

## Document #1725-04-10-04 – A Woman Flees to the Woods of the *Petits Collas*

**K4BL Abstract:** In 1725, an unnamed enslaved woman (or girl)—noted only as a *pièce d'Inde*—was transported by *pirogue* from New Orleans by her new enslaver, *Sieur* de Chavannes, to his plantation near the *Petits Collas* village upriver from the German Coast. Along the way, the woman attempted to flee captivity, jumping into the water at the sight of another *pirogue*, which belonged to Indigenous passers-by whom she presumably knew, perhaps from a previous attempt at *marronage* about one year earlier. Although de Chavannes recaptured the woman, pulling her from the water and bringing her ashore, she successfully escaped into the woods never to be heard from again. As a result, de Chavannes petitioned the Superior Council to release him from his obligation to pay his debts for the sale of the woman and claimed she must have simply been insane to have wanted to escape. The racialized and gendered language used in this document is reminiscent of "drapetomania," a supposed mental illness created in the 19th-century by enslavers wishing to explain why enslaved people would try to seek their freedom.

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Names: Black - "*négress*"; "*pièce d'Indes*"; (de Chavannes), "*négress*"

Names: White - de Chavannes, Jean-Baptiste; de Gauvrit, Sr.; Fazende, Jacques; Berard, Sr.

Names: Native - unnamed "*Indiens*"; unnamed "*sauvages*"; *Petits Collas* (Acolapissa)

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Transcription (French, diplomatic)	Translation (English, modern)
<p>[feuille 1 recto] [digital 2]</p> <p>A Messieurs les Presidents Et. Conseillers du Conseil et Regis.</p> <p>De Chavannes secretaire dud.<sup>[i]t</sup> Conseil a l'honneur de vous Représenter qu'il auroit il y a près de trois ans acheté du S.<sup>r</sup> De Gauvrit Cap.<sup>[itai]ne</sup> d'infanterie une <i>negresse</i> piece d'inde qu'il ne luy vendit que six cent Soixante livres, prix que la compagnie vendoit les ___ <i>negres</i> dans ce tem[p]s la, pour laquelle Somme il luy donna une Lettre de change de pareille valeur payable en france avec laquelle ledit S.<sup>r</sup> de Gauvrit acheta une vache et son Ecroit du S.<sup>r</sup> Berard pour lors chirurgien major a la nouvelle orleans, que partoit pour france delaquelle Lettre led.<sup>[i]t</sup> S.<sup>r</sup> Berard n'a point recçu le payement sans cependant quelle ait esté protostée, le supliant embarqua a l'instant lad.<sup>[i]te</sup> [page déchirée] Esclave dans une Pirogue d'Emprunt pour lamener sur son habitation des Petits Collas, il fut surpris</p>	<p>[page #1] [digital 2]</p> <p>To the Gentlemen Presidents And Councilors of the Council and King</p> <p>De Chavannes, Secretary of the said Council, has the honor of representing to you that he had, nearly three years ago [now], purchased from <i>Sr</i>: de Gauvrit, Infantry Captain, a <i>négresse, pièce d'Inde</i>, whom he [de Gauvrit] sold to him [de Chavannes] for only six-hundred and sixty <i>livres</i>, [the] price at which the company sold the <i>negres</i> at that time,<sup>i</sup> for which amount he gave him a Bill of Exchange of equal value [that is] payable in France, with which the aforementioned <i>Sr</i>: de Gauvrit purchased a cow and its calf from <i>Sr</i>: Berard, [who was] at the time the chief surgeon of New Orleans [and] who was leaving for France. Of which [amount of] the Bill [for the cows] the aforementioned <i>Sr</i>: Berard has not received payment yet [but], [even] without [the promissory note] having been vacated, the supplicant [de Chavannes] loaded at that moment the said [page torn] slave into a borrowed <i>pirogue</i> to bring her to his</p>

[f. 2 verso] [dig.3]

en arrivant au village des Collas de la voir frenetique, et sans continuel sa route l'auroit remené, et rendu au d.<sup>[i]t</sup> Sr. de Gauvrit s'il eût été le maitre de sa voiture; en arrivant a son habitation le lendemain matin les folies et frenesies de lad.<sup>[i]te</sup> Negresse redoublerent a l'aspect d'une pirogue menée par des sauvages dont elle s'effreia jusqu'au point de se jeter dans le fleuve et se vouloir noyer si on ne l'avoit secourüe, sans autre cause que son alienation d'Esprit, puis qu'il y avoit plus d'un an quelle voioit journellement des *Indiens*, et après que l'on l'eut tirée de l'eau et fait manger s'en alla au bout d'une heure dans les bois, sans que l'on en ait jamais eü aucune nouvelle depuis.

Depuis lequel temps le suppliant n'a entendu [parler] de rien, il a crü que la Lettre de change qu'il avoit tirée sur Paris

plantation at the *Petits Collas* [an Acolapissa village on the Mississippi River]. He was surprised,

[p. #2] [dig.3]

upon arriving at the village of the *Collas*,<sup>ii</sup> to see her frantic, and without [having needed to] continue his journey he would have taken her back, and given her [back] to the said *Sr*: de Gauvrit, if [only] he had been the master of the vehicle [*pirogue*]. Upon his arrival at his plantation the following morning, the madness and frenzies of the said *négresse* redoubled at the sight of [another] *pirogue* manned by some *sauvages*, at which point she took fright, throwing herself into the river and wanting to drown herself—[which she would have done] if she had not been rescued—without any other reason than her losing her mind. [By] then, it had been over a year since she had seen the *Indiens* daily, and after she had been pulled out of the water and made to eat, within an hour she went away into the woods, without anyone having any news of her since.

Since which time the supplicant has heard of nothing, [thus] he believed that the Bill of Exchange that he had sent to Paris

[f. 2r] [dig.4]

étoit acquittée, cependant depuis deux jours le S<sup>r</sup>. De Gauvrit luy a dit que cette lettre n'avoit pas été payée quoy quelle n'aye pas esté protestée, et demande que le suppliant luy paye lad.<sup>[i]te</sup> somme de 660<sup>++</sup>. pour lad.<sup>[i]te</sup> *negresse*, mais comme il a appris que cette *negresse* venoit de la Comp.<sup>[agni]e</sup> Et que led.<sup>[i]t</sup> S.<sup>r</sup> de Gauvrit ne l'a pas payée qu'il la vendu au suppliant contre les deffences du con.<sup>el</sup> il craint que s'il venoit a la payer que vous ne la luy fassiez payer une seconde fois, ce qui l'oblige d'avoir recours a vous. Ce Consideré, Messieurs il vous plaise permettre au suppliant d'assigner devant vous atel jour qu'il vous plaira led.<sup>[i]t</sup> S.<sup>r</sup> de Gauvrit pour voir dire qu'il rapportera au suppliant la permission qu'il a eû du con.<sup>el</sup> pour vèndre lad.<sup>[i]te</sup> *Negresse* ou la quittance du prix d'icelle pour faire voir qu'il la payée, aux offres que fait

[f. 2v] [dig.5]

le suppliant d'acquitter lad.<sup>[i]te</sup> lettre de

[p. #3] [dig.4]

had been forgiven. However, since two days [ago], *Sr.* de Gauvrit told him that this Bill had not been paid, [and] it had not been vacated, and [he] asks that the supplicant pay him the said sum of 660 *livres* for the said *negresse*. But as he [de Chavannes] learned this *negresse* came from the Company [of the Indies], and that the said *Sr.* de Gauvrit had not paid for her at the time that he had sold her to the supplicant, contrary to the prohibitions of Council. He [the supplicant] fears that if he pays you might make him pay a second time, which would force him to take recourse with you. With this being considered, *Messieurs*, if you would please permit the supplicant to summon before you, on whichever day should please you, the said *Sr.* de Gauvrit, so that he may report to the supplicant the permission that he had from the Council to sell the said *negresse*, or [provide] the receipt for the price of her to prove that he had paid it, [and] proffer to

[p. #4] [dig.5]

the supplicant to discharge the said Bill

<p>change, et luy permettre d'arrete icelle entre les mains de ceux qui en sont porteurs <sup>++sauf</sup> a prendre d'au.<sup>re</sup> conclusions et vous feras bien.</p> <p>a la N.<sup>[ouve]lle</sup> orleans ce 10 Avril 1725</p> <p>[Signé:] De Chavannes</p> <p>Permis d'assigner au premier jour ala N.<sup>[ouve]lle</sup> Orleans le 20.<sup>e</sup> avril 1725,</p> <p>[Signé:] fazende</p>	<p>of Exchange, and permit him to stop [the transfer] [of funds] into hands of those who are [the Bill's] bearers, barring other conclusions [of which] you would be well to make.</p> <p>At New Orleans, [on] this [day], 10th April 1725</p> <p>[Signed:] [Jean Baptiste] de Chavannes</p> <p>Permission to summon [de Gauvrit] to appear on the first day [possible]. At New Orleans, the 20th April 1725.</p> <p>[Signed:] [Jacques] Fazende</p>
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Please note that what appear to be typos (missing spaces, abbreviations, misspellings, strikeouts, superscript) appear in the original manuscript, but are corrected in the more modernized translation. For more on our editorial practices see <https://docs.k4bl.org/bestpractices>.

i. Employing *pièce d'Inde* reduced Africans to a measurement of commercial exchange, in an attempt to erase their humanity. In September 1721, French officials established the exchange rate of *pièce d'Inde* in Louisiana at 660 *livres*, the price at which this unnamed woman was purchased in 1722 or 1723. B. F. French, *Historical Collections of Louisiana and Florida* (New York: J. Sabin & Sons, 1869), 3: 101-3. For more on *pièce d'Inde* and gender, see Jessica Marie Johnson, *Wicked Flesh: Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom in the Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 77-120.

ii. The name of the community whom the French called the *Petits Collas*—a smaller band of the Acolapissa—signals that the French recognized this Native nation as a distinct polity, one of the *Petite Nations*. For more on the *Petite Nations* and the diversity of strategies they pursued in the Gulf South to shape French colonization, see Elizabeth N. Ellis, *The Great Power of Small Nations: Indigenous Diplomacy in the Gulf South* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022). For a reference to the home of this enslaved woman and de Chavannes in a colonial journal, see “Journal of Diron D’Artaguiette, Inspector General of Louisiana, 1722-1723,” in Newton D. Mereness, ed., *Travels in the American Colonies* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1916), 41-42, <https://www.loc.gov/item/16009410/>.