

# The New York Times Magazine

By Henry Louis Gates Jr.

in collaboration with American Ancestors  
and the Cuban Genealogy Club of Miami

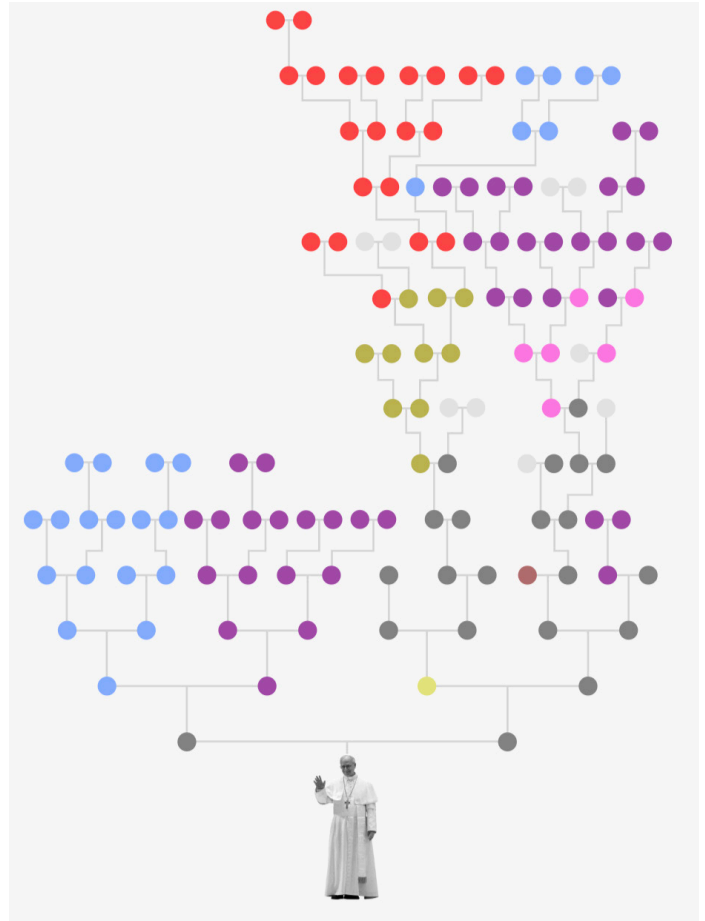
June 11, 2025

*Noblemen, enslaved people,  
freedom fighters,  
slaveholders: what the  
complex family tree of  
the first American  
pontiff reveals.*

FINDING THE POPE'S ROOTS

On May 8, moments after the world learned that an American cardinal named Robert Francis Prevost was becoming Pope Leo XIV, my inbox was flooded with emails. For the past 13 years, I've hosted a PBS show called "Finding Your Roots," where, with the help of a team of genealogists, we trace the family history of prominent figures, often turning up fascinating details about their ancestors that they didn't know they had. As soon as Prevost became one of the most eminent people in the world, fans of the show wanted to know what mysteries lay in his family's past.

They didn't have to wait long. Hours later, news broke: The New York Times, drawing on research by Jari C. Honora, a genealogist, revealed that Pope Leo had recent African American ancestors. Prevost's maternal grandparents, residents of the Seventh Ward in New Orleans, were described in records as

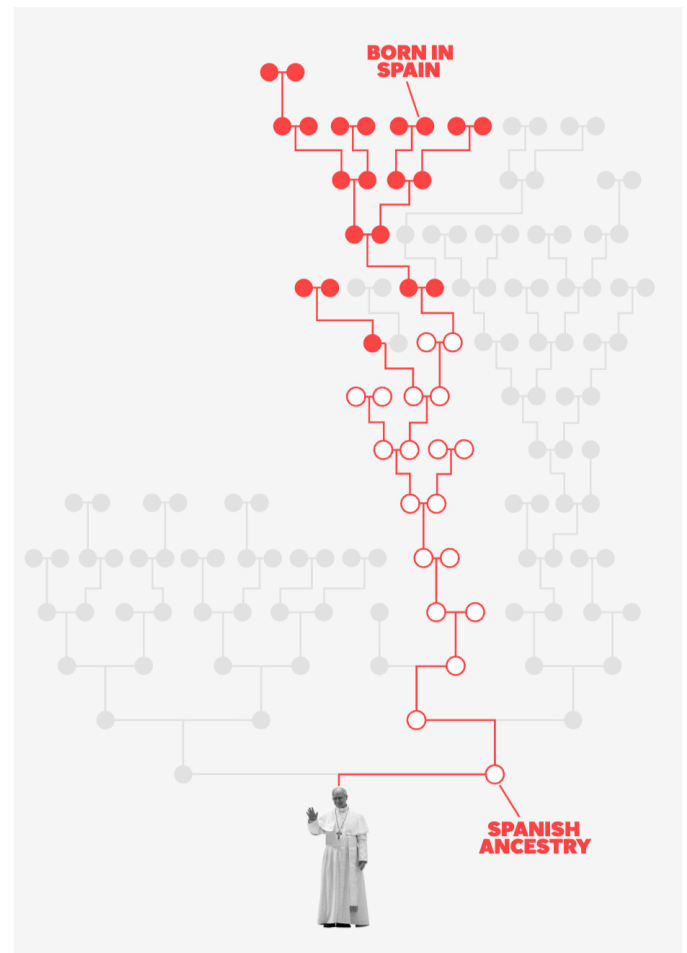


The pope (bottom left) with his mother and two brothers outside Holy Name Cathedral in Chicago.

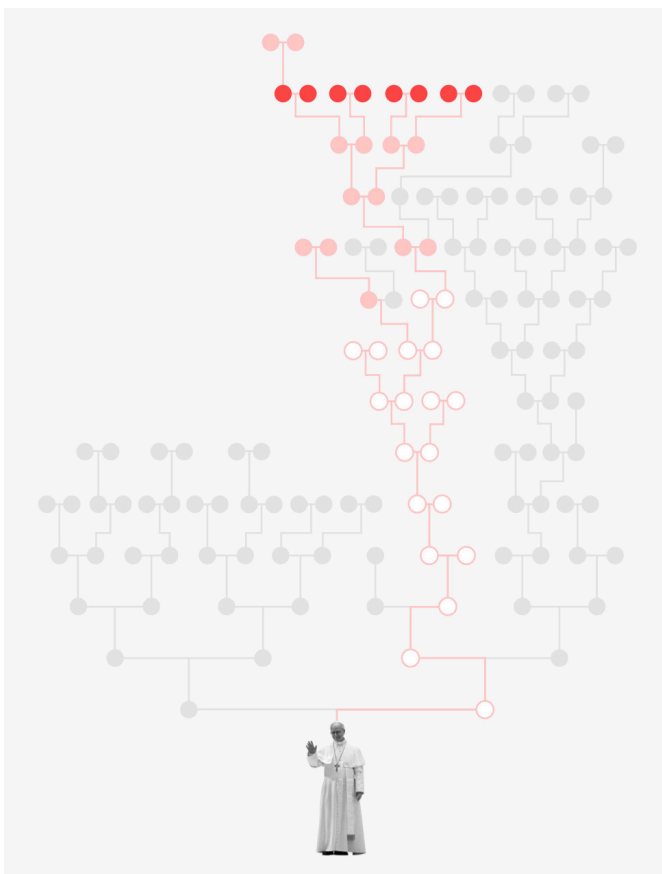
“mulatto” and “black.” This was earthshaking news, but we knew it was only the beginning.

Every one of us descends from an astounding number of recent ancestors: two parents, four grandparents, eight great grandparents, 16 great great grandparents, 32 third great grandparents and 64 fourth great grandparents — that’s 126 unique ancestors through two parents. Go back to our 12th great grandparents, and everyone has a whopping 32,766 forebears.

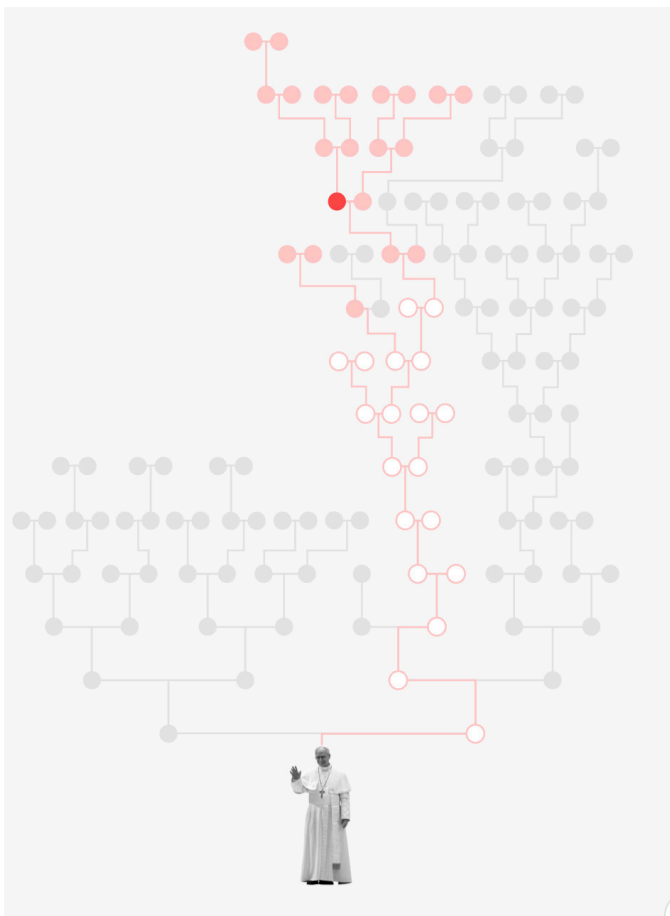
The initial finding about the pope’s Black ancestry looked back three generations. In collaboration with the genealogists at American Ancestors and the Cuban Genealogy Club of Miami, we were able to identify more than 100 people going back 15 generations and discovered a wealth of fascinating stories. We all agreed that, after more than a decade of doing this kind of genealogical work, the pope’s roots make for one of the most diverse family trees we have ever created.



The farthest back we could go was to Spain in the 1500s on the pope’s mother’s side.



Four of his **11th-great-grandfathers** are listed as “hidalgos” (“gentlemen,” or minor untitled nobility) in the 1573 census for Isla, a small town in northern Spain.

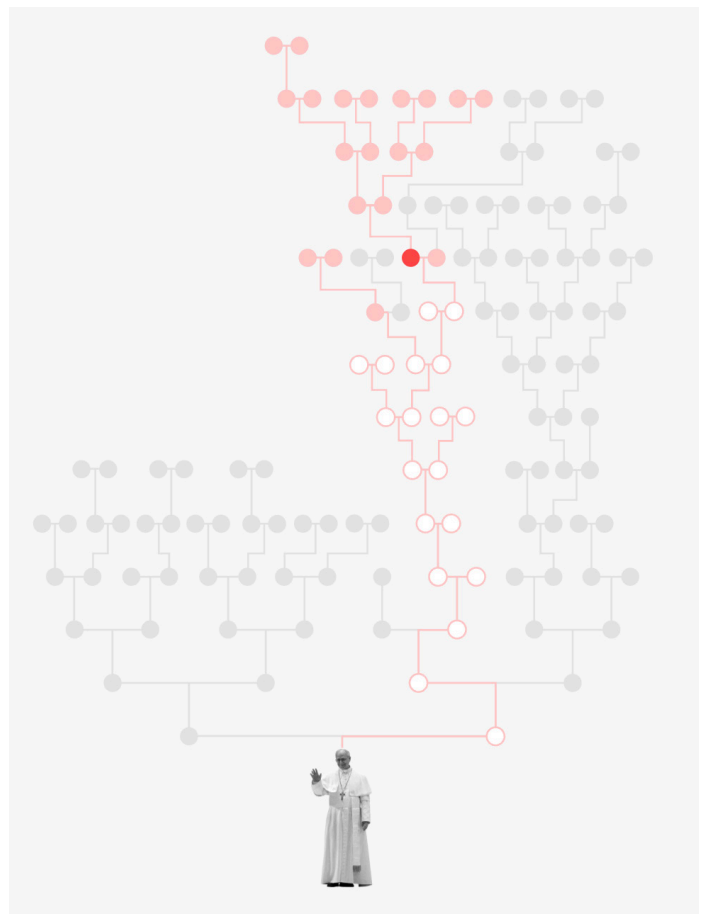


One of their grandchildren was **Diego de Arana Valladar**, a captain of land and sea in the Royal Armada who spent years fighting Dutch privateers trying to take over Portugal's colonial holdings in America.

His son, **Diego de Arana Isla**, was 9 when his father died. He traveled the world in the Spanish military, first to Panama, where he served as captain of artillery.

Through Diego's sister, the pope is related to Antonio José de Sucre, the hero of the Battle of Ayacucho, who played a crucial role in defeating Spanish colonialism in Latin America. (The tree shows only direct ancestors, so it excludes aunts, uncles and cousins.)

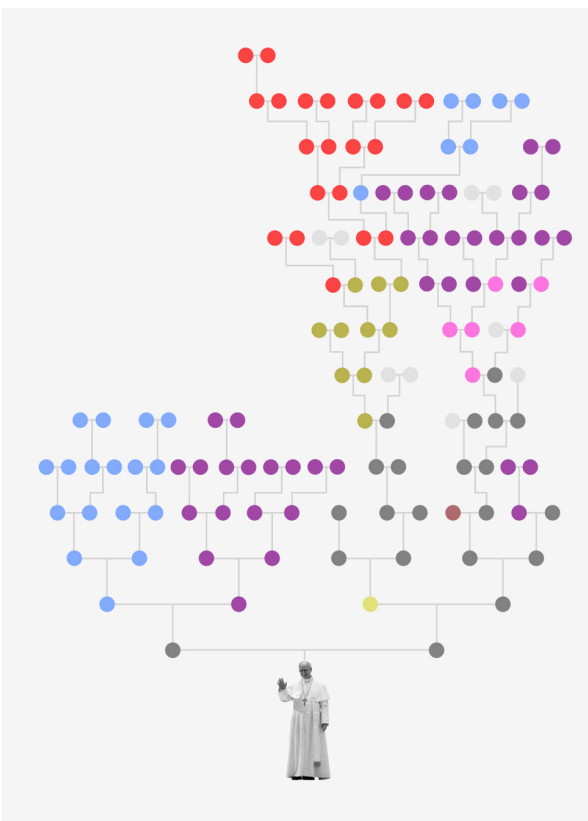
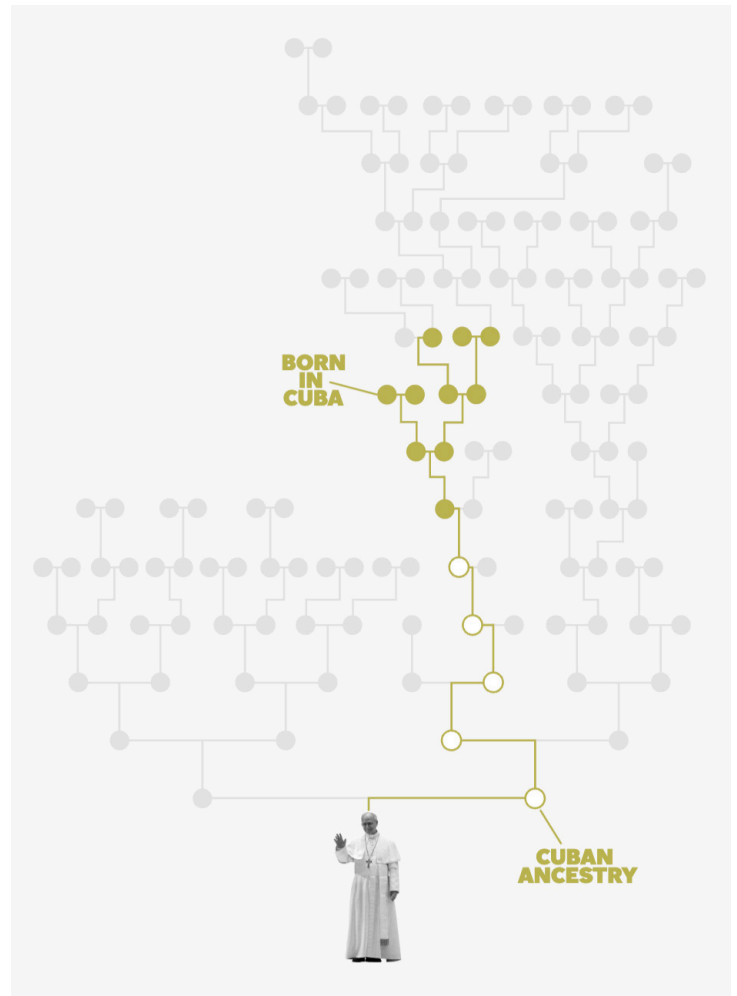
Diego settled in Cuba around 1663, as accountant for the royal treasury, and died there in 1684. The family remained in Cuba.



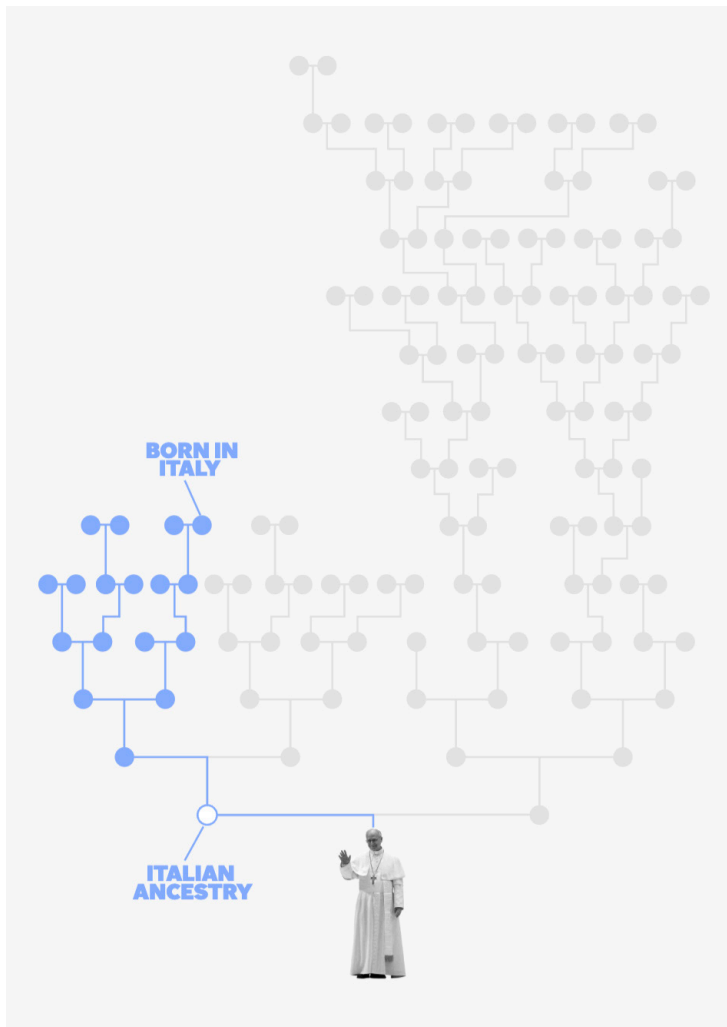


*Antonio José de Sucre was the first constitutionally elected president of Bolivia and a close friend of Bolivar himself.*

Four generations of his mother's line were born in Havana.



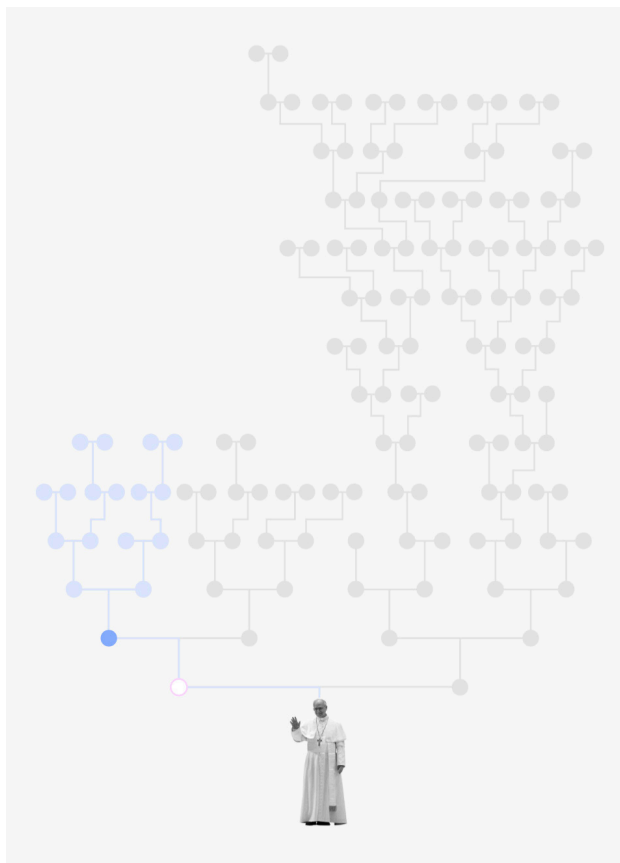
His father's side shows a more recent story of immigration.



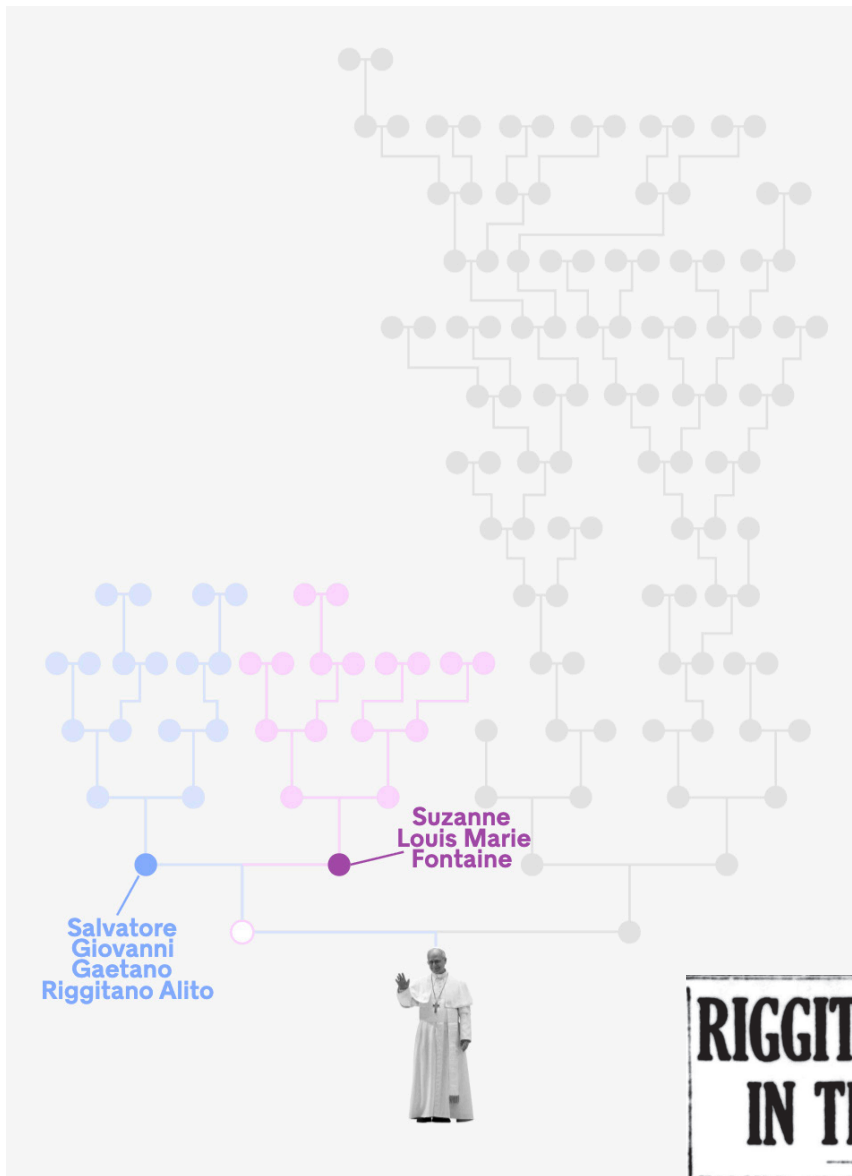
At least five generations of his father's ancestors were born in Sicily, including the pope's grandfather, **Salvatore Giovanni Gaetano Riggitano Alito**, in 1876. He most likely immigrated to the United States in 1905.



*Salvatore Giovanni Gaetano Riggitano Alito*

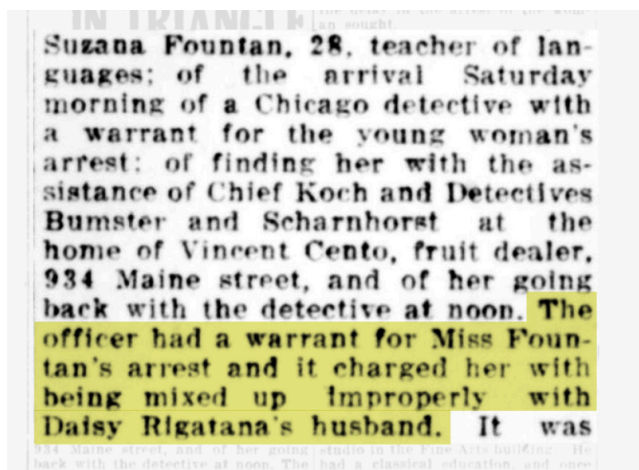


Salvatore was on his way to becoming a priest but was unable to take his vows and chose to marry instead.



However, the person who shows up in the pope's family tree opposite Salvatore is not his wife. It is his lover, **Suzanne Louise Marie Fontaine**, who was born in France and, like Salvatore, immigrated to the United States, 10 years after he did.

A newspaper clipping from 1917 tells part of their story.



## RIGGITANO IN TRIANGLE

**FORMER HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER'S WIFE ACUSES HIM.**

**Second Chapter of Story of Affinity Who Fled to Quincy Where Man in the Case Once Taught Spanish.**

There's a bit more to the story, "An Italian Wife," than was printed under this head in Saturday's Herald. The second chapter developed after the first had been given publication.

**What First Story Told.**

Chapter 1 told of the arrival a week ago yesterday, from Chicago, of Suzana Fountan, 28, teacher of languages; of the arrival Saturday morning of a Chicago detective with a warrant for the young woman's arrest; of finding her with the assistance of Chief Koch and Detectives Bumster and Scharnhorst at the home of Vincent Cento, fruit dealer, 934 Maine street, and of her going back with the detective at noon. The officer had a warrant for Miss Fountan's arrest and it charged her with being mixed up improperly with Daisy Rigatana's husband. It was

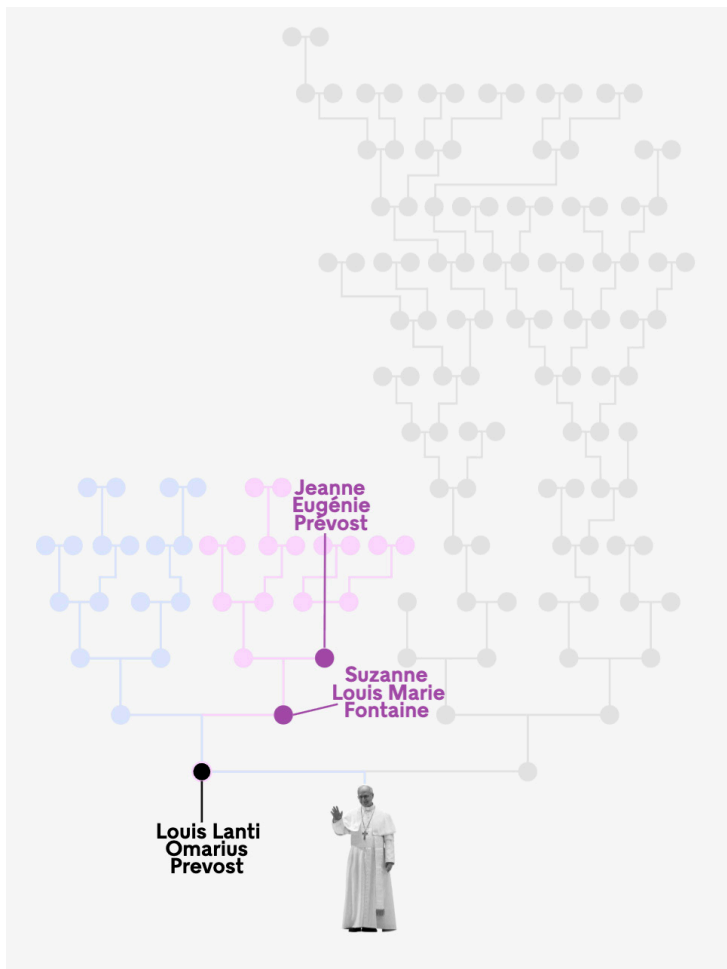
was happening packed her trunk and came to Quincy. It was only after the lapse of nearly a week that the fact of the trunk being shipped to Quincy was learned, thus explaining the delay in the arrest of the woman sought.

**The Development.**

Chapter 2, developed after the publication of Chapter 1, recalls to mind Giovanni Riggitano, or Rigatana of the Suzana Fountan episode and Giovanni Riggitano turn out to be one and the same. In 1908 and for a year or two on either side of then Giovanni Riggitano was a resident of Quincy, at different times a member of the faculty of the Conservatory of Music and of St. Francis college, a teacher of the Romance languages. He was also, it will be recalled, a teacher of Spanish as a member of the High school faculty and as a private tutor. Giovanni was a scholar, and he was dapper and polished and made many friends, quickly becoming a favorite. He did excellent work both in institutions and as private tutor and those with whom he came in contact as students and in a social way have of him only the kindest recollection.

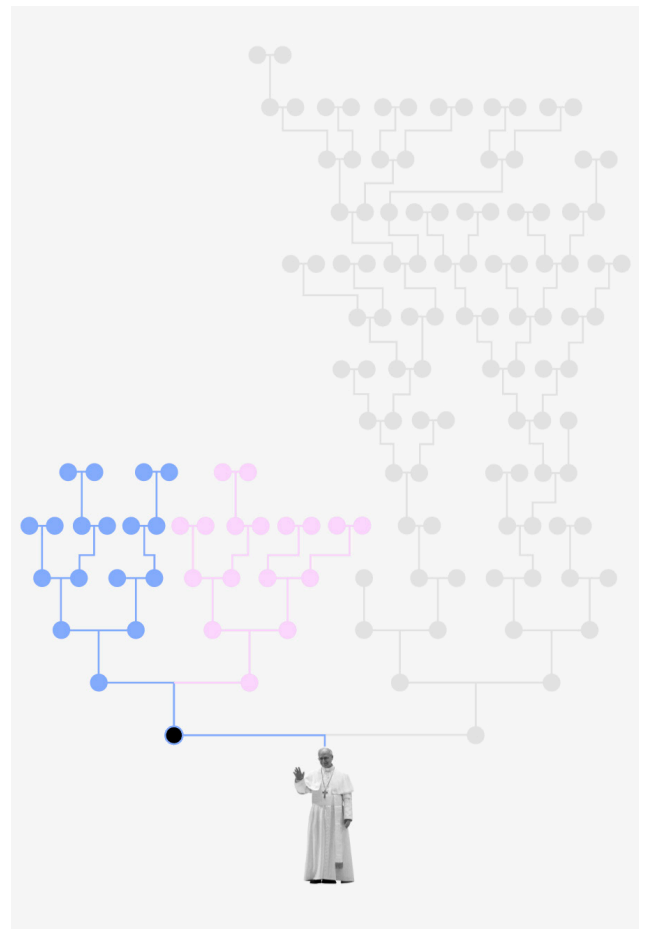
**Had Studio in Chicago.**

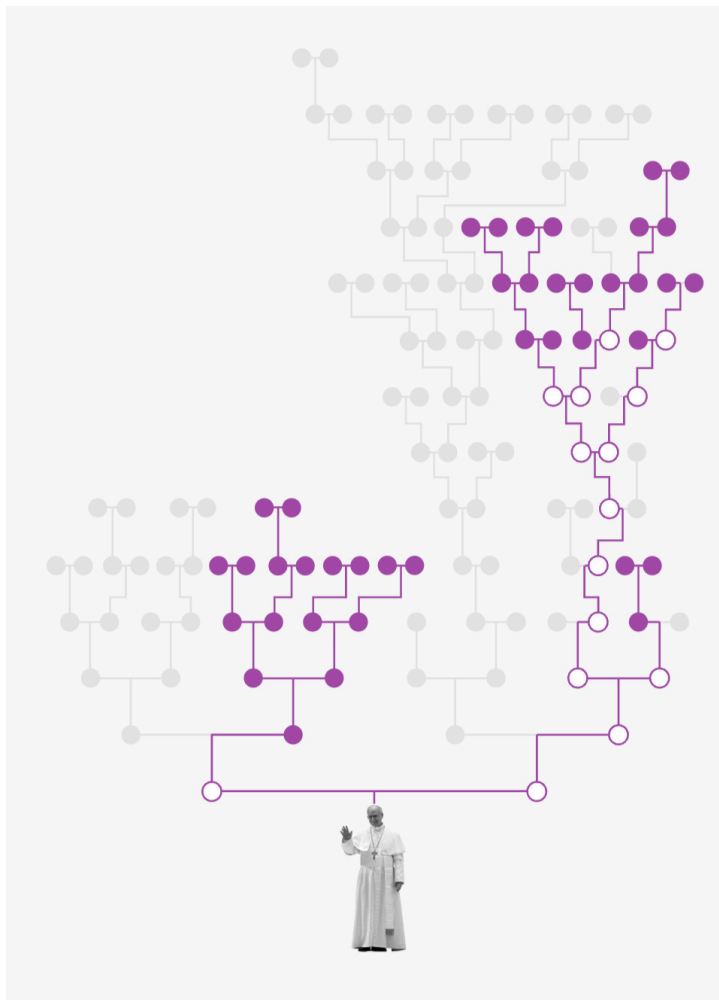
When Riggitano left Quincy he went to Chicago, where he opened a studio in the Fine Arts building. He had a classical education, and once in conversation with one of his friends here, said that he had been educated for the priesthood, but felt that he could not take the vows, and ran away from the school. In Chicago he was taken up by the society called "The Lovers of Italy" to which some of the wealthy and aristocratic women of Chicago belong, and because of his wide knowledge was made much of. He taught Ital-



Their extramarital affair produced two sons out of wedlock, Jean, the pope's uncle, and Louis, the pope's father. They were given their grandmother's maiden name, **Prevost**.

That's how the pope ended up with a French surname—minus the accent—even though his paternal grandfather's ancestors were almost all Italian.

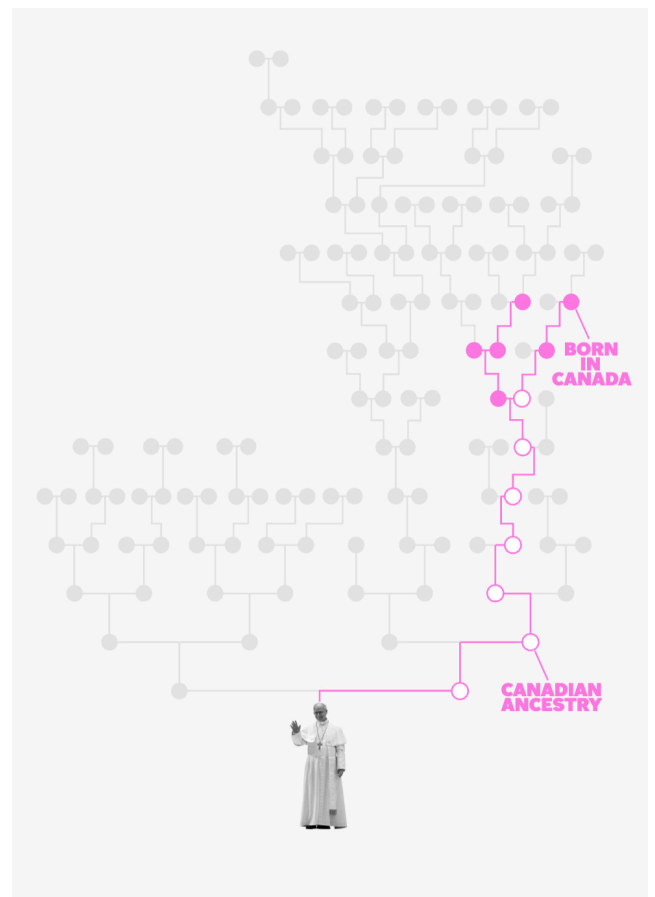


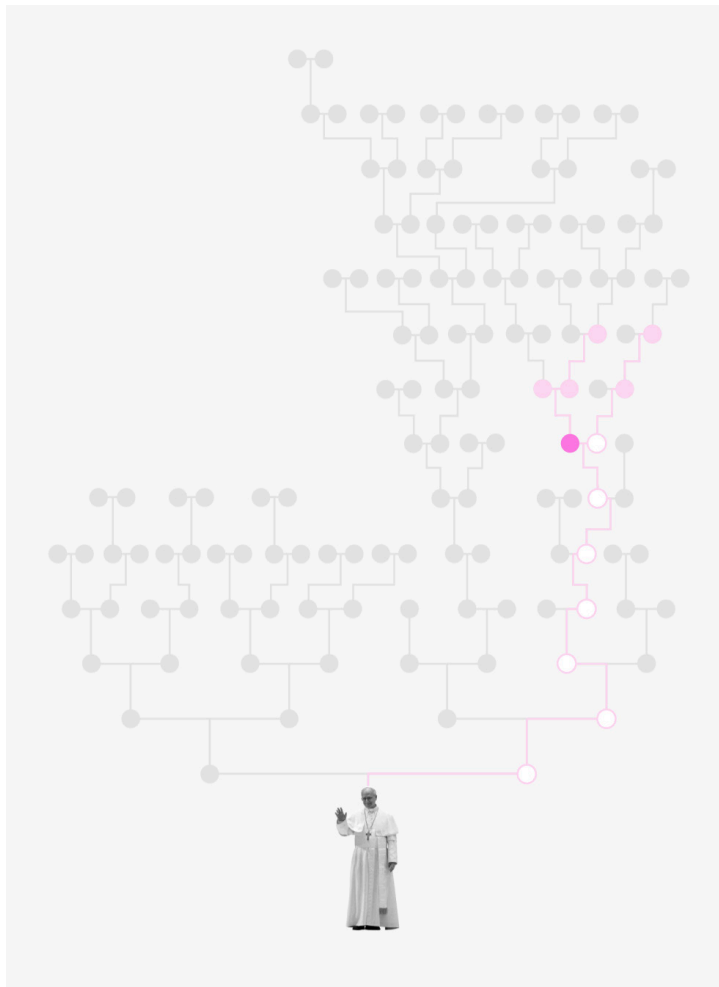


His surname befits the fact that a significant portion of his ancestry—on both parents' sides—traces back to France.

Of his ancestors so far identified, 40 are from France, 24 are from Italy and 21 are from Spain.

Of the pope's eighth-great-grandparents known to have been born in France, all had relocated to Quebec by the mid- to late 1650s.

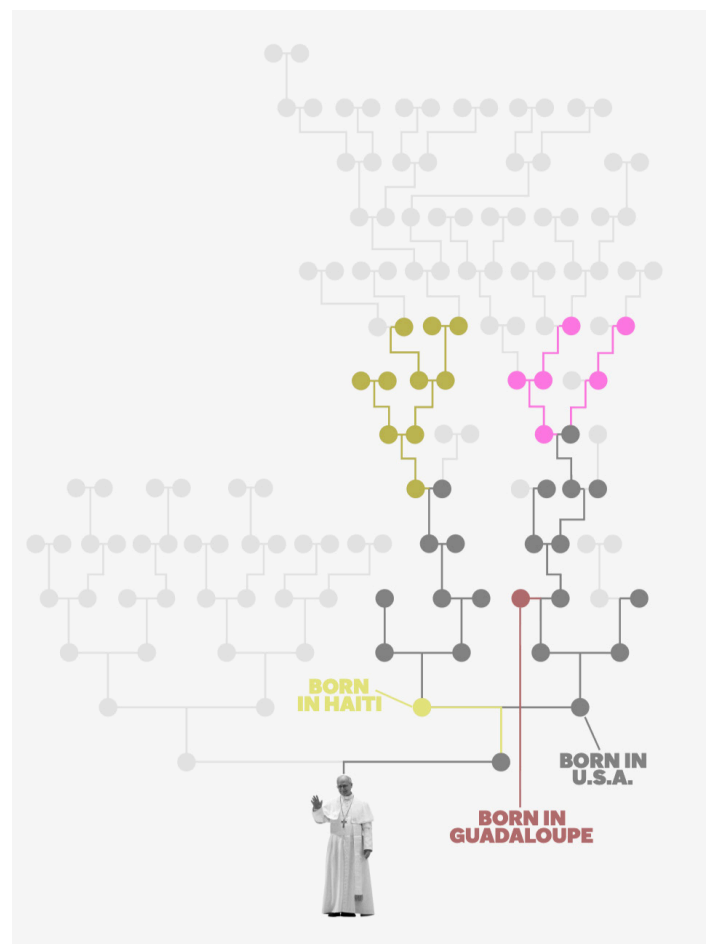


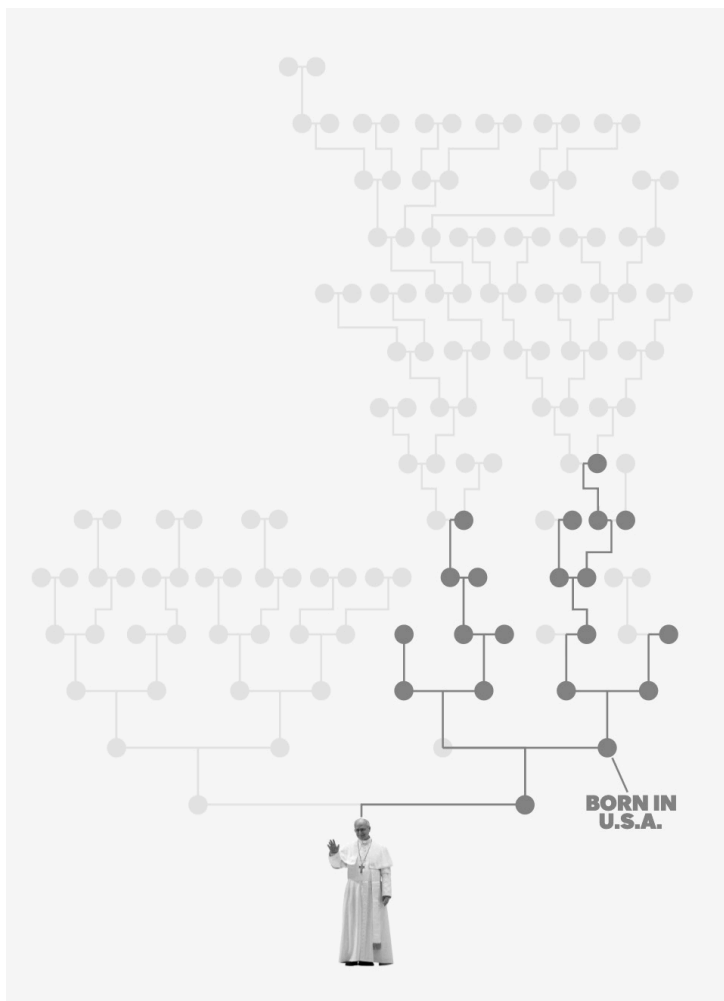


Through one Canadian ancestor, **Louis Boucher de Grandpre**, who was born in Trois-Rivières, Quebec, the pope is related to numerous Canadian-derived distant cousins, including Pierre and Justin Trudeau, Angelina Jolie, Hillary Clinton, Justin Bieber, Jack Kerouac and Madonna.

Louis's descendants, like the pope's other French Canadian relatives, would settle in the United States within a century, at the same time as his Cuban ancestors were moving to the country.

Many of them ended up in New Orleans.

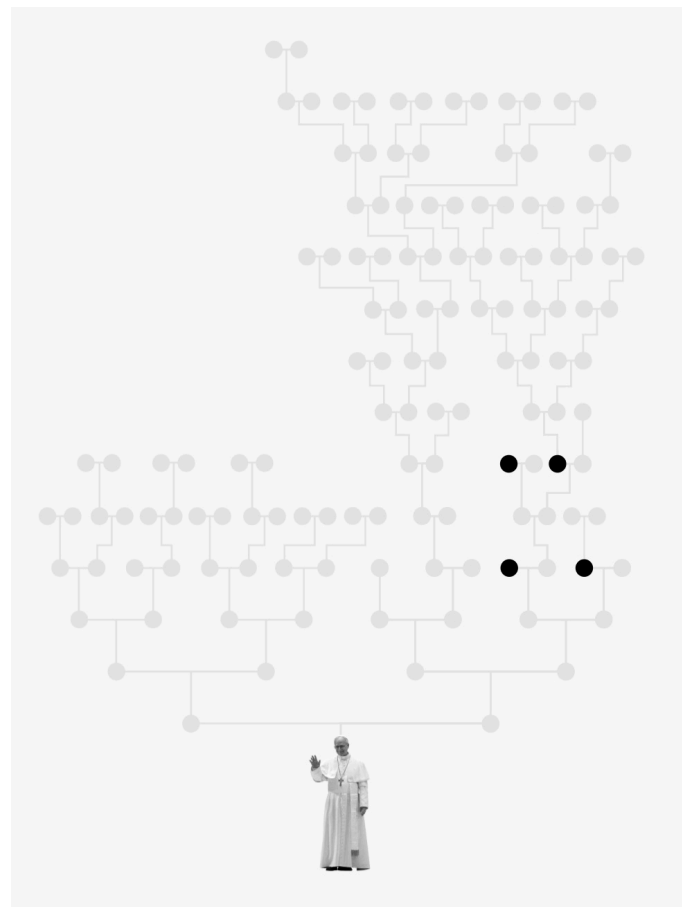


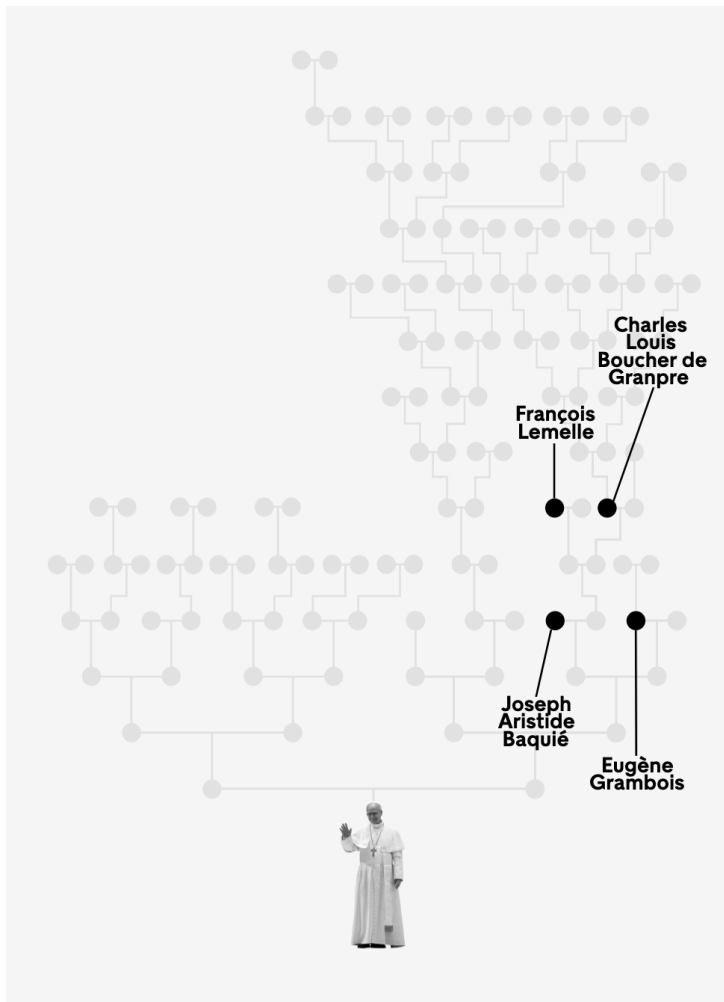


New Orleans, arguably one of America's first melting pots, has a long history of cultural and ethnic diversity, peopled first by Native Americans, then by the French and the Spanish, along with a growing number of enslaved Africans.

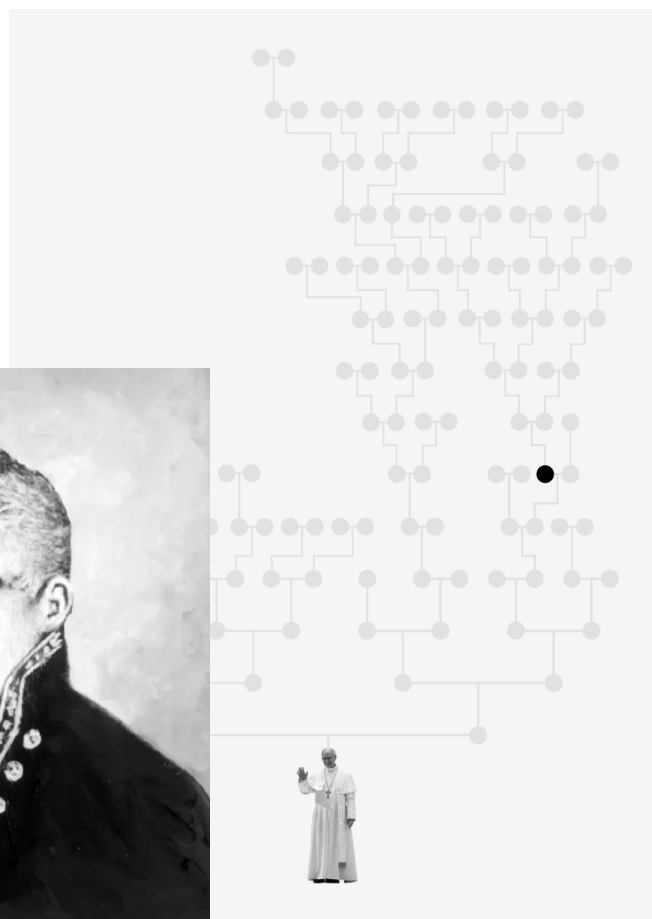
By 1805, according to one census, more than half of the city's population was composed of enslaved and free people of color. The pope's ancestors have many intersections with the institution of slavery.

We identified four white ancestors who owned slaves in the United States. (There were probably more, including in Cuba, which was also a slaveholding society.)





His fourth-great-grandfather **François Lemelle**, enslaved at least 20 people. His second-great-grandfathers **Joseph Aristide Baquié** and **Eugène Grambois** enslaved at least three and five people.

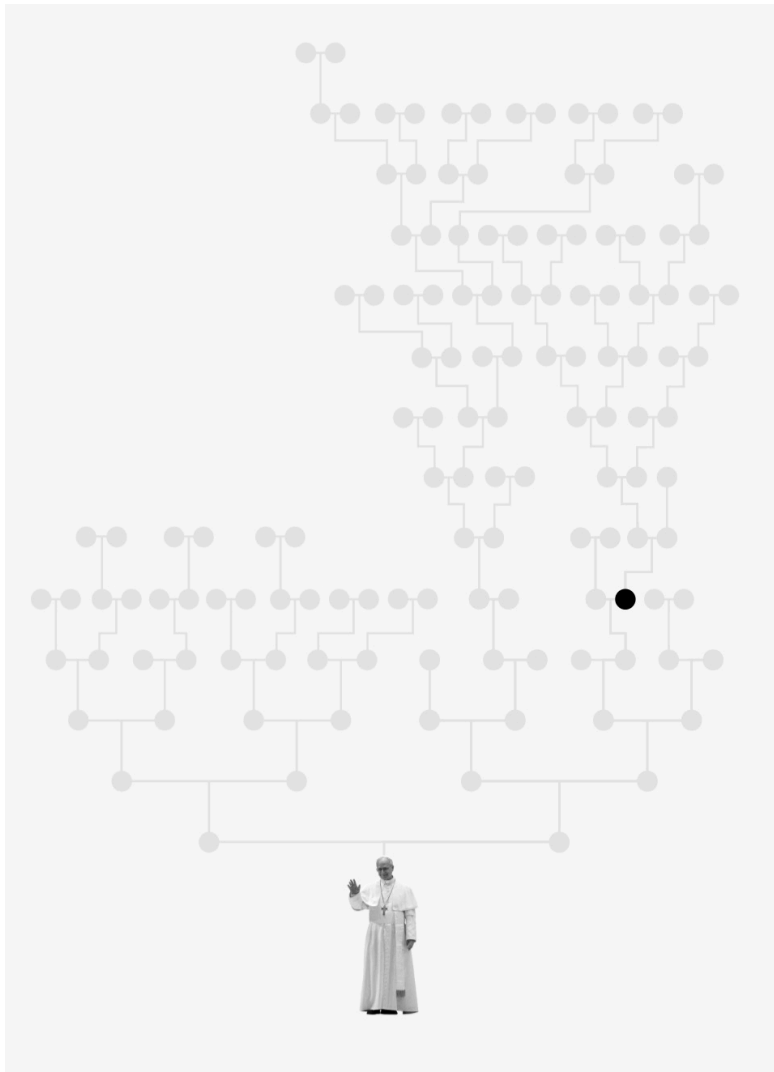


**Charles (Carlos) Louis Boucher de Grandpre**, who served as the Spanish governor of the Baton Rouge District from 1799 to 1808, owned at least 11 enslaved people.

Charles was commander of the militia at Pointe Coupée in 1777 during the American Revolution. He interrupted British communication between Baton Rouge and Natchez, which was crucial in ending British control along the Mississippi River.



*Charles (Carlos) Louis Boucher de Grandpre*

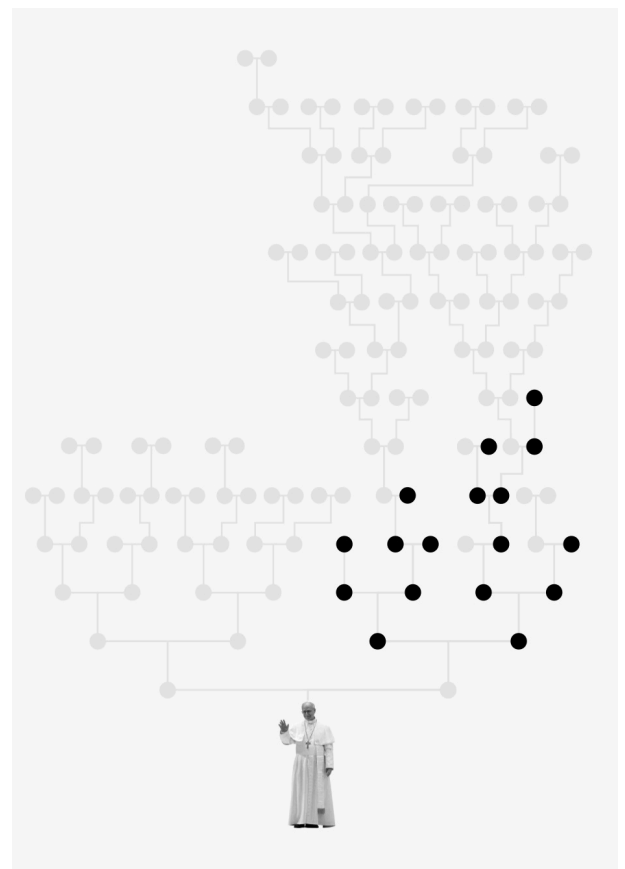


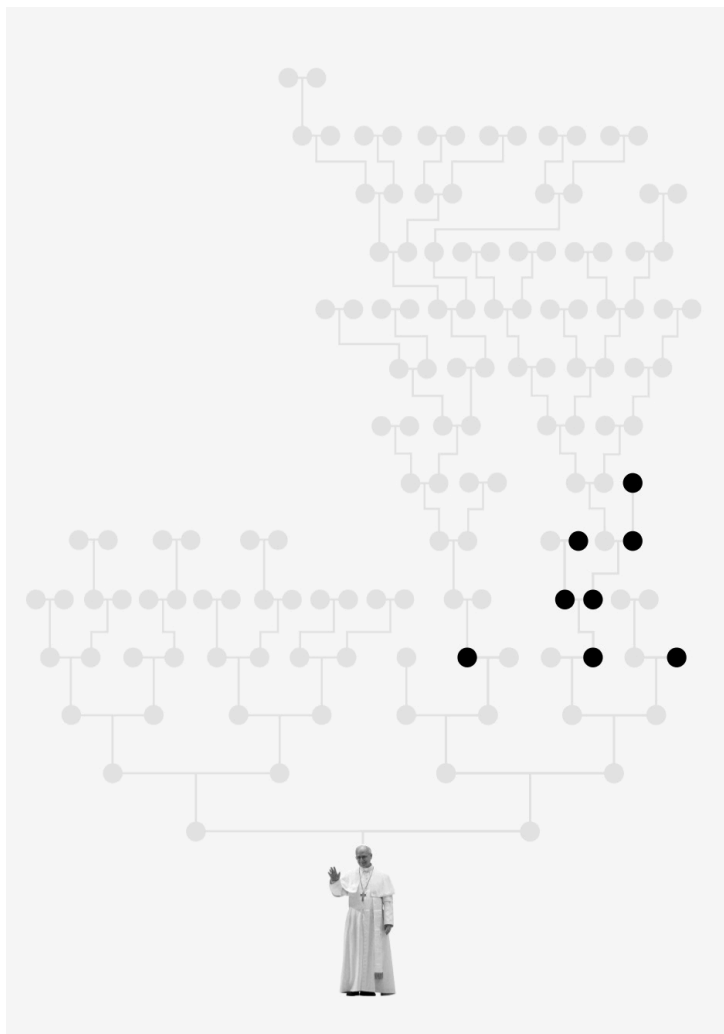
Around this time, he was recorded as the father of **Celeste Olympe de Granpre**, the pope's third-great-grandmother, who is listed in her marriage contract as a "free quadroon," indicating that her ancestry was thought to be one-quarter Black. ("Mulattos" were half white; "octoroons" were one-eighth Black.)

Pope Leo descends from a long line of individuals—at least 17—who were identified in various records as "mulatto," "mulatress," "mulâtress créole," "free person of color" and "quadroon."

Among the more interesting discoveries: The pope's African American ancestors include not only enslaved people but also enslavers themselves.

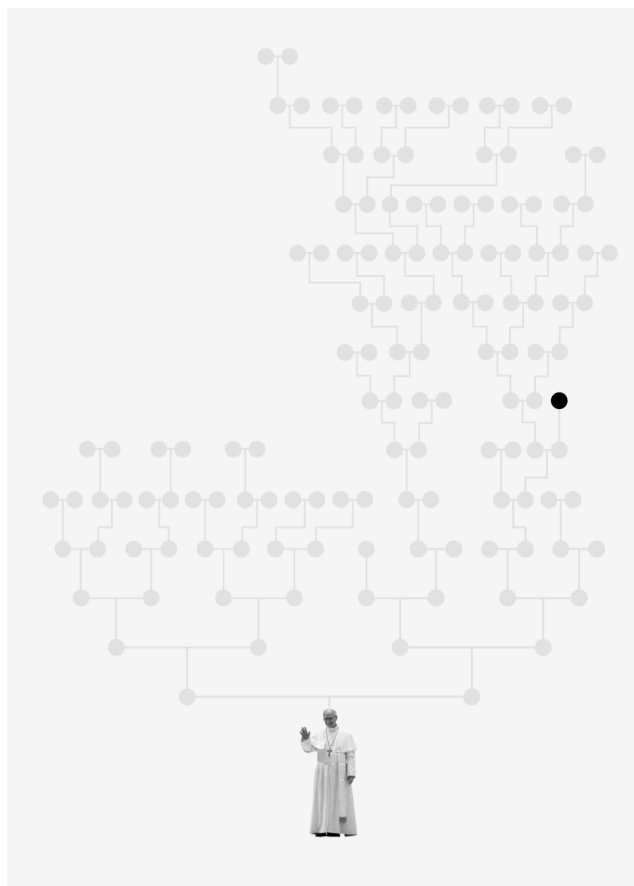
It may come as a surprise to hear that African Americans were among those who owned other Black human beings, though the number was small. In 1830, for example, just over 1 percent of the free Black population were slaveholders, enslaving between 1 and 84 women and men.

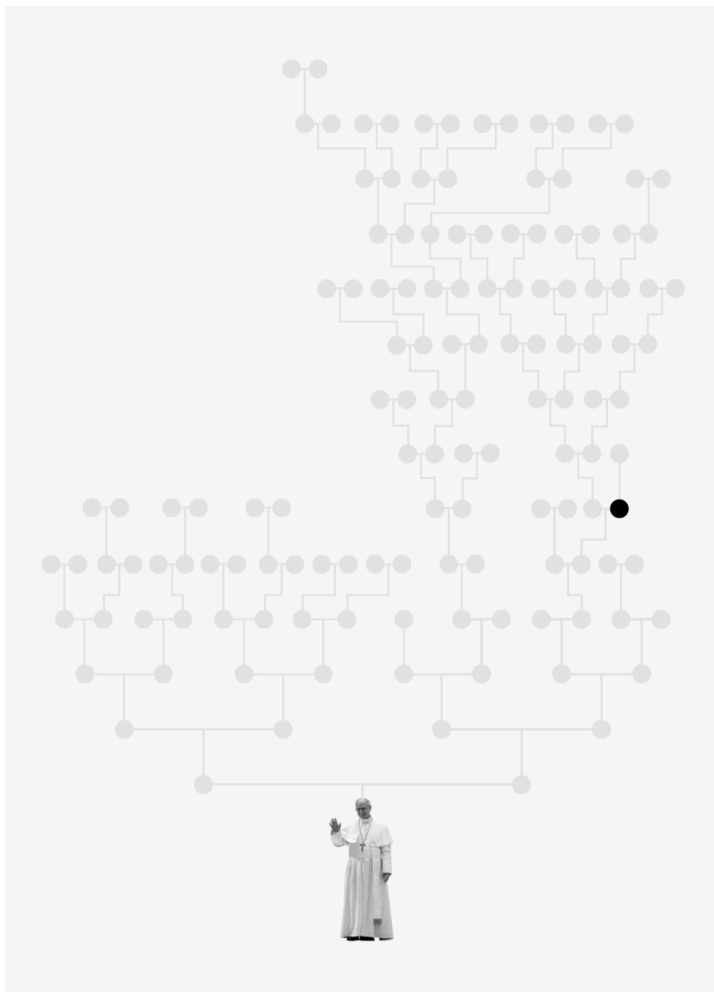




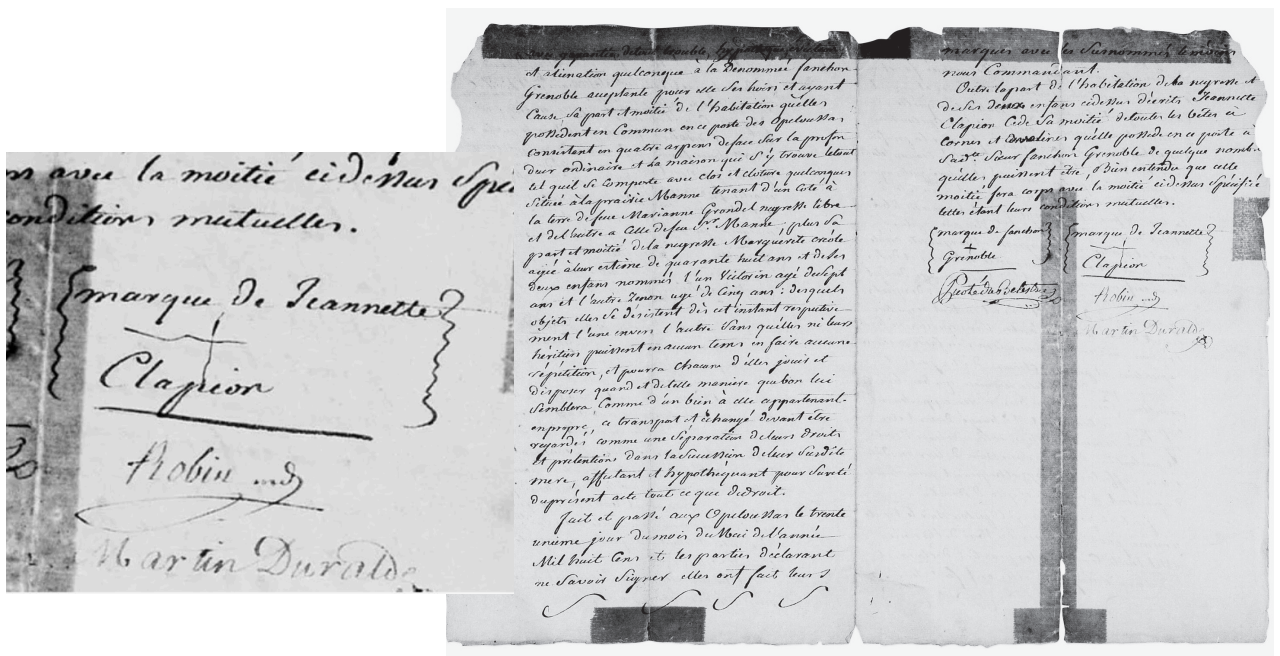
Eight of his Black forebears are known to have enslaved, in total, at least 40 other people of color.

One of the earliest identified was his fifth-great-grandmother, **Marie Louise**, who had been enslaved by Sir Baron of Point Coupée. She was described as a “free negresse” in an estate document from 1800.



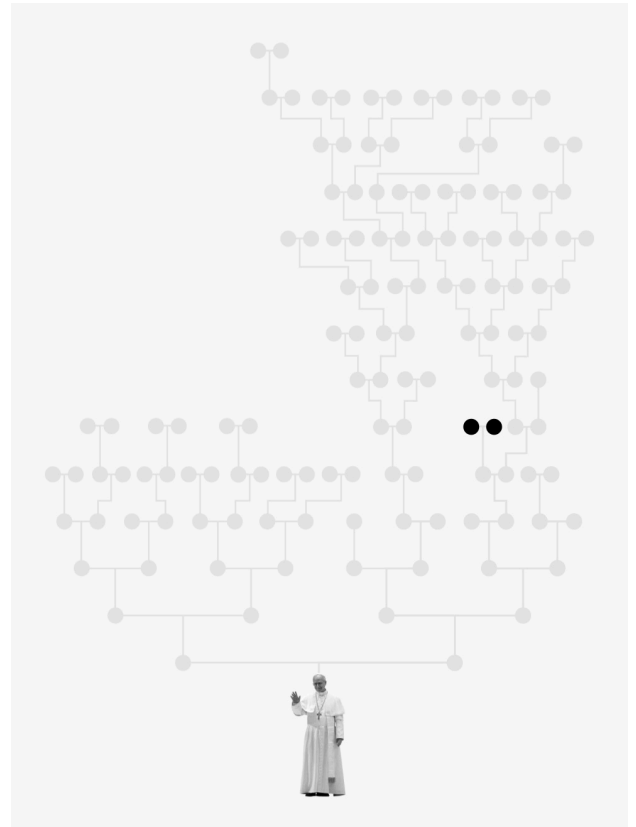
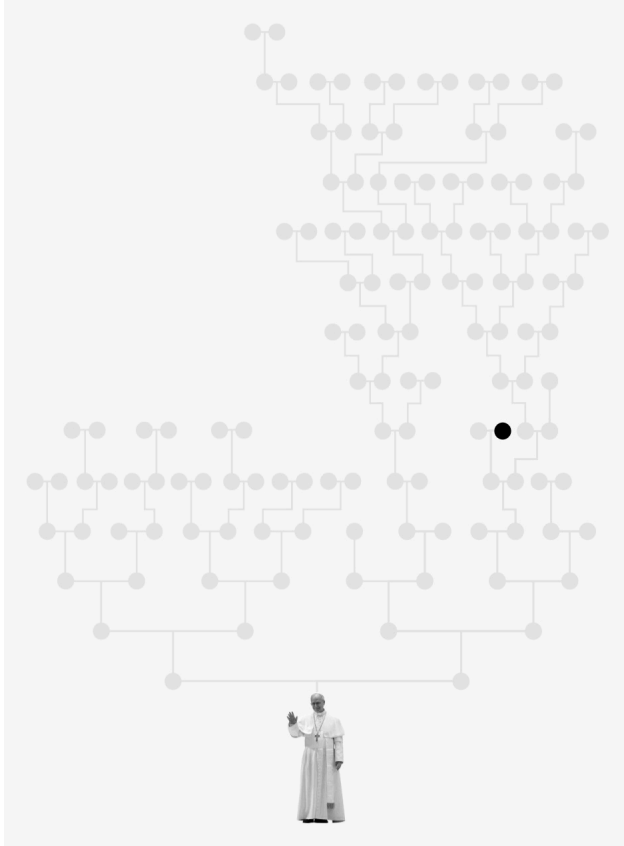


Her daughters, Fanchon Grenoble and **Jeannette Glapion**, who is the pope's fourth-great-grandmother, inherited an estate that included land in Opelousas, La., as well as three enslaved people: 48-year-old Marguerite and her children, Victorin and Zenon. Their names appear on ownership documents from 1800.



The mark of Jeannette Glapion (recorded here as Clapion) is a cross next to her name on this estate document.

Another fourth-great-grandmother of the pope, **Marie Jeanne**, was an enslaved “mulata,” counted among the property of François Lemelle, of New Orleans.

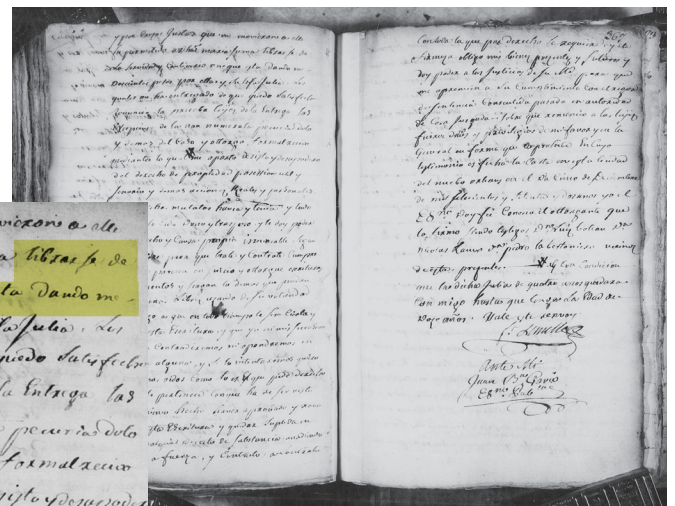


**François Lemelle** and **Marie Jeanne** had at least six children together.

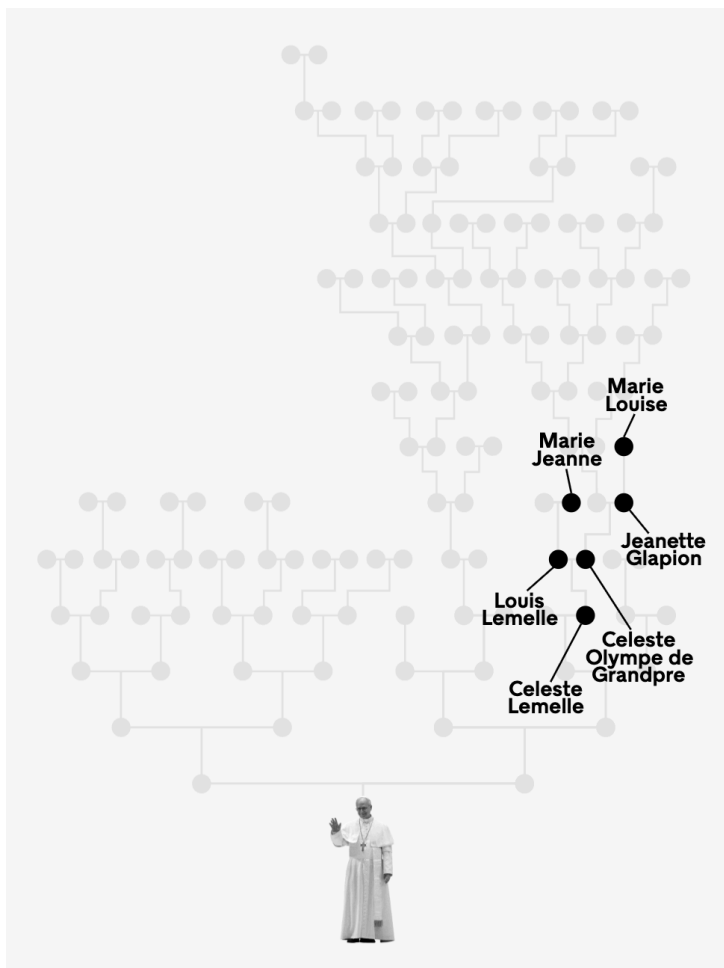
In 1772, **François** manumitted, or freed from slavery, **Marie Jeanne** and two of their daughters, Jacqueline and Julie. (In 1777, according to the Colonial Slave Census, he still owned 20 other enslaved people.)

At his death, François left Marie Jeanne one-fifth of his estate, which included enslaved people. Thirty years later, her holdings had grown to 1,040 acres, and “her movable possessions included five slaves.”

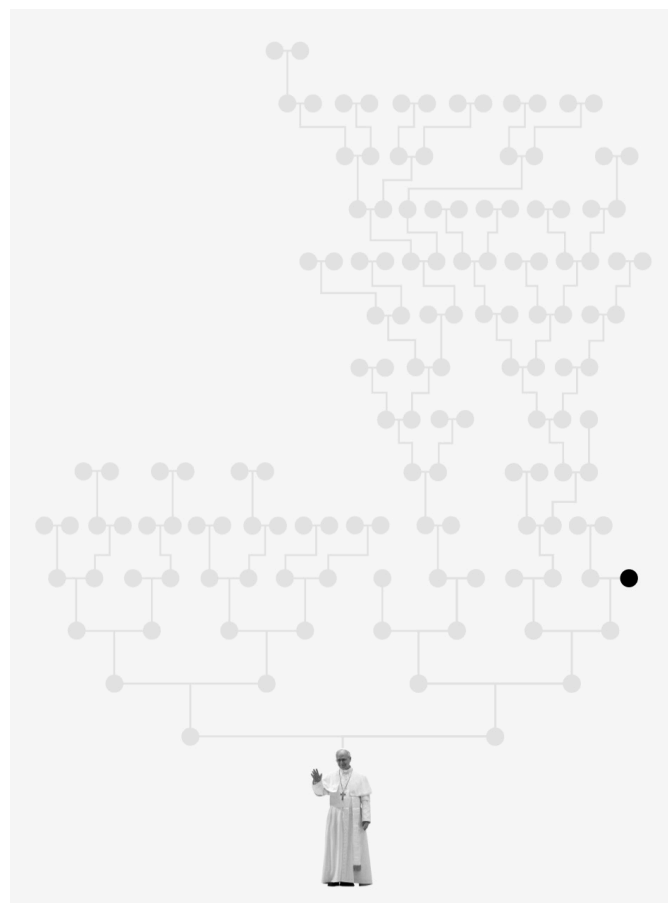
Over her lifetime, Marie Jeanne would own at least 20 enslaved people, more than any of the pope’s other Black ancestors who have so far been identified as slave owners.



The manumittance document. This line roughly translates to “is freed of the servitude and captivity of which she is serving him.”



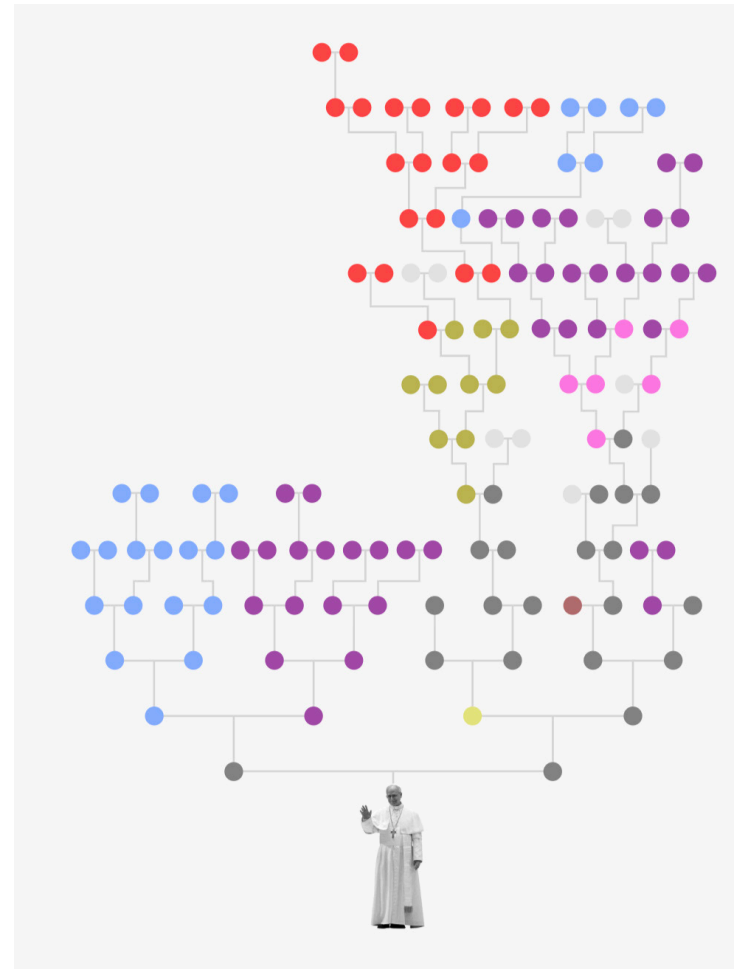
The families of **Marie Jeanne** and **Marie Louise** were united when Marie Louise's granddaughter, Celeste Olympe de Grandpre, married Marie Jeanne's son, Louis Lemelle. We found evidence that all enslaved people.



The source of one ancestor's wealth, that of **Odile Copele**, described as "mulatto" in the 1850 and 1860 censuses, is not known. She bought a 2-month-old "negro orphan slave named Guillaume Celestin." In the 1850 census, she is listed as the owner of a 7-year-old girl.

There have always been class divisions within the African American community, often expressed through a series of binaries: enslaved versus free, house servants versus field workers and so on. But class divisions were also defined by physical features: shades of color, hair texture and facial features. These mixed lineages resulted from a range of causes, from rape to second families born of mistresses. The latter, especially, sometimes meant proximity to wealth and inheritance.

It comes as no surprise, then, that the bulk of the pope's Black slaveholding ancestors are consistently described as mixed-race. (At the time of the 1830 census, according to the historian Thomas J. Pressly, some 40 percent of "Free Colored Persons" who enslaved others possessed only one, most likely a family member, and often a spouse purchased from a white slaveholder to protect her from being violated or sold.)



Does his family history mean Pope Leo is Black? That depends on definitions, whether legal, historical or conventional. The historian Daniel Sharfstein points out that while the 1865 Tennessee Black Code defined "Persons of Color" as everyone "having any African blood in their veins," most legal definitions in the 20th century of who was "Black" depended on the measurement of supposed "fractions" of ancestry, such as one-fourth or one-eighth, which were arbitrary and extremely difficult to gauge (as well as entirely unscientific). By 1910, Louisiana law classified anyone "with any appreciable mixture of Negro blood" as a "colored person." At least 10 other states followed with their own laws of "hypodescent" — the notorious "one-drop rule." In 1924, Virginia's Racial Integrity Act defined as a "white person" anyone who had "no trace whatsoever of any blood other than Caucasian."

Though self-identification has supplanted, I believe, the legality of the one-drop rule, all too often this sort of thinking remains a powerful social convention when categorizing the genetic gumbo that characterizes the astonishing number of us who are descended from multiethnic, highly admixed ancestral lineages and who are increasingly representing what it means to be "American." The fantasy of genetic purity is belied by simple commercial DNA tests — and a DNA test would be required to determine the percentages of sub-Saharan African (or Spanish or French or Italian) "ancestor regions" from which Pope Leo might have descended over the last few centuries.

This ambiguity, as well as the sheer heterogeneity of the pope's ancestry, with its quite colorful, multiple roots and branches, may be what makes it so truly *American*: a reflection of the complexities of the conquest and settling of the New World, the vast extent of voluntary European immigration and the involuntary, forced migration and enslavement of people of African descent who were brought to the Americas.

Perhaps the most salient feature of Robert Francis Prevost's family tree is that it is strikingly "ecumenical," an expression of the endlessly fascinating, multifarious geographical and ethnic threads that make up our grand national story, threads that combined to help shape the truly cosmopolitan worldview of the man we might think of as the first pan-American pope.

**The family tree reflects the best-known research as of the time of publication.**

**Genealogical research by** Christopher Child, Sarah J. Dery, Sheilagh Doerfler, Lindsay Fulton, Abe Laxague, Anjelica Oswald and Aidan Walsh at American Ancestors; Marial Iglesias Utset, research scholar at the Afro-Latin American Research Institute; Mirelis Peraza González and Lourdes del Pino at the Cuban Genealogy Club of Miami; Antonio Herrera-Vaillant at the Academia Venezolana de Genealogía; and Dr. Kevin Burke, director of research, and Dr. Robert Heinrich, research associate, at the Hutchins Center at Harvard.

**Images:** Christopher Furlong/Getty Images (pope); Photo shared by John Joseph Prevost (pope with mother and brothers); The Daily Gate City (Riggitano Alito); Eric Robert/Getty Images (Madonna photo on homepage promo).