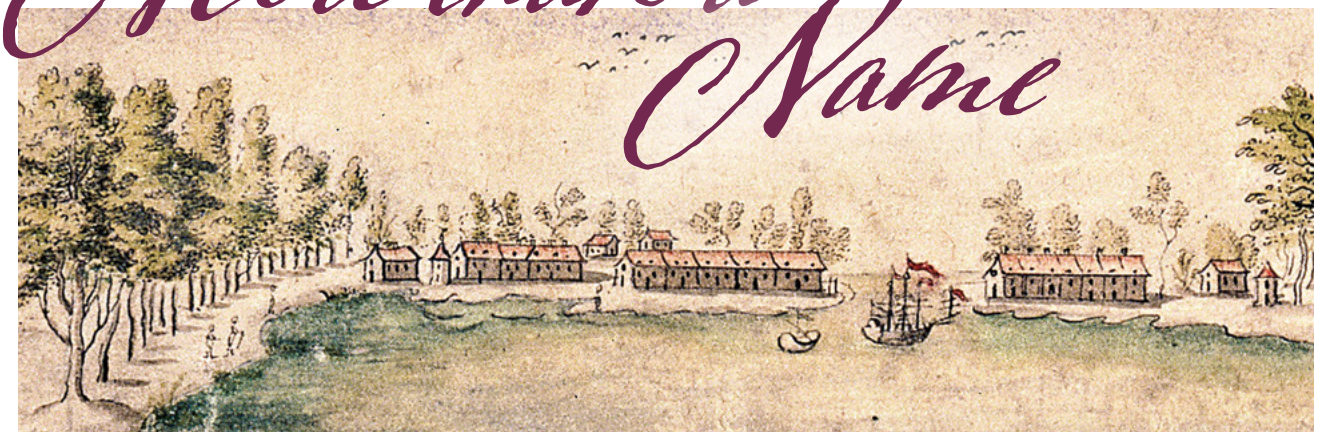
More than a Name



A detail of *Map of Louisiana, View of New Orleans*, 1720. Drawn by de Beauvilliers. Library of Congress.

Jacqueline Lemelle's Life of Enslavement and Freedom in French Colonial Louisiana

My ancestor Jacqueline was just a name to me when I began my research on her. All I knew was that she was enslaved in colonial Louisiana and freed in 1772 by Jacques Lemelle, her former enslaver and the father of three of her children. She adopted his surname and lived with him and their children until his death. But I knew Jacqueline had more to her life story, and I was determined to know her as best I could across centuries.

My interest in genealogy began later in my life, in the late 1990s, after my mother had died. Her brother Gilbert Lemelle had pursued our family history for decades, following our line back to one of Jacqueline's daughters, Marie Jeanne Lemelle (1750–1834). But he could go no further. We knew something of our French ancestors, the Lemelles, who could be traced back to Paris in the late 1600s. But the lives of our earliest ancestors of color were little more than cardboard stereotypes—enslaved people (some of whom were later freed) who had no known history. I was determined to learn more about them. Not for grand purposes, just for me.

Identifying Jacqueline as Marie Jeanne's mother was relatively easy. Marie Jeanne's 1772 emancipation record referred to her as the "hija de otra mulata numbrada Jacquelina"—"daughter of another mulatress called Jacqueline." However, the details of Jacqueline's life came more slowly, only after I analyzed old French and Spanish probate, property, and church records, and countless other documents. And only after learning an invaluable lesson. I learned the hard way that secondary and tertiary sources should be taken with a grain of salt. A sketch of Jacqueline's life was published[1] and other authors referenced her in passing, but her actual history did not emerge until I disregarded these accounts and started from scratch.

Jacqueline's story begins with an Acadian named Jean Labbé. Labbé had a farm at Cannes Bruslées (present-day Kenner), north of New Orleans, where he lived with his wife, Christine (Allard), and their children, Jean, Jeanne, Charlotte, and Jean Baptiste. When Labbé first settled in the area in the mid-1720s, he held no enslaved people, according to the local French census of 1727.[2] But by 1737, Labbé had become heavily indebted to the French Company of the Indies—a monopolistic trading company that was a major importer of slaves, settlers, and supplies to Louisiana. Labbé owed "7520 livres" for "negroes and advances of money."[3] One of these "negroes" was Jacqueline's mother.



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After Labbé's death on March 7, 1738, his widow was elected as tutrix, or guardian, of the minor children. A family friend, Pierre Joseph Delille dit Dupard, a neighbor in the 1727 census, was elected as undertutor, an additional secondary guardian.

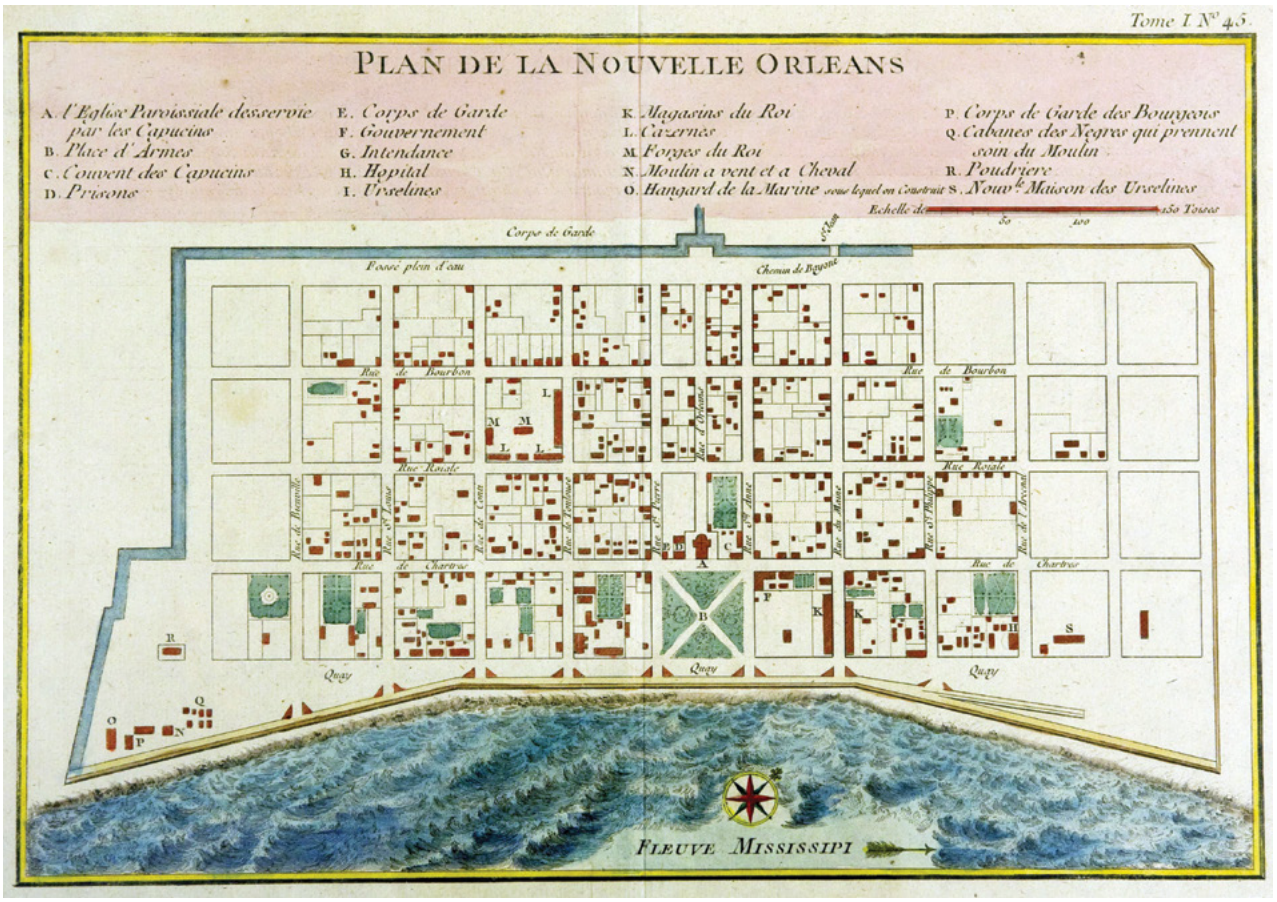
Three of Labbé's children married before his estate was settled in 1746. In 1739, 16-year-old Jeanne married Pierre Laurent Ducoder, an officer of the militia and man of some status in the young colony. Largely due to the decisions of Delille dit Dupard, the Labbé estate contributed a dowry in advance of Jeanne's inheritance equivalent to 3,000 livres in enslaved people and property. In December 1744, Charlotte Labbé married Guillaume Vincent DuPre[4] and, in October 1745, Jean Labbé married Jeanne Julie Ozenne.[5] Neither of these siblings received advances comparable to those provided to Jeanne.

Given the disparity, concern arose that Guillaume Vincent DuPre and Jean Labbé might challenge the distribution of assets. To stave off litigation, a settlement was reached on June 6, 1746, between the Labbé estate and these households. As part of that agreement, Guillame and Charlotte Vincent DuPre received two enslaved siblings—"a mulatress named Jaqueline, a Creole age about eighteen years, and Jean, a mulatto, her brother, age about 11 years."[6]

This young woman was Jacqueline. With this record and her November 1772 emancipation record indicating she was 42, I had an approximate time frame for her birth. I searched surviving baptismal records for the area and only one record matched. Comprised of a single line of text, the January 17, 1730, entry stated that "Jacquemine," "a mulatress girl of a Negresse belonging to Mr. Labbeé, inhabitant" was baptized.[7]

After living in the Labbé household for eighteen years, Jacqueline was separated from her mother, who was presumably later sold in connection with the final disposition of the Labbé estate. Jacqueline became the property of Charlotte (Labbé) Vincent DuPre, who was no more than four years her senior and perhaps a former playmate. Within a few years—by April 29, 1750—Charlotte's husband died.[8]

In about 1750, around the time of Charlotte's marriage to Michael Paquet,[9] Jacqueline had her first



Plan de la Nouvelle Orleans, 1764. Created by cartographer Jacques Bellin. Tulane University Special Collections.

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child, Marie Jeanne, whose father's surname was likely Davion.[10] By 1757, Michel Paquet sold Jacqueline to Jacques Lemelle, a ship captain and lifelong bachelor.[11] Whatever the reasons for the sale, Jacqueline, now about 27, was separated from 7-year-old Marie Jeanne. Small comfort, perhaps, was that Marie Jeanne remained with Jacqueline's brother, Jean.

On January 21, 1758, an enslaved infant in Jacques's household was baptized in New Orleans.[12] The baptismal entry described the child as "Louis natural son of Jacqueline mulatress slave of Jacques Lemelle." This child was Louis Dusuau de la Croix, Jacqueline's second child and the son of Joseph Dusuau de la Croix.[13] In 1760, Jacqueline had a daughter, Agathe, with Jacques Lemelle.

Charlotte's second husband, Michel Paquet, died a couple of years before 1761, the approximate year of her third and final marriage. Her new husband was François Lemelle, Jacques' younger brother, who was at least ten years Charlotte's junior. Based on the age of the couple's first child, Marie Louise Lemelle (born ca. 1762), the wedding likely occurred about 1761. To this marriage, Charlotte brought an unknown number of enslaved people, including Marie Jeanne, Jacqueline's daughter, and Jean, Jacqueline's brother. The family lived outside of New Orleans on the so-called German Coast until about 1773, when François moved his family north to the Opelousas Post.

Brothers Jacques and François Lemelle, then, were the enslavers, respectively, of Jacqueline and her daughter Marie Jeanne. But Jacques was apparently uncomfortable with enslaving his own child. At Agathe's baptism, on May 5, 1760, Jacques told the priest conducting the baptism that the child was to be free.[14] By 1765, Jacques had decided to free Jacqueline.

Jacques had to travel to Europe in November 1765, either due to settling the estate of his father, who had died the previous year, or because of his own business interests. Before departing, Jacques left a power of attorney with his brother François and petitioned the Superior Council (the colony's ruling authority) for permission to free Jacqueline. He gave her instructions to follow in his absence regarding his business and his mother, who had recently relocated to a house near Jacques in New Orleans. He promised Jacqueline that she would be formally freed upon his return.

Having been enslaved for her entire thirty-five years, Jacqueline fully embraced her imminent freedom while Jacques was away. Despite Jacques's instructions, she did not maximize the revenue of the other enslaved people in the household who she was to hire out for day labor



A detail of *Plan of New Orleans the capital of Louisiana . . . in the year 1720*, 1759. By Thomas Jeffreys. Norman B. Leventhal Map & Education Center Collection. Cannes Bruslées and New Orleans are highlighted.

or other work. She talked back to Jacques's mother—and became pregnant by a white man named Gasparde Gardelle.

Upon his return in 1767, Jacques was less than pleased and immediately petitioned the Superior Council. Lemelle's 1765 petition for Jacqueline's freedom is not known to exist today, but a record of his 1767 petition survives.[15] This petition sought to undo the earlier promise of freedom. Jacques presented his account (below) mostly in the third person.

> Saying, sirs, that in the month of November, 1765, he had the honor of petitioning you to give freedom to his mulatress named Jaqueline, for services that she had provided and as to which you agreed to permit. The supplicant then went on a voyage to Europe and eagerly put the said mulatress Jaqueline in charge of his effects and slaves, that he left directions for her to give a good accounting and especially to give the Lady Lemelle, his mother, all the respect and obedience possible, and obey her in all things, and he promised as a matter of fact to free her [Jaqueline] upon his return. The supplicant arrived in this city a few days ago to great pain because of the misconduct and misbehavior that the said mulatress Jaqueline had performed, having dissipated the product of the revenues of the slaves for which he left directions for her to amass the revenues, that she lacked respect and obedience to the Lady, his mother, throughout his absence and continuing up to the day of his return, all of which was

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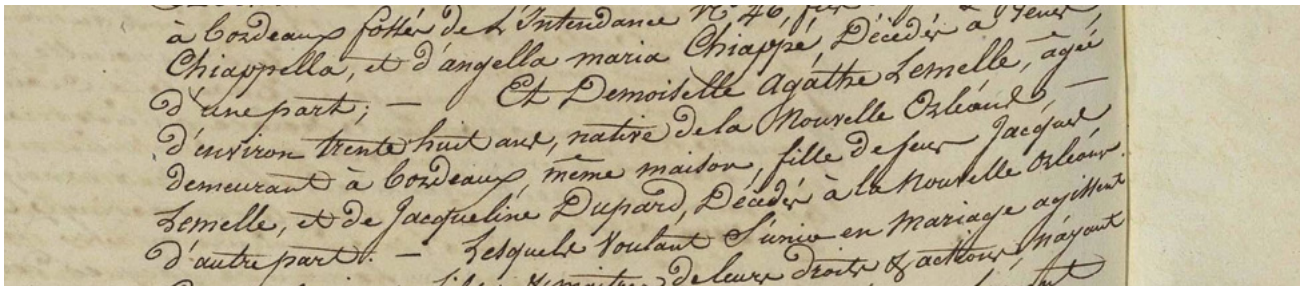

A detail from the 1810 Bordeaux, France, marriage record of Agathe Lemelle and Jerome Chiapella. The record is the only one to provide Jacqueline's original surname as Dupard, thus identifying Jacqueline's father.

> confirmed to him by Sr. Braud, his brother-in-law, who could not correct her misbehavior toward the Lady, his mother, who is aged and infirm. The said mulatress Jaqueline responded to the smallest thing asked of her that she would not do it, that she does not have to follow the orders of any person, that she is free, and that upon my return she would go away on her own. Sirs, I beg you, that my intention is not to grant this freedom, if you please, inasmuch as the aforementioned mulatress Jaqueline by her continuous pattern of behavior and performance in my absence did not act at all in accordance with my will. Thus, I want to annul the said liberty and make her my slave again.

This second petition was granted, and Jacqueline's freedom was revoked. Jacques sold Auguste, Jacqueline's son with Gasparde Gardelle, to Gardelle on July 19, 1767, requiring him to free the child upon maturity.[16]

Jacqueline had two additional daughters (Jeanne "Tonton" Françoise and Adelaide) with Jacques in 1769 and 1771. Their baptismal records describe Jacqueline as the "mulatresse slave of Mr. Lemelle."

Jacques's anger towards Jacqueline softened over time. On November 10, 1772, he freed her and their three daughters. Less than a month later, on December 5, 1772, Jacqueline financed the emancipation of her daughter Marie Jeanne and her granddaughter Julia from François Lemelle.[17] Other researchers have overlooked the fact that on the same day, for an additional payment, François also freed a mulatto man named Jean. Jean, who upon emancipation took the name "Jean Paquet," was almost certainly Jacqueline's brother.

Jacqueline and her daughters lived with Jacques for the rest of his life. Plus, the 1778 New Orleans census revealed another member of the Lemelle household—a mixed race, male child less than age 13. This child was likely Auguste, Jacqueline's son with Gasparde Gardelle. According to the 1767 sale document, the child would be permitted to remain with Jacqueline after six months if Gardelle paid a daily fee.

Jacques Lemelle died in 1784. In his will, he left a substantial portion of his estate—both enslaved people and real property—to Jacqueline and their daughters. Jacqueline died by 1794.

The final records documenting Jacqueline's life story were created after her death. In 1810, Jacqueline's daughter Agathe married a white man, Jerome Chiapella, in Bordeaux, France (because interracial marriages were not permitted in Louisiana). The marriage register described Agathe as a "native of New Orleans" and a daughter of "Jacques Lemelle … and Jacqueline Dupard."[18]

This source was the only one to provide a name for Jacqueline's father. "Dupard" was undoubtably Pierre Delille dit Dupard, a friend and neighbor of the Labbé family and the undertutor of the Labbé children in the 1730s. Dupard had a clear attachment to the name Jacqueline. It was his wife's name, and he likely chose it for his enslaved daughter Jacqueline when she was born about 1730. In 1732, Dupard even gave the name to his daughter with his wife.

Jacqueline's mother was likely Angelique Perret, who was enslaved by a man named Jean Perret and freed by him sometime prior to 1772. The evidence is persuasive. When Jacqueline's brother, Jean Paquet, died in 1788, he left a will that directed his wife to care for his mother, "Angelique Perret, a free Negro." In 1746, when the Labbé family holdings were finally settled, four enslaved adult black women were part of the estate. These women were likely brought from Africa and sold to Labbé by the Company of the Indies. One was a woman named Angelique.[19]

After Angelique Perret's death, on June 4, 1805, her property now known as at 519 Royal Street in New Orleans was sold.[20] The sellers were two groups of free people of color that were owners "by right of succession"—Angelique's heirs. The first group was represented by Louis Dusuau—Jacqueline's second child—and included all of Jacqueline's children—by Davion, Dusuau, Lemelle, and Gardelle.

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Jacqueline knew her parents and her history and passed this knowledge to her children. She was the first of her maternal line born in Louisiana, an original Creole. Her mother was an African who was freed before she was. Her father was a white man who likely separated her from her mother to settle his neighbors' estate litigation.

During her lifetime, Jacqueline was both enslaved and an enslaver, a free woman of color, a victim, a property owner, and a daughter, a sister, a mother—all of this and more. Strong-willed and determined, Jacqueline resolved that she, her children, and her brother would be free. She accomplished her goals for herself and her descendants, one of whom would become Pope Leo XIV. (The Pope is a descendant of Jacqueline's oldest child, Marie Jeanne, and François Lemelle.) Now, with her story more fully recovered, Jacqueline's spirit and dedication to family can echo down through the centuries. ◆

Notes

1 L. Virginia Gould, "Urban Slavery—Urban Freedom: The Manumission of Jacqueline Lemelle" in *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas*, eds. David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine (Indiana University Press, 1996).

2 Charles R. Maduell, Jr., *The Census Tables for the French Colony of Louisiana from 1699 Through 1732* (Clearfield Company, 1972).

3 "Records of the Superior Council of Louisiana, No. XI," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 4, no. 2, 244.

4 "Records of the Superior Council of Louisiana, XXII," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 7, no. 2, 338. (Guillaume Vincent DuPre was sometimes known as Guillaume Vincent.)

5 "Records of the Superior Council of Louisiana, XLVI," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 13, no. 2, 329 (Charlotte's Labbé's marriage); and "Records of the Superior Council of Louisiana, LII," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 14, no. 4, 588 (Jean Labbé's marriage).

6 Settlement transaction, Collection of the Louisiana State Museum Historical Center, RG #1, #1746060601.

7 Eglise catholique. Paroisse de Nouvelle-Orléans (Louisiane), Registres paroissiaux, 1720–1734, DGS 8105965, image no. 126, FamilySearch.

8 As a baptism sponsor or godmother at New Orleans's St. Louis Cathedral, she was recorded as "Charlotte Labbe, Widow Vincent." Earl C. Woods and Charles E. Nolan, eds., *Sacramental Records of the Roman Catholic Church of the Archdiocese of New Orleans*, vol. 1, 1718–1750 (Archdiocese of New Orleans, 1987), 25.

9 Although no marriage record has been found, she was recorded as Charlotte Labé Paquet in a July 24, 1754, baptismal record when she was a godmother at St. Louis Cathedral. Earl C. Woods and Charles E. Nolan, eds., *Sacramental Records of the Roman Catholic Church of the Archdiocese of New Orleans*, vol. 2, 1751–1771 (Archdiocese of New Orleans, 1988), 38, 66.

10 After she was freed in 1772, Marie Jeanne used the surname "Lemelle," the name of her former enslaver and the father of her children. When her oldest sons married, they reported her surname as Davion.

11 The sale document no longer exists but in Jacqueline's November 1772 emancipation record Jacques noted that he purchased her about "ten years ago" from a "Monsieur Paquet. Notarial Acts of Andres Almonaster y Roxas, November 10, 1772. Orleans Parish Clerk of Court. Gould [note 1] and others have misread Paquet as beginning with an L. A detailed review of the entire record and of the handwriting of Roxas in other documents makes clear that this is a P, written with a footer.

12 St. Louis Cathedral: Baptisms, 1753–1759, Archdiocese of New Orleans Online Records. nolacatholic.org/church-records.

13 Upon adulthood, Louis was freed by his father. In Joseph Dusuau's 1794 will, he acknowledged Louis as his son and "the natural son of Jacqueline Lemelle free 'mulata' deceased."

14 The declaration to the priest was likely one not taken lightly, despite the absence of legal force. The statement may suggest how the child was raised, perhaps with a degree of freedom not typical for an enslaved person.

15 Jacques Lemelle to Messieurs Aubry and Foucault, 1 767, James Brown Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Brown, a lawyer in New Orleans in the early 1800s, presumably was hired by one of Jacqueline's daughters with Jacques and, intentionally or not, kept the proof of Jacqueline's re-enslavement.

16 "Cash Sale of Infant Quadroon," Collection of the Louisiana State Museum Historical Center, RG #1, #1767071901. This is the only known record to document the Gardelle child's given name.

17 Marie Jeanne and François had seven children. Louis, Marie Jeanne's firstborn son (b. ca. 1773), married and was the father of Celeste Lemelle, Pope Leo XIV's great-great-grandmother.

18 *Church Marriages and Civil Marriages*, citing Etat-civil—Archives de Bordeaux, France. MyHeritage.

19 "Account Rendered of Succession of Deceased Jean Labbe by His Widow Christine Allard," Collection of the Louisiana State Museum Historical Center, RG #1, #1746060602.

20 Acts of Pierre Pedesclaux, June 4, 1805, vol. 50, 536–37. Orleans Parish Clerk of Court.

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