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The Native Ground: Indians and Colonists in the Heart of the Continent

Interpreting a Continent: Voices from Colonial America (with John DuVal)

Independence Lost: Lives on the Edge of the American Revolution

Independence LOST

Lives on the Edge of the American Revolution

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CHAPTER SIX

Petit Jean

THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR put slaveholders in a dilemma. On both sides, war conditions demanded the assistance and loyalty of all members of a community, including slaves. Freedom was the obvious way to ensure their loyalty, but without slaves, the colonies' economies might fail regardless of the war's outcome. The British moved first. In 1775 Royal Governor of Virginia John Murray, the Fourth Earl of Dunmore, proclaimed that any slaves or indentured servants of rebellious Virginia masters who fled to British lines and served in the British army would thereby win their freedom. Thousands of people took Lord Dunmore up on the offer, not only men of military age but also women, children, and old men who interpreted the invitation to include themselves. On the rebel side, Crispus Attucks died in Boston protesting British soldiers. Other free and enslaved black urbanites rioted for the same reasons as the white men and women by their sides—protesting poverty and oppression as part of a long tradition of British subjects. Within the empire's hierarchical political system, only a small minority of British subjects could vote or hold office, but all had the right to protest. When the conflict first began, northern

slaves who volunteered for the rebel militias were promised freedom. The Continental Congress at times encouraged enslaved and free black enlistments, especially as the war dragged on and white recruits became less enthusiastic. Ultimately, most of the states enlisted slaves and free blacks in the forces they were required to provide the Continental Army as well as in state militias.[1]

War on the Gulf Coast would offer opportunities to seize freedom in large and small ways, in addition to the dangers that wars always bring to those caught in them. In Mobile, Petit Jean would take advantage of the wartime need for his skills, expertise, and loyalty to become a go-between and increase his own independence.[2]

Slavery in French Mobile

Enslaved people were a central part of early America by any measure: sheer numbers, participation in the economy, influence on the decisions of imperial and local leaders. Yet the vast majority of them left no documents in their own writing, nor did colonial officials record their spoken words as they did with American Indian diplomats. In the colonial and revolutionary periods, enslaved people appear in the documentary record mostly as numbers on a page: age, price, and perhaps a name. These are chilling documents, and they remind us that colonial Americans bought and sold human beings, but they do little to tell the stories of the real people behind the numbers. We know more about Petit Jean because of his wartime work for the Spanish, but we have to guess at his history before and after the war from what we know about slavery in Mobile more generally. But that is more than we have for most. For example, an enslaved woman was married to Petit Jean, but we do not even know her name.

The ancestors of Petit Jean and his wife most likely came in slave ships to French Louisiana from West Africa in the early 1700s soon after Frenchman Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville and his brother, the Sieur de Bienville, founded Louisiana. Coming south from Montreal, the brothers hoped to establish plantations in this warmer climate. Between 1719 and 1730, French settlers imported seven thousand African slaves to Mobile, New Orleans, and other Gulf Coast towns. Nearly five thousand of them came from Senegambia (present-day Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, and Guinea-Bissau) and most of the rest from the Bight of Benin (to the southeast, the present-day coasts of eastern Ghana, Togo, Benin, and western Nigeria). But in 1729, Natchez Indians destroyed the French plantations established on their lands and killed and captured hundreds of settlers and slaves. This massacre persuaded French colonial administrators to focus their plantation efforts on the Caribbean rather than Louisiana, where plantations on Indian lands could spark another Indian attack or even a united Indian-African war against the French. They cut off Louisiana's slave supply, although slaves continued to trickle into Mobile on unauthorized ships and with new French settlers.[3]

Petit Jean's French name (meaning "Little John") implies that he was born in French Louisiana and served a French master. One official referred to him as "the mulatto Petit Jean," so he may have had French or Native American ancestry as well as West African. Petit Jean was a cattle driver. He raised his master's cattle in the countryside north of Mobile, feeding them on forest vegetation. When his master wanted meat from his hundreds of cattle to sell or eat, Petit Jean either drove them into Mobile or Pensacola or killed and butchered them on the spot.[4]

Slavery in British Mobile

The Seven Years' War changed the map of North America dramatically, and Petit Jean saw the effects as British plantation agriculture took over. Short on settlers and fearful of slave rebellions and Indian wars, the French had built the colonies of New France (Canada) and Louisiana on the fur trade. The British experience in North America could not have been more different. Plantation slavery spread across most of the British colonies, raising tobacco in the Chesapeake, sugar in Barbados and Jamaica, and rice in South Carolina and Georgia. When the Seven Years' War left Britain with West and East Florida, slavery there grew.

The years following the war brought more and more African slaves to Mobile and put them to work on more and more plantations. British settlers, including James and Isabella Bruce, expected African slaves to do the labor to make their British land grants profitable. Some brought slaves with them from other colonies, and most bought slaves from ships coming from Jamaica and beyond. At least 2,500 new slaves arrived from Africa between 1763 and the Revolution. Almost all came from Senegambia and Sierra Leone. Most worked along the coast or up the Mississippi River, while some were sold illegally into Spanish Louisiana.[5]

British slavery in West Florida became more entrenched and more rigid than French slavery had been in the region. Now some tobacco and indigo plantations had over a hundred slaves. Foreshadowing antebellum restrictions after this region became the cotton South, the British slave code for West Florida restricted the right of slaveholders to manumit (free) their slaves and prohibited slaves from going farther than two miles from home without a pass; buying liquor without their masters' permission; conducting business for themselves; keeping their own pigs, cattle, or chickens; and carrying guns beyond their owners' property.[6]

Still, Petit Jean retained a role in the plantation system altogether different and more autonomous than most slaves in post-1763 Mobile. A skilled second- or third-generation slave, Petit Jean remained highly mobile and had a deep knowledge of the landscape around Mobile, including the confusing cattle paths. He knew its cane breaks, pine barrens, scrub oaks, bogs, and creeks. He carried messages from one plantation to another, bringing word of a birth, a harsh punishment, or an impending visit. He would regularly have come across groups of Indians traveling the region's roads. He may have spoken not only French but also Mobilian Jargon, a trade language based on Choctaw, which Indians used to communicate across linguistic barriers and which Africans and Europeans adopted since their arrival. His cattle fed Native diplomats who came to Mobile, including Payamataha. And importantly Petit Jean almost certainly carried a gun, a privilege forbidden to most slaves.[7]

Freedoms

In July 1776, Mobile's slaves whispered rumors to one another of a slave rebellion near Natchez. White men and women whispered too, with futile hopes that their slaves would not hear the news. Plantation owners had discovered what seemed to be a plot by several of their slaves to rebel against them. Four slaves accused of the conspiracy felt the noose that Thomas Jefferson and John Adams feared as they declared independence that same summer in Philadelphia. Another accused man drowned in the river to escape hanging. There is no way to know for certain if the accused actually planned a rebellion or if nervous planters imagined or exaggerated the threat, but the message Petit Jean heard was that swift and brutal violence would punish those who even discussed rising up.[8]

Running away was the most common way of seeking permanent or temporary freedom in West Florida and Louisiana. In July 1776, two slaves, Ketty and Bessy, ran away from one of the same plantations involved in the alleged conspiracy. Bessy's master found her that night at a neighbor's plantation, and Ketty returned home the following day, "finding it uncomfortable in the woods," according to her master. When another slave, Paul, went missing, the master assumed that he had gone to visit his wife on another plantation.[9] Ketty, Bessy, and Paul suffered punishment, probably physical, for running away, but they knew that they would not be killed, and their master's tone in recording the events implies that this kind of temporary flight was common and not particularly worrying.

This kind of running away is evidence that freedom was not the all-or-nothing proposition we might imagine. On a daily basis, it could be seized in small amounts. And no longer being enslaved did not necessarily mean full freedom. An old or sick slave might need a master's food and lodging. Indeed, French Louisiana's Code Noir required that "slaves sick from old age, disease, or any other malady, incurable or not, shall be nourished and sustained by their masters."[10] Depending on circumstances, being close to one's family, secure from

military attack, or sold to a less vicious master might be as important as legal freedom. Finding community and ways of integrating into new social networks could be a primary goal for people who had been stripped from their homes and alienated from their peoples. No one wanted to be a slave, but almost no one questioned the legitimacy of slavery as an institution. Petit Jean had a great deal of autonomy in his work and certainly could see around him examples of slaves in worse circumstances than himself.

Petit Jean could have run away. Some of his fellow enslaved men and women crossed the border into Spanish Louisiana, hid in the bayous, sneaked onto ships, or blended into New Orleans's free population of color. Petit Jean had plenty of opportunity as he tended cattle alone or with other slaves in the borderlands of British West Florida, Spanish Louisiana, and Choctaw country. Starting in the late 1600s, in an attempt to undermine the English, the Spanish crown promised freedom to slaves fleeing from English colonies to Spanish ones. Slaves left Jamaica for Cuba and South Carolina for St. Augustine. However, the powers along the Mississippi River in the 1760s and 1770s were trying to keep a delicate peace. Not interfering with one another's slave system was a key point of agreement. If Petit Jean headed west to Louisiana or north to Choctaw country, he could count on being returned in the next diplomatic exchange, suffering worse conditions in the meantime, and facing punishment upon his return to his Mobile master. Worries over a master's retribution plus alligators, snakes, and starvation kept most slaves at home no matter how badly they wanted freedom. For Petit Jean, coming back to town meant returning to his wife, who presumably had less freedom of movement than her husband and would have found it hard to escape with him.[11]

Toward the Revolution?

Rumors of rebellion on the Atlantic Coast arrived with thousands of loyalists and their slaves fleeing Georgia and South Carolina. The British crown promised these refugees land in the Floridas, markets,

protection, and escape from the violence that threatened their personal liberty. The government compensated those who had abandoned substantial land holdings in the thirteen colonies with even larger grants. West Florida's population doubled with people whose lives had been torn apart by the rebellion.[12]

Protestors against the Stamp Act at times accused Parliament of trying to enslave them, and their choice of metaphor makes sense. For people who lived with slavery, enslavement was an image that came quickly to mind when accusing others of tyranny. Slavery itself did not strike them as unnatural, only tyranny by men they held to be their equals. In the era of the Enlightenment, European colonists throughout the Americas tended to believe that African slavery was a necessary evil, and they had difficulty imagining a successful American colony (or nation) without it.[13]

Metaphors of slavery of course had particular resonance for people who were actually enslaved. In 1774 Massachusetts slaves drew on the rhetoric of the Revolution as well as the Enlightenment and Christianity to argue not just for individual emancipation but also for a new goal: the complete abolition of slavery. They claimed that "we have in common with all other men a natural right to our freedoms." In 1777, abolitionist leader Prince Hall wrote a petition to the Massachusetts legislature arguing that slaves had "a natural and unalienable right to that freedom which the Great Parent of the universe hath bestowed on all mankind."[14] But in Mobile, Petit Jean was unlikely to hear rhetoric that questioned hierarchy and dependence. Probably no one in Mobile read Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* aloud or erected a Liberty Pole, as they did in Atlantic coast cities.[15]

In war as in peace, enslaved people made different decisions based on the circumstances of their bondage, and Petit Jean's slavery had some freedoms within it. Petit Jean probably valued his important and relatively independent work. Even though other people stole their labor, some slaves took pride in skills and hard work and behaving honorably. Indeed, those attributes could be particular points of pride in the face of the common European belief that enslaved people had no ambition or honor. Like all people, of course, slaves were individual human beings who thought and acted in a variety of ways. As

slaves, Petit Jean and his wife did not labor by choice in Mobile, and their loyalty was not necessarily to British West Florida or to their masters. Like many slaves and free blacks from New England to New Orleans, they would work for their own interests in white Americans' war for independence. Petit Jean would forward his family's personal independence by making others dependent on him.