

National Newspaper and Legislative Reactions to Louisiana's Deslondes Slave Revolt of 1811

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During January of 1811, only seven years after the United States purchased the vast Louisiana colony, plantation life on the lower Mississippi River erupted in violence when perhaps as many as five hundred slaves and runaways, led by Charles Deslondes, rose against slave owners. The Deslondes uprising remains the largest slave revolt in United States history. While other revolts, such as Nat Turner's in Virginia, resulted in greater numbers of white casualties, fewer slaves participated.

Of the historians who have analyzed the Deslondes revolt, the works of John S. Kendall and James H. Dormon are the most important. Kendall hypothesized that the inhabitants of New Orleans never fully recovered from the Deslondes revolt and continued throughout the antebellum period to live in fear of another insurrection. That fear cast a "shadow over the city" and caused the Creoles of Louisiana, he argued, to keep their slaves unusually suppressed and to treat them with exceptionally harsh cruelty. Dormon believed Louisiana's inhabitants developed a sense of denial, refusing to admit that their own earlier severe treatment of slaves could have prompted the revolt. He pointed out that the terminology used by most whites to describe the revolt helped develop a "rationalization need" to ease their own fears. Contemporary Louisiana

[†]Mr. Thompson died in summer 1991.

newspaper accounts, he noted, always referred to the rebelling slaves as "brigands" or "banditti," reflecting the self-serving perception that the slaves who revolted with Deslondes were exceptions, not typical slaves. But both historians, like the other scholars who have treated the Deslondes revolt, evaluated it only from a Louisiana perspective. None considered the impact the uprising made on the country at large.¹

The present study is based on an examination of the accounts of the revolt carried by 122 newspapers across the country. While it makes no claim to be a complete analysis of the nation's reaction to the uprising, it represents a first step in that important direction. The appearance of articles in newspapers in every state and territory where newspapers were published betrayed a national anxiety over the huge, and still largely foreign, slave population in newly acquired Louisiana. And editorial comments made in the various newspapers often showed interesting, and sometimes important, regional differences in attitudes, and in developing attitudes, towards the institution of slavery. The newspaper accounts, along with legislative records, also showed that news of the revolt caused reorganization of various state militias and prompted the introduction of new laws for slave control.²

¹The best secondary studies are Joe Gray Taylor, *Negro Slavery in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge, 1963), pp. 212-213; Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York, 1963), 249-251; John S. Kendall, "Shadow Over the City," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, XXII (1939), 14-165; and James H. Dormon, "The Persistent Specter: Slave Rebellion in Territorial Louisiana," *Louisiana History*, XVIII (1977), 389-404. Dormon's is the most detailed account.

²Actually 140 newspapers were surveyed. Eight of the 140 newspapers specialized in financial, literary, and Irish news, and hence could not be expected to have covered a slave revolt, effectively reducing the number of potential sources to 132. Of these 132 newspapers, 122, or ninety-two percent, carried stories of the Deslondes revolt. The survey included seventy-eight percent of the newspapers available for inspection in the South, sixty-seven percent in Missouri and Ohio, sixty-five percent in New England, and sixty-two percent in the Middle Atlantic states. The survey consisted of sixty-four percent of surviving newspapers in the United States. For convenience, the original names and the present day names of some political units and geographical areas are, throughout the present piece, used interchangeably. The original Territory of Orleans, for example, is often called simply Louisiana, and the old District of Louisiana around St. Louis sometimes simply Missouri.

Of the 140 newspapers surveyed, 137 were published outside Louisiana; the remaining three, published within the state, were used for comparison. Clarence S. Brigham, *History and Bibliography of American Newspapers, 1690-1820*, 2

At the same time, the newspaper accounts printed outside Louisiana shed some new light both on the Louisiana reaction to the revolt and on certain particulars of the revolt itself. Some newspapers in other parts of the country quoted accounts directly from three newspapers, no copies of which any longer exist—one in New Orleans, the *Orleans Gazette*, and two in Natchez, the *Natchez Chronicle* and the *Mississippian*—thus providing bits of new information from original local sources. Similarly, letters written by New Orleans residents to friends and relatives in other states, and printed in newspapers there, contained a number of details on the revolt not found in sources previously used by historians. And a comparison of the dates of the many articles indicated the route news of the uprising travelled from New Orleans to the rest of the nation.

The revolt began on the cold and rainy evening of January 8, 1811, on the eastern bank of the Mississippi River, thirty-six miles north of New Orleans, near the present-day town of Norco. Charles Deslondes, a mulatto from Saint-Domingue and a slave driver on the plantation of Col. Manuel Andry, organized his fellow slaves and enlisted the support of a number of runaway slaves, or maroons, living in colonies in adjacent swamps. The gang broke in on Col. Andry, wounded him with an axe, and killed his son. The rebels seized a few weapons stored on the plantation since the Burr Conspiracy a few years earlier and pillaged gunpowder from a nearby mill.³

Deslondes divided his followers into companies, appointed officers, flagmen, and drummers, and armed them with guns and swords, and his "troops" with farm implements. After

vols. (Worcester, Mass., 1947), vols. 1-2, and the "Additions and Corrections" published in 1961 were used as the guide to newspapers consulted. All newspapers cited in the notes below are for the year 1811.

³Advertisements for runaway slaves reveal that a hundred or so slaves had escaped from plantations in the southern section of the Orleans territory and may have joined the maroon colonies that participated in the uprising. These advertisements appeared in three New Orleans newspapers: *Le Moniteur*, the *Louisiana Courier*, and the *Louisiana Gazette*; hereafter cited as the *Moniteur*, *Courier*, and *La Gazette*. The *Baltimore American and Commercial Daily Advertiser*, February 23 noted the Burr conspiracy weapons store. Charles Deslondes did not belong to Andry, but to Madame Anne Baude Paumet Deslondes, the widow of Jean-Baptiste Deslondes, hence his surname. Presumably he was working for Andry on some sort of lease agreement Andry had made with Deslondes for his employment.

taking from the Andry plantation anything they could use, including a few horses and a supply of liquor, the slaves set off, marching in parade formation, singing songs, and chanting the war cry, "on to Orleans!" As they marched, the insurgents augmented their ranks with maroons and with slaves from plantations they passed. Eventually, Deslondes attracted or impressed nearly five hundred followers according to some contemporary newspaper accounts, though other accounts estimated their number as low as one hundred and fifty. Any who refused to join him, he had tortured or killed. At four o'clock in the afternoon of January 9, the slave army stopped at the Jacques Fortier plantation, raided it, cooked, ate, drank, and frolicked to the point of near riot.⁴

White inhabitants in their path, warned by horsemen of the approaching slave army, fled downriver to New Orleans. Their quick flight saved all other white lives except for that of Jean-François Trépagnier, a planter who refused to flee. The slaves, intent upon New Orleans, did relatively little damage. They burned three plantation houses but nothing else, no sugar mills, for example.⁵

On the night of January 9 and the morning of the 10th, a detachment of United States regular troops and two companies of militia commanded by Gen. Wade Hampton, plus a company of dragoons and one of light infantry from Baton Rouge, met in St. Charles Parish, sixteen miles from New Orleans and attacked the slaves at the Fortier plantation. When the battle ended—if it can be called that, for it was more in the nature of a massacre—sixty-six slaves lay dead, sixteen in captivity, and seventeen unaccounted for. Numerous uncounted bodies remained scattered through the woods, victims of a shooting spree that continued until no other suspected blacks could be found in the vicinity. The next day, local planters hired Indians to search out and kill or capture all blacks who were still hiding in the woods. After the slaughter was over, the authorities held about seventy-five captives for questioning, including Charles Deslondes, and returned the rest of the slaves to their owners.

⁴*Raleigh*, North Carolina, *Star*, February 28, and *Richmond Enquirer*, February 22, reported the torturing.

⁵*Richmond Enquirer*, February 22, refers to the three houses burned.

In preparation for the trial, which was held at Destréhan Plantation, local newspapers aided officials in gathering evidence by publishing lists of slave names and their owners and asking that persons who had arrested the slaves come forth and give the authorities the details. Specifically, the authorities wanted to know where the slaves had been arrested, if they were with the brigands when arrested, if they had stolen arms or goods, and if they had previously been seen with the brigands at any of the slave attacks on plantations.⁶

The St. Charles Parish district court spent a week interrogating the seventy-five or so slave captives being held at Destréhan Plantation, and held twenty-seven of them for trial. On January 13, Judge Pierre Bauchet Saint Martin began the trial itself. He explained that it was necessary to commence proceedings as soon as possible because emotions were running so high they could "take on a ferocious character if the chiefs and principal accomplices are not destroyed."⁷

The judge, not concerned with legal niceties, immediately appointed a tribunal of five plantation owners, some of whom had suffered property damages in the revolt. And he invested the panel with the authority to examine, interrogate, and pass sentence on the accused slaves. On the morning of January 15, after one day of investigation and deliberation, the tribunal condemned eighteen slaves to death. Each, without torture, was to be taken to the plantation of his own master, where he would be shot. The tribunal also specified that the heads of the executed slaves were to be cut off and mounted on poles as an example to the remaining slaves of what rebellion would mean. The tribunal kept in custody nine other slaves against whom the charges were "vague and of little certainty." A few days later, the tribunal released three of these slaves and condemned three others to death. The records do not indicate the fate of the

⁶See *Courier*, January 18 and 21 for examples.

⁷The Original Acts of St. Charles Parish, 1811, pp. 100-101. The account given above supplements Dormon's with some details. Unlike the long and thorough inquiries that Louisiana's Spanish authorities made into colonial slave rebellions, usually including verbatim transcripts of interrogations of participants as well as witnesses, the apprehension, trial, and execution of the Deslonde insurgents was swift and summary, with only a few sketchy records kept. Hence we know far fewer details of that insurrection than we do of most earlier ones.

remaining three. In all, twenty-one were executed, including Charles Deslondes.⁸

Within two days, news of the report appeared in New Orleans newspapers. The *Louisiana Courier*, *Le Moniteur*, and the *Louisiana Gazette*, published, in addition to descriptions of the revolt and its suppression, the full text of edicts issued by Governor William Charles Cole Claiborne calling for two hundred militiamen to patrol New Orleans; a six o'clock evening curfew for all black males; and the closing of all cabarets in the city.⁹

Though New Orleans was one of the largest cities in the United States, its location on the sparsely populated southwestern frontier meant that few nearby towns had newspapers. Outside New Orleans, the nearest newspapers were published in Alexandria, Louisiana, and Natchez, Mississippi. Alexandria had one paper and Natchez had the two mentioned earlier. No other towns in Louisiana or Mississippi had newspapers, and no newspapers existed in the regions that would eventually become the states of Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, and Texas. No copies of any of the three newspapers in Alexandria and Natchez survive. But other papers around the country reprinted a number of articles from one or another of the Natchez newspapers, though, more often than not, without making it clear which of the Natchez papers was the source. None of the newspapers surveyed in this study reprinted any of the Alexandria paper's articles on the Deslondes revolt.¹⁰

News of the uprising spread from New Orleans to the rest of the country via two routes, up the Mississippi and Ohio from river town to river town and up the Atlantic coast by seagoing vessels. The news reached Kentucky in a month, by February 9, and within six weeks Ohio and Tennessee. It is clear that the news travelled by river rather than an overland route because it reached Kentucky by February 9, but did not appear in Tennessee until February 16. Tennessee had no Mississippi

⁸Original Acts of St. Charles Parish, 1811, pp. 101-102.

⁹*Courier*, January 11; *Moniteur*, January 12; *La. Gazette*, January 10. No surviving copies exist of four other newspapers published in New Orleans at the time: the *Amis de Lois*, *Mesagero Luisianes*, *Telegraphie*, and *Orleans Gazette*.

¹⁰The name of the Alexandria paper was the *Louisiana Planter*.

River port towns with newspapers. If the news had spread northward by land routes, Tennessee, geographically closer to New Orleans, would have learned of the revolt first.¹¹

It is uncertain when the news first reached Missouri or how, whether by way of the river or overland. The *St. Louis Gazette* was the only newspaper in the Missouri area. Its first mention of the revolt took the form of a firsthand account by an eyewitness who had told his story to the newspaper in person. The eyewitness mentioned in his account that he had left New Orleans on January 14, but he did not say when he arrived in St. Louis. The newspaper did not print his account until almost seven weeks later, on March 7, by which time it was already running stories on new Missouri slave control acts just passed. The incongruity of the sequence of events strongly suggests that the *St. Louis Gazette* had learned of the Deslondes revolt well before March 7, but delayed publishing any mention of it until local authorities could take steps to tighten control of local slaves.¹²

Seagoing vessels leaving New Orleans carried packets of newspapers containing reports of the Deslondes insurrection to cities along the Atlantic seaboard. On February 15, the *New York Gazette* became the first eastern newspaper to run a story of the revolt, using the *Louisiana Courier* for its information. From New York, the news quickly spread to nearby states along the Atlantic coast and throughout New England, where most newspapers used the *Gazette* as their source.¹³

News of the uprising reached the southern states along the Atlantic coast only after it did New York. It appeared first in Norfolk, Virginia, on February 18, and from there spread throughout the state and into North Carolina. A Richmond newspaper warned, typically, that the combination of slaves and

¹¹*Lexington, Kentucky, Reporter*, February 9; *Frankfort, Kentucky, Argus of Western America*, February 13; *Nashville Clarion and Tennessee Gazette*, February 22; *Wilson's Knoxville Gazette*, February 16; *Chillicothe, Ohio, Spectator*, February 16; *Cincinnati Western Spy*, March 2; *Marietta, Ohio, Western Spectator*, March 5. No copies of the nine other newspapers in Tennessee and Kentucky survive, and six Ohio papers have been lost.

¹²The full name of the newspaper was the *Louisiana Gazette*, so called because St. Louis was the capital of the old District of Louisiana.

¹³*New York Gazette*, February 15.

free blacks in New Orleans was potentially "powerful and dangerous."¹⁴

Charleston, South Carolina, learned of the revolt about a week after New York had, but for the most part, newspapers there suppressed the information, as did most newspapers in Georgia. One Charleston paper printed the story on February 23, and two in Augusta and one in Milledgeville, Georgia, in March. Though the Milledgeville paper did not mention the two white casualties or the number of slaves killed, it did comfort its readers by adding "no doubt exists of their total subdual." Accounts of the revolt did not appear in Savannah's two newspapers or in two of Charleston's three journals. The newspapers in these states censored the story or declined to mention it altogether because of the large number of slaves in the area, the highest concentration in the country.¹⁵

The very last part of the country to learn about the Deslondes insurrection was a north-south band comprised of the western portions of Atlantic coast states and the eastern portions of states bordering the Mississippi and Ohio rivers. Apparently it took some time for the news to travel overland into these isolated regions. For example, accounts did not appear in Augusta, Georgia, in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and in Marietta, Ohio, until well into March, two months after the revolt.¹⁶

Lack of familiarity with Louisiana and Mississippi geography caused many northeastern newspapers to print incorrect details about the Louisiana insurrection. Some papers coupled the Deslondes revolt with news about military actions

¹⁴*Norfolk Gazette* and *Norfolk and Portsmouth Herald*, February 18; *Richmond Virginia Patriot*, February 19; *Alexandria, Virginia, Gazette*, February 22; *Charlestown, West Virginia, Farmer's Repository*, March 1; *Martinsburg, West Virginia, Gazette*, February 22; *Edenton, North Carolina, Gazette*, February 22; *Raleigh Minerva*, February 22; *Raleigh Register*, March 7; *Raleigh Star*, February 28. Less than half of the newspapers from these two states have survived.

¹⁵*Augusta Mirror of the Times*, March 3; *Augusta Chronicle*, March 8; *Milledgeville Georgia Journal*, March 6; *Charleston Times*, February 2. The *Savannah Columbian Museum*, *Charleston Carolina Gazette*, *Charleston Courier*, and *Savannah Republican*, did not print the story. No other South Carolina or Georgia newspapers have survived.

¹⁶*Augusta Mirror of the Times*, March 11; *Harrisburg Dauphin Guardian*, March 12; *Marietta Western Spectator*, March 5.

near Mobile and placed both stories under the heading "News from the Mississippi territory." That confusion probably stemmed from the fact that Governor Claiborne announced, about the same time, that he was going to add to the Territory of Orleans the portion of West Florida that the United States had annexed in 1810.¹⁷

Some northeastern papers also confused the relationship between Governor Claiborne and Colonel Andry. The English-language-section of the *Louisiana Courier* had printed a letter from "Andry, father, to his Excellency Governor Claiborne," simply a clumsy translation of the French expression "*Andry, père*," meaning Andry, the elder. The northeastern newspapers misread the phrase and misreported Andry to be the "father of Governor Claiborne."¹⁸

Two newspapers printed incorrect details of the revolt itself. The Martinsburg *Virginia Gazette* reported that, in the insurrection, "many whites have been murdered and many plantations burnt." And the *Cincinnati Western Spy* erroneously stated that the condemned slaves had been hanged, when in fact they were shot.¹⁹

On the other hand, out-of-state newspapers sometimes had information on the revolt that New Orleans newspapers lacked. Such information came from letters written by Louisiana residents to friends or relatives in other states and printed in the newspapers there as well as from articles that out-of-state newspapers reprinted from issues of Louisiana and Mississippi papers that do not exist today.

¹⁷Claiborne's announcement appeared in the *La. Gazette*, January 30. The Mississippi error appeared in the *Connecticut Courant*, February 20; *Hallowell, Maine, American Advocate*, February 27; *Boston Gazette*, February 18; *Boston Patriot*, February 23; *Salem Gazette*, February 19; *Concord New Hampshire Patriot*, February 26; *Portsmouth, New Hampshire, Oracle*, February 23; *Burlington, New Jersey, Rural Visitor*, February 25; *New York Gazette*, February 15; *Providence Rhode Island American*, February 19; *Danville, Vermont, North Star*, March 2; *Burlington Vermont Sentinel*, February 28.

¹⁸*Courier*, January 14; *Hallowell, Maine, American Advocate*, February 27; *Concord New Hampshire Patriot*, February 26; *Burlington Vermont Sentinel*, February 27; *Providence Rhode Island American*, February 19; and even one Southern paper, the *Alexandria, Virginia, Gazette*, February 22.

¹⁹*Martinsburg, West Virginia, Gazette*, February 22; *Cincinnati Western Spy*, March 2.

One important bit of new information from such sources fills in some details of the insurrection, unknown from Louisiana sources, and clarifies the positioning of the groups that attacked the insurgents, which explains why so many of the slaves were killed. When reports of Deslondes' slave army reached New Orleans, officials fired alarm guns and beat warning drums to call the city to arms. But the regular army troops normally garrisoned in the city were away fighting in West Florida near Mobile, which left the city practically defenseless. Officials immediately began handing out swords and muskets from the city's arsenal to any volunteers who would take them, including a number of Mississippi residents who were in the city. Within an hour, a group of thirty such volunteers set out on horseback to engage the slaves, and about sixty men from the surrounding area joined them as they rode upriver.²⁰

When the volunteers, led by Major Derrington of the United States Infantry, neared the Fortier plantation, they stopped. Derrington, hoping for reinforcements, wanted to hold off the attack until morning. But about fifteen of the anxious volunteers, without his knowledge or authorization, attacked the slaves who were feasting in the plantation house kitchen, at about nine p.m., and captured twelve to fourteen prisoners. The unorganized attack, however, allowed most of the slaves to escape and hold up in the sugarhouse.²¹

Wade Hampton and his forces reached the Fortier plantation just as the volunteers were storming the house. He agreed with Major Derrington's analysis of the situation, and ordered that no further action be taken. During the night the slaves could see, by bright moonlight, reinforcements arriving in Hampton's camp. At four o'clock in the morning of January 10, the slaves began leaving the sugarhouse and moving into a nearby wooded area. In the meantime, Andry had crossed to the other side of the Mississippi River, checked to make sure slaves there were not organizing, gathered about eighty volunteers, and re-crossed the river north of the Fortier plantation to cut off the rebels in case they should attempt to escape in that direction. At

²⁰*Raleigh Star*, February 28, relying on information from one of the Natchez newspapers, though which is not clear.

²¹*Baltimore American and Commercial Daily Advertiser*, February 21. Derrington's first name was not given.

that point the two groups, Hampton's forces and Andry's forces, had the slaves effectively surrounded, and, to use Andry's own word, the "slaughter" began.²²

A more important discovery made in surveying out-of-state newspapers was that several northeastern newspapers, including the New York *Evening Post*, February 20, obtained some of their information on the Deslondes revolt from a letter written by a New Orleans resident to a friend in Chester, Pennsylvania, and first printed in the Philadelphia *Political and Commercial Advertiser* on February 19. The letter writer mistakenly identified Charles Deslondes as a free man of color. That error led a number of the newspapers that used the letter as a source to cite as objects of danger not only Louisiana's huge slave population, but also the area's large number of free people of color. Knowing the origin of the error and the route it travelled also answers the question on Charles Deslondes' status, slave or free, that James Dormon, citing the New York *Evening Post* story, raised more than a decade ago. Deslondes was a slave.²³

Outside Louisiana, newspapers, especially in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and New England, tended to emphasize the severity of the suppression. Twenty-one newspapers reprinted the following complaint concerning the severity. "We are sorry to learn that 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 the level of savage; our laws are summary enough and let them govern." The *Louisiana Courier* had originally printed these lines on January 14. The Philadelphia *Political and Commercial Advertiser* featured a letter written by a New Orleans resident who reported a particularly gruesome detail: "One negro was killed after he became a prisoner, for what reason I know not,

²²*Courier*, January 11, 14.

²³The *Northampton*, Massachusetts, *Hampshire Gazette*, February 27, was typical in placing blame for the revolt on free people of color as well as slaves. Dormon raised the question of Deslondes' status in his *Louisiana History* article, page 394, note 15.

unless to gratify the revengeful feelings of the planters—they turned him loose in a lane and shot him as he ran."²⁴

In Ohio, where the Northwest Ordinance had made slavery illegal, newspapers printed the strongest condemnations of both slavery and the severity of the suppression. The revolt occasioned Marietta, Ohio's *Western Spectator*, whose motto was "Be just and fear not," to issue a strong anti-slavery statement.

Villainous blacks, and MORE VILLANOUS WHITES who have reduced to the level of the *beasts of the field* these unhappy Africans—and are now obliged to sacrifice them like *wild beasts* in self preservation! The day of vengeance is coming!²⁵

In Cincinnati, the *Western Spy* ran a letter sent from Natchez to a local citizen. The correspondent noted that the place where the Deslondes revolt took place was "Red Church," the only use of that name discovered in newspaper articles or other sources, the rest of which called the area of the revolt simply the "German coast." The Natchez resident also reported that only one-fourth of the slaves had carried guns but that even they had no musket balls for ammunition, only small duck and partridge shot. And he added that "the levee . . . is ornamented with poles, on which are placed numbers of the heads of these unfortunate wretches." No other newspapers, including those in New Orleans, had mentioned that detail.²⁶

Some editors, especially in New England and the Northeast, used the news of the revolt as an occasion to state yet again their long-standing opposition to admitting Louisiana into the Union. Several ended their accounts of the uprising identically,

²⁴*Hartford Connecticut Mirror*, March 4; *Boston New-England Palladium*, February 19; *Providence Rhode Island American*, February 19; *Burlington Vermont Centinel*, March 7; *Harrisburg*, Pennsylvania, *Dauphin Guardian*, March 12; *New-York Weekly Museum*, March 2; *Chillicothe*, Ohio, *Supporter*, February 16; and fourteen other newspapers. *Philadelphia Political and Commercial Advertiser*, February 19.

²⁵*Marietta*, Ohio, *Western Spectator*, March 5. The Great Lake territories west of Ohio, which would eventually become the states of Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Minnesota, had no newspapers at the time.

²⁶*Cincinnati Western Spy*, March 2. "Red Church" was probably the plantation of that name that lay just north of Destrehan's. It shows up on maps as late as 1858.

with a printer's device in the shape of a pointing finger, followed by the message, in large italic typeface: "The population of New Orleans is 24,554 of which 16,654 are blacks and mulattoes!" Similarly, a New Jersey paper carried a letter from a New Orleans citizen who recounted that: "Fears were entertained that should the negroes enter the city and be joined by those here (who appear to be 8 or 10 to one white) a general massacre would take place."²⁷

One Massachusetts paper introduced its report of the Deslonde's insurrection with the following comment on what having the Territory of Orleans, with its large black population, in the Union could mean:

After reading the following, the public will indulge what a grand acquisition the new state of Orleans (lately taken into the bosom of the Union by our good Democrats in Congress) will be to this country. Nor must it be forgotten, that . . . blacks . . . were at that identical moment endeavoring to cut the throats of their *white fellow citizens*.²⁸

Newspapers in the Northeast also printed portions of a letter by Colonel Andry in which he emphasized the danger constituted by the very existence of a huge servile population and called for more humane treatment of slaves.

Had a citizen of any of the Atlantic cities or seaport towns, where discipline and good order is rigidly and impartially exacted, been present to witness the confused consternation and apparent dismay . . . he would have said in the bitterness of his soul 'alas my country, are such men as these thy only vigils in a corner the most vulnerable of any in the whole union!' . . . The solemn warning which we have just had from the mouth of a fierce and bloody insurrection should not only awaken us, . . . as respects the use of arms, but it should serve also as the

²⁷Portland, Maine, *Eastern Argus*, February 21; *Portland, Maine, Gazette*, February 25; *Boston Colombian Centinel*, February 20; *Hallowell, Maine, American Advocate*, February 27; *Keene, New Hampshire, Sentinel*, February 23; *Canadaiqua, New York, Ontario Repository*, March 5; *Newport, Rhode Island, Mercury*, February 23; *New Brunswick, New Jersey, Advertiser*, February 21.

²⁸Northampton, Massachusetts, *Hampshire Gazette*, February 27, relying on the letter from a New Orleans resident that first appeared in the *Philadelphia Political and Commercial Advertiser*, February 19.

persuasive advocate of humanity between the master and slave.²⁹

The *New York Gazette* also picked up from the *Orleans Gazette* a portion of another of Andry's letters which it labeled a "mysterious" paragraph in its reprint. Andry was actually warning of the dangers that could result from having a weak militia, but his confusing language, the *New York* editors realized, would likely be taken by their readers to be a condemnation of slavery:

This awful lesson should strike deep into the hearts of slave holders, and those whose duty it is to keep our country in a state of defense; the time may not be far distant when we shall be called to the field against a more formidable foe than the banditti lately quelled. The doctrine of passive obedience and non-resistance must and will be abandoned. Pleasant as the sleep of peace with disgrace may be to the sordid mind, it cannot be any longer indulged. Let our rulers awaken from their lethargy and say by acts, not by words, that they are worthy of their station, or let them hand the national sword to those who know how to appreciate its value.³⁰

Closer to the South, newspapers were generally less critical. The *St. Louis Gazette* focused on the two white men killed by the slaves and on the two or three more wounded in the fighting and on the property damaged by the insurgents. The account did not mention the severity of the suppression, and, indeed, praised General Hampton for his "prompt, judicious, and officer-like conduct."³¹

²⁹*New Haven Connecticut Herald*, February 21; *Boston Independent Chronicle*, February 21; *Boston Patriot*, February 23; *Amherst, New Hampshire, Farmer's Cabinet*, February 26; *Concord New Hampshire Patriot*, February 26; *Canadaigua, New York, Ontario Messenger*, March 5; *Cazenovia, New York, Pilot*, March 6; *Cooperstown, New York, Otsego Messenger*, March 9; *Huntingdon, Pennsylvania, Gazette*, March 7; *Philadelphia Political and Commercial Register*, March 1; *Pittsburgh Gazette*, March 8.

³⁰*New York Gazette*, February 25. The paragraph was later reprinted and also labeled "mysterious" by the *New Bedford, Massachusetts, Mercury*, March 15 and by the *Providence, Rhode Island, Gazette*, March 2.

³¹*St. Louis Louisiana Gazette*, March 7.

Even in the South some newspapers stressed the severity of the suppression. On January 18, at least one Natchez newspaper ran a story, later picked up by the Raleigh, North Carolina, *Star*, that characterized the suppression as ferocious. The paper also noted that "a general rout commenced" after the soldiers first fired upon the slaves and that the whites "indiscriminately butchered" many prisoners. In closing, the piece observed that lamentably "the most cruel and unusual punishment, at least in the United States, are inflicted without ceremony, and the neighborhood of their assemblage is said to exhibit all the horrors of the Vendee," associating the suppression with one of the infamous massacres of the still recent French Revolution.³²

But most Southern newspapers simply focused, in a complimentary fashion, on Hampton's effective and speedy handling of the crisis. Three, for example, printed the identical, and typical, passage of praise and reassurance:

. . . the brigands were so closely pursued by the army under Gen. Hampton, that before they could commit any very serious depredations, they were entirely annihilated, except for a few who were taken into the city as prisoners to be made public example of.³³

In the wake of the Deslonde's revolt, several theories emerged concerning its causes. General Hampton blamed the revolt on disgruntled Spanish planters in Louisiana. Since he had become governor of the Orleans Territory, Claiborne had been in conflict with officials in Spain's neighboring West Florida colony, particularly over boundaries and over navigation rights of rivers. Spain's official anti-American stance, Hampton believed, had been taken up by some Spanish inhabitants of Louisiana.³⁴

³²*Raleigh Star*, February 28.

³³*Norfolk and Portsmouth, Virginia, Herald*, February 20; *Edenton*, North Carolina, *Gazette*, February 22; *Charleston Times*, February 26.

³⁴Jared W. Bradly, "W. C. C. Claiborne and Spain: Foreign Affairs Under Jefferson and Madison, 1801-1811: Part II, A Successful Expansion, 1807-1811," *Louisiana History*, XIII (1972), 5-27; Dormon, "Persistent Specter," 400.

Others blamed the revolt on the French. Some said it was the fault of Louisiana French privateer Jean Lafitte. It was well known that he had close associations with maroons, who helped him in his smuggling activities. Others blamed it all on the French government. A South Carolina paper, relying on what it called British sources from the West Indies, claimed the revolt had been "stirred up by French emissaries." The reports the South Carolina newspaper published probably were less echoes of known French involvement in some of the Louisiana slave revolts of the 1790s than they were expressions of the then generally current British anti-Napoleonic sentiment.³⁵

Still others said it was the fault of the Louisiana French planter Barthélémy Macarty. A series of letters printed in New Orleans newspapers accused Macarty of having delayed suppression of the revolt by refusing to give provisions to the soldiers battling the slaves. Macarty denied the accusations in a paid advertisement in the New Orleans newspapers. The advertisement listed the names of a number of volunteers and officers who swore he had freely given them supplies, and ended with Macarty's challenge of accusers to a duel. The publisher of the *Louisiana Courier* sought to calm the parties by noting in an editorial aside that everyone was momentarily overwrought. Tempers eventually cooled and no duels ensued.³⁶

But some Northern newspapers picked up the accusations against Macarty. One in Massachusetts charged that he had treated the American volunteers "inhospitably," and another added a federal officer's personal accusations against Macarty and against Louisiana's "foreign," *i. e.*, French, planters in general:

The ill treatment of the slaves is said to be the cause of their late rising. Americans, who have negroes, are under no fear; they are well treated, and their masters boast they could sleep in the huts with them and be perfectly safe. But the foreigners allow a negro but a peck of corn for a month; some have blankets, and some have none. We slept one night on the levee, were refused house room by the French . . . I plead with them for leave to lie on

³⁵Dormon, "Persistent Specter," 401.

³⁶*Charleston Times*, February 23; *Courier*, January 14, 16.

the platform, under the portico of a house to keep the dew off. But was refused . . . They are unfriendly and inhuman.³⁷

Claiborne and others in New Orleans, indeed probably most native whites, blamed slaves from the West Indies for instigating the revolt. Charles Deslondes was himself from Santo Domingo, where slaves, a few years before, had won a slaughterous revolution against their masters. Because of Santo Domingo's reputation for revolution, particularly slave revolution, importation of slaves from the island had been temporarily banned, even before Congress closed all foreign slave trade. Hence a connection between Deslondes and Santo Domingo was an easy assumption to make. And it was quickly picked up by newspapers outside Louisiana. A letter from a New Orleans resident was reprinted in Connecticut, Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania, and Virginia newspapers, a letter labelling the revolt "a miniature representation of the horrors of St. Domingo."³⁸

³⁷Haverhill, Massachusetts, *Merrimack Intelligencer*, March 2; *Philadelphia Pennsylvania Gazette*, March 20; *Norristown, Pennsylvania, Herald*, March 21; *Philadelphia Poulson's American Daily Advertiser*, March 19; *New York Weekly Museum*, March 30.

³⁸Dormon, "Persistent Specter," 401; *Hartford Connecticut Mirror*, February 25; *Frederick-Town, Maryland, Gazette*, February 23; *Hagers-Town, Maryland, Gazette*, February 26; *Goshen, New York, Orange County Patriot*, February 26; *Philadelphia Political and Commercial Advertiser*, February 19; *Norfolk and Portsmouth, Virginia, Herald*, February 18.

The New Orleans resident whose letter the *Philadelphia Political and Commercial Advertiser* published February 19, referred to above in note 23, also mentioned that many of the "inhabitants" of the area where the Deslondes revolt occurred had been victims of the earlier slave revolt in Saint-Domingue. The remark raised the intriguing possibility that the Deslondes uprising was largely a revolt of Saint-Domingue slaves against Saint-Domingue masters. But the facts (1) that the Trepagnier and Fortier families' French-Canadian and French, rather than Saint-Domingue, roots are well known, (2) that Earl C. Woods and Charles E. Nolan, eds., *Sacramental Records of the Roman Catholic Church of the Archdiocese of New Orleans*, 6 vols. (New Orleans, 1987-1991), II, 90, make it clear that Charles Deslondes' owner, the Widow Deslondes, as well as her deceased husband, Jean-Baptiste Deslondes, were natives of Louisiana, not Saint-Domingue, and (3) that the service sheets of the Louisiana militia units in Jack D. Holmes, *Honor and Fidelity: The Louisiana Infantry Regiment and the Militia Companies, 1766-1821* (Birmingham, Ala., 1965), p. 164, indicate that Manuel Andry was born in New Orleans vitiate that possibility. The letter writer had made but another error.

Whatever its precise cause or causes, the revolt most likely took place when it did because of the general political and military instability that prevailed at the time. The area where the uprising occurred lay adjacent to Spain's former West Florida colony, which had just been taken by the United States, after it had revolted against Spain and made itself, for a brief period, an independent republic, all within a few months. The rapid changes in government created a general anxiety in the minds of many slaveholding landowners. And it is well known that slaves were always closely attuned to the minds and moods of their masters.³⁹

It is also important to keep in mind that the absence of the troops normally stationed in New Orleans greatly increased the chances of a successful slave insurrection, though, of course, there is no certain evidence that Deslondes knew that, only the suggestive fact that, from the outset, his rallying cry to his slave army was "On to Orleans." Had not Hampton's troops happened to have been passing through the Orleans Territory, on their way to fight in West Florida, the revolt almost certainly would have been much more destructive, and had the insurgents reached predominantly black New Orleans it could have been catastrophic.

The Deslondes revolt immediately prompted the legislature in Louisiana, as well as those in several other states and territories, to pass a number of new and tougher slave-control laws. Barely two weeks after the revolt, on January 29, Governor Claiborne convened a special session of the Orleans territorial legislature. In his speech to the assembly he sought to minimize the insurrection, calling it "a small uprising among the slaves of several neighboring plantations that did not reflect the feelings of loyal slaves in the rest of the territory." And he stressed the ease of its suppression, and that the execution of the guilty slaves would discourage future revolts.⁴⁰

Because he believed the revolt had been caused by outsiders, *i. e.*, Santo Domingan slaves, not local, *i. e.*, Creole, slaves, Claiborne asked for no new laws for control of slaves. However,

³⁹See Isaac Joslin Cox, *The West Florida Controversy, 1789-1813: A Study in American Diplomacy* (Baltimore, 1918), 151-156.

⁴⁰*La. Gazette*, January 30.

he did call for new restrictions on importing into Louisiana slaves convicted of felonies elsewhere. But the lawmakers, virtually all wealthy slaveholders, judged the potential dangers from such slaves to be less than the potential profits to be made off their labor, and rejected Claiborne's request.⁴¹

Less than a month after the Deslondes revolt, the Kentucky General Assembly passed a bill "for the more effectual prevention of crimes, conspiracies, and insurrections of slaves, free negroes, and mulattoes, and for their better government." The law authorized the death penalty for any slave who conspired to plan an insurrection or attempted to murder or rape a white person.⁴²

The Virginia and Georgia legislatures also passed bills placing new controls on slaves. Virginia was the site of more slave revolts than any other state, and took some of the strongest actions to prevent them. One of Virginia's new laws required not only the registering of new slaves brought into the state, but also mandated that if a male was brought in, within three months, a female slave between the ages of ten and thirty would have to be sent out of Virginia. The purpose was to slow the growth of the state's already huge slave population. Similarly, Georgia legislators passed new and stricter procedures for the prosecution of slaves involved in illegal activities. One of the Georgia laws called for quickly held trials before juries who had the power to order the immediate execution of convicted slaves.⁴³

The St. Louis city council, called the Board of Trustees, required more severe punishments for the purchase of liquor and horses by slaves without written permission from their masters. The regulations also prohibited meetings of more than four slaves at any location other than at their "master's," unless written permission had been granted by the Board of Trustees itself. The Board also voted to punish any white, mulatto, or free black caught at illegal slave gatherings and prohibited the

⁴¹*Courier*, April 13.

⁴²*Acts Passed at the First Session of the Twentieth General Assembly for the Commonwealth of Kentucky*, 1812.

⁴³*Acts of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia*, 1811; *Acts of the General Assembly of the State of Georgia*, 1811.

attendance of whites at authorized slave dances. Another ordinance authorized the militia to collect names of male citizens who could be called upon to man patrols during a crisis and established a nine p.m. curfew for slaves. The trustees established fines ranging from three to twenty dollars for violators who were free persons, and from ten to twenty lashes for slave lawbreakers.⁴⁴

In Louisiana Claiborne also called upon the legislature to enact a series of reforms to insure improvement in the quality and effectiveness of the local militia. He had long been concerned about the state of the militia, and in 1809 had written then Secretary of State James Madison about it:

The militia here is an inefficient force; my best and incessant exertions to introduce order and discipline have been attended with little success; they are moreover badly armed, and indeed in case of attack (by Spanish troops in West Florida), the negroes are so numerous in the settlement on the Mississippi, that it might be dangerous to draw a considerable detachment of the militia, to any one point.⁴⁵

Now Claiborne recommended more frequent musters of the local militia, with increased fines for absences, "so much so as to make the wealthiest of our citizens unwilling to incur them." He also wanted to give more authority to officers to administer rigid punishments and levy fines for disobedient and disorderly behavior of militiamen. And he demanded that the laws be "as rigid as the principles of a free government can be brought to sanction."⁴⁶

Following the governor's suggestions, the legislature reorganized the administration of the militia and stipulated fines of up to twenty dollars for missing inspections. It also gave more authority to militia officers, who could not arrest subordinates for disciplinary infractions or failure to pay fines.

⁴⁴*St. Louis Louisiana Gazette*, February 7, 14.

⁴⁵*La. Gazette*, January 30; Claiborne to Madison, January 1, 1809, Dunbar Rowland, ed., *The Official Letter Books of W. C. C. Claiborne*, 6 vols. (Jackson, Miss., 1917), IV, 284.

⁴⁶*Courier*, January 30.

And it gave the militia control of all public roads for maneuvers. The Militia Act, which passed with only one dissenting vote, exempted from service only ferryboat captains, doctors, ministers, and men over fifty.⁴⁷

The legislature also passed a resolution asking Madison, who was by then president, to station permanently near New Orleans a regiment of regular army troops. The resolution listed a number of factors justifying the request: a scattered population along the river; few city defenses; fear of internal and external hostilities; and a poorly prepared militia. And the legislature required New Orleans newspapers to print an official request that swords and muskets borrowed during the panic be returned to the militia. One legislator proposed a bill to form a militia group of free blacks, but it was immediately voted down.⁴⁸

The legislatures of Kentucky, Tennessee, and the Mississippi Territory also quickly, in the first sessions held after they learned of the Deslonde revolt, passed laws to strengthen their militias. Newspapers in Kentucky and Tennessee printed transcripts of Governor Claiborne's speech to the Orleans legislature on militia reform. The three legislatures increased the frequency of militia musters and the penalties for noncompliance with regulations, created more militia districts, and authorized the appointment of more officers. The Tennessee law specified, as had the one in the Orleans Territory, that blacks, mulattoes, and Indians could not be members of the militia.⁴⁹

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, February 4, 11; *Acts of the Second Session of the Third Legislature in the Territory of Orleans*, 1811, pp. 148-160; hereafter cited as *Acts*, with appropriate page numbers. The legislature, however, refused to reimburse the city of New Orleans more than twelve hundred dollars that its treasury had dispersed to suppress the revolt.

⁴⁸*Courier*, February 4, 11; *Acts*, 1811, pp. 148-160. The War of 1812 prompted the legislature to reverse itself and organize a black militia group, with white officers, and not to exceed 275 Creoles and free blacks who paid taxes and who themselves, or their fathers, owned \$300 worth of property. *Acts of the First Assembly of the State of Louisiana*, 1812, p. 72.

⁴⁹*Acts Passed at the First Session of the Twentieth General Assembly for the Commonwealth of Kentucky*, 1812; *Acts Passed at the Second Session of the General Assembly of the State of Tennessee*, 1811; *Acts Passed at the First Session of the Seventh General Assembly of the State of Mississippi*, 1812; *Frankfort, Kentucky, Argus of Western America*, April 10; *Nashville Clarion and Tennessee Gazette*, February 22.

The Deslondes revolt was not the exclusive reason for the militia reforms. In Louisiana, the planters, along with Claiborne, had, since the American purchase, been arguing for a buildup of the militia, which, during the late colonial period the Spanish governors had intentionally kept small and weak. The Spanish authorities distrusted the French Creole planters and feared that an effective militia controlled by planters might become an instrument for a planter insurrection against the Spanish crown. Also the possibility of impending war with England had a bearing. Fear of what slaves might do if a war with Britain drained off local militia forces greatly heightened concern for increased militia strength throughout the South.⁵⁰

Governor Claiborne also recommended to the Orleans territorial legislature that it consider compensating planters who had lost slaves or property in the Deslondes revolt. That proposal caused the most controversy. The speaker of the house promised to consider indemnification of losses but cautioned that this "new and delicate question" could create suspicion even from "an enlightened and liberal public." He worried about the legislature giving the appearance of using public funds for private interests, especially since several legislators, Andry for example, would be eligible to receive such remunerations.⁵¹

An editorial in the *Louisiana Courier* favoring remuneration addressed the main points of the arguments in opposition. It explained that the justification for the compensation was not sympathy—though it noted, sympathy should be considered because those who lost property had been singled out by a force that threatened the whole community. The reason for compensation, the editorial argued, was that the legislature, governor, and courts owed citizens protection and the government had armed itself with militia forces it believed sufficient to prevent riots, rebellions, and property loss. But the recent revolt proved the government had been mistaken. Its preparations had been inadequate. Thus it owed the damaged citizens restitution.⁵²

⁵⁰On Spanish colonial militia policy vis-a-vis the French Creole planters see James T. McGowan, "Creation of a Slave Society: Louisiana Plantations in the Eighteenth Century" (Ph. D. dissertation, University of Rochester, 1976), pp. 217ff.

⁵¹*Courier*, February 4.

⁵²*Ibid.*, March 29.

The editorial writer based his argument on what he called the legal principle: "the government owes protection from violence, or indemnification for it." This warranty was limited, he said, in that an individual was himself responsible for personal injuries resulting from chance misfortune or dispensation of Providence. An individual should be competent to protect his own interest or repair private losses, but no individual could still a riot or defend against an insurrection of hundreds of slaves. While government protection should not extend into domestic affairs, it surely should take care of "general security."⁵³

The editorial went on to suggest that there was legal precedence for remuneration. It listed several examples of similar compensations paid to injured citizens in other parts of the country and abroad: slave owners in Virginia had been compensated full price for slaves executed after recent insurrections; the United States Congress had paid for all damages done in suppressing the Burr Conspiracy; and the British parliament had remunerated victims of recent riots in Birmingham and London.⁵⁴

Such arguments apparently persuaded the legislature. It authorized payment, from a standing territorial "compensation" fund, in the amount of three hundred dollars for each slave killed or executed during the insurrection and in the amount of one-third the value of any other property lost or damaged. Because the "compensation" fund set aside in the territorial budget for recompensing owners of slaves sentenced to life imprisonment or killed while running away was nearly exhausted, the legislature specified that payments to Deslonde revolt claimants would be spread out over the next three years. The bill provided no compensation for the death of the two white planters.⁵⁵

⁵³*Ibid.*

⁵⁴*Ibid.*

⁵⁵*Acts*, 1811, pp. 132, 190; *Courier*, February 20, 25. The territory paid five hundred dollars apiece for male and female slaves sentenced to life in prison and three hundred dollars for any slave killed while running away. After Louisiana entered the Union in 1812, its first state legislature passed a law stipulating that no remuneration would be paid for slaves killed in insurrections or killed while attacking whites, but the law was not made retroactive.

During the session one legislator also proposed a bill "to reward slaves who had been faithful" during the insurrection. But most of the members, including Colonel Andry, whose son had been murdered in the rebellion, opposed the legislation, and the legislature rejected it. Subsequently, the legislature appointed a committee consisting of the judges of Saint Charles and Saint John the Baptist parishes and six local inhabitants and charged them to produce a list of slaves who had saved the lives of their masters or of some other white persons during the insurrection. The group was to report to the governor within fifteen days, but it apparently never fulfilled its charge, for no mention of it appears in subsequent legislative documents.⁵⁶

Despite Governor Claiborne's attempts to minimize the severity of the Deslondes revolt and the moderation of the new laws he proposed to the legislature, the New Orleans city council passed a series of ordinances regulating and restricting slave activities in the town. Ten days after the uprising, on January 18, the council passed an ordinance making it illegal for slaves not owned or temporarily hired by city residents to be in New Orleans. Any slave suspected of being in the city illegally could be searched, jailed, whipped, and fined.⁵⁷

The New Orleans council also restricted the actions of slaves legally residing there. They could not congregate except for funerals and for authorized dances to be held on Sundays before dark, and then only with the specific approval of the mayor. Slaves could not gather in the streets, public squares, meat markets, or tavern houses, and property owners failing to report illegal slave meetings could be heavily fined. The ordinance also prohibited slaves from carrying canes, unless blind, with a penalty of twenty-five lashes and forfeiture of the cane. To pay for the implementation of these new regulations the council authorized additional property taxes, and the local citizens did not object.⁵⁸

Accounts of the Deslondes revolt appeared in over ninety percent of the newspapers published in the United States at the

⁵⁶Taylor, *Negro Slavery*, pp. 213-214; *Acts*, 1811, p. 144; *Courier*, February 1.

⁵⁷*Courier*, January 18.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*

time. Several papers printed letters written by Louisiana residents who reported some details of the revolt not mentioned in local New Orleans newspapers, thus adding to the small fund of already existing factual information on the uprising. Similarly, some out-of-state newspapers reprinted stories from New Orleans and Natchez newspapers no copies of which now exist, also adding to our fund of facts.

Reports of the revolt also raised national concern about possibilities of large-scale slave uprisings in areas with huge servile populations. Several state legislatures in the South passed a series of stricter slave-control laws and reorganized and strengthened militia capabilities. And the news of the revolt, and of the severity of its suppression, also served to focus the long-standing, but previously rather general, anti-slavery attitudes present in certain areas of the North, particularly in Ohio and New England. That focusing was so pronounced that the insurrection probably deserves to be considered an important, if not a critical, factor in the formation of abolitionist sentiment. However looked at, the Deslondes revolt constituted a major national event in United States history.