God's Black Firstfruits:
Creating Community among Eighteenth-Century
Nantes' Gens de couleur

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Le Conquis' arrival in late May 1752 at Nantes from Martinique should have been unexceptional. Nantes was France's wealthiest and most politically influential port city for the majority of the eighteenth century and saw the arrival of ships bearing goods and persons from the New World almost daily. Le Conquis, however, was noteworthy because it was carrying an unusual and important guest: a prince.

Aged between fifteen and sixteen, the young man had been a guest aboard the Nantais vessel La Béhinière before joining the crew of Le Conquis on its trip to Nantes. On 20 May, the eve of Pentecost, the prince was ushered to the church in Nantes' St. Nicolas parish by his guardian, merchant and noble homme François Touchy, who owned both La Béhinière and Le Conquis. With Touchy standing beside him as godfather, the prince was baptized, culminating a most incredible journey. Just moments before, he had been a nameless "free Negro . . . the son of the King of Petit Demoulte, Gold Coast" who had crossed the Atlantic on a French slave ship, then boarded another French vessel returning to Nantes; now, washed spiritually white on the eve of the commemoration of the advent of the Holy Spirit, he carried a name "imposed on him" by his French hosts: Alexandre, Nègre. Young Alexandre did not find himself transformed into a new creature by himself. Also baptized that day in St. Nicolas parish were René Julien, the fifteen-year-old Angolan slave of noble homme René Bertrand de la Clanserie, Henriette Louise Claude, the ten-year-old slave of noble homme Claude Le Manne, and twenty-month-old René Marie, the
illegitimate son of a unknown dead black female slave and the property of noble homme Pierre Duval.¹ That 20 May, God's firstfruits had traversed the Atlantic Ocean and were black.²

This 1752 mass baptism reveals important characteristics of eighteenth-century Nantes' gens de couleur population. Of the four persons baptized, only one was free. Significantly, he was afforded special consideration as the son of an African ruler, as would be twelve others who were, or at least claimed to be, royalty.³ Furthermore, each of the baptized was either the property of or protected by a bourgeois merchant or a person involved in maritime trade, and they were all destined for domestic service. I have been able to identify a total of 1,424 gens de couleur resident in Nantes between 1694 and 1843. 893, or 62.7%, were clearly chattel property who, unless their owners

¹ Archives Municipales de Nantes [hereafter AMN], GG254, fol. 82 (1752). René Marie joined his mother in death on 8 June 1752. See Ibid., fol. 92 (1752). La Béhinière left Nantes on 1 Aug. 1750 under the command of Michel de Kervenny. Slaves were purchased in the Bananas Islands, Cape Grand Mount, and Sierra Leone between 17 Nov. 1750 and 16 May 1751. Thirty-seven slaves disembarked in Martinique upon La Béhinière's arrival. Nineteen slaves had died en route. See David Eltis, et al., eds., The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-ROM (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), entry #30580. Le Conquis does not appear in the database.

² Mass baptisms occurred on twenty-two separate occasions, sixteen of which were performed during Holy Week or Pentecost.

³ Archives Départementales de Loire-Atlantique [hereafter ADLA], 1M696 and 1 M699; and Archives Nationales [hereafter AN] Col F³B24.
were from the Caribbean, mostly belonged to Nantais merchants, ship owners, and captains. Overall, 909 persons, or 93% of those persons for whom a profession was indicated, served as domestics.4

Attempting to reconstruct the lived experience of the "firstfruits" of a modern French population of color is frustrating. For every insight the records provide, ten questions seemingly remain unanswerable. The records from which it is possible to trace France's gens de couleur – parish registers, port records, censuses, and police records – were generated by French authorities who were, for the most part, more interested in containing what they thought of as a dangerous racial pollutant than in capturing their humanity. Of the available sources, the church's registers are by far the best for information about Nantes' gens de couleur's daily lives, providing the historian's best entrée into the worlds that black Nantais inhabited. This article sketches a profile of one of France's earliest populations of color by analyzing parish baptismal, wedding, and funereal records. I do not analyze the documents' language for clues about eighteenth-century French racial attitudes; rather, I focus on what they tell us about how persons of color in Nantes behaved. These records reveal that, in Nantes, "God's black firstfruits" were a small community that ultimately could not and did not sustain itself through natural reproduction. Nevertheless, these records demonstrate that the gens de couleur created their own spheres of intra-racial sociability that even crossed parish lines.

Formal marriage seems to have been rare among Nantes' eighteenth-century gens de couleur. Parish registers report only six gens de couleur marriages for the whole century. Of these, only two featured a black spouse and a white spouse. In both instances, a free black man married a white woman. There was no record of a white man choosing to marry a black woman. The four remaining ceremonies featured black men marrying women described as "négresses" of African or, in one case, Indian

4 See Dwain C. Pruitt, "Nantes Noir: Living Race in the City of Slavers," (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 2005).
origin. One, in fact, featured a black widow named Charlotte Bourbouin marrying her second black husband, a free sailor named Allain Paschal.5

Marriage is not, of course, necessary for procreation, so what do we know about children born to Nantes’ gens de couleur? The first enfant de couleur was born in 1729 to thirty-three-year-old Anne Chapelet, a white Nantaise, on 4 May 1729. The baby’s father was Pierre, the slave of a merchant named Monsieur Gourand.6 Nothing of how the two met or the final disposition of the mother and child is revealed. This first child of color born in Nantes was of mixed racial heritage, but overall interracial births were surprisingly rare. The next recorded child of color born in Nantes, Catherine, was born on 3 September 1737 to two black slaves, Hélène and Antoine.7 Five other declarations of pregnancy filed between 1737 and 1777 featured only women of African heritage, most of whom were enslaved, impregnated by other gens de couleur.8 Seven more black children would be born in Nantes before the next mulatto child, Jullienne Jeanne, daughter of François Simon and Jeanne Dupré, was born on 29 August 1753.9 Between 1753 and 1777, six more births to gens

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5 AMN, GG248, fol. 42 (1746) and GG250, fol. 150 (1748). Charlotte Bourbouin was a free black native of Martinique. Her age is not indicated. The circumstances of the life and death of her first husband, Jean-François Cofy, are unknown. The marriage record only indicates that he had been a resident of St. Nicolas parish. Allain Paschal was a thirty-year-old free black sailor aboard La Rivière de Nantes originally from "the coast of Guinea" when he was baptized on 9 Apr. 1746. The couple married on 15 Oct. 1748. See Pruitt, 149-236, esp. 162-70 and 176-90.

6 AMN, GG747, fol. 35. According to her declaration of pregnancy, Anne only had sex with Pierre because he had promised to marry her. For more on gendered notions of honor and morality as revealed in pregnancy declarations, see Arlette Farge, Le cours ordinaire des choses dans la cité du XVIIIe siècle (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1994).

7 AMN, GG240, fol. 94 (1737) and GG748, fol. 38.

8 Déclarations de grossesse for Perrine Françoise, Marie Barbe, Thérèse, Jacquette Le Roux, and Anne can be found in AMN, GG750, fols. 45-6; GG752, fol. 64; GG754, fol. 125; and GG756, fol. 13 and fol. 34 respectively. Pruitt, 220-2.

9 AMN, GG255, fol. 153 (1753).
de couleur were reported. After twenty-four years, the next interracial child, the mulatresse Hortense Marguerite, was born on Christmas Day 1777 to Olive Rose, a slave owned by a Monsieur Coltin. The father's identity was not given. Hortense Marguerite died of unspecified causes on 6 April 1778.¹⁰ In sum, only three interracial children were born out of a total of sixteen children of color born in Nantes during the eighteenth century.

Information concerning births and the limited number of interracial marriages celebrated in Nantes lead to the conclusion that the gens de couleur largely associated with one another. This assumption of intimacy and sociability among gens de couleur is underscored and strengthened by a closer reading of baptismal announcements, the witness lists generated at gens de couleur weddings and funerals, and late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century census records. Sue Peabody read the trial of Catherine Morgan as proof of the existence of "a network of black women in Nantes" who aided one another in times of crisis.¹¹ This network was not a gendered phenomenon; there also existed a general network of persons of color in Nantes that provided practical and moral support for its members.

A review of baptismal records offers additional insight into the levels at which Nantes' gens de couleur were socially familiar with one another. It was, of course, normal procedure for a person being baptized to have at least one godparent. Most of the black Nantais were slaves in the eighteenth century and, consequently, the owners chose the godparents if godparents were named. While the court elite at Versailles viewed the baptism of Africans as a fashionable opportunity to demonstrate their wealth and social prestige as the patron of a black-skinned convert,¹² Nantes' business elite used black baptisms as occasions to reward family members and business partners or

¹⁰ AMN, GG279, fol. 347 and GG280, fol. 80.
curry favor with the socially prominent or prospective partners. For example, five-year-old Christophe Clair Daniel de Kervegan stood as godfather to Françoise Madeleine, a twenty-three-year-old slave from Congo, in 1744. She was owned by Sieur Gilles Lambert of Saint-Domingue. Lambert and slave were residing with the Kervegans, a merchant family living along Nantes' Quai de la Fosse. Thirty-five years later, Kervegan was elected mayor of Nantes on 20 August 1789.13

When children of color were born in Nantes and their parents were able or allowed to select the godparents themselves, one sees signs of a different pattern emerging. In those cases in which godparents were indicated in the baptismal record, most were persons of color or white Nantais related to the child by marriage.14 For example, Catherine Augé was the godmother and namesake of Catherine, the daughter born to Hélène and Antoine, the slaves of Sieur Guillodeu, in 1737. It is uncertain who chose Augé or how well she knew the two slaves. It is certain, however, that she was a black woman with some degree of independence. She was not described as a slave nor did the baptismal record specify that she was attached to any house or person.15

Perhaps the best example of the use of persons of color as godparents is the baptism of Catherine Menard in 1745. Catherine, the illegitimate daughter of nègresse Jeanne Menard, was born on 19 January 1745 in St. Nicolas parish. Jeanne Menard's legal status is unclear but she seems to have been free. Catherine's father's name and racial heritage do not appear in the baptismal record. Jeanne selected two free blacks to serve as her daughter's godparents, Jean-Louis Hercule and Marie Catherine Henriette. One wonders how Jeanne Menard made their acquaintance. The baptismal record described Marie Catherine

14 For example, Jullienne Jeanne's godfather was Antoine Choinneau, her mother's uncle and a witness to Jeanne Dupré's marriage to François Simon. AMN, GG255, fol. 153 (1753).
15 AMN, GG240, fol. 94 (1737).
Henriette as a free woman in domestic service to the widow Morin. Jean-Louis Hercule did not even live in St. Nicolas parish. He had been the slave of M. Berthault the elder in St. Clément parish. Some time after his emancipation, Jean-Louis Hercule entered the service of the widow Batho but still resided in St. Clément parish. Here it seems likely that Peabody's conjectured network of black women was at work. Though the baptismal register is not explicit, it seems that Jeanne Menard was in some difficulty when she arrived in Nantes. Upon her daughter's baptism, the newborn Catherine was immediately handed over to her free and likely more stable godmother for care. One could surmise that Jeanne somehow met Marie Catherine Henriette upon her arrival and appealed to her for assistance. Moreover, since Marie Catherine Henriette and Jean-Louis Hercule would be married on 11 February 1745, perhaps Jeanne was turning her daughter over to the couple in an official or unofficial adoption. Whatever her intentions, Jeanne's actions proved all for naught: Catherine Menard died on 22 January 1745.  

Black Nantais rejoiced and mourned together, further proving the elaboration of a gens de couleur sphere of sociability. In 1762, Nantes' mayor, Léonard Joubert du Collet, complained to the Admiralty that blacks were arriving in the city day and night in such large numbers that they were posing a serious risk to the public order. According to Collet, the gens de couleur, who were afforded greater liberty of movement than in the colonies, socialized together at night. According to reports, they assembled on the piers in large numbers, hurling insults at passing white men and vulgarly propositioning white women. The mayor opined that such blatant disregard for due deference to white authority was best explained as the slaves "avenging themselves of their enslavement in the colonies by freeing themselves in France, where laws are exercised less harshly in their regard." A similar report also complained of the noise that

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16 For Jeanne and Catherine Menard, Jean-Louis Hercule, and Marie Catherine Henriette, see AMN, GG247, fols. 9, 11, and 19.
African slaves in Nantes produced at night. Numerous complaints were lodged about the shouts, singing, and drumming emanating from Afro-Creole ring dances introduced to France from the slave quarters of the Caribbean. Slave festivities were so loud, in fact, that many Nantais in the Ile Feydeau complained that they were unable to sleep at night.\(^{17}\)

Other social gatherings also led to intra-racial celebration and solidarity. At least six weddings involving \textit{gens de couleur} were celebrated in Nantes in the eighteenth century. The 1766 union between Jean-Charles and Marie Louise, attended by members of Nantes' white merchant community, was also attended by the free black Gabriel Constant, \textit{père}, who signed the register.\(^{18}\) When Louise Magdelaine, known as Tisbée, married Pierre François on 19 May 1772 in St. Nicolas parish, it attracted an even larger number of Nantes' colored population. Tisbée arrived in Nantes in 1754 from her native Portugal aged fourteen. The slave of a Monsieur Forget, she was baptized on 13 April 1754. It is unclear whether Forget emancipated Tisbée while they were in Nantes or if she were a free servant all along, but she was free when she wed her husband. For his part, Pierre François was a thirty-nine-year-old free domestic in service to a Monsieur Bellisle. Their wedding was witnessed by four free black men, each of whom signed the register. Among Tisbée's witnesses was Jacques Rivière, who lived with Monsieur Augustin de Luynes in Ste.-Croix parish. Rivière's presence at a black wedding in another parish as a friend of the bride lends further credence to the notion that \textit{gens de couleur} socialized across parish boundary lines due to friendship and, perhaps, even racial solidarity.\(^{19}\)


\(^{18}\) AMN, GG268, fols. 208-9.

\(^{19}\) AMN, GG274, fol. 134 (1772). For more on Jacques Rivière, see AMN, GG454, fol. 72 and GG461, fols. 84 and 97. Jacques Rivière was a free native of Saint-Domingue serving as a domestic. He married Félicité Marie Hélène
Gens de couleur funerals also attracted representatives of black Nantes. When Marie Marthe, the slave of a Monsieur Mesneux, was buried on 18 June 1747, a slave named Pierre and a black man of uncertain legal status named Barthélemy witnessed her burial. Barthélemy would prove to be something of a fixture at gens de couleur funerals, signing as a witness at the services for the mulatresse Marie Anne along with her widower "Jean Baptiste naigre" in 1751 and along with Jean-Baptiste Badin and the bereaved Louis Lappy at the funeral for Jeanne Lappy in 1753.

As the eighteenth century drew to a close, Nantes' gens de couleur population was increasingly made up of refugees from Saint-Domingue. Most of these persons found themselves struggling to reach bare subsistence levels for their families. Financial difficulties among gens de couleur, whether occasioned by their status as refugees or as underpaid domestic or manual labor, forced them to make accommodations and rely on one another for support. It was therefore not uncommon to find persons of color traveling together or sharing a common dwelling. In Year V, for example, André Maximien shared the home of Joseph Reynaud in Section 17 with a number of people including the free blacks Zéphir and Prospect Africain. Conditions for Zéphir were so difficult that the offer of a place to sleep at the Reynauds' was all that allowed him to remain in Nantes. Several other examples could be cited of persons of

Rivière in Ste.-Croix parish on 26 June 1770. The couple had its first child on 25 Oct. 1781, but young Henri Rivière died on 29 Nov. of the same year.

For Marie Marthe, AMN, GG249, fol. 85 (1747). For Marie Anne, see AMN, GG253, fol. 28 (1751), and for Jeanne Lappy, see AMN, GG255, fol. 1 (1753). Marie Anne died in St. Nicolas parish at the age of twenty-seven and was buried on 29 Jan. 1751. Jeanne Lappy was forty and was laid to rest on 1 Jan. 1753. The other funeral with a list of black witnesses was that of the slave Geneviève in 1748. Geneviève, the slave of the widow Feurre, died at age twenty-five and was buried on 25 Sept. 1748. Her burial was witnessed by Jean Quintin and Laurent who were probably Madame Feurre's slaves, but that is not specified in the record. AMN, GG250, fol. 141 (1748).

For AMN, I45, fol. 1 "Renseignements donnés par les Commissaires de Police sur les Réfugiés des Colonies, an V."
color living and applying for public assistance together, but the story of Bonitte, Lise, and Victoire (known as Popette) Bernier, *filles de couleur*, and their black slave governess, Catherine, is one of the most intriguing. The story not only underscores Nantes' considerable ties to Saint-Domingue; it also hints at the degree to which the community of *gens de couleur* offered mutual assistance in times of crisis.

The Bernier sisters landed at the port of Nantes on 4 February 1793. Their father had shipped them from their home in Cailles de St. Louis, Saint-Domingue, to the ship owner Arthur Montaudoin. Bernier's relationship with Montaudoin is not explicitly stated, but there are indications that they were commercial partners.\(^{22}\) Though the record is not clear on this point, it seems that the girls and their black slave went to live with Citizeness Piété, a merchant of limited means, while Arthur Montaudoin apparently agreed to take care of them financially.

Montaudoin subsidized the four women of color from Saint-Domingue until his death, at which time the girls were left without means or protection. Someone, most likely Piété who suddenly had the considerable financial burden of caring for four additional persons, drafted a letter to Nantes' municipal council asking that the girls be admitted to the public assistance rolls. The Montaudoin successors had decided not to honor Arthur's agreement with Monsieur Bernier, arguing that the Berniers already owed the Montaudoins a significant amount of money. The letter filed on behalf of the four women from Cailles de St. Louis asked that all monies awarded the Bernier girls be turned over to the slave-governess Catherine. On 11 Nivôse III (31 December 1794), the council agreed to award the girls a settlement and named Catherine their governess. The three girls each signed the award letter. Catherine, notably, did not. The
girls were admitted to the public assistance rolls on 27 Nivôse III (16 January 1795).

The Berniers and Catherine disappeared from the record until Year V, when a police commissioner canvassing Section 9 of the city visited Catherine. Despite the fact that two years earlier she had been assigned full custody of the Bernier sisters, only the eldest, Bonitte, was living with her. The other two sisters were "lodged in different sections of the commune of Nantes." Catherine and Bonitte were living with a black man named Prospert, a native of Cap François in Saint-Domingue. This situation seemed to have offended the police commissioner greatly. In his report back to his superiors, he recommended that police officials effect Bonitte's immediate removal, arguing that the moral conditions in the home were such that "[t]his young girl is not well placed in this home. It is hardly a proper setting (elle n'y est pas à l'école des moeurs) and it is my duty to warn the administration of it."24

The observer's concerns about Bonitte are unclear. Perhaps he witnessed something offensive or inappropriate that he did not record for the sake of propriety. This possibility, however, does not seem in keeping with the picture one can construct of the persons in question. The man known as both Prospect Africain and Prosper Africain arrived in Nantes in 1793. A native of Angola, Prospect was sold into slavery in Saint-Domingue's capital of Cap François where he worked as a laborer in tobacco. He fled Cap François in 1792-1793 and sailed from St. Marc to Nantes where he worked as a day laborer. He was married to Sophie, though the date of their marriage is unknown. Also described as being of Angolan origin, Sophie, too, had served as a manual laborer in Saint-Domingue's tobacco fields. Sophie did not depart Saint-Domingue with her husband; according to her port records, she arrived in Nantes directly from Cap François. The two were still living together as husband and

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23 AMN, I^245, d. 2, "Réfugiés et déportés de St. Domingue et des Colonies. Demandes de secours et Pièces annexes. Lettres ABC: Ans II à V."
24 Ibid., d. 1, "Renseignements donnés par les Commissaires."
wife in 1807 when yet another census of persons of color was taken in their section. Both were then described as being thirty-nine years old.²⁵

What were the observer's objections? One can only speculate since the record ends here. Had he simply complained about the physical conditions of the home, it would be easy to make sense of his comments. His disparaging remarks about the morality of the home, however, are problematic, since outside of this report police registers never mention Catherine, Prospect, or his wife evidencing character flaws.

The simplest explanation is that the police commissioner arrived at the Prospect home and did not see Sophie, leading him to believe wrongly that Catherine was leading a sexually wanton life. This scenario, however, would be unlikely given the small numbers of persons of color living in any given district and the frequency of censuses of people of color in the early nineteenth century. A police officer familiar with the area should have known Prospect and his wife.²⁶

Perhaps the answer lies with Bonitte Bernier herself. Assuming that there was nothing wholly inappropriate going on in the Prospect home, it seems plausible that the commissioner's concern about morality was due to the young girl's light skin color. The Bernier sisters, in contradistinction to their "négresse" governess, were described as "de couleur." Given the degree of racial admixture in Saint-Domingue by this time period, the police commissioner may well have thought that Bonitte was white. Perhaps his objections were to the possibility that black people were shaping the mind and character of a white girl without the supervision of white residents of Nantes.

The motives of the police commissioner who investigated Catherine and her care for Bonitte remain debatable, and unfortunately, the records do not reveal whether city officials

²⁵ AMN, I²38, d. 1, "Etats des Hommes de Couleur, 1807"; I²41, d. 6, fol. 10; and I²43, d. 13.
²⁶ According to the "Etats des Hommes de Couleur, 1807," only seven people of color lived in the 10th Section.
acted to seize the girls. What is clear, though, is that Catherine, much like Catherine Morgan in 1746-1747, could rely on a network of persons of color to care for her needs and those of the children in her charge when financial pressures required it. A married black couple had taken Catherine and Bonitte in, and the other two girls were living with other persons in town who may or may not have been gens de couleur. Their story indicates that gens de couleur were engaged enough in their community to locate white persons of good will to serve the needs of helpless children and of a slave forced to live with the irony of being a surrogate mother owned by her children.

This paper does not exhaust the intriguing anecdotes buried in Nantes' parish registers. Fascinating stories remain to be told about gens de couleur in Nantes and elsewhere in France. This essay simply proposes a preliminary model for scholars interested in the ways in which "God's black firstfruits" lived in the metropole. Rather than seeking assimilation, persons of color in eighteenth-century Nantes seem to have sought companionship and community amongst their racial brethren.