

## Slavery and Black Labour in a St. Mary's Bay Acadian Family, 1786-1840

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### Résumé de l'article

Des documents laissés par un missionnaire catholique français et un capitaine acadien de navire marchand qui avait des liens avec les Antilles ont révélé que des Noirs furent réduits à l'esclavage et engagés dans d'autres relations de travail non libres par un réseau d'Acadiens de premier plan. Analysées et mises en dialogue avec des études de portée plus large portant sur l'esclavage dans les Maritimes et le silence de la mémoire collective acadienne, ces sources placent deux chefs de file bien connus de la communauté acadienne aux côtés d'autres propriétaires d'esclaves loyalistes dans les premiers temps de la Nouvelle-Écosse. Les héritiers de ces deux hommes ont signé une pétition adressée à l'Assemblée législative de la province en 1807 pour assurer que des esclaves demeuraient leur propriété, à une époque où, par ailleurs, le sentiment anti-esclavagiste et la politique abolitionniste gagnaient en influence dans l'Empire britannique.

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Des documents laissés par un missionnaire catholique français et un capitaine acadien de navire marchand qui avait des liens avec les Antilles ont révélé que des Noirs furent réduits à l'esclavage et engagés dans d'autres relations de travail non libres par un réseau d'Acadiens de premier plan. Analysées et mises en dialogue avec des études de portée plus large portant sur l'esclavage dans les Maritimes et le silence de la mémoire collective acadienne, ces sources placent deux chefs de file bien connus de la communauté acadienne aux côtés d'autres propriétaires d'esclaves loyalistes dans les premiers temps de la Nouvelle-Écosse. Les héritiers de ces deux hommes ont signé une pétition adressée à l'Assemblée législative de la province en 1807 pour assurer que des esclaves demeuraient leur propriété, à une époque où, par ailleurs, le sentiment anti-esclavagiste et la politique abolitionniste gagnaient en influence dans l'Empire britannique.

Documents left by a French Roman Catholic missionary and an Acadian merchant captain with Caribbean connections have revealed that Black people were enslaved by, and in other unfree and labouring relations with, a prominent Acadian network. Analyzed and placed into conversation with broader studies of Maritime slavery and the silences of Acadian public memory, these sources position two well-known Acadian community leaders alongside other Loyalist slaveholders in early Nova Scotia. The heirs of these two men signed an 1807 petition to the provincial legislature to secure their property in slaves at a time when anti-slavery sentiment and abolitionist policy were otherwise gaining influence in the British Empire.

ON 17 JUNE 1806 THE ROMAN CATHOLIC PRIEST Jean-Mandé Sigogne, “Missionary of the French Acadians in the township of Clare, County of Annapolis,” was summoned to the home of the ailing magistrate Amable Doucet. Sigogne then recorded the last will and testament of this esteemed Acadian elder. “[T]rusting in the Suffrages and prayers of the Holy Catholick and Apostolical Church,” Amable first pledged his soul to Christ his redeemer. He then requested that the dower rights of his wife, Marie, be fulfilled and his debts paid. In the will’s third article Amable bequeathed to “Said Mary [*sic*] my wife all my movable property and Jerome the Negro Slave.” The details of

inheritance for Amable's only surviving son and his six yet unwed daughters were then outlined. Lastly, he named two men, "Anselm or Samuel" Doucet and Francis Gilis, "yeomen of the Said township of Clare," his co-executors.<sup>1</sup> Anselm/Samuel<sup>2</sup> Doucet was the son of Amable's distant cousin, the deceased Captain Pierre Doucet. These two related Doucet families represent prominent resettled Acadians who, during the late 18th century, took up slave-owning, and, in the case of Pierre Doucet, slave-trading as well. The captain, the magistrate, and their kin were involved in enslavement locally at St. Mary's Bay and across broad Atlantic networks.

The records of Captain Doucet indicate he transported slaves between West Indian and American port cities. At home, several members of his extended family resisted the growing anti-slavery movement as it spread through the British Atlantic colonies during the early 1800s. They added their names to a December 1807 document by numerous Annapolis County residents petitioning the colonial government to secure their property in slaves at a time when the legal footing of slavery in the province was growing uncertain. This petition is crucial to understanding the nature of Maritime slave-owning. It was drawn up during a historical turning-point when the transatlantic commerce in enslaved Africans had been recently outlawed in the British empire by the Slave Trade Act (passed by Parliament in March 1807). Hearing this news and threatened with the prospect of potentially losing their enslaved property, 27 petitioners named as "Negro proprietors" pushed back and sought legal recognition of this property. These documents – Amable Doucet's will of June 1806, the slaveowners' petition of December 1807, and Captain Doucet's papers – are entry points for this analysis of Acadian practices of slavery.

### New light on Acadian history

As most monographic studies of Acadian history have addressed the period before and leading up to their deportation by the British (1604-1755), the Acadian resettlement era (1763-1840) has gone relatively unaddressed by historians working in English.<sup>3</sup> This has largely been due to the lack of robust

1 Will of Amable Doucet, Digby County probate files, A-96, Nova Scotia Archives (NSA). Thank you to Harvey Amani Whitfield as well as the editors and anonymous reviewers at *Acadiensis* for providing constructive feedback on an earlier draft of this paper.

2 "Anselm" as it was popularly used by the Acadians was rendered "Samuel" in English.

3 Essential works on Acadian history in English include N.E.S. Griffiths, *From Migrant to Acadian: A North American Border People, 1604-1755* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University, 2005); John G. Reid et al., eds., *The 'Conquest' of Acadia, 1710: Imperial, Colonial, and Aboriginal Constructions* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2004); Geoffrey Plank, *An*

archival sources on the Acadians during this period of imperial transition and colonial upheaval. It was during the 1760s and 1770s, however, that the townships of Clare and Argyle on Nova Scotia's southwestern coast were surveyed by the provincial government and settled by returning Acadians willing to pledge allegiance to King George III.<sup>4</sup> Many Acadians deported to New England returned to Nova Scotia to claim this offer of land. They soon, however, learned the quality of land offered to them at St. Mary's Bay was not comparable to the lands they had been deprived of in the agriculturally rich Bay of Fundy settlements. As a result, the distinct Acadian communities in Clare and Argyle largely turned to the sea to eke out a living during the first decades of their return to Nova Scotia. By 1800, the Acadian parish community of Clare counted approximately 120 families, with the Acadian parish community of Argyle counting approximately 80 families.<sup>5</sup> Linguistically and culturally isolated from Acadian communities in eastern Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, the Acadians of Clare and Argyle lacked official administration for several decades. Each community, however, was near English-speaking settlements of Black Loyalists and others of the African diaspora recently arrived in Nova Scotia. Clare, on St. Mary's Bay, bordered the town of Weymouth, home to many Black residents; and Argyle, between Yarmouth and Shelburne, was a day or two's journey from the Black Loyalist settlement called Birchtown.

While the St. Mary's Bay family network studied here is not representative of the overall Acadian population of its time, it is crucial to note that these family heads – Amable and Pierre Doucet – have been centered in the regional oral tradition and limited extant historiography as community leaders of the resettlement era. Popular memory has recorded many details about the lives

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*Unsettled Conquest: The British Campaign Against the Peoples of Acadia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2001); John Mack Faragher, *A Great and Noble Scheme: The Tragic Story of the Expulsion of the French Acadians from Their American Homeland* (New York: Norton, 2005); Jeffers Lennox, *Homelands and Empires: Indigenous Spaces, Imperial Fictions, and Competition for Territory in Northeastern North America, 1690-1763* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2017); Gregory M.W. Kennedy, *Something of a Peasant Paradise? Comparing Rural Societies in Acadie and the Loudunais, 1604-1755* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University, 2014); and, on post-Deportation Acadian history, see Christopher Hodson, *The Acadian Diaspora: An Eighteenth-Century History* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University, 2012).

- 4 Montagu Wilmot's proclamation to the Acadians, November 1764, Isaac Deschamps collection, MG-1, v. 238, NSA; Sally Ross and Alphonse Deveau, *The Acadians of Nova Scotia: Past and Present* (Halifax: Nimbus, 1992), 76-100.
- 5 Jean-Mandé Sigogne to Pierre Denaut, 26 January 1800, Fonds Jean-Mandé Sigogne, MG-9, boîte 1, dossier 5, Centre Acadien, Université Sainte-Anne (CAUSA).

of these men while remaining silent on the archival documents that prove they were involved in enslavement. These Doucet men have been described as leaders of an “uprooted people”<sup>6</sup> who suffered an “arrested continuity.”<sup>7</sup> Under such “survivance”<sup>8</sup> narratives, driven by recollective and nationalistic aims characteristic of foundational Acadian historiographies, the lives and accomplishments of Amable and Pierre Doucet have been uncritically valorized. Such selective silence and remembrance have been noted qualities of Acadian history-telling and public commemoration. The collective trauma of the deportation and its aftermath has rendered it difficult for Acadians to “tourner la page” or perceive their history as settler colonial.<sup>9</sup>

Records left by the Catholic missionary Sigogne have been central to understanding Black-Acadian relations in St. Mary’s Bay. Sigogne left important but under-studied documents, including a “journal d’office” from his role as magistrate after Amable Doucet’s death as well as family catalogues, sometimes called censuses, of the St. Mary’s Bay parishioners conducted intermittently between 1818 and his death in 1844. These supplement the otherwise very fragmented parish records that survived the “Great Fire of 1820” that swept through the region.<sup>10</sup> As the Black lives only glimpsed in these documents appear as sporadic traces, historian Marisa Fuentes’s call to “productively min[e] archive silences”<sup>11</sup> was very useful in writing this article.

6 Neil Boucher, “The Doucets of Saint Mary’s Bay: Community Leaders Amongst an Uprooted People,” *Nova Scotia Historical Review* 5, no. 1 (1985): 43–58.

7 Ronald Robichaud, “Deportation Era Acadian Leaders: An Arrested Continuity” (MA thesis, Saint Mary’s University, 2002).

8 M.-Adelard Tremblay, “Les Acadiens de la Baie Française : L’histoire d’une survivance,” *Revue d’histoire de l’Amérique française* 15, no. 4 (March 1962): 526–55.

9 For a more nuanced treatment, see Ronald Rudin, *Remembering and Forgetting in Acadie: A Historian’s Journey Through Public Memory* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2009); on memory in early Acadian nationalism, see Chantal Richard, “Le récit de la Déportation comme mythe de création dans l’idéologie des Conventions nationales acadiennes (1881–1937),” *Acadiensis* 36, no. 1 (Autumn 2006): 69–81; on Acadian memory as settler colonial, see Travis Wysote and Erin Morton, “‘The Depth of the Plough’: White Settler Tautologies and Pioneer Lies,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 9, no. 4 (February 2019): 1–26. Stephanie Pettigrew’s work on museology demonstrates that efforts are being made to critically disaggregate Acadian histories from the nostalgic notion that Acadians lived in a peaceful, pre-deportation golden age; see <https://acadiensis.wordpress.com/2019/07/09/pointe-sainte-anne-the-continuity-of-a-destroyed-eighteenth-century-acadian-village/>.

10 A letter in the *Acadian Recorder*, 23 September 1820, described this fire and the loss of “all papers, public and private, connected with the settlement of French Town [Clare].”

11 Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2016), 5.

### Pre-deportation Acadia and slavery

Acadians were familiar with slavery under both the French and British colonial regimes. Pierre Morpain, a French privateer, sailed several times from Port-Royal to Saint-Domingue in the years before the seizure of Acadie by the British in 1710. On a voyage out of Saint-Domingue in 1707, Morpain took a British slave vessel. He sailed his prize north to Port-Royal with its cargo of foodstuffs and 37 enslaved Africans. The slaves, however, were not sold to Acadians and did not remain at Port-Royal; they were taken to Saint-Domingue.<sup>12</sup> Morpain nevertheless represents an early and significant connection between the Acadian capital and the Caribbean and its slave economy.

After Port-Royal was taken by the British and renamed Annapolis Royal, British colonial administrators, other elites, and their families established themselves in the town. They brought with them at least some enslaved persons of African descent. Isaac Provender was one such person. In April 1737 the colony's administrative council heard the complaint of fellow council member Lieutenant Edward Amhurst, "whose House was set on fire & Burnt to the Ground" by Provender "his Bound Servant [a euphemism for "slave" in this case], a Boy betwixt Ten & Eleven years of Age." Margaret Conrad has concluded that Provender was enslaved and used arson to "protest" his enslavement. Conrad also states that "although most of the labour in Annapolis Royal was performed by soldiers and indentured servants, a few families were sufficiently affluent to purchase slaves." A witness told the Annapolis Council he heard from Provender "that Lieutenant Amhurst was a very bad Master." At the proceedings, Provender confessed that he "had it often in his Head to cut his Master's and Mistress's Throats" and later resolved to set fire to their house. No express indication was given of Provender's race; however, the case much resembles other instances of arson committed by enslaved persons of colour, including that of Marie-Joseph Angélique in Montreal three years prior.<sup>13</sup> While some of the town elites of Annapolis were known slave-owners,

12 Robert le Blant, "Un corsaire de Saint-Domingue en Acadie : Pierre Morpain, 1707-1711," *Nova Francia* 4 (1931): 193-208; Bernard Pothier, "Pierre Morpain," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online* (DCB) III, [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/morpain\\_pierre\\_3E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/morpain_pierre_3E.html). An enslaved teenager named Georges Sauzy, for instance, was later personally owned by Morpain. During the 1745 Siege of Louisbourg, Sauzy saved Morpain's life on the battlefield. For this act, Sauzy was granted his freedom.

13 Minutes of His Majesty's Council, Annapolis Royal, 20 April 1737, <https://archives.novascotia.ca/heartland/archives/?Number=Four&Page=1>; Margaret Conrad, *At the Ocean's Edge: A History of Nova Scotia to Confederation* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2020), 113-14; Brenda Dunn, *A History of Port-Royal/Annapolis Royal, 1605-1800* (Halifax: Nimbus, 2004), 191-4. On Marie-Joseph Angélique, see Afua Cooper, *The Hanging of*

it remains unclear if Acadian families of the Bay of Fundy settlements likewise profited from enslaved labour.

Louisbourg on Île-Royale (later Cape Breton) was home to many enslaved Africans and West Indians as well as a smaller number of enslaved Indigenous persons known as “panis.” Some Acadian families from the Bay of Fundy settlements migrated to Louisbourg and Île-Royale after the British conquest of the mainland. An Acadian family at Louisbourg known to have owned at least one slave was that of Jeanne Dugas, whose parents relocated to Île-Royale from Annapolis prior to Jeanne’s birth.<sup>14</sup> The importation of African slaves to Louisbourg from the French Caribbean enabled this Acadian Dugas family to profit from such economic connections with the extended French empire. Kenneth Donovan has examined the history of slavery on Île-Royale and concludes that between 1713 and 1758 there were at least 242 enslaved persons of African descent being held on the island colony.<sup>15</sup>

Amable and Pierre Doucet were, respectively, a teenager and a young boy at the start of the Acadian deportations in 1755. Both were from the Annapolis settlements and would not have witnessed slavery as practiced on Île-Royale. Their personal exposure to Atlantic slavery would have come from their experiences as youths in exile in Massachusetts.

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Angélique: *The Untold Story of Slavery in Canada and the Burning of Old Montréal* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia, 2007).

- 14 Anne Marie Lane Jonah, “Everywoman’s Biography: The Stories of Marie Marguerite Rose and Jeanne Dugas at Louisbourg,” *Acadiensis* 45, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2016): 153.
- 15 See Kenneth Donovan, “Slaves in Île Royale, 1713–1758,” *French Colonial History* 5 (2004): 30 and, on slavery in New France, see Marcel Trudel, *Deux siècles d’esclavage au Québec*, ed. Micheline D’Allaire (1960; Montreal: Bibliothèque Québécoise, 2009) and Brett Rushforth, *Bonds of Alliance: Indigenous and Atlantic Slavery in New France* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2012). On slavery in Planter and Loyalist Nova Scotia, see the following studies: Carolyn Smardz Frost, “Planting Slavery in Nova Scotia’s Promised Land, 1759–1775,” in *Unsettling the Great White North: Black Canadian History*, eds. Michele A. Johnson and Funké Aladejebi (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2022), 53–84; Harvey Amani Whitfield, *North to Bondage: Loyalist Slavery in the Maritimes* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 2016); Whitfield, “The African Diaspora in Atlantic Canada: History, Historians, and Historiography,” *Acadiensis* 46 (Winter/Spring 2017): 213–32; Catherine Cottreau-Robins, “Searching for the Enslaved in Nova Scotia’s Loyalist Landscape,” *Acadiensis* 43 no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2014): 125–36; James W. St. George Walker, *The Black Loyalists: The Search for a Promised Land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, 1783–1870* (1976; Toronto: University of Toronto, 1992); and Alexander X. Byrd, *Captives and Voyagers: Black Migrants Across the Eighteenth-Century British Atlantic World* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2008). On slavery in British colonial Quebec, see Charmaine A. Nelson, *Slavery, Geography, and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Marine Landscapes of Montreal and Jamaica* (New York: Routledge, 2019) and Frank Mackey, *Done with Slavery: The Black Fact in Montreal, 1760–1840* (Montreal: McGill–Queen’s University, 2010).

### **Amable and Pierre Doucet: slave owner and slave trader**

Neil Boucher composed the most comprehensive study of the Doucet family of St. Mary's Bay published thus far. Boucher continues the narrative of Acadians as victims, calling them "a subdued people, having suffered the psychological effects of total uprootedness, of losing family members during their banishment, and of returning to a land that at the beginning denied them all political and educational rights."<sup>16</sup> While Acadians were denied early political and educational rights, the story is more complex than Boucher sketches – especially when placed in the context of other marginalized populations with whom the Acadians of the time were engaged.

Amable Doucet was an esteemed elder of the St. Mary's Bay Acadians. Approaching 70 as he lay on his deathbed, Amable had been born on 23 April 1737 and baptized in the Saint-Jean-Baptiste parish of Annapolis Royal.<sup>17</sup> He was 18 when the deportations began. The plight of Acadian families during their forced expulsion is sometimes difficult to trace, yet it is known that Amable Doucet's family was removed to New England. They were enumerated in the records of Marblehead and later Newbury in Massachusetts. In a record from 1760, Amable was noted as 23 years old and sickly.<sup>18</sup> Little other documentation records the details of his life until he reappeared as a settler at St. Mary's Bay. There Amable was granted 350 acres in May 1772.<sup>19</sup> This extensive property made up the landed estate he bequeathed to his son in his will, and it made Amable one of the region's largest Acadian landowners.<sup>20</sup> Such property holdings, combined with his privileged and influential social function, contributed significantly to his enduring position in public memory.

Amable was also literate at a time when few Acadians were.<sup>21</sup> His signature appears on several surviving documents. His ability to read and write propelled him to become the first Acadian magistrate of Clare. Isaiah Wilson, early chronicler of Digby County, called Amable Doucet, "Esquire, J[ustice of the]

16 Boucher, "The Doucets," 43.

17 Baptism of Amable Doucet, 23 April 1737, *Registre de baptêmes, mariages et sépultures pour la paroisse de St Jean Baptiste à Annapolis Royale* (SJB register), <https://archives.novascotia.ca/acadian/>; Stephen A. White, "Amable Doucet," *DCB Online* V, [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/doucet\\_amable\\_5E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/doucet_amable_5E.html).

18 Boucher, "The Doucets," 45.

19 Isaiah Wilson, *A Geography and History of the County of Digby, Nova Scotia* (Halifax: Holloway Brothers, 1900), 40.

20 In July 1817 Amable's widow and son sold 250 acres of this property to Anselm Doucet, Digby County Registry of Deeds (DCRD), Transaction Register 3B, p. 67, NSA.

21 Gérald C. Boudreau, "« L'ignorance est une vice » : une démarche de scolarisation en Acadie," *Études d'histoire religieuse* 59 (1993): 125–41.



P[ease], the first Acadian Magistrate commissioned for [the] ancient County of Annapolis.”<sup>22</sup> Just prior to his death, Amable’s magistracy was transferred to the priest Sigogne.<sup>23</sup>

Along with his position as a justice of the peace, Amable served as a lay leader of the Acadian religious community. In the absence of any resident Catholic priests during the first decades of their resettlement in Clare, some Acadian elders performed rituals such as lay baptisms and the informal blessing of marriages. Boucher writes: “This ‘elder’ would preside over prayers at Sunday service, which were then called *messes blanches*.”<sup>24</sup> These white masses consisted only of group prayer and recitation of portions of the Catholic liturgy that were readily put to memory. Any rites of baptism and marriage performed by Amable would later require solemnizing upon the visitation of an ordained priest. Such was the case with Sigogne’s arrival in July 1799. Between 1791 and 1798, Amable conducted 18 lay unions.<sup>25</sup> These rituals served, in rudimentary form, to support the spiritual and pastoral needs of the Acadian community during their period of diaspora and resettlement. In 1792 Amable authored a petition to the new provincial governor, John Wentworth, requesting a resident priest for his community. This followed several unsuccessful requests made to the Catholic hierarchy. The request was endorsed by 22 male heads of household who either signed or made their mark, declaring: “We are his Majesty’s faithful Acadian Subjects.”<sup>26</sup> In December 1799, Amable was one of six publicly respected men of the St. Mary’s Bay community appointed as trustees of the parish fabrique established at that time by Sigogne.<sup>27</sup>

22 Wilson, *Geography and History*, 227.

23 Journal d’office, Fonds Jean-Mandé Sigogne, [https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac\\_reel\\_c1487/77](https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac_reel_c1487/77).

24 Boucher, “The Doucets,” 47 [italics in original]. The tradition of the messe blanche was also performed by displaced Acadians who settled in Louisiana – where Acadians frequently became slaveowners; see Carl A. Brasseaux, *The Founding of New Acadia: The Beginnings of Acadian Life in Louisiana, 1765-1803* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1987), 153, 188-97.

25 Baie Ste-Marie, Nouvelle-Écosse, registre des baptêmes, des mariages et des sépultures de la paroisse Ste-Marie, catholique, 1799-1801 (BSM register), FM 9, B8, v. 26, Library and Archives Canada (LAC).

26 Petition of Amable Doucet and others to Wentworth, undated, Fonds Placide Gaudet, boîte 88, CN-2-156, Centre d’Études Acadiennes, Université de Moncton (CEAUM).

27 Registre de Fabrique de la Paroisse de la Baye Ste Marie Anglicé Clare Diocèse de Québec, Fonds Jean-Mandé Sigogne, MG-9, boîte 1, dossier 2, CAUSA. A “fabrique” was an elected assembly of laymen who managed the parish’s temporal affairs.

Shortly after settling in Clare, Amable, a widower, married Marie Gertrude Gaudet in October 1774.<sup>28</sup> Marie was Amable's second wife. She was approximately 20 years his junior. The couple had ten children, four of whom were officially baptized in August 1799.<sup>29</sup> In June 1806, as summarized by Boucher, Doucet "dictated his last will and testament to Father Sigogne, leaving all his movable property and a Negro slave named Jerome to his wife Marie." Following this statement, however, Boucher, in a footnote, disregards the reality of slavery among St. Mary's Bay Acadians. He carefully avoids the terms "slave" and "slavery" by saying "there are no other records of domestic servitude in Clare . . . . Could Doucet's Jerome be a mark of social distinction for his master?"<sup>30</sup> Doucet was socially distinct; nevertheless, Boucher dismissed the presence of the term "slave" in Amable's will as an anomaly in the Acadian community, foreclosing the notion that slavery was a significant part of St. Mary's Bay society. When Amable died in 1906, his only son was 10 years old. This boy would not become the head of the household for several more years. During this interval, Jerome would have been responsible for maintaining the family's extensive properties. Jerome's labour would have included making repairs to the homestead and outbuildings, harvesting crops, and tending livestock.

Pierre Doucet, a distant cousin of Amable, was baptized at Annapolis on 17 May 1750.<sup>31</sup> When the deportations began, Pierre was five years old. Like the family of Amable, Pierre's family was also taken to Massachusetts. Considering this, their mutual experiences growing up in New England exposed them to the culture of the British colonies that would soon become the United States. Pierre married Marguerite LeBlanc in Salem, Massachusetts, and the couple settled at Casco Bay in Maine, where their first son, Olivier, was born. The remainder of the Doucet children were born at St. Mary's Bay.<sup>32</sup> Historians Sally Ross and Alphonse Deveau note that "after 20 years in exile, Pierre Doucet sailed back to

28 Placide Gaudet, "Imposante Démonstration Religieuse," *L'Évangeline* (Weymouth), 16 July 1891.

29 Baptisms of Marie, Angélique, Amable, and Marcelline Doucet, August 1799, BSM register, FM 9, B8, v. 26, C-3026, LAC.

30 Boucher, "The Doucets," 48.

31 Baptism of Pierre Doucet, 17 May 1750, <https://archives.novascotia.ca/acadian/>.

32 Alphonse Deveau, "Pierre Doucet (Dowset)," *DCB Online IV*, [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/doucet\\_pierre\\_4E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/doucet_pierre_4E.html).

Nova Scotia in 1775 . . . and settled in the Township of Clare where his cousin, Amable Doucet, was already well-established.”<sup>33</sup>

Boucher surmises that as a boy in exile in Massachusetts, the young Pierre was “bound out” (indentured or apprenticed) to a local family because in such a manner “it was much easier to assimilate them [Acadians] culturally.” It is likely he was thus bound to a sea captain’s family, explaining how he became a captain himself. Boucher concludes Pierre’s boyhood in New England “was very profitable, since it enabled him later to become Clare’s first master mariner.” By the age of 19 he was commanding vessels “out of Piscataqua (on the Maine/New Hampshire border) to various Caribbean destinations,”<sup>34</sup> including Antigua, Barbados, and Jamaica.<sup>35</sup> After his establishment at St. Mary’s Bay, Doucet commanded at least two known vessels: the *Hannah* and, later, the *Peggy*.<sup>36</sup>

During the tumultuous revolutionary period of the late 1770s, “Peter” Doucet, his father, and his brother appeared in memorials to the Massachusetts Council demonstrating sympathy for the American cause. In August 1776, not long after establishing himself at St. Mary’s Bay, a certificate signed by Captain Doucet noted that he received men escaped from an American sloop captured by HMS *Vulture*. Doucet said he “Carried them and Landed them at Mount Desart [Maine] according to their Desire.” Writing from Portsmouth, New Hampshire, in May 1777, John Battson certified that he “was taken last Summer by the Viper belonging to the King and was put on board the Scarbary [HMS *Scarborough*] – Where I was much Confined.” After being held prisoner for six months Battson made his escape along with some other captives. They soon found themselves along the shores of St. Mary’s Bay. It was there Battson “happily fell in with Peter Dousett, [who] kindly entertained us and went to the Expence and trouble of bringing us to Machias [Maine].” Lastly, in July 1778, Daniel Newman certified that while “cruising upon the Coast of Nova Scotia and falling in with an English Cruiser was drove on Shore at St. Mary’s Bay.” Newman says he “fell in with Peter Doucet and his Father & Brother, who received us very kindly and provided a Passage for us home to Ipswich in New England.”<sup>37</sup>

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33 Ross and Deveau, *Acadians of Nova Scotia*, 91.

34 Boucher, “The Doucets,” 49–50.

35 Deveau, “Doucet,” *DCB, Online IV*, [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/doucet\\_pierre\\_4E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/doucet_pierre_4E.html).

36 Boucher, “The Doucets,” 51.

37 Edmund Duval Poole, *Annals of Yarmouth and Barrington in the Revolutionary War* (Yarmouth, NS: J. Murray Lawson, 1899), 92–3.

In his own words, on 11 August 1780, Captain Doucet petitioned the state council of Massachusetts, requesting to continue participating in the West Indies trade via Boston. Doucet claimed he “has Constant and from principle Aided and done all in his Power to Support the American Cause. That he has often and frequently received and entertained a number of American Prisoners at his own Expense, and at the Hazard of his Life brought off one that had made his escape from Halifax Gaol.” Doucet requested of the Massachusetts government permission “to take passage with Capt. Solomon Rider in the Boat Seaflower with liberty to carry with him a small quantity of West India Goods which he had purchased with Thirty Quintals Fish & Four B[arrel]ls Oyl that he brought up.” On 16 August, the Massachusetts Council “passed an order granting Capt. Dousett permission to purchase and export to St. Mary's Bay 150 gallons of rum, 300 lbs. of sugar and one cask of tobacco; also permitting him to return again to Massachusetts.”<sup>38</sup>

This evidence is telling. It demonstrates Doucet's American commercial and social ties, as well as his varying political sympathies. His connections enabled triangular trade between St. Mary's Bay, American port cities, and the West Indies. Timber and fish were primary Nova Scotian exports, and Boucher details Doucet's imports: “knives and forks, buckets, candles, nails, sugar, molasses, iron, flour, tea and salt.”<sup>39</sup> Additional sources record that Captain Doucet also traded enslaved Africans. Considering his coming of age in New England, and his involvement in the events of the American Revolutionary War, Doucet was acclimatized to, supported, and participated in modes of slave-owning and slave-trading that he had observed in the Thirteen Colonies.

Doucet's logbook and accounts provide some important glimpses into the nature of his trading voyages. In May 1785 he departed Cape Sable, Nova Scotia, bound for Barbados loaded with a cargo of lumber and shingles. On 6 June, Doucet arrived at Barbados when he reported “This Day Began To Take In Rum and Sugar.” On a voyage the following year, Doucet, commanding the *Hannah*, landed in Savannah, Georgia, on 30 March 1786 after departing Montego Bay, Jamaica, on 20 February. He reported in his “Accounts of Expenses and Disbursements” that he paid duties on items including rum,

38 Poole, *Annals*, 93.

39 Julian Gwyn, *Excessive Expectations: Maritime Commerce and the Economic Development of Nova Scotia, 1740-1870* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University, 1998); Boucher, “The Doucets,” 51.

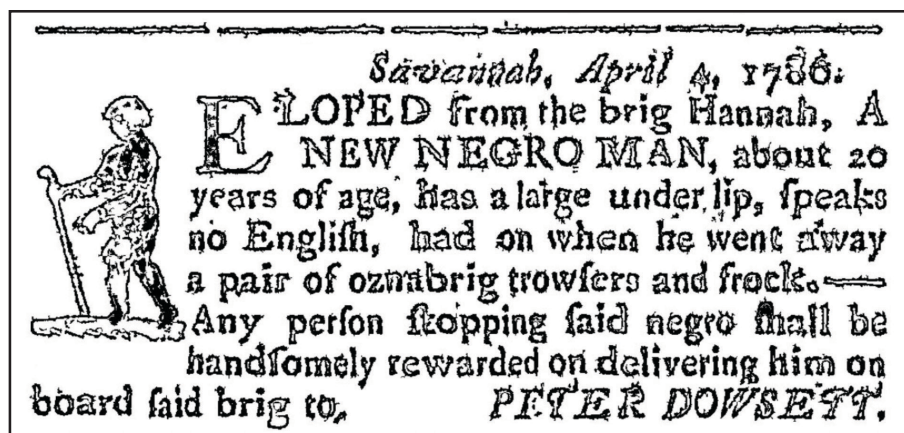


Figure 1 – Runaway advertisement.

Source: *Gazette of the State of Georgia* (Savannah), 6 April 1786.

sugar, coffee, and “3 Negros.”<sup>40</sup> One of these enslaved persons fled not long after arrival in Savannah harbour. On 6 April Doucet published in the *Gazette of the State of Georgia* an advertisement for a fugitive slave who had escaped two days prior: “Eloped from the brig Hannah, A New Negro Man, about 20 years of age, has a large under lip, speaks no English, had on when he went away a pair of oznabrig trowsers and frock. – Any person stopping said negro shall be handsomely rewarded on delivering him on board said brig to PETER DOWSETT” (see Figure 1).<sup>41</sup> Because this escaped young man was described as “new” and that he did not speak English, it is likely that he was recently brought to Jamaica from Africa.

It is uncertain if the escaped man was caught and returned. Doucet’s logbook, however, contains an indication the man was apprehended. On 7 April, Doucet wrote “at 4 PM Came Nuse [news] of Our Negro taken oup [up].”<sup>42</sup> If the man was indeed returned to Doucet, he was likely sold at auction in Savannah along with the two other enslaved persons for whom the captain reported paying duties.<sup>43</sup> More than a month later, Doucet sailed from Tybee Island, just outside Savannah, and returned to Jamaica.

40 Journal de bord et livre de compte, Fonds Pierre Doucet, MG-3, boîte 1, dossiers 1, 2, et 5, CAUSA.

41 *Gazette of the State of Georgia* (Savannah), 6 April 1786.

42 Journal de bord, Fonds Pierre Doucet, MG-3, boîte 1, dossier 1, CAUSA.

43 On the importation of slaves to Savannah from the West Indies after the American Revolution, see Watson Jennison, *Cultivating Race: The Expansion of Slavery in Georgia, 1750-1860* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 2012), 53.

Captain Doucet also relied on paid labour during his voyages. His accounts report that on several occasions he hired Black labourers in ports of call. Among these instances was the summer of 1786, when he recorded among his disbursements in Jamaica the following details: "Payd a Negro 1 Day," "Payd 3 Negros," and "Hire of Negros 2 Days." The labour provided by these men likely included loading and unloading Doucet's cargo and making repairs, along with personal errands that are not enumerated. He also employed Black labour for larger projects. That same summer he recorded disbursements in Jamaica, including "Payd to 5 Negroes for 10 ½ Days Labour" and "Payd a Negro for 5 Days Work." Closer to home, in July 1787 he paid a Black labourer in Halifax for "picking Okham [oakum]," a hemp fiber used to caulk vessels and obtained from picking apart old rope.<sup>44</sup>

Doucet travelled repeatedly between Jamaica and Nova Scotia and carried communications on his voyages. A letter dated 8 August 1786 from William Easson, of Montego Bay, to his brother David Easson, of Annapolis Royal, was sent in "favor of Cap. Dowsett."<sup>45</sup> At least one of Pierre Doucet's sons personally benefitted from his father's Caribbean trade networks. In the late summer of 1792, an unnamed Doucet son<sup>46</sup> sailed to Jamaica and wrote to his "very dear" parents back home to assure them of his well-being after a storm.<sup>47</sup> The merchant captain also hired members of his crew from American ports such as Philadelphia and Boston.<sup>48</sup> The range of Doucet's social and commercial connections enabled him to import lucrative goods from the Caribbean to St. Mary's Bay. His ledger chronicles the sugar, rum, molasses, tea, fabric, etc. he traded or sold to the Acadians of Clare.<sup>49</sup> In June 1790 he imported a puncheon of rum for John Easson at Annapolis, presumably the father of the Easson brothers. The cargo was brought from Jamaica aboard the *Peggy* by "Peter Dousett, Master."<sup>50</sup> The *Peggy* also sailed the next year to the West Indies and Doucet's cargo again contained slaves. Records of his inventory declare that in

44 Livre de compte, Fonds Pierre Doucet, MG-3, boîte 1, dossier 5, CAUSA.

45 William Easson to David Easson, 8 August 1786, Easson-Hoyt records, MG-1, v. 2166, H/49, NSA.

46 Pierre Doucet and Marguerite LeBlanc had three sons: Olivier, Joseph, and Anselm. It is unclear which son composed the unsigned letter.

47 Doucet son to "Mon tre Cher Pere Est Ma tres Cher Mere," 19 October 1792, Fonds Placide Gaudet, boîte 88, CN-2-126, CEAUM.

48 Receipts for "wadgers [wages]," Ephraim White, 3 November 1786 and Stephen Erlap, 18 July 1792, Livre de compte, Fonds Pierre Doucet, MG-3, boîte 1, dossier 5, CAUSA.

49 Registre, Fonds Pierre Doucet, MG-3, boîte 1, dossier 3, CAUSA.

50 Receipt for Import Duty, Peter Dousett, Easson records, MG-1, v. 3478, A/177, NSA.

August 1791 he transported ten slaves between Kingston and Havana.<sup>51</sup> Thomas Watson Smith, in his 1899 study *The Slave in Canada*, states: “For such a traffic the constant communications by shipping between the Maritime Provinces and various ports in the United States and the West Indies gave special advantages. . . . Captain Pierre Doucet, of Clare, on his way in August 1791, in his schooner ‘Peggy’ from Jamaica to Cuba with ten slaves, [was] neither the first nor the last [of] Nova Scotia captains engaged in the slave trade.”<sup>52</sup> Before departing Cuba, Doucet paid Havana merchant Jossef Martinez “for freight of 30 hogsheads of molasses from [Danish] St. Croix.”<sup>53</sup> This molasses would eventually be consumed by Acadians in Nova Scotia.

Doucet’s movement of goods and enslaved cargo across imperial or early national borders was therefore not uncommon. Gregory O’Malley has examined what he calls the “intercolonial slave trade” that “linked the Caribbean heart of the slave system with its North American periphery.”<sup>54</sup> The example of the vessel *Mars* is instructive when considering the movements of Captain Doucet. In January 1786 a cargo of 35 slaves recently captured from Angola was boarded in Kingston bound for Savannah, Georgia. O’Malley writes: “The crew had also packed the *Mars* with goods besides enslaved people.” Like the three slaves Doucet brought to Savannah from Jamaica along with rum, sugar, and coffee, “the Angolans aboard the *Mars* maneuvered around barrels of rum, sugar, and pimento.”<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, the ten enslaved persons Doucet transported to Havana were part of a larger policy known as the *Asiento*. This was a general contract issued by the Spanish Crown to permit the foreign importation of slaves into the Spanish colonies. British Jamaica was a primary supplier of slaves via the *Asiento*. According to O’Malley, “Spanish policy for Cuba began to encourage slave importation after the Seven Years’ War to spur the colony’s growth . . . . African immigration to Cuba especially accelerated after 1789, when Spain eliminated restrictions altogether on purchasing slaves in foreign colonies.”<sup>56</sup> Pierre Doucet took advantage of these

51 Deveau, “Doucet,” *DCB, Online IV*, [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/doucet\\_pierre\\_4E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/doucet_pierre_4E.html).

52 Thomas Watson Smith, *The Slave in Canada* (Halifax: Nova Scotia Historical Society Collection 10, 1899), 119.

53 Receipt of Jossef Martinez, 2 May 1792, *Livre de compte*, Fonds Pierre Doucet, MG-3, boîte 1, dossier 5, CAUSA.

54 Gregory E. O’Malley, *Final Passages: The Intercolonial Slave Trade of British America, 1619–1807* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2014), 171.

55 O’Malley, *Final Passages*, 46.

56 O’Malley, *Final Passages*, 294. “*Asiento*” was short for “*Asiento de Negros*,” meaning “Agreement of Blacks” in Spanish.



shifting imperial policies as he moved slaves and commodity goods between and amongst many Caribbean and Atlantic locales.<sup>57</sup>

One other known voyage of Captain Doucet involved the transport and sale of enslaved persons. In December 1787 Doucet sailed a vessel called the *Betsey* from Annapolis to Bridgetown, Barbados. He was commissioned for the voyage by Annapolis merchant Phineas Lovett. Among the cargo bound for Barbados were “4 Negroes” whose passage cost Lovett “4 Guineas each.” Upon arrival in Bridgetown, two of these enslaved persons were sold at auction: James, sold to a “Captain Cock” for £46; and Scipio, sold to “Captain Colwell” for £25. The difference in price suggests Scipio was a boy. After calculating these two sales along with the other exported cargo (including some horses) against the freight charges, Lovett noted he owed “P. Dousett” a small balance of nearly two pounds for his services as ship’s captain.<sup>58</sup> Thus Pierre Doucet’s voyages supported not only his family and the Acadian community of St. Mary’s Bay, but he also aided the commercial enterprises of Anglo-Protestants such as Lovett and the Eassons. The captain thereby participated in the known transport of enslaved Black people from Nova Scotia – a location associated with “northern freedom” – to the West Indies where such persons were re/sold into slavery.<sup>59</sup>

In August 1815, the Catholic bishop of Quebec, Joseph-Octave Plessis, visited the Acadians of St. Mary’s Bay as part of a pastoral tour of the Maritimes. In his journal of the visit he noted the deep esteem the Acadians of the region held for Captain Doucet nearly two decades after his death in a shipwreck at Grand Passage in autumn 1798.<sup>60</sup> Plessis wrote: “The Acadians of St. Mary’s Bay speak with praise of one among them: one named [Pierre] Doucet, who died about 20 years ago, to whom they believe they are indebted for the good treatment of the government towards them. He was an educated, honest,

57 Trevor Burnard, *Planters, Merchants, and Slaves: Plantation Societies in British America, 1650-1820* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2015); Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1987).

58 Account of Sales of 2 horses & 2 Negroes at Bridgetown, Barbados, on acc. of Mr. P. Lovett, being his private adventure, December 1787, Pierre Doucet papers, MG-1, NSA.

59 Sarah Elizabeth Chute, “To ship her to the West Indies, and there dispose of her as a Slave”: Connections of Enslaved People to the Loyalist Maritimes and the West Indies,” *Acadiensis* 51, no. 2 (Autumn 2022): 34-59.

60 The precise date of Pierre Doucet’s death is unknown. In September 1798, however, “Margaret Dowsett,” the widow and “administratrix to the Estate of the late Peter Dowsett,” sold a significant portion of her deceased husband’s land; see DCRD, Transaction Register 1A, p. 78, NSA.



reasonable man, knowing how to present himself to advantage, by making himself commendable by his deference to the Governors at Halifax. He did not forget that the other Acadians were his brothers, and worked for them as well as for himself.”<sup>61</sup> The value and esteem accorded Doucet is clear in these observations. Plessis’s comments reveal the Acadians perceived Doucet as a generous and well-connected benefactor of their community. In 1900, Isaiah Wilson recounted a local tradition concerning the wreck of Doucet’s vessel in a fall storm off Brier Island with an almost hagiographic tenor: “Captain Doucet’s watch was afterwards found near the shore. . . . No other relic of this sad calamity was found.”<sup>62</sup> This mention of a salvaged “relic” is resonant with accounts of the captain as a greatly mourned and fondly remembered figure.

Captain Doucet’s legacy was carried on by Anselm (or Samuel), his son and primary heir. Known in popular tradition as Major Doucet, he was a militia captain for the Annapolis Regiment. He died in 1861 and is the namesake of Pointe-à-Major, a significant historical site of the region. Once the location of the Doucet homestead, this point of land also contains the first Acadian cemetery in St. Mary’s Bay and dates from the winter of 1756.<sup>63</sup>

### **A petition of “Negro proprietors” and a family network of Acadian slave-owners**

When Amable Doucet bequeathed the enslaved Jerome to his widow in 1806, he also named “Anselm or Samuel” Doucet (son of Pierre) as one of his two co-executors. The slippage of this name is crucial to several interpretations that follow. It demonstrates the difficulties of representing personal names in multi-lingual archives. “Anselm” was a popular name among the Acadians at this time and was rendered in English as “Samuel.” By listing both names, Amable covered the legal ground for French and English interpreters of his will. It is important also that Amable’s wife Marie was called “Mary” in the will. The document was intentionally written in English by the French priest because the county administrators at the time were English-speaking Protestants.

A year-and-a-half after the time of Amable’s death, a petition of “Negro proprietors” was produced for Annapolis County. Composed in December

61 Joseph-Octave Plessis, “Le journal des visites pastorales en Acadie de Mgr Joseph-Octave Plessis: 1811, 1812, 1815,” *Les Cahiers de la Société historique acadienne* 11, nos. 1, 2, 3 (March–September 1980): 211 (author’s translation).

62 Wilson, *Geography and History*, 84.

63 Placide Gaudet, “La Pointe-à-Major: Berceau de la Colonie de Clare,” *L’Évangeline*, 18 June 1891.

Bithiah	Purdy	1	
Samuel	Melanson	1	1
Beloney	Melanson	1	1
Samuel	Doucet		1
Marcy	Doucet	1	
Frederick	Devoue	1	1

**Figure 2 – Acadians and enumerated property in slaves, December 1807.**

Source: Petition of John Taylor and other slaveholders, RG-5, ser. A, v. 14, no. 49, NSA.

1807, it contains the names of slave-owners who sought legal recognition of their right to own slaves at a time when the pro-slavery argument was growing thin in the British colonies.<sup>64</sup> Harvey Amani Whitfield maintains “the owners listed in this petition should be understood as among the most strident advocates of slavery in the region.” Moreover, he states “a statistical breakdown of the petition reveals some striking facts. First, about 42 percent of the slaves are children. . . . The percentage of children might have been unique and much higher than in other areas. Their numbers clearly show that a second generation of slaves had been born in Nova Scotia and that their owners remained committed to expanding the institution.” Whitfield admits the document is difficult to read in places due to its condition and acknowledges some discrepancy in the interpretation of the numbers. In total, Whitfield counts 84 slaves owned by 27 individuals.<sup>65</sup>

A grouping of four names near the bottom of the petition requires further investigation (see Figure 2). They represent St. Mary's Bay Acadian slave-owners as they bear the well-recognized Acadian surnames of Melanson and Doucet. The names in question appear to be written by the same hand, likely an English-speaking clerk at the Annapolis office where the document says it was authored. The surnames Melanson and Doucet appear, as Whitfield

<sup>64</sup> Petition of John Taylor and other slaveholders, December 1807, RG-5, series A, v. 14, no. 49, NSA. On the progress of British abolitionism, see Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2006).

<sup>65</sup> Whitfield, *North to Bondage*, 69-71.

interprets them, as “Heloson” and “Dowset.”<sup>66</sup> Certainly, this reflects how the French surnames could have been misheard and inaccurately spelled by an English listener.

Crucial to the present argument is a misinterpretation of these two surnames. What has been transcribed as “Heloson” is actually “Meloson,” itself a mis-rendering of Melanson. The surname was represented by two men: “Samuel Heloson” and “Beloney Helo[n]son.” On close examination, a letter ‘n’ was inserted by the clerk in the middle of the latter surname. While there was no family called Helo[n]son, there was a Béloni Melanson and he married in May 1800 Rosalie Doucet, daughter of the deceased Captain Pierre Doucet.<sup>67</sup> When the other “Heloson” is taken into consideration, the identities of these two men become unquestionably clear. “Samuel Heloson” is Anselm (or Samuel) Melanson who, in October 1794, married Monique Doucet, another daughter of Captain Doucet.<sup>68</sup> Considering all this, “Samuel” and “Beloney” were two Melanson brothers who married two Doucet sisters – both daughters of the slave-trading sea captain. On the petition, Anselm/Samuel Melanson reported owning one enslaved adult female and one enslaved child. Béloni reported the same numbers – one adult female and one child. A family network of Acadian slave-owners emerges from the document.

Legal historian Barry Cahill seems to have recognized that the petition included Acadian names and that the spelling “Heloson” is an error. Although most of the names on the petition represent Loyalists who migrated north after the American Revolution, he says “a few . . . were non-Loyalist old settlers.” Of these “old” (i.e., Acadian) settlers he notes the names “Dowset and Heloson [sic].”<sup>69</sup> While Cahill does not provide an alternate interpretation of “Heloson,” he marks it questioningly with a “sic” indicating it to be a discrepancy.

The next relevant name, “Samuel Dowset,” is Anselm Doucet, the son and primary heir of Captain Pierre Doucet and co-executor of Amable Doucet. Anselm styled himself “Samuel” in English correspondence.<sup>70</sup> As the son of

66 Harvey Amani Whitfield, ed., *Black Slavery in the Maritimes: A History in Documents* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2018), 96.

67 Marriage of Béloni Melanson and Rosalie Doucet, 13 May 1800, BSM register, FM 9, B8, v. 26, C-3026, LAC.

68 Marriage of Anselm Melanson and Monique Doucet, 2 October 1794, MG-55/23, no. 89, LAC; for the genealogy of this family network, see *Généalogies acadiennes*, Fonds Placide Gaudet, [https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac\\_mikan\\_99141](https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac_mikan_99141).

69 Barry Cahill, “Slavery and the Judges of Loyalist Nova Scotia,” *University of New Brunswick Law Journal* 43 (1994): 118n163.

70 Boucher, “The Doucets,” 53.

Pierre Doucet, he was also the brother-in-law of the two Melanson men listed above him on the petition. The intimate relatedness of these names becomes increasingly clear. Anselm/Samuel Doucet reported owning one enslaved child.

Beneath "Samuel Dowset" is a name that has been interpreted as "Harry Dowset." An examination of the parish and census documents, however, reveals there existed no one named Harry Doucet. As with the above misreading, what has been incorrectly interpreted as a capital letter H is a stylized capital M. The letters beginning the names "Heloson" and "Harry" are precisely the same and were produced by the same hand. As "Heloson" becomes "Meloson" with this reading, "Harry Dowset" becomes "Marey Dowset" – or, Marie Doucet, the widow of Amable, who inherited the enslaved Jerome a year and a half earlier.<sup>71</sup> This corroborates with "Marey" reporting, on the petition, that she owned one adult male slave. It is highly likely this unnamed adult male was Jerome. Furthermore, because "Anselm or Samuel" Doucet was a co-executor of Amable's estate in June 1806, he was invested with legal authority and the responsibility to defend the property interests of Amable's widow. This responsibility was carried out the following year, in December 1807, by ensuring Marie was also represented on the petition as a solid claim to her dower inheritance of enslaved property.

These Doucets, as well as other Acadians who married into their family (the two Melanson brothers), were mutually invested as slave owners. They supported one another in their understanding of their right to hold such private property, actively seeking an avenue to maintain their property in enslaved humans at a time when the anti-slavery cause was gaining influence. They did this by having their names added, alongside other prominent county residents, to the petition to the Nova Scotia legislature. Cahill says this resulted in the introduction in early 1808 of "*A Bill for regulating Negro Servitude within and throughout this Province*, which addressed the grievances stated in the petition."<sup>72</sup> The proposed bill was twice debated in the House of Assembly, and it was twice deferred due to lack of support. The 1807 petitioners came close to having their grievances passed into law, but the proposal was ultimately tabled and forgotten due to the mounting abolitionist sentiment of Chief Justice Blowers and others of the assembly.

71 "Marie" was sometimes written as "Marey" on English documents.

72 Cahill, "Slavery and Judges," 119.

## Elizabeth and Silvie Newbar

In the fall of 1811 Elizabeth Newbar, “a Negro single woman,” was raped twice by Acadian Laurence Guillault near the church at Church Point in St. Mary’s Bay. A year later, in September 1812, she reported the assault to the priest Sigogne, who recorded her testimony in his “journal d’office.”<sup>73</sup> It is an account that can be taken as the voice of Newbar herself. Historian Sophie White has noted the importance of legal testimonies, particularly as practiced in the French colonies, in accessing the voices of historical persons usually silenced by archival traditions.<sup>74</sup> Testifying, White asserts, “provided individuals with an unexpected opportunity to narrate their own stories.” Such a procedure should be seen “not as an antagonistic ordeal, but as an opportunity for expression.”<sup>75</sup> In providing her account to the French priest, who was also a magistrate, Newbar spoke out about her abuse and enabled her words and experience to be recorded in a manner to which she otherwise had no access. While it is unclear if Elizabeth Newbar was enslaved or otherwise bound at the time of her rape and testimony, she was, by 1818, in some form of service to the Doucet family (as discussed more below).

Under an oath “Sworn upon the holy Evangelists [Gospels],” Newbar described to the priest the circumstances of the rape: she recounted that “two weeks [after] the coming of Laurence Guillault to the Catechism held in the Church of Clare . . . in the beginning of the season Potatoes were taken out of the ground in a certain place not far from the Spot where a Cross hath [since] been planted in the Garden of said M. Sigogne.” It was then that “the above named Laurence Guillault a young man of Clare had carnal knowledge of her body one morning & again the Same day in the afternoon in the Wood near the Church when Said Laurence Guillault was working at the Little house of old Sam a Negro man and did beget her with child.”<sup>76</sup> Elizabeth, a single Black woman, was, in the eyes of Laurence, an acceptable target to violate and upon

73 Examination of Elizabeth Newbar, 22 September 1812, [https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac\\_reel\\_c1487/82](https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac_reel_c1487/82).

74 Nova Scotia was no longer a French colony at this time, but Sigogne was born and trained in Ancien Régime France and so was accustomed to French legal traditions. Additionally, Acadians would have carried over cultural practices and expectations from their former French colonial origins.

75 Sophie White, *Voices of the Enslaved: Love, Labor, and Longing in French Louisiana* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2019), 12–14. See also Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2006).

76 Examination of Elizabeth Newbar, 22 September 1812, [https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac\\_reel\\_c1487/82](https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac_reel_c1487/82).

whom to publicly sate his lust. The spatial details provided by Newbar outline her isolation in this region. Raped twice outdoors by her assailant (a local resident) in the span of a single day, in an area not far from the church, no one witnessed these acts of violence, or else turned a blind eye to Elizabeth's violation.

It was in Elizabeth Newbar's racial and social isolation that she was daily subject to what Charmaine Nelson calls "radical uncertainty." According to Nelson, "the isolation and living arrangements of enslaved people [and persons of colour otherwise bound] in places like Nova Scotia and Quebec left them open to various forms of corporal punishment and torture."<sup>77</sup> Newbar's rape was one such form of violence perpetrated against the body of a single Black woman living in an area where her race and unwed marital status made her stand out among the members of an otherwise white Acadian society characterized by large patriarchal families. Newbar's words, however, do imply she was part of the catechism class attended also by her assailant. This indicates she was, at least partially, in the process of integrating into the region's Roman Catholic community. In June 1812 Elizabeth Newbar gave birth to a daughter, Margaret. Newbar swore "that the female child which she hath been delivered of . . . was begot by Said L. Guillault and no other person." When "being asked Whether anybody else had any carnal knowledge of her body from the beginning of August to Christmass that Same year [she] answered Nobody but the Said Laur. Guillault."<sup>78</sup>

A further detail about Elizabeth's fate is contained in Sigogne's 1818 catalogue of the St. Mary's Bay parish families. "Elizabeth Neubard [Newbar] negresse" appears in the household of Acadians Anselm Melanson and Monique Doucet.<sup>79</sup> The couple had five children at the time, and Elizabeth's young daughter "Marg." was also in the home. As already noted, Monique Doucet was a daughter of Captain Pierre Doucet, and her husband appeared on

77 Charmaine A. Nelson, "'Ran away from her master . . . a negroe girl named Thursday': Examining Evidence of Punishment, Isolation, and Trauma in Nova Scotia and Quebec Fugitive Slave Advertisements," in *Legal Violence and the Limits of the Law*, eds. Joshua Nichols and Amy Swiffen (New York: Routledge, 2018), 81.

78 Examination of Elizabeth Newbar, 22 September 1812, [https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac\\_reel\\_c1487/82](https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac_reel_c1487/82).

79 Hereafter, all data cited from Sigogne's catalogues can be found in Leonard H. Smith, ed., *St. Mary's Bay, 1818-1829: Catalogue of Families. St. Mary's Bay Roman Catholic Parish, Clare, Digby County, Nova Scotia* (Clearwater, FL: n.p., 1975) and Smith, ed., *St. Mary's Bay, 1840-1844: Catalogue of Families. St. Mary's Bay Roman Catholic Parish, Clare, Digby County, Nova Scotia* (Clearwater, FL: n.p., 1975); original manuscripts are in Fonds Jean-Mandé Sigogne, MG-9, boîte 1, dossier 1, CAUSA.

the 1807 slaveowners' petition. With this information the depth of the Doucet family's reliance on Black labour (whether enslaved, indentured, or otherwise) emerges more fully. But the question remains: was Elizabeth Newbar the unnamed adult female slave recorded on the petition as the property of Anselm Melanson?

Further details of Elizabeth's plight can only be guessed. Was she in the household of Anselm and Monique in 1811-12, during the time of her rape, pregnancy, and subsequent testimony? Was she enslaved when she appeared in the 1818 catalogue? Or was she a servant? Or was she formerly free, only to be indentured for some sense of security for herself and young daughter following the ordeal at the hands of Guillault? The details recorded by Sigogne during her testimony – that in September 1812 she was a "Negro single woman" – leave these questions unanswerable. As inconclusive as the sources are, "the line between black servants and black slaves was extremely fluid and could easily be transgressed, crossed, and manipulated." Whitfield says "Even those blacks who were indentured servants were often treated as slaves."<sup>80</sup> What is certain is Elizabeth Newbar and her daughter were, for a time, part of the domestic economy of the Melanson-Doucet household. By late 1823 Elizabeth was no longer in the home of Monique and Anselm. Listed at this time as "Isabelle Neubard negresse,"<sup>81</sup> she and her 11-year-old daughter Margaret appeared in Sigogne's 1823 catalogue entry as "vagantes" (literally "wanderers"), a Latin term used by the priest to denote vagabonds or those otherwise homeless or dispossessed. Elizabeth/Isabelle had also recently given birth to a son, Marcel Dauphin, on 30 September 1823.

Considering that Elizabeth had a second illegitimate child – Marcel Dauphin appears as "fils naturel"<sup>82</sup> – might this be taken as a reason why she was no longer in the Melanson-Doucet household? Who was the father of Marcel? What were the circumstances of his conception and birth? Why was Elizabeth removed from the Melanson-Doucet family? These questions cannot be answered. Did she give birth a second time after again being sexually violated? This could explain her removal from the family. Ken Donovan, in his

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80 Harvey Amani Whitfield, "Runaway Advertisements and Social Disorder in the Maritimes: A Preliminary Study," in *Violence, Order, and Unrest: A History of British North America, 1749-1876*, eds. Elizabeth Mancke, Jerry Bannister, Denis Mckim, and Scott W. See (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2019), 217.

81 In this time and place the names Elizabeth and Isabelle were convertible; in the regional French dialect these names sounded quite similar – "Zabette" and "Zabelle" respectively.

82 "Natural" was a euphemistic term for "illegitimate," or born outside Christian wedlock.



study of Île-Royale, says "it was customary to discharge servant girls when they became pregnant in order to avoid public scandal."<sup>83</sup> Such a custom displaced responsibility from the male perpetrators of sexual violence onto the victims. Donovan indicates that nearly half the children born of enslaved women on Île-Royale were illegitimate, therefore likely conceived through sexual violence.<sup>84</sup> It would be in keeping with such a custom that Elizabeth was discharged from the household for the pregnancy that resulted in the birth of Marcel. Perhaps Elizabeth deliberately left the Melanson-Doucet family. But why would she do so when pregnant and without resources?

Finally, in the 1840 catalogue, "Isabelle Neubard" appears again but by this time she is married to "Jacques [or James] Riggs," a Black landowner. Marcel Dauphin was the only offspring in the household, then a young adult of 17. Newbar's daughter Margaret appears elsewhere in the catalogue, having started a family of her own with a mixed-race husband.<sup>85</sup> Throughout all these records neither Isabelle/Elizabeth's age nor her birth date are given. Nor is the date of her marriage to Riggs known. Jacques Riggs is nowhere listed in the prior catalogues compiled by Sigogne and appears to have been a Protestant. And in 1838, "James Rig" was enumerated in the provincial census of Clare with his wife and her son Marcel.<sup>86</sup>

From these fragmented details it can be concluded Elizabeth/Isabelle Newbar lived amid radical uncertainty. From the time of her rape in 1811, Newbar went from being a "single Negro woman" to being in some form of service to an Acadian family in 1818 to being homeless with two illegitimate children in 1823 to being married to Riggs by 1838. Despite the uncertainty of her circumstances, Elizabeth/Isabelle survived multiple trials to eventually find some freedom and security for herself and her son Marcel in the form of lawful marriage and a family unit of her own. Lastly, Sigogne's catalogues confirm that Newbar and her two children (albeit both born out of wedlock) all received Roman Catholic baptism in the St. Mary's Bay parish.<sup>87</sup>

83 Ken Donovan, "Female Slaves as Sexual Victims in Île Royale," *Acadiensis* 43, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2014): 151.

84 Donovan, "Female Slaves," 148.

85 Margaret and her husband Cyril Hatfield, "a Man of Colour of the Township of Clare," obtained a mortgage for a plot of land from Acadian Celestin Robichaud in early 1835; see DCRD, Transaction Register 12, p. 235, NSA.

86 Return of Census for the Township of Clare in the County of Digby . . . in the First Year of the Reign of Her Majesty Queen Victoria, 1838, RG-1, v. 449, no. 145, NSA.

87 Smith, *St. Mary's Bay, 1818-1829* and Smith, *St. Mary's Bay, 1840-1844*, Fonds Jean-Mandé Sigogne, MG-9, boîte 1, dossier 1, CAUSA.



Curiously, a woman named “Silvie Neubard [Newbar] negresse” also appears in Sigogne’s family catalogues. Was she related to Elizabeth/Isabelle? The Newbar name makes no appearance in Whitfield’s collected evidence of Maritime Loyalist slavery, nor is the name to be found elsewhere in the St. Mary’s Bay records. What is certain is Silvie’s story varies significantly from Elizabeth’s. She is first to be found, aged 26, in an 1823 catalogue entry in the family of Joseph Doucet and Marie Dugas. Joseph was the elder brother of Captain Pierre Doucet, further confirming the extended Doucet family’s reliance on forms of Black domestic labour. In 1840, when Sigogne began gathering information for his final family catalogue, Silvie was noted as 41 years of age and still in the household of “Jos[eph]. l’anc[ien]. Dousset.” The elderly Joseph, then in his nineties, died during the four-year span that Sigogne was collecting data. The only Doucet offspring remaining in the household at the time was a 34-year-old unmarried daughter.<sup>88</sup>

Did Silvie choose to remain with this family because she was bound to them in some manner? Or was she cared for in a way that made it more convenient to remain in an indefinite and undefined condition of service to the Doucets? Such arrangements were not uncommon. Whitfield makes an apt observation on the spatial nature of slavery in the rural Maritimes: “The close living and working conditions of slaves and owners meant that there was a substantial level of intimacy between both groups.”<sup>89</sup> While such intimate conditions certainly brought about relationships of violence and abuse, as in the case of Elizabeth Newbar, it is possible Silvie Newbar’s situation was different considering she continued to live with the widow and unwed daughter of her recently deceased master. It is also possible in living together the three women developed emotive bonds and functioned as supports for one another. Silvie, like Elizabeth, was baptized into Sigogne’s Catholic parish, and so was part of the Acadian region’s spiritual community.

The conditions of living with the Doucet family in some mode of domestic service marked Silvie’s life for nearly two decades – from at least 1823 to 1840. Without kin connections or accumulated wealth, where was Silvie to go otherwise? Her continued residence in an Acadian household of two adult women and an elderly patriarch may have seemed the best option for her

88 Baptism of Joseph Doucet, 7 May 1748, SJB register, <https://archives.novascotia.ca/acadian/>; Smith, *St. Mary’s Bay, 1840–1844*, Fonds Jean-Mandé Sigogne, MG-9, boîte 1, dossier 1, CAUSA.

89 Whitfield, *North to Bondage*, 69.

well-being. While Elizabeth Newbar experienced life events that shifted from sexual violence to vagrancy and single motherhood, and, finally, to marriage, Silvie Newbar experienced some level of constancy living with and labouring for the Doucets.

In addition to Jerome's enslaved labour, the heirs of Amable Doucet benefitted for a time from the work of a Black female servant. According to Sigogne's 1823 catalogue, Jerome was no longer in the Doucet family and Amable's widow was residing in the household of her son and daughter-in-law. Along with the couple's three children, a 13-year-old Black girl, Marie Anne Bright, was also living with the family. No information is available about Marie Anne's origins, but her older brother Simon Bright was likewise in the St. Mary's Bay community. He was 15 and recorded in the home of Joseph Bastarache and Cécile Maillet. The Bright siblings may have been the children of Samuel Bright, "a Black Man of Said Town[ship of Clare]," who, in December 1802, obtained ten acres of land from Acadian Paul Dugas.<sup>90</sup> The Brights remained in St. Mary's Bay throughout their lives. In 1840 Sigogne noted Marie Anne was by then the wife of Jacob Jarvis, identified in the 1838 provincial census as a Black "yeoman" from nearby Digby.<sup>91</sup>

Based on the extant documentation, Marie Anne Bright and the Newbar women occupied a grey area in terms of their relations to the Doucets. They were likely servants working in some informal and contingent arrangement. Racial coercion was likely, and a formal indenture was also possible. These women would have prepared food, mended and washed clothes, tended children, and made household goods like butter and soap. Marie Anne laboured for and lived with Amable Doucet's heirs for a time after Jerome's departure from the family. Both Newbar women were described racially as "négresses," and each appeared in families related to the slave-trader Pierre Doucet. Elizabeth found herself discharged by, or else left, the Doucets by 1823. Silvie remained with the family until 1840, and perhaps longer. In Ancien Régime France, the terms "nègre" and "négresse" were often used to indicate the status of enslavement – in addition to their overt racial designation for a person originating from Africa. Sigogne's use of the term would have reflected his knowledge of such meanings.<sup>92</sup> While Jerome was called a slave

<sup>90</sup> DCRD, Transaction Register 1A, p. 130, NSA.

<sup>91</sup> Return of Census of the Black Population in the Township of Digby, 1838, RG-1, v. 449, no. 146, NSA.

<sup>92</sup> Sue Peabody, *"There Are No Slaves in France": The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1996), 60-1.

and transferred as heritable property in 1806, it is evident he was not bound to the Doucets for life. His fate is unclear. It is possible he died or ran away. It is also possible he was granted his freedom upon reaching a certain age. The details available about his life in relation to the Doucets indicate white families claimed individuals as slaves to whom they perhaps had no legitimate claim – hence the anxieties expressed by the petitioners in 1807.

It is evident that members of the Doucet family fervently participated in enslavement, a practice that, during the era in question, has otherwise been described as a Loyalist phenomenon. In practicing slavery in British Nova Scotia, the Doucets asserted themselves as Acadian Loyalists – claiming proprietary rights they understood to belong to those white settlers loyal to the British Empire. For the 1807 petitioners, in exchange for their loyalty as former “inhabitants of His Majesty’s late revolted Colonies,” they “received the Royal assurance of full protection to . . . security to their properties.”<sup>93</sup> This would have included the six unnamed enslaved persons enumerated by the Doucet network.

### **Conclusion: slave or servant?**

In the Maritimes the enslaved and their owners shared physical and emotional intimacy in close living arrangements. This proximity blurred boundaries between freedom and bondage for those Black persons arriving in Nova Scotia on the wave of Loyalist diaspora. Freedom was uncertain as white settlers sought to exploit Black labour to hasten the development of agricultural resources and civic infrastructure. In her study of Maroons and slavery in Nova Scotia, Ruma Chopra cites grievances made by Black Loyalists before many departed the province for Sierra Leone. Noted by visiting British abolitionist John Clarkson in 1791, “they complained of being forced to work as day laborers, sharecroppers, indentured servants, and, in the case of children, apprentices. They told him [Clarkson] that ‘whites seldom or ever pay for work done.’ . . . Black children received no pay when they worked in white households; whites had already compensated black parents by providing children with lodging and food.” Chopra concludes that “Black Loyalists portrayed a dismal picture of unchecked servility and racism.”<sup>94</sup>

93 Petition of John Taylor and other slaveholders, December 1807, RG-5, series A, v. 14, no. 49, NSA.

94 Ruma Chopra, *Almost Home: Maroons between Slavery and Freedom in Jamaica, Nova Scotia, and Sierra Leone* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2018), 108.

While Jerome's condition of enslavement was legally articulated in Amable Doucet's last will and testament, the status of the Newbar women and Marie Anne Bright in relation to the Doucets will remain unclear. They all lived amid what Jared Hardesty, in his examination of 18th-century Boston, calls "a complex and hierarchical continuum of unfreedom." In the northern British colonies "African slavery existed alongside many other forms of oppression, including indentured servitude, apprenticeship, pauper apprenticeship, and Indian slavery."<sup>95</sup> As Black Loyalists and others of the African diaspora struggled to survive in Nova Scotia, some – children especially – found themselves bound to white families due to the often dire and racist circumstances in a still-unstable colony. Jerome, Silvie, Elizabeth, and Marie Anne experienced the complex scope of such unfreedom in different ways in their relations with the Doucets, as did the enslaved – James, Scipio, and others – Captain Doucet transported across Atlantic networks and those unidentified slaves his kin and heirs claimed in 1807 as their own.

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<sup>95</sup> Jared Ross Hardesty, *Unfreedom: Slavery and Dependence in Eighteenth-Century Boston* (New York: New York University, 2016), 46, 2. Such a continuum should not be taken to relativize the violence, white supremacy, and racism perpetrated against the enslaved. Rather, such a continuum here addresses a methodological concern by underscoring the difficulties of pinning any single or unchanging condition to such persons as many of those in this study.