



## Episode 810, Story 2: Galvez

Elyse Luray: Our next case investigates a collision of power, race, and unexpected love in revolutionary-era New Orleans. 1779: as the American War for Independence rages into its fourth year, the battle lines move south. In Louisiana, a Spanish territory, Governor Bernardo de Galvez picks up arms to defend the American colonies, assembling a militia, and routing the British from their garrisons along the Mississippi River. His heroic actions help secure freedom for the young American nation. But did he also seek to secure the freedom of a single African American slave? Now, Michael Henderson from Sugar Hill, Georgia, has come across a document that he thinks ties this revolutionary figure to the emancipation of his distant relative.

Michael Henderson: My family has long wanted to know what these papers tell us.

Elyse: I'm meeting Michael in New Orleans, where his story begins. Hi Michael, Elyse.

Michael: How are you?

Elyse: Good.

Michael: Come on in.

Elyse: Thanks. OK What do you have?

Michael: Well I have a manumission document.

Elyse: What's a manumission document?

Michael: Manumission document is the freedom papers of my 4th generation great grandmother. Her name was Agnes. The document was signed December 16, 1779. I was actually doing family history and at the time she was the furthest ancestor that I was able to trace back to. And in discovering her manumission document or her freedom papers over at the Notarial Archives, it allowed me to enter into a part of the family history that I was not aware of at the time.



Elyse: In 1779, New Orleans was under Spanish rule, which explains why the manumission document is in Spanish. Michael tells me he has had a short summary translation made.

Elyse: What does it basically say?

Michael: It speaks about how Agnes actually got her freedom. There are several players that are involved in this story here. One was named Mathieu Platilla who was assisting Agnes in getting her freedom. There was another lady by the name of Madame Harang who was Agnes's owner.

Elyse: According to his translation, Michael believes his relative, Agnes, was trying to buy her freedom, with the assistance of a white man, Mathieu Platilla. But her owner, Madame Harang, would not permit it. Agnes is only freed after the intervention of Bernardo de Galvez, the Governor of Louisiana.

Michael: The document itself was signed by Bernardo de Galvez.

Elyse: What exactly do you want me to find out?

Michael: Why did the Governor of Louisiana actually have to take time out to actually sign the document?

Elyse: Okay. Well I'm going to have to take the documents with me. Sounds like an interesting legacy you have on your hands.

Michael: Okay.

Elyse: All right let's see. Well first of all it's a Xerox. This copy is seven pages long, and the writing does look period. It looks like it was probably used with quill ink and that looks good. It's very hard to read. But it clearly says Galvez here. There was definitely some type of damage to this document at some time. I've never seen a manumission document before. So I need to find out more information about this era and I also need to find out some more information about the characters that are in this document. Michael said the original manumission papers are at the New Orleans Notarial Archives. I want to see them, and get my own translation, so I'm making an



appointment. But first, I want to learn how a slave could buy his or her own freedom. I went to school at Tulane University, so New Orleans is close to my heart. The city has long been a world to itself. While the British colonies in North America often separated races, New Orleans followed different rules. Africans, Indians, and Europeans mixed freely, giving the city a unique culture, including a population of so called "free people of color". Emily Clark is a professor of American Colonial Louisiana History. I've told her about my document.

Emily Clark: So this is the part of the city where free people of color settled. We're at the intersection of Royal and Ursuline Street. This building is pretty typical of the kind of place they would live or have their business.

Elyse: Emily explains that in the 1770's, the city had a growing population of emancipated slaves like Agnes, who were called "free people of color," or *libres*, in Spanish.

Emily: It was a majority black city then as it is now. And just behind us is Treme, which became also a place where many free people of color lived later on in the 19th century. But this was the area in the 18th century, in the 1770's and 80's.

Elyse: Emily says manumission papers were common at the time, because Spain's legal system, as well as its Catholicism, emphasized freedom as the ideal state for humanity. The population of *libres*, like Agnes, increased exponentially every decade of Spanish rule.

Emily: They were an important part of the economy and of the social life of New Orleans during this period of time. Some of them married other free people of color, in some cases women of mixed racial descent formed life partnerships with European white men. So there were all different kinds of arrangements.

Elyse: I want to show Emily Michael's document, so she suggests we move inside to the Louisiana State Museum, housed in the *cabildo*, the seat of Spanish colonial government. I have these manumission papers and I wanted to talk a little bit about that. What were they?

Emily: They were notarial documents...a kind of boiler plate document drawn up giving that person their freedom. There were two main ways that you could become free. One was, your



owner initiated the manumission process. You're free because you've served me well, you're free because of the affection I have for you, you're free because you're a good Christian.

Elyse: Emily says the second way for slaves to gain their freedom was something called *coartacion*, or self purchase.

Emily: And this is really important under the Spanish slave law. You had the right to buy your freedom for an appropriate price. And that price was set by a team of appraisers.

Elyse: To me it seems strange that someone who is enslaved would have money. I mean how would you have money to buy your own freedom?

Emily: We don't think of enslaved people as having money. But enslaved people had Sundays off and so they could hire themselves out on Sundays. And because the population of New Orleans was mostly male throughout the colonial period, they needed women to do their laundry. In some cases to do their cooking. In other cases simply to keep house for them. And enslaved women earned money.

Elyse: What would they do if they didn't have money?

Emily: There was something called "third party petition". So a friend, a relative, could on behalf of an enslaved person supply the money.

Elyse: The year of this document is 1779. It's signed by Galvez. How unusual would it be to see his signature on one of these manumission documents?

Elyse: Emily tells me 1779 was a busy year for the Governor. In support of the colonies, Spain had declared war on Britain in August. By December, when our document is dated, Galvez had already marched out of the city and into battle. Emily isn't sure if he had returned to New Orleans in December.

Emily: He usually wouldn't have been involved in a manumission. And so there's a bit of a mystery.



Elyse: Emily has noticed something else unique about our document: its length. I have a typical one; it's much shorter. It's really just two pages long.

Elyse: So what does that mean that this one is so long?

Emily: Means it's contested.

Elyse: Contested meaning...?

Emily: Meaning that the person was trying to obtain their manumission through self-purchase. And the owner said "No, I'm not going to take the money that the appraiser has said you're worth. You're not free." This was a court case. So that was unusual.

Elyse: I need to get to the bottom of this court case, and find out what Governor Galvez has to do with it. The original Galvez document, now close to 240 years old, is stored here, at the New Orleans Notarial Archive. Sally Reeves is the consulting archivist for special projects who has been examining our document. So this is the original?

Sally Reeves: This is the original Act of Emancipation of this slave Ignas who was Agnes in French; notice that this document went through the fire of 1788 and the edges were burned throughout the book.

Elyse: Sally has offered to translate the document.

Sally: It starts off with Bernardo de Galvez, Knight of the Military Order and, representation of Carlos III and all of his honors. In December of 1778, Mathieu Platilla entered the Governor's court.

Elyse: Platilla is asking Governor Galvez to "give freedom to the negro slave named Agnes."

Sally: And he was offering to pay for the emancipation of the slave Ignas.



Elyse: Okay. So he had the money to set her free and wanted to set her free.

Sally: And it took 425 pesos to do it.

Elyse: But Agnes's owner, Madame Harang, does not agree with the price, and is refusing. Sally translates: "that lady has not complied with these orders and continues in her criminal obstinacy." Is it unusual for that slave owner to say, "I'm not selling," after that?

Sally: It's not common, Madame Harang has refused, repeatedly refused, to take the money and to issue the emancipation.

Elyse: The standoff escalated and lasted more than a year. A second appraiser was brought in, and he, too, agreed on the price.

Sally: But she still wouldn't do it. And so in the end the Governor himself made the declaration that she is free.

Elyse: Sally suspects that Platilla wanted to free Agnes so they could live together in common law.

Sally: They could not marry. It was against both colonial law in the French and Spanish periods and later against the Constitution of the State of Louisiana until after the Civil War.

Elyse: She found a document deep in the archive: Mathieu Platilla's will from 1810. It lists Agnes as the mother of his children.

Sally: He does not leave money to her. He leaves his estate to the six surviving children and the five grandchildren. But he states very clearly that she is their mother.

Elyse: That explains the relationship between Agnes and Platilla. But why had the Governor intervened in the case? How unusual was it for Galvez who's the Governor at the time and he's probably very busy. I mean, why would he want to hear something like this?



Elyse: Sally suspects the two men knew each other, and that Platilla somehow persuaded the Governor to get involved.

Sally: And a person with a little bit of pull or some kind of entry with the Governor could go into the Governor's court and lay their case.

Elyse: What pull did Agnes, or Platilla, have with the Governor, getting him to intervene on their behalf, in the middle of the Revolutionary War? I'm headed to the Historic New Orleans Collection. Jason Wiese is the assistant director of its Williams Research Center, and an authority on the Revolutionary War in the Louisiana territory. I show Jason our manumission papers, and he immediately hones in on the date, and the drama facing the Spanish authorities in New Orleans.

Jason Wiese: In 1779, the American Revolution has been going on and Spain is getting pulled more and more into the conflict.

Elyse: After waiting on the sidelines, Spain finally declares war against Britain in 1779. Jason says Galvez gathers his militia and marches north, up the Mississippi, to a British garrison at Baton Rouge. It's a moment of tension and great risk for the colonial Governor, as he prepares to attack. What happens at the battle of Baton Rouge?

Jason: He used his militia to stage a diversion while his artillery dug in in an unexpected spot. And then when the fog lifted and day dawned, the British garrison were completely surprised to find Spanish artillery where they weren't expecting it.

Elyse: Galvez's artillery was brutal and accurate.

Jason: He bombarded the fort into submission very quickly. They surrendered not only the fort at Baton Rouge but also another fort upriver at Natchez.

Elyse: How in the world would he have time to work on a domestic case? On a document that has to deal with freeing a woman of slavery?



Jason: It does seem very strange. He was the Governor in addition to being the commander of military forces. I think military preparations would have occupied most of his time.

Elyse: But Jason explains that our document had been signed just three months after the battle of Baton Rouge — and he believes that may be a clue.

Jason: I actually did some digging on the names that you sent and I found something that may interest you. What I have to show you from our library is a roster of Louisiana soldiers who served under Galvez in the American Revolution.

Elyse: What Jason shows me next will certainly be of interest to Michael. Michael it was a great opportunity for me to learn about Spanish Colonial Louisiana which I think most people in our country don't realize how important that time period was for the freedom of our country, not to mention freedom from slavery. So you asked me why Governor would sign this document. And in order to answer that we really had to look into the document itself and the people that were involved. Especially Mathieu Platilla.

Jason: And at the top of page seven. There is a name he heads the list of other militia men who are not so young but who are nevertheless able to serve in the military. And the first name on the list is Mathieu Platilla.

Elyse: And so it says "B" here. Those marked "B" are preferred for cannon.

Jason: That's right.

Elyse: Right. And didn't you just tell me that in the battle of Baton Rouge that the artillery played a pivotal role?

Jason: Well the artillery played a pivotal role in almost all of the campaigns in West Florida. Since Galvez had to capture fortified positions, the only way to really do that was bombard the fortifications and force them to surrender.



Elyse: So it's clear that he was part of his militia but do you think they knew each other? I mean, how many people were part of the militia?

Jason: Well there were only 50 people in the company that Platilla was a part of. So he certainly would have recognized him by sight, if not also by name.

Michael: Wow, this is great.

Elyse: Mathieu Platilla had been part of the artillery force that had dealt the British a fatal blow at Baton Rouge. And it appears that the Governor had repaid his loyal soldier with a favor: freedom for Agnes. So your ancestor was fighting for the freedom of our country and at the same time he was fighting for the freedom of his loved one. It's quite extraordinary.

Michael: That's amazing. That right there ties the family history into this period of time that was an extraordinary period of time. Independence and freedom It kind of ran hand in hand, you know. That's good. Thanks for everything that you guys have done, too.

Elyse: After he defeated the British at Baton Rouge, Galvez and his militia continued their advance, routing the enemy at Natchez, Mobile, and Pensacola in 1781. Galvez's second front in the South secured the Mississippi River for the colonies, and is credited with taking men, money, and resources away from the British army's battle with Washington's forces in the North — aiding his success at Yorktown. Galvez died in 1786. The island of Galveston, Texas, is named in his honor.