

The Persistent Specter: Slave Rebellion in Territorial Louisiana

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There is no problem in the study of American Negro slavery so thorny as the problem of slave rebellion, nor any aspect of the slave experience so inadequately treated. It is a problem compounded by the hopeless confusion pervading the matter of definition: How does one determine what constituted an actual rebellion against the slave status as opposed to some form of resistance to immediate circumstances? Similarly, by what criteria does one determine the existence of an actual "conspiracy" among potential rebels, as opposed to mere *rumor* of conspiracy? Can "rebellion" be distinguished from revolt and/or resistance? No one seems to agree.

The problem of rebellion is further compounded by the apparent inability of scholars to divest themselves of bias and preconception. However objective one tries to be, it seems that he will inevitably commit himself to a position asserting either 1) that rebelliousness was inevitable and chronic in the slave system, as the urge for freedom was constant and compelling, or 2) that rebellion was markedly exceptional and even aberrant in the world of slaves and slaveholders. The reason for the apparent contradiction is, I think, readily apparent. First, "rebellion," "insurrection," "revolution" are all terms that are value-charged, terms that posit elements of ideological commitment in their very use. Whoever writes about slave rebellion thus reveals much of his own view of slavery; and possibly even of his attitude toward blacks in general, either by affirming rebellion as a necessary concomitant of oppression, or by minimizing rebellion as unnecessary, thus extremely rare (as in the case of those who see the slave system as essentially paternalistic and benign), or impossible (a position often held by those who see

the system as stifflingly oppressive).¹ Although none of the many recent studies of the "peculiar institution" has ignored the problem, there is still little or no real agreement on the extent or nature of antebellum slave rebellion; the entire matter continues still in a state of some considerable confusion.

Yet another dimension of the problem of rebellion lies in the extreme paucity of reliable sources from the rebels (or conspirators) themselves. With few exceptions, the survivors of slave uprisings were not permitted the privilege of public statement in their personal defense, much less in defense of the rising itself.² Most of what is known about any specific episode, be it actual insurrection, conspiracy to rebel, or just rumor, is known from white sources only, and the whites living among substantial numbers of slaves tended to harbor extremely complex and confused attitudes toward the threat of rebellion, about which more anon. White sources simply cannot be read at face value on the matter, not the least reason for which being that they are invariably inconsistent and frequently contradictory. With such acute problems bedeviling the study of slave rebellion then, there is little reason to wonder at the confused state of scholarship on the subject.

It is not my intention to unravel the confusion in this analysis of certain aspects of slave rebellion in Territorial Louisiana. Indeed, if I have any purpose other than to rehash some purely descriptive material, it is to offer the Louisiana experience as a case study in the difficulty of analysis of insurrection. Having taken a long look at the matter, and having given it some hard thought, I still find more questions than answers in the sources. But there are, I believe, some matters deserving consideration even in view of the problems,

¹ It is noteworthy that Eugene D. Genovese, who sees American Negro slavery as partaking of *all* of these aspects, has treated the matter of rebellion most realistically. See Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll. The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974), pp. 587-598. But even Genovese is at times inconsistent, apparently claiming that the *spirit* of rebellion was often present, but that the realities of slave conditions inhibited actual outbreaks of rebellion. For varying recent viewpoints, see Robert W. Fogel and Stanley C. Engerman, *Time on the Cross. The Economics of American Negro Slavery*, 2 vols. (Boston, 1974), I, 242-243; George P. Rawick, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography. 1. From Sundown to Sunup. The Making of the Black Community* (Westport, Conn., 1972), pp. 112-113; John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1972), pp. 125-131.

² The case of Nat Turner seems to be the exception, but there is still some doubt as to the nature and purpose of the so-called "Confession" prepared with white amanuensis. See Henry Irving Tragle, *The Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831* (New York, 1973).

not only because the revolutionary spirit among black Louisianians deserves investigation, but also because Territorial Louisiana provides special circumstances that lend themselves to a new consideration of the subject, and hopefully, additional light on some, though by no means all, of the dark corners of the problem.

There is another reason for considering the subject in the Territorial Louisiana setting. It was a period and a place chronically beset with a variety of forms of "rebellion" or "insurrection" or "revolution." From the very outset, the beleaguered Governor William C. C. Claiborne contended with the possibility of an attempted coup by either the Spanish or the French, both much in evidence.³ The West Florida Rebellion of 1810, while working to the benefit of American interests, was still assuredly a rebellion.⁴ Mexico seemed to be in a state of constant turmoil, creating tensions to the immediate west at Nacogdoches.⁵ And to the south, 1810-1811 saw actual revolutionary movements for independence in Paraguay, Cartagena, and Guatemala as well as in Mexico.⁶ The French Revolution had had disturbing repercussions in Louisiana.⁷

And there was still the memory of the great Santo Domingan insurrection of 1793, burned indelibly on the consciousness of slaveowners everywhere, all the more so in Louisiana because the white refugees from that holocaust were available in numbers to remind the nervous Louisianians of their potential powder-keg. The new slave imports arriving constantly from points unknown were

³ Claiborne's correspondence abounds with material concerning these matters. See, for example, William C. C. Claiborne to James Madison, January 17, 1804, in Dunbar Rowland, ed., *Official Letter Books of W. C. C. Claiborne, 1801-1816*, 6 vols. (Jackson, Miss., 1917), I, 339-340 (hereafter cited as *Claiborne Letterbooks*); Claiborne to Madison, February 6, 1804, in *Claiborne Letterbooks*, I, 363-364. See also Gerard J. Toups, "William Charles Cole Claiborne and the Louisiana Interests," (M.A. thesis, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1969), pp. 38-62.

⁴ On the rebellion, see Francis S. Philbrick, *The Rise of the West* (New York, 1965), pp. 231-233; Stanley Clisby Arthur, *The Story of the West Florida Rebellion* (St. Francisville, La., 1935), *passim*.

⁵ See, for example, *Natchez Chronicle*, December 6, 1810, as quoted in *New York Evening Post*, February 20, 1811, proclaiming ". . . the whole . . . of Mexico is in a state of revolution."

⁶ Richard Graham, *Independence in Latin America* (New York, 1972), pp. 71-92; Jay Kinsbruner, *The Spanish-American Independence Movement* (Hinsdale, Ill., 1973), *passim*.

⁷ Ernest R. Liljegren, "Jacobinism in Spanish Louisiana, 1792-1797," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, XXII (1939), 47-97 *passim*. For further detail on the Pointe Coupée conspiracy of 1795, see Jack D. L. Holmes, "The Abortive Slave Revolt at Pointe Coupée, Louisiana, 1795," *Louisiana History*, XI (1970), 341-362.

hardly calculated to allay the fears. Although Congress had acted to forbid further importation of slaves to Louisiana after October 1, 1804, Governor Claiborne had feared (justifiably) that there would be a rush to import slaves prior to that date and harbored no doubt that smuggling would continue to provide new bondsmen afterward, many from the volatile West Indies.⁸

Clearly, then, the specter of black insurrection was a constant reality in the minds of whites. And white fears were reflected time and again in reports of conspiracy or rumor of slave unrest. Most important of all, the year 1811 saw the threat become reality in the form of the largest slave uprising in the history of the United States, along the old River Road, northwest of New Orleans.

The threats and rumors of insurrection seemed to come in spurts. The years 1804–1805 represented one such “spurt” period. Reports that the blacks were thought to be contemplating revolt arrived in New Orleans with discouraging regularity. In October 1804, for example, Governor Claiborne received an insurrection report from the Natchitoches District: “I hasten to inform you,” wrote the district commandant, “that the tranquility of this District has received a violent shock, and the Inhabitants are now in the greatest state of alarm. . . .” An insurrection conspiracy had been uncovered in which some thirty blacks were involved. Especially noteworthy was the notion that the plot involved a purported effort to escape to Spanish Nacogdoches, and that both Spanish and In-

⁸ See Claiborne to James Madison, May 8, 1804, in *Claiborne Letterbooks*, II, 134, in which Claiborne expresses fear that prior to October 1 “thousands of African Negroes will be imported into this Province . . . ,” for the planters felt that additional slaves were necessary to the prosperity of Louisiana. Claiborne especially feared West Indian immigration: “The emigration from the West Indies to Louisiana,” he wrote to the secretary of state, “continues great; few Vessels arrive from that quarter but are crowded with passengers, and among them many Slaves.” *Ibid.* See also Claiborne to Madison, October 28, 1804, in *Claiborne Letterbooks*, II, 346–347, in which the governor wrote of the necessity of rigorous enforcement of the new restrictive legislation. For further expression of Claiborne’s fear of dangerous imports, see Claiborne to Etienne de Boré, February 8, 1804, in *Claiborne Letterbooks*, II, 360; Same to Same, April (?), 1804, in *Claiborne Letterbooks*, II, 113–114; Claiborne to Madison, July 12, 1804, in *Claiborne Letterbooks*, II, 360–361, in which Claiborne describes precautions to be taken by the commandant at Plaquemine: “This is done to prevent the bringing in of Slaves that have been concerned in the insurrection of St. Domingo. . . . The Citizens of Louisiana are greatly apprehensive of the West Indian negroes, but no effectual stop can at present be put to *their introduction*” (Claiborne’s italics).

dian conspirators were implicated.⁹ Again, in November 1804 Claiborne was forced to dispatch a military contingent to Pointe Coupée, where (as he wrote), "A spirit of Insurrection among the Negroes at Point [*sic*] Coupée has occasioned considerable alarm in that District. . . ."¹⁰

The specter of insurrection struck far closer to home in October, 1805, when a plot was uncovered in the city of New Orleans which appeared to have involved substantial numbers of slaves, upwards of thirty at least, who planned to kill all the city officials and take over the city.¹¹ The plot was aborted, but the threat had been very real, or so it appeared to the terrified whites of the city, doubly susceptible to terror by virtue of the previous threats which seemed by then to be unremitting.¹²

But until 1811 nothing in the way of actual violent insurrection ever got off the ground. For all the rumors (and they were myriad) and some apparent actual conspiracies, the frightful reality of slaves actually seizing weapons and attacking whites had not materialized. In January of 1811 it happened. "We began on Wednesday last," noted one white observer, "to have a miniature representation of the horrors of St. Domingo."¹³

The details of the 1811 insurrection are by no means altogether clear, and it is doubtful that we will ever know exactly what transpired. We do know *where* it happened, however, and are able to sketch in enough detail to form a recognizable picture.¹⁴ The upris-

⁹ Edward D. Turner to William C. C. Claiborne, October 16, 1804, in *Claiborne Letterbooks*, II, 386–387.

¹⁰ William C. C. Claiborne to Colonel (?) Butler, November 8, 1804, in *Claiborne Letterbooks*, III, 5.

¹¹ New Orleans Municipal Council Records (ms.), October 8, 1805, Louisiana State Archives. The report referred to "Horrible complot tramé contre les habitants de ce pays. . . ." The Council voted to appropriate \$2,000 to buy the freedom of a mulatto slave, Celestin, who had revealed the plot to his master. See also Joe Gray Taylor, *Negro Slavery in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: 1963), p. 212 (hereafter cited as Taylor, *Slavery*).

¹² On the white fear of slave revolt in New Orleans, see John S. Kendall, "Shadow Over the City," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, XXII (1939), 144 (hereafter cited as Kendall, "Shadow").

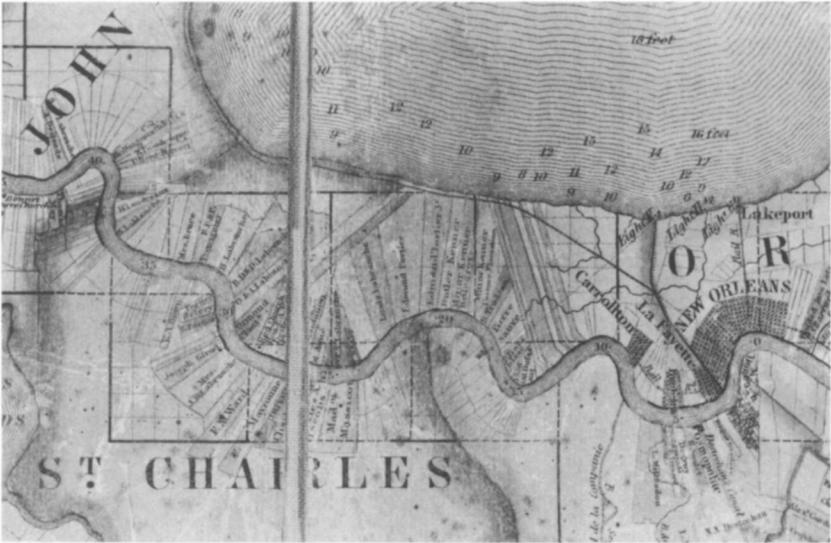
¹³ Letter from "A Gentleman at New-Orleans" to "A Member of Congress," January 11, 1811, reprinted in *New York Evening Post*, February 19, 1811.

¹⁴ The best secondary accounts of the insurrection are in Taylor, *Slavery*, pp. 212–213, and Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York, 1963), pp. 249–251 (hereafter cited as Aptheker, *Revolts*).

ing began late in the evening of January 8, 1811, on the plantation of Colonel Manuel Andry (or Andre; the sources use alternate spellings), located in German Coast County, some thirty-six miles northwest of New Orleans near present-day Norco. According to all contemporary accounts the leader of the revolt was a mulatto slave, probably of Santo Domingan origins, the property of the Widow Jean-Baptiste Deslonde. At the time of the insurrection he was in the temporary employ of Colonel Andry. His name, Charles, is the only other thing known about him, except that he had made prior arrangements with others among the Andry slaves to initiate the insurrection.¹⁵ The first move was directed toward Andry himself and his son; the insurgents killed the young man, then wounded the father and made their escape from the plantation.¹⁶ Within a short time after this opening assault, the initial group made its prearranged rendezvous with the support group, which included slaves from adjoining plantations as well as a number of "maroons," runaway slaves who had been living in the woods as fugitives. From the rendezvous point the insurgents moved southeast on the River Road toward New Orleans, attacking other plantations en route, burning several and buttressing their force with arms and additional men. By the following afternoon (January 9, 1811) they had arrived at the Jacques Fortier Plantation, some "five leagues" distant according to one source, where they

¹⁵ The sources do not agree on Charles Deslonde's status. The most reliable single source, the trial record of the blacks later accused of insurrection, indicates that he was a mulatto slave. See Louisiana, St. Charles Parish, Original Acts, Book 41, 1811, #1 [bis], p. 7 (hereafter cited as Original Acts). The trial record is in two parts. The first is a record of the actual interrogations of individual blacks; the second is the summary of trial proceedings written by the presiding judge, Pierre Bauchet St.-Martin. This second portion of the record appears, in translation by the Editor, in the *Notes and Documents* section of this number of the journal. The entire record is available at the St. Charles Parish Courthouse, Hahnville, La., and a microfilmed copy of the record is on deposit in the archives of the University of Southwestern Louisiana. See also the *New York Evening Post*, February 20, 1811, which states that the insurrectionaries were "headed by a free mulatto from St. Domingo who was employed by Col. Andre. . . ." But cf. the *Louisiana Gazette* (January 11, 1811), which refers to Deslonde as "a yellow fellow, the property of Col. Andre. . . ."

¹⁶ Manuel Andry to William C. C. Claiborne, January 11, 1811, in Clarence Edwin Carter, ed., *The Territorial Papers of the United States*, vol. IX, *The Territory of Orleans, 1803-1812* (Washington, D. C., 1940), 915-916; *La Courrier de la Louisiane*, January 14, 1811; Claiborne to (Secretary of State) Robert Smith, January 9, 1811, in *Claiborne Letterbooks*, V, 95-96; *Louisiana Gazette*, January 10, 1811.



Map of the area in which occurred the 1811 slave uprising. (Courtesy of the Howard-Tilton Memorial Library.)

“commenced killing poultry, cooking, eating, drinking and rioting.”¹⁷

Whether the drinking and rioting suggested in this account rendered the insurrectionaries less formidable is a moot point. But it is clear that the majority of the whites for miles around, up and down the German Coast, were terrified. From the very onset of the rebellion they began to evacuate the area.¹⁸ Indeed, the first word of the outbreak arrived in New Orleans by way of the panic flight to the city and the protection it afforded. Carriage after carriage, loaded with white families and a few personal belongings, began pouring into town within hours of the initial rising.¹⁹ But even as the evacuation progressed, the suppression forces were organizing under the

¹⁷ *Richmond (Va.) Enquirer*, February 22, 1811. The *Enquirer* published a long account, written by an unnamed participant in the action taken to suppress the revolt.

¹⁸ Existing evidence suggests that several white families were warned of the insurrection by local slaves who had refused to join the rebels. See Original Acts, #18 (n.p.), February 20, 1811, which contains depositions taken from families reporting such instances.

¹⁹ *Richmond Enquirer*, February 22, 1811; *New York Evening Post*, February 19, 1811 (quoting letter from New Orleans correspondent dated January 11, 1811); Kendall, “Shadow,” 144–145. See also *Louisiana Gazette*, January 12, 1811; which assures the “planters” and their families that it was now safe to return to their plantations.

leadership of Manuel Andry himself. Within twenty-four hours after the initial attack, Andry had mobilized some 80 local militia troops and vigilantes and set out in pursuit of the rebels, by then numbering between one hundred fifty and five hundred.²⁰ The whites attacked, according to Andry's own account, near the plantation of François Bernard Bernoudi, where the rebels stood their ground, "colors displayed and full of arrogance," their leaders mounted and in some cases uniformed.²¹ But they were woefully deficient in firepower and in military organization. They retreated into the woods where the whites would be forced to pursue under difficult circumstances, particularly in view of the prevailing cold and rain.

Meanwhile, Andry had communicated with Claiborne, calling for the assistance of regular United States Army troops. And he and the other planters were in luck. On January 7, 1811, General Wade Hampton, commander-in-chief of U.S. troops in the Southern Division, had arrived in New Orleans.²² Hampton was quickly dispatched to the scene of the rebellion in command of a detachment of regular troops and two companies of militia to take charge of all suppression forces. Moreover, additional assistance was already on the way from Baton Rouge in the form of a company of dragoons and one of light artillery under command of Major Homer Virgil Milton.²³ The insurrectionaries were armed with cane knives, axes, hoes, other tools, and a few small arms when the pursuit into the woods began on the morning of January 10.²⁴

What followed was hardly a battle at all; it was more in the form of a mass execution, an open season on blacks in the vicinity. By

²⁰ The precise number involved is impossible to determine. These figures represent the range of contemporary estimates. See *Louisiana Gazette*, January 10, 1811; *Le Moniteur de la Louisiane*, January 12, 1811; *New York Evening Post*, February 19, 1811.

²¹ See Manuel Andry to Claiborne, January 11, 1811, in Carter, ed., *Territory of Orleans*, 915-916; *La Courrier de la Louisiane*, January 14, 1811. The trial record confirms that the leaders were mounted, several horses having been procured at the onset of the rebellion. Original Acts, p. 12.

²² *Richmond Enquirer*, February 19, 1811, quoting New Orleans correspondence January 7, 1811.

²³ Wade Hampton to (Secretary of War) William Eustis, January 16, 1811, in Carter, ed., *Territory of Orleans*, 917-918; Claiborne to Robert Smith, January 9, 1811, in *Claiborne Letterbooks*, V, 95-96. Milton is elsewhere identified as Major "Mason" Milton. Original Acts, p. 17.

²⁴ *Louisiana Gazette*, January 17, 1811.

mid-morning of January 11, when Hampton's force had joined with that of Major Milton at Destrehan Plantation, anything resembling a military operation was already over. Hampton wrote Claiborne from Destrehan, informing the governor that he had dispatched two companies, one of light artillery and one of dragoons, "to touch at every settlement of consequence, and to crush any disturbance that may have taken place higher up." "The chiefs of the party," he further informed Claiborne, "are taken."²⁵ By ten o'clock in the evening of January 11, Andry could write Claiborne that the insurrection was completely broken, and that the leaders, including Charles Deslonde, had all been killed or captured.²⁶ The blacks had been decimated: actual body count revealed sixty-six killed in battle or summarily executed, seventeen missing and sixteen taken captive and held for trial.²⁷ But the same on-the-scene report also revealed that "beaucoup de cadavres" (many bodies) were still being uncovered by the patrols.

The trial of those captured or accused of participation commenced immediately. St. Charles Parish Judge Pierre Bauchet St.-Martin summoned a special court consisting of five local property owners to hear testimony and render judgement.²⁸ By the afternoon of January 13, the tribunal was prepared to open hearings at Destrehan Plantation. The interrogations proceeded, and for the next two days the court heard from some thirty of the accused. Most admitted their guilt. Some accused others, citing specifics. Many refused to implicate anyone other than themselves. When asked why he had joined the insurrection, one of the rebel leaders,

²⁵ Hampton to Claiborne, January 12, 1811, reprinted in *Louisiana Gazette*, January 14, 1811.

²⁶ Manuel Andry to Claiborne, January 11, 1811, in *La Courrier de la Louisiane*, January 14, 1811. The other leaders were named in another letter, from Charles Perret to the *Moniteur*, January 17, 1811. The "chefs de brigands" included Pierre Griffe, Hanns Wimpren, Jacques Becknell, and Barthélemy Trépagner. The trial record adds several names to the list of purported leaders, including most prominently one Dagobert, property of one of the prominent Delhomme families. Original Acts, p. 7.

²⁷ *Le Moniteur de la Louisiane*, January 24, 1811. On the cruelty of the suppression activities, see the *New York Evening Post*, February 27, 1811, quoting an unnamed Louisiana newspaper. The quotation begins: "We are sorry to learn that a ferocious sanguinary disposition marked the character of some of the inhabitants. Civilized man ought to remember well his standing, and never let himself sink down to a level with the savages; our laws are summary enough and let them govern."

²⁸ See *Notes and Documents*, p. 472, for particulars of the proceedings.



Destréban Plantation, scene of the trial of slaves involved in the 1811 uprising.
(Photo courtesy Hearn, Harahan, La.)

Jupiter (the property of Manuel Andry), replied simply “to kill the white” (“détruire le Blanc”).²⁹

Twenty-one of the accused were found guilty and sentenced to death. Despite a longstanding tradition to the contrary, they were shot, not beheaded. But their corpses were, in fact, decapitated, and their heads placed on poles along the German Coast “as a terrible example to all who would disturb the public tranquility in the future.”³⁰ Three of those implicated were judged innocent and released to return to their bondage. Six were held captive pending further investigation. Their ultimate fate was not recorded.

The physical damage perpetrated by the insurgents is a matter of some conjecture. At least two whites were killed, young Andry and Jean-François Trépagnier, who was killed by the rebels in their assault on his plantation. And the loss of “two highly esteemed Citizens” was officially bemoaned by the governor in his report to a

²⁹ Original Acts, #17 (n.p.), February 20, 1811.

³⁰ Original Acts, pp. 7–20.

joint session of the territorial legislature, Claiborne claiming that they had been “cruelly massacred.”³¹ He also added, however, that the slave insurrectionaries had caused “great and serious loss of property” to the planters of the region. At the specific request of the governor, the legislature passed an appropriation to reimburse the planters for part of their loss, to the tune of one-third of the appraised value of each “dwelling-house” destroyed.³² The act also provided that the territory would pay \$300 to the slaveowners for each slave killed or executed “on account of the late insurrection in this Territory.”

There remained but for the governor to assure the populace that the danger had passed, and indeed, that there had never been any real danger at all. This he did by asserting that the rebellion had not been “of extensive combination; but the result only of previous concert between the slaves of a few adjoining plantations.” “It has,” he continued, “been speedily and entirely quelled.”³³ He wrote privately, however, that the insurrection “has awakened a spirit of vigilance throughout the Territory, which, if persisted in will tend very much to our future safety.”³⁴ Claiborne was also in hopes that the legislature might be stung by fear of future rebellion into improving the militia system, and curbing further importation of

³¹ Claiborne, Speech to the Joint Session of the Territorial Legislature, January 29, 1811, in *Claiborne Letterbooks*, V, 123. But see also the Charles Perret letter in the *Moniteur*, January 17, 1811, suggesting that one “M. Thomassin” (probably Antoine Thomassin) was also killed by the slaves. Perhaps M. Thomassin was less “highly esteemed.” Trépagnier was apparently killed by one of his own trusted house-servants. See Clarence J. Laughlin, *Ghosts Along the Mississippi* (New York, 1948), Plate 11; Harnett Kane, *Plantation Parade. The Grand Manner in Louisiana* (New York, 1945), pp. 128–129. It is interesting to note, nevertheless, that Cupidon, a slave subsequently convicted of participation in the uprising, testified that Kooock, a slave belonging to James Brown, “donné un coup de hache à M. François Trépagnier, lorsque celui-ci était déjà mort.” Original Acts, p. 7.

³² Session Laws, Territory of Orleans, Second Session, Third Legislature (1811), p. 132. See also supplemental legislation of March 6, and April 30, 1811, *ibid.*, pp. 190, 198; and ms. “Act Providing for the Payment of Slaves Killed & Executed on Account of the Late Insurrection,” April 25, 1811, in Archives, Louisiana State University. See also Original Acts, #4 (n.p.), January 28, 1811; #21 (n.p.), March 7, 1811. Extant records reveal that claims were filed for the loss of forty-one slaves identified as having been killed in action or executed. This represents only a portion of the total, however. The median age of the dead slaves as recorded in the formal depositions was twenty-eight. *Ibid.*

³³ Claiborne to Joint Session of Orleans Territorial Legislature, January 29, 1811, in *Claiborne Letterbooks*, V, 123.

³⁴ Claiborne to John Ballinger, January 20, 1811, in *Claiborne Letterbooks*, V, 108–109.

slaves from outside the territory.³⁵ Pursuant to the governor's recommendation, the territorial legislature did indeed pass new legislation completely reorganizing the territorial militia in order that it be more quickly responsive to threats of slave rebellion.³⁶

But what of the general white response to the insurrection at its inception? Clearly, it ran to a pattern. The initial reaction was terror and panic flight, then the formation of a counterforce, then crushing military suppression, then the vigilante assault and the blood-bath, the "GREAT EXAMPLE" to the other slaves that Manuel Andry had insisted was necessary in his first correspondence with Claiborne,³⁷ and finally the post-insurrection measures taken to prevent other such horrors. Yet even as the whites evidenced so vividly their fear and loathing, they also manifested what the social psychologists call a "rationalization need" to believe that actual slave rebellion did not *really* occur, at least not among the good, tried and true, utterly reliable homegrown blacks; at least not sizeable, carefully planned insurrections, representing any *real* danger to the white population or to the slave system.

The very terminology employed by the whites to describe the rebellion suggests that they saw it not as an insurrection of chattel bondsmen striking for freedom (even with Saint Domingue as clear example that such could be the case), but rather as a kind of criminal depredation. The two terms used most often to describe the rebels were "brigands" (lawless plunderers) and "banditti" (outlaws). The instigators were believed to have been runaway maroons, not faithful house servants, even after it came to light that Jean-François Trépagnier had been killed by one of his own "people," who was also a rebel leader. The need to blame "outsiders" is patently clear in the white sources. Claiborne blamed new arrivals, and fought persistently against their further introduction, though there is no evidence at all in the trial record to suggest that

³⁵ *Ibid.* See also *La Courrier de la Louisiane*, January 30, 1811; *Le Moniteur de la Louisiane*, January 31, 1811. The Municipal Council of New Orleans had already enacted stringent new slave control regulations for the city and its suburbs. See *La Courrier de la Louisiane*, January 18, 1811.

³⁶ Session Laws, Territory of Orleans, Second Session, Third Legislature, 1811, pp. 148-164.

³⁷ Manuel Andry to Claiborne, January 11, 1811, in Carter, ed., *Territory of Orleans*, 915-916.

newcomers constituted either the leadership or the majority of the rebels. Wade Hampton blamed the *Spanish* for the rising: "the plan is unquestionably of Spanish Origin," he wrote from the battlefield, "& has had an extensive combination."³⁸ This belief persisted despite the fact that there is no direct evidence of Spanish complicity, and that Claiborne reported that the plot was not widespread. Some participants believed that the instigators of the conspiracy had come in through the agency of Jean Laffite, by way of Baratavia, though there is, again, no evidence to support such a claim.³⁹ The whites, then, found it necessary to blame "outside agitators" for the trouble, and did so over and over, as though reciting a formal litany. To do otherwise was to call into question the security of the slave-plantation system itself. And this they could not do, at least not consciously.

I am suggesting that it was impossible for the whites to admit openly that there could ever be a dangerous rising of the slaves, even when the evidence of great fear is so overwhelming. The duality of perception involved here is clearly manifested in a letter written at the time of the insurrection by a New Orleans merchant, Peter V. Ogden, to a customer in Mississippi. "A little disturbance among the Negroes up the coast," Ogden wrote, "has put a stop for the moment to all kinds of business. . . ."⁴⁰ The "little disturbance" had brought a temporary halt to all commercial operations in one of the burgeoning commercial capitals of the United States. But Ogden apparently saw no inconsistency in his statement. Such was the nature of the duality arising from the rationalization need to distort the unthinkable reality.

And what of the blacks? What are we to conclude about their motives, their response to the rebellion, their aspirations? Sad to

³⁸ Hampton to Claiborne, January 12, 1811, in *ibid.*, 916–917. The trial record contains an intriguing reference to one "Joseph, a Spaniard," mentioned by one of the accused slaves "as having called together the brigands on the levee in front of the home of Charles Paquet, free man of color, and saying to them 'COMRADES, come drink a little,' " then giving them rum. There is no further mention of "Joseph" anywhere else in the sources, though it appears that he had been jailed in New Orleans before the trial opened. See Original Acts, p. 9. (Translation by the author.)

³⁹ Kendall, "Shadow," 146. See, however, Joe Gray Taylor, "The Foreign Slave Trade in Louisiana after 1808," *Louisiana History*, I (1960), 38.

⁴⁰ Peter V. Ogden to Nathaniel Evans, January 11, 1811 (misdated 1810), in Evans Family Papers, Archives, Louisiana State University.

say, conclusions simply cannot be drawn. If we accept the evidence of the white sources, it would seem that only a minority of the slaves in the region participated in the insurrection, and that other slaves and free blacks helped put it down. Indeed, census figures suggest that no more than 8 percent of the German Coast-area slaves were involved. Shortly after the rebels had been defeated, the Legislative Council passed a resolution calling for an investigation of the actions "of the slaves who have distinguished themselves during the late insurrection by saving the life of their master or of some other white person . . . so that such heroic action might be duly rewarded."⁴¹ And one observer of the actual fighting, Charles Perret, named several free persons of color whom he deemed worthy of "l'estime publique," free blacks who lent aid in defeating the rebel slaves "with an indefatigable zeal, and intrepid courage."⁴² Doubtless it was so, though it would fit into the pattern of their other rationalization needs that the whites had to *believe* it to be so.

Despite the size of the rising, and it bears repeating that this was the largest slave insurrection in U.S. history, surely it is not surprising that most did not join the rebels to do battle with the whites. As James C. Davies has pointed out, "when it is a choice between losing their chains or their lives, people will mostly choose to keep their chains. . . ."⁴³ And without question this was the choice open to the blacks of the German Coast in 1811. They quite literally had no chance. Confronting resistance among whites who had all the advantages of organization, structure, and military firepower, and whose ferocity was a certainty in view of their fear, the black effort was suicidal. But it was not, at least in one respect, in vain. Whatever the motives of the leaders (and they were doubtless mixed), insurrections such as that of January 1811 were among the factors operating to keep the system of plantation slavery in a

⁴¹ Session Laws, Territory of Orleans, Second Session, Third Legislature, 1811, p. 196. See also note 18 above. Census figures reveal that the slave population of the German Coast was 3,839 in 1810. There were 2,442 whites and free blacks. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Aggregate Amount of Persons, 1810*. Third Census, Book I (1810), p. 82. If a median figure of 300 slave participants is employed, this would constitute about 8 percent of the total slave population.

⁴² *Le Moniteur de la Louisiane*, January 17, 1811. (Translation by the author).

⁴³ James C. Davies, "Toward a Theory of Revolution," *American Sociological Review*, XXVII (1962), 7.



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chronic state of tension in the early nineteenth century. To an important degree the fear born of the occasional insurrection, however abortive, weakened the system by undermining its security and by giving rise to doubts of its viability even among its leading beneficiaries and loudest publicists. It is also likely that the insurrection gave rise to a melioration of the material conditions among the slaves of the region.⁴⁴ And in yet another way did the rebels of 1811 succeed: They became legends. As late as 1923, we are informed by a resident of the German Coast area, "The old Negroes still relate[d] the story of the slave insurrection of 1811 as they heard it from their grandfathers."⁴⁵ Legendary military defeats have only too often served later generations in their struggles for survival.

But for all the comforting, distortive rationalizations of the whites, the thing they could not rationalize away was the specter.

⁴⁴ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, p. 596.

⁴⁵ Lubin F. Laurent, "A History of St. John the Baptist Parish," Typescript, Louisiana Room, Louisiana State University. Undated ms. originally published serially in *L'Observateur* (Reserve, La.), 1922-1923. See also *Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, VII (1924), 324-325.

On January 19, 1811, as the last reports of action against the rebels were coming in to Governor Claiborne, he wrote Jean-Noël Des-tréhan "I hope this dreadful Insurrection is at an end and I pray God! we [*sic*] may never see another."⁴⁶ Yet before the year was out, the harried governor again confronted the nightmare. On Christmas Eve, 1811, Claiborne wrote to Manuel Andry informing him of a rumor of insurrection conspiracy "among the Negroes of German Coast," calling for the reorganization of a regiment of militia forces "lately under your command."⁴⁷ Once again the whites were panicked into flight by the report, which suggested further that New Orleans blacks also "evidenced a disposition to rise in Insurrection. . . ."⁴⁸ The specter would not be still; its persistence as well as the reality of rebellion would simply not permit the whites to live in peace, even on Christmas. Fear of revolt lay at the very heart of the relationship between slaves and masters and was thus fundamental to the creation of distrust by whites, even as the whites created for their own psychic salvation the myth of the contented bondsman.

⁴⁶ Claiborne to John M. Detrehan [*sic*], Esqre., January 19, 1811, in *Claiborne Letterbooks*, V, 107-108.

⁴⁷ Claiborne to Andry, December 24, 1811, in *Claiborne Letterbooks*, VI, 18.

⁴⁸ Claiborne to Major (?) McRae (U.S.A.), December 11, 1811, in *Claiborne Letterbooks*, VI, 17, 20.