

A Secret among the Blacks



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among the Blacks

Slave Resistance before the Haitian Revolution

JOHN D. GARRIGUS

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A Secret among the Blacks

Introduction

This book tells the story of men and women who, alone and together, over thirty years, prepared the land they lived on for revolution. They toiled in fields and houses, tended cattle in remote mountains, stoked refinery fires that burned day and night, drove coaches on roads through the sugarcane fields, and kept vigil over the sick and injured, healing when they could. They were enslaved and freed Africans and their descendants who lived on the mountain slopes and in the coastal plains surrounding the French-controlled city of Cap Français—the commercial capital of a territory that would become the nation of Haiti. In a colony built on their submission, these people persisted and resisted in communities that were the seedbed for a revolution that would end slavery in the most profitable plantation economy in the Americas.

Introductions are in order because these few individuals, along with thousands of other enslaved people silenced by history, played a vital but misunderstood role in fighting against slavery. First comes Médor, an enslaved domestic servant who lived in the port city of Cap Français in the 1740s. When his enslaver moved the household to a mountainous coffee estate, he was forced to leave the friends who had helped him and others work toward freedom. The Seven Years' War erupted shortly thereafter, and a terrible drought struck the colony. During these years, a wave of unexplained deaths swept the region. Médor was accused of

being a poisoner, and, after three days of interrogation, he confessed to secretly drugging his masters for freedom. He revealed that free Black people were using medicines to soften their enslavers and hasten their manumission. A growing community of freed people hoped to ultimately confront the colonists, he said. Médor's confession led to a spiraling investigation into poisoning that ensnared many free and enslaved Black people.

A plantation nurse named Assam was one of the next to be accused. Her enslaver had sent her away on foot in search of African-style medicines to cure other captives. After days of searching, she found and administered the medicines. When her patients died, she was tortured as a poisoner. Assam's confession pointed authorities toward an African man named Makandal, who had escaped slavery to live hidden in the mountains. Black men and women sought out Makandal to have him divine the future with the help of spirits. His rituals created the kinds of deep loyalties that could embolden a person to resist oppression. Makandal was arrested and unjustly convicted of running a network of poisoners who aimed to destroy the colony.

Makandal became known to history as a fearsome poisoner even though he denied it, and, within two decades of his execution, medical experts concluded that a newly diagnosed illness could have caused the unexplained deaths. As planters continued to accuse alleged poisoners, enslaved people across many communities found creative ways to resist. A free Black woman named Lizette went to court to save her freed adult son Kängal when his former enslaver levied a poisoning accusation calculated to return him to bondage. While fear and death navigated the colony, an enslaved woman named Kingué used African-inspired rituals to divine the identity of poisoners. An enslaved man named Nicolas undertook a dangerous journey with thirteen others from a coffee plantation to Cap Français and succeeded in filing a formal complaint of torture against their enslaver.

Resisting in obscurity on a sugar plantation that would become the cradle of the Haitian Revolution, enslaved foremen Jean-Jacques and Hippolyte led strikes among cane field and refinery workers that paralyzed the plantation. Nine years later, on the neighboring estate, a coachman named Boukman lit the first of the fires that within a month would burn thousands of acres of sugar to the ground. This was the August 22 revolt that ignited the Haitian Revolution. Historians have chronicled Boukman's fires but failed to illuminate the decades of resistance that preceded them.

Until thirty years ago, most historians of the only successful slave revolution in modern history maintained that it occurred in a colony with no tradition of organized resistance, for Saint-Domingue had no documented revolts between the 1720s and the revolution.¹ Even today, except for work focused on slave escapes, very little has been written about how enslaved men and women resisted captivity in Saint-Domingue. In some ways, this is not surprising; enslaved people are too often silenced in the sources that scholars rely on. Historian Tiya Miles calls this "the conundrum of the archive."² Thousands of documents record enslaved people's existence as economic assets, but almost none record their voices.

Historians have been able to reconstruct the resistance of colonized people elsewhere in the Caribbean and Latin America using records from religious trials. In Portuguese Brazil and Spanish America, Catholic missionaries worked to convert enslaved Africans. They punished those who refused to abandon their original beliefs. Documents from colonial-era religious trials have allowed historians to describe the lives of enslaved Africans in places like Brazil and modern-day Colombia.³ Historians of French colonial Haiti, known as Saint-Domingue, have no such records because there was no Catholic Inquisition in France or any of its territories.

Records from criminal trials in Saint-Domingue might have provided a valuable window into slave resistance, but humidity, insects, carelessness, and violence destroyed thousands of documents. The Cap Français court was said to be especially disorganized, with no central archive. In 1734, a fire destroyed all criminal records in Cap. Many more documents disappeared in 1787 when the Cap Français and Port-au-Prince courts merged.⁴ Fires set during the Haitian Revolution destroyed yet more papers. The legal sources that survived, for the most part, were those that colonists deemed important enough to send back to France.

Most significantly, courts in Saint-Domingue systematically destroyed the records of slave criminal trials. In 1717, the Superior Council of Léogane, the colony's oldest court, ordered employees to purge slave trial records up to 1715.⁵ In 1724, the Cap Français Superior Council ordered the burning of "old criminal trials of blacks and other useless items." In 1744, the Léogane Council again ordered officials to pull all slave trials from their archives and burn them.⁶

Eliminating criminal trial records might have served the interests of colonial judges, who were nearly all planters. Evidence offered at trial could include descriptions of poor conditions on a plantation or abuses committed by enslavers. French slave laws directed courts to investigate masters who treated slaves "inhumanely and barbarically." This "Code Noir" instructed judges to prosecute colonists who tortured, mutilated, or murdered their captives. It also allowed enslaved people to complain to a judge about a master's cruelties, such as denying food to enslaved people or inflicting savage punishments.⁷ In the roughly one hundred years of Saint-Domingue's history, only five prosecutions of an enslaver for cruelty can be documented.⁸ Judges might have wanted to destroy documents that proved they had shown leniency to planters.

What we know of slave resistance throughout the Americas shows that some of slavery's most successful Black opponents

were maroons, people who escaped plantations to set up communities in the wilderness. In Jamaica, maroon communities fought a war that forced the British colonial government to guarantee their liberty. However, their freedom did not mean an end to slavery. A condition of the agreement was that they would help maintain the colonial system of slavery. They were required to fight against slave rebellions and to capture escaped slaves.

In Saint-Domingue, there were undoubtedly thousands of captives who managed to escape bondage permanently. Maroon leaders such as Plymouth and Colas Jambes Coupées attacked plantations and killed French colonists. However, Saint-Domingue's maroons never united to wage a long and coordinated campaign. *Marronage* did deprive the plantation system of valuable labor. Enslavers published over ten thousand notices in Saint-Domingue's newspaper describing escapees and seeking their return. For fifty years, scholars have mined these notices to determine whether a rising tide of escaped captives might have caused the Haitian Revolution.

Most maroons in Saint-Domingue were newly arrived African men. Early scholars asserted that these men escaped because they had not adjusted to slavery. They also said that people who were *born* into slavery on the island only fled when there was a problem on their estate, most often a lack of food.⁹ Later scholars strongly disagreed and cited the same notices to argue that Saint-Domingue's people never accepted slavery. All types of enslaved people, they showed, tried to escape bondage.¹⁰ Some historians have concluded that maroons "may indeed have contributed to the basic groundwork and general form of the massive outbreak of 1791."¹¹ Others determined that "marronage was not, all things considered, a permanent threat against the established order."¹²

David Geggus calculates that "at any given moment less than one percent of Saint-Domingue's enslaved people had escaped and maybe one out of every 30 or 40 adults escaped in a given

year.” Most of these people, he estimates, were captured or returned on their own after absences ranging between several days and several months.¹³ Crystal Eddins, in a sophisticated analysis of marronage notices, recognizes that “scholarly debate surrounding the role and relevancy, or lack thereof, of enslaved runaways before and during the Revolution seems to have reached a stalemate.”¹⁴ Eddins concludes, “The Haitian Revolution, although not wholly dictated by Africa-inspired rituals and marronage, benefitted from maroon bands and ritual leaders at important moments of its unfolding.”¹⁵

Until now, one man has epitomized prerevolutionary resistance in Saint-Domingue. Makandal is considered to be a poison conspirator who sought to drive white people from the island. Makandal is revered in Haiti and remembered as a rebel who resisted to his very end, leaping from his burning execution pyre to cries of “Makandal escapes!” The poison plot attributed to Makandal has been described as “the only hint of an organized attempt at revolt during the hundred years preceding the French Revolution.”¹⁶ Why and how Makandal fought oppression and inspired others to do the same is a complex question made more difficult to resolve by myths that have come to shroud his life and actions.

Over time, writers developed three different versions of the Makandal story, each reflecting and serving the political ideas of its era. The first myth was that Makandal was a colonist-killer. This idea emerged very quickly, appearing first in a pamphlet published in France in 1758, the year Makandal was executed. The pamphlet contained part of an anonymous letter claiming that “the slaves seek to make themselves masters of the country, by killing all the whites.”¹⁷ This became the central theme in colonists’ descriptions of Makandal.

A second Makandal story appeared in France about thirty years later: Makandal was a madman. Makandal-the-madman appealed to Europeans and North Americans. This myth had a long life because proslavery writers in the 1800s used it to help

explain the Haitian Revolution. The myth started in 1787 in Paris, when a writer known only as Larival published a work of fiction called “Makandal: True Story.”¹⁸ The story combines seemingly authentic details with obviously fictional elements. Larival combined the idea of a poisoning plot and exotic colonial words taken from a contemporary book with an unmistakably fictional plot: a doomed romance.¹⁹ In the first paragraph, Larival wrote that Makandal was a “monster,” and the story portrays him as a gifted healer who is driven mad by the cruelties of slavery. Madness is essential to Larival’s story because Makandal is shown using poisons to kill and terrorize other enslaved people as well as colonists.

This story was quickly picked up by other journals and translated and published in Germany and Great Britain. A 1789 British version added sabotage and a race war to Larival’s story, having Makandal’s lieutenants confess that their leader planned to “destroy privately the greater part of the planters, or to ruin them, by poisoning all their slaves who appeared to be attached to them; and lastly to exterminate the whole race of white men by a general massacre which would render him the deliverer and sovereign of the whole island.”²⁰ When Saint-Domingue’s enslaved people launched their great uprising in 1791, the story found a second life in the United States, where readers were already consuming news that emphasized the horrors of the French and Haitian Revolutions.²¹

In the twentieth century, a third Makandal myth arose, as Caribbean writers of African descent began to portray him in mostly positive terms. One of the earliest was the Martinique-born abolitionist and free man of color Civiique de Gastine. In his 1818 history of Haiti, Gastine argues that Makandal’s “force of character and correctness of mind” showed that Black and white people are intellectually equal. For him, the lesson of Makandal’s plans to purge Saint-Domingue of colonists is “Despots and tyrants, beware!”²²

More than a century later, Trinidadian writer C. L. R. James wrote his highly influential *The Black Jacobins* (1938), which praised Makandal as the precursor of the Haitian Revolution. “An uninstructed mass, feeling its way to revolution, usually begins by terrorism, and Mackandal aimed at delivering his people by means of poison.”²³ In *The Kingdom of This World*, a 1949 novel describing the Haitian Revolution, Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier created the most famous portrait of Makandal, one that symbolized the vitality of African and Afro-Caribbean cultures. Carpentier’s description of Makandal’s supernatural powers created the Latin American literary style of “magical realism.” This Makandal was a man of great moral purpose who planned a massive slave uprising and taught an enslaved boy about the glories of African civilization.²⁴

The myth of Makandal as a heroic revolutionary allowed other creators to imagine him on an even larger stage.²⁵ In 2012, multimedia company Ubisoft released “Liberation,” the fourth installment of its popular video game *Assassin’s Creed*. Set in Louisiana in the 1760s and 1770s, “Liberation” features enslaved and free characters of color, including two rival assassins who claim that Makandal taught them his lethal arts in Saint-Domingue.²⁶ As a rebel loosely aligned with Ubisoft’s fictional Brotherhood of Assassins, Makandal is part of a secret centuries-long struggle against tyranny.

In the words of historian Annette Gordon-Reed, these Makandal depictions are “forms of fantasy written as fact.” Gordon-Reed observes that “historians have a duty . . . to look beyond the presentations of people who deliberately forced obscurity upon others and portrayed the oppressed in a way that justified their rule over them. Privileging [enslavers’] documents has historians playing along with a rigged system, producing history that is indelibly marked by prejudice, a form of fantasy written in fact.”²⁷

Relying on carefully deconstructed archival sources, this book disputes that Makandal was a poisoner. He was a diviner in the

Congo tradition who formed spiritual communities for healing and self-defense. In doing so, he established one of the multiple cultures of resistance that emerged in the decades before the Haitian Revolution. Other enslaved people took vengeance against their enslavers or appealed to colonial courts to protect them from torture and abuse. Still others planned and participated in labor stoppages or strikes against plantation policies and leadership. Enslaved people were thinking strategically about their lives as they imagined and worked for a future in which French colonists would no longer dominate Saint-Domingue.

Ten maps reveal how resistance over a period of three decades was centered around mountainous foothills between sugar and coffee land. This terrain was overlaid by drought, epidemic illness, and poison interrogations. On the same ground, the revolution's first fires broke out on the night of August 22, 1791. This location was not accidental. Vincent Brown argues that rebel leaders in Jamaica were "keenly attuned to their spatial situation . . . [and] worked to build alliances across mountains and across plantation lines."²⁸ They knew "who was on the estates . . . who controlled particular regions." With this knowledge of the physical and political landscape, they could begin to persuade and pressure people to join the revolt, for this was not a "simple reaction to the fact of enslavement."²⁹ Social connections, shared ethnicities, membership in a local community, and loyalties to local leaders all combined to shape the coalition and determine the fate of the rebellion in Jamaica. The same processes occurred in Saint-Domingue before 1791. As Brown writes, "Paying careful attention to movements in space and over time offers a new perspective on the military maneuvers of the combatants."³⁰ The maps in this book offer that perspective.

This book is part of an ongoing scholarly debate about what constitutes resistance. After a wave of studies in the 1980s and 1990s that celebrated slave resistance, some historians have argued that the term has become too broadly applied, encompassing

nearly all elements of enslaved people's lives.³¹ French scholar Frédéric Régent champions a narrower definition of resistance, limiting its use to "any behavior by a slave that went against the economic system."³² Régent considers slowing down plantation work, sabotaging equipment, injuring livestock, and escaping the estate as forms of resistance because these diminished production and profit. Participating in a dance ritual, tending a private garden, or growing vegetables to sell in a colonial market were not, in his view, cultural or economic resistance, because they helped enslaved people accept slavery. "Music, dance, and singing let the enslaved population unwind and diverted it from different forms of resistance."³³

Historian Randy Browne studies enslaved people living under British colonial control in what is today Guyana. There, enslaved people were permitted to complain to a judge about abuses, and those records were preserved, culminating in "the single largest archive of first-person testimony from and about enslaved people in the Americas."³⁴ Browne found very few records of people fighting their enslavement. His evidence showed that people enslaved on Caribbean sugar estates had little excess energy to fight the plantation system. The best that most could manage was to survive the brutal work they were forced to do. Browne advocates for a narrow definition of resistance, while cautioning that "an exclusive emphasis on domination and resistance obscures the many other important relationships—and conflicts—that shaped enslaved people's lives."³⁵

This book's position is that enslaved people's survival efforts can constitute resistance. In Saint-Domingue, resistance was a response to specific threats that were, depending on the case, personal, local, regional, and global. An offended plantation manager could imprison a free Black man on a pretext. Rivers dry from drought could spark a brutal production drive to recover lost refinery profits. Mysterious death could carry off enslaved neighbors living up and down a river valley. Deadly

bacteria imported from foreign fields could infect an entire island's soil, livestock, and inhabitants.

Saint-Domingue's colonial plantation economy undeniably brought all these forces to bear against the enslaved. But the corps of enslaved resisters was not monolithic. They were from dozens of cultures in West or West Central Africa or had been born in the colony. They were men and women. Many were in positions of authority over other slaves: factory foremen, artisans, nurses, and household managers. They had a variety of political visions. As Brown and Browne recognize, people who resisted oppression did not necessarily seek to end slavery.³⁶ They were, however, looking to alleviate aspects of their suffering. Community was key to accomplishing this. A free Black woman together with her allies sued for her son's freedom in a campaign that ascended to the King's Council at Versailles. A crew of enslaved refinery workers walked into the foothills on a seven-day labor strike. An African diviner convened ritual communities across a chain of estates to stem a tide of illness.

These communities had years of practice resisting oppression, which made armed resistance possible. In the moment any coordinated rebellion begins, every man and woman must decide how they will engage. In his history of Tacky's Revolt, Vincent Brown describes how slaves present at the beginning of that rebellion were "compelled . . . to make unbearable decisions about when to yield, how to protect themselves and others from harm, whom to align with, and when and how to fight back, if at all."³⁷ These decisions were not made alone. In the years preceding the Haitian Revolution, environmental pressures, epidemic illness, and poison accusations were a stress test for enslaved communities. Communities survived those tests if their members were connected by powerful bonds of loyalty and if they had determined their priorities and established their willingness to tolerate risks. Communities that survived were strengthened because their members had decided which risks they were

willing to confront. In the poison zone, when the call came to join a revolt, many leaders and their communities were prepared to answer. On the night of August 22, 1791, thousands of enslaved men and women in Saint-Domingue made the “unbearable decision” to join Boukman’s rebellion.



I

Médor's Town and Country Lives

MÉDOR TRAVELED against his will. War and capitalism wrested him from West Africa, forcing him across the Atlantic Ocean, past the reefs and shallows of the Cap Français harbor, over the sandy beach, and past the charred remains of the recently burned settlement, where other enslaved men worked to replace wooden houses with stone buildings. After living twenty years in the port town, Médor was forced into one last involuntary journey, rumbling on a wagon down thirty miles of road surrounded by cane fields, to later walk alongside laden mules up a river valley, deep into the mountains. For Médor, like hundreds of thousands of other enslaved people in Saint-Domingue, there was no retreat, so he endured these journeys, imagined how to improve his life, and worked to attain that change.

When Médor arrived in Saint-Domingue, probably in the early 1730s, French colonists made up about 9 percent of the population and held 89 percent of the colony's people in bondage.¹ The labor of those enslaved workers made the colony Europe's leading supplier of sugar and, eventually, coffee. Plantation labor in Saint-Domingue was so brutal that half of all Africans who arrived there died within eight years.² Planters replaced dead captives with new ones, paying slavers to unload thousands of shackled Africans in Saint-Domingue nearly every year. Médor wore those chains himself and then watched tens

of thousands of people like him pass through Cap Français, the colony's leading port.

From 1700 to 1790, more enslaved Africans passed through Cap than any other single port in the Caribbean.³ Most of those captives were on their way to the countryside, where they would face different kinds of living conditions depending on the type of plantation they worked on. A man enslaved on an estate that grew coffee or made indigo dye might live in the mountains with thirty to eighty other Africans and one or two colonists. On a sugar plantation, a captive might be one of three hundred enslaved workers on a coastal plain overseen by four or five white people.⁴ On many plantations, enslaved people had little contact with colonists; they were watched, trained, and compelled to work by higher-ranking slaves called drivers.

By 1757, Médor had survived slavery for at least twenty years. He was still alive because for fifteen of those years, he was enslaved in a house in Cap Français rather than on a plantation. He and a handful of others were under the constant surveillance of their enslavers, the Delavaud family. He spoke French with the Delavauds, or Creole, an emerging language with African-inspired grammar and mostly French vocabulary. With other enslaved people, Médor spoke African languages, but not in front of the Delavauds. His African name is lost to history because the Delavauds imposed French names on all the enslaved household workers: Agnès, Élisabeth, Hippolyte, Adrien, Scipion, Venus, and Mercure.⁵

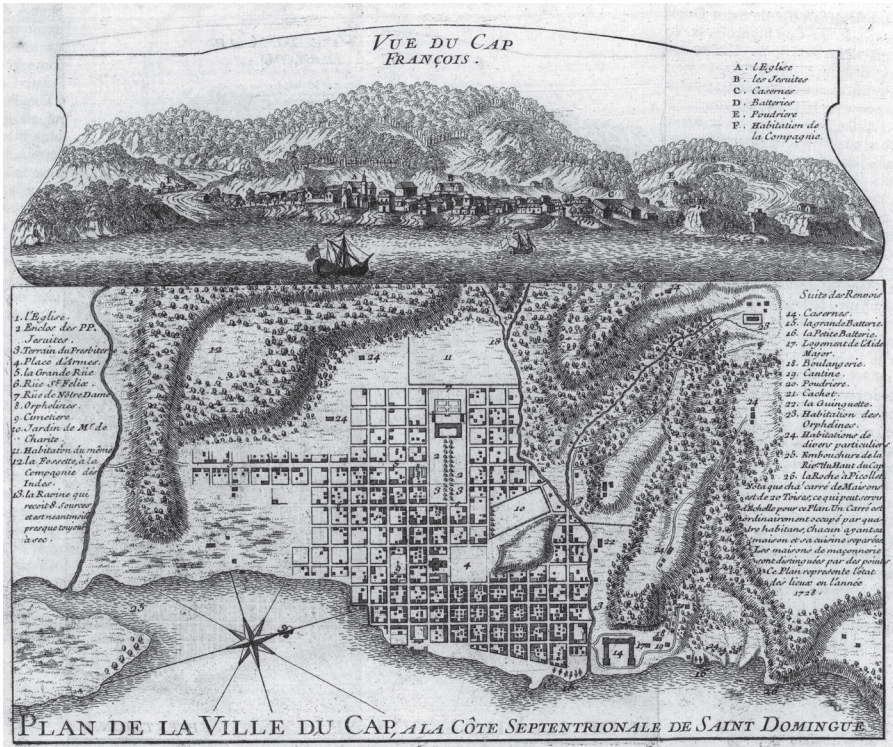
Médor worked as a valet or manservant to surgeon Philippe Delavaud. On Delavaud's order, Médor might have left the house alone to buy food at the market or the butcher stall, or he may have been sent to collect packages from merchants. He also would have carried messages from Delavaud to the surgeon's patients or other doctors. As the surgeon's personal servant, Médor likely experienced moments of autonomy and greater freedom of movement than other people enslaved by the family.

However, he and the others were all subordinate to Agnès, an enslaved woman who managed the household. For an enslaved person, occupying a position of trust or authority over others could be both advantageous and perilous. A personal servant could be the first accused of betrayal. A skilled driver leading a crew could be the first accused of conspiracy. Any woman under an enslaver's control could be used for sex.⁶ This might have happened to Agnès.

Médor came from West Africa, perhaps modern-day Benin or Togo. We know this because his friend Venus said she heard him talking to a man named Gaou in "their language." The African name Gaou probably came from the Kingdom of Dahomey, in what is today Benin.⁷ This suggests that Médor, Venus, and Gaou were probably swept into the Atlantic slave trade during Dahomey's military expansion, which flooded Saint-Domingue with captives in the 1720s and early 1730s.⁸ In the first half of the eighteenth century, more than one-third of the Africans arriving in the colony came from this region, more than from any other part of Africa.⁹ Médor, Gaou, and Venus probably spoke Fon, Ewe, or another of the Gbe languages of modern-day Togo or Benin.

Cap Français was Saint-Domingue's largest and most important settlement. When Médor lived there, it was more of a town than a city, with three to four thousand residents. If he had seen cities in Benin in the early 1700s, like Grand Ardra or Savi, with populations of up to thirty thousand, he would not have been impressed by the French settlement's size.¹⁰ By the 1780s, long after Médor's death, Cap Français grew to fifteen thousand residents.¹¹

In Médor's time, a great mass of humanity toiled beyond the city's gate. Forty thousand enslaved people lived in the surrounding parishes, and roughly 170,000 enslaved people populated the colony.¹² Cap was the main port for European cargoes and passengers. The city's booming economy was heavily dependent



1.1 Cap François in 1728. “Plan de la Ville du Cap, a la Côte Septentrional de Saint Domingue,” from Pierre-François-Xavier de Charlevoix, *Histoire de l’Isle Espagnole ou de S. Domingue . . . Tome second*. Paris: Hippolyte-Louis Guerin, 1731. Reproduction courtesy of John Carter Brown Library.

on exporting plantation products and importing food, draft animals, enslaved Africans, and agricultural tools. Cap was also the center of the colony’s provincial political and legal system, with courts that could condemn and execute free and enslaved people. But Cap was a space of relative freedom for freeborn biracial and Black people, and for ex-slaves, who were mostly African-born. They formed a free population of color and had identical legal rights to French colonists; in practice, however, their lives were heavily constrained by racism.¹³

Three-quarters of the people who lived in Cap Français were Black, and many of them, like Médor, had been born in Africa. As Médor walked past the harbor on any given day in the 1730s and 1740s, he would have seen dozens of ships at anchor. Half a dozen might have been slavers. The sight might have triggered memories of his own weeks of misery and terror in a slave ship's hold. He might have remembered being auctioned to a colonist, perhaps Philippe Delavaud, on the deck of that same vessel.¹⁴ Years later, when Delavaud returned to the harbor to buy two dozen captives for his new coffee plantation, Médor would have served and accompanied him.

If time spent at the harbor made Médor reflect on the misery of the slave trade, it might have led Delavaud, a Paris-trained master surgeon, to think about disease. Ships from Europe, Africa, and other colonies carried diseases that spread through Cap Français and into the surrounding parishes. From the beginning of the 1700s, laws required that an official doctor inspect all incoming vessels, especially slave ships, for evidence of a ship-board epidemic. All ships arriving at Cap had to be cleaned and “perfumed,” in the hope that this would disinfect them.¹⁵

Colonists particularly feared yellow fever, which could kill 40–50 percent of an unexposed population. If Médor had experienced a mild case as a child, he might have been immune to yellow fever, but he would have seen it cut down many of Cap's residents in the summer of 1733. The dreaded disease returned in 1735. Authorities canceled the “perfuming” requirement the following year, but yellow fever was back in 1742 and 1746.¹⁶

Smallpox was another scourge that arrived by sea. A physician in Cap Français noted in 1738 that many slave ships carried captives with the disease, which struck Saint-Domingue hard in 1741, killing many enslaved people. As smallpox epidemics became more regular, some colonists had doctors inoculate their slaves in 1745, although this was still a highly experimental practice.¹⁷

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