, April 4, 1783, Guarcio in: Mississippi Provincial Archives: Spanish Dominion, Vol. 2 1783-1786, 2, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson. Alston nevertheless reappeared in the Natchez court documents as a witness to land sales in 1801. He apparently made his return, although it is unclear if he did so under the Spanish or American regime. See Indenture, February 26, 1801, in McBee, *Natchez Court Records*, 371.

²³³ Grant, "The Natchez Revolt of 1781: A Reconsideration," 322-23.

group of people arrived in Natchez in 1782. Gran Pré initially welcomed them, but he quickly grew suspicious of their demeanor and began an investigation. One of the new arrivals, Thomas Etridge, served as a witness in that investigation and was questioned thoroughly by the governor with the help of a translator.²³⁴ Etridge alleged “that those who came down with him are Americans by birth but not sentiment. Their conduct in America was always that of people who place themselves on the stronger side, now one, now the other, according to the success of the belligerent powers.”²³⁵ Etridge also explained that the new arrivals were not excited about living under Spanish government, yet had decided to do so anyway.

The long-term interests of Spain and the newly arriving settlers were pitted against each other in this case. On the one hand, the Spanish empire needed settlers to populate the Natchez District, on the other they were not keen on inviting suspected criminals into their midst. The new arrivals, however, brought everything they needed to start careers as planters. Therefore, the Spanish hoped to be able to contain them. Although the situation in Natchez was calm at the moment, it remained primed for conflict. It was the conflict that often ensued between planters and Spanish officials that drove change in Natchez over the next two decades, as both sides attempted to appease each other. In the process, they understood that slavery was a unifying interest that bound both sides together in mutual goals.

Gran Pré pressed Etridge especially hard on rumors of an imminent American attack and whether the new arrivals might be American spies. Etridge was able to relieve

²³⁴ Carlos de Grand-Pré to Estevan Miró, Natchez, May 26, 1782, in Kinnaird, ed. *Spain in the Mississippi Valley, 1765-1794*, 16-17.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

Gran Pré's gravest fears, but the American was adamant that his countrymen were less than trustworthy. Gran Pré showed a deep interest in the origins of the slaves brought to Natchez by these men, and Etridge did not disappoint him. "Of the Negroes that they own or which have been brought here by the one named David Smith, six were stolen, and these same Negroes will say and declare the name of their master in case they are so required. William Smith, brother of the former, also has a stolen Negress and a child."²³⁶ Although the slaves were reported as stolen property, Gran Pré could not, or would not, prevent the sale of at least some of them. David Smith quickly disposed of some of the slaves he had brought with him. Gran Pré opted to accept the Americans, despite their suspicious past. His actions prove that Spain used easy access to, and transactions of, slaves to establish a measure of control over Natchez.

The Spanish empire was unusually open for immigrants to Louisiana. As the Iberians conquered Natchez, the Spanish court in Madrid developed immigration and colonization policies that allowed foreign settlers, including American Protestants, into their territory. As Sylvia Hilton correctly asserts, "this striking departure from the norm was pragmatically justified by local authorities, Prime Minister Floridablanca, his successor Manuel Godoy, and other Spanish officials and government advisors, on the grounds that the demographic growth of these colonies was essential for both frontier defense and economic development."²³⁷ The Spaniards understood the risk involved in accepting settlers like the Smiths who had less than desirable reputations. Although they received orders that prospective settlers "must also be upstanding, law-abiding

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Hilton, "Loyalty and Patriotism on North American Frontiers: Being and Becoming Spanish in the Mississippi Valley, 1776-1803," 9.

individuals,” these concerns were overruled by the dearth of settlers and slaves in Natchez. Consequently, Gran Pré tried to add to the numbers of white settlers and black slaves. His superiors agreed with him and argued that “once they have emigrated and sworn vassalage, anyone who takes part in a revolution will risk a great deal, and far from gaining glory, will stain his reputation with the ugly epithet of traitor.”²³⁸ Although people in Natchez had already shown that they did not care what they were labeled, Spanish officials still allowed new settlers with Anglo-American background to settle in the district because they were under enormous pressure to succeed with their respective endeavors.²³⁹

The Slave Market of Spanish Natchez

The backcountry’s need for slaves was not easy to satisfy. The remote location made it difficult for planters to observe prices and human stock at slave markets, which were not held regularly at this time. Merchants in New Orleans could provide slaves, but planters from Natchez were often too late to purchase slaves in desired numbers even if they were notified in time of the arrival of new shipments. This caused severe unhappiness in Natchez. The people were anxious to see how the new Spanish regime would handle the supply and demand for slaves.²⁴⁰ The language barrier contributed to the anxiety. Communication at official proceedings and sales was often a mixture of

²³⁸ Miró to Campo de Alange, Madrid, Aug. 11, 1792, as quoted in *ibid.*, 10.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 9-11.

²⁴⁰ Clayton James reports that people in Natchez immediately utilized their new trade connections with New Orleans. Gilbert Din shows that Spanish mercantile interest were heavily involved in importing larger slave numbers to Louisiana. See James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 29-30; Din, *Spaniards, Planters, and Slaves*, 67-68.

English and Spanish, sometimes even French, underlining the diverse character of Natchez's population.

This was especially visible in the legal process. Understanding the difficult position of the Spanish government in an area dominated by English speaking settlers, authorities tried to accommodate local law under the umbrella of the Spanish judicial system. Although the Spanish required all sales to be notarized, Natchez was not yet committed to the Spanish laws.²⁴¹ Spanish authorities exercised their power carefully and thereby created a legal system that was constantly in flux, at least until 1789.²⁴² Planters had to navigate that legal system to legitimize their trade in African slaves, and the Spanish acquiesced to ensure that their authority was accepted.

The planters of Natchez could rely on two sources for slaves under British control from 1763 until 1779. The first was the internal slave trade, usually consisting of planters bringing their slave property with them, or planters traveling to the East Coast and purchasing a small number of slaves directly. The second opportunity allowed planters to buy slaves on credit from Jamaican merchants under the British, but a similar custom had yet to be established under Spanish rule.²⁴³ Planters were also worried that the internal

²⁴¹ According to Jack Holmes, "English local government customs were followed from the beginning of Spanish rule." Jack D. L. Holmes, "Law and Order in Spanish Natchez, 1781-1798," *Journal of Mississippi History* 25, no. 3 (1963): 187. For a discussion of the Spanish process of selling a slave, see Laird W. Bergad, Fe Iglesias García, and María del Carmen Barcia, *The Cuban Slave Market, 1790-1880* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

²⁴² Laura F. Edwards, *The People and Their Peace : Legal Culture and the Transformation of Inequality in the Post-Revolutionary South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 3-54. There has been no in depth study of the legal changes from British to Spanish law in Natchez. Edwards's study about the differences between local and state law in post-revolutionary North and South Carolina comes very close in describing the discrepancies between both systems in the Anglo-American law tradition. One can assume that the people of Natchez followed a similar path in understanding and utilizing the new Spanish law. When Manuel Gayoso de Lemos arrived in Natchez, he would alter that approach significantly.

²⁴³ Claiborne and Lagrone, *Mississippi*, 137.

slave trade from the United States might be cut off due to Spanish tariff impositions once the Iberian empire took possession of the district in 1781. Both ways had introduced new slaves to Natchez, yet it is almost impossible to know how many slaves arrived in the district by each method. As Robert H. Gudmestad fittingly puts it, albeit for a later period “Disentangling the various strands of forced migration is like trying to unite the Gordian knot. Migration with owners, planter purchase, and the interstate trade blended together to form a seamless whole.”²⁴⁴ Exact numbers for the slave trade to early Natchez cannot be provided.

This is especially true for the early importations to Natchez under Spanish rule from 1781 to 1798, since a professional trading firm was not yet established and the Spanish legal system in Natchez did not necessarily record all sales, as it is doubtful that every slave sale was made in the courthouse.²⁴⁵ However, one can catch glimpses of the slaves’ origin at some points, as their origin is often preserved in the documents when the slaves do appear as objects of a sale in the courthouse. For example, in 1788 John Willis bought four slaves from Peter Perkins in Bladen County, North Carolina, and brought them to the district.²⁴⁶ Americans in the South, including Americans in Spanish Natchez,

²⁴⁴ Robert H. Gudmestad, *A Troublesome Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 8.

²⁴⁵ Spanish court records registered an increasing number of slave sales between 1781 and 1782 in the Natchez courthouse. In 1781, three sales were registered, in which nineteen slaves changed owners. In 1782, the number of sales that were recorded at the courthouse increased to seventeen, and forty-six slaves were forced to leave their homes behind. The gender ratio in these sales was also very even. In the two-year period, eighteen male slaves and seventeen female slaves were sold. This is indicative of a frontier slave market running on natural increase, and not African imports. Most of the sales involved one or two slaves at a time, and often it was a mother and her child. See McBee, *Natchez Court Records*, 1-18. Slave sales, Natchez, January 19-28, 1782; February 14, 1782; April 9, 1782; April 16, 1782, NTC:PTR. The bills of sale did not always include the slaves’ gender, especially when children were involved. Therefore the numbers of male and female slaves is less than the total number of slaves sold in Natchez.

²⁴⁶ Bill of sale, Bladen County, North Carolina, January 18, 1788, Barnes-Willis Family Papers, Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin. Unfortunately, slave purchases from

had few qualms about selling and buying slaves and were not yet faced with abolitionist sentiments. Consequently, “promoters of the domestic slave trade used the ideals of the American Revolution to justify this abominable trade.”²⁴⁷

Nevertheless, the internal slave trade would not supply substantial numbers of slaves to the district until the end of the 1790s, leaving planters dependent upon African and Afro-Caribbean slaves imported into New Orleans by the Spaniards. The Spanish crown was aware that Louisiana planters needed a continuous stream of African slaves and did its best to encourage slave imports. Recent developments in the Atlantic World had prompted the Spanish Crown to rethink its policy on slave imports, and the Natchez District benefitted from these changes.²⁴⁸

The Spanish policies that allowed planters at Natchez to increase their slave holdings had their origins not in Louisiana, but in Cuba. In 1762, the Spanish lost Havana to an invading British force for ten months. Ironically, some of the soldiers who were part

outside of Natchez were not recorded in the court records of Natchez. Therefore I have to rely on the family papers and a few surviving records that indicate the place of origin of slaves.

²⁴⁷ Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 17; David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 164-67.

²⁴⁸ Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 146; Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 275-315. The numbers for slaves with an African origin vary greatly throughout the literature. For example, Hall calculates an increase of slaves from Africa in Pointe Coupée alone of 16 slaves. In a more recent work on the slave trade to colonial Louisiana, Jean-Pierre Leglaunec records no arrival from slaves out of Africa. Leglaunec focuses on shipping manifests, whereas Hall works off census records. Exact numbers are probably not available, and the truth will be somewhere in the middle. See Jean-Pierre Leglaunec, "Slave Migrations in Spanish and Early American Louisiana: New Sources and New Estimates," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 46, no. 2 (2005): 195. For the Natchez District, no census records with the origins of slaves survive. However, 87 slave sales recorded in the courthouse between 1780 and 1787 included slaves with an African origin. This constituted 47 % off all slave sales recorded. Leglaunec records 0 imports from Africa during that time period to all of Louisiana. See Ronald L. F. Davis, *The Black Experience in Natchez, 1720-1880*, Special History Study (Denver, Colo.: U.S. Dept. of the Interior, National Park Service, Denver Service Center, 1993), 10.

of the invasion force would later settle in Natchez and join the 1781 revolt.²⁴⁹ The British invasion left Cubans with the desire for more slaves. In the short period that the Cubans were under British control, Cuba saw an increase in merchant ships arriving in the harbor, and more than ten thousand slaves were imported. As Franklin Knight argues: “Among other things, the English occupation of Havana emphasized the gigantic gap between the prevailing Cuban demand for slaves and its effective supply. It also convinced Charles III [the Spanish king] and his ministers that the entire colonial situation was ready for the rational reforms which they had already been contemplating.”²⁵⁰

Before the British invasion, Spain had contracted the right to sell slaves in Cuba to individuals and later stock companies of any country. These so-called *asientos* allowed the importing party a specified number of slaves, which would be imported into the colonies and taxed by the Spanish crown. The number of slaves imported was always insufficient, so an illegal slave trade began to blossom in the Caribbean. The crown realized the shortcoming of the *asiento* system, yet its own trading company, the *Real Compañía de Comercio de la Havana*, set up after 1740, still failed to import an adequate number of slaves to Cuba and the surrounding colonies.²⁵¹ The reforms concerning Spanish America instituted by Charles III in 1778 turned Cuba’s major port, Havana, into “a focal point for the entire gulf area [including Louisiana], handling larger and larger quantities of European manufactured goods and slaves.”²⁵² These reforms, occurring

²⁴⁹ Claiborne and Lagrone, *Mississippi*, 127.

²⁵⁰ Knight, *Slave Society*, 7.

²⁵¹ Sherry Johnson, *The Social Transformation of Eighteenth-Century Cuba* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 26.

²⁵² Knight, *Slave Society*, 10-11.

throughout the Spanish colonial empire, are known as the Bourbon Reforms.²⁵³ They included incentives and regulations for free trade, and specifically put an end to the *asiento* system that had retarded the growth of the Cuban economy.

The effect of the Bourbon Reforms in terms of slave importations was first felt in Louisiana, not Cuba. Charles III distrusted the Cuban planters who had quickly sided with the British in 1763 (thereby exhibiting their own version of *rogue colonialism*) and did not allow a free importation of slaves or a deregulated sugar plantation economy on the island. Instead, he turned his reformer's eye to Louisiana.²⁵⁴ In 1782, the Spanish exempted the colonists in Louisiana from all duties on slaves imported from Africa, the French colonies, or America.²⁵⁵ This *cédula* came seven years before the Spanish Crown allowed such tax incentives and regulation-free trade in Cuba.²⁵⁶ Planters in New Orleans openly celebrated this new royal *cédula* in 1782. "The city welcomed the news with parades, illumination of houses, decoration of ships in the river, and cannon salutes fired by the vessels," and the number of recorded slave imports to Louisiana rose tenfold from five hundred slaves in 1782 to over five thousand in 1797.²⁵⁷ ²⁵⁸ The greatest gift to Natchez planters since its inaugural French settlement was the Bourbon Reforms and their stipulation of free slave imports into Louisiana.

²⁵³ David R. Murray, *Odious Commerce: Britain, Spain, and the Abolition of the Cuban Slave Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 10.

²⁵⁴ Johnson, *The Social Transformation of Eighteenth-Century Cuba*, 56.

²⁵⁵ Royal Cedula granting new favors to encourage the commerce of Louisiana, 1782. By Order of his Majesty, January 22, 1782, in Kinnaird, ed. *Spain in the Mississippi Valley, 1765-1794*, 3.

²⁵⁶ Knight, *Slave Society*, 11.

²⁵⁷ Davis, *The Black Experience in Natchez, 1720-1880*, 10.

²⁵⁸ Din, *Spaniards, Planters, and Slaves*, 122.

The importation of slaves did not only benefit male planters. Natchez's female slaveowners also benefitted from the Bourbon Reforms, even though single women consciously chose the courthouse sale over any other deal they might have struck with a seller. The wives of Hutchins or Alston, or widowed plantation mistresses, often saw the courthouse sale as a protection. Under Spanish tutelage they retained the legal right to their property and were not entirely dependent on the managerial skill of their husbands. Widows protected their property by the use of a courthouse sale, as did both the widows Osborne and McIntosh. McIntosh's widow sold land and plantation property to afford the purchase of the slaves and also received a slave boy aged twelve, brought from Carolina, as part of the payment.²⁵⁹ Then she bought a "negro boy name 'Luke,' aged about ten years," for three hundred dollars on May 17, 1782.²⁶⁰ In the early summer of 1782, the widow bought two more slave women, Jane, age eighteen, and Bertha, age forty.²⁶¹ Jane Osborne bought "a woman named 'Mary,' of the Senegal nation, and her daughter named 'Emelia' aged about five months."²⁶²

Slaves of all ages and genders served as a valuable investment, in addition to their immediate return as a work force. Under British law, in Virginia for example, white married women agreed, "to waive their dower rights in real estate [or slaves] their husbands wanted to sell. In contrast, the laws of Spanish Louisiana allowed women, married or single, white or of color, more freedom to exercise their legal authority and

²⁵⁹ Sales Contract, Natchez, May 12, 1782, McBee, *Natchez Court Records*, 13.

²⁶⁰ Bill of Sale, Natchez, May 17, 1782, *ibid.* There is a notice of death for William McIntosh in the Natchez Court Records, but none for Alexander. However, Alexander disappears in late 1781, whereas Anne McIntosh, widow, appears frequently.

²⁶¹ Sales contracts, Natchez, May 12, May 17, June 1, 1782, *ibid.*, 13-14.

²⁶² Slave sale, Natchez, January 28, 1783, *ibid.*, 11.

financial creativity.”²⁶³ Women, especially widows, seemed to prefer small family units with young children and a female parent, or single female slaves. This served several purposes. For one, a female slave and her child presented less of a risk. It would be highly unlikely for the slave to run away by herself, and a runaway female slave with a child did not stand much chance to survive in the backcountry without help. Secondly, the threat of resistance was not as high as it would have been if the widows had purchased an adult male slave. A male slave had the potential to physically threaten the widow, or simply to escape into the wilderness. This does not mean, however, that female slaveowners were not capable of controlling their slaves, but it seems a logical choice, given the gender expectations of the time.²⁶⁴

Slaves became the pivotal commodity that could make or break a planter’s dream of becoming rich. As Bonnie Martin points out, “Southerners who owned slaves outright and who wanted to retain their workforce used human collateral to convince merchants to make cash advances and to sell supplies on credit.”²⁶⁵ In colonial Natchez, planters used slaves as tokens of wealth and created a modus operandi around human chattel and their service that closely bound the planter’s success to the availability of slaves. At the same time, the slaves played an equally important role for the Spanish empire. Although the settlers, not the empire, owned the slaves, the bound Africans were at least some guarantee to imperial officials that planters would remain with the empire. Therefore,

²⁶³ Martin, "Slavery's Invisible Engine: Mortgaging Human Property," 824.

²⁶⁴ Historians, of course, have shown that women were just as capable of violence and slave control as men. See for example: Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1985).

²⁶⁵ Martin, "Slavery's Invisible Engine: Mortgaging Human Property," 817-21.

Spanish officials in Natchez invited as many slaveowners into the district as possible, thereby bolstering the population and reinforcing the defenses of Natchez against all foes.²⁶⁶

Planters—even aspiring ones—in the Natchez District exhibited certain traits across all members of the class. They created a culture that mirrored that of Virginia planters of the eighteenth century as described by T.H. Breen in his *Tobacco Culture*.²⁶⁷ Breen shows how the planters of the Commonwealth directed all their attention and energy to creating a culture that was centered on the production of tobacco and slavery, subordinating everything else in its favor. Slaveowners in Natchez, male and female, emulated the behavior of the Virginians. Natchez was on the verge of becoming a slave society under the British, but that crucial step could only be completed under Spanish tutelage.

Prosperity Under Spanish Rule

Historians writing about Natchez—usually antebellum Natchez—often contend that the ascent of King Cotton was inevitable. Hence, the colonial period of the Natchez District has been largely dismissed as a mere predecessor to the more colorful history of the district.²⁶⁸ Yet it is precisely the early colonial history with its constant strife between empires and experimentation with various staple crops that laid the foundation of

²⁶⁶ Hilton, "Loyalty and Patriotism on North American Frontiers: Being and Becoming Spanish in the Mississippi Valley, 1776-1803," 14-15.

²⁶⁷ T. H. Breen, *Tobacco Culture: The Mentality of the Great Tidewater Planters on the Eve of Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

²⁶⁸ See for example: Timothy Ryan Buckner, "Constructing Identities on the Frontier of Slavery, Natchez Mississippi, 1760-1860" (Ph. D. Dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2005); Herring, "Natchez, 1795-1830: Life and Death on the Slavery Frontier"; James, *Antebellum Natchez*; Libby, *Slavery and Frontier Mississippi, 1720-1835*; John Hebron Moore, *The Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom in the Old Southwest: Mississippi, 1770-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988).

antebellum Natchez. The conflicts that planters and empires, especially the Spanish, had to endure drove the development of cotton. The royal crop would eventually become the preeminent staple, but not until the 1790s. In many ways, Cuba's sugar industry parallels Natchez's development. Historians of Cuba long presumed that the eventual development of sugar was the driving force in the switch from a society with slaves to a slave society and regularly ignored the development that Cuba underwent before it became the major sugar producer in the Caribbean.²⁶⁹ Nobody could have predicted the slave rebellion on Haiti, which prompted the sudden rise of Cuba, or the advent of the cotton gin, making Natchez the center of the American planter aristocracy.

Sherry Johnson's already cited book *The Social Transformation of Eighteenth-Century Cuba* makes a compelling case to reconsider the development of Cuba before it became a sugar-producing island.²⁷⁰ Johnson argues that Cuba and its early history has to be viewed in the larger context of the Atlantic World to explain why it became the world's largest producer of sugar, and she indicates the developments preceding the 1790s that aided that progress.²⁷¹ She clearly demonstrates that a lack of slaves held back the planters of Cuba prior to the Haitian rebellion of 1791. Ironically, it was the British invasion that spiked slave importations and showed Cuban planters what they could achieve if slaves could be purchased freely and in large numbers.²⁷² In Natchez, it was the advent of the Spanish regime that exposed British planters to the possibilities under a regime that allowed for an easy importation of an unlimited number of slaves. Thus the

²⁶⁹ Johnson, *The Social Transformation of Eighteenth-Century Cuba*, 1-17.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ Ibid., 3.

²⁷² Ibid., 27.

transition to a slave society marks a significant turn in both colonies of the Spanish empire. Under the period of Spanish rule, the Natchez District was more closely connected to the Caribbean and Cuba than to the Anglo-American areas of settlement on the North American East Coast.

The Natchez District actually preceded Cuba in its shift from a society with slaves to a slave society. As shown, American settlers and their slaves continued to arrive in Natchez after 1781, although they had to live under Spanish rule. The first solid numbers of slaves and white settlers in Natchez stem from a 1785 report. Francisco Bouligny, then governor, undertook “a conservative estimate based on the last census.” He estimated “a total of two hundred seventy-five families, which based on an average of four persons in each, represents one thousand and one hundred persons. There are to be added to this population about nine hundred Negro slaves, which make a total of two thousand persons, among whom it may be judged that there are one thousand laborers.”²⁷³

Bouligny went on to describe the capability of the settlers to produce products for market:

This small population, according to a conservative estimate, will extract this year from a peaceful and satisfactory cultivation a product of one hundred and fifty to two hundred thousand pesos in tobacco, cotton, maize, vegetables, animals, wood for construction, and planed lumber—a thing to be marveled at by one who gives it any thought, for such production is seen in only a few parts of the world.²⁷⁴

The economy of Natchez was clearly diversified and as of 1785 not yet dominated by a single crop. However, tobacco and cotton are not listed by accident as the first two items,

²⁷³ Francisco Bouligny to Esteban Miró, August 22, 1785, in Kinnaird, ed. *Spain in the Mississippi Valley, 1765-1794*, 136.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 137.

and the previous mention of 900 slaves shows that Natchez was an expanding economy approaching a full-fledged slave society.

The slave numbers mentioned by Bouligny suggest that planters in Natchez used slaves differently than what Christopher Morris found in the area that would later become Vicksburg. Farming, especially if it was primarily done for subsistence, did not require masters to own more than a limited number of slaves, and the ratio of slaves and white people would not have approached almost fifty-to-fifty. According to Morris, “once one or two white members of the community purchased slaves the urgency of others to do so lessened, for they could meet their labor requirements by hiring their neighbor’s slaves.”²⁷⁵ The high number of slaves in Natchez, therefore, suggests that farmers and planters were producing a crop, either tobacco, cotton, or indigo, and sometimes wood and meat, for a market. They needed slave labor because no other labor was available, and the Spanish could provide the necessary labor after 1782. Bouligny also reported the incredible productivity demonstrated by the people of Natchez. Although it can be assumed that Bouligny was self-serving in reporting that the District’s productivity was high, the number of slaves supports his claims. Planters and farmers would have only invested heavily in African laborers if they could have utilized that labor and turned a staple crop into profit.

Even though the number of slaves suggests a thriving market production, there clearly was no mono-crop system in place as yet. In 1785, planters and farmers were producing multiple crops, and they often utilized their slaves not only to harvest tobacco, indigo or cotton, but also to cut wood and sell it to the Caribbean. The wood cut in the

²⁷⁵ Morris, *Becoming Southern*, 27.

Natchez District provided an additional link to the Caribbean for Natchez planters.

Natchez's wood was probably used as fuel in Cuban boiling houses, since the burgeoning sugar production on the island quickly consumed the native wood. As Morris points out, this economy was typical for frontier societies, yet the increasing number of slaves in the district proved that planters began to focus on a single cash crop.²⁷⁶

The Price for Slavery's Success

Slave imports to Natchez increased under Spanish tutelage. During the first seven years of Spanish rule between 1780 and 1787 the court records in Natchez list a total number of 183 slave sales. Roughly half of these sales (87) were for slaves brought directly from Africa, and only 20 percent (36) arrived from either the Caribbean or the United States. In 30 percent of the court-registered sales (60), no origin of the slaves was given. The numbers from the court records strangely conflict with the newest estimates on the Atlantic slave trade to Louisiana, which lists no slave shipments arriving from Africa for that period. However, they do list 131 slaves with unknown origin arriving in New Orleans. Based on these numbers—and if we assume that some of the unknown slaves were from Africa—Natchez received at least half of all the slaves brought from Africa, an astonishing number for the burgeoning but still relatively small outpost.²⁷⁷ The 1787 census of Natchez lists a total of 658 slaves living and toiling in the district.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 31.

²⁷⁷ See Davis, *The Black Experience in Natchez, 1720-1880*, 10; Leglaunec, "Slave Migrations in Spanish and Early American Louisiana: New Sources and New Estimates," 195; McBee, *Natchez Court Records*.

²⁷⁸ 1787 Census, Natchez, January 18, 1787, in leg. 200, Archivo General de Indias, Papeles de Cuba, Seville, Spain. Translation by author unless otherwise noted.

Planters had to accrue financial assets in a cash poor frontier economy to purchase slaves. Most often, they purchased slaves on credit. Debt therefore was a major issue in colonial Natchez. The people arriving in Natchez were often unlike the planters that would come to settle in Florida, Alabama, or Texas in the early nineteenth century, who moved parts or their entire plantations west.²⁷⁹ These planters had the financial means and an available cash flow from the East Coast to undertake their settlement plans.²⁸⁰ Many of the people arriving in Natchez were unable to tap into large financial resources. Some of them brought slaves, but cash remained in short supply on the frontier.²⁸¹

Therefore, borrowing money was often the only chance to increase one's property. The debtor had to hope that the investment he had made would yield a sufficiently high profit to pay back his debt in time. Slaves were often the only commodities, aside from land, that the aspiring landowners could use as a security against their loan. If the aspiring planter had to default on his debt, he had to relinquish the slaves used as security. By doing so, he not only lost his land, which was given back to the creditor or auctioned off, but also his slaves. Consequently the planter had utterly failed and had no hope of establishing himself in Natchez. This is one reason why many

²⁷⁹ This movement of planters largely happened throughout the nineteenth century, but Natchez follows the same trajectory. See Baptist, *Creating an Old South*, 16-36; Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 163-209; Randolph B. Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery: The Peculiar Institution in Texas, 1821-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989); Dupre, *Transforming the Cotton Frontier: Madison County, Alabama, 1800-1840*; Steven F. Miller, "Plantation Labor Organization and Slave Life on the Cotton Frontier: The Alabama-Mississippi Black Belt, 1815-1840," in *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas*, ed. Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993).

²⁸⁰ See: Hammond, *Slavery, Freedom*; Roger G. Kennedy, *Mr. Jefferson's Lost Cause: Land, Farmers, Slavery, and the Louisiana Purchase* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Rothman, *Slave Country*.

²⁸¹ Inglis, "Searching for Free People of Color in Colonial Natchez," 100; Petition by John Farquhar, Natchez, February 25, 1784, in McBee, *Natchez Court Records*, 25.

debtors fled to Indian country and took their slaves with them. This at least secured them the slim chance for a new start. If, however, a planter paid his creditor in time, he likely invested in new slaves and new land, continuing his rise in the planter class. This goal drove many an aspiring planter to take high risks.

One example of using slaves as collateral is the case of William Dueit. On August 15, 1783, Dueit received \$1,100 from Don Miguel Eslava. Dueit promised “to pay in three months from date, for surety he mortgages three negroes, his property.”²⁸² The three slaves were two twelve- and one fourteen-year-old boys. He repaid the loan in three months, and the boys were out of danger. However, on December 20, 1783, Dueit sold another boy, Airy, aged ten, to Miguel Eslava for \$300.²⁸³ There were certain advantages to mortgaging young slaves because “they continued to appreciate in value.”²⁸⁴ Meanwhile, they could still continue to labor for Dueit. These mortgage deals could turn into a traumatic experience for the slaves rather quickly. Slaves never knew which one of them was part of the mortgage, and who was the likely creditor. Although mortgages in some cases could have been used as a tool to avoid sales, it was more common that families were separated through the use of such mortgages.²⁸⁵ Dueit continued to use his slaves as collateral, but he disappeared from the court records during the mid 1780s, indicating that he was unsuccessful. Still, it is evident how crucial slaves were to the function of Natchez’s economy. As such, the Spanish did well to ensure that this part of

²⁸² Loan, Natchez, August 15, 1783, McBee, *Natchez Court Records*, 21.

²⁸³ Bill of Sale, Natchez, December 20, 1784, *ibid.* Airy’s age is given as 12 years at first, than later as ten. They must be different boys, or the Spanish record keepers simply made a mistake.

²⁸⁴ Martin, "Slavery's Invisible Engine: Mortgaging Human Property," 820-21.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

the economy was not hampered by new regulations, thereby allowing business among planters to develop unperturbed by imperial policies.

Legal Change, Debt, and Slavery in Colonial Natchez

The case of the Woods family and their slaves illustrates how closely connected debt, slaves, and success on the slave frontier were. John Woods was a planter who aspired to greater wealth and took the risk a little too far. His story in the court records began on August 1, 1783. He bought land from Stephen Minor—or Estevan in the Spanish records—and either extended or established a plantation with Adam Bingaman, William Smith, and the Widow Coleman as neighbors for \$300. The land had originally belonged to John Blommart and was seized by the Spanish crown after he had fled the town following the rebellion of 1781.²⁸⁶ The payment of the original land purchase was not due until December 1784, which gave Woods two harvest seasons to settle his debt. Yet Woods wanted more. On January 7, 1784, Woods sold “a negro boy named ‘Jack’ for \$275” to Richard Harrison.²⁸⁷ Woods did not use the profit from the sale to satisfy the outstanding debt to Minor. Instead, he bought more land from fellow planters in Natchez.²⁸⁸ In a short time, he bought about 1,250 arpents (1,200 acres) of land for a total of \$1,025.²⁸⁹

John Woods’s dreams came crashing down sometime in early April 1784. Creditors seized one of his plantations. The court appraised the plantation for \$400, and

²⁸⁶ Land sale, Natchez, August 1, 1783, in McBee, *Natchez Court Records*, 20.

²⁸⁷ Bill of Sale, Natchez, January 7, 1784, *ibid.*, 22.

²⁸⁸ Bill of Sale, Natchez, February 6, 1784, *ibid.* and Bill of Sale, Natchez, February 17, 1784, *ibid.*, 22-23.

²⁸⁹ One arpent equals 0.99 acres.

two unnamed slaves, mother and daughter, for \$500. The property sold for a loss; Adam Bingaman bought the land for a mere \$155, while Minor snatched the slaves for \$561.²⁹⁰ However, the case of John and Margaret Woods does not end with the forced sale of some of their property. According to eyewitness accounts and his wife, John Woods fled to the Choctaw Nation to hide from his creditors.²⁹¹ Woods thereby followed the example set by John Alston and other men who decided to flee the Spanish authorities, either because of debt or treason. Continuing with the familiar pattern, John left his wife Margaret behind. The Woods plantation and property was foreclosed on, yet Margaret was able to petition the Spanish government for help. Before the first part of the Woods property could be sold, Margaret asked the governor “that a certain negro wench, named ‘Rebecca,’ with her children, be restored to her, which said wench was given to her by her husband, John Woods, at the time of her marriage, about eleven years ago.” Margaret Woods successfully claimed that the slave had always rightfully belonged to her and that the property of her husband would be enough to satisfy the creditors.²⁹²

What happened next is unclear. John Woods reappeared in the court records on October 3, 1784. It seems that Woods was not able to escape Spanish law for long, because he is listed as “confined in the fort, or rather a prisoner on bail.”²⁹³ Shortly thereafter, on November 13, 1784, his wife demanded a passport to go to New Orleans

²⁹⁰ Appraisal of John Woods Property, Natchez, April 3, 1784, McBee, *Natchez Court Records*, 24.

²⁹¹ Stephen Hayward, Natchez, June 28, 1785, NTC: PTR.

²⁹² Petition of Margaret Woods, Natchez, January 16, 1784, McBee, *Natchez Court Records*, 164.

²⁹³ John Woods versus Russel Jones, Natchez, October 3, 1784, *ibid.*, 324.

for business. Strangely, John Woods was listed as “absconded” once again.²⁹⁴ However, Margaret Woods never made it to New Orleans.²⁹⁵

Just before Mrs. Woods could board the barge that would carry her down river, Philip Trevino, the new governor of Natchez, stopped her. Maybe he already suspected that she was in league with her refugee husband and had plans to disappear as well. It is unknown if Margaret had the requested slave with her, but it is a strong possibility since she would not dare to leave her only available property behind. Whatever the case, Margaret did not leave Natchez and it is only in 1786 that the court discovered the full measure of the situation.²⁹⁶

In 1785 and 1786, the court in Natchez tried to shed light upon the case between Stephen Minor and Margaret and John Woods.²⁹⁷ Above all, the court was interested in settling the debt issue. In addition, the court tried to understand why Margaret Woods had attempted to steal an additional slave that had been sold to Stephen Minor to satisfy John Woods’s debt. Margaret Woods was fully involved in protecting the family property, and her actions belied the idea of a virtuous lady on the frontier. To protect her property, Mrs. Woods appealed to Estevan Miró, the Spanish Governor of Louisiana. Margaret had already been successful in petitioning the Spanish authorities for property she supposedly owned, and she likely hoped to convince Miró to give her additional leeway. For the

²⁹⁴ Travel permission, Natchez, November 13, 1784, *ibid.*, 164.

²⁹⁵ Francisco Bouligny to Estevan Miro, Natchez, August 22, 1785, Kinnaird, ed. *Spain in the Mississippi Valley, 1765-1794*, 138.

²⁹⁶ Statement of Daniel Perry, Natchez, undated, McBee, *Natchez Court Records*, 164.

²⁹⁷ John Woods also returned to Natchez one more time in 1785, accompanying one of the American agents from Georgia. He probably hoped that a regime change would grant him a new chance in Natchez, yet the Spanish immediately arrested him, and otherwise thwarted his and the American plans as well. See the following chapter.

same reasons, Minor tried to stop her. Stephen Minor was a leading citizen of Natchez and would in fact become interim governor at the end of the Spanish regime. He wanted to keep the case local, since Natchez offered him the greatest chance of success in reclaiming his property. Mrs. Woods, however, still pleaded her case to Governor Miró. On March 16, 1786, Margaret's letter to the governor in which she explained her situation was received in New Orleans. She claimed:

Her husband, John Woods, being a simple man and somewhat addicted to liquor, concluded a bargain with a certain Stephen Minor for a tract of land in the said District of Natchez, containing about 200 arpents, together with 3 horses, 3 cows, and 2 plows, and being intoxicated at the time, agreed to pay the said Minor for the same the enormous sum of \$1500, a sum far beyond the real value thereof, and much more than the husband of your petitioner was able to pay without the total ruin of himself and family, as the event has proved.²⁹⁸

Mrs. Woods clearly tried to appeal to the European gender norms by presenting her husband as simple and addicted to liquor. Maybe she anticipated that the governor in New Orleans would simply void the contract based on her description of her husband. Whatever Margaret hoped to achieve with the letter, the result backfired. Spurred by his superior in New Orleans, the new governor of Natchez, Charles de Gran Pré—now in his second term—initiated a thorough investigation. If Mrs. Woods had hoped to receive a sympathetic verdict again, she was sorely disappointed.

Gran Pré began to examine the documents concerning the purchase made by John Woods, and he ordered witnesses to give their account of the sale. An examination of a copy of the original sale removed any legitimacy from Margaret Woods' claim that Minor had somehow cheated her husband.²⁹⁹ The called witnesses all agreed that the

²⁹⁸ Margaret Woods to Estevan Miro, New Orleans, March 16, 1786, McBee, *Natchez Court Records*, 164.

²⁹⁹ Colonel Don Felipe Trevino to Carlos the Gran Pré, Natchez, June 12, 1784, NTC:PTR.

plantation had been sold at a reasonable and fair price.³⁰⁰ Margaret Woods's claim that her husband had drunkenly struck a bad deal with Minor was therefore completely refuted.

Now that the court had negated Margaret Woods' initial claim, it went on to investigate all other matters connected to the land deal. One part of that investigation led the court to address the claim of Margaret Woods that the slave Rebecca and her child were Mrs. Woods' property. Woods had claimed the slave as her possession, and therefore Rebecca—also called “Beck” or “Becky” in the court documents—was returned to her after her husband had to sell all their slaves to Stephen Minor. However, as more and more witness testimonies were collected, a pattern for Margaret Woods' actions became evident. The story that unfolded in the Natchez court revolved around Rebecca, her child, and her husband London. Shortly after she had claimed the slave Rebecca, the wily Mrs. Woods was caught in the woods trying to steal London, who had also belonged to the family before their expansion scheme had faltered.

In 1786, Abraham Mays swore an affidavit in the Natchez court. Mays, who had been hired by Stephen Minor to return London, encountered the slave in the company of Margaret Woods, his former owner. Following Minor's orders, Mays captured the slave and led him back to Natchez. Woods followed Mays and his colleagues and the following situation developed: “Mrs Woods finding herself detected in Stealing the negroes she then in some measure endeavoured to satisfy herself by following the party and giving leave to her tongue, which for a space of time dealt out scurrility in the greatest

³⁰⁰ Witness accounts, Stephen Haywood, John Ellis, Richard Harrison, Natchez, July 3, 1786 and John Bingaman, Natchez, July 9, 1786, McBee, *Natchez Court Records*, 165. Benjamin Belt, Natchez, undated, in NTC:PTR, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

abundance.”³⁰¹ Woods was obviously quite upset with the situation and did not withhold her contempt, mixed with a good measure of panic. Being caught in the act unraveled all her plans of escaping the Natchez District with her slaves.³⁰²

Mrs. Woods had begun planning her coup shortly after her husband defaulted on the property he had bought from Minor and fled the district in 1784. She had no legal claim to any of the slaves, as the trial would prove.³⁰³ But Margaret Woods understood the importance of slaves on the frontier and she desperately tried to retain at least some property. She explained to a fellow villager, Patience Welton, “that ever since she had been married she was used to have negroes wait upon her and that it would go very hard with her to be without a negro to do her business but she feared that it would take all of her husband’s negroes to pay the debts.”³⁰⁴ Thus, Woods wanted to keep as many slaves as possible. She elected to claim Rebecca because the slave had a child and a husband. She then conveyed to London that she had hidden Rebecca in a canebrake and wanted London to join his wife.³⁰⁵

Even after the Woods property had been divided between the debtors and Mrs. Woods, Rebecca and London remained in Natchez. Although they did not live on the same plantation, they were likely able to see each other on Sundays or during other occasions like market days in Natchez. Although a sale always loomed over the fragile family life of slaves, the Natchez District absorbed slaves, and rarely sold them away

³⁰¹ Abraham Mays, Coles Creek, July 7, 1786, NTC:PTR.

³⁰² Abraham Mays, Coles Creek, July 7, 1786, NTC:PTR.

³⁰³ Deposition of Patience Welton, Natchez, July 9, 1786, McBee, *Natchez Court Records*, 165.

³⁰⁴ Patience Welton, Natchez, July 9, 1786, *ibid.*

³⁰⁵ Statement of William Owens, Natchez, July 7, 1786, Minor Family Papers, 1783-1852, Dolph Brisco Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

since the demand was great. Their chances to remain at least in the vicinity of each other were therefore relatively good. In addition, London might have gathered from Minor that his new master was trying to reclaim Rebecca as his rightful property.

Margaret Woods had to use the fear of sale, an effective weapon to coerce slaves into obedience across the South, to coerce London away from Minor.³⁰⁶ When caught, London admitted to Abraham Mays that “Mrs. Woods had persuaded him to run away and told him Mr. Minor intended selling him to the Spaniards.”³⁰⁷ This news, even though invented, brought London’s world down. Once sold to the “Spaniards,” usually meaning New Orleans, he would not remain in Natchez and could end up in numerous destinations across the Caribbean. His wife and child would be lost to him, his family forever separated. When London heard that Woods had hidden Rebecca in a canebrake and wanted London to join his wife, he chose to run away and take his chances with the Woods among the Choctaw, but in company of his family.³⁰⁸

This plan, in all likelihood, would have worked if not for the greed and chattiness of Margaret Woods. According to William Owens, Woods “begged of me and my wife to steal a wench, named “Kate,” that Mr. Minor had bought of her.”³⁰⁹ Kate apparently was Margaret Woods’ favorite slave and she did not want to leave her with Stephen Minor. Woods planned to lure London into running away and then to steal Kate. In a frontier town like Natchez, runaway slaves were not uncommon, and, although people might have

³⁰⁶ Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*; Eva Sheppard Wolf, *Race and Liberty in the New Nation: Emancipation in Virginia from the Revolution to Nat Turner's Rebellion* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006).

³⁰⁷ Abraham Mays, Coles Creek, July 7, 1786, NTC: PTR.

³⁰⁸ Statement of William Owens, Natchez, July 7, 1786, Minor Family Papers, 1783-1852, Dolph Brisco Center of American History.

³⁰⁹ Statement of William Owens, Natchez, July 7, 1786, McBee, *Natchez Court Records*, 166.

been suspicious, evidence suggests that slaves disappeared frequently. Francisco Bouligny, for example, reported in 1785 about the state of the defenses in the district. He asserted that the people lived at a great distance from each other and that most of their property had virgin woodland on at least one side. This land not only provided a chance for undetected escape, but it also invited “the many vagabonds and villains who inhabit the Choctaw and Chickasaw nations.”³¹⁰ Bouligny went on to explain that “the greater part of these vagabonds, dregs of Europe and America, are men abandoned to all vices and capable of committing any crime. They are the ones who have devastated this district with their continual theft of horses, mules and Negroes.”³¹¹ In other words, slave thefts were common, and Kate would have just been another case of theft. Unfortunately for Woods, Owens decided to play along with her and then to report back to Stephen Minor. Minor then set a trap for Margaret and London and successfully retrieved his slave.

After Margaret Woods was caught and the legal process began, she tried to prove that Rebecca did in fact belong to her. However, she only managed to call three witnesses in her support. Stephen Jett, Archibald Rea, and John Pickens all testified for Margaret Woods. However, only two, Jett and Pickens, agreed that Margaret Woods had a legal claim to Rebecca. Archibald Rea named the slave Kate as Margaret’s property.³¹²

Stephen Jett claimed that her husband had given Rebecca to Mrs. Woods “at the time of

³¹⁰ Bouligny to Miro, Natchez, August 22, 1785, in Kinnaird, ed. *Spain in the Mississippi Valley, 1765-1794*, 137.

³¹¹ Bouligny to Miro, Natchez, August 22, 1785, *ibid.*

³¹² Deposition of Stephen Jett, Natchez, October 4, 1784, Archibald Rea and John Pickens, Natchez, October 1, 1784, in McBee, *Natchez Court Records*, 137.

her marriage.”³¹³ Yet Archibald Rea claimed that Margaret had inherited Rebecca from her father Matthew Thompson.³¹⁴

The case was lost. Margaret Woods’s key witnesses presented conflicting stories, giving the court all it needed to come to a decision that favored Stephen Minor. What had started as the dream of an aspiring planter couple in 1784 came toppling down by the end of 1786. Margaret Woods was a frequent “guest” in court, her husband John was on the run in the Choctaw Nation, and both of them had lost all their land, and in December 1786, Carlos de Gran Pré’s verdict also took away their last slave. The verdict itself was short and simply read: “Margaret Woods is excluded from all claim to the woman ‘Rebecca.’”³¹⁵ This one sentence ended all dreams the couple might have held when they came to Natchez from Carolina. With no slaves, no land, and no other assets, their chances to become planters were non-existent.

Although the fate of the slaves involved in this case is unknown, the sources yield some information on the rest of the people involved. After Charles de Gran Pré had given his verdict, Margaret Woods disappears from the records. Her husband John, however, returned to Natchez sometime between 1786 and 1787. His lands and most of his property were sold off to satisfy his debt, and John must have reappeared from hiding to eke out an existence in Natchez. Woods continued to appear in court as a debtor.³¹⁶

Although the sums were small in comparison to the debt Woods had amassed between 1783 to 1786, the ne’er-do-well planter had nothing left and must have lived a meager

³¹³ Stephen Jett, Natchez, October 4, 1784, *ibid.*, 167.

³¹⁴ Archibald Rea, Natchez, October 4, 1784, *ibid.*

³¹⁵ Examination, Natchez, December 16, 1786, in *ibid.*

³¹⁶ John Pickens vs. John Woods, Natchez, June 25, 1787; John Vaucheret vs. John Woods, Natchez, December 27, 1787; Appraisement and Sale, Natchez, January 16, 1788, *ibid.*, 254-55.

existence in the shadow of the other planters in the district. Nevertheless, Woods did not leave the area. It appears that he was able to acquire another plot of land by 1804, yet Jesse Lum claimed “preemption right to 250 acres in Jefferson County on Milburn’s Creek, waters of bayou Pierre, which he inhabited December 10, 1801.”³¹⁷ Woods could not establish himself in any capacity in the district and his high hopes had fallen fast and hard. Men and women like the Woods, however, exemplify the means settlers employed to achieve their dream of becoming a planter. The tale of the Woods might have served as a warning for other aspiring planters, but it did not deter new arrivals from trying.

Conclusion

The transition of the Natchez District from British to Spanish hands was not without its problems. The people in Natchez had to adapt to new laws, new economic policies, and a new language. Many of these transitions were contested, either in court or by force. Natchez planters wanted to forge their own destiny, but were nevertheless dependent on the Spanish government as well as the economic and imperial forces of the lower Mississippi Valley. Its inhabitants had a strong understanding of who they were, and they were able to live under the rule of many empires as long as their property was safe and the white masters prospered. After the Spanish had calmed the district and extracted the most rabid Loyalists, life in Natchez was largely undisturbed. Spanish immigration policies allowed Anglos and their slaves to enter the district, and many came. Liberal Spanish trade regulations and the repeal of the duties on imported slaves further warmed the Anglo-American population to the presence of the Spanish, and it won many people over to the Spanish side. Yet not every settler found his or her dreams

³¹⁷ Land Claim of Jesse Lum, Adams County, March 19, 1804, *ibid.*, 522.

come true. Some people took great financial risks to achieve their dreams, but the boom climate made many forget the risks they were taking. Once in debt, the dream could quickly become a nightmare. Recognizing that slaves were the key to their economic fortune, prospective planters tried to broker their human property in as many ways as they could. If, however, their slaves were threatened, they became creative in holding on to them and lengthy court cases could ensue, proving how precious the human property was for the new settlers. By using slaves as a collateral for their debts, they had a valuable pawn and a workforce to earn enough capital to repay the debt. With the slaves gone, settlers had to rely on their own labor. Realizing that this would not suffice, they employed every method they could think of to protect their slaves from sale.

For the Spanish dons, the beneficial trade policies and the steadily rising number of slave sales and imports brought a measure of control that the preceding empires lacked. In an increasingly competitive lower Mississippi Valley—both in staple crops and colonial powers that sought to dominate it—the Spanish were able to hold on to Natchez longer and with more success than both their French and British predecessors. They were able to do so, even though they allowed slaves and free people of color to openly challenge the white population in court. But since the Spanish kept slave importation levels high, the American planters remained content with the Spanish dons. This would eventually change, but not before two decades came and went.

CHAPTER IV

CHALLENGING THE MASTERS: SLAVERY, LIBERTY, AND KINSHIP IN
SPANISH NATCHEZ

Your Excellencies [sic] humble petitioner late the slave of Mr. Asahel Lewis deceased, presents herself before your Excellency and says she has for nearly three years unsuccessfully prosecuted before your Excellency for what is of much greater importance to her than life, her liberty, which by the mildness of the laws, she is led to hope she is entitled to.

—Amy Lewis to Manuel Gayoso de Lemos, Natchez, July 24, 1797³¹⁸

On July 24, 1797, this desperate plea for help arrived on the desk of Manuel Gayoso de Lemos. As the outgoing Spanish governor of Natchez, Lemos had spent the summer preparing to leave for New Orleans while the United States was finalizing its takeover of the Natchez District. The plea came from a slave named Amy Lewis, who implored Gayoso “to grant her permission, to remove her suit to the tribunal at [New] Orleans where a more speedy decision may in all probability take place.”³¹⁹ Lewis’s plea for liberty was accompanied by a statement that explained why she so desperately wanted the case moved. She argued “that as helpless and unprotected as she is, she sees no prospect of a speedy determination and the pangs of suspense being more terrible to her than the most dreadful certainty.”³²⁰ The “most dreadful certainty” was a life in slavery, and she rightfully feared re-enslavement once the United States assumed control of Natchez on March 30, 1798. Amy Lewis’s case will serve as a conduit to demonstrate the role people of color played in Natchez’s society and how they maneuvered the legal changes as the town went from the control of Spain to the United States.

³¹⁸ Amy Lewis to Manuel Gayoso de Lemos, Natchez, July 24, 1797, in NTC:PTR.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

³²⁰ Ibid.

Amy Lewis followed several other people of color in Natchez who had called on the Spanish court. Beginning in 1781, the dawn of Spanish control in Natchez, a number of black people had utilized Spanish courts to claim their freedom, demand their rights, or secure their property. This was a marked departure from the previous two years. The Spanish had not imposed their laws on Natchez between 1779 and 1781 because governor Esteban Miró allowed British subjects to retain their laws under the surrender agreement signed in Baton Rouge. After the Natchez revolt, however, Spain took full control of the district and opened the courts to people of color. Most of the cases involved black women trying to secure justice for themselves and their families. For example, in 1782 a woman known only as “Jeannette” bought her son “Narcisse” from their former master, who may have been the child’s father. Likewise, Nelly Price, who had been living in Natchez as a free woman of color since the British period, repeatedly appeared in court suing business partners and her landlord.³²¹ All of these women had forged relationships with white men in Natchez.

The four surviving censuses of Spanish Natchez do not list free people of color (*libres*).³²² After the Spanish vacated Natchez in 1798, the first American census of 1801 listed 182 free people of color living in the three counties that were carved out of the

³²¹ See Enfranchisement, Natchez, January 17, 1782, NTC:PTR, and Nelly Price v. Thomas Green, Natchez February 26, 1783; Nelly Price v. Richard King, Natchez, April 26, 1784, Natchez Court Records: Original Spanish Records (NCR: OSR), Book 3, Adams County Court House, Natchez Mississippi; Eleanor Price v. Estate of Miguel López, Natchez, February 22, 1788 in NCR: OSR, Book 14, Adams County Court House.

³²² See Natchez Census, Natchez, undated, 1784, in Archivo General de Indias: Papeles de Cuba (AGI: PC), legajo 116, Natchez Census, April 14, 1795, *ibid.*, legajo 31, Census of the Natchez District, Natchez, January 18, 1787, in *ibid.*, legajo 200, Williams Research Center, Historic New Orleans Collection, New Orleans, Louisiana, and Census of the Natchez District, Natchez, April 27, 1793, Microfilm 2528, Mississippi Department for Archives and History (MDAH), Jackson, Mississippi.

Spanish Natchez District.³²³ 155 of those free blacks lived in Adams County, where Natchez was located. The census does not list separate male and female columns, and it is therefore impossible to determine the gender ratio in the Natchez District. It is clear, however, that free people of color were a growing part of Natchez society, especially considering that during the British period only two known free people of color lived in Natchez.³²⁴

This chapter investigates how blacks and whites negotiated bondage on the edge of empires. It traces the implementation of Spanish law regarding slaves and free people of color beginning in 1781, first explaining the actual legal changes and then illustrating their real effects in the cases of black people like Amy Lewis, Jeanette, and Nelly Price. These women and other people of color tried to maintain kinship and family ties in an economic environment that stacked the odds against them. The following pages uncover the voices of African and African-American slaves from the court records, and demonstrate that blacks had some agency when it came to their legal fate. Families played an important part in this story. Masters were able to manumit slaves they saw as deserving in Spanish Natchez, and black people frequently used family or kinship ties to whites in Natchez to defend their rights. Although the cases are few, they show that Spanish Natchez offered black people ways to challenge white control. These opportunities had not existed under previous colonial regimes, nor would they under American control.

³²³ Territorial Census of Washington, Pickering, and Adams Counties, 1801, Microfilm 2528, MDAH.

³²⁴ Inglis, "Searching for Free People of Color in Colonial Natchez," 98-104.

The circumstances of interracial families highlight the role of women in frontier slave regimes. It was not uncommon for men in slave societies like St. Augustine or New Orleans to establish sexual relations with slaves, occasionally even slaves that did not belong to them.³²⁵ If these women could build longstanding romantic relationships with their masters, they might possibly receive their freedom. Enslaved women were the weakest members in a slave society and could rarely defend themselves against sexual advances. They did, however, have access to certain measures of birth control, including abortion, and slave women could successfully terminate pregnancies.³²⁶ The women in this chapter did not do so. They accepted their roles as mothers to mixed race children. They used their sex to acquire at least a chance at freedom, and in combination with the Spanish legal system, created—intentionally or not—a situation that was limited to female slaves. Nevertheless, motherhood was no guarantee of freedom, and the hopes of black women rested on a fickle legal system that hinged on Spanish law.³²⁷

Not only was Natchez a frontier society that was transitioning from a society with slaves to a slave society, but the inhabitants were predominantly Anglo-American throughout the British, Spanish, and American periods. In addition to local changes, the

³²⁵Jane Landers notes several cases in Spanish Florida, and Kimberly Hanger also addresses the issue in her work. See Hanger, *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places*, 36-39; Landers, *Black Society*, 150-53.

³²⁶ Slave women did their best to maintain control over their sexuality, yet ultimately they were helpless against advances from white members of society. See Hilary McD. Beckles, *Natural Rebels: A Social History of Enslaved Black Women in Barbados* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 97, 158-59; Bernard Moitt, *Women and Slavery in the French Antilles: 1635-1848* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 96-97; Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 97-105, 207-11.

³²⁷ For one example of how women used their gender and motherhood to eventually achieve freedom see Keila Grinberg, "Manumission, Gender, and the Law in Nineteenth-Century Brazil," in *Paths to Freedom: Manumission in the Atlantic World*, ed. Rosemary Brana-Shute and Randy J. Sparks (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 219-34.

Spanish empire itself was in a transitional stage because of the Bourbon Reforms.³²⁸

Although still governed by the traditional legal system, Spanish governors and district commanders were specifically authorized to administer Natchez and its “foreign” inhabitants with more leniency. The new rules facilitated decision-making by the commandants and granted them a measure of independence from Madrid. The settlers themselves came from different legal cultures.³²⁹ The planters were keen to test the new imperial laws, especially regarding human property. Over time, an uneasy hybrid legal system developed—one that proved difficult to navigate for both whites and blacks.

Spain carefully implemented legal changes based on long established Iberian law and they offered new chances for people of color to carve out their own place in colonial Natchez and protect their families. For bondsmen and women the smallest victory provided hope and a measure of safety vital to surviving forced labor and captivity. When the United States claimed Natchez from Spain, those benefits disappeared with the Spanish governor.

Creating Spanish Natchez

After taking West Florida from the French in 1763, the British implemented a stringent slave code for their new province in 1766. Slaves could not own property, people of color were entirely subjected to white rule, and manumission was difficult. Not

³²⁸ The Bourbon Reforms were a set of economic and political legislation introduced by Spain throughout the eighteenth century. Intended to modernize imperial Spain, the reforms in Spanish America were designed to create a more efficient administration and to promote the economic, commercial, and fiscal development of the Spanish colonies. The reforms became policy under the Spanish Bourbon monarchs Charles III (1759-1788), and his heir, Charles IV (1788-1808). See Johnson, *The Social Transformation of Eighteenth-Century Cuba*, 11-12.

³²⁹ As Laura Edwards points out for the United States, local law in the Anglo-American tradition did not necessarily follow state—or in Natchez’s case imperial—law. See Laura F. Edwards, *The People and Their Peace: Legal Culture and the Transformation of Inequality in the Post-Revolutionary South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 7-9.

only did slaveowners have to pay a security of £100, but they also had to travel to Pensacola to have the manumission recorded.³³⁰ For slaveholders in Natchez, this meant several days on the road through swamps, bayous, and Indian country to reach the capital of their province. West Florida as a whole, according to one historian, only had between forty and sixty free people of color, and the records of Natchez mention only two prior to the arrival of the Spanish.³³¹ The Spanish seized Natchez from the British in 1779 as they conquered British West Florida during the American Revolution. With Spanish supremacy came Iberian law, and the transition from the British to the Spanish brought new possibilities for people of African descent.

Beginning in 1781, Spanish law opened doors to freedom. Unlike the British code, Spanish law treated slaves as “worthy of participating in the Christian community,” and the enslaved “had the right to receive the sacraments, and their marriages and families were protected by law, custom, and the church.” Moreover, Spanish law granted local authorities considerable flexibility regarding the legal claims of slaves and created an environment favorable to manumission and self-purchase.³³²

The tradition of legal protection that the Spanish offered to slaves went back to the thirteenth-century code of the *Siete Partidas* and emanated throughout the Spanish colonies in the Atlantic world. Evelyn Jennings notes that “portions of the code governing slavery and the philosophy behind those regulations guided Crown policy for

³³⁰ See An “Act for the Regulation and Government of Negroes and Slaves,” Pensacola, December 24, 1766, as reproduced in Smith, “A Settlement of Great Consequence: The Development of the Natchez District, 1763 - 1860,” 104-19.

³³¹ Fabel, *The Economy of British West Florida, 1763-1783*, 42-43; Inglis, “Searching for Free People of Color in Colonial Natchez,” 101-03.

³³² Fuente, “Slave Law and Claims-Making in Cuba: The Tannenbaum Debate Revisited,” 339-70; Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen, the Negro in the Americas*, 69.

centuries.” Although Spain introduced a new slave code in 1789 as a result of growing plantation economies throughout their empire, “the Siete Partidas’ juridical framework continued to shape interactions in Spain and its colonies among slaves, their owners, and the state.”³³³ Natchez fell under these statutes in 1781. The district’s slaves were among those who struggled under a growing plantation economy, and even though their masters probably favored the older British slave code, they were forced by Spanish law to interact with their property in front of Spanish courts.

The initial 1781 transition from British to Spanish rule ultimately brought several improvements for both black and white settlers in Natchez. Spain supplied the planters of Natchez with African slaves to feed the growing plantation economy. At the same time, Spanish law lowered barriers to manumission and opened the courthouse to slaves. The Bourbon Reforms expanded local authority within the Spanish Empire to such a degree that local officials gained unprecedented power. The administrators in Natchez used their new abilities to forge a working alliance between colonial Spain and Anglo-American settlers. This attempt to form a coalition resulted in a hybrid legal system influenced by British settlers and Spanish laws. At the same time, Natchez planters discovered that their human property was not without means to defend claims in court. Slaves and free blacks learned to navigate the muddy legal waters of Spanish Natchez to acquire property and to protect it in court and even, on occasion, to gain their liberty.

Controlling Natchez was not an easy task. Therefore, to accompany the new rules on slaves, Spain also offered the Natchez planters an additional incentive to remain in the

³³³ See Jennings, "Paths to Freedom: Imperial Defense and Manumission in Havana, 1762-1800," 123. Spain altered the slave codes one more time in 1845.

district. They encouraged landowners to grow tobacco by offering subsidies, a guaranteed market, and they opened the slave trade from Africa. These concessions kept planters loyal, but only temporarily, as Spanish support for plantation agriculture wavered during the 1780s and collapsed in the 1790s. Subsidies were cut, prices dropped, and planters were left to deal with their debt from reckless speculation in slaves. Local authorities in the 1790s had to govern a district whose planters were on the brink of bankruptcy and increasingly restless. Fortunately, the Bourbon Reforms allowed the legal system in Natchez some flexibility. When Governor Manuel Gayoso de Lemos took over the district in 1789, he catered to the wishes of the planters, but he nevertheless maintained the right of people of color to call on the courts and to sue for their rights.³³⁴ This certainly presented a point of contention with the Natchez planter elite, yet the Spanish empire and its laws would bend, but not break, even under such critical circumstances. It was difficult, however, to implement the new Spanish slave code in Louisiana. Some laws benefitted the slaves, others were adjusted to appease the planters, and still other laws turned established custom on its head, benefitting nobody and actually hurting the slaves they were meant to protect.

Establishing Spanish Law in the Colonial Backwater

The Spanish empire was not unaccustomed to the problems legal change brought to the lower Mississippi Valley. Spain had been governing Louisiana, including New Orleans, since 1763 when it took control of Natchez in 1779. The French elite planters initially resisted Spain's influence on law and culture in Louisiana. Over time, however, a

³³⁴ Jack Holmes argues that Gayoso was “almost independent, though he submitted his proposals for new rules and regulations dutifully to the governor general *after* they were a *fait accompli*. See Jack David Lazarus Holmes, *Gayoso: The Life of a Spanish Governor in the Mississippi Valley, 1789-1799* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), 53.

hybrid system between Spanish slave law and the French *Code Noir* developed in Louisiana. It is important to investigate some of these basic Spanish laws concerning slavery and how the government in Louisiana handled the clash between the Spanish code and the French *Code Noir*, which was established until 1763, to understand how Spain handled the legal change in Natchez. Although the *Code Noir* was infused with Catholic ideology accepting all people into the church community, it was harsher than the new Spanish codes. Under Governor Estevan Miró, the government in Louisiana began to develop specific law codes that regulated all matters concerning slavery in the colony in the 1770s. Miró relied heavily on the New Orleans *Cabildo* (Municipal Government) to develop rules that were suited to frontier conditions in Louisiana. Key to the new rules was the control of slave behavior in a colonial backcountry struggling to become a slave society. Eventually, laws governing Louisiana would become the legal standard in Natchez.

Since French planters ran the *cabildo*, some of their customary law found its way into Spanish codes when they replaced the French *Code Noir* in the 1760s and 1770s.³³⁵ The new Spanish codes included some of the original French laws, but they remained in the tradition of the *Siete Partidas*. For example, Spanish law, like the British slave codes, required slaves traveling off their home plantation to carry passes or face immediate punishment. If patrols encountered a known runaway, he was brought to jail and whipped under the supervision of a Spanish official. Slave patrols or owners did not exact the punishment. The sale of liquor was also prohibited. The authorities then addressed the

³³⁵ For an exhaustive discussion of the struggle between French creole planters and the Spanish governors see Din, *Spaniards, Planters, and Slaves. Spaniards, Planters, and Slaves: The Spanish Regulation of Slavery in Louisiana, 1763-1803* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999), 35-133.

use and ownership of guns by slaves, a problem that was typical for the frontier.

Slaveowners on frontier plantations often armed their slaves to hunt game to supplement their diet.³³⁶ The new laws explicitly challenged this custom by prohibiting the sale of gunpowder and shot to slaves. If owners armed slaves with firearms, the guns had to be marked with the owner's name. Slaves no longer had the right to assemble or use (or own) horses, and free blacks had to carry "certificates attesting to their emancipation."³³⁷

The *cabildo* of New Orleans introduced these new regulations, and Governor Miró signed them into law on May 1, 1784. He then sent copies of this decree to post commandants, including the one in Natchez.³³⁸ While this new legislation made sense in urban New Orleans, it proved extremely difficult to enforce in more rural settings like the Natchez District. Plantations were scattered and Spanish soldiers were sparse.³³⁹

Nevertheless, these rules reinforced some of the master's powers and permitted them easier control over their human property on the frontier. But planters were also limited in their own ability to do with slaves as they pleased. For example, the code prohibited the hiring out of unskilled slaves, thereby curtailing the chances of small slaveholders to add additional workers from neighbors at harvest time. The smaller planters could not afford the larger workforce needed at harvest time because of the expense of supporting idle or underemployed hands. This regulation circumscribed the movement of slaves and

³³⁶ This was not uncommon on many plantation frontiers. Peter Wood discovered the same for colonial South Carolina. See: Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority - Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1974).

³³⁷ Holmes, *Gayoso*, 53.

³³⁸ Din, *Spaniards, Planters, and Slaves*, 94.

³³⁹ Holmes, *Gayoso*, 98. Holmes shows that Gayoso and the Spanish empire tried to rely on friendly Indian nations to protect their borders to relieve the thinly stretched Spanish military force in Louisiana.

benefitted the wealthy planters who sat in the *cabildo* but it hurt the upstart planters, as slaves could no longer move freely from plantation to plantation and assist with the harvest.

The right to self-purchase, *coartación*, was the most important new law in Spanish Louisiana. *Coartación* allowed a slave to purchase his or her freedom for a specified sum that was either agreed upon with the master or arranged in the courts. Once set, the purchase price could not be changed and the slaveowner had to honor the contract, even if the slave was sold. Slaves could initiate this process themselves; they did not have to rely on their master to start the process.³⁴⁰ The Spanish government in New Orleans allowed this new law to take effect in 1769, after Alejandro O'Reilly had ended the rebellion of French Creoles in Louisiana. Soon after its passing, the first slaves attempted to ransom themselves. Slaves demonstrated keen awareness of what the Spanish regime could offer them, even though the laws were not published. Historian Kimberly Hanger has found that “indeed, the text of several Spanish documents indicates that slaves and free persons acting in the interest of slaves were aware of and acted upon the privileges extended to them by Spain.”³⁴¹ The legal avenue to freedom presented a great opportunity for slaves, but it annoyed French and Anglo-American planters, many of whom “abhorred the idea of blacks purchasing their freedom.”³⁴² Despite all of these

³⁴⁰ Hanger, *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places*, 21, 25; Ingersoll, "Slave Codes and Judicial Practice in New Orleans, 1718-1807," 41-43. Ingersoll argues that Alejandro O'Reilly had introduced *coartación* as a legal code to Cuba in 1762 or 1763 and then brought it to New Orleans and Louisiana on his punitive expedition against the revolt of the French elite against Spanish rule. Ingersoll also contends that O'Reilly never made the new avenue to freedom public, yet slaves still found out about the new beneficial law.

³⁴¹ Hanger, *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places*, 26.

³⁴² Din, *Spaniards, Planters, and Slaves*, 129. The practice of *coartación* goes back to medieval Spain, yet most planters in Louisiana came from a French background and were unfamiliar with the practice. Therefore they opposed it.

improvements, Louisiana was still a backcountry and many slaves lived on outlying plantations with no access to the court system. For those unable to take their cases to court, running away and maroonage remained the primary routes to freedom.

Some of the new laws had a negative effect on both master and enslaved. The 1790 *Real cédula* (royal decree) established the right of slaves to marry and encouraged efforts to Christianize the slaves who had recently been swept into the district via the Atlantic slave trade. Based on Catholicism, it included a code that forbade slaves working on Sunday unless compensated by their owners. Although intended to stop the exploitation of the slaves on the Sabbath, the law actually was detrimental to the slaves and their masters. It had become customary for slaves under the *Code Noir* to tend their gardens on Sunday, much like the established custom in Anglo-American or Cuban slave societies. The produce of the slaves' Sunday work was used to supplement their paltry rations, with the surplus being sold in the market. When their right to work on Sunday was curtailed, slaves lost an important source of food. Even worse, the loss of a relatively steady—if meager—income also threatened the slaves' avenue to *coartación* and freedom.³⁴³ Masters and mistresses had always dangled the possibility of self-purchase in front of slaves to motivate good behavior and keep the slave population under control. If a slave misbehaved, masters could legally refuse to honor the contract that allowed the slave to pay off his or her worth.³⁴⁴

The Bourbon Reforms allowed the Spanish to establish free trade through the port of New Orleans, which allowed for a steady increase in slave importations into Natchez.

³⁴³ Ibid., 143-46.

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 129. There is no definition given for misbehavior, which allowed the planter to judge liberally based on his own definition.

Fortunately for the planters, Cuba was not absorbing large numbers of slaves in the 1780s, and the Spanish king explicitly granted Louisiana planters a preferred status over Cuba. Incoming slaves were no longer creoles from the Caribbean islands, but rather direct imports from Africa. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall estimates that about 14,000 African captives arrived in lower Louisiana between 1777 and 1795.³⁴⁵ At least 1,500 of the slaves arriving in Louisiana (over 10%) would spend most of their captivity under the mercilessly burning sun of the Natchez District.³⁴⁶ In 1787, the official census of Natchez recorded 658 slaves in Natchez, 21 of whom were labeled as mulattos.³⁴⁷ By 1795, the number of slaves had more than tripled to 2,060, with a corresponding increase of mulatto slaves to 74.³⁴⁸ This influx of slaves, combined with the cheap land and initial subventions of the Spanish crown for tobacco, appeased most planters and allowed a smooth transition from British to Spanish control in Natchez. Yet just as in New Orleans, planters and slaves would meet each other in court more often than the Anglo-American planters could have anticipated. Indeed, it seems that slaves in Natchez were as knowledgeable about the intricacies of the Spanish legal system that benefitted them and their families as their fellow Africans in New Orleans. Soon planters would learn that their human property was willing—and capable—of exercising their rights.

³⁴⁵ Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 278-79.

³⁴⁶ Slave numbers in Natchez grew from 505 in 1784 to 2,060 in 1794. See 1784 Census of Natchez, Natchez, undated, 1784, in Archivo General des Indies, Papeles de Cuba (AGI: PC), legajo 116, Historical New Orleans Collection (HNOC), Williams Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana, and Natchez Census, April 14, 1795, in AGI: PC, legajo 31, *ibid.*

³⁴⁷ Census of the Natchez District, Natchez, January 18, 1787, in AGI: PC, legajo 200, HNOC, New Orleans, Louisiana.

³⁴⁸ Census of the Natchez District, Natchez, April 14, 1795, in AGI: PC, legajo 31, HNOC, New Orleans, Louisiana.

Legal Transition in Natchez

With the arrival of the first governor of Natchez, Captain Charles de Gran Pré, in 1781, the people of the district saw a dramatic change in the laws governing slaves. Spain and its governors quickly demonstrated that Spanish law was supreme and differed in significant ways from its British predecessor. For example in, 1781 “James” sued Clement Dyson and John Staybraker over outstanding payments of \$50 for a quantity of corn he had sold them from his own supply. This case was significant for two reasons. First, James was a free person of color and a former slave of Philip Alston, brother of the rebel and fugitive John Alston. The defendants were white, and under British law James would have had no standing against them in court, a fact that Dyson and Staybraker probably sought to exploit. The sale was dated December 26, 1780, and James was not named in the note, but his former master, Philip Alston, did appear as the seller of the corn. “According to English law, which forbids the negro to make any law claim,” James’s former master had to sign the contract.³⁴⁹ In 1781, however, under Spanish law, James could legally claim his money from the two defendants—white or not—and the Spanish court lost no time in ordering Dyson and Staybraker to pay the money they owed.³⁵⁰

Over the next two decades, the population of free people of color would increase dramatically in comparison to British Natchez. In New Orleans the ratio of free people of color increased from 97 (5.1 %) in 1771 (O’Reilly had instituted the new Spanish law

³⁴⁹ Negro James v. Clement Dyson and John Staybraker, Natchez, October 21, 1781, in Natchez Court Records: Original Spanish Records (NCR: OSR), Book 1, Adams County Court House, Natchez, Mississippi.

³⁵⁰ Ibid.

codes in 1769) to 862 (26.5%) in 1791.³⁵¹ The first American census counted 182 free blacks in 1801, the highest available number of black people in the Natchez District. Free blacks only constituted about 3.8 percent of the free population.³⁵² Yet this was not the only change the Spanish introduced into the district.

Before the Spanish occupied Natchez, there had been few free people of color in the district. With the arrival of the Spanish troops and the first Spanish governor, the chances for freedom for Africans in Natchez changed, especially for black women. White women were scarce in Natchez, and it is not surprising that the court records suggest that most free blacks were women.³⁵³ White settlers in frontier societies frequently turned to enslaved women for sexual favors and occasionally rewarded them with freedom for their sexual favors. Kimberly Hanger found gender ratios heavily tilted toward women among the free people of color in New Orleans as well.³⁵⁴

The key for the discrepancies in the number of free people of color between Natchez and New Orleans lay in the character of each settlement. If Frank Tannenbaum's thesis prevails in its entirety, the number of free people of color in Natchez would increase just as much as in New Orleans, based on the new Spanish legislation. However, the legal structures were not the only factors that influenced the number of slaves that could obtain freedom. Eugene Genovese sheds new light on the Tannenbaum thesis as he

³⁵¹ Hanger, *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places*, 23.

³⁵² First Territorial Census of Washington, Pickering, and Adams Counties, 1801, Microfilm 2528, MDAH.

³⁵³ According to census records, 690 white men lived in Natchez in 1787, whereas only 589 white women resided in the district. By 1794, the number of white men had increased to 1546, and the number of white women to 1282. Single white women were therefore sparsely available in Natchez. See Natchez Census 1787, in Archivo General de Indias: Papeles de Cuba (AGI: PC), legajo 116, HNOC, and Natchez Census 1794, legajo 31 *ibid*.

³⁵⁴ Hanger, *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places*, 22, 34-40; Landers, *Black Society*, 139-44.

separates the idealist from the materialist approach.³⁵⁵ The idealist Tannenbaum based his theory on the law and the assumption that colonial officials followed it to the letter. Historians like Laura Foner and Genovese, as well as anthropologist Marvin Harris, on the other hand, argue that material conditions also defined the chances for freedom. Harris, for example, explains that the sex ratio of white settlers and the black-to-white ratio had a significant influence on manumissions. White fathers were more inclined to free their offspring or sexual partners than a regular field hand. In societies where blacks outnumbered whites, Africans also filled the role of artisans and service employees. They could earn money and then buy their own freedom, usurping the role of the master as the only person with the power to free a slave.³⁵⁶

Demographics, however, were not the only reason for masters and mistresses to manumit their slaves. The state of the plantation economy also dictated how likely it was for a master to free a slave. Hanger concludes that manumissions were most easily achieved at the very top or the very bottom of the economic cycle. Foner and Genovese agree with this economic explanation. They also argue that the rates of manumission were not only connected to demographics, but also to the market structure. "Slave treatment and manumission rates followed economic cycles." If the economy was undergoing a boom phase and commodity and slave prices were locked in an upward spiral, slavery became more restrictive and slaveowners became more reluctant to grant

³⁵⁵ Eugene D. Genovese, "Materialism and Idealism in the History of Negro Slavery in the Americas," *Journal of Social History* 1, no. 4 (1968); Hanger, *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places*, 19.

³⁵⁶ Hanger, *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places*, 19; Marvin Harris, *Patterns of Race in the Americas* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980). Also see Ingersoll, "Slave Codes and Judicial Practice in New Orleans, 1718-1807." Ingersoll forcefully refutes the Tannenbaum thesis for New Orleans squarely based on legal codes and no cultural considerations, yet his research is not as minute as Kimberly Hanger's research. Therefore, I am more inclined to follow Hanger's reasoning.

manumissions. If, however, the economy declined, circumstances were reversed. As production declined, slave prices dropped and planters looked for ways to rid themselves of human chattels. At the peak of the cycle, planters felt secure enough in their wealth to free a slave. The reverse was true in an economic downturn. Many times, according to Hanger, “masters reduced their costs by manumitting crippled, ill, or retarded slaves.”³⁵⁷

The economic and social (or material) situation in Natchez almost offset the legal changes that occurred in Spanish Natchez. Unlike New Orleans, Natchez was still in the transitional stage from a society with slaves to a slave society. Planters and settlers developed an insatiable demand for slaves, creating a climate that stimulated an economic boom. Spanish tobacco subsidies caused slave prices to skyrocket and closed loopholes that led to freedom. Anglo-American planters in Natchez sternly opposed manumissions no matter the circumstances because they were unfamiliar with the manumission laws inspired by the Catholic Church. These planters tried to resist the Spanish codes and closed some, if not all, of the legal routes to liberty. Still, slaves in Natchez sometimes achieved freedom through Spanish courts by mobilizing—and manipulating—ties of kinship and family. Natchez remained distinct from New Orleans because of its frontier status and its burgeoning slave society.

Regardless of the economic climate, women had a better chance of claiming their freedom.³⁵⁸ To illustrate, the first free person of color to register the purchase and

³⁵⁷ Laura Foner, "The Free People of Color in Louisiana and St. Domingue: A Comparative Portrait of Two Three-Caste Slave Societies," *Journal of Social History* 3, no. 4 (1970); Genovese, "Materialism and Idealism in the History of Negro Slavery in the Americas."; Hanger, *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places*, 19.

³⁵⁸ Jane Landers focused specifically on female slaves and their quest for freedom in her landmark study *Black Society in Spanish Florida*. She argued that “due to Spanish custom and law, and to the particular economic and political circumstances of Spanish Florida, a greater percentage of women of

subsequent manumission of a slave in Spanish Natchez was Jeanette. A free woman of color, she had followed Charles de Grand Pré from their former home in Point Coupée to Gran Pré's new posting in Natchez. On January 17, 1782, the records of Natchez documented the following:

Be it known, etc. that I, Jeannette, a free women of colour, residing at present in the District of Natchez., having purchased from Don Charles de Grandpre,³⁵⁹ the Commandant of the Post of Pointe Coupee, a mulatto boy named "Narcisse," my natural son, now aged 8 years, for which I paid him in cash as will more fully appear in the bill of sale, executed at Pointe Coupee afsd. On 7 June 1781, with the intent to enfranchise and set free from all service whatever the said boy.³⁶⁰

To legalize the rights of her son Jeannette had a Letter of Enfranchisement drawn up by Gran Pré that certified her son's status as a free person of color.³⁶¹ Gran Pré set a legal precedent that altered slavery in Natchez. The first Spanish governor—in all likelihood without fully comprehending the consequences—introduced the Spanish practice of *coartación* to the Natchez District. This practice secured "the right of a slave to 'purchase

African descent became free in that colony than in the Anglo colonies to the north." See Landers, *Black Society*, 139. There is now circumstantial evidence that the proximity of Spanish Florida forced the Legislature of Georgia to allow for relatively lax manumission laws in the last four decades of the eighteenth century. Compare Watson W. Jennison, "From Subjects of the King to Citizens of the Sate: Race and Status in Early Georgia," paper given at the Fourth Biennial Symposium on Southern History "Slavery in the Colonial South" at Rice University, February 18-20, 2011. The same would then also have occurred in Natchez under Spanish control. For a comparison between frontier societies with similar conclusions, see Foner, "The Free People of Color in Louisiana and St. Domingue: A Comparative Portrait of Two Three-Caste Slave Societies." Thomas Ingersoll vehemently denies that any of the slave codes in Louisiana offered the slaves a better chance of freedom, yet the example of Natchez clearly shows the fluidity, but not the ineffectiveness of Spanish law. See Ingersoll, "Slave Codes and Judicial Practice in New Orleans, 1718-1807."

³⁵⁹ The spelling of the name of Charles de Grand Pré varies throughout the sources between the Spanish Carlos and the French (or English) Charles, as well as his last name as Granpre or Gran Pré. I chose to use Charles de Grand Pré throughout the dissertation, unless used in a direct quote.

³⁶⁰ Enfranchisement, Natchez, January 17, 1782, NTC: PTR (Original in French). Also see McBee, *Natchez Court Records*, 11.

³⁶¹ Enfranchisement, Natchez, January 17, 1782, NTC: PTR.

their freedom for a stipulated sum of money agreed upon by their masters or arbitrated in courts.”³⁶²

Jeanette’s origins remain a mystery. What we can discern from the sources, however, is that she had been with Gran Pré for at least eight years, since the Captain acknowledged that Narcisse was his “natural son.”³⁶³ Gran Pré, an Acadian, could have purchased her during his tenure at Point Coupée.³⁶⁴ Whatever the case, Jeanette did not receive her freedom until after Narcisse’s birth in 1773, because children followed the status of their mothers, and Narcisse remained a slave. Jeanette followed Gran Pré to Natchez because the Spanish officer still owned her son. It seems plausible that Jeanette exercised her right to *coartación* as Gran Pré required an unspecified amount for Narcisse to claim his freedom as well.³⁶⁵

Jeanette learned valuable lessons along her way to freedom. Living in Spanish Point Coupée familiarized her with Spanish culture and legal practice. Once freed, Jeanette likely remained in the employ of Gran Pré and saved money toward her son’s freedom. Spanish law protected Jeanette’s privileges, and Narcisse could no longer be sold once an agreement for *coartación* was reached. Gran Pré ensured the freedom of mother and son by following Spanish protocol and recording their new legal status in the

³⁶² Inglis, "Searching for Free People of Color in Colonial Natchez," 97.

³⁶³ Enfranchisement, Natchez, January 17, 1782, NTC: PTR.

³⁶⁴ See Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 281-87. Hall argues that many of the slaves were imported from Africa and that numbers increased significantly after 1777. Natchez certainly absorbed a greater number of slaves than Point Coupée, yet the increase in numbers is still significant. The free population of Africans also increased while Gran Pré was in command, but it did not keep pace with the numbers of imported Africans.

³⁶⁵ Landers, *Black Society*, 140. As the author suggests, the Spanish officer might have simply manumitted his consort Jeanette without requiring a payment

court records.³⁶⁶ Jeanette was able to protect her small family with the help of the court, even though Gran Pré did not show a particular interest in their child as he forced Jeanette to buy their son.

The case raises several questions for the Spanish regime in Natchez. In the Spanish colonies, Charles de Gran Pré's actions were not uncommon. Laura Foner quotes a Spanish colonial bishop who "complains that Spanish military officers 'and a good many inhabitants live almost publicly with colored concubines,' and they did not even 'blush' when they carried their illegitimate children 'to be recorded in the registries as their natural children.'"³⁶⁷ Jeannette, the former slave, posed a different problem for Natchez planters. She and her son represented a curious case in a town that had neither seen large numbers of free people of color, nor any recorded sexual relationships between master and slave. In a small place like Natchez, no news of this scale could be hidden for long. They set a precedent that could potentially be harmful to the emerging slave society in Natchez, especially if viewed through the eyes of slaveowners with Anglo-American heritage. The large majority of the planters originated from the British seaboard colonies and was accustomed to their slave codes and racial hierarchies. Despite the occasional manumission in these colonies, the planters who made their way to Natchez would have been suspicious and resentful of a free black woman.³⁶⁸

³⁶⁶ Enfranchisement, Natchez, January 17, 1782, NTC: PTR.

³⁶⁷ As quoted in Foner, "The Free People of Color in Louisiana and St. Domingue: A Comparative Portrait of Two Three-Caste Slave Societies," 411. Military personnel were an important factor in Spanish America, especially in the late eighteenth century. Cuba, for example, absorbed many military officers as settlers, after they retired. Sherry Johnson shows that the ex-military people drove settlement in Cuba and were largely responsible for the developing planter class in Cuba. See Johnson, *The Social Transformation of Eighteenth-Century Cuba*.

³⁶⁸ See Chapter 2.

It is important to note that Jeanette's case remains something of an anomaly; her freedom bespoke personal ties to an important Spaniard, not an unsound legal footing for slavery. Still, Natchez provided more than just one chance for mother and son to tell their story and to inform their fellow people of color about the opportunities under the Spanish. From the market in Natchez, news could have spread throughout the neighborhoods of the Natchez District. Over the next two decades, black women in relationships with white men repeatedly approached the court. Like Jeanette, they often defended kin or families and tried to resist the choking grip of Natchez's developing slave society.

Resisting *coartación*?

The years between 1781 and 1786 saw a heavy involvement of both slave and free people in events in the Natchez District. All governors were military men and they changed posts frequently. The governors' main goal was the defense of the district, but the question of slavery remained integral to their administration as a powerful group of planters began to emerge during the tobacco boom in the 1780s. Local authorities understood that they needed to manage the slaves to remain in control of settlers.

Many critiques of the Tannenbaum thesis focus on the materialist interpretation of slave societies. Therefore the formative period of the Natchez District throughout the 1780s deserves special attention, as the material interest of the planters stood in stark contrast to the ideal interpretation of Spanish law. In the 1781 rebellion planters had proven that they were willing to resist the Spanish empire, and Spanish officials went along with planter demands only to keep a tentative peace. It is this process that, according to Genovese, needs to be investigated most carefully. Genovese argues that

Tannenbaum had “greatly deepened our understanding of the process by which specific slaveholding classes were formed, and those processes are, or ought to be, the central concern of a materialist interpretation of history.”³⁶⁹

This uneven power arrangement between planters and Spanish officials through the first eight years of Spanish control meant that slaves and *libres* could rarely take advantage of the Spanish court system. Planters successfully blocked access to the courts, or so it seems, since the surviving court records remain silent on manumissions or other cases involving the freedom of slaves during this period.³⁷⁰ Other Spanish cities in the circum-Caribbean such as St. Augustine, Florida, New Orleans, or Havana, Cuba, all developed systems that adapted (eventually) to a balance between slaves and planters. In Havana, slaves and free people of color formed *cabildos de nación*, fraternal organizations in which people of African descent connected and mingled with each other. Free people of color joined the militia and had a crucial part in defending Cuba from invasions. They also gained social standing through their military service.³⁷¹ In New Orleans, the Spanish also utilized free people of color in their militia, and the increase of manumissions under Spanish tutelage is undeniable.³⁷² In St. Augustine, slaves and ex-

³⁶⁹ Genovese, "Materialism and Idealism in the History of Negro Slavery in the Americas," 383.

³⁷⁰ The reason for that is twofold. There probably were not many attempts of slaves (yet) to gain advantage through Spanish courts. In addition, we don't know if all court records survived the centuries in Natchez. A part of the records disappeared and is now housed at the Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas, Austin. It is possible that more records disappeared and have not been recovered; maybe they never will.

³⁷¹ Matt D. Childs, *The 1812 Aponte Rebellion in Cuba and the Struggle against Atlantic Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 78-119.

³⁷² See Hanger, *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places*. Hanger clearly shows that the number of free people of color increased exponentially in Spanish New Orleans. However, Thomas Ingersoll argues equally eloquent that the laws, in fact, did not change enough to justify the increase. His analysis is strictly based on the local slave codes passed, and not focused on the whole society as is Hanger's analysis. See Ingersoll, *Mammon and Manon in Early New Orleans: The First Slave Society in the Deep South, 1718-*

slaves also played important roles in the defense of the city. They fought for their rights in court, gaining a good track record for decisions in their favor.³⁷³ The big difference from the Natchez District is the prolonged time all three areas spent under Spanish control. New Orleans had spent fourteen years under Spanish rule before a significant increase in the free population of Africans occurred.³⁷⁴

The Iberian empire struggled in Natchez where it had succeeded in New Orleans. It did its best to support the planters in Natchez in their endeavor to create a thriving slave society. Tobacco subsidies led planters to import slaves on a massive scale, and at the same time forced them to keep their precious labor force under tight control. Spain wanted to keep the planters under control, and its governor in Natchez understood that he could only exert stable control if he limited their complaints and kept their slave force growing. The difference, then, between Natchez and the other three slave societies was the frontier character, the economic boom climate, and the relatively short time Spain was in power. Planters in Natchez were desperate for slaves, buying them at high rates and tying their livelihood to their human property.

Two examples of slave sales illustrate the settlers' desperate need for slaves. On May 4, 1785 Richard Devil sold his slave Leville to the merchant Francisco Menar. Menar paid \$300 for Leville, which was about an average price for slaves in the 1780s. What was not so average about this particular African was his age. Leville was "more

1819. Gilbert C. Din follows Hanger's approach and he comes to comparable conclusions, also arguing that the Spanish codes indeed opened the way for freedom for many formerly enslaved Africans. See Din, *Spaniards, Planters, and Slaves*.

³⁷³ See Landers, *Black Society*.

³⁷⁴ See Hanger, *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places*, 22. Hanger's data shows that the free population of color in New Orleans increased from 97 in 1771 to 315 in 1777. This number more than doubled again in 1788 to 820. At the same time, slave imports rose slightly less, from 1,227 to 2,131.

than 50 years of age.” Slaves were in high demand, and even at his advanced age Leville was still valuable. His profession is unknown, but he could have been a skilled worker, or maybe he was able to read and write, which would explain Menar’s interest in Leville.³⁷⁵

In 1787 the demand for slaves was still strong. Estevan Minor, one of the leading planters in Natchez, sold a female slave to Jacob Liephart for \$400. Molly was a native of Virginia, fifty years old, and had experienced the woes of the internal slave trade.³⁷⁶

Despite her age, she netted Minor a handsome profit. Both Molly and Leville were clearly too old for manual labor, and given the harsh conditions of frontier life, especially for a slave, were likely not in pristine physical condition. Nevertheless, the demand for slaves even drove up the prices for old slaves, causing their owners to sell, rather than manumitting them. As these examples show, the economic boom sealed off avenues to freedom for the time being. However, the longer Spanish laws prevailed in the district, the more the walls erected by Natchez’s planters to keep their slaves in check became porous. Slaves and free people of color began to slip through the cracks and reached the open ear of Spanish justice.

The Gift of Freedom

Despite the steep prices that slaves commanded on the market in Natchez, some slaves received their freedom in the first decade of Spanish rule. These cases were rare because of the high demand for slaves of any age, gender, or origin. Natchez absorbed a growing number of slaves every year, and slaves sales in Natchez also increased

³⁷⁵ Slave sale, Richard Deval to Francisco Menar, Natchez, May 4, 1785, James Mather to Richard Deval, Natchez, April 6, 1785, Francisco Menar to Estevan Minor, Natchez, July 11, 1785 in McBee, *Natchez Court Records*, 31.

³⁷⁶ Slave sale, Estevan Minor to Jacob Liephart, Natchez, July 9, 17887, *ibid.*, 42.

substantially after 1787. The courts recorded 257 slave sales between 1788 and 1790, whereas during the previous eight years only 183 sales occurred in Natchez.³⁷⁷

Dick was the first slave to be manumitted after Narcisse was. His master, Stephen Jordan, died in early January of 1788. Jordan divided his relatively meager belongings among his family, indicating that he was not a planter of any means, and Dick was his most prized possession. Yet Jordan's will proclaimed "freedom to my negro Dick immediately," and Dick became an example of how a slave could achieve freedom under the Spanish system. The will protected Dick against any claims the family members might bring against him, and he was protected throughout Spanish Louisiana.³⁷⁸ Over time, other slaves would be fortunate enough to follow his example.

That time arrived slowly, since planters still clung to their property. Yet change became gradually visible through the court records. When William Pountney died in February 1788, his outstanding debts were recorded and their payment ordered. Among the beneficiaries was "a negro wench," who received a back pay of four dollars for one shift of work.³⁷⁹ Unfortunately, the term "negro wench" is rather ambiguous and a name is not given in the court records. The African-American woman was either a free person of color working for a wage, or she was the slave of a Mrs. Baker, who claimed her outstanding debt for room and board of Mr. Pountney. Under Spanish law the unnamed African-American woman had a right to request her share of the debt, slave or not, and she received what was due to her.

³⁷⁷ Davis, *The Black Experience in Natchez, 1720-1880*, 10.

³⁷⁸ Will of Stephen Jordan, January 18, 1788, Natchez, in McBee, *Natchez Court Records*, 49.

³⁷⁹ Estate Sale of William Poutneney, February 9, 1788, Natchez, in *ibid.*, 50.

Slaves who could not receive their freedom in the court sought it on the roads. Running away was the most frequent and visible form of slave resistance in the South. Natchez offered numerous opportunities to escape to freedom, and a plethora of white debtors set the example for runaway slaves.³⁸⁰ The frontier should have been open to slaves who sought their freedom in flight, but the court records only offer three examples of slaves and their families who were caught in their quest for freedom. Source material is simply insufficient to draw significant conclusions about runaway patterns, and the lack of court documents could also point to a high success rate of runaways. Yet that would have certainly triggered a response from the Spanish government.

Slaves certainly took advantage of Natchez's geographic isolation and the ease of transportation on the Mississippi River to escape into freedom, as frequent advertisements in newspapers of the Mississippi Territory prove.³⁸¹ However, not many runaway advertisements survive from the Spanish period. Yet slaves ran away in all slave societies, across North and South America. Jane Landers shows that slaves in Spanish Florida frequently ran away to the Seminole Indians and established themselves among the natives.³⁸² But the Indian nations around Natchez, unlike the Seminoles in Florida, adapted quickly to the slave culture of the Europeans. Adam Rothman contends that "it is romantic to imagine an alliance between African Americans and the Chickasaw, Choctaw, or Creek Indians in opposition to the expansion of slavery" during the last two

³⁸⁰ See preceding chapters on settlers fleeing to "Indian country" because of debt.

³⁸¹ Beginning in 1807, newspapers survive that indicate a much more frequent occurrence of slave flight than any sources of Spanish Natchez indicate. Those ads will be analyzed in a later chapter.

³⁸² Landers, *Black Society*, 67.

decades of the eighteenth century.³⁸³ It was during the Spanish period that the Indian nations around the district began to tighten their control over slaves and welcome chattel slavery as a means of production.³⁸⁴

Slaves were aware of the troubles that they could face in “Indian country,” yet still they tried to escape. To illustrate, Robert and Mariana escaped their master Francisco Menar with their children in June of 1791. Although the slaves certainly knew about the danger of escaping into the backcountry, freedom was more tempting than the fear of Indians. Unfortunately, the Choctaw captured the family and Stephen Minor assisted Menar in recovering them from the Indians.³⁸⁵ The Indian nations offered no protection, and so New Orleans often was the only hope for runaways. The city’s large population of free people of color and the often-chaotic life offered slaves on the run a place to disappear and virtually become free.³⁸⁶ However, according to Kimberly Hanger, the

³⁸³ Rothman, *Slave Country*, 61. See also Usner, *Indians, Settlers & Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy*, 139-44.

³⁸⁴ The role of Native Americans in harboring runaway slaves depends both on the decade and the geographic location of the Indians. As Landers points out, the Seminoles accepted runaway slaves in the eighteenth century. In the nineteenth century, however, with the onslaught of plantation slavery in middle Florida, the Seminoles often killed runaways found in their territory during the Second Seminole War (1835-1842). See Baptist, *Creating an Old South*, 204-07. Slave women escaping from slave societies in South Carolina during the late eighteenth century also could find refuge among the Creek Indians, whereas the Chickasaw and Choctaw nations were not forthcoming in offering runaway slaves sanctuary. On the absorption of female runaways slaves into Creek society see Barbara Krauthammer, "Kinship and Freedom: Fugitive Slave Women's Incorporation into Creek Society," in *New Studies in the History of American Slavery*, ed. Edward E. Baptist and Stephanie M. H. Camp (Athens: Univeristy of Georgia Press, 2006), 148-65; Barbara Krauthammer, "A Particular Kind of Freedom: Black Women, Slavery, Kinship, and Freedom in the American Southeast," in *Women and Slavery: The Modern Atlantic*, ed. Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, and Joseph C. Miller (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008), 100-27. In addition to Adam Rothman, Christina Snyder and Daniel Usner have also argued that the Choctaw and Chickasaw nations did not assist fugitive slaves, and beginning during the Spanish period, began to develop their own slave societies according to racial principles. See Snyder, *Slavery in Indian Country: The Changing Face of Captivity in Early America*; Usner, *Indians, Settlers & Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy*.

³⁸⁵ Power of Attorney, Natchez, June 16, 1791, in McBee, *Natchez Court Records*, 84.

³⁸⁶ Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 201-36. Kimberly Hanger also suggests that runaway slaves contributed to the growing population of free people of color in New Orleans, see footnote 123 in Hanger, *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places*, 192.

black militia of New Orleans excelled in slave catching and a successful escape from Natchez to New Orleans could certainly end at the hands of African creoles.³⁸⁷ Nevertheless, some slaves took the risk to escape toward the city. Peter and Mary escaped from Natchez in 1787. They made their way down the Mississippi River, through swamps and bogs, and survived the ordeal to arrive in New Orleans. Here their luck ran out, and they were captured in 1788.³⁸⁸ Adam Bingaman's slave Romeo also tried to escape to New Orleans in 1796, yet he too saw his dreams of freedom crushed as he ended up in jail. Whereas the slaves Peter and Mary were reclaimed by William Cooper and returned to Natchez, Adam Bingaman was not interested in taking Romeo back. According to Bingaman, Romeo was to be recovered from jail and then sold in the New Orleans slave market.³⁸⁹

The few recorded flight attempts during the Spanish period of Natchez were all unsuccessful. Yet the slaves who escaped from Natchez were exemplary for their valor in braving the treacherous currents of the frontier of the lower Mississippi Valley to seek their freedom. Unfortunately for the families in the records, these attempts failed. How many slaves actually ran away is impossible to discern because only unsuccessful flights are preserved for posterity. Overall, the dearth of recorded escapes and the unsuccessful attempts preserved in the records indicate how closely controlled the slaves of the Natchez District were. Despite the Spanish legal system and its leniency, slaves obviously sought freedom outside of the courts. Yet escape from slavery was a near insurmountable obstacle in any slave society.

³⁸⁷ Hanger, *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places*, 119, 21-22, 53.

³⁸⁸ McBee, *Natchez Court Records*, 139.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 126.

“What is of much greater importance to her than life, her liberty”

The United States had long coveted the Natchez District and in 1795 Spain agreed to relinquish Natchez to the American republic. Amy Lewis’s fight for freedom coincided with the transition of the Natchez District from the Spanish empire to the United States, resulting in a sudden change of the legal culture that ultimately doomed her quest for freedom.³⁹⁰ The border dispute that had caused the state of Georgia to create Bourbon County, and almost caused a rebellion in Natchez, was finally resolved in 1795.³⁹¹ On October 27, 1795, the United States and Spain signed the Treaty of San Lorenzo del Escorial, otherwise known as Pinckney’s Treaty, which finally settled the border between Spain and the United States territory at the thirty-first longitudinal line east of the Mississippi River.³⁹² Natchez thus became part of the United States, and Spain relinquished its claim to the district on paper. In reality, however, the American surveyor Andrew Ellicott did not arrive in Natchez until the early spring of 1797, and it would take him and Manuel Gayoso de Lemos, at first governor of Natchez, later governor of Louisiana, an additional year to finally transfer the district to the Americans.³⁹³

Amy Lewis’s case is exceptional in that the court records are surprisingly complete—they stretch through the Spanish and American periods. The case highlights the way the Spanish legal system allowed Lewis to maintain and defend her freedom, even to call on the courts in her defense, while it also shows that her journey to freedom

³⁹⁰ Throughout the court case, her name is spelled several different ways. Amee, Emme, Aime, Eme, Aimy and other variations were common, yet Amy is the correct English version.

³⁹¹ James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 54-57.

³⁹² Inglis, "Searching for Free People of Color in Colonial Natchez," 107.

³⁹³ For a detailed and recent analysis of the transfer from Spain to the United State see Robert V. Haynes, *The Mississippi Territory and the Southwest Frontier, 1795-1817* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010).

came to a sudden stop in the newly established American courts. Lewis tried to utilize her strong familial relation to her former master and the father of her child, yet everything was undone because Lewis's European family threw their weight behind the American law.

Both master and slaves lived inconspicuous lives on the frontier. Amy Lewis's master, Asahel Lewis, had been in Natchez since at least 1788.³⁹⁴ Although he never became a planter Lewis was not unsuccessful in Natchez. In April 1790 he and his partner Charles Boardman bought a sawmill from Bennet Truly for \$3,000.³⁹⁵

Accordingly, Asahel Lewis was a rather successful, if not extremely wealthy, inhabitant of the Natchez District. When Amy Lewis entered the picture is unclear. Lewis possibly exchanged her for a male slave named Jameson in a trade with the widow of Richard Carpenter (Lewis's sister), Mary. Mary Carpenter had received one female slave named "Anny" in her husband's will, yet the slave she gave to Lewis was called "Emma." However, they are likely the same slave, because the Spanish officials had trouble pronouncing, and subsequently correctly committing Anglo-American names to paper. The similarity of those names therefore suggests that Anny, Emma and Amy were the same slave, and that Lewis acquired her on September 9, 1790.³⁹⁶

Although Amy Lewis's history is elusive, there are several facts we can glean from the records with some certainty. She was born in 1765 and must have arrived in Natchez before 1788 for she was listed in Richard Carpenter's will of that same year. The

³⁹⁴ Estate of Richard Carpenter, Natchez, August 7, 1788, in McBee, *Natchez Court Records*, 289.

³⁹⁵ Sale, Bennet Truly to Asahel Lewis and Charles Boardman, Natchez, April 16, 1790, *ibid.*, 76. The large sum was paid off in three payments in 1792, 1793, and 1794, Lewis and Boardman retired their debt to Truly

³⁹⁶ Exchange of slaves, Natchez September 9, 1790, in *ibid.*

bill of sale drawn up by Mary Carpenter and Asahel Lewis listed her as a native of South Carolina, indicating that she was an American Creole and born into slavery. It was possible she had some knowledge of the slave laws of South Carolina and therefore understood the beneficial Spanish laws as her avenue to liberty for her and her son. It is unclear whether she was literate. Amy Lewis possibly signed some of the court documents, but as Jane Landers points out, illiterate slaves in the Spanish system had the option to dictate their missives to a court clerk. Usually, however, Spanish officials noted if a plaintiff could only sign with his or her mark, and in Amy Lewis's case, this note is missing. Consequently it is likely that she could at the very least sign her name. Throughout her years in the Natchez District, Lewis acquired knowledge of the Spanish court system that would aid her greatly in her effort to become free.

Many facts about Asahel, Amy, and Henry Lewis remain buried in history. We can only speculate how Amy and Asahel Lewis met and how they viewed their relationship. Since Asahel Lewis was the brother of Mary Carpenter it is likely that Asahel Lewis had been acquainted with the slave before he bought her in 1790.³⁹⁷ It is possible that Amy Lewis was pregnant at the time of her sale to Asahel Lewis, since a 1799 document listed her and a son named Marshall, in addition to her son Henry (Henrique).³⁹⁸ Henry was the son of Amy and Asahel Lewis and the latter wished for

³⁹⁷ Will of Richard Carpenter, Natchez, July 28, 1788, in *ibid.*, 80. One of the witnesses in a later account states that Mary Carpenter was Asahel Lewis's sister. Therefore we can assume that Lewis knew Amy, possibly intimately, before he acquired her. See: Statement of John Williams, Natchez, September 29, 1796, in NTC: PTR.

³⁹⁸ Bill of sale, Natchez, October 11, 1799, in *Natchez Court Records: Land Deed Records (NCR: LDR)*, Book B, Adams County Court House, Natchez Mississippi.

both to be freed after his death.³⁹⁹ Lewis thereby opened the road to freedom for Amy and their son, following a custom across Latin America, including Spanish Florida and Spanish Louisiana.

Mother and son should have had no problem becoming free members of Natchez society after Lewis's death, unless his debts were too high and one of his slaves had to be sold off to satisfy his creditors. Such cases were not uncommon. In 1791, for example, Ezekiel DeWitt left all his property to his wife, but freed his "negro girl Margaret when you should become of age."⁴⁰⁰ In 1787 Carlos Enrique Barchelot Desubias freed two slaves in his will, yet his outstanding debts forced both slaves to remain in bondage. The presiding judge hired them out to pay off Desubias's debt, and then they were freed.⁴⁰¹ Although Lewis and her son(s) would not share that destiny, they would still face adversity after the death of their master and father.

Asahel Lewis had possibly fallen ill by the time he wrote the manumission into his testament, since he was dead by March 1795. Amy Lewis submitted her suit to the Spanish court and demanded her freedom on the basis of her master's testament on March 9, 1795. She demonstrated her intimate knowledge of Spanish law when she informed Governor Gayoso that "his [Lewis] Estate is very little in debt, therefore after his debts were discharged, most earnestly . . . that your Excellency will be pleased to confirm Mr. Lewis [sic] desire in setting (your petitioner) me free." Lewis also reminded

³⁹⁹ Carta de Libertad, Ashael Lewis, Natchez, undated (the *Carta de Libertad* was probably recorded on November 1, 1794), in NTC: PTR, University of Texas, Austin.

⁴⁰⁰ Will of Ezekiel DeWitt, Natchez, March 21, 1791, in McBee, *Natchez Court Records*, 82.

⁴⁰¹ Will of Carlos Enrique Barchelot Desubias, Natchez, November 18, 1787 and mortgage of Carlos Enrique Barchelot Desubias, December 12, 1787, in NCR: OCR, Book 13.

Gayoso that these measures would be “consistent with the laws of the Country.”⁴⁰² She displayed a very thorough knowledge of her rights, and Gayoso dutifully acknowledged her claim and ordered a review of Asahel Lewis’s papers. Yet neither the former slave nor the Spanish governor could foresee the odyssey that Amy would have to complete before she could taste her liberty, only to have it negated by American courts.

Working and Surviving as a Free Person of Color in Spanish Natchez

Surviving in a blossoming slave society as a free person of color was difficult. Natchez remained an outpost with no resemblance to a town until the Spanish governor Manuel Gayoso de Lemos laid out a grid of plots in the 1790s and the white population usually relegated people of color to manual labor in the docks or as small artisans in town or the outlying plantations.⁴⁰³ The small population of the Natchez District did not support a service industry that could absorb many *libres*.⁴⁰⁴ Yet the court records reveal several black people who managed to work for a living wage and provide several services to the white community.

Black women for instance, successfully claimed positions as domestic laborers. To illustrate, the “Negress Betty” successfully sued for an outstanding debt of ten dollars. The debtor was Captain James Willing, the American rebel who had led a military expedition against formerly British Natchez. Betty had been washing and mending his clothes. Near the end of 1783, Betty sued for her wages since she had heard that Willing

⁴⁰² Petition of Amy Lewis, Natchez, March 9, 1794, in NTC: PTR, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin.

⁴⁰³ The “mulatto” Henry Jones, for example, operated a construction business and even contracted with slaveowners for slaves as his assistance. See Jones would later be enslaved until 1801. See McBee, *Natchez Court Records*, 101, 255-56.

⁴⁰⁴ 2,672 people lived in the Spanish Natchez District in 1792. See Census of the Natchez District, Natchez, April 27, 1793, Microfilm 2528, MDAH.

was about to leave the district for good, and Betty wanted to secure her debt before Willing could disappear.⁴⁰⁵ Black women living in the town of Natchez had an available market for their services.

One remarkable black woman who rendered a multitude of services was Nelly Price. She supported prisoners in the Natchez fort and peddled all kinds of goods. Price frequently came into contact with the courts and made full use of her rights under the Spanish system. She sued influential people like Thomas Green and Richard King, won her cases, and received payment on all outstanding debts.⁴⁰⁶ In a particular case, she served as midwife and charged eight dollars “to attendance wench in labor.”⁴⁰⁷ Price managed to claim a feeble foothold in Natchez society and utilized the courts for her own designs.

In the early 1780s Nelly Price sought a stable position to gain a steady income. In 1782 she began to live with Mitchel (Miguel) López, who was described by Spanish courts as a hat manufacturer. After López passed away in 1788, Price again called on the courts to defend her assets. She claimed several outstanding debts from López’s estate, amounting to the impressive amount of more than 970 dollars. This amount was suspect to Spanish officials, since a notation in the margins denoted that “errors [are]

⁴⁰⁵ Negress Betty v. James Willing, Natchez, November 27, 1783, in McBee, *Natchez Court Records*, 314. Willing had returned to Natchez to live in the town again under the protection of the Spanish.

⁴⁰⁶ Nelly Price v. Thomas Green, Natchez, February 26, 1783; Nelly Price v. Richard King, Natchez, April 26, 1784, in NCR: OSR, Book 3.

⁴⁰⁷ Nelly Price v. John Stowers, Natchez, February 26, 1783, in NCR: OSR, Book 3; Eleanor Price v. James Barfield, Natchez, October 30, 1782, in McBee, *Natchez Court Records*, 294-95. Nelly and Eleanor were used interchangeably in the Spanish records, depending on whether the witness was of Anglo-American descent or not.

expected.”⁴⁰⁸ In addition, the free person of color also claimed that at least part of López’s house belonged to her. Price clearly expected some difficulties, because she approached the governor of Louisiana, Estevan Miró, with her demands. Miró ordered Gran Pré to satisfy the debt, if witnesses could sustain her claims.

The witnesses that were called before Gran Pré were apparently more inclined to comment on the relationship between Price and López than on the question of debt. Witnesses declared that Price indeed had a claim to half of the house. They also supported Price’s assertion that López owed her pay for six years of work. Many witnesses also commented on the troubled relationship between López and Price. The nature of this relationship is unknown, but it is quite possible that it was amorous and physical. A former German soldier described a scene in the summer of 1782, when he explained that he “saw the free mulatto, Price Nelly [sic], who was crying and asking her what was the matter she told him that Miguel López had beaten her, and at this same time she left his house in order to go live elsewhere; and the said López coming to her begged her to return, which the said mulatto refused to do unless López promised to give her ten dollars a month.” The witness continued the testimony by reporting that Price and López eventually agreed to the terms.⁴⁰⁹

Price was clearly concerned with the treatment she had received at the hands of López, but she was still willing to return to him. Her readiness to return could have had several explanations. For one, her living arrangements with López promised a steady income and a home. Price was unable to secure enough money to purchase a house by

⁴⁰⁸ Eleanor Price v. Estate of Miguel López, Natchez, February 22, 1788; Estevan Miró to Gran Pré, New Orleans, June 12, 1788 in NCR: OSR, Book 14.

⁴⁰⁹ Witness account, Patrick Morphy, Natchez, August 9, 1788, in NCR: OSR, Book 14.

herself, which clarifies why she returned to López after being physically abused. One has to remember that Price had braved the frontier in Natchez since the British period as a free person of color, which meant that a description such as “tough” would be well-deserved. She understood how to survive in Natchez, and López offered the best opportunity. If there was a romantic relationship, Price also made a good choice by demanding a steady income. She did not want to rely solely on López’s support. With López’s death Price then sued for her outstanding income, which she evidently had not received during López’s lifetime. The lack of interest in that income before López died suggests that Price was content under his roof. She only sued twice for outstanding debts in the years from 1782 to 1786, implying that she had resources to survive at her disposal.⁴¹⁰

Those reserves were not sufficient. While many court cases in Natchez included slaves and property in excess of \$100, Nelly Price usually sued for less. She sued James Barfield for \$38, Jesse Standley for one-third of a cow, John Stowers for \$14, John Farquhar for \$5, and Thomas Green for \$26.⁴¹¹ Price’s white customers paid the small sums without delay, but Price clearly needed the money or she would have not contacted the Spanish court. She was not intimidated and recovered her debts. Price knew how to “work” the Spanish legal system, and she had successfully created an existence among European settlers that rivaled the meager existence of some of the non-planter white folk who moved in and quickly out of the Natchez District without any means of support.

⁴¹⁰ Nelly Price v. Richard King, Natchez, April 26, 1784, in NCR: OSR, Book 6; Nelly Price v. John Stanley, Natchez, March 27, 1783, in McBee, *Natchez Court Records*, 304.

⁴¹¹ Nelly Price v. Thomas Green, Natchez, February 26, 1783, Nelly Price v. John Stowers, Natchez, February 26, 1783, Nelly Price v. Jesse Standley, Natchez, March 27, 1783, in NCR: OSR, Book 3; Nelly Price v. John Farquhar, September 19, 1781, Nelly Price v. James Barfield, Natchez, December 30, 1782, *ibid.*, 291, 94-95.

Unfortunately, Nelly Price had built a house of cards that collapsed as soon as Miguel López drew his last breath. Although she sued successfully for her outstanding pay, she could never fully establish a claim for at least half of the house owned by López. The house was auctioned four times to satisfy López's creditors, yet no suitable buyer stepped forward, or the highest bid was well under the appraised price. It seems that Price was biding her time, hoping to get the house at a steal. Her hopes were dashed when in the fourth sale she bid \$301 and was quickly outbid by Robert Abrams. Although the house was finally adjudged to Price for \$305 she was evidently unable to pay the sum in cash because William Brocus served as her surety.⁴¹²

Despite having the backing of William Brocus, Price did not enjoy the house for very long. By June of 1789, the courts foreclosed on Price. She probably was not able to earn enough money to support herself and make the payments for her house. Brocus refused to take any financial responsibility for her, and Gran Pré sold the house to the Robert Abrams.⁴¹³

In all likelihood, this was the end of Nelly Price's residence in the Natchez District. No court records mention her again, either as debtor or creditor. For at least two decades she had worked and lived in Natchez and had carved out a niche among whites and blacks. She successfully navigated the society of Spanish Natchez to take advantage of the court system established by the Iberian Empire. Several leading citizens used her services as midwife and seamstress, and she became a member of the Natchez

⁴¹² Nelly Prive v. Estate of Miguel López, Natchez, September 1, 1788 – February 14, 1789, NCR: OSR, Book 14.

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*, June 13, 1789.

community. However, communal ties ended when Price sought financial support to keep her house in town and she eventually lost it to a white settler.

Libres were very much part of Natchez society, although often at or near the bottom of the social strata. Lewis, for example, was a mulatto and indebted to Polser Shilling for \$9 and to Thomas Yarrow for \$6 in 1783. Lewis may have also owed Joseph Duncan \$20 in the same year.⁴¹⁴ The current governor of Natchez, Philip Trevino, gave Lewis three days to respond to the charge against him, but Lewis disappeared from the records and it is unknown if he retired his debts. Still, free people of color operated businesses and created a livelihood for themselves, but despite the protection granted to them by the Spanish they were still largely dependent on white patrons. Even so, the Spanish courts took the claims of free people of color seriously and granted them fair trials and equal protection under the law. African Americans could not expect that courtesy from any Mississippi court for almost another two centuries.

Challenging the Master Class

The Spanish court system did differentiate between white and black. In 1791, the military commandant of Natchez, Joseph Page, imprisoned Juan (John) Bautista Morel, a suspected runaway. Morel struggled to provide sufficient evidence that he was a free man rather than a runaway slave. He submitted his petition to the court in New Orleans, where a case was opened to hear two witnesses on his behalf. Both witnesses reported that the Morel family had freed Juan after their death because the “petitioner is the son of Mr.

⁴¹⁴ The first two cases only named “Mulatto Lewis” as a claimant, whereas the third case named Lewis Clare as a claimant. The close proximity of the dates, however, suggest that it is the same Lewis. See: Polser Shilling v. Lewis, Natchez, July 14, 1783, Thomas Yarrow v. Lewis, Natchez, 1783, and Joseph Duncan v. Lewis Clare, Natchez, December 4, 1783, in McBee, *Natchez Court Records*, 309-15.

Morel's brother and a negro woman." Governor Miró himself presided over the case and set Morel free after hearing the testimony.⁴¹⁵

Another case illustrates how well slaves and free people understood and trusted the legal machinations of the Spanish courts. Betty and Jude, two black women from "Carolina," had been taken from Anthony Hutchins during Willing's Raid in 1778. They were sold in New Orleans along with other stolen slaves. Betty and Jude disappeared in the bustling town and Hutchins was never able to recover them. The women reappeared in 1786 when they appealed to the Spanish courts for their freedom. They insisted that Hutchins had initiated a process of gradual emancipation before the 1778 raid.⁴¹⁶ No testimony survived describing what had happened to Betty and Jude between the raid and 1786, but they were finally able to petition their former masters to support their claim for liberty.

Although the wheels of the Spanish legal system turned slowly, the court eventually ordered Anthony Hutchins and his wife to appear in New Orleans in 1786. Hutchins did not protest the order. To the contrary, he gave testimony supporting their claim. Hutchins swore that the two women were bound as apprentices by a British court in Carolina until they turned twenty-one. Hutchinson demonstrated his knowledge of Spanish and British laws when he added that both women were born to a "free mulatto woman," bolstering the claim that Betty and Jude deserved their freedom, since in both societies children followed the status of the mother. He also stated that his "sole motive

⁴¹⁵ Petition of Juan Bautista Morel (Mulatto) to prove his freedom, New Orleans, January 12, 1791, Dispatches of the Spanish Governors 1766-1800, Document 2675, Louisiana State Museum, New Orleans, Louisiana.

⁴¹⁶ Slaves Betty and Jude, New Orleans, no date given (probably 1786), in NCR: OSR, Book 8.

to make this declaration is to free my [Hutchins'] mind from a distress that I have long been tortured with, being assured that they are as free born as my own children.”

Hutchins concluded by asserting that he hoped both women would go free, since it was not his intention to subject them or their offspring to perpetual slavery.⁴¹⁷

Hutchins's testimony created a strong case in the women's favor. All that was left for the sisters to do was to add that “the petitioners have served the whole time of their indenture and several years more, [and] ask to be liberated.” With Hutchins and his wife as witnesses, the case was closed in New Orleans on March 21, 1788.⁴¹⁸ Betty and Jude received their freedom in a Spanish court. The kin-like ties of the two sisters to their former master allowed them to go free. Without the aid of their former master, this case might have not been resolved in their favor because his testimony was essential to establish the sisters' claim. Although Spanish law allowed them to sue for their freedom, it was their master who sealed their liberty.

Back in Natchez, Amy Lewis had pinned her hopes on this very legal system to protect her freedom and that of her son Henry. Just like Betty and Jude, she hoped to convince the Spanish officials to award her the freedom she deserved under the will of Asahel Lewis. But unlike the two sisters in New Orleans, Lewis's case coincided with a significant change in the lower Mississippi Valley. When she submitted her case to court in 1795, Spain and the United States were about to enter negotiations to finally resolve the border issues that had kept Natchez in the minds of rulers on both sides of the

⁴¹⁷ Slaves Betty and Jude, New Orleans, no date given (probably 1786), in NCR: OSR, Book 8.

⁴¹⁸ Petition of Betty and Jude, New Orleans, March 21, 1788 or 1789, in McBee, *Natchez Court Records*, 255.

Atlantic since the end of the American Revolution. Unfortunately for Lewis, the change from Spanish to American law terminated her hopes of freedom in 1799.

Amy Lewis submitted her case to the Spanish court in 1795, shortly after her master had died. In fact, her deceased master probably advised Lewis to file her suit as quickly as possible, and she profited from Lewis's knowledge of the law and her close ties to him. But Lewis's help did not reach beyond the grave. Although everything went well initially, Amy Lewis soon encountered insurmountable obstacles. Adversaries of her freedom quickly appeared in the form of relatives of Asahel Lewis.

Amy Lewis sued her former master's relatives on April 23, 1794 over a horse that she had received before his death "in recompense of her service."⁴¹⁹ Although seemingly unrelated to the freedom suit, this court case is critical in many ways. For one, Lewis was not classified as a slave, but as "negress Amy." The distinction here is an obvious one. Slaves could also bring suits against debtors, but they were clearly designated as slaves in the court records.⁴²⁰ As far as the Spanish court was concerned, Amy Lewis was no longer a slave, and she secured her property against any possible claims by producing witnesses who testified that Lewis had indeed bequeathed the horse to her.⁴²¹ Amy prevailed in this case and secured her title to the horse, but Lewis' relatives soon started a

⁴¹⁹ Negress Amy versus the heirs of Asahel Lewis, Natchez April 23, 1794, in *ibid.*, 49.

⁴²⁰ For example, on April 8, 1797, Mary Williams and her slave sued a former corporal of the Spanish military over a horse belonging to the slave. Mary Williams acknowledged that it was the slave's property, although it was technically illegal for slaves to own horses, as explained earlier in the chapter. Nevertheless, Gayoso ordered his former corporal to appear before the court and to bring the horse with him. Gayoso thereby acknowledged the right of the slave to sue for his property. In addition it was obvious that the plaintiff was a slave, not a free person of color. See: Mary Williams to Manuel Gayoso de Lemos, Natchez, April 8, 1797 and Order of Gayoso de Lemos, Natchez, April 9, 1797, in NTC: PTR.

⁴²¹ McBee, *Natchez Court Records*, 280.

campaign of their own to claim not only the horse, but much more valuable chattels, Lewis and her son.

Beginning on July 4, 1796, a legal battle ensued between both parties. The Spanish legal system in the person of Governor Gayoso tried to even the scales of justice for Amy Lewis. The *libre* tried to preempt the challenge of the Lewis family by establishing that her former master had freed her in his will.⁴²² This claim was cemented by a document found in Lewis's house, which officials identified as the legitimate will of her owner.⁴²³ The Lewis family promptly challenged the document's authenticity. Their lawyer, Joseph Bernard, submitted a petition to court on July 4, 1796 asserting that Amy Lewis was still a part of the estate and that she "for a considerable time past imagined herself to be free in consequence of a writing found among the papers of her deceased master."⁴²⁴

Bernard continued his missive with an accusation that rattled Lewis even more. He asserted "from a full examination into the matter, it appears from the evidence of four persons upon oath, that said writing [*Carta de Libertad* (freedom papers)] is not authentic, but a forgery in all its parts." Based on this claim, Bernard demanded that Lewis and her children "return to their duty and obedience."⁴²⁵ Bernard's statement reasserted his clients' claim to Lewis and her small family. Interestingly, Lewis had taken both Henry and Marshall with her and extended liberty to both of them, but Asahel Lewis

⁴²² Petition of Amy Lewis, Natchez, March 9, 1794, in NTC: PTR, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin.

⁴²³ Negress Emma versus heirs of Asahel Lewis, Natchez, November 1, 1794, in McBee, *Natchez Court Records*, 280.

⁴²⁴ Joseph Barnard to Manuel Gayoso de Lemos, July 4, 1796, in NTC: PTR.

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*

had only mentioned Henry in his will. Therefore it seems unlikely that Amy Lewis forged the document that asserted her freedom, since she would have included in the document her second child, of which we know nothing but his name. The Spanish had sent Charles de Gran Pré, the highest military official and former military governor of Natchez, to Lewis's house in January to ensure that all papers were in order. Gran Pré and the witnesses found the will and the *carta de libertad*, yet the Spanish officer remarked in his report that they needed further investigation into the document's signature and the handwriting. He stopped short of calling it a forgery, but he was suspicious.⁴²⁶

Lewis was upset. She understood her perilous situation but remained determined to claim her freedom. She asked Gayoso for a lawyer two weeks after Bernard had submitted his claim to the court. In her plea for a lawyer, either she or the Spanish clerk recording the claim used the surname Lewis for the first time.⁴²⁷ Previously, it was always negress Amy, but never Amy Lewis. Amy Lewis understood how the Spanish system worked and the seriousness of the accusations made by her adversaries. Gayoso acknowledged the woman's request and named Manuel Fescada, a highly regarded Spanish planter and lawyer, to represent her.⁴²⁸ The Spanish law supported her claim and Asahel Lewis' will attested to her liberty. Yet when the document came under scrutiny, the Spanish court also acknowledged the rights of the heirs. Therefore Lewis needed a representative who could navigate the Spanish courts with more dexterity than she could muster.

⁴²⁶ Report of Charles de Gran Pré, Natchez, January 30, 1796, in NTC: PTR.

⁴²⁷ Amy to Manuel Gayoso de Lemos, Natchez, August 5, 1796, in NTC: PTR.

⁴²⁸ Order of Manuel Gayoso de Lemos, Natchez, August 5, 1796, in NTC: PTR.

While the case continued to wind its way through the Spanish courts, the shadow of the impending United States takeover loomed ever larger over the Natchez District. Yet Lewis stood not alone in her fight for freedom, and while she struggled, others succeeded in Natchez. In 1796, the slave Nanette also entered into a suit that would ultimately grant her liberty. Nanette had a powerful spokesperson on her side. Her father, a free person of color named Samba from New Orleans, supported the nineteen-year-old's claim by offering to pay a court-regulated sum to her master, William Brocus. Nanette was originally from New Orleans, and her father had purchased her from Brocus for \$460 on August 5, 1796. Gayoso quickly resolved Nanette's case; Brocus received the money and relinquished any right to his former slave. Gayoso thus supported the Spanish law of *coartación*, yet Nanette was the last person who received her freedom under Spanish rule and through *coartación* in Natchez. After her, the shadow of the American legal system expunged the light of freedom from slavery in the Natchez District, as Lewis was to learn shortly after Nanette escaped the clutches of slavery.⁴²⁹

Amy Lewis had no reason to despair yet, but she was wise to request a lawyer. Fescada familiarized himself with the case and proceeded to pursue a clever tactic. Instead of trying to prove the validity of the suspicious document, he tried to establish the exact relationship between Lewis and his slave.⁴³⁰ On September 10, 1796, Fescada began to interrogate Amy Lewis. Under the threat of punishment, he asked her if she had indeed forged her master's signature, which she denied. Satisfied with her answers, Fescada then proceeded to establish facts about the relationship. His familiarity with the

⁴²⁹ Purchase of Slave Nanette, Natchez, July 21, 1796, in NTC: PTR.

⁴³⁰ Proceedings of Manuel Fescada, Natchez, September 10, 1796, in NTC: PTR.

Spanish law benefitted Lewis, since Fescada established five distinctive points that he believed would undoubtedly prove that her claim was just and her freedom legitimate.⁴³¹

The first point Fescada tried to prove was that the relationship Amy and Asahel had kindled went beyond that of master and slave. Spanish law did not recognize a relationship as marriage until vows were exchanged in church, but the lawyer still intended to present the relationship of slave and master as close as possible to what Anglo-American tradition referred to as common law. Fescada maintained that Amy and Asahel Lewis ate at one table and slept in the same bed, and that they exhibited this behavior not only when they were alone. Fescada also continued to call Lewis by her full name, adding her surname to every document presented to court. His point became especially clear when Fescada explained that the fruit of this relationship was a child and that Lewis had declared publicly that the child was his. Fescada showed that Lewis had nursed her master during his fatal illness and that Asahel had rewarded Amy with her freedom upon his death.

Fescada's tactic had several benefits that Amy Lewis would not have enjoyed under American law. As Joshua Rothman points out, for example, interracial common-law marriage in the United States "was always vulnerable to legal harassment and its legitimacy could always at least be called into question."⁴³² Although Spanish society frowned on interracial marriages as well, unions between a white man and a woman of

⁴³¹ Ibid.

⁴³² Joshua D. Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex and Families across the Color Line in Virginia, 1787-1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 70, 80-82. Rothman clearly demonstrates that although it was well known that a racially mixed couple lived in Charlottesville, Virginia, their status was never that of legally married partners, nor could they benefit in any way from their de-facto common-law marriage.

color were not illegal.⁴³³ But Amy never married Asahel in church, either Protestant or Catholic. Nevertheless, Fescada presented Amy Lewis as more than a common slave. Therefore, Fescada argued, the deed of manumission was authentic and Amy Lewis and Henry were legally free. When Asahel Lewis acknowledged paternity of Henry and freed him, he made him an *hijo natural reconocido* (recognized natural child), which explains why Fescada was so intent on the relationship between Asahel and Henry. Spanish law then recognized Henry's status as a son and he had a right to his father's inheritance.⁴³⁴ Furthermore, Henry was not seen as a 'bastard,' but his "maternal and paternal heritage was legally defined."⁴³⁵ Thus, Fescada succeeded to establish a recognized kinship relation between father and son as defined by Spanish law.⁴³⁶

The principal issue was that witnesses to the signing of the will arrived late at the Lewis residence, after Asahel had already passed away. Fescada therefore demanded that a number of citizens appear before the court to testify in the case, hoping that they would corroborate Lewis's version of events. Among those called were William Bisland, Joseph Backor, William Boardman and George Cochran—all influential and powerful people. This alone attests to the importance the Spanish court gave to the case. Fescada made

⁴³³ Karen Y. Morrison, "Slave Mothers and White Fathers: Defining Family and Status in Late Colonial Cuba," *Slavery and Abolition* 31, no. 1 (2010): 36.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*, 34-35. Medieval Castilian law declared that the father of a child conceived out of wedlock accepted "the cost of 'subsistence, nurturing, and education.'" See footnote 26, page 49. Also see Linda Lewin, *Surprise Heirs: Illegitimacy, Patrimonial Rights, and Legal Nationalism in Luso-Brazilian Inheritance Laws, 1750-1821*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

⁴³⁵ Morrison, "Slave Mothers and White Fathers: Defining Family and Status in Late Colonial Cuba," 46.

⁴³⁶ For a detailed debate about alternative kinship see Karen Y. Morrison, "Creating and Alternative Kinship: Slavery, Freedom, and Nineteenth-Century Afro-Cuban Hijos Naturales," *Journal of Social History* 41, no. 1 (2007): 55-80.

sure that Lewis received the due process of Spanish justice.⁴³⁷ He demanded that all witnesses answer to five statements involving Amy, Asahel, and Henry. First, the witnesses had to declare if they knew the couple in Natchez, second, if Asahel had treated Amy as his legitimate wife, third if Asahel had hidden his relationship with Amy from the public. Much more interesting to Amy Lewis were points four and five. The fourth question demanded that the witnesses testify to the relationship between Asahel Lewis and Henry, and if Lewis had publicly acknowledged paternity of the child. The last point asked the witnesses to testify whether Lewis had ever mentioned to anyone that he had any intention of freeing his slaves.⁴³⁸

Over the next nineteen days, witnesses made their appearance in front of Gayoso, who understood the magnitude of this case. Gayoso conducted the hearings in Spanish, and even though he spoke English—and was in fact selected for this post because of it—he elected to employ a translator throughout the testimonies. He clearly expected that this case might make its way to New Orleans, in which case the documents needed to be in Spanish. Other cases limited to property in Natchez involving English-speaking settlers were usually tried in English.

The first people to testify were Guillermo (William) and Juana (Jane) Kirkwood. Both had known Amy and Asahel for about six years, and both acknowledged that Amy and Asahel had lived together, eaten together, and slept together. Neither of the Kirkwoods left any doubt that Asahel had treated Amy like a wife. The most enlightening part of their testimony related to Henry. Guillermo Kirkwood assured the court that

⁴³⁷ Proceedings of Manuel Fescada, Natchez, September 10, 1796, in NTC: PTR.

⁴³⁸ Ibid.

Lewis “had always recognized the small mulatto as his son Henry” and intended to send him to Philadelphia for schooling. In addition, the couple agreed that Asahel had made it clear that Amy was to be freed after his death and that his son Henry was to inherit all of his property.⁴³⁹ Asahel Lewis evidently had a deep paternal affection for his son.

Although Henry was a *libre*, Lewis planned to give him every opportunity to succeed in life. Only white children could take advantage of education in the lower Mississippi Valley. Natchez did not build an academy until 1801, and New Orleans had yet to offer sufficient educational facilities for black and white, as did other cities in the Caribbean.⁴⁴⁰ Currently, New Orleans only had educational facilities for girls within the Ursuline convent. Boys had no institutions they could attend unless the family hired a private tutor. Lewis clearly understood the difficulty of providing an education for his boy on the frontier. Even though Spanish laws provided people of color with paths to freedom and laws to defend their rights, education was not among those benefits. Sending Henry to Philadelphia was a conscious choice on Lewis’s part to better his son’s chances of success.

The Kirkwoods did not hesitate to declare that Asahel treated Amy “on all occasions as his own wife.” This suggests that Natchez society in the 1790s was not as racially closed as other slave societies in the territory of the United States.⁴⁴¹ Both witnesses understood that Amy Lewis was still a slave, yet they seem to have had no

⁴³⁹ Testimony of Guillermo Kirkwood, Natchez, September 22, 1796; Testimony of Juana Kirkwood, Natchez, September 22, 1796, in NTC: PTR.

⁴⁴⁰ See Emily Clark, *Masterless Mistresses: The New Orleans Ursulines and the Development of a New World Society, 1727-1834* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007). The same is also true for Cuba in the nineteenth century, see Morrison, "Creating and Alternative Kinship: Slavery, Freedom, and Nineteenth-Century Afro-Cuban Hijos Naturale," 55-80.

⁴⁴¹ Testimony of Guillermo Kirkwood, Natchez, September 22, 1796, in NTC: PTR.

moral qualms about the union. They were frequently guests in the Lewis house and treated Amy Lewis as the wife and hostess.⁴⁴² Other members of white society during these times, especially women, would not have interacted with the ease that Jane Kirkwood did with the mixed-race family. Many mistresses feared that their husbands would step outside their marital vows with slave women, which was then blamed on the overly sensual stereotype of black women called “Jezebel.”⁴⁴³ In Spanish Natchez, however, Amy became an accepted part of society to a degree that people accepted her as a friend, hostess, mother, and wife.

The other testimony collected by the Spanish government echoed the sentiments expressed in the preceding records. Abner Pipes saw Asahel and Amy horseback ride together, which Pipes interpreted as a sign of the loving relationship. He also “noted that he [Asahel] seemed to have much affection for the little mulatto [Henry],” but he did not know if Henry was Asahel’s son.⁴⁴⁴ John Foley and William Barland also confirmed that Lewis intended to give freedom to Amy “and that he had given all his property to his

⁴⁴² Testimony of Guillermo Kirkwood, Natchez, September 22, 1796; Testimony of Juana Kirkwood, Natchez, September 22, 1796, in NTC: PTR. Although there were numerous reports in the antebellum South of black mistresses in cities like Charleston, South Carolina, even in urban centers an open relationship would have been somewhat scandalous. As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese has shown, the racism expressed by many southern women was “generally uglier and more meanly expressed than that of the men.” See Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake & Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 405-410. White women suspiciously watched the behavior of free black women or female slaves and white men, only begrudgingly accepting the temptations offered by these “licentious” women as a necessary evil that came with slavery. See James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 218; Scarborough, *Masters of the Big House: Elite Slaveholders of the Mid-Nineteenth-Century South*, 66-67. Scarborough shows that there was indeed “a pronounced educational pipeline to the Northeast.” Lewis planned to create a similar opportunity for Henry.

⁴⁴³ See Louis A. Pérez, *On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality, and Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

⁴⁴⁴ Testimony of Abner Pipes, Natchez, September 22, 1796, in NTC: PTR.

son.”⁴⁴⁵ Like the preceding witnesses, all three men offered no indication that Amy Lewis lied or otherwise cheated to achieve her freedom. Asahel Lewis had made his intentions clear to friends and had exhibited every behavior that was commonly accepted between husband and wife.

The report of many witnesses that Lewis planned to bestow his property on his son suggests why Lewis’s family pursued the case so vigorously. Amy, of course, was by herself a valuable commodity if she could be sold as a slave in the vibrant slave market in Natchez.⁴⁴⁶ Slaves could own property under Spanish law, but Asahel Lewis had left no will that declared Amy Lewis an heir. However, if the court confirmed Henry’s freedom, he stood to inherit some of his father’s possessions due to his status as a free natural child. Lewis had already successfully sued for her horse, and the Spanish courts had no qualms about delivering judgment on behalf of people of color in Natchez if their claims were justified. Lewis’s heirs then stood to lose more than just the immediate value of Amy and her offspring.⁴⁴⁷ They also faced a possible lawsuit over half of the mill that the deceased operated. The white family members also might have simply been playing for time. Understanding that the American laws would be entirely on their side, they may have intended on stalling the case long enough for the United States to take control of Natchez. Amy Lewis would barely have a chance under the much more stringent and limited laws for black people in the American legal system.

⁴⁴⁵ Quoted from Testimony of John Foley, Natchez, September 26, 1796; Testimony of William Barland, Natchez, September 27, 1796, in NTC: PTR.

⁴⁴⁶ Amy would later be sold for a sum of \$425 (U.S.), which corresponds to roughly \$7,770.00 (U.S.) in today’s consumer price index. See <http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare/>. Accessed on July 25, 2011. See Deed of sale, Natchez, October 11, 1799, in NCR: LDR.

⁴⁴⁷ Unfortunately, and somewhat surprisingly, the inventory of Asahel Lewis’s estate did not survive in the Natchez records.

John Williams's testimony shed further light on the circumstances surrounding Asahel Lewis's death and Amy Lewis's role in the events. Williams admitted that Amy was promised her freedom, that she had been treated as a wife by Asahel Lewis, and that Lewis had publicly announced that Henry was his son. Yet Williams also added an important caveat to the story of Amy Lewis's struggle. Williams stated that he had specifically asked Asahel about Amy, and Lewis had told him that he wanted to pay off his debt, then free Amy, and relocate with her to the United States.⁴⁴⁸ Lewis's sickness interfered with those plans. According to Williams, Asahel had fallen sick in the house of his sister, Amy's former owner Mary Carpenter. The latter apparently neglected to care for her sickly brother, but Amy attended him with "great affection." It was there that Asahel Lewis repeated his desire to emancipate Amy after his death, a decision which apparently angered Carpenter, who may have wanted Amy and her offspring to return to her possession.⁴⁴⁹

Fescada introduced no further evidence after he finished the interviews. Amy Lewis appeared in court on an unrelated matter on January 11, 1797, when she sued Juan Rodriguez for payment over some goods sold to him. It seems that she was indeed able to provide an income for herself and her children by working for townspeople.⁴⁵⁰ In April 1797, Fescada implored Gayoso to verify Amy and Henry Lewis's freedom based on the testimony and the *carta de libertad* found among Lewis's papers. It is unclear why Fescada only included one son in his plea. He might have deemed the chances of also

⁴⁴⁸ The debt Williams mentioned was probably the last payment for the sawmill operated by Lewis.

⁴⁴⁹ Testimony of John Williams, Natchez, September 29, 1796, in NTC: PTR.

⁴⁵⁰ Amy vs. Juan Rodriguez, Natchez, January 11, 1797, in NTC: PTR.

freeing Marshall miniscule, and the latter only appeared in the documents twice. If his fortune was connected to Amy Lewis's, the Spanish court documents make no mention of it. Gayoso forwarded the request to Asahel Lewis's heirs and committed everything to the records so that Amy Lewis's status could be secured, once a decision was finally reached.⁴⁵¹

Two weeks passed before Fescada again approached the court. This time he demanded freedom for his clients as well as a provision that would secure Henry's education. Fescada suggested that some of Lewis's property should be added to a fund, which then would provide the necessary financial support to send the boy to school, as was his right as a natural recognized son (free) under Spanish law. The witness accounts supported the claims that Henry was indeed Asahel's natural son.⁴⁵² The Spanish courts appeared poised to award not only Amy Lewis her freedom, but also additional property of Asahel Lewis to benefit Henry's education.⁴⁵³

Unfortunately for Amy Lewis, the Treaty of San Lorenzo smothered her hopes, and the swift current of the Mississippi River brought the new American dignitaries and their laws to Natchez. The strong forces that had pulled the interest of the United States toward the Natchez District proved too difficult for Spain to defeat, and in the waning moments of Spanish control in 1797 Amy Lewis's case was the first victim of the

⁴⁵¹ Manuel Fescada to Manuel Gayoso de Lemos, Natchez, April 8, 1797, in NTC: PTR.

⁴⁵² Spanish law required the support of natural children (as distinct from legitimate children). They had certain rights to inherit, and could not be disinherited. See Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth - Century Chesapeake & Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 405-10; Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*, 349.

⁴⁵³ Morrison, "Slave Mothers and White Fathers: Defining Family and Status in Late Colonial Cuba," 46.

treacherous currents. The summer of 1797 brought big changes to Natchez. The emissary of the United States, Andrew Ellicott, had finally established the process for a successful transfer of power with Gayoso. Gayoso and his officers were embroiled in the complex redeployment of the Spanish troops to the Spanish lands in Louisiana. Charles de Gran Pré was re-assigned to Baton Rouge, and Joseph Vidal became the commandant of the newly established post of Concordia, across the Mississippi River from Natchez in Louisiana. Gayoso himself was made governor of Louisiana and left Natchez in late July of 1797, arriving in New Orleans on August 5.⁴⁵⁴ Throughout all these proceedings, which had an international impact and changed the landscape of the lower Mississippi Valley forever, the case of Amy Lewis remained unresolved.

On July 24, 1797, five days before Gayoso left the Natchez District for New Orleans, Amy Lewis grasped the last straw and sent her heart-wrenching plea to the departing governor. Obviously the intervention of Fescada had not borne fruit over the last two months, and the news that Gayoso would leave the district behind struck cold fear into her heart. With Gayoso and his lieutenants gone, Spanish law also made its exit from the district. Lewis understood what this meant for her, Henry, and their freedom. Therefore she pleaded one more time with Gayoso:

Your Excellencies humble petitioner late the slave of Mr. Asahel Lewis deceased, presents herself before your Excellency and says she has for nearly three years unsuccessfully prosecuted before your Excellency for what is of much greater importance to her than life, her liberty, which by the mildness of the laws, she is led to hope she is entitled to.⁴⁵⁵

⁴⁵⁴ White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*

⁴⁵⁵ Amy Lewis to Manuel Gayoso de Lemos, Natchez, July 24, 1797, in NTC: PTR.

Once again, Lewis demonstrated intimate knowledge of the legal system. She knew that American law was more stringent and would not champion her cause, since she had been enslaved before in South Carolina. The mildness of the Spanish law, in comparison, was her only hope to assure liberty for Henry and herself. Unlike the other court documents, Lewis's last plea was written in English, hinting at the time constraints she was working under. One more time she beseeched Gayoso to honor the law and grant her liberty.

Knowing that Gayoso was about to become the primary judicial official in New Orleans, Lewis wrote: "That as helpless and unprotected as she is, she sees no prospect of a speedy determination and the pangs of suspense being more terrible to her than the most dreadful certainty, she begs your Excellency to grant her permission, to remove her suit to the tribunal at Orleans where a more speedy decision may in all probability take place."⁴⁵⁶ One last time, Lewis demonstrated her knowledge of the ways in which the Spanish legal system operated. She correctly assumed that she would lose any legal protection under the newly established American legal system. Understanding her dire situation, she saw only one solution. New Orleans was still Spanish, and Gayoso, who had until now followed Spanish law to the letter in Lewis's case, would be the highest authority in that city. Therefore she tried to move her case to New Orleans.

What exactly happened is unknown. Lewis's presence in the Spanish court documents ended, but it would return shortly in the first American records in Natchez. She was unsuccessful in moving her case to New Orleans, and in the chaos of the power change in Natchez, her liberty was one casualty that went unnoticed. With Gayoso and the Spanish law gone, her case crumbled. Fescada had no sway over the new judicial

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid.

power. Lewis could no longer call on the court since her status was not defined as free. With the arrival of American judges, black people immediately lost their voice in the documents. After four years of fighting, hoping, and ostensibly winning, her hopes for freedom were destroyed by the powers in Madrid and Washington.

Amy Lewis made it clear to the Spanish court that there was no monetary value that could be attached to her freedom and that liberty was the most valuable prize she could imagine. The white relatives of Asahel Lewis begged to differ. They pinpointed her value at \$425 and sold Amy and her older son Marshall back into slavery to Ebenezer Rees in October of 1799. Two years had passed, but Lewis did not appear in any surviving court records. Maybe she continued her fight, but whatever she did, she ultimately lost.⁴⁵⁷

For some reason, however, they manumitted Henry. Why the family relinquished their title to Henry is unknown. It seems doubtful that they did so for any charitable reason. Nowhere in the deed of manumission did they mention that Henry was Asahel's son, likely because the status of the son followed the mother's status. They only described him as a mulatto slave, the only hint that Asahel could indeed have fathered him.⁴⁵⁸ Although Asahel Lewis's family did not acknowledge Henry's paternity, they freed him nevertheless. The reason for this, at least, could have been the public statements of the witnesses brought to court by Amy Lewis. All witnesses reported that Lewis had publicly announced that Henry was his son and possibly public pressure forced Lewis's heirs to manumit Henry. Either way, Henry became a free person, but his

⁴⁵⁷ Bill of sale, Natchez, October 10, 1799, in NCR: LDR.

⁴⁵⁸ Deed of manumission, Natchez, October 10, 1799, in NCR: LDR.

mother and his half-brother remained enslaved. Henry could not purchase the freedom of his mother and brother easily, as he could have in Spanish Natchez, and there are no sources indicating that he tried. Aside from the legal realities under American law, Henry was not yet even ten years old. No trace remains of where he went after the manumission, or how he supported himself. His mother and stepbrother also disappear from the court records. The family that Amy Lewis tried so hard to keep together succumbed to the dark currents of the Atlantic world and disappeared in the anonymity of slavery in the steadily expanding Natchez District.

Could Amy Lewis have been saved under Spanish rule? Speculating can be utterly fruitless, but in this case there is evidence that Manuel Gayoso de Lemos would have granted Lewis and her son liberty. Shortly after he arrived in New Orleans, an eerily similar case was brought before him. In 1797 Renato Trahan of New Orleans had died, and his will also included a provision to free his “black mistress and their mulatto children.” As with Amy Lewis, the white heirs in the case contested the will, wanting to claim the human property of Trahan for themselves. Gayoso, possibly inspired by the Lewis case, granted the black mistress and her children her freedom and one-fifth of the estate. According to historian Gilbert C. Din, Gayoso ruled in favor of the slave because “she was the mother of Trahan’s children” and the “ruling followed Spanish law.” The only caveat was that the price of the woman and that of her children was subtracted from her part of the inheritance.⁴⁵⁹ Margarita Josepha, another slave, also pleaded her case with Gayoso one year later. She argued that she was “half white and her children were sired by

⁴⁵⁹ Din, *Spaniards, Planters, and Slaves*, 200.

a white man.” Gayoso freed Josepha and her children.⁴⁶⁰ Judging by Gayoso’s decisions in those cases, Amy Lewis would have become a legally free person if her case had not overlapped with the American take over.

Conclusion

Black people in Natchez had struggled under the shadow of slavery since the French introduced it into the district in the 1720s. Under Spanish rule, small windows to freedom opened, which allowed a handful of slaves to escape. Compared to the opportunities for freedom in New Orleans, these cracks were tiny. Most black people had to rely on connections with white husbands, lovers, and fathers to succeed. For example, the cases of Jeanette, Amy Lewis, and Nelly Price were framed as family matters, not necessarily struggles for freedom. Their struggles illuminate both possibilities and limitations for black people to escape the control of whites in Spanish Natchez. The Spanish laws did influence Natchez’s legal culture, but its legal tradition was British. Its inhabitants were predominantly British and American and they bristled under Spanish control. Still, the Spanish managed to install a legal system that both appeased the American planters and opened alleys to freedom for slaves. Just as Laura Edwards has found for the post-revolutionary American South, Spanish legal tradition had to be somewhat adjusted to govern American subjects, and the resulting hybrid legal system created both opportunities and challenges for all parties involved.

Some people of color benefitted from the new legal system, although Natchez experienced a boom period under the Spanish regime that deterred planters from giving liberty to their valuable human property. The largest increase in the population of free

⁴⁶⁰ Holmes, *Gayoso*, 223.

people of color in New Orleans appeared from 1771 to 1777, a period of change, economic decline, and imperial uncertainty. More than two hundred black people received their freedom in those years, and the number of free people in New Orleans continued to increase the longer the Spanish regime lasted in the city.⁴⁶¹ Natchez census records do not even list a column for *libres*, but they certainly existed. Records in Natchez suggest that the cases presented in this chapter were the exception to the rule, but black people challenged planter control openly backed by a strong legal system. The laws of the Natchez District would never allow direct challenges of black people again after 1798.

Lewis's case fell right into the period of change in Natchez and demonstrated convincingly how different the legal systems of the United States and the Spanish Empire were. Not only did her case end abruptly under American control, but she also lost any voice that she had possessed under Spanish rule. For Lewis and other black people in Natchez, the regime change put a sudden end to any chances of freedom outside the mercy of their master. Yet even these cases disappeared once "King Cotton" took the throne and slaves became even more prized as commodities. Lewis was forced back into slavery and vanished from the records, as the color of her skin no doubt deprived her of the legal channels to claim her rights. Yet even the short period she spent in court asserting her freedom allows historians a glimpse at the ever changing legal systems and the way black people tried to utilize every possibility to gain liberty. In Amy Lewis's

⁴⁶¹ Lewin, *Surprise Heirs: Illegitimacy, Patrimonial Rights, and Legal Nationalism in Luso-Brazilian Inheritance Laws, 1750-1821*; Bianca Premo, *Children of the Father King: Youth, Authority, & Legal Minority in Colonial Lima* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

case, freedom was not forthcoming, but her son remained free, and that was likely worth a great deal to his mother.

CHAPTER V

NEW CROPS, NEW RULERS: THE COTTON BOOM AND AMERICAN
ASCENDANCY

We continue to cultivate cotton with very great success. It is by far the most profitable crop we have ever undertaken in this country. The climate and soil suit it exactly, and I am of opinion that the fiber, already of so fine in quality, will be still better when our lands are well cleared and the soil properly tritured.

William Dunbar to John Ross, Natchez, May 23, 1799⁴⁶²

The last decade of the eighteenth century brought change to the Natchez District. The discovery of the cotton gin and the United States' desire to make Natchez a part of the republic led to the departure of Spain from the district in 1798 and ultimately from the lower Mississippi Valley. Yet when Manuel Gayoso de Lemos came to Natchez as new governor in the summer of 1789, neither he nor the people of the district could foresee that the United States would be in control of the district nine years later. It fell on Gayoso to develop Natchez's economy, negotiate with its inhabitants, and to implement Spanish colonial policies that would court the planters and convince them to stay loyal to Spain. The greatest difficulty for Gayoso, as one historian put it, was "to steer a smooth course between autocracy and democracy, between the divine right paternalism of Spain and the individualism of the frontier."⁴⁶³

The "frontier" that Gayoso encountered in 1789 continued to change dramatically throughout his governance. Whereas Natchez during the first decade of Spanish rule can be described as borderless, the westward expansion of the United States turned Natchez into a borderland by the time Gayoso took office. Before the 1790s, Spain held sway over

⁴⁶² William Dunbar to John Ross, Natchez, May 23, 1799, in Claiborne and Lagrone, *Mississippi*, 143.

⁴⁶³ Holmes, *Gayoso*, 33.

a Natchez District which resembled “a meeting place of people in which geographic and cultural borders were not clearly defined.”⁴⁶⁴ The emergence of the United States as a continental power in the 1790s through its expansion into modern-day Kentucky and Tennessee turned the lower Mississippi Valley into a clearly defined borderland. Then, as the United States pressed Spain to negotiate the Treaty of San Lorenzo in 1795, the Natchez District turned into a bordered land, theoretically with clearly defined borders.⁴⁶⁵ Nonetheless, it took Spain and the United States an additional three years to negotiate these borders in Natchez, and in this period fell the advent of cotton and other economic struggles that forced both empires to court Natchez planters in support of their measures.

Slaves were the losing party in the transfer of power. Both the United States and Spain recognized that slavery was essential to Natchez’s growth. But as historians Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron argue, “to the peoples for whom contested borderlands afforded room to maneuver and preserve some element of autonomy, this transition [from borderlands to bordered lands] narrowed the scope for political independence.” The status of Natchez as a borderland allowed slaves to find relief from slavery to some degree in Spanish courts. Unfortunately for Natchez’s slave population, “intercultural frontiers yielded to hardened and more ‘exclusive’ hierarchies” under American control.⁴⁶⁶ As demonstrated by the example of Amy Lewis, for instance, the transfer from Spain to the

⁴⁶⁴ Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron developed a concept which takes into account the changing environs that define a frontier or borderland. I utilize their definition to show that Natchez moved from a frontier to a borderland, and eventually to a bordered land. Key to their model is the missing clear definition of borders, and Indian and European nations all had some claim, but no defined borders, to Natchez. See Adelman and Aron, "From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in between in North America," 815.

⁴⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 814-17.

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 816.

United States further diminished chances for slaves to create situations in which they could attain freedom. Therefore, there are only a few examples of black actors in this chapter, but as the previous chapter and the following chapter show, the role of slaves could never be diminished by either Spain or the United States. It is important, however, to investigate the process of imperial change to show how planters engaged imperial politics and policies, since those changes did have a tremendous effect on the lives of the slave population in Natchez.

Gayoso succeeded in his mission to court the settlers for the Spanish empire. He backed the planters' plans to expand tobacco production, and he supported them in the economic crisis following the end of tobacco subsidies until the economy recovered. He assisted planters in numerous other ways, understanding that his power, to a degree, rested on the shoulders of the major landowners. Although these settlers sometimes challenged his judgment, they never contested Gayoso's authority until the American plan to incorporate Natchez into the new nation succeeded in 1795.

The transition of power was laden with pitfalls. It took two years for the American delegation under the leadership of Andrew Ellicott to arrive in the remote frontier settlement, and Ellicott's arrival sparked immediate unrest. Gayoso soon found himself embroiled in small conflicts that obstructed his administration until it came to a grinding halt in the summer of 1797 when the Spanish king promoted Gayoso to the post of governor of Louisiana and he left Natchez for good. Both men understood that Natchez could only be governed with the help of its planters and both went to great lengths to gain the support of the landowners. Ultimately, the planters in Natchez found

Gayoso more likeable than Ellicott, but the booming United States backed Ellicott, which swayed many settlers in Natchez to support the latter.

This chapter introduces the issues that Gayoso faced in Natchez and relates his efforts to the struggle over the lower Mississippi Valley. Constantly fearing warfare—either with Indians or the United States—the governor had to evaluate carefully his policies to keep the Natchez District in equilibrium in an increasingly tumultuous lower Mississippi Valley. Gayoso had to negotiate conflicts between planters and ranchers, marking the last threshold of change to an agricultural society dominated by plantations. He had to stabilize military control in Natchez, and he did so by creating an elite company, led by himself, that would supplement royal Spanish troops in case of emergencies.⁴⁶⁷ Gayoso also endeared himself to many planters by constantly supporting issues that were critical to the planters. Multiple episodes demonstrate how Gayoso courted the planters and tried to weld Natchez to the Spanish empire.

In addition to being the supreme legal authority in Natchez, Gayoso also took an active part in social events, making close friendships with planters, especially with the Minor clan. He also relied on established Spaniards who had resided in Natchez since its occupation by the Spanish in 1779, most closely working with Charles de Gran Pré, his military commander. This close-knit personal network allowed Gayoso to maintain peace and order in Natchez even when Andrew Ellicott stirred the waters and threatened Gayoso with a rebellion of Natchez's citizens. In short, Gayoso was able to secure tentative loyalty from at least some of the planters in Natchez, based on economic

⁴⁶⁷ Spain's standing army in the New World was very small. Militias were thus common and Natchez was no exception.

policies of the Spanish Empire and Gayoso's willingness to vouch for them in the Spanish royal court.

Andrew Ellicott, on the other hand, found his hopes for a quick and smooth transfer of the district to the United States swiftly destroyed. Although American planters dominated the population in Natchez, Ellicott did not automatically command their loyalty. As the U.S. territorial governors who succeeded Ellicott soon learned, governing Natchez, and later the Mississippi territory, could only be achieved through the support of the planters.⁴⁶⁸ Ellicott's journal and his letters to his superiors in Washington attest that the American already had his hands full in 1797, and it would continue to be a troublesome situation until 1798 when Spain finally vacated the district. Both Gayoso and Ellicott accosted each other continuously throughout the period, blaming each other for torpedoing negotiations, violating the treaty conditions, and being unpleasant to deal with in general.⁴⁶⁹ The bickering of the two officials went on unabated, and Stephen Minor, the American planter who became Lieutenant Governor of Natchez under Gayoso, was left to sort through the diplomatic entanglement in the end. At any rate, Ellicott found considerably more difficulties in Natchez than he had expected, and the

⁴⁶⁸ Hammond, *Slavery, Freedom*, 13-54.

⁴⁶⁹ See Andrew Ellicott, *The Journal of Andrew Ellicott, Late Commissioner on Behalf of the United States During Part of the Year 1796, the Years 1797, 1798, 1799, and Part of the Year 1800 for Determining the Boundary between the United States and the Possessions of His Catholic Majesty in America: Containing Occasional Remarks on the Situation, Soil, Rivers, Natural Productions, and Diseases of the Different Countries on the Ohio, Mississippi, and Gulf of Mexico: With Six Maps Comprehending the Ohio, the Mississippi from the Mouth of the Ohio to the Gulf of Mexico, the Whole of West Florida, and Part of East Florida: To Which Is Added an Appendix, Containing All the Astronomical Observations Made Use of for Determining the Boundary, with Many Others, Made in Different Parts of the Country for Settling the Geographical Positions of Some Important Points, with Maps of the Boundary on a Large Scale, Likewise a Great Number of Thermometrical Observations Made at Different Times, and Places.* (Philadelphia: Printed by William Fry, 1814).

transition of power was a hazardous undertaking that once more brought Natchez to the attention of the Atlantic world.

Establishing a Firm Spanish Hand

Manuel Gayoso de Lemos arrived in Natchez in the late summer of 1789. One of his first orders pertained to the rights and privileges of the settlers in Natchez. The orders originated from the governor of Louisiana, Estevan Miró, but it was Gayoso's responsibility to implement them. Gayoso was able to grant new settlers land in proportion to the people a prospective planter brought with him. Most importantly, he announced that "they [settlers] will have the liberty of importing all their property in any produce whatsoever of the Country without paying any duty whatever, with the absolute freedom to dispose of the said property in the Posts they should pass by or in this town." The settlers enjoyed all privileges of a citizen of Spain, and the Iberians only required an oath of allegiance and service in the militia in exchange.⁴⁷⁰

The Spanish administrators went to great lengths to ensure an equal distribution of land. Gayoso recognized that planters with slaves had an advantage over settlers with no slaves, since the former were to be granted more land than those without human chattel. Other officials in the Spanish empire recognized the same issues. Accordingly, Miró received new orders in 1789 granting a minimum acreage (6 by 40 arpents) to new settlers, increasing that acreage if they had at least four children.⁴⁷¹ The Spanish understood that they could only attract new settlers if they offered them enticing options

⁴⁷⁰ Royal Orders from Estevan Miró to Gayoso and Charles de Gran Pré, New Orleans, April 20, 1789, as quoted in Holmes, *Gayoso*, 34.

⁴⁷¹ Valdés to Miro, Aranjuez, May 14, 1789, Archivo General de Indias, Papeles de Cuba (AGI, PC), legajo 176-B, Seville, Spain, as quoted in *ibid.*, 36.

once they arrived in Natchez. An ever-growing slave market was one side of the offer; cheap land was the other side of the deal that motivated many Americans to travel through the wilderness and establish a homestead in Natchez. Although historians have recently argued that the planter elite dominated Natchez and actively sought to police the immigrants and rejected non-planters, the Spanish policies clearly speak to the contrary.⁴⁷² In fact, the Spanish custom of land grants established by Manuel Gayoso was more egalitarian than that of the United States, which led to increasing distrust between the two powers in the lower Mississippi Valley.⁴⁷³

According to historian Jack Holmes, Gayoso was very lenient with his land grant policies, frequently exceeding the stipulated minimum acreage when new planters arrived.⁴⁷⁴ Gayoso supported the immigration of planters and their slaves because they boosted the economic production of the district, yet he kept a tight grip on the land policies and did not allow planters to dabble in land speculation. Gayoso intervened when planters tried to sell their grants and leave the district. Land speculation was strongly

⁴⁷² See: Buckner, "Constructing Identities on the Frontier of Slavery, Natchez Mississippi, 1760-1860," 42-56. Buckner ignored the evidence provided by Jack D. L. Holmes, although he relied heavily on Holmes's book. For example, Holmes mentions that Gayoso attempted to create a *cabildo*, yet it never officially materialized. Buckner also maintains that the elite planters of the *cabildo* denied access to land to new settlers, yet Spanish policies ran counter to this theory.

⁴⁷³ The American policies often led to land speculation that drove the price for virgin soil up and by default excluded poor white families from purchasing fertile land. For a detailed discussions of this see Hammond, *Slavery, Freedom*; Kennedy, *Mr. Jefferson's Lost Cause: Land, Farmers, Slavery, and the Louisiana Purchase*.

⁴⁷⁴ Holmes, *Gayoso*, 37-38.

discouraged in Spanish Natchez, and planters had to return their land to the Spanish crown if they left.⁴⁷⁵

Although Gayoso and the Spanish government were enacting these favorable and egalitarian measures to attract new settlers, they also sparked conflict with the United States. Kentucky also appealed to many planters and their slaves, but planters were confronted with inflated prices for land, driven up by speculators and unchecked by the government in Washington. Many of the planters who were unsuccessful in establishing a plantation in Kentucky moved on to Natchez, where land was readily available and the Spanish empire checked speculation. Adding to the trepidations of the westward moving planters was an additional problem that reared its head in the United States, but was completely unheard of in Natchez: the abolition of slavery. Slaveholders were welcomed in Natchez with open arms, but the Northwest Ordinance had barred slaveholders from carrying their property across the boundaries of the North West Territory in 1789 and planters were fearful that their human property could be endangered by similar policies in the newly established U.S. territories. The governor of the Northwest Territory, Arthur St. Clair, was alarmed by the possibility of planters moving west into Spanish territory and becoming loyal Spanish subjects, which posed a threat to the territorial integrity of the United States.⁴⁷⁶

The planters of Natchez were many things, but they were no abolitionists. While American politicians in Congress pondered the abolition of slavery in the Northwest

⁴⁷⁵ See for example: Manuel Gayoso to Baron de Carondelet, Natchez, August 6, 1793, AGI, PC, legajo 42, Seville, Spain. Generally, the Spanish crown claimed title to all lands, it only allowed planters or ranchers to work the land and thus planters were usufruct over the land. In Natchez some land grants from the British period remained valid and Spain had no control over those. How land grants were otherwise handled is unknown, but it seems likely that a hybrid legal system developed here as well.

⁴⁷⁶ Hammond, *Slavery, Freedom*, 17.

Territory, while Thomas Jefferson and George Washington grappled with their consciences, and while some wealthy Virginians manumitted their human property, the planters of Natchez had no such sentiments.⁴⁷⁷ Many planters who decided to move west were displeased with the wavering politics of the American government and did not have to think twice about moving to Natchez, where debates over slavery belonged entirely to the realm of philosophy. Spain offered extremely cheap land and a continuous supply of African slaves through the Atlantic slave trade. Therefore settlers undertook the gamble of crossing the treacherous Indian country with their families to come to Natchez. Once in Natchez, these new settlers received land and they could immediately profit from several other Spanish policies designed to attract American settlers. Spain offered guaranteed prices for staples such as indigo and tobacco, no import duties on slaves, and therefore a seemingly secure economic environment. Gayoso successfully courted new American immigrants to the Natchez district and his success left the United States worried about the prospects of westward expansion.⁴⁷⁸

The United States had coveted the Natchez District since the 1780s, but it had yet to find a way to integrate it into its territory. Spain's successful attempt to attract American settlers ran counter to the plans of American expansion. Historian John

⁴⁷⁷ For an example on Jefferson's struggle with the question of slavery see John Chester Miller, *The Wolf by the Ears: Thomas Jefferson and Slavery* (New York: The Free Press, 1977); See Gary B. Nash, *The Forgotten Fifth: African Americans in the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006). Nash skillfully investigates the abolitionist and pro-slavery debate in the first years of the United States Congress and highlights the ambivalent nature of U.S. slavery politics, and the divergence between North and South; For George Washington's decade long struggle to bring the revolution and slavery into symbiosis see Henry Wiencek, *An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003); For the example of how close Virginia came to abolish slavery see Wolf, *Race and Liberty in the New Nation: Emancipation in Virginia from the Revolution to Nat Turner's Rebellion*.

⁴⁷⁸ Hammond, *Slavery, Freedom*, 16-19; On additional analysis of potential U.S. expansion and the question of slavery see Rothman, *Slave Country*; and Usner, *Indians, Settlers & Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy*.

Hammond fittingly concludes that “on the whole, American settlers in the lower Mississippi Valley seemed generally content under Spanish rule, adding to the concerns of American officials and policymakers charged with bolstering the American presence in the West.”⁴⁷⁹ Spain wanted American settlers to reinforce its claim to the land, and the United States wanted Spain expelled from its immediate neighborhood. It was Thomas Jefferson who prophesied that eventually the growing numbers of Americans in Natchez and the liberal Spanish immigration policy would lead to a forceless transition from Natchez to the United States. As noted historian David Weber concludes, “immigrants from the United States began to Americanize Spain’s border provinces long before the United States acquired those territories politically.”⁴⁸⁰ Yet it was never a design on which the United States could rest its hopes comfortably.

Creating Loyalty in a Backcountry

Gayoso tried hard to gain the favor of the Natchez people. By the time he arrived in Natchez in the summer of 1789, the town had already undergone significant development since it became part of the Spanish empire. Most significantly, the Spanish had removed the center of the town from the already notorious Natchez-under-the-Hill to a tract of land on the Natchez Bluffs.⁴⁸¹ When Gayoso took command, he restructured the

⁴⁷⁹ Hammond, *Slavery, Freedom*, 18.

⁴⁸⁰ David J. Weber, *The Spanish Frontier in North America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 281. Weber is rather optimistic and America centered with his analysis, and Hammond is certainly correct with his interpretation of trepidation on the American side that the Spanish could in fact establish a lasting hold on Louisiana through American immigrants.

⁴⁸¹ Minor sold this land to Gran Pré for \$2,000 in March of 1788, but it seems that he had just purchased a part of this land for a significantly lower sum from Richard Harrison for \$150. Minor thereby made a significant profit and probably knew that governor Miró had ordered Gran Pré to buy the land for a new town. See Power of attorney from Stephen Minor to Richard Harrison, Natchez, March 17, 1788; Land sale, Natchez, March 17, 1788, in McBee, *Natchez Court Records*, 51; Holmes, *Gayoso*, 41; Buckner, "Constructing Identities on the Frontier of Slavery, Natchez Mississippi, 1760-1860," 52.

plans and, according to Jack Holmes, incorporated some modern features, including zoning, into the layout.⁴⁸² Natchez grew to a two-tiered township, one section famously known as “under-the-hill.” The new section quickly became known as Spanish Town. Buildings were erected swiftly, and by 1791 Spanish Town had taken shape. Planters were expected to live on their plantations which were not far from town and not to purchase houses in the town proper.⁴⁸³ Thus, Gayoso gave the planters a town center, a local focal point for the settlers to congregate and to establish a social life different from the roughneck frontier life they had experienced previously.

Gayoso quickly proved to be a skilled governor and planner. He vetoed the establishment of a smaller town on Cole’s Creek because the location was swampy and unhealthy.⁴⁸⁴ Instead, he relocated the settlement to a more suitable place, which quickly earned him the respect and admiration of influential planters like Cato West, as well as the Green, Murray, and Cabot families living on Cole’s Creek. These leading citizens approached the Louisiana governor and suggested that their village should be renamed Villa Gayoso in honor of their new governor.⁴⁸⁵ Louisiana governor Baron Francisco Luis Héctor de Carondelet granted the request, and Gayoso wrote a grateful letter to his leading citizens expressing his gratitude for the honor bestowed upon him.⁴⁸⁶ Although both notions were likely motivated by political calculation as much as true sentiment, it

⁴⁸² Holmes, *Gayoso*, 41-42.

⁴⁸³ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

⁴⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁴⁸⁵ People of Cole’s Creek to Baron de Carondelet, Cole’s Creek, March 24, 1792, in Lawrence Kinnaid, ed. *Spain in the Mississippi Valley, 1765-1794*, 4 vols., vol. IV, Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1945 (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1949), 19-20.

⁴⁸⁶ Gayoso to the people of Cole’s Creek, Natchez, undated, in *ibid.*, 20.

nevertheless shows that Gayoso had quickly become a respected man and that he was successful in courting the planters.

He advanced these relationships by creating a royal militia company under his command and naming it *Compañía Real Carlos* after the Spanish King. Among those planters in the company were members of the Green family, Stephen Minor, Adam Bingaman, Manuel Fescada, William Dunbar, Abraham Ellis and Ebenezer Rees. Thus, the elite planters of early Natchez formed this company, and Gayoso consciously chose the elite to be under his command. If the order of the names in Gayoso's list is any indication, Stephen Minor ranked highest among the planters of Natchez in the governor's esteem. Even Spanish planters like Fescada or Vidal did not rival Stephen Minor.⁴⁸⁷ Over the next decade under Spanish rule, Minor would cement his standing and eventually rise to the post of Lieutenant Governor of Natchez, while Gayoso was promoted to Governor of Louisiana. Minor was then responsible for transferring Natchez without any major complications from the Spanish to the Americans in 1797 and 1798, and his social position remained intact throughout the proceedings.

However, offering planters elevated social status was not enough to rule the Natchez District. Although the militia served as a bonding mechanism between the Spanish crown and Natchez's planters, Gayoso realized that planter loyalty could not be bought through their honorable service to the Spanish king alone. While Gayoso's *Compañía Real Carlos* certainly elevated the social standing of the planters, it did not grant them any advantages beyond the increase in status. When Gayoso took office in

⁴⁸⁷ Relacion de los Individuos comprendidos en la Compañía titulada *Real Carlos*, undated, Natchez, leg. 41, PC:AGI.

1789, no dominant staple crop had established its reign over Natchez. Tobacco and indigo were both viable options, and cotton was only an experimental crop. Therefore Gayoso understood that before all else he had to satisfy the hunger of planters for land, slaves, and profits.

Prince Tobacco

Cotton was king in antebellum Natchez, but it had not established its reign in the Spanish period. Instead, tobacco paved the way for King Cotton's dominance in later years, providing planters with a stable income and therefore sustenance. Beginning in 1784, the Spanish royal government in Madrid offered "hard cash and a ready market to the province's tobacco planters." The Spanish crown promised planters in Natchez and Point Coupee to purchase two million pounds of tobacco per year.⁴⁸⁸ This promise gave the Natchez planters a false—and ultimately dangerous—sense of security. The guaranteed price for tobacco under the royal monopoly shielded Natchez tobacco growers from the market force of the Atlantic world that had buffeted their brethren in Virginia for the last eight decades and ultimately forced many of the Virginia planters into an increasing debt.⁴⁸⁹ Accordingly, the planters were very interested in the Spanish policies regarding tobacco. To illustrate, Natchez planter Daniel Clark sent a letter in 1781 to Martin Navarro, the Spanish intendant in New Orleans, reminding him of the quality of

⁴⁸⁸ James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 31.

⁴⁸⁹ On Virginia tobacco culture, see Breen, *Tobacco Culture*.

Natchez's tobacco.⁴⁹⁰ Clark pointed out that the tobacco grown in Natchez could be sold in America and Europe, and that its quality was easily comparable to the crop generally grown in North America, particularly in Virginia.⁴⁹¹ The planters appealed to Navarro to maintain his support for their crop and to keep the guaranteed prices in place, thereby securing the planters' fortune.

Speculating on the guaranteed return from Spain, and receiving cheap land grants from the Spanish crown, the planters invested in slaves. They calculated that with the guaranteed profit and an expanding slave labor force, many obstacles to wealth and fortune would be removed. From 1783 to 1787, 2,145 slaves were imported into Louisiana. The following four years saw an increase of slaves brought across the Atlantic and Caribbean to 4,833. Slave imports more than doubled, thus satisfying demands in Natchez and elsewhere.⁴⁹² During that same timespan, 257 slave sales were registered in the Natchez courthouse. Slaves sales were up across the board, highlighting the success of both Natchez planters and Spanish government to promote the plantation economy in Natchez.⁴⁹³

Soon, however, the fickle world the planters had constructed around their tobacco crop began to fall apart. Spanish officials grew wary about the increasing production as

⁴⁹⁰ Spanish intendants were a product of the Bourbon Reforms. The position were created in the early eighteenth century to "absorb the financial and administrative functions previously reserved to the captain-general." Later they would become part of every provincial government and intendants were supposed to control the administrative and economic organs of each province. In Louisiana, and across the rest of the Spanish empire, they frequently clashed with the governors about the exact powers their mutual positions included. See John Lynch, *Spanish Colonial Administration, 1782-1810: The Intendant System in the Viceroyalty of the Río De La Plata* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), 46-50.

⁴⁹¹ Daniel Clark et al. to Martin Navarro, New Orleans, August 20, 1787, in AGI:PC, legajo 594. Microfilm copy in Williams Research Center, Historic New Orleans Collection, New Orleans, Louisiana..

⁴⁹² Leglaunec, "Slave Migrations in Spanish and Early American Louisiana: New Sources and New Estimates," 195-96.

⁴⁹³ See Davis, *The Black Experience in Natchez, 1720-1880*, 10.

early as 1788. The quality of Natchez tobacco was not superior or equal to the tobacco grown in Virginia or elsewhere.⁴⁹⁴ Still, Natchez planters insisted on growing tobacco and even petitioned intendant Navarro to adopt changes in the marketing and transportation requirements for their crop. The planters informed the intendant that the use of hogsheads for Natchez tobacco was impracticable, since they did not have the facilities to manufacture the containers. They also reminded the intendant that they had no proper warehouses for the storage of tobacco hogsheads, thus leading to the idea of maintaining carrots as storage containers.⁴⁹⁵ A carrot was much smaller and easier to make. Workers bundled the tobacco tightly, wrapped the rolled up leaves in cloth, secured them with twine and shipped them in canvas to protect the carrot from water. Carrots could weigh anywhere from one to three pounds. These carrots could be more easily stored in smaller houses, allowing for greater convenience for Natchez planters.⁴⁹⁶

Although the planters acknowledged the favorable conditions offered by the Spanish crown for their tobacco, they still managed to raise complaints. The planters admitted that the price they received for their tobacco was higher than Virginia planters received for their tobacco, yet argued that the purchase power of the Spanish dollar received in Natchez was inferior to that of the American dollar in Virginia. Although the Mississippi River presented a perfect transportation artery for their crops, planters lamented the price charged by merchants and boatmen for transportation and storage

⁴⁹⁴ Antonio Valdez, Spanish government report, New Orleans, March 7, 1788, in AGI:PC, legajo 594. James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 48.

⁴⁹⁵ A hogshead was a large wooden barrel that held about 1,000 pounds of tobacco fully packed.

⁴⁹⁶ Abner Green, Anthony Hutchins, John Ellis, James McIntosh et al. to Martin Navarro, Natchez, undated (probably Spring 1788, since it was followed by the government report of Antonio Valdez cited earlier), in AGI:PC, legajo 594.

costs, which added to the low return for their crop.⁴⁹⁷ Yet the key to their problems was the rising costs that the Spanish imposed on their cash crop. They repeatedly pointed to the increased burden laid upon them by the requirement of hogsheads, and they reminded Navarro that the climate in Natchez was much different from that of Virginia. They conceded that plants grew quickly and “luxuriously,” but cautioned that the fragile tobacco plant was threatened by “the frequent heavy rains of that place, nor is it free from the violent exhales of the scorching sun when it happens directly after a rainy attack.” The reasons the planters pointed to the weakness of the tobacco plant and the trouble of packaging it were all closely connected to the profit margin of ten “Spanish Milled dollars per 100 pounds weight,” which not one tobacco grower wanted to relinquish.⁴⁹⁸ The planters who signed this petition were among the leading members of the Natchez elite. They understood perfectly that the new restrictions placed on them for transportation would cut into their profit margin and endanger their position on the frontier. Their guaranteed profit had placed many planters on financially risky footing and as soon as the tobacco revenues faltered, so did the planters.

The planters besieged the Spanish government with their concerns. As they pointed out to Navarro, food items like salt were more expensive on the market in New Orleans than in Virginia, not even considering the transportation to Natchez from the city. In addition to items like salt, planters expressed their concern for the most valuable commodity known in Natchez—slaves. Natchez’s planters were thirsty for more human chattels, and although the Spanish had opened the African trade to them, the planters

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid.

were still unhappy with the availability and price of their favorite commodity. Tobacco growers of Natchez were quick to point out that they had a disadvantage to Virginia “notwithstanding the echo of so high a price for Tobacco.”⁴⁹⁹ The premium price they had to pay for their slaves allegedly had caused many planters to share the fate of their Virginia brethren; they had incurred large debts that had to be paid off, while at the same time they hungered for still more African slaves. More slaves equaled more acres that could be planted with more tobacco, resulting in larger profits, if a planter could escape the clutches of debt he incurred along the way.⁵⁰⁰

A crisis in the Atlantic world impacted Natchez in 1789. The Spanish tobacco market was flooded with tobacco and prices were depressed. In addition, Spain’s treasury—notoriously empty—could not afford to maintain the premium prices guaranteed to Natchez planters. Although the year 1789 brought in a crop of 1,402,725 pounds for Natchez, Spain took this occasion to drop its tobacco subsidies for Natchez.⁵⁰¹ Instead of offering guaranteed prices, the Spanish crown announced that it would instead unlock commerce to every nation in the world and end the royal monopoly for Natchez. They allowed Natchez planters to market their tobacco freely, but the problem was that Natchez tobacco was subpar and could not compete, a problem comparable to that faced by Louisiana sugar producers in the antebellum period. Although Gayoso linked the favorable price conditions of tobacco directly to the loyalty of his American subjects, the

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁰ It is important to note that the Spanish crown was extremely lenient with its land grants, so that acquiring land rarely led a planter into debt. As shown in earlier court cases, land only became a problem if purchased at a premium price from a fellow planter, especially if that land had been developed. Virgin land was readily and cheaply available from the Spanish crown.

⁵⁰¹ James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 48.

Spanish crown did not relent.⁵⁰² The suppressed prices were not the only problem the people of Natchez encountered with their staple crop. Not only did the Atlantic market economy begin to hurt their interests, but Spanish border politics also took its toll on the Natchez plantation world.

While Governor Estevan Miró had previously placed great emphasis on attracting new settlers to Natchez, and thereby securing the northern border of Louisiana, the governor now shifted his focus even further north. Kentucky, also a tobacco-growing region, approached Miró under the leadership of James Wilkinson. The latter negotiated for equally favorable prices for Kentucky tobacco with the Spanish, and Miró saw his chance to further infringe on American expansion.⁵⁰³ The planters of Kentucky readily took advantage of the Spanish offer to use the Mississippi River and had no complaints like their fellow planters in Natchez. Shipping their tobacco across the United States to the East Coast ports was more expensive than utilizing the Spanish-controlled Mississippi and trading their crop in New Orleans. For the Spanish, the Kentucky tobacco trade presented an equally favorable opportunity. Previously Miró had favored Natchez and its people as a protective barrier against American expansion into northern Louisiana, but he now saw a chance to spread his frontier defenses even further north. He attempted to lure

⁵⁰² "Political Condition of the Province of Louisiana" by Manuel Gayoso de Lemos, Natchez, July 5, 1792, in James Alexander Robertson, ed. *Louisiana under the Rule of Spain, France, and the United States, 1785-1807: Social, Economic, and Political Conditions of the Territory Represented in the Louisiana Purchase*, 2 vols., vol. I (Cleveland, Ohio: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1911), 286.

⁵⁰³ On James Wilkinson and his schemes on the American frontier see Thomas Robson Hay, "Some Reflections on the Career of General James Wilkinson," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 21, no. 4 (1936); Andro Linklater, *An Artist in Treason: The Extraordinary Double Life of General James Wilkinson* (New York: Walker, 2009). Wilkinson was a colorful character in American frontier history, polarizing his contemporaries and continuously on the edge of treason, from an American perspective. He became a close friend of Manuel Gayoso de Lemos, the governor of Natchez and later Louisiana, and eventually he would settle his family in Natchez where they became part of the local planter class.

Kentucky toward the Spanish empire the same way he had created the loyalties of the planters of the Natchez District. In doing so, he sacrificed the economic well-being of the region. Instead of granting the prices to the planters in Natchez, Miró instead purchased significant amounts of tobacco from Wilkinson and his Kentucky tobacco growers, undermining the Natchez economy in favor of border stability.⁵⁰⁴ Accordingly, the interest of Natchez's planters and those of the Iberian empire worked at a cross purpose, as Spain willingly sacrificed planter control for the greater good of the empire and lastingly damaged the relationship with Natchez's planters. As Spain came to learn, imperial politics and policies needed to work in concert with planter interests to guarantee stability and prosperity in the district.

In December of 1790 a royal order was issued that reduced the amount of tobacco purchased by the royal factory in Seville, Spain to forty thousand pounds annually. This order interfered with Miró's designs for both Natchez and Kentucky, eliminating the economic attraction of the Spanish Empire for most Americans. The free trade, which Spain offered instead of the tobacco subsidies, was not an important incentive for planters outside of Louisiana, and so Spanish politics decided the fate of tobacco as a staple crop for Natchez. Planters in Kentucky switched back to food crops. The latter were in high demand because the immigration to Kentucky had swelled the local population immensely and the United States military activities against the Northern Indians all led to a consumption of surplus foodstuffs in Kentucky.⁵⁰⁵ Planters in Natchez faced financial

⁵⁰⁴ James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 48-50.

⁵⁰⁵ Arthur Preston Whitaker, *The Spanish-American Frontier: 1783-1795; the Westward Movement and the Spanish Retreat in the Mississippi Valley* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin company, 1927), 158-60.

ruin with the end of Spanish subsidies. It was left to Manuel Gayoso de Lemos to deal with the circumstances created by his superiors in Spain after the change in tobacco policies became known in Natchez.

Debt was the most critical issue Gayoso faced as most Natchez planters had incurred impressive amounts over the last decade. The planters had counted on the Spanish subsidies for their tobacco and had continuously acquired slaves to increase their production of the crop. Now that Spain had limited the production to forty thousand pounds a year—a weight exceeded the previous year by Adam Bingaman and David Williams alone—the planters of Natchez were in dire straits. Benjamin Farrar, one of the most prosperous planters in Natchez, had recently applied for permission from the Spanish crown to import two hundred slaves from the coast of Africa annually to the Natchez District.⁵⁰⁶ He had clearly anticipated a strong demand for slave labor in the future. Without the guaranteed stability of Spanish subventions, however, merchants began to call in their outstanding debts, thus threatening the livelihood of many a Natchez planter. Although Gayoso was a recent arrival in Natchez, he immediately demonstrated his ability to negotiate with the local elites and therefore justified his selection as the first English-speaking Spanish governor. Natchez's commanders before him had a military function, with the addition of judicial responsibilities. Gayoso, however, was the supreme military and civilian commander of Natchez. This position granted him some extraordinary leeway, which he tended to utilize to the best of his abilities. As his biographer, Jack Holmes, fittingly puts it: "Gayoso considered the wishes of the people

⁵⁰⁶ Application of Benjamin Farrar, New Orleans, unknown, 1790, in Archivo General des Indias: Audiencia de Santo Domingo, (AGI: SD), legajo 2545, Seville, Spain.

together with the needs of the State.”⁵⁰⁷ It fell on the Spanish statesman to devise a policy that somehow unified planter interest with the desires of the Spanish empire. The need of both the Spanish and the planters of Natchez in the early 1790s was predominantly defined by a reduction of the debt. Although the royal authorities in Madrid and New Orleans had demonstrated that they would and could sacrifice the people of Natchez for the greater good of the empire, Gayoso was nevertheless convinced that Natchez was the key to the longevity of Spanish Louisiana.⁵⁰⁸

In 1792, the situation was threatening enough for the planters to address the legislature in New Orleans. The petition crafted by Anthony Hutchins and signed by several leading planters leaves no doubt that the tobacco planters had fully converted to plantation agriculture, investing only in slaves and tools to grow tobacco, and exhibiting the same traits that doomed crop diversification in the antebellum South. As Hutchins described the situation, “Few of us possessed much stock. When our crops fell short many of us had no other resources.”⁵⁰⁹ Only a lucky few had diversified their crops, and those were small operations. All big planters had transitioned to tobacco.⁵¹⁰

⁵⁰⁷ Holmes, *Gayoso*, 52-53.

⁵⁰⁸ Political Condition of the Province of Louisiana by Manuel Gayoso de Lemos, Natchez, July 5, 1792, in Robertson, ed. *Louisiana under the Rule of Spain, France, and the United States, 1785-1807: Social, Economic, and Political Conditions of the Territory Represented in the Louisiana Purchase*, 285-87.

⁵⁰⁹ Petition of Natchez planters to Manuel Gayoso de Lemos, Natchez, December 21, 1792, in Claiborne and Lagrone, *Mississippi*, 139-40.

⁵¹⁰ Although Christopher Morris argues in his book *Becoming Southern* that plantations and slave labor in conjunction with staple crops such as tobacco was not a dominant force in frontier Mississippi, even this short statement by Hutchins suggests otherwise. In addition to this document, Gayoso’s constant negotiations with Miró to keep tobacco as a staple crop—as cited on the following pages—also points toward a Natchez District that already had developed into a fully developed plantation society. Additional documents support that proposition. For example, Manuel Gayoso de Lemos authored a complex and all encompassing new order that regulated the upkeep of roads and established a public system of pens which had to be utilized to keep roaming livestock in check. On the one hand Gayoso assisted the cattle farmers of the district, who still represented an economically powerful group, consistent with Morris’s argument.

Hutchins assigned blame for the planters' situation to the court of Spain and the merchants of Natchez. The merchants drew the ire of the elite planters just as the cotton factors of antebellum New Orleans occasionally drew the wrath of the grandchildren of Hutchins and his fellow planters.⁵¹¹ He accused them of profiting from the planters' helpless situation, demanding higher interests and paying below market value for crops like cotton and indigo or products like beef.⁵¹² Understanding the delicate balance between empire and American settlers, Hutchins reminded Gayoso that the current situation would not attract immigrants from the United States. He still praised the opportunities at Natchez as "the mildness of government—the equity of the laws—their impartial administration—no taxes imposed—the climate and soil so happily blended of the cultivation of both northern and southern products." The planter finished the letter with an ominous prediction that showed how thin the resources of his colleagues were stretched and how taut their nerves were. Hutchins predicted that "time is not very far

However, Gayoso also stipulated that these pens were to guard "against the natural inconvenience that attend the making of indigo." Gayoso published these orders while planters were experimenting with indigo during the tobacco crisis in the early spring of 1793, and roaming cattle had apparently been trampling across indigo fields and destroying the harvest of planters. Additional information can be gleaned from the census records. Although there was no established format for the census in Natchez until the first American census, the Spanish list pounds of tobacco produced (589,920) as a category in the 1787 census, yet cattle are not listed. This changed for the 1794 census, where 3,944 horses and cattle were listed. Nevertheless, plantation agriculture had succeeded farming or livestock endeavors as the leading business of the people of Natchez. See: Order of the Governor, Gayoso de Lemos, Natchez, February 1, 1793, in NTC:PTR; for Christopher Morris argument see Morris, *Becoming Southern*.; 1787 Census of Natchez 1794 Census of Natchez, Natchez, April 14, 1795, in AGI: PC, legajo 31, HNOC.

⁵¹¹ See for example Moore, *The Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom in the Old Southwest: Mississippi, 1770-1860*; Scarborough, *Masters of the Big House: Elite Slaveholders of the Mid-Nineteenth-Century South*; Harold D. Woodman, *King Cotton & His Retainers; Financing & Marketing the Cotton Crop of the South, 1800-1925* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1968).

⁵¹² Petition of Natchez planters to Manuel Gayoso de Lemos, Natchez, December 21, 1792, in Claiborne and Lagrone, *Mississippi*, 139.

distant *when the planter must destroy the merchant, or the merchant must destroy the planter.*⁵¹³

The merchants, on the other hand, were also hard-pressed, since their accounts were equally overdrawn by insufficient business, and they depended on the repayment of debts to stay afloat in a suddenly hostile Atlantic economy. Therefore they too addressed the government, and explained that planters had failed to pay their debts regularly since 1771. They allowed the planters a grace period until February of 1793, claiming “it will only be in extreme cases that coercion will be resorted to.”⁵¹⁴ But they still demanded that the planters at least try to produce a crop of some staple, clarifying that they had not done so since tobacco had failed because they simply did not know what else to plant. In addition to indigo and corn, the merchants suggested cotton as a possible crop and even guaranteed a price for either the seed or cleaned cotton. Although Eli Whitney had not yet invented the cotton gin that would make short staple cotton profitable, the merchants nonetheless supported the production of the future royal crop in 1792. It was left to Gayoso and his superiors to prevent the destruction of either planter or merchant, as Hutchins put it, because both were needed in the frontier economy of the Natchez District.

Gayoso tried his best throughout the years 1791 and 1792 to lobby for Natchez tobacco, and he described the planters in Natchez as extremely industrious and frugal. He also explained that they put all of their slaves to work, and it would not be just to “leave them drowning” in their debt. He suggested that Miró should continue to buy the tobacco,

⁵¹³Ibid., 140.

⁵¹⁴ Circular of Natchez merchants, Natchez, undated, 1792 ?, in *ibid.*

at least until the king opened the world market to the inhabitants of Natchez. He repeated his plea twice, arguing that the planters grew enough tobacco to receive at least a fair price for the bulk of their product if sold on the open market. This would allow them to pay at least some of their debt.⁵¹⁵ None of the pleas was successful, and so Miró and Gayoso had to find an internal solution that would grant both planters and merchants a chance to survive the current crisis.

Gayoso's pleadings were partially answered when governor Miró issued a moratorium on the debt situation in Natchez following the letters of the planters and the merchants' response. Miró declared that the planters had to repay their debt, yet at a fixed rate of five percent per year. The moratorium read:

It is declared that what is called 'lawful interest,' in the stipulations between the inhabitants of Natchez and their creditors, is to be understood at the rate of five percentum only, and the same, by any delay in the payment thereof, shall not be converted into principal, and interest be paid upon interest; because that would be manifest usury. The accounts of the said inhabitants shall be settled upon this principle, abating such as have been previously settled at a higher rate than is here prescribed.⁵¹⁶

Although this moratorium slightly favored the planters by capping the ceiling of their debt, it satisfied both sides for the present.

Unfortunately, Miró's decree was not able to mend the rift between planters and merchants in Natchez permanently. The planters of Natchez wrote a lengthy letter to the new Louisiana governor, Francisco Luis Héctor de Carondelet, in December of 1795.

They again complained about their debt and the dishonest merchants who did not allow

⁵¹⁵ Gayoso to Estevan Miró, Natchez, April 30, 1791; Gayoso to Estevan Miró, Natchez, June 15, 1791; Gayoso to Miró, Natchez, March 10, 1792, in AGI: PC, Legajo 41.

⁵¹⁶ Moratorium on debt, Estevan Miró, New Orleans, undated, probably 1791, as quoted in Claiborne and Lagrone, *Mississippi*, 139.

for a settlement according to Miró's 1791 moratorium. The planters therefore asked Miró to forward their letter explaining the planters' plea for debt reduction and solidified debt repayment to the Spanish king.⁵¹⁷ Again, the planters complained that their "debts are so increased as to form their present monstrous and Hydra-headed figure." Although the Natchez merchants were their chief adversaries in this case, the tobacco growers raised the issue of debt beyond the borders of the Natchez District. Although they only alluded to it, they made certain that the Spanish king understood how closely connected the fate of the Natchez planters was with the well-being of the Spanish empire in North America:

And although the Gentlemen [Manuel Gayoso de Lemos and Baron de Carondelet] who from principles of virtue, have recommended our case to Your Majesty's notice and consideration, have had our grateful thanks for the same, yet moreover we resolve, that they shall not have cause to blush before the Throne; for allegiance is our ambition, we pride in acts of duty and firmness, and it is notorious from our efforts on all occasions, when exigencies of Government require our exertions (although it greatly disconcerts us in our Crops and preparations for payment of Debts) that we confirm our attachment and zealous endorsements, by ever preferring the cause of Government, to that of Merchants or Individuals, or even that of our own concerns.⁵¹⁸

Planters were loyal to the Spanish empire, yet the merchants were not trustworthy.

Although they expressed their loyalty, the planters also described the cross currents that had gripped the Natchez District. If the planters wavered, the whole district was poised to fall victim to the currents of the swiftly flowing Mississippi River. Thus, Spain had better lend its support to the suffering planters.

Only a new staple crop that would return the planters to profitability and the merchants to affluence would bring lasting peace and tranquility to the district. Planters

⁵¹⁷ Planters of Natchez to Francisco Luis Héctor de Carondelet, Natchez, December 21, 1795, in AGI: PC, legajo 43.

⁵¹⁸ Planters of Natchez to the King of Spain, Natchez, December 21, 1795, in AGI: PC, legajo 43.

turned to indigo from about 1792 to 1795 as their main staple crop, with prices ranging from “one and a half to two dollars and a half per pound.” But in 1793 a caterpillar plague began to ravish the whole colony of Louisiana and destroyed Natchez’s indigo crop in 1795.⁵¹⁹ The destruction of that crop then left only cotton as a viable option, and the invention of Eli Whitney’s gin in 1793 (patented in 1794) had made its way to Natchez by 1795. Unfortunately, cotton was not able to mend the division between planters and merchants quickly and newcomers had to learn how to navigate the dangerous undercurrents in Natchez.

King Cotton’s Infancy in the Natchez District

The invention of Eli Whitney’s cotton gin changed slavery in the United States forever, especially in the new territories of the lower South. Long staple cotton had been grown in South Carolina and Georgia, and its production had increased during the American Revolution to supplement fabrics imported from Great Britain. Yet the short staple variety of cotton, more suitable to plantation agriculture in the lower South, could not be cleaned as easily as the long staple variety. Many experiments of planters to become wealthy with the smooth fiber were unsuccessful, yet the invention of the gin did not bring instantaneous wealth to Natchez.⁵²⁰ It took approximately two years before the gin arrived in Natchez, and in the meantime settlers in the district fell on hard times.⁵²¹

⁵¹⁹ See Claiborne and Lagrone, *Mississippi*, 140; Louisiana Writers' Project, *Louisiana; a Guide to the State*, American Guide Series (New York: Hastings House, 1941), 61. According to Jack Holmes, the tobacco boom and bust cycle and its effect in Natchez is comparable to that of Cuba as described by Fernando Ortiz y Fernàndez in *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, trans. Harriet de Onis (New York, 1947); see Holmes, *Gayoso*, 99 FN 45.

⁵²⁰ Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 302.

⁵²¹ Charles de Gran Pré to Baron de Carondelet, Natchez, September 23, 1795, in AGI: PC, legajo 32, HNOC.

The economic crisis was soon followed by social unrest among all people of the district. According to historian Jack Holmes, merchants had become increasingly agitated about the ongoing dispute over payments, and they began to blame Gayoso for protecting the planters.⁵²² Social tensions ran high, and they increased when news of a slave conspiracy in Point Coupée arrived in Natchez. Although no violence occurred, planters were extremely nervous. Their fear increased when Neptuno, a slave from Natchez, began to inform his fellow captives that “blacks in Point Coupée had murdered eighteen whites, after which they fled to avoid arrest. Neptuno claimed that these well-armed runaways now were in Bayou Sara in the Natchez District.”⁵²³ Although no insurrection had occurred in Natchez since the 1729 revolt against the French, planters understood that the increasing number of slaves in the district presented not only an economic opportunity, but also a growing danger.⁵²⁴ The slaves themselves, however, did not seem to have been actively planning an insurrection in Natchez. The questioning of Neptuno led nowhere, and the district remained at peace. Although slaves in Natchez had many opportunities throughout the Spanish period to seize the day and rebel during the frequent periods of unrest, they wisely chose not to do so. Slaves were never in the majority in Natchez during the Spanish period. Whites outnumbered their human property in all census records, substantially decreasing the chance for a successful revolt.⁵²⁵

⁵²² Holmes, *Gayoso*, 95-101.

⁵²³ Din, *Spaniards, Planters, and Slaves*, 157.

⁵²⁴ The slave population in Natchez had increased to 2,060 slaves, according to the census of 1794. See Natchez Census, April 14, 1795, in AGI: PC, legajo 31, HNOC.

⁵²⁵ See 1784 Census of Natchez, Natchez, undated, 1784, in AGI: PC, legajo 116, HNOC; 1787 Census of Natchez 1794 Census of Natchez, Natchez, April 14, 1795, in AGI: PC, legajo 31, HNOC.

Yet the advent of cotton required substantial numbers of slaves. Natchez planters had not grown cotton in any significant quantity before 1787. The 1792 census recorded 75,227 pounds, but that number declined to 36,351 pounds in 1794. The same year also saw indigo production decline to 17,521 pounds.⁵²⁶ However, after 1795 the production of cotton increased rapidly to 1.2 million pounds, or up to 3 million pounds, depending on the source. This explosion in cotton production can be attributed to the cotton gin that was brought to the district by John Barclay. The latter was a former planter who had fallen in debt like many of his colleagues. He went to North Carolina in 1794, but returned to Natchez the following year. With him, he brought the design for Eli Whitney's cotton gin.⁵²⁷

Success of Technology

Constructing a gin at Natchez was not as easy as Barclay or Daniel Clark imagined. Clark informed Anthony Hutchins that "Barclay will soon have his gin sufficiently forward to essay [sic] how it will work. I have done a great deal to bring this brat into the world, and if it succeeds shall put in a claim for my share of the honor."

⁵²⁶ See 1784 Census of Natchez, Natchez, undated, 1784, in AGI: PC, legajo 116, HNOC; 1787 Census of Natchez 1794 Census of Natchez, Natchez, April 14, 1795, in AGI: PC, legajo 31, HNOC; Holmes, *Gayoso*, 100. footnote 54.

⁵²⁷ James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 51; Holmes, *Gayoso*, 99-100. Both James and Holmes agree that Barclay was a planter who had fallen on hard times in Natchez, with James gathering his information from Holmes. Both authors differed in the spelling of the name Barclay, one spelling it Barclay, whereas primary Spanish sources even use Bartley. Holmes, however, might have been mistaken. He believes that Barclay was an indebted planter based on a letter written by Gayoso to Carondelet, in which the governor of Natchez explains the situation of the indebted Barclay and his reason to leave. However, on February 10, 1795, Daniel Clark announced to the Court in Natchez that he had sold a part of his property to his business partner John Barclay in Pennsylvania because he could not afford to make any other payment for his debt. If the two Barclays are the same, then Holmes was mistaken and Barclay probably brought the designs for the gin during his initial journey to Natchez, not merely on a return trip. He then also was a landowner not in debt, but quite wealthy. Yet it is impossible to determine conclusively which Barclay brought the cotton gin, or if Holmes interpreted the sources correctly or if Gayoso understood the situation in its entirety. See Daniel Clark to John Barclay, February 10, 1795 in Natchez Court Records, Book 36, Adams County Court House, Natchez, Mississippi.

Clark still had to convince the Spanish crown that everybody in Natchez would profit from the new machine.⁵²⁸ Under Spanish rule, the construction of a cotton gin had to be approved by the colonial government. Therefore, Clark and Barclay had to convince the local official and the governor of Louisiana that his project was promising. Leading planters quickly lent their support to Barclay. The engineer pointed out that the whole community of Natchez would be able to profit from this invention. Barclay went into great detail about the machine itself, especially pointing to the fact that the gin was very efficient and could clean quite a bit of cotton in a short time.⁵²⁹

Charles de Gran Pré sent a report to Carondelet, in which he supported the construction of the mill. He also allowed the construction of a test version. Barclay asked to construct the mill on the plantation of Daniel Clark, and William Dunbar, Peter Walker, and Henry Hunter were named as witnesses to report on the ginning capabilities of Barclay's apparatus. Gran Pré made sure to inform his superior about the necessity to gin the cotton, and what a successful cotton crop could do for Natchez planters and Louisiana as a whole. In addition, Gran Pré offered recommendations for the widespread adoption of the cotton gin, if the invention succeeded.⁵³⁰

Planters like Daniel Clark or John O'Connor had already officially pledged their support to the new machine, as they announced to the Spanish government in a short declaration in August. They saw the machine at work while only partially finished and

⁵²⁸ Daniel Clark to Anthony Hutchins, Natchez, August 21, as cited in Claiborne and Lagrone, *Mississippi*, 143.

⁵²⁹ John Barclay to governor of Natchez (Gran Pré served as temporary governor at the time), Natchez, September 21, 1795, in AGI: PC, legajo 32, HNOC.

⁵³⁰ Charles de Gran Pré to Baron de Carondelet, Natchez, September 23, 1795, in AGI: PC, legajo 32, HNOC.

described its amazing capabilities as “far superior to anything hitherto seen.” They added that they were convinced that the gin would be efficient enough “to give a thousand pounds of clean cotton per day once fully complete.”⁵³¹

Cotton quickly triumphed in Natchez. Several additional gins were in operation by 1796. Some of them were public and usable for a fee; others were constructed on plantations of the wealthier planters. William Dunbar, the local surveyor and scientist, quickly began to experiment with cotton crops. In 1801 he ordered a screw press from Philadelphia and began to investigate the use of cottonseed oil.⁵³² As many planters had hoped, cotton became the dominant staple crop of Natchez. Now the planters benefitted from the Spanish trade policies that allowed them to export their products across the world, and Natchez cotton began its rise to the number one export commodity in the antebellum period. Once again, Natchez’s proximity to New Orleans, and the riverways of the Mississippi enabled planters to bring their crop quickly to market and establish dominance over the market.

⁵³¹ Daniel Clark et al. to Spanish government, Natchez, August 24, 1795, in AGI: PC, legajo 32, HNOC. In a note that was apparently written during the test run—probably by Clark—and then attached to the document, one of the planters noted the time it took to clean the cotton. Astonishingly, the planters quite accurately timed the cleaning process, measuring time for cleaning the teeth and the overall process. Based on these figures, they then calculated the one thousand pounds figure. Time, and management of it, had clearly arrived in the Natchez District. Unfortunately no plantation books for the early period have survived, but the attempts of the planters to record scientifically and analyze the production capability of the cotton gin suggest that they employed scientific methods throughout their plantation operations. The author of the note speculated that “it will clean 1000 pound per day, with two horses and three attendance.” As Mark Smith points out, “by setting events against the clock and, in fact, setting the clock itself, people could insinuate their own temporal definitions within nature’s round.” The planters of Natchez had finally found a mechanical solution to their most pressing problem with cotton, and through the cotton gin they could establish dominance over their crop (and nature) as well as over their human chattel. See *Observation of Cotton Gin*, unknown author, Natchez, undated, AGI: PC legajo 32, HNOC. For time and slavery in the colonial South see Mark M. Smith, *Mastered by the Clock: Time, Slavery, and Freedom in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 12-16. Quote on page 14.

⁵³² Claiborne and Lagrone, *Mississippi*, 144; Holmes, *Gayoso*, 100-01.

Slaves were the obvious losers in the first Natchez cotton boom. They did not profit from the new crop. To the contrary, the new cotton market quickly turned the somewhat porous slave society of Spanish Natchez into a solid slave regime that did not tolerate any roads to freedom for slaves, as the example of Amy Lewis (from the previous chapter) makes clear. Planters found a cash crop that was in great demand by Great Britain, granting them profits in an Atlantic market that was previously hostile to their tobacco crop. The planters were not going to jeopardize any cog in their newly tuned plantation machine, especially not the human chattel that drove it. The cotton gin, then, sealed the fate of the Natchez District as a resilient plantation society. The advent of the cotton gin also eased the path of the United States toward the Natchez District. In the same year the gin arrived, 1795, the United States acquired the district from the Spanish Empire in the Treaty of San Lorenzo.

King Cotton turns the Tide

Although the adoption of cotton did not proceed without difficulties, its ascension to the throne was never seriously hampered.⁵³³ Annual production grew quickly to more than one million pounds by 1800, exceeding any other commodity in the district. In 1799, the cotton gin had been improved by mechanics David Greenleaf and William Hazlett to a degree that Dunbar enthusiastically proclaimed “I have reason to think that the new gin has been greatly improved here. Our latest and best make, injure the staple little more

⁵³³ Some of the cotton gins were faulty, and Bennet Truly, who constructed one for public ginning, was sued by several planters and had to flee the district because his gin and Truly’s malpractice in handling ginned cotton destroyed several bags of cotton. He either ginned inferior cotton, with leaves mixed in, or he stored the cotton on barges, uncovered in the fall rains. See Petition of Richard Harrison, Natchez, May 28, 1796; George Cochran and others versus Bennet Truly, Natchez, May 19, 1796, May 24, 1796; William Foster versus Bennet Truly, Natchez, July 21, 1796, all in McBee, *Natchez Court Records*, 286.

than cards.”⁵³⁴ But the economic success of the cotton gin also had side effects that the Spanish empire did not anticipate. As the Iberians had withdrawn their support for tobacco prices five years earlier, they had simultaneously struck down every commercial barrier or tariff in existence, allowing Natchez planters to trade freely. This meant that planters could now import slaves from anywhere they desired, and they could dispense their crops cheaply, since prices were not artificially raised through export duties. Now planters had a crop to sell, and they reaped impressive profits. That in turn spurred the slave trade to Natchez.⁵³⁵

The newfound freedom to export at the planters’ own volition and the relatively stable and secure market for cotton weakened the position of the Spanish Empire severely. From the beginning of the Spanish occupation, planters in Natchez were willing to cooperate with the Spanish Empire because it granted them access to slaves, access to a market, and a subsidy for tobacco. Planters even adjusted to the new slave laws that allowed some slaves to gain freedom. After the arrival of the cotton gin, the planters no longer needed to lean as heavily on Spanish authorities for their profits. Slaves were no longer just available from Africa in larger groups, but the internal slave trade began to increase dramatically throughout the mid 1790s.⁵³⁶ With both slaves and profits available independently from the Spanish empire, Natchez planters became more independent than

⁵³⁴ William Dunbar to John Ross, Natchez, May 23, 1799, in Claiborne and Lagrone, *Mississippi*, 143.

⁵³⁵ William Dunbar to John Ross, *ibid.*

⁵³⁶ Deyle, *Carry Me Back*, 21-22; Gudmestad, *A Troublesome Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade*, 17-18. Gudmestad points out that the real boom in the internal slave trade was brought on by the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade in 1808, yet Natchez always needed slaves and Gudmestad admits that people were always looking and capable of selling slaves South. Unfortunately, there are no sources allowing historians to analyze slave trade patterns for slave trade in Natchez before the 1810s. Edward E. Baptist is currently working on an updated history of the early antebellum Natchez slave trade based on new sources, yet even those do not reach back into the eighteenth century.

the Spanish or the Americans preferred. As Natchez began its transition from Spain to the United States, planters displayed their independence for the Atlantic world to see, and the Spanish empire to suffer.

1795 marked an important turning point in the history of the Natchez District as Spain by treaty transferred the district to the United States and the cotton gin arrived in Natchez. Change was also occurring on the local level. Yet for the next three years, first the United States and later Spain managed to stall the transition of the district. Despite Gayoso's valiant efforts to create a tighter community in Natchez among Iberian officials and Anglo-American settlers, his courtship had suffered through the recent economic difficulties.

Natchez after the Treaty of San Lorenzo

After Spain and the United States signed the treaty of San Lorenzo on October 27, 1795, Natchez ostensibly became part of the United States. Yet due to politics and the distance of Natchez from the central government in Philadelphia, it took an astonishing three years until the transition was completed.⁵³⁷ In those three years, the people in Natchez had to undergo several critical periods, during which they contested the Spanish empire or the American emissary, Andrew Ellicott. The main reason behind every crisis in Natchez, before and during this period, always revolved around the issue of property. In this case, Natchez planters desired the umbrella of United States control, because Spain could no longer offer them any incentives. The problem, however, consisted of the multiple land grants the settlers had received under Spanish and British control and the

⁵³⁷ On the intricacies of the treaty and the lower Mississippi valley, see Whitaker, *The Spanish-American Frontier: 1783-1795; the Westward Movement and the Spanish Retreat in the Mississippi Valley*, 201-22. The treaty involved more territory than just the Natchez District, and imperial as well as local politics in Natchez, Louisiana, Kentucky and Georgia complicated the issue tremendously.

debts the planters had incurred under Spanish reign. While the Spanish empire tried to stall its evacuation of the district, the Natchez planters began to fear for their lands, and the merchants for the validity of their outstanding debts. Since both Spanish and British grants sometimes had competing claims, the planters grew nervous about which grants would be accepted by the Americans. With every month the Spanish stalled, the Americans and Natchez planters grew more anxious to determine the boundaries and land claims, especially with the cotton crops exceeding expectations.⁵³⁸ In addition, American land speculators had moved into Natchez to claim, sell, and buy land north of Natchez soon to be under American control, thereby destabilizing a formerly stable market where Spain had kept a tight control over land grants and strongly discouraged or disallowed land speculation. The presence of these speculators further unnerved the planters who understood the value of land perfectly.⁵³⁹

A second issue arose in the aftermath of the 1795 slave conspiracy at Point Coupée and the ongoing rebellion of formerly bound Africans in Haiti.⁵⁴⁰ Governor Carondelet issued new laws to control the growing slave population in the colony. Although Carondelet did not stiffen the slave code significantly, in large part simply reiterating laws in place, slave control obviously became an issue. Carondelet moved to curb severe punishments that had been exerted by masters to prevent unrest among the

⁵³⁸ For an exhaustive and masterfully written narrative of the transfer from Spain to the United States see Haynes, *The Mississippi Territory and the Southwest Frontier, 1795-1817*, 7-71.

⁵³⁹ The most prominent speculators were William Blount, Zachariah Cox, James White, and George Matthews, see James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 64.

⁵⁴⁰ For the Point Coupée conspiracy, see Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 344-74. For the slave rebellion in Haiti, see Carolyn E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990); C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1963).

enslaved population, and he reaffirmed the rights of free people of color, acknowledging that they had the same rights as any white person. The only caveat was that people of color had to be courteous to Europeans. Although courteous was a relatively flexible term, basic rights for free people of color could not be violated. As shown, the planters in Natchez were content to live under these rules. Unfortunately, the planters in the *cabildo* convinced Carondelet in 1796 to ban slave importations. Carondelet and the New Orleans planters were concerned about possible slave insurrections and unlike Natchez, which had adopted cotton, southern Louisiana struggled in the mid 1790s and did not require new slaves. The situation in Natchez was the direct opposite, and with Spain closing off the slave trade from Africa, Natchez planters lost almost all incentive to stay with the Iberian empire.⁵⁴¹

Andrew Ellicott, the American commissioner who had been sent to mark the boundary between the United States and Spain, did his part to keep tempers flaring in a frontier district that had seen its share of territorial changes. Unprepared for the diplomatic challenge that awaited him, he could not negotiate effectively enough to convince the Spaniards to leave. This caused him to turn toward the planters and even sparked a revolt among the people of Natchez.⁵⁴² The first exchange between Gayoso and Ellicott on February 24, 1797, set the tone as Ellicott announced his arrival in the district to Gayoso by letter. Gayoso was unprepared and scolded Ellicott for his unexpected arrival.⁵⁴³ This earned the ire of Ellicott, who insisted on carrying out his mission and

⁵⁴¹ Din, *Spaniards, Planters, and Slaves*, 177-86.

⁵⁴² From the first day of his arrival, Ellicott met with resistance from the Spanish and often reacted in open disdain, not with the proper diplomatic courtesy. See James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 65-66.

⁵⁴³ Andrew Ellicott, *The Journal of Andrew Ellicott*, 42-43.

eventually settled into a position a short distance from Natchez where he raised the American flag on February 27. Demonstrating his inexperience in diplomacy, Ellicott refused to lower the flag when Gayoso asked him to do so. This strained the relationship between Spain and the United States. In the span of three days, Ellicott had not only created a tense situation with the Spanish, but also forced the planters to choose a side in the struggle between Madrid and Philadelphia.⁵⁴⁴

Gayoso and Ellicott eventually established a civil rapport after the feisty American commissioner found his footing in Natchez, yet each side distrusted the other. Gayoso did his best to remain cordial, and once more it was his skill with the English language that eased the tension. However, in July of 1797 he was promoted to the post of governor of Louisiana and left Natchez in the capable hands of Stephen Minor. The continuous evasiveness exhibited by Spain increasingly rattled the world of the planters. Like all businessmen, planters preferred stable imperial conditions that allowed them to stabilize their exports and secure profits. Therefore, a resistance began to form against the Spanish that would help to accelerate the transition of the not so loyal Anglo-American subjects.

According to historians D. Clayton James and Jack Holmes, Natchez was soon split between merchant-creditors and planter-debtors, with the debtors favoring the American side, and the creditors remaining largely loyal to Spain. This breakdown was not without exception, but generally accurate.⁵⁴⁵ Given the division of the population, Gayoso's mission became even more difficult. The planters and merchants exhibited an

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid., 43-44.

⁵⁴⁵ See Holmes, *Gayoso*, 187-88; James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 68-69.

independence that should have warned not only Gayoso but also Ellicott. Yet the American thought himself so secure in the powers vested in him by President John Adams that he often saw himself as the premier authority figure. But the divisions in the town, furthered by the American military commander Percy Smith Pope, who had accompanied Ellicott as an escort, soon escalated on June 20 to a barely averted revolt of some Natchez citizens.⁵⁴⁶ Planters quickly reacted to the threatening conditions and formed a committee of citizens to deal with the troublesome situation. Gayoso accepted the competence of this committee to maintain peace in Natchez and advised his officers and officials to cooperate with the committee. Andrew Ellicott had no place on the committee and remained an outsider.⁵⁴⁷

Despite Ellicott's inability to negotiate a quick solution and force Spain out of Natchez, and despite his difficulty in establishing a lasting relationship with the American planters, the Quaker abolitionist nevertheless understood what drove the planters of Natchez. Ellicott doubted that a democratic government could easily take root in Natchez "until their habits become more congenial to the true principles of liberty." He was clearly dissatisfied with the settlers and their all too independent stance during his negotiations with Spain. Adding to his misgivings about the people of Natchez was their close connection to slavery. Ellicott proclaimed that "although domestic slavery is extremely disagreeable to the inhabitants of the eastern states, it will nevertheless be expedient to tolerate it in the district of Natchez, where that species of property is very

⁵⁴⁶ James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 70-72. For additional information on this aborted revolt see Haynes, *The Mississippi Territory and the Southwest Frontier, 1795-1817*.

⁵⁴⁷ Manuel Gayoso de Lemos to citizens of Natchez, Natchez, July 10, 1797, AGI: PC, legajo 213, HNOG and Gayoso to Inhabitants of Natchez, Natchez, June 22, 1797, in Territorial Papers, Department of State, National Archives and Records Administration.

common, and let it remain on the same footing as in the southern states, otherwise emigrants possessed of that kind of property, would be induced to settle in the Spanish territory.”⁵⁴⁸ The American emissary evidently had quickly learned what was important to the planters and what the United States had to do to secure the planters’ loyalty.

In addition to their slave property, the planters were concerned with the disposition “of the vacant land.”⁵⁴⁹ Ellicott maintained that the planters needed to be able to buy land in small quantities at reasonable prices, a continuity of Spanish practice. Land should only be sold to actual settlers, keeping speculators out and local elites in control.⁵⁵⁰ Ellicott had learned that the United States had to provide slaves and land in reasonable quantities and at low prices to maintain the planters’ favor and keep tranquility in Natchez. Without those two factors, neither Ellicott, the U.S. military, nor any treaty could guarantee the loyalty of Natchez’s inhabitants.

Conclusion

The advent of cotton changed everything in Spanish Natchez. When cotton came, Spain left Natchez, and with Spain the last hope for slaves to achieve freedom sank into the muddy sills of the Mississippi river. While their masters vied for land and speculated about the timing of the Spanish withdrawal, the slaves saw the advent of a new labor regime under cotton, and for generations to come these slaves, their families, and their heirs would see few changes coming to the district. When the borderlands of Natchez changed to bordered lands between Spain and the United States, the line between freedom and slavery became just as rigid as the line drawn by the two powers in the

⁵⁴⁸ Ellicott, *Journal of Andrew Ellicott*, 153.

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁰ John Craig Hammond supports this thesis in Hammond, *Slavery, Freedom*, 13-29.

lower Mississippi Valley. The United States solidified its power in Natchez over the next twenty years, and despite all the modifications to the slave society of Natchez that had occurred earlier, the Natchez economy was set in its ways from 1795 forward.

Although political turmoil would persist, eventually culminating in secession in 1861, the imperial turmoil that had held Natchez in its grip was all but gone. This did not necessarily mean that slaves did not try to challenge their masters anymore. King Cotton's reign was profitable for Natchez's masters, but it spelled disaster for their human chattel. The United States, however, had successfully courted Natchez's planters away from the Spanish without much effort. The American republic, or so concluded the planters, was more appealing than the struggling Spanish empire. All its efforts were ultimately unsuccessful, because the transition from borderlands to bordered lands made the United States look much more preferable than the Iberian empire. Ultimately, the American republic offered a state power that could be altered by participation in the democratic process, giving planters a voice in government that was lacking with Spain. Despite all of Gayoso's efforts, his authority collapsed in the turmoil of the transition period from tobacco to cotton.

CHAPTER VI

MISSISSIPPI FEVER: FORTIFYING SLAVERY'S "MALIGNANT EMPIRE"

Although domestic slavery is extremely disagreeable to the inhabitants of the eastern states, it will nevertheless be expedient to tolerate it in the district of Natchez, where that species of property is very common, and let it remain on the same footing as in the southern states, otherwise emigrants possessed of that kind of property, would be induced to settle in the Spanish territory.

Diary of Andrew Ellicott, Natchez, September 29, 1797⁵⁵¹

After nineteen years under Spanish rule, the Natchez District became the first economic center of the newly formed Mississippi Territory on April 7, 1798. The planters were now under the protective umbrella of the United States, yet they were not as satisfied with the newly established bond with Washington as one might expect. As Andrew Ellicott had foreseen and warned against, the major concern of the people in Natchez for the next twenty years was their wealth. Any interference from Washington, Madrid, Paris—or slaves—elicited a sharp response from the unruly inhabitants of the Natchez District. Ellicott had “assured the planters and settlers that the United States would protect ‘their system of slavery,’ that was so essential to their burgeoning plantation regime.” Yet the planters understood that Ellicott had no authority to do so. From the very beginning, Natchez planters labored to convince Congress that “they welcomed American rule but opposed any measures to restrict slavery.”⁵⁵² Planters were the dominant political group in the district, and they sought to expand their power constantly. They met challenges to their power with stern resistance.

⁵⁵¹ Ellicott, *Journal of Andrew Ellicott*, 153.

⁵⁵² Hammond, *Slavery, Freedom*, 22.

The loyalties of Natchez's planters lay with themselves. Historian David J. Libby declares that the district's planters were "more loyal to the market than any sovereignty, and the opportunity to sell their products mattered more to them than retaining any nationality."⁵⁵³ The independence gained under Spain to sell their crops to whomever they pleased, although it was a shallow gesture at the time, firmly rooted the Natchez planters in the economy of the Atlantic world. Slavery and the slave trade were part of that world, and if the new republic harbored any sentiment about the abolition of slavery, planters in Natchez would hear none of it.⁵⁵⁴ Consequently, the United States indulged the planters' needs and counted on cotton exports to support the westward expansion of the United States. Slavery was instrumental to that end.

The transition to cotton and the United States heralded hard times to come for the slaves. Slave imports from the eastern states continued to increase, while the slave market of New Orleans reopened to supply African slaves. In time, the Natchez slave market at the Forks in the Road would signify the solid and unwavering commitment not only to slavery, but also to the slave trade. Mississippi territorial law made it more difficult for slaveowners to manumit their slaves, and slaves suing for their freedom met with stiff resistance. Under the new regime, the steady drumbeat of cotton production, the planters' hunger for more slaves, and the westward expansion of the American republic drowned

⁵⁵³ Libby, *Slavery and Frontier Mississippi, 1720-1835*, xv.

⁵⁵⁴ Technically, slavery was illegal in the newly formed Mississippi Territory. The territory was added under the same ordinance as the Northwest Territory, which provided "that there should be 'neither slavery nor involuntary servitude.'" This only changed in 1802 when the first acts for an establishment of government were created. Although still based on the Northwest Ordinance, the provision recognized slavery as legal. See Alfred Holt Stone, *The Early Slave Laws of Mississippi* (Oxford: Mississippi Historical Society, 1899), 134.

these voices out. Yet however faint the voices of the slaves were, their echo still reverberates through court records and letters of the Natchez District.

Seven years after Spain and its legal culture vacated the Natchez District, the American settlers in the newly formed Mississippi Territory passed an “Act to prevent the Liberation of slaves.” Enacted on July 20, 1805, the law made it extremely difficult and costly for a slaveowner to free a slave. Slaveowners had to “first prove to the satisfaction of the General Assembly, that such slave, or slaves, have done some meritorious act; either for the benefit of the said owner, or for the benefit of this territory.” Whereas in Spanish Natchez a visit to the courthouse was enough to grant a slave his freedom, now the General Assembly had to judge every act of manumission. In addition, the act stipulated that “the owner or owners of the said slave or slaves, shall first give bond and security to the governor.” The money was collected as insurance, in case the free person should become “chargeable to the public.”⁵⁵⁵ Liberty became a commodity that no longer rested on the good will of the master, or the ability of a slave to procure funds to buy his or her own freedom. With the advent of American law, slaves could rarely claim their freedom.

The change from the Spanish empire to the American republic transformed the lower Mississippi Valley forever. It signaled the region’s transition from the margin of empire to the center of American expansion and the spread of slavery. Of course, both Europeans and Americans ignored the Indian nations of Chickasaws, Choctaw, and Creeks living, and still dominating, life outside of the pockets of frontier settlements, yet

⁵⁵⁵ Harry Toulmin, *The Statutes of the Mississippi Territory* (Natchez: Printed by Samuel Terrell, 1807), 249-50.

over the next two decades the United States established an unquestioned dominance over the Mississippi Territory.⁵⁵⁶ Planters continuously developed their skills in growing cotton, managing and acquiring slaves, and accessing the cotton markets of the Atlantic world. Between 1798 and 1820, Natchez planters truly became masters of their world. They took on every challenge posed to them and more often than not enforced their will on the government of the Mississippi Territory and the federal government in Washington.⁵⁵⁷ Complete control proved elusive, as neither Indians nor slaves accepted dominance of the Natchez cotton masters without resistance. For the slaves the departure of the Spanish legal codes also signaled the end of a possible, if often only theoretical, chance to gain their freedom in court.

This chapter investigates the transformations that occurred in the slave society of Natchez under the auspices of the United States. Although the Spanish period had not seen a flurry of slave suits, slaves still had a chance to plead their cases in court. Planters now relied on American and territorial law to keep slaves in check and to maintain tight control over any possible avenues to freedom. Under the dons of the Spanish empire, planters were largely able to prevent slaves from escaping their clutches, with a few notable exceptions. Although the American legal system heavily favored the planters, slaves, especially women with families, still challenged their masters for freedom. They

⁵⁵⁶ See Greg O'Brien, *Choctaws in a Revolutionary Age, 1750-1830* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002).

⁵⁵⁷ Several recent books explore the nature of the westward expansion of the United States, and the role the Natchez District played in it. For more detailed interpretations on this matter see Hammond, *Slavery, Freedom*; Haynes, *The Mississippi Territory and the Southwest Frontier, 1795-1817*; Gene A. Smith and Sylvia L. Hilton, *Nexus of Empire: Negotiating Loyalty and Identity in the Revolutionary Borderlands, 1760s-1820s* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010); Kennedy, *Mr. Jefferson's Lost Cause: Land, Farmers, Slavery, and the Louisiana Purchase*; Rothman, *Slave Country*.

relied on the same family networks that the black population under the Spanish had used to secure justice.

A new government meant making adjustments for both black and white. However, the planters no longer had to court the favor of the Spanish government and therefore began to influence policies on slavery more aggressively. They used the military and legal power of the United States to police their territory. Although they may have fought over the level of control the American state had in Natchez, planters nevertheless welcomed the change in power on the local level.⁵⁵⁸ The territorial laws clamped down on manumissions, even forcing some planters to take back promises of freedom made only days before. Even though the court records are sparse, and only a few cases survived in their entirety, those cases do highlight a significantly different face of slavery in Natchez after 1798. Amy Lewis had fallen victim to this change, and many of her fellow Africans in Natchez would suffer the same tragic fate. Nevertheless, the key examples in this chapter show that people of color were still able to use the legal system, although their chances decreased significantly over the course of the first two decades of the nineteenth century. During this time, Natchez slowly began to resemble the sanitized image of the antebellum Natchez that was postulated by the Garden Club in the 1930s.

The changes did not discourage slaves from challenging planter control. Throughout the first two decades of American sovereignty, slaves resorted to all kinds of resistance, short of slave rebellion. They ran away, vied for their freedom in court, tried to circumvent the law of their masters where possible, and maintained an identity aside from the master-inflicted control of a slave worker, as they did across the Americas. But

⁵⁵⁸ Haynes, *The Mississippi Territory and the Southwest Frontier, 1795-1817*.

the Natchez District of the Mississippi Territory was different from the district under Spanish control. Newspapers created under the territorial government carried numerous advertisements for runaway slaves, effectively shrinking the world slaves could utilize for their escape. Nevertheless, as numerous runaway ads suggest, slaves increasingly sought their freedom through flight.⁵⁵⁹

In addition, the planters placed many other obstacles in the slaves' path toward freedom. Access to the courts for people of color was limited at best. As a matter of social control, planters sought to curb African American's (and poor people on general) access to alcohol. Although the Spanish had controlled the distribution of alcohol as well, the territorial judiciary prosecuted multiple persons for the distribution of alcohol to slaves. Obviously, the planters had become more concerned with their slaves' indulgence in alcohol, and they tried to maintain a higher level of control to counter any alcohol-fueled fraternization that could potentially lead to unrest and rebellion among the ever-growing slave population. The legal traditions of the judges in the American Natchez District were rooted in British slave codes mixed with codes from Virginia and South Carolina. People of color were clearly discriminated against, and they lost all the outlets to freedom the Spanish codes provided them.

Coming to Terms with Change: Slavery and Freedom under the New Government

The new government brought transformations that affected all people in Natchez. The most obvious and easiest transition occurred on the administrative level. The district was split into Adams and Pickering counties in 1799. The Republican William C.C.

⁵⁵⁹ The newspapers that appeared in Natchez, especially after 1810, give a much better indication of the number of runaway slaves than the spotty records during the Spanish period. Yet it is still likely that the numbers of runaway slaves increased as the frontier slowly moved west and the Native American Nations were forced out of the region, opening up safer passages for slaves to escape to freedom.

Claiborne relieved the first territorial governor, Federalist Winthrop Sargent, on November 22, 1801. Claiborne moved the capital six miles to the east of Natchez, to the new town of Washington, but Natchez remained the focal point of politics and intrigue, as well as the economic hub of the Mississippi Territory.⁵⁶⁰ The other settlements closely hugged the Mississippi; none was located further than twenty miles away. In December of 1801 the Choctaw nation signed a treaty that ceded lands north of Natchez to the United States.⁵⁶¹ In 1805, the territorial government passed a new slave law that clearly heralded the new regime in the territory and disallowed easy manumission for slaves. All these events laid the foundation for Natchez's expanding slave society.

The slave trade soon became a driving economic force for Natchez, and planters closely monitored the importation of Africans.⁵⁶² William Dunbar inquired of the firm of Tunno and Price in Charleston, South Carolina about their "assistance to procure a Certain number of African slaves" in 1807, before the United States enacted the ban on the international slave trade. He was willing to "procure slaves to the amount of £3000 sterling including all expenses to the hour of shipment from Charleston." Dunbar continued to describe the slaves he desired in detail, even addressing the required sex ratio among them. He also asked the traders not to procure slaves from the coast of

⁵⁶⁰ James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 76-77. The political strife of the early Republic was also closely mirrored in Natchez, and the territorial governors experienced the political opposition to their appointments immediately. Planters, usually Federalists, clashed with farmers, predominantly Jeffersonian Republicans. The overbearing dominance of the Natchez planters then forced the move of the capital from Natchez to Washington, according to Sydnor. See Charles S. Sydnor, *A Gentleman of the Old Natchez Region*, Benjamin L.C. Wailes, Duke University Publications (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1938), 28.

⁵⁶¹ Sydnor, *A Gentleman of the Old Natchez Region*, Benjamin L.C. Wailes, 17-20.

⁵⁶² See for example Gudmestad, *A Troublesome Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade*.

Africa, but rather from the interior of the continent because slaves from the African coast were less “civilized” than their fellow Africans.⁵⁶³

The increase in slave imports was not followed by an increase in manumissions in Natchez. With only a few exceptions, planters did not willingly manumit their slaves during the first two decades of the nineteenth century. Daniel Clark, for instance, the planter and merchant who was so instrumental in bringing the cotton gin to Natchez in 1795, registered two separate manumissions in the Natchez court in 1799 and 1800. In 1799, Clark freed Pollidore for “his great merit, services, honesty, and fidelity, during the term of twelve years.” On February 20, 1800, Adams County judge Thomas Wilkins granted Pollidore his freedom officially.⁵⁶⁴ Pollidore’s twelve years of faithful service netted him his freedom, but the deed does not mention the age of the slave. The Clarks acquired Pollidore during the Spanish period in Natchez, but age and time of sale are important indicators in this case. If Pollidore was an elderly slave, even at the time of his purchase twelve years before, Daniel Clark might simply no longer have had a need for his services and wanted to rid himself of a financial burden. Another possibility, although not very likely, was that Pollidore had entered into an agreement with Clark twelve years before under Spanish control to serve the set term of twelve years. Clark might have

⁵⁶³ William Dunbar to Tunno and Price, Natchez, February 1, 1807, in Rowland, ed. *Life, Letters, and Papers of William Dunbar of Elgin, Morayshire, Scotland, and Natchez, Mississippi: Pioneer Scientist of the Southern United States*, 351-52. Although Dunbar expressed interest in several nations, historians have long pointed out and questioned whether these requests were rather illusory. Traders in Africa had no real influence on the origins of their human chattel, or understanding of African ethnicity, and they would openly mislead their customers to sell the load. In addition, the geographic origins described by Dunbar and other planters often did not match the actual regions in Africa that should have corresponded with it. See David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Daniel C. Littlefield, *Rice and Slaves: Ethnicity and the Slave Trade in Colonial South Carolina* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981).

⁵⁶⁴ Manumission of the slave Pollidore by Daniel Clark, Natchez, December 28, 1799 and Grant of Manumission, Natchez, February 20, 1800, in NCR:LDR, Book A, Adams County Court Records, Natchez, Mississippi.

simply tried to circumvent a possible lawsuit by an aging slave and set him free without going through any trouble. Another possibility was that the Clark family genuinely valued their slave's service and therefore granted him his freedom.

Pollidore joined 181 free people of color who were registered by the first census of Washington, Pickering, and Adams counties in 1801. It is impossible to tell if the 1801 figure represented an increase or decrease in the population since Spanish census records do not indicate the number of free blacks living in Natchez. It seems plausible to speculate that the majority of free blacks in Natchez had lived there under Spanish dominion as well. (If we estimate the number of free people of color conservatively at 150 during at the end of the Spanish period and compare it to the number of slaves in the 1795 census, the percentage of free people of color is an estimated six percent (6.2%) of the black population in Natchez.) Regardless of the increase or decrease in the population of free people of color, the number of slaves in Natchez had already increased dramatically. Whereas the Spanish recorded 2,062 slaves in their last census in 1795, six years later that number had increased to 3,481. By 1810, the same three counties had an enslaved population of 8,840, more than the other eight counties of the Mississippi Territory combined (7,863). The population of free blacks had decreased to 121 (1.4%) in the Adams, Washington, and Jefferson (formerly Pickering) counties, and the population of free blacks in the whole Mississippi territory was down to 174 (1%), eight less than nine years earlier. The laws introduced into the territory obviously took their toll on slaves and free people of color alike.⁵⁶⁵

⁵⁶⁵ See census records: Spanish census of 1795, Natchez, April 14, 1795, in legajo 31, Archivo General de Indias, Papeles de Cuba, Williams Research Center, Historic New Orleans Collection, New

A second string of manumissions dating back to the Spanish period support the theory that the Clarks were not unreasonable masters. They seem to have been genuinely interested in at least some of their slaves, as the case of Jupiter Dowda demonstrates. Their “first slave” Jupiter Dowda died in Philadelphia in 1799. He had relocated to the East Coast after his manumission, demonstrating the far-reaching information channels of the Atlantic world upon which slaves relied. Dowda understood that Philadelphia offered him unique opportunities with its large free black population, even more than New Orleans did. Dowda was able to free the rest of his family as well, probably profiting from the close ties he had developed with his master through his involuntary servitude. Family ties once more underlay the motive of a master to free his slave, and Jupiter Dowda succeeded in uniting his entire nuclear family in liberty in the city of brotherly love.

We know about this case because of the manumission of Dowda’s daughter Susana, entered into court on January 1, 1800. Susana was the last child of Dowda still in Clark’s possession. Other members of her family had already been freed before she at last received her freedom. Clark had freed Dowda’s wife Nanny, their daughter Isabella, and their son Jonathan over the preceding years, all in recognition of Jupiter’s “uncommon fidelity” to the Clarks.⁵⁶⁶ The Dowda clan then presumably relocated to Philadelphia and Susana followed them in 1800, to live in freedom away from the scorching sun of Mississippi’s cotton fields.

Orleans, Louisiana; Territorial Census of Washington, Pickering, and Adams Counties, 1801, in Microfilm 2528, MDAH; Territorial Census of Mississippi Territory, 1810, *ibid*.

⁵⁶⁶ Manumission of Susana Dowda by Clark family, Natchez, January 1, 1800, NCR:LDR, Book A.

The inroads of American law wiped away the opportunities granted to slaves under Spanish law—even when it came to manumission—as a rising tide would eliminate footsteps on beach sand. Although manumissions would occur later in the history of the State of Mississippi, and free people continued to live in the Natchez District, the change in government significantly affected the people of color in Natchez. Family ties remained not only the surest, but soon the only possibility for slaves to receive their freedom.

Dealing with Human Chattel

The growing slave population worried the administrators of the Mississippi Territory. After the U.S implemented its legal system in Natchez, manumissions such as the ones undertaken by the Clarks became a rare occurrence. The new laws discouraged masters from offering freedom to slaves and left bondspeople without legal avenues to freedom. Planters could almost sense the desperation of their slaves as word of Gabriel's Rebellion reached Natchez in 1800, and officials immediately urged planters to remain vigilant.⁵⁶⁷ Winthrop Sargent stated in a circular letter to all planters of the territory that there were several dangers posed by the large slave population in their midst, yet reason should prevail over panic. Apparently two overseers on the plantations of David Lintot and Mr. Moore had been recently attacked. Yet Sargent dismissed these outbreaks of violence as unrelated incidents based upon the misconduct of the respective overseers. Sargent further reiterated that he did not believe that slaves were threatening to rise against their masters at this moment. Rebellion was always a threat, but the governor

⁵⁶⁷ For a history of Gabriel's Rebellion see, Douglas R. Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion - the Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 & 1802* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

expressed hope that revolt could be avoided with “mild and wise Treatment.”⁵⁶⁸

Curiously, slave rebellion had become a major concern after two years of American government, and violence was reported on at least two plantations. Throughout almost two decades of Spanish reign, only two instances of a possible threat by slaves were reported in the surviving records, and both of these were in response to a slave insurrection in other parts of Louisiana.

Nevertheless, the danger that was felt by the planters was not to be underestimated. Sargent warned his constituents about recently imported slaves “some of whom, it is more than probable have been actors in the Bloody scenes that have already devastated whole Countries.”⁵⁶⁹ The governor referred to the slaves that had recently arrived in the lower Mississippi Valley from the French colony of Saint Domingue, where slaves had risen and had successfully defeated French, British, and Spanish efforts to regain control of the wealthiest slave colony in the history of the Atlantic world. Some of those slaves had made their way to Louisiana, and Sargent feared that the influence of revolutionary Haiti might manifest itself among Natchez slaves.⁵⁷⁰

Two months later, Sargent issued new orders to the territorial militia. Once again, a major concern—besides the ever-present Indian threat—was the issue of slavery.

Sargent urged them in a January 12, 1801, address to remain heedful and well-armed

⁵⁶⁸ Governor Winthrop Sargent, Circular Letter to Slave-holders, Grove Plantation, Mississippi Territory, November 16, 1800, in Dunbar Rowland, *The Mississippi Territorial Archives, 1798-18* (Nashville: Brandon Printing Company, 1905), 311.

⁵⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 312.

⁵⁷⁰ On the slave rebellion in Haiti see Fick, *The Making of Haiti*; James, *Black Jacobins*. Cuban planters were equally concerned with the importation of slaves from Haiti, as Matt Childs notes in his book on Cuban slave rebellions. See Childs, *The 1812 Aponte Rebellion*, 1-119. Many of the free people of color who were first ousted from Haiti and moved to Cuba were subsequently forced out of the Spanish empire as well and made their way to New Orleans, further adding to the tension created by the Haitian revolution. See Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 142.

because the number of slaves in the district had increased gradually and Sargent was painfully aware of the internal slave trade. The slave trade not only added to the number of slaves in the district, but “reasoning from the fine feelings of Man to the number of our most inveterate Enemies *also*.”⁵⁷¹ Sargent specifically cautioned that:

Tis more than probable, that in the Lapse of another year, there will be more Blacks than Whites within the Mississippi Territory. —That we deprive them of the sacred Boon of Liberty is a Crime they can never forgive—Mild and humane Treatment may for a Time Continue them quiet, but can never fully Reconcile them to their situation—and Calculating from the Experience of some amongst us, in a War with any European, or even Indian Power, *they* might be irresistibly stimulated to Vengeance.⁵⁷²

Sargent again reiterated that it was most important to treat slaves with mildness and humanity, cautioning any planter from driving his human chattels too hard and punishing them too severely.

The planters perceived the threat of violence from slaves as very real. Manuel Gayoso de Lemos, and no other governor of Spanish Natchez, ever thought it necessary to caution the planters to treat their slaves well.⁵⁷³ Yet three years later, the American governor felt seriously threatened by the slaves’ presence in the district. Winthrop Sargent even ventured so far as to remind the planters that slavery was indeed a crime, and a revolt of slaves a logical consequence. To counter this, Sargent declared that officers of the militia needed “to Carry into full effect, the Laws for the Regulation of Slaves.” He ordered slave patrols and cautioned once again that he had received reports

⁵⁷¹ Governor Winthrop Sargent, Address to Militia Officers, Natchez, Mississippi Territory, January 12, 1801, in Rowland, *The Mississippi Territorial Archives, 1798-18*, 324.

⁵⁷² *Ibid.*, 325.

⁵⁷³ Although Gayoso had to contain a smaller number of slaves, he also had much more pressing needs of border security. Despite all these hardships, Gayoso did not feel the need to issue any particular orders concerning the treatment of slaves.

of “cruel and Barbarous usage practiced towards slaves, under a pretended Authority.” These actions earned his official disapproval, since they put the district further in the danger of a slave rebellion.⁵⁷⁴

It seems plausible that unsanctioned and unsupervised assaults on slaves had previously taken place in Natchez. The white inhabitants of the Natchez District must have felt in imminent danger of a rebellion to act with the reported violence, even though no such acts were reported under Spanish supervision. Yet the combination of a regime change, a large influx of slaves, and the fearsome reports from the Haitian revolution and Gabriel’s Rebellion did their part in turning Natchez planters into a fearful lot at times.⁵⁷⁵

Planters quickly established new legal codes in the Mississippi territory to counter these threats. They passed two acts heralding the change from Spanish to Anglo-American legal tradition in January 1803 and January 1805. The 1803 “Act Concerning Marriages” outlawed all unions between white people and people of color, free or enslaved, and it also punished both the newlyweds and the orchestrator of the wedding with heavy fines.⁵⁷⁶ Two years later, the legislature passed “An Act Respecting Slaves.” This act undid two decades of Spanish legal tradition in Natchez and resembled the British Act of 1766 in its severity. Slaves could not bear witness against white people, could not carry weapons, or own property. According to the act, slaves could only sell the produce they raised in their free time with the permission of the master. The

⁵⁷⁴ Rowland, *The Mississippi Territorial Archives, 1798-18*, 325-26.

⁵⁷⁵ Libby, *Slavery and Frontier Mississippi, 1720-1835*, 55-58.

⁵⁷⁶ An Act Concerning Marriages, January 17, 1803, in Bills, Series 525, Box 27182, MDAH.

administration severely limited slaves' movement and restricted it to their plantation or master's home, unless they carried their master's permission to leave the plantation.⁵⁷⁷

But the legislature pushed even further. Slaves were also prohibited from keeping dogs or horses. Resistance against white people was obviously forbidden and severely punished under all circumstances. If a slave were tried for a capital crime, two thirds of the jury had to be "composed of owners of slaves." Courts only permitted slave testimony in felony cases involving other bondsmen. Originally, the act included a clause that required the jury to estimate the value of the slave, and then called for the reimbursement of the master through territorial funds. Evidently, this section of the act was not ratified. Instead the administration levied a special tax on slaveowners to establish a fund from which the owner of an executed slave could be reimbursed.⁵⁷⁸ After 1805, then, the legal status of slaves had been clearly relegated to that of property. While Spanish law certainly did not endorse capital crime by slaves and cracked down on such violence equally strong, Spanish laws did not define slavery as the natural state of a black person. After 1805 black people in Natchez had become just that, and they constantly had to prove their freedom, if they could obtain it.

Natchez planters had to find ways to deal with the new laws and the growing slave population. They enacted legislation that empowered them to subject people of color to tight control in all matters of life, and thereby established a tentative feeling of security. This security was easily destroyed by rumors of slave resistance and no legal code, no matter how restrictive, could prevent planters from fearing that their slaves to

⁵⁷⁷ An Act Respecting Slaves, January 29, 1805, in Bills, Series 525, Box 27182, MDAH.

⁵⁷⁸ Ibid.

rise up in rebellion. Yet the new codes served their purpose. Manumissions were rare, and planters successfully relegated black people to the bottom of society.

The Price of American Slavery

Manumission occasionally occurred after the change in legal systems in 1798 with a familiar pattern established in Spanish Natchez. Masters (and often fathers) manumitted family members before 1805 and the legislature did so after that date, if the masters provided the necessary funds. Paternity of the master (or a white person) was often implicitly stated because the mother was described as black, but the children as mulatto. The Clarks freed their slaves, the heirs of Asahel Lewis reluctantly freed Amy Lewis's son, and a few other masters followed the example of those families.

The Natchez court recorded several manumissions based on a wide variety of circumstances over the next ten years. One slave, manumitted by the Reverend Adam Boyd in Georgia in 1799 and then brought to Natchez, continued to serve his master for set wages.⁵⁷⁹ Anthony Hutchins, one of the most influential planters in early Natchez history, manumitted his slave Tony after his death in 1805.⁵⁸⁰ William Vousdan did the same for his slave Ben in 1803.⁵⁸¹ In 1807 Susanna Scott freed the four-year-old slave girl Clarinda. Her parents, Monday and Philly, paid Scott the sum of two hundred dollars

⁵⁷⁹ Manumission agreement, Richmond County (Probably Augusta), Georgia, May 10, 1799, in NCR: LDR, Book C, Adams County Court House, Natchez, Mississippi.

⁵⁸⁰ Manumission of Tony by Anthony Hutchins, Natchez, June 18, 1805, in NCR: LDR, Book D, Adams County Court House, Natchez, Mississippi.

⁵⁸¹ Manumission of Ben by William Vousdan, Natchez, December 1, 1803, in NCR: LDR, Book D, Adams County Court House, Natchez, Mississippi.

for the girl, and in turn Scott manumitted the slave girl. Clarinda, unlike her parents, was now free and could no longer be returned to a state of bondage or lifelong servitude.⁵⁸²

The case of George Fitzgerald is an especially informative tale. In 1804 he informed the court that he wanted to free his “negro woman named Mary and her four mulattoe children christened by the names of Elizabeth, Polly, Isabelle and George.” He did so because of “divers good causes and considerations,” and specifically because of “principles of humanity and tenderness to the said Mary and her four children aforesaid as being unfit to undergo the hardships of slavery to which the said Mary and her four children might in the state of bondage be exposed.”⁵⁸³ Several indications in the court document suggest that George Fitzgerald might have been the father of the four children. Mary was from Jamaica and not described as a mulatto, but her children were of mixed racial heritage. The only boy among the four was named George, possibly after George Fitzgerald. Yet the latter was no opponent of slavery himself. Not only did he own Mary and possibly had four children with her, but two years after the manumission was carried out, he purchased another slave named Hannah and her child, Phillister.⁵⁸⁴ Obviously, Fitzgerald had no qualms about the institution of slavery, but he was concerned with the fate of Mary and her children. Therefore he freed them from slavery and spared them from the destiny of many slave families in Natchez that would have been broken up through sales or other business dealings of their masters. Fitzgerald divided his estate in

⁵⁸² Manumission of Clarinda, Natchez, February 7, 1807, in NCR: LDR, Book D, Adams County Court House, Natchez, Mississippi.

⁵⁸³ Manumission of Mary, Elizabeth, Polly, Isabelle, and George, Natchez, April 18, 1804, in NCR: LDR, Book E, Adams County Court House, Natchez, Mississippi.

⁵⁸⁴ Slave sale, Matteo Jardito to George Fitzgerald, Natchez, May 12, 1806, in NCR: LDR, Book E, Adams County Court House, Natchez, Mississippi.

equal parts between his “mulattoe children” and two mulatto women after his death in 1812.⁵⁸⁵

Few slaves followed Mary and her children to freedom in Natchez. The first slaves freed by the legislature of the territory and not by the master were a female slave and her eight children on December 28, 1805.⁵⁸⁶ Historian Todd Herring has found three additional manumissions between 1803 and 1804, but they were missing from the books in Natchez. Jane Clark manumitted her slave Dinah, yet Dinah had to pay her former mistress 30 Spanish silver dollars for the manumission, as well as an additional 30 every year for ten years. Robert Moore allowed his slave Esther to purchase her freedom for \$100 in 1804, and John Forsyth freed Hannah after she paid him a total of \$700.⁵⁸⁷ Yet these manumissions were relatively rare. Over all, only thirteen manumissions were recorded in the deed record books of Adams County in the first decade of territorial government beyond the single act of manumission by the legislature that freed eight slaves. Almost all of these manumissions, except two, occurred before July 20, 1805, the date on which the new slave law was enacted by the legislature of the Mississippi Territory.

Other slaves who were manumitted in other states or territories had their manumission deeds recorded in the Natchez records to avoid any complications and to

⁵⁸⁵ Testament of James Fitzgerald, Natchez, June 26, 1812, in Bisland Family Papers, Lower Mississippi Valley Collection, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge.

⁵⁸⁶ Manumission of the mother and her children Lucia, Romain, Euphasine, Maxmilian, Sylvester, Ferdinand, and Anastasie, approved by governor Robert Williams, Washington ?, Mississippi Territory, 28 December, 1805, in Territorial Papers, Department of State, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.

⁵⁸⁷ See Herring, "Natchez, 1795-1830: Life and Death on the Slavery Frontier," 265-66. Herring has located these records as typescripts in the William Baskerville Hamilton Papers at Duke University. How these typescripts got there and why there are missing from the Adams County Court Record Deed Books is unknown.

prove conclusively that they were indeed free.⁵⁸⁸ For example, John Foster had to rely on his legal papers from Kentucky to defend his freedom in the Natchez court. As evident by the records in Natchez, Adams County officials requested not only legal proof of his freedom from Kentucky, but also two witness statements that corroborated that the “dark mulatto,” John Foster, was indeed free in the State of Kentucky. Both witnesses testified that John Foster, age twenty-three, was born to free parents in North Carolina and had migrated from there first to Kentucky, and then later to Natchez.⁵⁸⁹ Unfortunately it is unknown why he had to prove his freedom, but the frequent reference to him as a “dark mulatto” hints at the fact that people in Natchez judged his dark skin as a sure indicator of slavery, no matter what John Foster explained. Fortunately, Foster was able to legalize his status as a free person of color.

Manumitted slaves still needed to support themselves in the face of a booming slave economy. Skilled laborers had little trouble finding employment in Natchez and the small communities in its vicinity, but unskilled workers were hard pressed to find jobs.⁵⁹⁰ Many might have sought to move to New Orleans to find suitable jobs. In many ways, the Mississippi River offered superior employment opportunities to the Natchez District,

⁵⁸⁸ Manumission of slave Aaron, Mason County, Kentucky, April 4, 1805, in NCR:LDR, Book D, Adams County Court House, Natchez, Mississippi.

⁵⁸⁹ Deed of Manumission, Davidson County, Kentucky, October 22, 1804; and witnesses accounts, Davidson County, Kentucky, October 19, 1804, in NCR:LDR, Book D, Adams County Court House, Natchez Mississippi,

⁵⁹⁰ See chapter IV for various jobs of free people of color in Natchez. They worked as nurses, dock workers, seamstresses, hat makers, and midwives, in addition to carpenters, smiths and so forth.

because it allowed for easy movement and little resistance from local societies or elites.⁵⁹¹ Some ex-slaves remained in servitude, but on their own terms. They indentured themselves for a limited time to a white master. Romino, for example, entered a second indenture contract with a white master in 1805. He contractually bound himself for three years and three months, and the court document includes a witnessed note from his new master that declared that after the time in this contract had expired, Romino would once again be a free man.⁵⁹² The contract did not stipulate what kind of work Romino was doing, yet it netted him a job for over three years, and it secured Natchez as his home. Perhaps he had a family on a surrounding plantation and, rather than leaving, he entered an indenture to remain close to his loved ones.⁵⁹³

Direct manumissions were not the only means by which masters allowed their slaves to receive their freedom. Some masters sold their human property, yet provided clauses in the sales contract that in theory afforded freedom for the sold slave at a future time. Unlike provisions comparable to this one under Spanish law—like self-purchase that was guaranteed in contract over time—the manumissions that should have occurred

⁵⁹¹ On free people of color on the Mississippi River, although during the age of the steamboat see Douglas Walter Bristol, *Knights of the Razor: Black Barbers in Slavery and Freedom* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 44-50; Thomas C. Buchanan, *Black Life on the Mississippi: Slaves, Free Blacks, and the Western Steamboat World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

⁵⁹² Indenture of Romino, Natchez, February 13, 1805, in NCR:LDR, Book D, Adams County Court House, Natchez Mississippi.

⁵⁹³ Former slaves in frontier towns frequently had to seek employment with their old masters. See Burton and Smith, *Colonial Natchitoches: A Creole Community on the Louisiana-Texas Frontier*, 101.

based on such contracts in Natchez were not documented.⁵⁹⁴ Evidently, some masters intended to free their slaves eventually, but they were unwilling to forego some recompense for that deed. They thereby placed the onus on the new owner of their slave and somehow expected that that person would ignore the financial side of the deal and set the slave free. Unfortunately, Natchez planters never had been known for their willingness to let a profit slip. Therefore, as the following examples show, many attempted gradual manumissions never came to fruition.

James Moore, for instance, bought the mulatto slave Polly from her Kentucky owner James Ward in 1800. Aside from the usual legal text associated with a bill of sale, however, Ward added:

Until she shall arrive at the age of twenty five years, which will be on the first day of January One Thousand Eight Hundred Twenty and whereas the said Polly is now my Slave for life Now know ye that I the said James Ward, for diverse good causes and Reasons and Conditions me thereunto moving, have manumitted, set free, and wholly exonerate the said Polly from servitude after the said first day of January [illegible] of said year.⁵⁹⁵

Polly was five years old at the time of sale and could only hope that she would at least receive freedom at age twenty-five, although the court records do not reveal whether she ever became free. Yet maybe her parents' dread over their daughter being sold down to

⁵⁹⁴ I could not find any record of such slaves ever being manumitted according to the conditions in the bill of sale. This could have several reasons. Their masters might have taken them out of Natchez and freed them elsewhere, or they might have been sold again. The law of the Mississippi Territory also constantly tightened the conditions of manumissions, and planters might have simply elected to forego the bill of sale contract in lieu of the more restrictive law in Mississippi. Again, the sources in the Natchez Court House might be lost, misplaced, or destroyed. Only over the last two decades have efforts been made to preserve effectively some of the court records, but in the two centuries previous to these efforts many sources might have been lost. Unfortunately, the record groups in Natchez are not comparable to records in Virginia or New England, for example.

⁵⁹⁵ Bill of sale, James Ward to James Moore, Mason County, Kentucky, January 28, 1800, in NCR:LDR, Book A, Adams County Court House, Natchez, Mississippi.

Natchez was eased a slight bit by the fickle hope that Polly could receive her freedom in two decades.⁵⁹⁶

One can speculate that the previous masters of the slaves mentioned simply tried to ease their conscience by inserting a clause for manumission after a set time, or maybe they wanted to appease the slave, or in many cases, the family of the slave. If the bondspeople learned of the sale, yet were promised freedom for good behavior after a certain time of service, their obedience could be secured without threats or violence, and transportation to their new owner was achieved with less flight risk.⁵⁹⁷ However, the restrictive manumission policies of the Mississippi Territory prohibited many manumissions from being carried out. Although free people of color lived in Natchez, it was increasingly difficult for a slave to become free in a world dominated by cotton and its labor demands. Slaves had to find other options to become free.

Spain was still tantalizingly close. Obviously, the Spanish legal system no longer held sway in Natchez, yet until France wrested Louisiana away from Spain and sold it to the United States in 1803, crossing the river could mean arriving in the Promised Land as it might bring freedom. Spanish authorities were not actively encouraging slaves to run away like they had done in the eighteenth century in Florida, yet Spanish law did offer

⁵⁹⁶ Other examples include Anna, who was purchased in 1804, as well as Spencer and William, purchased in 1806. It is not known if they were eventually freed. See Bill of sale, Natchez, August 2, 1804, in NCR:LDR, Book C, Adams County Court House, Natchez, Mississippi; Bill of sale, June 28, 1806, Harrison County, Kentucky, in NCR:LDR, Book D, *ibid.*; Contract between Thomas Scott and Samuel Postlethwait, Natchez, June 21, 1806, in NCR:LDR, Book E, *ibid.* William Foster was in all likelihood the brother of Thomas Foster, who bought the slave Ibrahima, or Prince, for his plantation and whose story became famous in antebellum America. See Alford, *Prince among Slaves: The True Story of an African Prince Sold into Slavery in the American South*.

⁵⁹⁷ On delayed manumission contracts see Max L. Grivno, *Gleanings of Freedom: Free and Slave Labor Along the Mason-Dixon Line, 1790-1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 137-46; T. Stephen Whitman, *The Price of Freedom: Slavery and Manumission in Baltimore and Early National Maryland* (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 8-61; Wolf, *Race and Liberty in the New Nation: Emancipation in Virginia from the Revolution to Nat Turner's Rebellion*.

some rare opportunities for freedom.⁵⁹⁸ One slave who enlisted liberty for a few fleeting moments by crossing the Mississippi River was Phillis, the slave of Thomas Bissett of Kentucky. Bissett's brother Joseph took Phillis through Natchez and across the Mississippi River, where he liberated the slave without the consent of his brother. Thomas Bissett then retained Joseph Ray as his lawyer, and Ray crossed the Mississippi and confronted the Spanish courts with Bissett's claims. Bissett did not want Phillis back, so he simply instructed Ray to sell Phillis in Natchez after he had regained possession of her.⁵⁹⁹ Phillis felt certain of her freedom and never left town. This oversight led her back into slavery. Joseph Ray crossed the river and reclaimed Phillis as human property. He then sold her to Prosper King of Natchez for four hundred and fifty dollars.⁶⁰⁰

To avoid cases like Phillis's, Natchez planters insured their property rights against Spanish law. John Joseph Rodriguez, a Spanish inhabitant of Natchez had apparently mortgaged two slaves to Walter Beall in 1790. Beall, now hailing from Kentucky, bought the slaves for \$1,000 in 1800. Understanding the problems between the two legal systems, he included in the bill of sale a provision that "any claim or demand the Spanish Government may have claiming for and under it which are not meant to be warranted against," would be null and void. In other words, the slaves were his under American law, and the Spanish government could do nothing to take them back, whether or not that

⁵⁹⁸ During the imperial conflicts between Great Britain and Spain over North America, the governor of Spanish Florida promised freedom to British runaway slaves from the Carolinas and Georgia, if they converted to Catholicism. This offer caused tension between the colonies, to say the very least. See Landers, *Black Society*; Wood, *Black Majority*.

⁵⁹⁹ Appointment of lawyer, between Thomas Bissett and Joseph Ray, Nelson County, Kentucky, April 5, 1800, in NCR:LDR, Book A, Adams County Court House, Natchez, Mississippi.

⁶⁰⁰ Bill of Sale, June 11, 1800, Natchez, *ibid*.

slave had entered a contract of self-purchase.⁶⁰¹ Planters, like slaves, were certainly savvy enough to recognize the difference between the legal codes, and they sought to exploit them. The Spanish government, on the other side of the river, had already made concessions concerning property claims in 1798, yet American planters wanted to make sure that they could deal in their human chattel without any interference from their friendly Iberian neighbors across the river.

Planters knew many of the Spanish officials on the other side of the Mississippi from Natchez's Spanish days. The Spanish authorities had apparently decided that in cases where property was in dispute, they would remain neutral and follow the law of the United States after 1798. Many Spanish settlers such as Josef Vidal, Antonio Gras and Francisco Candle, who had spent twenty years in Natchez and then had settled across the river, endorsed that decision.⁶⁰²

The case of the slave Clarinda is the most telling of how the legal change in Natchez could destroy any hope of freedom for slaves. The haunting story transpired just as the Mississippi Territory sharpened its manumission law again in 1808 and compelled masters who manumitted their slaves to pay a security in case the slave became a burden to the public. Joseph Galvan, Clarinda's master, did not consider this when he manumitted his slave on June 24, 1808.⁶⁰³ Exactly five months later, Galvan rescinded

⁶⁰¹ Bill of sale, Natchez, September 16, 1800, in NCR:LDR, Book A, Adams County Court House, Natchez, Mississippi.

⁶⁰² Order of Spanish Government, Natchez, March 21, 1798, in NCR:LDR, Book A, Adams County Court House, Natchez, Mississippi. Translations by author unless otherwise noted.

⁶⁰³ Manumission of slave Clarinda, Natchez, June 24, 1808, in NCR:LDR, Book E, Adams County Court House, Natchez, Mississippi. Galvan had just purchased Clarinda from William Cochran and had actually advertised for her as a runaway, but enticed her to come back by promising no punishment. See *Mississippi Messenger*, Joseph Galvan, Natchez, June 30, 1808.

his manumission. He stated that “at the time of executing this emancipation [he] was unacquainted with the conditions prescribed by the statute of this Territory for liberating slaves and he now not being able nor inclined to give the security in such cases required, doth hereby renounce, revoke and make null to all intents [sic] and purposes the within manumission [sic].”⁶⁰⁴ Despite his expressed “consideration of the faithful service” of Clarinda, the merit of her service was not sufficient to validate the price tag that came with freedom for a slave after 1808.⁶⁰⁵ This represented a dramatic reversal of custom, not only from the Spanish period, but even from the first years of American legislation. Consequently, slavery became ever more restrictive for the victims of the Atlantic slave trade, and freedom was removed to an all but faint glint of hope on the horizon.

The continuation of American government and eventually statehood did nothing to lesson the obstacles placed in the way of bondspeople who tried to claim their liberty. Even family bonds that often assisted slaves to claim freedom no longer sufficed to guarantee success of their liberty suits. Mary Ann, a slave who was sold from Maryland to Mississippi, claimed that she was not sold as a slave but as an indentured servant. Under the terms of her servitude her contract was to expire after six years and she demanded her freedom in 1821. Her current owner in Mississippi simply claimed that he had paid the full price and purchased her as a slave for life and Mary Ann lost her case. Although some documents remain which state that Mary Ann’s Maryland owner had indeed tried to emancipate her after the service of six years, the courts of Mississippi did

⁶⁰⁴ Manumission of slave Clarinda rescinded, Natchez, November 24, 1808, *ibid.*

⁶⁰⁵ Manumission of slave Clarinda, Natchez, June 24, 1808, *ibid.*

not uphold the legal validity of the paper and rejected Mary Ann's suit.⁶⁰⁶ Her liberty was the latest victim to the ever-increasing planter pressure to keep slaves in bondage.

On July 20, 1821 the slave Debby committed a similar story to the records of the Adams County court. She also claimed that she had been sold in Maryland as an indentured servant and that her term had expired after fourteen years of service. Debby was not alone. She claimed the freedom of her children Barley, Charles, Joseph, Polly, and Hetty as well. The whole family, according to Debby, was rightfully free, and their master Anthony Campbell held them in bondage without any justification.⁶⁰⁷ To demonstrate her desire and determination, Debby described herself and her family as "Debby, a free person of color, and her children." She went so far as to demand "damages for their services, work and labor and injuries done their persons."⁶⁰⁸ It seems that Campbell had not only deprived Debby of her freedom, but he had also exacted physical punishment on her and her family.

The field was stacked against her. Campbell held her small family as slaves and Debby could not oppose his claim until she ran away and found the assistance of a lawyer. Her petition explained that she had not been in the possession of Anthony Campbell "for some few weeks last past, nor is she now in his possession."⁶⁰⁹ Her case apparently moved attorney Edmund Turner to come to her aid, and he brought her claim to court. Debby's children remained in bondage and under the control of Campbell, and

⁶⁰⁶ See Adams County, State of Mississippi, Mary Ann vs. Ray Baumerman ?, May 1821, in Superior Court Records, Adams County, Historic Natchez Foundation (HNF), Natchez, Mississippi.

⁶⁰⁷ Slave Debby to Superior Court of Adams County, Natchez, Mississippi, July 20, 1821, in Superior Court Records, Adams County, HNF.

⁶⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid.

Debby must have feared for their well-being while she ran away to secure the family's liberty. Unfortunately, her courage would not be rewarded.

To Campbell's chagrin, Debby had a strong case. Not only did she have the foresight to obtain the services of an attorney, but she could also produce witnesses to testify that she indeed had been sold as an indentured servant.⁶¹⁰ According to James Grafton, his brother Daniel had bought Debby's contract in 1805. The contract was set to expire in 1819, but Daniel Grafton had died in June 1816, and Campbell had taken over the contract and Debby. Furthermore, the witness stated that all of Debby's five children were born after 1805, making none of them slaves. James Grafton also proclaimed that he had seen Debby's indenture contract and knew that "she was indentured to serve but fourteen years, when [she] was to be free and that it was on these terms his said brother Daniel Grafton purchased the plaintiff."⁶¹¹ Debby was right to sue and demand her freedom.

After the court received the witness report, attorneys for both sides went to work and questioned James Grafton thoroughly. Campbell's lawyer tried to press Grafton on several points of his testimony, including whether he had actually seen Debby give birth to any of her children, or if he had really seen the bill of sale. Here Grafton ran into some trouble. He could not remember the exact date on the bill, nor whether it was a witnessed bill of sale. Grafton did not know her status prior to her sale, nor did he know the name of

⁶¹⁰ Indentured servants were not uncommon in Natchez, even in the early nineteenth century, as several runaway ads for German indentured servants published in Natchez demonstrate. See for example *The Mississippi State Gazette*, Natchez, July 18, 1818 and February 13, 1819.

⁶¹¹ Testimony of James Grafton, Natchez, July 19, 1821, in Superior Court Records, Adams County, HNF.

her original master.⁶¹² Debby's lawyer asked similar questions. Grafton again proclaimed that Debby had made it known that she was to be freed, but he was not sure if papers could prove her status. Apparently the papers were not in order when Debby was transferred from Daniel Grafton to Campbell after Grafton's death. The witness could not remember exactly what the bill of sale said and if a manumission in any country was attached, but he testified that Debby was to go free at some point in time. When Grafton was asked why a black indentured servant should be purchased in Maryland, he replied that it was customary in Maryland to sell bondspeople as term slaves with limited service contracts. As to Debby's children, Grafton could not provide any additional information. He did not know if his brother intended to free them as well, or if he strove to keep them in bondage.⁶¹³

Debby's chances for success decreased over the following weeks. The questioning was postponed until August 1, 1821. When the hearing continued, it was revealed that Debby had indeed run away from the plantation in the spring of 1821 to obtain a trial and an attorney. Campbell's lawyer continued to press hard, but no further substantial evidence could be introduced that moved the case either way. The lawyer revealed that it was James Grafton who had originally procured Debby's lawyer and asked him for advice on how to proceed in the case.⁶¹⁴ After the interrogations were completed, no further witnesses were called.

⁶¹² Questioning of James Grafton, Natchez, July 19, 1821, in Superior Court Records, Adams County, HNF.

⁶¹³ Questioning of James Grafton, Natchez, July 19, 1821, in Superior Court Records, Adams County, HNF.

⁶¹⁴ Ibid.

James Grafton, curiously, remained the only witness interrogated in the case, and his role in the case or his relationship to Debby is difficult to glean from the sources. He helped Debby tremendously when he organized her defense and functioned as a key witness in the case, but his motives are unknown. It also seems that Debby had sought refuge in his house for a while, which adds to the murky circumstances of the case. His brother held Debby and her children as servants, yet James Grafton willingly helped her. He seems to have been convinced that Campbell had treated Debby unfairly, and he tried to prevent her from becoming a slave for life.

In summary, this case demonstrates why slaves were rarely freed and why planters were so keen to avoid freedom suits altogether. Not only could they lose their slave property, but the master of a freed person had to “first give bond and security to the governor, for the time being, that the said slave or slaves should not become chargeable to the public.”⁶¹⁵ Campbell stood to lose much more than the work force of Debby and her children or their market value. The additional \$1,800 designated as bond for the slaves was also a substantial sum of money, and Campbell surely tried his best to avoid that payment. In addition, every fellow planter who might face similar suits in the future sided with Campbell. Therefore, the outcome of the trial is not surprising and demonstrates how much the legal culture of Natchez had changed in the two decades since Spanish control. The case lingered for two years in the courts, but ultimately an all-white jury explained “we of the jury find that the defendants are slaves, and not free persons in manner and form as in their petition they have alleged.”⁶¹⁶ The court and jury

⁶¹⁵ Toulmin, *A Digest of the Statues of the Mississippi Territory*, Chapter 30, Section 1, 249.

⁶¹⁶ Jury Verdict, Natchez, May, 1823, in Superior Court Records, Adams County, HNF.

obviously did not think the evidence in the case sufficient—or they simply ignored it—and condemned Debby and her children to a life of perpetual bondage in Natchez.

In less than a decade, the American territorial government, backed and urged by the planters, had enacted a series of laws that made manumission almost unobtainable for slaves. Without the help of a white settler slaves could not achieve their freedom. As under Spanish rule, families were often the only resort for slaves to achieve freedom. Either a white partner freed his consort and their children, or a master would agree to free at least the children of a slave family for a price. Cases in which masters freed slaves for good services on their deathbed were rare, and these cases virtually disappear after 1805. The road to freedom in the American Natchez District was exclusively dependent on the benevolence of the master.

Ebb and Flow of Slavery in Early Nineteenth Century Natchez

Avenues to freedom closed in lockstep with the emergence of King Cotton. Planters felt secure in their society as patriarchs, and they began to plot their ascent to the fabulous riches of the antebellum cotton planters. Along the way, they had to weather a few more bumps in the road, such as the war of 1812, where the lower Mississippi Valley became a battleground between U.S. and British troops, and statehood, which was finally granted in 1817. Much smaller bumps were present in the attempts of slaves to strive for their freedom and in economic struggles.

Newly arriving settlers or young sons of established planters usually asked for advice from frontier-hardened and successful planters living in Natchez. Most of the time, the men wanted to know in what they should invest their wealth, and more often than not slaves was the answer. Even when they left Natchez to try their luck in the

booming lands of the Louisiana Purchase, this equation held true. A case in point was James Steer, nephew of prominent Natchez planter John Minor. Trying to claim his fortune in the lower Mississippi Valley, young James Steer responded to his uncle's advice to invest in a bank (probably the Bank of the State of Mississippi). Steer explained to his uncle that it would be unwise to do so and argued as follows: "After reflecting on the subject, I feel disposed to decline taking any Bank Stock at this period. From a young man, just commencing in life, the best stock, in which he can invest capital, is, I think, negro stock. While cotton can command from 20 to 30 cts per pound, negroes will yield a much larger income than any bank dividend."⁶¹⁷ Slaves were the most valuable property in the lower Mississippi Valley, and neither bank stock nor the profits reaped from cotton outperformed the possible investment return on slaves.

However, Steer was already stricken with the problems that would befall future generations of planters and that troubled the inhabitants of Natchez during the Spanish period—debt. He told his uncle in no uncertain terms that his finances were simply not sufficient for investments of the order his uncle proposed (over \$10,000). Payments for parts of his land were due, explained Steer, and his debtors were not paying him promptly. Therefore, he opted to avoid speculation and picked the safest investment to be had on the frontier of the lower Mississippi Valley—slaves.⁶¹⁸

Another planter's correspondence supports this point. Philander Smith had received a letter from his mother in 1806, in which she presumed that he was a rich planter in Natchez. Philander was quick to point out that he, in fact, was not rich (at least

⁶¹⁷ James Steer to John Minor, Baton Rouge, February 24, 1818, in Minor (William J. and Family) Papers, Lower Mississippi Valley Collection (LMV), Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

⁶¹⁸ *Ibid.*

not by his standards, or probably the high standards of Natchez). He announced that his mother was “mistaken in thinking we [Smith brothers] are rich.” He also pointed out that “none of us is under the necessity to labor for our living we all have slaves enough to take the drudgery off our hands. I have nineteen some of my brothers is [sic] in better circumstances than I am and none in much worse but our fortunes are small compared to many in this country.”⁶¹⁹ Many poorer whites across the Mississippi Territory certainly envied Smith his slaves, even if he was still not rich by Natchez standards. Nineteen slaves was nothing to scoff at and represented a considerable investment. Still, Smith’s and Steer’s examples show that the planters’ demands for slaves was insatiable. Slaves were a highly esteemed investment, yet having slaves alone was no longer enough to break into the phalanx of the wealthy in Natchez.

Although planters were concerned with their financial situation, they considered the sky the limit once they paid their debts. Nathaniel Evans was one who had closely watched the cotton market for a decade and tried to make sure that his crop was sold at the right price. After weathering the 1807 Embargo Act, as well as the War of 1812, he

⁶¹⁹ Philander Smith to his mother, Natchez, April 27, 1806, in Philander Smith Papers, LMV, Louisiana State University. Smith’s letter also points to the high degree of dependency of Natchez planters on stability in the Atlantic world. He reminds his mother that “if Bonaparte should be successful and keep the command of the continent I think cotton will be very low.” Smith knew that the Napoleonic wars in Europe were destabilizing the cotton market, and he was well informed—as were most planters in Natchez—about prices in Liverpool. Planters were in constant communication with their factors across the Atlantic, receiving British newspapers with cotton prices to keep in touch with prices of their royal crop. See Liverpool newspaper, October 4, 1810, and December 16, 1812, in Evans, (Nathaniel and Family Papers), LMV, Louisiana State University; The embargo of 1807 also hurt planters in Natchez, as evident by a letter received by Evans in 1807. His contact in New York warned him not to sell his cotton at these low prices, since cotton was not a perishable good. Given Natchez’s remote location, and the times involved for news to travel, it is remarkable how closely the planters were already monitoring their markets, and how much interest they paid to all information concerning the markets of the Atlantic world. See Peter Ogden to Nathaniel Evans, Elizabeth Town, January 6, 1807, and Elijah Smith to Evans, New Orleans, June 12, 1808, in Evans, (Nathaniel and Family) Papers, LMV, Louisiana State University. The war of 1812 was also no exception to the fear of Natchez planters about collapsing cotton markets.

could finally declare himself debt free in 1816. His agent in London, Peter Ogden, congratulated him on the achievement. The decade before 1816 had seen a few smaller economic crises in Natchez, and the cotton price had varied over time. According to Ogden, Evans managed to escape debt because he maintained his payments and his yearly crop was bountiful. In the same breath, Ogden urged the planter to be cautious and not to flood the market with too much cotton. He warned Evans that the demand for cotton would not rise again for approximately two years and that it would be prudent to curb production until then, so as not to ruin the prices on the market.⁶²⁰ Whether Evans took the advice is unknown, but cotton enabled planters to escape debt, and slaves provided the planters with the labor necessary to produce a crop.

The Natchez District remained a popular destination for prospective planters. They either tried to come and settle or they solicited advice on how to become a planter elsewhere. William Saul, either a banker or merchant in New Orleans, informed George Tichenor in 1819 that he had just purchased twenty slaves. As we know from Steer's letter, these numbers were small for established Natchez planters, yet to Saul they represented a small fortune. He asked Tichenor for advice on selecting suitable land for a plantation. Tichenor was not only a planter, but he also held a position at the Bank of the State of Mississippi, and was well suited to dispense his financial advice to Saul. The aspiring planter was rightfully nervous, and he asked the banker for counsel and

⁶²⁰ Peter Ogden to Nathaniel Evans, London, March 4, 1816, in Evans, (Nathaniel and Family) Papers, LMV, Louisiana State University.

favorable loans. Both combined would prepare Saul for a secured future as planter, or so he hoped.⁶²¹

Unfortunately for Saul, his good fortune expired quickly. The slaves that he bought in January of 1819 could no longer be sold profitably in November because the Panic of 1819 had reached the lower Mississippi Valley. Saul faced mounting requests for payments on his debts and he asked Tichenor to dispose of some of his property in Natchez in order to retire some of the notes against him. He also asked for an additional loan to keep his plantation afloat. Instead of selling his slaves at a loss, Saul chose to buy even more human property, hoping to profit from the depressed market.⁶²² The prospect of cheap slaves and the resulting hope that the increased workforce would yield better profits to pay off the debt overrode all caution and financial wisdom. But in the 1820s, the economy and slave prices were depressed for good reason. The first cotton boom had ended, and the United States entered an economic recession. Nevertheless, planters such as Saul were eager to increase their human chattel, simply because the Natchez District—and the lower Mississippi Valley—promised riches that would justify all the risks taken if a planter were successful.

Acquiring land became a problem under the auspices of the U.S. government.⁶²³ Spain's egalitarian land laws no longer ruled Natchez. With the coming of the United States in the lower Mississippi Valley, American land speculators had also arrived in

⁶²¹ William Saul to George Tichenor, New Orleans, January 27, 1819, in Natchez Trace Collection: Bank of the State of Mississippi Records, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin.

⁶²² William Saul to George Tichenor, New Orleans, November 8, 1819, in *ibid.*

⁶²³ For the difference between U.S. and Spanish land grant policies, especially for a comparison between Spanish West Florida and Kentucky, see F. Andrew McMichael, *Atlantic Loyalties: Americans in Spanish West Florida, 1785-1810* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 18-28.

Natchez. Land grants came under question, and established planters such as William Dunbar had to use the courts to protect their land. People who wanted to enter the district from the Republic tried hard to find available land. Even if they had a claim, it was not easily proven.⁶²⁴

Nicholas Philip Trist was one such prospective settler. He was born in 1800, and would later marry Virginia Jefferson Randolph, the granddaughter of Thomas Jefferson.⁶²⁵ Trist's father had acquired land under the Spanish government in Natchez. In 1802, Nicholas Trist's mother wrote William Dunbar, the famous surveyor under British, Spanish, and American governments, to ensure that a tract of 200 acres would be recorded in favor of the Trist family. Dunbar obliged her and promised that the tract was there, yet he cautioned that it was a Spanish land grant.⁶²⁶ Apparently Trist's mother had no interest in moving to Natchez with her infant boy, because she sent no more letters until Nicholas came of age and graduated from West Point in 1822.

In the meantime, Theodore Stark laid claim to the tract in 1816, based on the fact that he was owed money from Trist's father's estate.⁶²⁷ This dispute must have lingered

⁶²⁴ Dunbar was sued at least once over land rights. Another example is the case of Elizabeth Minor. She contested a land grant by Ballard and Garland (no first names given) that reached back to the occupancy of Spain. Minor's lawyer argued that Spain was never legally in possession of the area north of the 31st degree line, and that therefore any land grant issued was void. The property was under dispute for years, and lawyers even referred to Supreme Court decisions for the new territories to resolve them. By the late 1810s and certainly by the 1820s, Natchez had ceased to yield land easily for new settlers. The established planters took the best lands, and new arrivals had to bank on marriage or costly purchase to become a planter in the district. See Minor to Ballard and Garland, Natchez, 23 March 1831, in *Minor Family Papers*, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin.

⁶²⁵ The Trist family apparently lived with Jefferson in Virginia, as evidenced by the fact that William Dunbar asked Mrs. Trist to greet the President from him in 1803. Nicholas Trist enrolled at West Point in 1818, married Virginia Jefferson Randolph in 1824, and become a major U.S. diplomat during the war with Mexico and beyond.

⁶²⁶ William Dunbar to Mrs. Trist, Natchez, December 9, 1802, in *Nicholas Trist Papers*, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁶²⁷ Theodon Stark to unknown, unknown place, March 12, 1816, in *ibid.*

for several more years, because in 1822 the young Nicholas Trist himself inquired about his father's land in Natchez. William Dunbar's reply was cordial, but curt. He explained that the claim was old, that some of the lands had been settled in the meantime, and that Trist would have a difficult time reclaiming his supposed property. In addition to the Spanish land grants of Trist's father, current settlers could stake their claim to British land grants preceding the one of the Trist family. All those facts weakened Trist's claim considerably, and Trist remained in Virginia, seeking his right via the postal service, rather than claiming it himself.⁶²⁸ Even so, the young man was eager to claim his land in Natchez and he was relentless in his pursuit of what he considered his property.

Dunbar maintained a cordial correspondence with the eager Virginian, but he continued to explain to him that hopes for recovering the Spanish land grant were slim.⁶²⁹ Whoever else Nicholas Trist contacted in Natchez over the next year, either referred the impatient young man back to Dunbar, or politely told him that there was virtually no chance for him to reclaim his property.⁶³⁰ William Dunbar himself grew increasingly impatient with Trist. Answering two of Trist's letters in 1822, Dunbar explained that "indeed I have nothing of importance to communicate to you on this occasion. I have only to repeat that my opinion remaining unchanged, that there cannot be any difficulty between us. Having translated the certificate of survey, I am, if possible better convinced than before."⁶³¹ Although cordial, Dunbar did not play coy with Trist. He had had enough of the letters sent from Virginia. Parties living in Natchez disputed the land, and Trist had

⁶²⁸ William Dunbar to Nicholas Trist, Natchez, February 4, 1821, in *ibid.*

⁶²⁹ William Dunbar to Nicholas Trist, Natchez, December 4, 1822, *ibid.*

⁶³⁰ See for example: Gabriel Winten to Nicholas Trist, Natchez, December 30, 1823, *ibid.*

⁶³¹ William Dunbar to Nicholas Trist, Natchez, May 5, 1822, in *ibid.*

not deemed it important enough to travel south to claim his father's land in person. After seeing his duty done, Dunbar no longer wanted any part of the process.

At this point, then, Natchez had become a closely knit, and closed off plantation society, as some historians have argued it was under the Spanish.⁶³² No matter how hard Nicholas Trist tried, he was at least a decade late in claiming his land. Slaves were pouring into the Natchez District not only through the overland slave trade and through the slave pens of New Orleans, but also through Natchez's own slave market at the Forks in the Roads.⁶³³ With slaves easily available, land became the major factor in the town, and no outsider was allowed easy access. As historian Clayton James argues, "during the territorial era when the town was passing through the transition from frontier to civilized community, social structures had been loose, and mobility was common on the basis of property." After 1817 and the achievement of statehood, however, "the urbanization had produced not only some degree of order and sophistication at Natchez but also a tendency toward class stratification."⁶³⁴ The Natchez nabobs by then held tight control over who might enter their circles and who might not. With his dream of becoming a planter shattered, Trist entered the service of the United States and became a clerk in the State Department in 1828. Eventually he would rise to become a prominent diplomat, yet a planter in Natchez he never was.⁶³⁵

⁶³² Buckner, "Constructing Identities on the Frontier of Slavery, Natchez Mississippi, 1760-1860," 48-50.

⁶³³ For the slave trade see: Deyle, *Carry Me Back*; Gudmestad, *A Troublesome Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade*; Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999); Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).

⁶³⁴ James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 137.

⁶³⁵ Trist would be able to secure a sugar plantation in Cuba in 1833 while working as the U.S. consul on the island.

Violence and Flight on the Cotton Frontier

Although the control of planters over slaves tightened steadily, fear of violent resistance was never far from the surface of the planters' conscience. In 1810, after the American planters of Spanish West Florida decided to become independent and oust the Spanish from West Florida for good, Governor David Holmes feared that the insurgency of the planters might lead to a slave rebellion in the area below Natchez.⁶³⁶ He mobilized two companies of regular troops in September 1810 because he feared "an insurrection of the slaves, who are very numerous in the upper part of the province [West Florida]." He ordered his troops to patrol the borderline and to inspect every movement of people of color, making sure that slaves did not cross the line in either direction.⁶³⁷ No insurrection took place.

Less than four months later Holmes again had to alert his military commanders about a possible slave insurrection. This time his fear was based on an actual rebellion in the sugar parishes of the German Coast in Louisiana. Between 200 and 300 slaves joined in a revolt to end their enslavement, but Louisiana planters who rallied to the support of their brethren crushed them. More than 100 slaves were executed.⁶³⁸ Although the rebellion was quickly put down, Governor Holmes was suspicious of his own slave population, by then numbering 16,703. In contrast, the households on the German Coast

⁶³⁶ The most recent works on the West Florida revolt are McMichael, *Atlantic Loyalties: Americans in Spanish West Florida, 1785-1810* and William C. Davis, *The Rogue Republic: How Would-Be Patriots Waged the Shortest Revolution in American History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011).

⁶³⁷ David Holmes to Colonel Cushings, Washington, Mississippi Territory, 28 September 1810, in Territorial Papers, Department of State, NARA.

⁶³⁸ Rothman, *Slave Country*, 106-17. The newest book on the 1811 German Coast Rebellion is Daniel Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt*. (New York: Harper, 2011).

only held 1,480 slaves. However, only 274 white people lived among their slaves, whereas whites still outnumbered their slaves by a margin larger than two to one in the Mississippi Territory.⁶³⁹ Still, Holmes sent out troops to patrol the district and to suppress any possible actions taken by slaves in the area to follow their fellow Africans in rebellion.⁶⁴⁰ The German Coast Rebellion must have rattled Homes quite a bit, since six months after the affair he heard rumors of an additional insurrection in Louisiana and once again called out his troops to defend the territory from (potentially) rebellious slaves.⁶⁴¹ During the War of 1812, Holmes also grew suspicious of the slave population and was more afraid of them than of the Choctaw to the North. He feared that slaves would take their chances with the British and were scheming to throw off the yoke of American slavery as their brethren in Haiti had done.⁶⁴²

Natchez's slaveholders continued to police their slaves closely after the end of the Spanish regime. American officials attempted to limit the availability of alcohol as best they could, especially for slaves. At first the people of Natchez were more concerned about intoxicated Native Americans and the resulting trouble with the still powerful nations surrounding Natchez, but soon those restrictions were extended to slaves and free people of color as well. Although planters might occasionally supply alcoholic beverages to their slaves on the plantations, the town of Natchez tried to deter drinking among slaves while they visited the town.

⁶³⁹ See Rothman, *Slave Country*, 107. For slave numbers in Natchez see Territorial Census of Mississippi Territory, 1810, Microfilm 2528, MDAH.

⁶⁴⁰ See Holmes to Lieutenant White, Washington, 17 January 1811; Holmes to Lieutenant Serget, Washington, Mississippi Territory, 18 January, 1811 in Territorial Papers, Department of State, NARA.

⁶⁴¹ David Holmes to Commander of Fort Adams, Washington, 19 July 1811, *ibid.*

⁶⁴² Libby, *Slavery and Frontier Mississippi, 1720-1835*, 56.

The prohibition against both the sale of alcohol and gambling was in place in Natchez by 1807. Under the Statutes of the Mississippi Territory, the sale, deliverance, or even gift of alcohol of any kind to “any apprentice, servant or slave” was punishable by a fine of at least \$10 for the first offense, and \$20 for any additional act of illegal distribution.⁶⁴³ Elites tried to maintain a maximum of social control, but slaves were not the only groups excluded from the purchase of alcohol. The law also forbade United States soldiers and Native Americans from purchasing alcohol of any kind.⁶⁴⁴ As Timothy Buckner has found, “a law passed in 1809 required all retailers to swear an oath that they would not buy or sell liquor to slaves without written permission from the slave owner.” Yet Buckner noted that problems with the sale of alcohol persisted, since many retailers did not even care to acquire a license for selling liquor, or they simply disobeyed the law if they had a license. White people were rightfully worried, because alcohol consumption tended to increase the mingling between poor whites and people of color. Social barriers were also broken down when poor white workers associated with plantation slaves who visited Natchez.⁶⁴⁵ Fear of rebellion was deeply ingrained in the nature of planters, and Gabriel’s Rebellion was still fresh on the minds of many in the early 1800s. As Douglas Egerton has shown, contemporary whites believed the plot arose from fraternization between blacks and poor whites in Richmond.⁶⁴⁶ The planter elites of the South clearly feared a union of poor whites and African Americans, and so they tried their very best to keep them apart—and sober.

⁶⁴³ Toulmin, *The Statutes of the Mississippi Territory*, 359-60.

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁵ Buckner, “Constructing Identities on the Frontier of Slavery, Natchez Mississippi, 1760-1860,” 104-09.

⁶⁴⁶ Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion*, 18-68.

In the late 1810s, several cases in Natchez were brought against people who illegally sold alcohol to slaves. In 1815 George Duncan was accused and convicted of selling whiskey to slaves without the permission of their masters.⁶⁴⁷ In 1818 two similar cases were brought to court. Daniel Herring was charged with selling liquor to slaves, and apparently the offense carried a fine of \$100.⁶⁴⁸ Authorities indicted William Brooks with that same offense in that same year. It seems that authorities were cracking down hard on illicit activities in Natchez when slaves were involved.⁶⁴⁹ Possibly the planters hoped to set examples and prove to the inhabitants of Natchez that they were more than willing to enforce the law banning the sale of alcohol to slaves if they had witnesses and evidence to convict the offenders.

Alcohol consumption was not only a problem with people of color. Alcohol-fueled violence in Natchez was on the upswing among whites as well. Slaves frequently became victims to white violence while they were in Natchez. This increase in violence is noteworthy because the Spanish records do not list violence of white citizens directed solely against slaves. Slaves were sometimes part of mixed-race traveling parties that were attacked, or they served their master in leading such an attack or raid, yet attacks on

⁶⁴⁷ Adams County, Mississippi Territory vs George Duncan, Natchez, August 21, 1815, in Superior Court Records, Adams County, HNF.

⁶⁴⁸ State of Mississippi, Adams County vs Daniel Herring, Natchez, September 30, 1818, in *ibid.*

⁶⁴⁹ State of Mississippi, Adams County vs William Brooks, Natchez, February 1818, in *ibid.*

slaves are conspicuously missing from the Spanish records. Therefore, it is plausible to suggest that violence against people of color increased, if the court records of Natchez are any indication.⁶⁵⁰

Among these cases of violence, one incident demonstrates how different the situation for slaves in Natchez was after the Spanish left. In January of 1817, Joseph White assaulted Amy, a female slave belonging to Joseph Clarke. Clarke immediately filed a suit against White, and the court proceedings of this case survived, albeit only partially. White had owed Amy money for unspecified services, and when the slave came to collect the debt, White assaulted her.⁶⁵¹ Despite the obvious injustice that Amy experienced, this episode also serves to show that the change in the legal system in Natchez was profound. Spanish court records held many cases in which people of color appealed to Spanish justice to receive their outstanding debts. Under American tutelage, slaves had to fend for themselves and face the charges alone. Amy endured a beating because she had no legal recourse. Her master, on the other hand, filed a suit against her attacker in the courts. Joseph Clarke was more interested in receiving damages for the

⁶⁵⁰ The court records that remain in Natchez, and the way they were ordered and stored, and then reorganized by several preservation projects, shuffled many of the sources around. Some ended up in Texas, and some might be entirely missing. It is impossible to know, unless some of them reappear in somebody's papers or other archives, as typescript, for example. Todd Herring, for example, discovered typescripts of Natchez court records in the William Baskerville Hamilton Papers at Duke University. These records supplement the records still in Natchez, although they seem to be copied from the same books. Hamilton was a historian of Mississippi in the middle of the twentieth century, and he probably had access to the court records before attempts were made to preserve and store them. In the meantime, records must have disappeared. Examples of violence against people of color can be found in Adams County, Mississippi Territory vs. James Audrey, Natchez, October 1810, in Superior Court Records, Adams County, HNF; Adams County, Mississippi Territory vs. John Adams and Ethan A. Wood, Natchez, July 20, 1817, *ibid.*; Adams County, Mississippi Territory vs. John Bell, Natchez, August 1, 1816, *ibid.*; Adams County, Mississippi Territory vs. George Mellon and Charles Holmes, Natchez, March 15, 1817, *ibid.*

⁶⁵¹ It is possible that the Amy in this case was the Amy that sued for her freedom in the late 1790s and lost her case, but it is impossible to prove the. However, the way this Amy approached White and the way she demanded her payment is eerily similar to the Amy who was freed by Asahel Lewis.

labor lost when Amy could not do her chores, than justice for Amy. The court case did not address the issue of debt repayment, and reduced Amy to property, with no voice in the legal system.⁶⁵² Natchez courts held no place for the complaint of slaves, and slaves sought their freedom in flight.

A review of two Mississippi Territory newspapers covering the years from 1805 to 1810 revealed 111 advertisements for runaway slaves.⁶⁵³ These five years allow for an estimate of roughly two runaways per month. These numbers suggest that slaves were actively scheming for their freedom, even though the newspapers provided an outlet for planters to provide descriptions of their slaves, thereby decreasing the chances for a successful flight. Unfortunately, these numbers cannot be compared to Spanish Natchez because only seven advertisements for fugitive slaves survived from that period. This number is significantly smaller than the numbers that survived in the Natchez newspaper ads from 1805-1810.⁶⁵⁴ It is reasonable to suspect that the figure of fugitive slaves in Spanish Natchez was much higher, but no additional data exists. What is clear, however, is that slaves sought their liberty in any way available to them, be it the courts or the wilderness of the Mississippi Territory. Potentially, the number of runaway slaves might indeed have increased, especially after the new laws of 1805 and 1808 that made manumission extremely difficult. For many slaves, the only remaining choice was flight.

⁶⁵² See Adams County, Mississippi Territory, vs John White, Natchez, June 23, 1817-January 24, 1818, in Superior Court Records, Adams County, HNF.

⁶⁵³ See *Mississippi Messenger*, Natchez, September 6, 1805 to June 30, 1808, and *The Weekly Chronicle*, January 4 1809 to November 12, 1810, both on microfilm, Cook Library, University of Southern Mississippi. Thanks to Ryan Tickle for sharing his research on runaway slave ads with me.

⁶⁵⁴ See chapter three.

Ironically, newspapers began to arrive in Natchez at the same time that the United States took control of the region and closed off legal avenues to freedom permanently. The first newspaper, the *Mississippi Gazette*, was published beginning in 1799. The following year, *Green's Partial Observer* appeared, but it ceased publication after two years.⁶⁵⁵ Shortly thereafter Andrew Marshalk began publishing the *Mississippi Herald* in 1802. Samuel and Timothy Terrell began printing the *Mississippi Messenger* at the same time. None of these newspapers had considerable long-term success, nor were they archived in any quantity. Varying publications make it difficult to track runaway ads. Consequently, exact numbers cannot be provided, especially because no complete collection of Natchez newspapers exists.

Reasons for running away are rarely given, yet sometimes they are quite apparent. Fortune, for example, escaped Joseph Robert at the Natchez Landing on June 11, 1806. His master described his posture, complexion, and other features of his body. Most noticeably, Robert depicted two scars, one "dim [...] extending across the upper part of his breast and on[e] large and visible on his left side, which he says was occasioned by the severity of a Frenchman, to whom he was once hired."⁶⁵⁶ John Walton advertised for his slave Mark: "his back is very much marked with the whip."⁶⁵⁷ These masters had punished their slaves, and they probably sought to escape further scarring.

⁶⁵⁵ On Andrew Marshalk and the first printing presses in Mississippi see Charles S. Sydnor, "The Beginning of Printing in Mississippi," *Journal of Southern History* 1, no. 1 (1935). On the other newspapers in Natchez under the Mississippi Territory see William C. Davis, *A Way through the Wilderness: The Natchez Trace and the Civilization of the Southern Frontier*, 1st ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 183-84; James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 103-04, 230-31.

⁶⁵⁶ *Mississippi Messenger*, Natchez, June 17, 1806.

⁶⁵⁷ *Mississippi Messenger*, Natchez, August 12, 1806.

In May of 1806, eight of John Lambermo's slaves escaped servitude. Among them were two mothers with their children. The advertisement in the *Mississippi Messenger* clarified that "Judah, not very black, has two children, both boys, one is 2 yrs. old and the other 4 months. Sally is a mulatto girl with two children—both mulattoes. The oldest is a boy about 3 yrs. old and the other about 5 months."⁶⁵⁸ In March of 1808, "a mulatto woman about 32 or 33 named Beck" took her three children plus two other children and ran away from their master Nicholas Boyce.⁶⁵⁹ Judah and Sally both took their small families on the treacherous road to freedom by running away, but they were the exceptions. Of all 111 advertisements, only three include families that ran away. 19 advertisements were searching for slaves that fled in groups, but were not related to each other. In flight, so it seems, slave families were an obstacle, but women still tried. Usually, however, slaves escaped alone. Escaping from slavery was a solitary act, and since planters were quick to search for runaways, solitary escape stood a greater chance of success.

Conclusion

After Spain vacated the Natchez District, opportunity for freedom dwindled. Following the 1805 act, the records remain silent on any further manumissions for bondspeople in the Natchez District. People of color came under intense scrutiny, and enslaved people became the focal point of social control in Natchez. Planters did all they could to limit access to the courts, and whereas courts had been the enslaved people's friend in Spanish Natchez, they now became an institution controlled by slaveowners.

⁶⁵⁸ *Mississippi Messenger*, Natchez, May 6, 1806.

⁶⁵⁹ *Mississippi Messenger*, Natchez, March 31, 1808.

These masters were unwilling to let slaves achieve freedom and, in conjunction with new legislation, they succeeded in fashioning a tightly knit slave society. Nevertheless, slaves were not idle in their pursuit of liberty. They still tried to utilize the courts to their advantage, although judges and the law were no longer as inclined to side with them as Spanish courts sometimes were. If all else failed, they ran away, as the increased number of runaway ads suggests.

Although King Cotton's reign was undisputed, small acts of resistance persisted, even though they only left faint evidence in the court records. Social control had returned to the hands of the planters. Slaves challenging that control were met with stern new laws and the reality of a booming cotton economy. For the first time in two decades, planters' desires and codified law went hand in hand to subjugate slaves to a life of servitude with as little room to maneuver as possible. The first two decades of the nineteenth century saw the uneven—but unstoppable—development of Natchez into a slave society of a magnitude unparalleled in the lower Mississippi Valley. Slave numbers increased constantly, and planters were unwilling to let any of them receive liberty, no matter the circumstances. Slaves were the number one investment for established and prospective planter alike, and none of them wanted their investment to disappear, thereby explaining the legislation that was so strikingly different from the Spanish laws and their narrow but available avenues to freedom.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

Seeking to attract tourists to Natchez in the 1920s, the Garden Club founded the Natchez Pilgrimage. Today a biannual event, the pilgrimage is held in the spring and fall of each year, when the climate and temperature in Natchez are pleasant. The event brings droves of tourists to the small Mississippi town. These tourists are thirsty to indulge in a place “Where the Old South Still Lives.” The Garden Club has created, as *House and Garden* put it, “the ‘Mecca of charm’ for the nation,” a tourism event that yearly draws more than 230,000 visitors and generates an estimated eighty-three million dollars in revenue for the local economy.⁶⁶⁰ Through tours of the town’s historic mansions, the ladies of modern Natchez recreate a past lost through the Civil War. They attempt to reestablish links to this past by tracing the current inhabitants of selected homes to the elites of the cotton kingdom, ancestors like the Minors, Dunbars, Holmeses and Davises. According to Steven Hoelscher, “when an ‘old home’ like The Briars is fortunate to count the woman who eventually married Jefferson Davis as one of its earliest inhabitants, lineage trumps all other stories.”⁶⁶¹

By focusing solely on Natchez’s illustrious inhabitants of the antebellum period, the Garden Club has marginalized other former inhabitants for practical reasons. It would not sell home-tour tickets very well, for example, to trace one’s lineage back to Jeremiah Bryan. Bryan makes an appearance in the court records when his neighbor, George

⁶⁶⁰Steven Hoelscher, "The White-Pillard Past: Landscapes of Memory and Race in the American South," in *Landscape and Race in the United States*, ed. Richard H. Schein (New York: Routledge, 2006), 42, 50-51.

⁶⁶¹*Ibid.*, 53.

Weagle, informed the Spanish governor that “a certain Jeremiah Bryan has against decency and humanity bitten and struck your petitioner in the testicles.”⁶⁶² Such behavior was unseemly for a gentleman of Natchez. Similarly, Jacob Holmes would also not make a stellar ancestral example for the Natchez Pilgrimage. Citizens found his body in the gallery of John O’Connor’s house one December morning in 1791 and concluded that “his death had proceeded from intoxication and being exposed to the cold all night.”⁶⁶³ Though they would not likely attract visitors to the rural Mississippi town, people like Bryan, Weagle, O’Connor, and Holmes were nevertheless part of Natchez’s eventual rise, laying the foundations for Natchez’s wealth at a time before cotton was a money-making crop.

Notably, the Natchez Pilgrimage entirely skirts another large section of Natchez’s population. African Americans, whose slave labor built the fabulous wealth of all Natchez planters, receive only scant attention. In fact the residence of Natchez’s most famous black inhabitant, barber William Johnson, does not appear on the program.⁶⁶⁴ During pilgrimages, tourists are guided through many fine and elaborate homes belonging to former planters, but Johnson’s house, once owned by the Garden Club itself and now operated by the National Park Service as a museum, is not a stop. As Hoelscher notes: “Only dwellings that conform to the dictates of the white-pillared past have a place in the Natchez’s landscapes of memory; all others are deemed ‘out of place’ and a

⁶⁶² George Weagle v. Jeremiah Bryan, Natchez, May 29, 1782, Original Spanish Court Records, Book IV, Adams County Court House, Natchez, Mississippi.

⁶⁶³ Protocol, Death of Jacob Holmes, Natchez, December 11, 1791, in May Wilson McBee, *The Natchez Court Records, 1767-1805: Abstracts of Early Records* (Baltimore: Genealogical Pub. Co., 1979), 147.

⁶⁶⁴ The program for the 2012 Spring Pilgrimage still does not feature the Johnson house.

potential threat to the entire project.”⁶⁶⁵ Johnson’s place in the past does not easily fit the streamlined history created in and for Natchez. Nevertheless, African-American slaves were crucial to the making of Natchez, and the conflicts fought over and with slaves in the town’s first century created the slave society that would come to dominate Natchez by 1817.

That year Mississippi became a state and joined the United States. Natchez, still the major commercial center of the new state, had weathered its fourth change of empire and finally come to rest in the arms of the American republic. The planters in the Natchez District could now send representatives to both houses of Congress and soon they would take part in the national debate about slavery during the Missouri crisis. Over the prior two decades, planters established an iron grip on their slaves, eradicating almost every avenue to freedom. There was no doubt that Natchez had become a slave society. People of African descent were predominantly reduced to the lowest rungs of society. Achieving and securing freedom, if possible at all, now required the involvement of the state legislature, a lengthy process that could not be initiated by a black person and necessitated the sponsorship of a white friend. Natchez had moved far from the days when Eleanor Price and Amy Lewis openly defied societal boundaries and challenged white people in court. Debby tried to do the same in the American period, but the Mississippi courts quickly quashed her efforts.

These and other cases illustrate the resiliency of slaves’ desires to claim their freedom. For the prior century, people of African decent had utilized family or kinship

⁶⁶⁵Hoelscher, "The White-Pillard Past: Landscapes of Memory and Race in the American South," 53.

connections in Natchez to advance their causes, if they saw a chance to do so. However, planters introduced new slave laws during the first two decades of the nineteenth century and people of color had no other choice but to have a white person speak for them, acting as their representative and guardian. While the legal options for black people in the courts decreased, the slave population in the district increased significantly.

By the 1820s the counties of the Natchez District all boasted a slave majority. Adams County alone had a slave population of sixty percent. If one excludes the city of Natchez and its large number of white inhabitants, that percentage increases to seventy-four percent. In 1810 only two of the river counties had a slave majority. By 1820 that number had increased to four, and would continue to grow over the coming decades.⁶⁶⁶ With a steadily swelling stream of new slaves arriving from the east, planters in the district took precautions to protect themselves and their property from any loss through manumission. Slaves were no longer given the opportunity to form easily the kinship or family networks that might once have offered them a chance for liberty. Undoubtedly masters continued to cultivate relationships with female slaves, but these slaves could no longer call on the courts, or submit demands of any kind. During the preceding century, particularly during the Spanish period, several slaves brought cases against white people without the involvement of an outside white supporter. By the 1820s, however, whites in Natchez had developed those unbending rules of slavery that created a legal system which snuffed out the opportunities that slaves had previously grasped.

⁶⁶⁶David J. Libby, *Slavery and Frontier Mississippi, 1720-1835* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 75-77.

Over the course of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the ranks of the original seventy slaves that toiled in the hot sun of the Natchez District under French control were gradually swelled by new forced migrants from Africa, the Caribbean, and the eastern plantation districts of the thirteen British colonies and later the United States. When Mississippi became a state in 1817, several thousand slaves toiled for their white masters in the rich soil of Natchez. The ladies of the modern Garden Club choose to highlight but a small portion of the “history” of their town. The myriad tales’ of Natchez’s black residents, discarded in favor of the wealth which they helped to build, recede from memory.

Quite to the contrary, black people played an instrumental role in the shaping of the Natchez District and in the ways the planters sought to facilitate the plantation business in the region. Therefore, the story of colonial Natchez needs to be grounded in the district’s dark fertile soil and the Africans who worked it. As the preceding chapters have shown, planters in Natchez sought to control their slaves and the steadily growing number of free people of color. They hoped to duplicate the success of similar slave societies across the Americas. The European empires governing the district often hampered the efforts of the planters. The French, British, Spanish, and Americans sought to contain the planters’ independence and exact dominance over all races in the region. The tensions between the Natchez elite and the ruling empires sometimes allowed slaves to resist their masters, and legal changes brought by every new empire circumscribed the boundaries of slave agency in the district. Over its first century as an infant slave society, people in Natchez faced a complicated web of imperial rules that inhabitants, both black and white, tried either to utilize or circumvent to achieve their goals.

Slaveowners, accustomed to favored status and omnipotence on their own lands, occasionally found the field of the law tilted against them; wars, regime changes, and an unstable economy conspired to place their mastery—as well as their titles to land and slaves—on unsound footings. The pitched battles between slaves and their owners, along with the contests between colonial subjects and their respective countries, had a profound effect on a region that became the heart of the Deep South.

Throughout the French and British periods, slavery was instrumental for empires to establish a foothold in Natchez. The would-be colonists repeatedly demanded a constant supply of African laborers to support the struggling plantations clustered around the motley buildings of Natchez. Despite their best efforts, the French endeavors in Natchez did not last long. French officials and planters were so focused on creating a plantation society that rivaled Virginia or Saint Domingue that they overlooked the mounting racial tension that gripped Natchez. They introduced the revised *Code Noir* to Louisiana in 1724, and soon enforced a racial hierarchy within Natchez's diverse population that ultimately led to disaster. The French subordinated not only their African slaves, but the Natchez Indians as well. French administrators misjudged their position in Natchez badly, and the combined revolt of Indians and slaves caught them by surprise. The Natchez Indians successfully ended French settlement attempts in Natchez in November 1729 with the help of African slaves. The *Code Noir*, designed by Colbert to administer the French colonies and control slaves, achieved the exact opposite and effectively stopped French expansion in the lower Mississippi Valley.

The British Empire was only marginally more successful. They inherited the Natchez District after the French and Indian War and attempted to lure settlers and slaves

to this remote corner of their American empire. Although settlers and slaves did not initially arrive in great numbers, the British nevertheless established a slave code in the 1760s that benefitted slaveholders tremendously. Whereas slaves in French Natchez did have avenues of freedom, and manumission was possible, British regulations practically eliminated that possibility. Through new laws and financial stipulations, the British effectively discouraged masters from liberating their human property. Records indicate that only two free people of color lived in all of British Natchez.

Spanish laws reversed many of the stringent British stipulations that had governed Natchez before 1781. Free people of color could approach the court freely and sue for their property and outstanding wages. Court documents indicate that they took European colonists to court on many occasions. Slaves also established their presence in court by suing for their freedom and affirming their limited rights within the Spanish legal system. Though Spain theoretically allowed these procedures in court, slaves in Natchez did have to rely on kinship networks to achieve their ultimate goals. Spain was primarily focused on protecting its imperial interests in the lower Mississippi Valley and in appeasing the Anglo planter population. The Spanish would not risk an open confrontation about slave rights during the first decade of Spanish government. Spain also provided the planters with a guaranteed market for their tobacco and tariff-free slave imports. They purposely bought the planters' loyalty.

The longer Spain controlled Natchez, however, the more slaves took advantage of the new legal system. Although they still relied on white kinship ties, the voices of those slaves were clearly present in courts in Spanish Natchez. Even as cotton began its ascent to the throne, enslaved people used the courts to claim their rights. Throughout the

Spanish period, people of color established a presence and influence in the courts that was unprecedented and would not remain under United States purview.

In the early 1790s, Spain removed the tobacco subsidies that bound planters to the empire. As a result, many planters found themselves on the brink of bankruptcy, and only Governor Manuel Gayoso de Lemos's skillful negotiations between planter debtors and merchant creditors maintained a tentative peace in Natchez. In spite of his eloquent governance, the Spanish empire had effectively destroyed the trust of Anglo planters by cutting their tobacco market. Ultimately the cotton gin sealed the fate of the Natchez District. The masters of Natchez's slave population understood that the fertile ground of their plantations granted them the potential for immense riches if they could find a suitable crop. Cotton suited the soil well, and with the introduction of the gin in 1795, and the ongoing industrial revolution in Great Britain, the market for the crop was almost insatiable. The ideal combination of crop, technology, and markets, centered on a slave society, perfectly fit the desires of Natchez planters. When the governor of Louisiana discontinued the slave trade to the colony in fear of revolt—and because of a lack of demand outside of Natchez—Anglo planters in the district shunned Spain and embraced the United States as the new power in the District.

The advent of cotton coincided with the establishment of the Mississippi Territory and it signaled the end of most legal avenues to freedom for people of color. The rights of freed people were severely limited by numerous acts of the legislature, and slave laws circumscribed what little options were left to the enslaved. They could no longer address the court, as the examples of Amy Lewis and Debby had demonstrated in their own time. They were relegated to minor roles as mute observers, as the white people who served as

their sponsors and the planters tried to pass judgment on their lives. Slaves who had enjoyed a chance at making their voices heard in Spanish Natchez were relegated to the legal margins in the antebellum Natchez District.

The preceding chapters illuminate the development of slavery in the Natchez District. In a larger sense, this dissertation contributes to an emerging historiography on slavery in the southern borderlands—a literature that complicates narratives of slavery that sidestep the Lower Mississippi Valley in favor of places like the Chesapeake and Carolinas. It places slavery at the center of efforts to create a plantation regime in Natchez and situates the district at the center of imperial struggles for control of North America.⁶⁶⁷ Moreover, by examining how slavery evolved in a setting that passed from one colonial regime to another, this study considers how changing legal systems shaped the institution's development. In particular, the Spanish period and the advent of Iberian legal codes—though refined to meet demands in Natchez—offer intriguing insights into the development of slavery in North America. Natchez was not only on the frontier of the United States, it was also the outer frontier to the vast landholdings of the Spanish in North America. As Juliana Barr has suggested, it is necessary to incorporate the marginal histories of the southern region of the modern-day United States into the story of historic

⁶⁶⁷ For other works see for example Edward E. Baptist, *Creating an Old South: Middle Florida's Plantation Frontier before the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); H. Sophie Burton and F. Todd Smith, *Colonial Natchitoches: A Creole Community on the Louisiana-Texas Frontier* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008); Daniel S. Dupre, *Transforming the Cotton Frontier: Madison County, Alabama, 1800-1840* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997); Libby, *Slavery and Frontier Mississippi, 1720-1835*; Christopher Morris, *Becoming Southern: The Evolution of a Way of Life, Warren County and Vicksburg, Mississippi, 1770-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

slavery.⁶⁶⁸ Without these border regions, no picture of slavery in North America can be complete.

Thus, historians must examine the experience of black people in the lower Mississippi Valley to understand fully slavery in the early South. Though their voices may be faint, they transmit the lasting legacy of an incredible will for freedom and numerous daring attempts to resist white mastery. Empires, laws, and high society might have changed, but the lives of black people remained much the same. Slaves toiled in the fields; free people of color labored as seamstresses, midwives, washerwomen, and at a host of primarily menial jobs. They all took part in generating the wealth that helped to construct Natchez's architectural masterpieces visited today—romantic monuments to the antebellum south. As modern tourists visit and exalt the fruits of the slaves' labors, the many varied faces and fates of colonial slaves and freedmen should not be forgotten.

⁶⁶⁸ Juliana Barr, "How Do You Get from Jamestown to Santa Fe? A Colonial Sun Belt," *Journal of Southern History* 73, no. 3 (2007).

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