
Documenting a Slave's Birth, Parentage, and Origins (Marie Thérèse Coincoin, 1742–1816): A Test of “Oral History”

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To prove identity, researchers prefer an original document in which someone with primary knowledge and sound memory makes an unbiased, direct, factual statement. Such documents are rare, however. Asserting identity requires finding and reassembling pieces of a life, fitting them into a nuclear-family puzzle, and testing it against an extended family and a still larger community puzzle. This progressive expansion from one fragment of a person to a panorama embracing families and crossing community, national, and generational bounds is the essence of genealogical research.

Documenting ages, birthplaces, and identities for American colonials can be challenging, and finding adequate evidence for slaves even more so. The problem can grow exponentially when a colonial slave is a local legend commemorated in the popular press by writers who did not fully investigate their stories—and by scholars who trusted oral accounts. When that slave is also credited with creating a National Historic Landmark and other structures in the Historic American Buildings Survey, separating myth from reality is essential.¹

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1. The National Historic Landmark at issue is Melrose (aka Yucca) Plantation on Cane River in Natchitoches Parish, Louisiana. For a “traditional” account of its founding, still used by the National Park Service, see <http://tps.cr.nps.gov/nhl/detail.cfm?ResourceId=1231&ResourceType=District>. For other historic sites linked to Coincoin see, for example, “Historic American Buildings Survey: Coincoin-Prudhomme House (Maison de Marie Therese), HABS No. LA-1295” (<http://www.nps.gov/hdp/samples/HABS/coincoin/history.pdf>).

THE WOMAN IN QUESTION

Marie Thérèse *dite*² Coincoin first appears on record in 1756, listed as a slave of Chevalier Louis Juchereau de St. Denis in his *succession* (estate settlement) papers. Her late owner had founded and commanded Poste St. Jean Baptiste des Natchitoches, the westernmost settlement of colonial Louisiana. After his 1744 death, the division of his property had been postponed until his youngest minor came of age. Beyond the settlement of his estate and that of his widow in 1758, Coincoin's life can be reconstructed from other ordinary but far-flung records.

Coincoin's life may be briefly summarized: As the young mother of five slave-born children, Coincoin was rented about 1767 to a French bachelor, Pierre Metoyer, to tend his home and other needs. Across a twenty-year relationship, during which Metoyer privately freed her, she bore him ten children. On the eve of his marriage to a friend's widow in 1788, he gave Coincoin sixty-eight acres off one side of his plantation. Metoyer retained possession of their children born before 1778 and eventually manumitted them when they reached their twenties, thirties, and forties.³

As a free woman, Coincoin grew tobacco, made medicine, and trapped bears and turkeys, shipping their by-products to market in New Orleans.⁴ With her earnings and at great sacrifice, she bought freedom for three children from her first union and several grandchildren. Eventually, she joined the ranks of other former slaves in colonial Louisiana who became slave owners. She expanded her landholdings to more than a thousand acres, mostly uncleared grazing land granted by the Spanish government. Her Metoyer children—freed by their father without donations of cash, land, or slaves—became wealthy, arguably the wealthiest free family of color in the nation.⁵

2. A *dit* (masc.) or *dite* (fem.) in this society was a nickname substituted for the surname. In colonial Louisiana, African names used by the African-born often were treated by the French as a *dit* and used in lieu of the Christian baptismal name. Some freed slaves used their African name as a surname.

3. The latest vetted biography of Coincoin is Elizabeth Shown Mills, "Marie Thérèse Coincoin (1742–1816): Slave, Slave Owner, and Paradox," in Janet Allured and Judith Gentry, eds., *Louisiana Women: Their Lives and Times* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, at press). Older, standard works are Gary B. Mills, *The Forgotten People: Cane River's Creoles of Color* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976) and Gary B. Mills, "Coincoin: An Eighteenth-Century 'Liberated' Woman," *Journal of Southern History* 42 (May 1976):203–22; reprinted in Darlene Clark Hine, ed., *Black Women in United States History* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1990). For earlier genealogical studies of her family, see Elizabeth Shown Mills and Gary B. Mills, "Slaves and Masters: The Louisiana Metoyers," *NGS Quarterly* 70 (September 1982):163–89; and Elizabeth Shown Mills, "Which Marie Louise Is 'Mariotte'? Sorting Slaves with Common Names," *NGS Quarterly* 94 (September 2006):183–204. For the methodology used in the reconstruction of Coincoin's life, see "Breathing Life into Shadowy Women from the Past," cover story, *Solander: The Magazine of the Historical Novel Society* 9 (November 2005):21–24.

4. Numerous assertions by popular writers and scholars that she grew indigo remain undocumented.

5. All the material in this paragraph is covered by the first three sources cited in note 3.

Despite documentation for the above, Coincoin’s *origins* are still debated. Among recent questions raised are those of scholars conducting archaeological work at Melrose Plantation and at Coincoin’s homestead site. In their view:⁶

Marie-Thérèse herself may have been born in West Africa—the most convincing source for her birth being family oral tradition that she was born in ‘Guinea’ (Woods 1972 [a sociological study of Coincoin’s offspring]) . . . though others have guessed at Nago/Yoruba . . . or Ewe . . . origins on the basis of her name alone. [One 1977 historian] argued that she was born in Louisiana of first generation African parents, rather than being native to Africa, but [t]his claim is based on rather shaky archival evidence.⁷

The present writer examines extant evidence as a genealogist—not as an archaeologist, sociologist, or historian—applying the Genealogical Proof Standard (GPS) to an inherently genealogical problem.⁸

THE PROBLEM

The “family oral tradition” that Coincoin was born in Guinea is one of many assertions made by various branches of her offspring, sundry fields of scholarship, and the press. When traced to their origins, all accounts display three patterns familiar to researchers of “family tradition” or “oral history”:

- Most such American accounts trace to early historians or genealogists with limited access to records and an urge to tell an appealing story.⁹

6. Kevin C. MacDonald, David W. Morgan, Fiona J. L. Handley, Aubra L. Lee, and Emma Morley, “The Archaeology of Local Myths and Heritage Tourism,” *A Future for Archaeology: The Past in the Present* (New York: Routledge Cavendish, 2006), 127–28. Emphasis added. A similar conclusion was published by MacDonald, Morgan, and Handley in “The Cane River African Diaspora Archaeological Project: Prospectus and Initial Results,” Jay B. Havisser and Kevin C. MacDonald, eds., *African Re-Genesis* (London: University College London Press, 2006), 123–44.

7. The statement “first generation African parents” should be “African-born parents.”

8. As articulated by the Board for Certification of Genealogists in its *The BCG Genealogical Standards Manual* (Provo, Utah: Ancestry, 2001), 1–2.

9. Coincoin offers a case in point: a “tradition” created in 1978. In the 1970s, amid heated debate over her contribution to local history, a son of the last white owners of Melrose tore the siding off the oldest building standing on her first tract of land, found the interior construction to be *bousillage* (a mud and deer-hair compound Creole America used well into the 1800s), and wrote a feature article in the local newspaper detailing his “amazing discovery” and the “evidence” that “proved” Coincoin lived there rather than at Melrose. He argued that because the house stood on land given to her by Metoyer and because its material and construction methods were in use during her life, it was her home. Nowhere in that two-page article was any prior local tradition mentioned. Nonetheless, the National Park Service’s official history of the house now asserts: “*Local tradition* holds that the Maison de Marie Thérèse is the house where Coincoin lived while she was managing her plantation.” (Emphasis added.) See Joseph H. Henry, “Discovery of Bousillage Cabin Substantiates True Story,” *Natchitoches Times*, 16 April 1978, pages 8a–9a; and National Park Service, “Maison de Marie Thérèse,” *Cane River National Heritage Area* (<http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/travel/caneriver/mai.htm>).

- Accounts often have a core of truth but are embroidered and layered in confusion. The researcher's challenge is to find the core.
- Many family stories are shaped not by fact, but by pride, societal prejudice, or a desire to inspire younger generations with tales of forebears' heroism. Beyond enhancements, storytellers plug their memory gaps with assumptions. Over time accounts evolve in wondrous ways.¹⁰

Other factors shape the stories. For journalists, the daily rush to produce news copy can leave little room for fact checking. Local historians untrained in research methodology and evidence analysis may make naive assumptions. Past genealogical authors working with records often were not grounded in the tenets of modern genealogical research.

Nor are these issues particular to America. Scholars elsewhere who test oral against recorded history report similar problems. For example, historian Donald R. Wright, who has interviewed West African and sub-Saharan griots and village elders since the 1970s, reports their recited history deals with either the very distant or the fairly recent. Details from the two eras could be merged, while little or nothing relates to the intervening years.¹¹

THE MYTHS, LEGENDS, AND LORE

Coincoin and Louisiana's historic landmarks are victims of the process. According to various offspring, she was full-blooded Indian¹² or a "black lass

10. For a comparable example in backtracking a tradition that supposedly existed in two presumably unconnected branches of a family, see Louise F. Johnson, "Testing Popular Lore: Marmaduke Swearingen a.k.a. Chief Blue Jacket," *NGS Quarterly* 82 (September 1994):165–78. In Coincoin's own family, compare two published accounts of a Civil War incident in which a local "dentist" was shot by a family member while "drilling" the man. This mid-twentieth-century version is related by Father J. J. Callahan et al.'s brief *History of St. Augustine Parish; Isle Brevelle, Natchez, La.; 1803–1953; 1829–1954; 1856–1956* (Natchitoches, The Church, 1956), 20–21. The second account, as described post-war by participants, appears in Gary B. Mills, "Patriotism Frustrated: The Native Guards of Confederate Natchitoches," *Louisiana History* 18 (Fall 1987):437–51, and sets things straight. The slain man was a medical doctor, not a dentist, and he was not shot by a *patient* being *drilled* in his dentist chair. Rather, the doctor was the wartime *drillmaster* for the two parish militia companies. The slaying, which occurred in the presence of the parish priest, was self-defense.

11. See Donald R. Wright, *Oral Traditions from the Gambia*, 2 vols. (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Center for International Studies, Africa Program, 1979–80), 1:14–16, particularly; and 2:139–43, for example. Also Wright, "Requiem for the Use of Oral Tradition to Reconstruct the Precolonial History of the Lower Gambia," *History in Africa* 18 (1991):399–408. Wright begins the latter with "The simple truth is that much oral tradition is mutually contradictory, biased, garbled, nonsensical, and essentially codswallop," quoting A. J. H. Latham, review of Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, in *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 19 (1986):153.

12. Hugh LaCour, Shreveport, Louisiana, to author, letter, 3 January 1973; interview with Lee Etta Vaccarini Coutii, 27 October 1973, notes in possession of the author.

from the Congo"¹³—or she was from New Guinea¹⁴ or Ghana.¹⁵ Or, perhaps she was born at Natchitoches of a father from Hispaniola, not Africa.¹⁶ As for her age, she was a wealthy planter by 1750¹⁷—or maybe 1743.¹⁸ In any event, about then she and "her half-caste offspring [were] carted off out of town" by Widow St. Denis, whose late husband was the suspected father of Coincoin's children.¹⁹ Or had St. Denis himself fathered Coincoin in 1742?²⁰

As for the storied plantation said to be the source of her wealth, not only do accounts of so-called "tradition" vary among branches of the family but they reveal the tale's evolution under the management of one local colorist. The plantation rose to prominence during the Great Depression of the 1930s, when

13. "Melrose: Home of Famous Louisiana Authors," *Louisiana REA News*, July 1953, page 11. Also D. Garber, "History of Melrose Plantation Like Turning Pages of Novel," *Dallas Morning News*, 21 October 1951, page 8.

14. Sister Frances Jerome Woods, *Marginality and Identity: A Colored Creole Family through Ten Generations* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1972), 32. The informant whom Woods "quotes" but does not name was interviewed by the present author a few months after Woods's book was published; she repeated much the same but added: "Sister Woods got it wrong when she said Grandpère's mother was African. She was from New Guinea. That's near Australia and they aren't Africans, they're Indians," Coutii to Mills, 11 March 1973. Coutii's description of New Guinea natives as "Indians," rather than aborigines, explains the obvious contradiction in this passage from Woods, which has Coutii saying "Grandpa's mother was an African woman from New Guinea. . . . [In the] beginning we were mixed with French and Indian The blood got mixed [with African], later"; Woods, *Marginality and Identity*, 32–33. Extrapolating from this contradiction, without knowledge of Coutii's elaboration, the authors of "Archaeology of Local Myths" interpreted Woods' "New Guinea" as a slip-of-the-tongue reference to Guinea—hence the wording of the quote first given in this paper; MacDonald to Mills, e-mail, 27 August 2008.

15. Coutii to Mills, 14 March 1975, relating a version of the family's "creation story" asserted to her that day by a cousin.

16. Terrell Delphine, "Creole Story," a manuscript "approved by the Cane River Colony at a public meeting held May 8, 1995," as abstracted in John O. Sarpy, *A Slave, a Frenchman, and The Blood of a Saint* (Shreveport: Sarpy Publishing, 2001), 82–83.

17. François Mignon, "Sale of Plantation Biggest in History," *Alexandria, Louisiana, Town Talk*, 21 April 1970. "Preservation Group Given Deed to Melrose Plantation," *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), 23 January 1972, sect. 3, page 7. Pesky Hill, "Melrose Plantation Donated to Group in Natchitoches," undated newspaper clipping (likely the *Shreveport Times*) sent to the writer by the late Arthur C. Watson, attorney for the Association for the Preservation of Historic Natchitoches.

18. François Mignon, "Cane River Memo: Melrose Highlights," *Natchitoches Times*, 19 December 1971.

19. "Melrose: Home of Famous Louisiana Authors," p. 11.

20. The 2005 managing editor of *Landscape Online.com*, which bills itself as the "Premier Portal to Landscape Development Industry," propagates this passage attributed to local tradition: "The community in which Melrose is found, called Isle Brevelle, was founded in 1714 by Louis Juchereau de St. Denis, a French Canadian. . . . One of his children, born in the colonies in 1742, was Marie Therese Coincoin, a slave." See Leslie McGuire, "Melrose Plantation: Home and Studio of Painter Clementine Hunter [p] An Ongoing Restoration" (<http://www.landscapeonline.com/research/article.php?id=4919>). St. Denis did not found Isle Brevelle, he founded the military post of Natchitoches in 1714. During his tenure Isle Brevelle was uninhabited.

its owner offered cabins to writers and a “curious society” to write about. A 1938 reporter, who billed the site as a “Relic of World’s Strangest Empire,” asserted it was built 150 years before by “Louis Metoyer, former native of Santo Domingo,” who founded it as a cotton plantation.²¹ Echoed in 1941, the story remained common fare throughout the 1940s.²² By 1950, however, Melrose took on a new identity with the help of a visiting writer, François Mignon. An adventurer of various occupations, Mignon had invented his own identity before Melrose’s chatelaine invited him to be the community’s “historian.”²³

Mignon’s “local color” columns in the *Natchitoches Times*, his other writings, and his reported interviews in other Louisiana papers document the tale’s evolution. Earlier accounts of Melrose made no reference to Marie Thérèse or to its founding by a woman or an African of either gender. Under Mignon, Coincoin took center stage. From the parish priest, he learned of a genealogy compiled by a nineteenth-century pastor. The priest’s interviews with surviving grandchildren of “Marie Thérèse” placed her at the head of the family tree.²⁴ Based on that, Mignon gave her credit for Melrose and enhanced her story, never using her African name. Like the priest before him, he used only her French baptismal name and endowed her with attributes admired by twentieth-century Americans of European descent.

A reporter who interviewed Mignon at Melrose in 1950 described “Marie Therese” as a “girl captured in the Congo”—a new origin which disagrees with at least one “family oral tradition” quoted earlier in this paper. After she was freed and, “for some strange reason,” received land from St. Denis’s widow, she immediately began clearing it and sold timber to the West Indies. Describing some older plantation buildings, the reporter implied she came to Louisiana as an *older* child, old enough to recall vividly the details of African architecture: “Amazing[ly] she was able to construct from memory houses which retained the appearance of Congo dwellings.” Another assertion in this account supports a

21. “Melrose Manor on Cane River Stands as Relic of World’s Strangest Empire.” Cotton did not become a cash crop in Louisiana until several years after Eli Whitney’s 1794 invention of the cotton gin.

22. Herman de B. Seebold, *Old Louisiana Plantation Homes and Family Trees* (Baton Rouge: Pelican, c1941), 361–63. Two writers of works on historical sites in that era, to their credit, described Melrose’s charm without perpetuating the unsubstantiated lore. See “Melrose on Cane River, 1833,” in J. Frazer Smith, *White Pillars* (New York: Dover, 1941), and Harnett T. Kane, *Plantation Parade: The Grand Manner in Louisiana* (New York: Wm. Morrow, 1945), chapter 16, “Châtelaine in Shirtwaists.”

23. Some records of Mignon’s prior life as Frank VerNooy Mineah of Cortland, New York, are detailed in Oliver Ford, “Francois Mignon: The Man Who Would be French,” *Southern Studies*, n.s., 2 (Spring 1991): 51–59; however, fundamental questions about his parentage remain unresolved.

24. Father A. Dupré, manuscript genealogical tables for each family in his parish, undated but compiled between 1878 and 1889, described in a subsequent pamphlet by Rev. Francis J. Smith, *Isle Brevelle: St. Augustine Church* (Natchez, La.: The Church, 1982), 5.

time frame for Coincoin's birth: "After France had ceded Louisiana to Spain in 1763 and it was difficult for a Frenchman to obtain a plantation, Thomas [sic] Metoyer came from Paris to . . . Natchitoches and subsequently met and married Marie Therese, now the mistress of an enormous plantation."²⁵

By 1953 Mignon had accepted architectural evidence that Melrose's "Big House" (as opposed to the older buildings) was not Coincoin's work. In an interview reported that year he echoed the tale of a "black slave girl from the Congo," adding that she had "mothered an alien racial breed" and that "*her black-eyed children of a French sire built Melrose.*"²⁶ The article then asserted that her son Augustin founded the plantation before he "turned his affairs over to his son Louis, [an] ambitious son of a half-Indian maid," who constructed the manor house in 1833. Even so, Mignon clung to tales of her grand estate. According to the reporter, "Before she died, this primitive child of the Congo owned 50 slaves."²⁷

Under his own byline in 1958, Mignon expanded his tale but still presented Coincoin as a wealthy adult in the mid-1700s.

[After] the French Crown bestowed a huge grant of land on her . . . Marie Therese's timber trade prospered . . . In the earlier days people in Natchitoches had been primarily concerned with military matters and the export of hides. But now that Marie Therese had demonstrated the land itself [held wealth], if properly managed, . . . Many a resident of the post of Natchitoches petitioned and received large grants of land . . . by 1763.²⁸

Mignon later backdated the lady's accomplishments even further, asserting in 1971, "The earliest record to a grant to Marie Therese is dated 1743," and "We do know that Marie Therese had been brought into Louisiana on a trans-Atlantic

25. Garber, "History of Melrose Plantation Like Turning Pages of Novel." Metoyer, whose full name was Claude Thomas Pierre Metoyer, always called himself *Pierre*. His descendants with Coincoin, to avoid offending Metoyer's legitimate offspring, claimed descent from *Thomas*—giving birth to the "legend" that two Metoyer brothers settled on Cane River, one who married Coincoin and the other who took a white wife.

26. "Melrose: Home of Famous Louisiana Authors," p. 11. Emphasis added.

27. To correct the many misstatements here, Augustin founded the adjacent plantation. Louis was his brother, not his son. Augustin's wife was not half-Indian, although Louis's wife was. Louis died in March 1832, so he could not have built Melrose in 1833. Another local tradition (undocumented) holds that Melrose was begun by Louis before his death and finished in 1833 by his son and heir, Jean Baptiste Louis Metoyer who was, indeed "the son of a half-Indian maid." Comparing the newspaper account to documentary evidence, the second of the three previously cited principles is illustrated: a core of truth wrapped in layers of confusion and embroidery.

28. Francois Mignon, "The Story of Melrose," in *Natchitoches: Oldest Settlement in the Louisiana Purchase, Founded 1714* (Natchitoches: Association of Natchitoches Women for the Preservation of Historic Natchitoches, 1958), 48–52.

schooner supplying the Fort . . . We know further that she was purchased by St. Denis.”²⁹ Mignon did not state *how* he knew such facts, however.

Most accounts written between 1950 and 1972 echoed Mignon’s version, with twists. Cedric Dover wrote in his 1958 book *American Negro Art*: “The famous Melrose . . . began as a cabin erected about 1750 by Marie Therese, a free slave who married Thomas Metoyer from Paris. Madame Metoyer owned fifty-eight slaves.”³⁰ When the plantation grounds were deeded to the local preservation society and named to the National Register in 1970–72, two writers for the same newspaper reported different versions. One attributed the plantation to “Coin-Coin,” claiming she acquired the property in 1744.³¹ The other asserted: “Melrose was first begun by a *Frenchman*, Augustin Metoyer, in the late 1700’s. He built ‘Yucca’ . . . and his son, a mulatto, built the house known as Melrose.”³² A sociologist and nun who spent the 1960s on the Isle of Canes, preparing her dissertation on the culture, quoted another variation in 1972: “Grandpa’s mother . . . and some co-workers cleared this plantation . . . The people who really helped her work, my grandmother say, were her coworkers [and not her slaves]. She bought their freedom. And then after that this man came from Lyon, France . . . Pierre . . . and he married her.”³³ The Frenchman here was Pierre from Lyon—not *Augustin* or *Thomas* from *Paris*, or *Louis* from *Santo Domingo*.

Since the mid-seventies, well-documented accounts of Coincoin’s life have appeared in scholarly journals and university-press publications. Yet the myths continue. Government agencies, scholarly forums, and tourist interests perpetuate the lore surrounding Coincoin’s origins and those of Melrose—and invent new myths. A current National Park Service database of women’s history sites identifies the mistress of Yucca (aka Melrose) Plantation, which offers “one of the oldest buildings of African design built by blacks, for the use of blacks,” as “Marie Therese Coin-Coin, a slave in the household of Juchereau St. Denis.”³⁴

29. Francois Mignon, “Cane River Memo: Melrose Highlights,” *Natchitoches Times*, 19 December 1971.

30. Cedric Dover, *American Negro Art* (New York: New York Graphic Society, 1960), unnumbered page, text at plate 2. Emphasis added. Marie Thérèse owned sixteen slaves, not fifty-eight, when she distributed them in 1816. Fifty-eight was the number owned collectively by her children at the time of the 1810 census. By the 1830 enumeration, they owned 287 and in 1850, 436; see Mills, *Forgotten People*, 108–11.

31. “Cluster of Treasures Along Cane River,” *Times-Picayune*, 2 July 1972, sect. 3, page 10.

32. “Auction Slated at Plantation,” *Times-Picayune*, 4 June 1970, sect. 6, page 8. Two weeks later a writer for the *Clarion Herald*, the official newspaper of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, added a new twist: “The French *father* of Augustine Metoyer built Yucca house in the late 1700’s and then built African house to remind his wife of her home land,” 18 June 1970, sect. 2, page 1. Emphasis added.

33. Woods, *Marginality and Identity*, 32–33.

34. Women’s Progress Commemorative Commission, “Women’s History Sites Database,” p. 55 (<http://www.nps.gov/archive/wori/whsDBase.pdf>).

The current National Park Service’s Web site for the misnamed “Maison de Marie Thérèse” guesses her birth year as “around 1740,”³⁵ while the 2006 *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America* reports her birth in 1724.³⁶ Moreover, a professor of architecture addressing students at a major university inspired the audience with a cultural paradigm crediting Coincoin with thirteen thousand acres and enrollment of her son Louis (the Melrose founder who could neither read nor write) in “the Beaux Arts School in Paris.”³⁷

EVALUATING THE TRADITION

Given the variations in the family’s creation story, can “family oral tradition” be considered reliable? If so, *which* tradition? If not, why? In any event, how can Coincoin’s birth place and date be determined? How can researchers identify her birth family, since no known account identifies her father, mother, or siblings—except the allegation that the French commandant himself fathered her (a woman whom all known records describe as *full black*)?

The five research criteria of the Genealogical Proof Standard provide the starting point for evaluating the assertions. The GPS requires researchers to do the following:

- conduct a reasonably exhaustive search for all information possibly pertinent to the identity, relationship, event, or situation in question;
- include in any compilation a complete, accurate citation to the source(s) of each information item used;
- analyze and correlate the collected information to assess its quality as evidence;
- resolve conflicts caused by contradictory evidence or evidence contradicting a proposed (hypothetical) solution;
- write a soundly reasoned, coherent conclusion.³⁸

The GPS and its seventy-two underlying standards consider oral tradition credible only when thorough skilled research supports the account or its

35. National Park Service, “Maison de Marie Thérèse,” *Cane River National Heritage Area* (<http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/travel/caneriver/mai.htm>).

36. Cecilia A. Moore, “African American Catholic Women,” in Rosemary Skinner Keller, Rosemary Radford Ruether, et al., *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America*, 3 vols. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 1:163. Emphasis added.

37. Visiting professor Carla Jackson addressing students at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign’s School of Architecture; presentation summarized at http://www.arch.uiuc.edu/events/news/2004/12_06_04/.

38. Board for Certification of Genealogists, BCG *Genealogical Standards Manual*, 1. The GPS is further codified in seventy-two targeted standards that address the quality of (a) data collection; (b) documentation; (c) evidence analysis; and (d) reports of findings.

compatibility with related evidence and with the temper of the place, time, and culture.³⁹

THE RESEARCH PLAN

“Exhaustive research,” by genealogical standards, does not mean searching indexes of local sources for the person of interest. Sound research is appropriately grounded in a literature search, but it is focused upon original sources created by individuals with primary information (first-hand knowledge).⁴⁰ It requires “appropriately broadening the search beyond the person, family, event, or record of most-direct impact on the project . . . [extending] to discovery of information that does or might illuminate (or conflict with) the other items of collected data.”⁴¹ Moreover, it includes pertinent context—e.g., regarding demography, geopolitics, history, law, religion, social structures, and topography—and it requires thorough familiarity with the language, handwriting, and records of the place and time.⁴²

Applying these principles to the current issue generated the following research plan and results:

- **Geographic areas:** In addition to the Natchitoches post where Coincoin spent her known life, research encompassed all surviving record groups for all other posts in the colonies (later states) of Louisiana, Texas, and the Floridas. Six locales held particularly valuable evidence: *Natchitoches* and *Opelousas* (where her owner moved, taking one of her daughters); *New Orleans* (colonial capital and market center); *Baton Rouge* (state capital with statewide holdings in two major archives); *Pensacola* (where her owner’s daughter moved, taking Coincoin’s sister), and *Nacogdoches* (where her first-born son was taken by the Spaniard who bought him as a child).
- **Time frame:** Research spanned roughly 1700–1900. Critical information on her surfaced in documents as late as 1878, over six decades after her death.
- **Types of records:** Church and local civil records were mainstays. Catholic church archives offered sacramental records for baptisms, marriages, burials, and some confirmations, dispensations, and correspondence. At the time the initial research was conducted, few such records were published, indexed, or microfilmed. Local civil records covered the usual deeds, marriage contracts (but not marriages per se in that society), wills, estate proceedings, and civil and criminal suits. Local research included university and private archives where civil and religious records had strayed.

39. As an example of an African-American oral history about family origins that meets the Genealogical Proof Standard, with some typical deviations being corrected by documentary evidence, see Douglas S. Shipley, “Teaming Oral History with Documentary Research: The Enslaved Austins of Missouri’s ‘Little Dixie,’” *NGS Quarterly* 90 (June 2002):111–35.

40. *BCG Genealogical Standards Manual*, 8–9, Genealogical Standards 21 and 22.

41. *Ibid.*, Standard 19.

42. *Ibid.*, Standard 24.

- **Administrative levels:** Research went beyond local records to those of higher governmental levels. This included use of New Orleans colonial notarial records, contemporary papers sent by Louisiana governors to France (at the Archives Nationales, Paris, and the Archives d'Outre Mer, Aix-en-Provence) and Spain (at the Archivo General de Indias [General Archives of the Indies] in Seville), and records dispatched to or created in Washington, D.C., after the 1803 Louisiana Purchase. U.S. General Land Office land patent files created as late as 1919 carried oral family accounts tracing land claimants (with considerable confusion) back to Coincoin.⁴³
- **Individuals studied:** Research covered Coincoin and (after each was identified) all her children and offspring through circa 1900, siblings and parents, neighbors and associates, and all owners and their in-laws. To sort out Coincoin's children, siblings, and parents from other same-name slaves, the project included genealogical reconstructions of all fellow slaves in the two households Coincoin served and the households that bought her children and siblings.

THE EVIDENCE

Prior accounts had agreed on one fundamental point: Coincoin had belonged to Commandant Louis Juchereau de St. Denis's household. He died in 1744. When his succession was opened in 1756, and his widow's in 1758, eight lists attempted to group the slaves (forty in 1756) into lots for distribution. Complying with Louisiana's *Code Noir* (Black Code), the slaves were also listed in family units so husbands and wives would not be separated from each other or from their children under the age of fourteen. Because the owner family was both French and Spanish, slave names appear in both languages, depending upon who created the list. For some slaves, African names appear as well.⁴⁴

Parentage and Race

Taken together, the eight lists identify Coincoin as the daughter of St. Denis's full-black slave couple François and Marie Françoise aka Francisque⁴⁵

43. For the 1919 records, which will not be further discussed in this paper, see Serial Patent file 437,269, Marie Therese Metoyer; Records of the General Land Office, Record Group 49; National Archives (NA), Washington, D.C.

44. Few papers of the two St. Denis successions remain in the main body of Natchitoches notarial records (Archive Conveyance Records). Most were removed before the series was bound and were kept in the Clerk of Court's private office. The Genealogical Society of Utah microfilmed them as "Miscellaneous Series, Archive Conveyance Records, 1726–1836"; microfilm 279,104, Family History Library, Salt Lake City. The State Archives version of the same film has different dates: "Miscellaneous Archive Records, 1733–1820" Louisiana State Archives microfilm FT. 565.

45. The inventories carry three male slaves named François—two adults deemed *pieces d'inde* (i.e., full, standard value) and a minor. The male who married Marie Françoise was ostensibly the oldest, given the large number of children attributed to him. A second adult male, married to Anne Marie, had only one child, an infant who bore the same name as one of Coincoin's sisters, Louise. The third François was the son of François and Marie Françoise who was called *Choera*.

—with some variances of Coincoin’s name and the sequence in which she was listed. Two lists from late 1756 in table 1 make the point:

FAMILLE DE MARIE FRANÇOISE ^a	FAMILLE DE FRANÇOIS ^b
François	François
Marie Françoise	Francisque
Marie Gertrude & François her son	Dgimby & her child
François or Choera	Choera
Jean Baptiste	
Thérèse	Coincoin
Marie Louise	Marie Louise
	Jean Bapt ^c
Margueritte	Margueritte
Bonaventure	
Hyacinte	Jazinte
Marie Jeanne	Marie Jeanne
	Bonaventure

a. Doc. 212, September 1756, “Miscellaneous Series.”
 b. Doc. 178, late 1756–57, “Miscellaneous Series.” The documents in this series are not numbered chronologically.

Although neither record specifies that *Thérèse* of the first list is *Coincoin* of the other, a comparison of both lists—and the other six—demonstrates that they represent the same nine children.⁴⁶

46. For the other slave lists, first see Doc. 176 and its attachments in “Miscellaneous Series.” The main document, no. 176 dated 10 December, is a partition that assigns François, Marie Françoise, and all their children except Dgimby and Marie Louise, to the widow. Attached to it are two undated lists that attempt to divide the slaves into variously composed lots that are still grouped by family. Also see Doc. 215, 23 August 1757 (2 lists) and another unnumbered, undated list of 1758 that is distinguishable by its rendering of names in Spanish except for the names of Marie Thérèse, whose African name is written *Quenquen*, and Gertrude, whose African name is written as *Chimba* rather than *Dgimby*. Dgimby, as an adult with a child, could legally be separated from her parents, who were requested by the widow. Two of the lists did place Dgimby out of birth sequence but still grouped her with her parents, immediately before them. Marie Louise, on two lists, was added to the end of other family units but priced separately to indicate that she did not belong in them. Marie Louise was too young to be legally separated from her parents. However, since all the heirs (even the married ones) lived in an enclave at a small post this meant there was no significant separation by assigning her to a married daughter rather than the widow.

As for Coincoin's parents, church registers reveal they were legally married:

FRANÇOIS

MARIE FRANÇOISE

8 January 1736, marriage of Francois, nègre, and Marie Françoise, négresse, both slaves of Mr. de St. Denys, commandant, in presence of Mr. de la Chaise and other witnesses.⁴⁷

Unlike some slave records of this time and place, this one states no tribal origin for François or Marie Françoise. However, the description of both as nègres in this society indicates they were of full African ancestry, unmixed with French, Spanish, or Native American. A second entry in this register shows François was native to neither the French nor Spanish colony: two weeks before his wedding, he was baptized as a "nègre adulte."⁴⁸

This entry does not show how long François had resided in the colony. Catholic policy called for prompt religious instruction for new arrivals and later records show most slaves were baptized soon after their arrival. In this case, however, no church records exist for the first thirteen years of post settlement (1716–1728). A handful of entries for May–July 1729 by a priest visiting from the nearby Spanish-Texas capital Los Adayes and random entries for 1731–35 by French and Spanish priests demonstrate religious neglect of the post and St. Denis's efforts to control the church.⁴⁹ Consequently, St. Denis did not force new arrivals to immediately convert. The slave Cesar, for example, converted with François in December 1735 and married Marianne on the same day in January 1736 that François married Marie Françoise. However, Cesar and Marianne had been together since at least 1728 when their first child was born and they were at the post as early as July 1729, when that child was baptized.⁵⁰

47. Register 1, 11th entry, Parish of St. François, now Immaculate Conception, Natchitoches. These records are closed to the public but translated abstracts are available to researchers in Elizabeth Shown Mills, *Natchitoches, 1729–1803: Abstracts of the Catholic Church Registers of the French and Spanish Post of St. Jean Baptiste des Natchitoches in Louisiana* (New Orleans: Polyanthos, 1977). Requests to the parish for records will typically generate a certificate compiled from the information in this book rather than from the fragile originals. Because of the lack of pagination and the erratic numbering of the original acts, further citations to the colonial church registers will be to the published work.

48. *Ibid.*, entry 33.

49. This issue is developed in Elizabeth Shown Mills, "Quintanilla's Crusade, 1775–1783: 'Moral Reform' and Its Consequences on the Natchitoches Frontier," *Louisiana History* 42 (Summer 2001): 277–302, particularly 279–80.

50. Mills, *Natchitoches, 1729–1803*, entry 521. The earliest sacramental entries, those for 1729, are bound now into what is Register 2. None of the folios in these registers was bound in proper chronological order.

Birth Pattern of Coincoin's Siblings

Baptismal registers account for all children inventoried for François and Marie Françoise—as well as two additional children who did not survive to 1756. Priests serving the fledging post had individual recording styles, as evidenced below. Some named parents and some did not:

Marie Gertrude	baptized 18 November 1736, legitimate daughter of François, nègre, and Marie Françoise, négresse; no owner named but two St. Denis children as godparents ⁵¹ implied it was St. Denis.
François	baptized 18 December 1738, <i>négrillon</i> (male infant or small child) belonging to Mr. de St. Denis. ⁵²
Jean Baptiste	baptized 13 November 1740, <i>négrillon</i> belonging to Mr. de St. Denis. ⁵³
—?—	[<i>the 1742 birth position into which Marie Thérèse should fall</i>]
Barnabé	born 9 September 1744, baptized 11 September 1744, son of Marie François [sic] and François, nègre slaves of Madame Emmanuel Sanchez de Navarre, widow of deceased Mr. Jucherot de St. Denis. ⁵⁴
Marie Jeanne	born about 1746. ⁵⁵
Marie Louise	born about 1747.
Louise Marguerite	baptized 6 April 1749, <i>négritte</i> (female infant or small child) of Mdme. de St. Denis. ⁵⁶

51. Mills, *Natchitoches, 1729–1803*, entry 48.

52. *Ibid.*, entry 111.

53. *Ibid.*, entry 188.

54. *Ibid.*, entry 253.

55. Definitive baptismal dates cannot be identified for Marie Jeanne and her next-born sibling, Marie Louise. The St. Denis inventories record four slave children of similar names: “Marie Jeanne” and “Marie Louise” as children of François and Marie Françoise, “Jeanne” as a child of Pierre dit Pierot and Marianitte dite Manon, and, finally, “Louise” definitively baptized in 1754 as the child of another adult François and Anne Marie (“Louise Reine,” entry 576). The first three, Marie Jeanne, Marie Louise, and Jeanne, were baptised in the years 1746 and 1747, but in each baptism, the child is called a *négritte* and the mother was identified only as a *négresse* of Mme. St. Denis. The three baptismal candidates are “Jeanne” on 26 June 1746 (entry 269), “Marie Louise” on 16 February 1747 (entry 279), and “Jeanne Marie Louise” on 11 December 1747 (entry 287).

The age of Jeanne Marie Louise corresponds to the age of “Marie Jeanne” in the 28 April 1758 distribution that included the family of François and Marie Françoise. There the St. Denis son-in-law Athanase de Mézières acknowledged receiving Gregoire, piece d’inde; Bonaventure, “aged 6 or 7”; and “Marie Jeanne,” aged “10 years and a half.” See Doc. 204, Miscellaneous Series. All subsequent records call this de Mézières slave *Jeanne* or *Jeanmeton*, not *Marie Jeanne*.

56. Mills, *Natchitoches, 1729–1803*, entry 305. In this society, naming a daughter *Louise Marguerite* did not mean her older sister *Marie Louise* had died. To the contrary, infants were usually named by and for their godparents, resulting in frequent duplication of names within a nuclear family unit. In the case of *Louise Marguerite*, her godmother was *Louise Marguerite Duplessis*, the illegitimate half-Indian daughter of the late commandant. For the evidence identifying *Louise Marguerite*, who is frequently but erroneously said to be a child of St. Denis’s marriage, see Gary B. Mills and Elizabeth Shown Mills, “*Louise Marguerite: St. Denis’s Other Daughter*,” *Southern Studies* 16 (Fall 1977): 21–28.

Bonaventure	baptized 8 April 1751, négriillon born of a négresse belonging to Mde. de St. Denis. ⁵⁷
Anne Hyacinthe	baptized 13 September 1753, négritte born of a négresse named Marie Françoise belonging to Madame de St. Denis. ⁵⁸
—?—	[No child is accounted for in this 4.5-year gap. However, an overlong gap between penultimate and last child was common in that place and time. ⁵⁹]
Françoise	baptized 21 April 1758, child of François and Marie Françoise, slaves of Mad. de St. Denis. ⁶⁰

Coincoin's Birth Date

No baptismal entry would have been created for a child named Coincoin, because Catholic baptismal names must be saints' names. No baptismal record exists for a child *Marie Thérèse* (or *Marie* or *Thérèse*) explicitly named as the child of a François or a Marie Françoise. However, two baptisms appear for Marie Thérèses, slaves of St. Denis:

Marie Thérèse	baptized 11 September 1740, a Cannecy Indian, aged 7 or 8 years. ⁶¹ Godparents were Spaniards from Los Adayes—the post that supplied Natchitoches with slaves from the western tribes.
Marie Thérèse	baptized 24 August 1742, négritte belonging to Mr. de St. Denys. ⁶² No age or birth date is stated. The godparents in this case were the St. Denis son-in-law Jacques de la Chaise and the four-year-old Marie [des Neiges] de St. Denis, the later wife of Manuel de Soto and a key figure in Coincoin's life.

57. Mills, *Natchitoches, 1729–1803*, entry 523.

58. *Ibid.*, entry 565.

59. For child spacing and other reproductive patterns at Natchitoches, see Elizabeth Shown Mills, "Family and Social Patterns of the Colonial Louisiana Frontier: A Quantitative Analysis, 1714–1803" (senior thesis, University of Alabama, 1981), chapter 3; copy in the Mills Collection, Cammie G. Henry Research Center, Northwestern State University, Natchitoches. Excerpts from this study are published as Mills, "Social and Family Patterns on the Colonial Louisiana Frontier," *Sociological Spectrum* 2 (1982): 233–48.

60. Mills, *Natchitoches, 1729–1803*, entry 677. This child is identified as a son in the baptismal act recorded amid a plague that claimed the lives of his father, mother, and mistress. On a tentative allotment list and the final distribution list, both dated 25 April 1758, the child is called "*la négritte dont a acouché Marie Françoise de 8 jours*" and "*la petite orpheline négritte de huit jours*," [a female orphan of 8 days, born to Marie Françoise]; Doc. 205, "Miscellaneous Series." On 4 May the child was buried without a name but called "infant of Françoise." For the four burials, see Mills, *Natchitoches, 1729–1803*, entries 817 (Mme. de St. Denis), 820 (François and Françoise), and 824 ("infant of Françoise").

61. Mills, *Natchitoches, 1729–1803*, entry 187.

62. *Ibid.*, entry 225.

No burial record exists for either child. The St. Denis estate in 1756–58 identifies only one Marie Thérèse, with no race assigned. As noted above, however, it placed her in the middle of a family consisting of members otherwise identified as nègre, négresse, négillon, and négritte. By implication, that daughter Thérèse dite Coincoin was also a négritte.

The baptismal record for the 1742 négritte stating neither age nor birth date provides negative evidence for her age. Poste St. Jean Baptiste des Natchitoches settlement was in its infancy. Scarcely a decade earlier, remnants of the Natchez tribe had besieged it, burning a captive Frenchwoman on a stake outside the fort. For safety, the settlers lived on lots surrounding the stockade and the church. Thus, baptisms could be performed promptly—typically within a day or two—when priests visited.⁶³ The steady stream of baptisms in 1742, all by the same priest, signals his presence. It is thus safe to place the birth of this Marie Thérèse, négritte, at 22 or 23 August 1742, fitting her seamlessly into the birth pattern of Marie Françoise’s children.

Other documentation for Coincoin’s birth date is meager and contradictory. Specifically, three documents assign her an age. Each was created in her thirties or forties. Two of the ages are “rounded off” to the nearest full or half-decade—typical for slaves in both Creole and Anglo-American societies throughout the 1700s and 1800s.

- **4 January 1779 mortgage statement:** When a parish priest opposed Coincoin’s cohabitation with Pierre and demanded she return to the house of her mistress (Coincoin’s godmother), Pierre sought to purchase Coincoin so she could remain with him. The parish priest pursued his charges, pointing to the *Code Noir* provision that any master fathering a child with his slave should have the slave taken and sold at New Orleans for the benefit of the hospital. To forestall Coincoin’s seizure, Pierre freed her; but one obstacle existed: her former mistress, heavily indebted, had mortgaged her at New Orleans.⁶⁴

In December 1778, Pierre queried the New Orleans notary who had recorded the mortgage, requesting a statement that the debt had been cleared. Notary Jean B. Garic responded on 4 January 1779, saying “the négresse named Coin Coin *of the age of thirty-two years*, with her children, belonging to Maria de Nege St. Denis de Soto is not clear even to this day in the mortgage books in my charge.”⁶⁵ On that date, Coincoin should

63. This is demonstrated by an analysis of all contemporary baptismal records—black, white, and Indian—that state both a date of birth and a date of baptism. The pattern of prompt baptisms changed after the mid-1760s, when relations with the area tribes became more stable and families began moving out to land grants distant from the post.

64. For the charges that Father Luis de Quintanilla brought against Coincoin and her mistress, see *Rex v. De Soto*, Doc. 1227, NCA.

65. Attachment to sale, De Soto to Metoyer, Doc. 1312, NCA.

have been thirty-six, not thirty-two. However, Garic would have copied the description from the earlier mortgage.⁶⁶

- **23 February 1779 mortgage statement:** Pierre sent a second inquiry. Garic's response, on 23 February, cited the children's names and ages and updated Coincoin's age. There, he says she is "about thirty-five." If correct, that would place her birth between February 1743 and February 1744—still a few months off, but "rounded off" as customary.
- **17 August 1787 census:** A 1787 Spanish census named, theoretically, every free individual and tallied their number of slaves. Coincoin, who had moved with Pierre from town out to his plantation, is listed in his household as "a *négresse* at the home of the same, with her three [free] infants ... age 35." This estimate of her age made her not two but twelve years younger. However, comparing the ages of the post's native inhabitants in the enumeration with their baptismal records, shows Coincoin's age discrepancy is not uncommon.⁶⁷

Parental Origins

All documents about Coincoin's parents call them *nègre* or *négresse* and none specifies that either came from Africa. François's baptism as an adult suggests he was born in a non-Catholic region. No baptismal record has been found for Coincoin's mother. It is likely lost. Mme. de St. Denis was Spanish and her kinsmen had founded the nearby Spanish post of Los Adayes, whose Spanish priests came to Natchitoches to administer sacraments. The records of that Los Adayes mission are believed to have been destroyed.

Absent direct evidence stating places of origin, the most salient point is this: Coincoin's parents gave African names to at least five of their children, a cultural persistence unmatched at the post. An emotional attachment to Africa is apparent. One leading Africanist in 1973 analyzed the three African names and variants known for the family at that point (Choera, Coincoin aka CoinQuin, and Dgimby aka Jimby) and proposed Ewe origins. He reported Coincoin (phonetically KoKwe) was a name used by second-born daughters among Glidzi dialect speakers of coastal Togo's Ewe people. When he proposed this, he did not know Coincoin was the couple's second-born daughter.⁶⁸ Current Africanists,

66. Ibid. The earlier mortgage has not been located.

67. General Census of the Residents and Sieurs at the Post of Natchitoches and Its Dependencies, 17 August 1787, legajo [file number] 201, Papeles Procedentes de Cuba, Archivo General de Indias [Cuban Papers, General Archives of the (West) Indies], Seville.

68. Jan Vansina, University of Wisconsin, to Gary B. Mills, 12 May 1973; letter in possession of the present writer. Vansina's original findings, which were essentially a response to a graduate student's inquiry, have proved problematic.

however, are reconsidering the conclusion, using the additional sibling names and more than a dozen other phonetic variants uncovered since then.⁶⁹

THE EVIDENCE

Determining Coincoin's age, nationality, and parentage is essentially an identity issue—the quintessential genealogical problem. Typically, evidence surviving in disparate bits and pieces has to be assembled, yet the whole is clear and cohesive. Even so, because no document specifies “*The slave named Coincoin was born at Natchitoches in August 1742 to the African born François and his African-born wife, Marie Françoise,*” theories endure among students of Coincoin and the historical landmarks associated with her. Amid the speculation, three hypotheses persist:

1. Coincoin could be the Canneci Indian Marie Thérèse baptized in 1740.

All documents created for Coincoin in her lifetime refer to her as *négritte* or *négresse*. None calls her *sauvagesse*, the common colonial term for Native American females, or *moreno*, a generic Spanish term sometimes used for those of visibly mixed (but dark) ancestry, including some of mixed African and Indian extraction. Nor do they call her *griffe*, a common term in colonial and antebellum Louisiana for those of mixed red and black ancestry. So-called traditions that she was Indian or even from “New Guinea” have no evidentiary support and are contradicted by every relevant document. The existence of a baptismal record placing the Canneci Thérèse in the St. Denis household explains another assertion: supposedly, an attorney for the last owners of Melrose found one record that this slave associated with the plantation was Indian, not African.⁷⁰

2. Coincoin could have been born in Africa, transported as a child, and adopted into the family of François and Marie Françoise.

Those who offer this theory invoke Gwendolyn Midlo Hall's cultural study, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, and its discussion of informal adoption. Hall's observations stress that African males greatly outnumbered available African females and that, to create families, they took in children who had no parents.⁷¹

69. The present author discovered the variants during three decades of research. The Africanists who continue to study these names' etymology are Kevin C. MacDonald, archaeologist of the Institute of Archaeology, University College London; and Roger Blench, a Cambridge-based cultural anthropologist and linguist.

70. As related to Gary B. Mills and Elizabeth Shown Mills by the late Joseph Henry, son of the last owner family, Natchitoches, December 1972.

71. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 298.

Several considerations weigh against any assumption that Coincoin or the family of François and Marie Françoise might fit that pattern:

- François, a married and obviously fertile male who produced surviving children at regular intervals across twenty-two years, had no need to adopt others. Moreover, the baptismal date of the one St. Denis négritte named Marie Thérèse falls precisely into an appropriate gap amid his documented children.
- The Louisiana colony officially ceased importing slaves from Africa in 1731, eleven years before Coincoin’s birth. Between 1731 and 1758, when Coincoin was recorded at Natchitoches, only one ship delivered Africans to Louisiana—in August 1743.⁷² Any proposition that Coincoin was a child aboard that ship has to be measured against the three records of her age, which place her birth at February 1743–44 or 1753. At best, she would have been a newborn, which invokes a second plausibility test: 13 percent of the 248 slaves aboard that mid-1743 ship died during the passage.⁷³ The odds of a nursing infant surviving were small.
- If, to enhance the likelihood of her shipboard survival in 1743 and to account for her “remarkable recall” of African architecture, she is posited as an older child, consider her 1784 pregnancy—her last of fifteen.⁷⁴ Identifying Coincoin as the Marie Thérèse baptized in August 1742 brackets her fertile years appropriately between the ages of seventeen and forty-two.⁷⁵ If she arrived in 1743 at the age of eight or ten, she would have been in her mid-twenties at the 1759 birth of her first child—radically beyond the norm for both blacks and whites at the post—and fifty or so at the birth of her last, again considerably past the norm.

3. *The striking number of African characteristics associated with Coincoin imply she was born in Africa, rather than at Natchitoches.*

Historical, archaeological, and architectural evidence discredit the mid-twentieth-century myth that Coincoin created the famed “African House” and “Yucca” on Melrose Plantation drawing from homeland memories. She was not the mistress of Melrose, and no evidence places her there. One family tradition contends that in her last months and declining health, she went to live with either her son Louis at Melrose or her son Augustin on the adjacent plantation but does not suggest she redesigned buildings from her deathbed. Meanwhile, archaeologists studying the two alleged African dwellings at Melrose date their construction to the 1820s and find none of their features uniquely African.⁷⁶

72. Ibid., 85–95, 139–40, and appendix A.

73. Ibid., 396–97.

74. Mills, *Natchitoches, 1729–1803*, entry 2489, baptism of François.

75. Ibid., entry 1713, baptism of Marie Louise, first child of Coincoin.

76. MacDonald, Morgan, et al., “Archaeology of Local Myths and Heritage Tourism,” 132–39.

In contrast, excavations of an abandoned dwelling site on her sixty-eight-acre homestead turned up numerous distinctly African artifacts and construction techniques—all dating to her residency period.⁷⁷ The known facts of her life suggest logical explanations.

Cultural retention of Africanisms at Natchitoches was rare, but the most pronounced known examples are in Coincoin's family. Coincoin, François, and Marie Françoise exhibited unusual respect for African religious beliefs and naming practices. As previously noted, François did not convert until two weeks before his marriage—as required before he could legally marry. A French Catholic marriage, moreover, was the only protection slaves had against spousal separation. After François and Marie Françoise married, their masters baptized the couple's children and gave them French Catholic names—over which they had no control. The African names they gave at least five of their Creole-born children represent a highly uncommon practice in that community.

Extant church and civil records for the post reveal the African names used by other black importees were rarely carried even to the first Creole generation. The African names François and Marie Françoise gave their children were so entrenched in their identity that scribes recorded them throughout their lives.⁷⁸ Those African names appear in public records through at least the third generation, to 1820.⁷⁹ Family recall of Coincoin's African name is documented into the 1930s, in a Cane River pastor's brief account of the parish.⁸⁰

Respect for religious beliefs of African captives is also evident in the records Coincoin left. After fifteen childbirths diminished her ability to work so she could buy her remaining enslaved offspring, she gradually acquired three African adults to help with the labor: Marguerite and Louis, both Congolese, and Harry, a "Quissay" (Kissi).⁸¹ While other slaveholders along the river routinely presented newly purchased Africans for baptism, Coincoin did not force hers to convert.

77. Kevin C. MacDonald to Elizabeth Shown Mills, e-mail, 27 July 2008.

78. In contrast, at Natchitoches (which eventually encompassed all of Northwest Louisiana), only two other contemporary Africans were known by their African *dits* through the end of the 1700s, Nicolas *dit* Docla and Yves *dit* Pacalé.

79. For example, Coincoin's first-born son by her slave union appears, in his old age, under the name "Coincoin" on the 1820 U.S. census, Natchitoches parish, Louisiana, stamped p. 95; NA microfilm M33, roll 31. Coincoin's niece Marie Françoise *dite* ChuCha (*var.* ChaCha) appears on record as late as 1821 under that name; see Natchitoches Parish Conveyances, Book 8:228, Office of the Clerk of Court.

80. J. A. Baumgartner, typescript, untitled, 4 pages, beginning "St. Augustine Church, School, Convent and Rectory, as they now stand, dates back to Spring of 1917." Father Baumgartner clearly was not taking his comments from any document or published source. He spelled Coincoin's name phonetically as *Cuancan*, a version not found in any other writing.

81. Coincoin's son Augustin Metoyer bought Harry in 1810 from the slave trader Thomas Parham; see Natchitoches Parish, Miscellaneous Book 1:225. For the identity of all Coincoin's slaves in 1816, when she distributed them among her offspring, see Natchitoches Parish, Conveyance Book 3:524–38.

Louis was not baptized until two years after he arrived at the post, Marguerite waited at least twelve years, and Harry was never baptized.⁸² Clearly, when slaves in Coincoin's household *wanted* to convert, she arranged it; otherwise, she appears to have respected their spiritual beliefs. Similarly, she may have allowed them to infuse other aspects of their African heritage into their lives and work—whether pottery making or the construction of out-buildings.⁸³

CONCLUSION

For proof of identity, researchers prefer original documents in which someone with primary knowledge and sound memory makes unbiased, direct, factual statements, for example, "The slave named Coincoin was born at Natchitoches in August 1742 to the African-born François and his African-born wife, Marie Françoise." Such documents are rare, however. Asserting identity requires finding and reassembling pieces of a life, fitting them into a nuclear-family puzzle, and testing it against an extended family and a still larger community puzzle. This progressive expansion from one fragment of a person to a panorama embracing families and crossing community, national, and generational bounds is the essence of genealogical research.

In keeping with the Genealogical Proof Standard, this search has been "reasonably exhaustive" and its results carefully documented. All findings have been analyzed and correlated. The only conflicts in the evidence center upon the age attributed to Coincoin by one census and two records relating to a mortgage, variances typical of the circumstances. All other evidence—the slave inventories, her own childbearing span, and her parental child-spacing patterns—brackets her birth into a narrow period when a baptismal record exists for a slave of her name, age, racial composition, and master. The evidence of her identity and parentage is consistent and clear.

Other proposed theories that carry no supporting evidence can be dismissed. One appears in this paper's first quote, which credits an unreliable tradition. Here, one further tenet of the Genealogical Proof Standard is relevant: "Meeting the GPS does not require—or ensure—proof beyond the shadow of a doubt, but an objection that 'something else *could* have happened' is insufficient to discredit our own or another person's conclusions."⁸⁴

82. Marguerite appears in the church registers periodically as the mother of an infant being baptized and eventually at her own baptism. Louis appears only at his own baptism (a joint one with Marguerite), and none of the three ever served as godparent to another Christian child. See Mills, *Natchitoches, 1729–1803*, entry 2060 (Marguerite and Louis).

83. Augustin not only bought the Kissi Harry but in 1809 bought eight other African natives; see Archibald Phillips to Augustin Metoyer, Natchitoches Parish, Misc. Book 1:98.

84. Board for Certification of Genealogists, *BCG Genealogical Standards Manual*, 2.