Who and What Were the *Panis* Indians Buried from Ste. Anne de Detroit?

Suzanne Boivin Sommerville, FCHSM member (s.sommerville@sbcglobal.net)

FCHSM member Gloria LeCureux has asked me to give some background about the *Panis* and *Panisse* Indians who appear in Gail Moreau-DesHarnais's lists of the people buried from Ste. Anne de Detroit. (See this issue for Part VI.) *Panis* (or *pany*, which provides a clue to pronunciation) and *panisse* (feminine form) are French language versions of the name of the Pawnee Indians (from what is now Nebraska, on the Missouri River) who were taken as slaves by other Indians. Long before the arrival of Europeans, Native Americans had a well-established custom of taking individuals from Indian Nations other than theirs (in particular, from the Pawnee) and making them slaves. They later took captives from the Europeans, and, as with the Natives captured, killed some and enslaved or even adopted others. At times Native Americans offered the captives as gifts to or in negotiations with the French. Some of the captives were bought from the Indians by the French,[1] who employed some as servants and set some free. In 1709, it became legal in New France to own slaves, *esclaves*, although the presence of a few *Panis* in New France can be documented before then.[2]

There is an interesting entry in the registers of Lachine for 17 August 1704,[3] five years before slavery was legalized. The margin identifies it as the baptism of "Joseph [*sic*] panis." The preceding entry is for a "Joseph" Roy, so it is possible the priest who wrote the act had a lapse in concentration because the text of the entry calls the child Paul. Be that as it may, the entry reads that on this date Father Rémy

> baptized paul Indian of the *panis* nation [*Sauvage de la nation des panis*], about 10 years old, dwelling in the house of Paul L'Ecuyer, inhabitant [*habitant*] of this parish, who said he bought the said *Sauvage* for the first time from the said *panis Sauvages* and [the boy] having been taken as a slave [*esclave*] by other *Sauvages* named the *Renards* [Fox], he [Paul] bought him back [*la rachepté*] from them. Paul L'Ecuyer was the godfather, and his wife, named Françoise LeComte, was the godmother, who [the godparents] have promised to bring the boy up and instruct him in the Catholic, Roman, and Apostolic faith, with the intention of keeping him in their service [*tenir a leur service*] as long as God is pleased to allow it [*queplaira a Dieu de disposer de luy*]. Godmother signed and the godfather declared he could not sign."

This entry certainly provides specific details about the attitude some French Canadians had about the *panis* they purchased or employed. Writing about the seventeenth century, Louise Dechêne comments: "The authorities encouraged Canadian families to hire Indian children—a covert form of adoption. These

---

[1] The French also ransomed English and other European prisoners taken in war by Indian allies, sometimes providing *dots* (dowries) for the women who married. See the marriage contract of Jean Baptiste Cardinet *dit* Chevalier and Marie Madeleine Stilson, a captive from New England, Chambalon, 18 October 1702, photocopy. Madame Champigny, wife of the intendant of New France, ransomed the young English woman. There are multiple examples of French and French Canadians in this period "buying back" those held captive by the Indians, both Native Americans and those of other origins, and setting them free. One of my ancestors, Katherine Stephen, from Pemaquid, now the State of Maine, was ransomed by Nicolas Pinault and hired as his domestic servant before her marriage to Jacques Paquet as Marie Françoise Nestyus; *Nestyus* is thought to be either the name of her Indian captor from the mission St. François de Sales of the river Chaudière or a mangling of her birth name. This name appears in her marriage contract, Chambalon, 28 July 1697, photocopy.

[2] My comments about the *Panis* evolved from many sources, in particular—and of most value—Gilles Havard, *Empire et métissages, Indiens et Français dans le Pays d'en Haut, 1660-1715* (Septentrion: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2003), as well as my own examination of primary records, too numerous to mention, in religious registers, judicial cases, and the colonial correspondence. Relatively few Blacks were slaves in New France. If you read French, see *Esclaves Panis* http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=142592032418278 (Accessed 5/21/11)

[3] Family History Library, microfilm of Sts-Anges de Lachine, #1018019, 17 August 1704.

youngsters were free when they came of age."[4] Some surviving records, especially after 1709, use the name *Panis* indiscriminately for *sauvages* of whatever Indian Nation, even when it might have been known that the individual was, for example, of the Nation of the *Renard* (Fox). An estimated 17.5% of those called *Panis* may have actually been Pawnee.[5] Marcel Trudel was the first historian of New France to seriously document the existence of slavery in New France. In his account, he presents the following summary that contains information from more than one source:

> 6 December 1727 at Québec, was baptized a *renarde*, Marie-Françoise [*sic*], natural daughter of LeVerrier and of the *renarde* Marie who belongs to the widow of Georges Regnard-Duplessis.[6]

I viewed the 6 December 1727 baptism at Family Search.[7] **Marie**, not "Marie-Françoise," as cited by Trudel, is the actual name of the child baptized; and her mother is not identified as an *esclave* or as a *panisse* who belonged to anyone. As PRDH[8] confirms, the mother is identified as: "Marie *Sauvagesse Renarde* dwelling at the home of the widow of deceased Mr. Duplessis, Treasurer."[9] Trudel's reference to this baptism led me to an earlier page on which he had given additional information about this *Renarde* named Marie, mother of Marie:

> When the renarde Marie, who belonged to the widow of Georges Regnard-Duplessis, gave birth in December 1727 to an illegitimate daughter, whom she had by LeVerrier, the son [*fils*], the baby was sent to l'Ancienne-Lorette where the Québécois often placed their babies *en nourrice* [with a wet-nurse]; the illegitimate daughter, Marie-Françoise, was buried at that place 25 January 1728.[10]

Widow Duplessis cared enough for the welfare of this baby to send her to a place where she could be cared for. Had the mother died? I do not know, but on the actual entry for the burial of this baby at L'Ancienne Lorette, the priest declares that the deceased had belonged to a woman named only as Madame Duplessis; he also says, which Trudel omits, that the father of Marie Françoise is said to be unknown (at least to those present), contradicting the baptismal record. The mother of Marie Françoise, the baby deceased at about two months old, is identified only as **Marie**, ***sauvagesse ou panis*** (female Indian **or** *panis*) and the note in the margin identifies the baby as daughter of *a sauvagesse de Quebec*, a

---

[4] Louise Dechêne, Liana Vardi (translator), *Habitants and Merchants in Seventeenth Century Montreal* (McGill Queens University Press, 1992), 8 and footnote 28.

[5] See *Esclaves Panis* in footnote 2.

[6] Marcel Trudel, *L'esclavage au Canada Français* (Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1960), 359, my translation. A revision and expansion of this 1960 book is Marcel Trudel, *Deux siècles d'esclavage au Québec* (Hurtubise, 2004).

[7] https://familysearch.org/ Quebec, Catholic Parish Registers, 1621-1900, Québec, Notre-Dame-de-Québec 1727-28, image 23 of 79: Baptism: 6 December 1727. Trudel's identification of the baby baptized in 1727 as Marie Françoise is another example of a researcher having knowledge that was not available to someone in the past, in this case, to the priest who entered the 1727 baptism record. The infant is named Marie at her baptism and Marie Françoise only at her burial. Was the name Françoise added later because the godfather's name was François Levitre?

[8] *Programme de recherche en démographie historique*, hereafter PRDH, #65819 Québec Baptism: 1727-12-06 Birth: 1727-12-05. The baby is named Marie Leverrier on the PRDH certificate; thus, at least by PRDH, the baby is given the last name of the man declared to be her father. Godparents: François Levitre & Anne Dufresne, widow of Letourneau. The PRDH certificate includes this detail from the record: "[Father] Boullard supplied the ceremonies [of Baptism], the baby having been given emergency baptism [*ondoyée*] by Morin."

[9] "Marie Sauvagesse Renarde demeurant chez la femme veuve de feu M. Duplessis Tresorier." From the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* online: "Regnard Duplessis, Georges, receiver of the Admiralty, treasurer of Marine, general and special agent for the Compagnie de la Colonie; b. in the province of Champagne; buried 31 Oct. 1714 at Quebec." His wife is Marie Roy (Leroy), whom he married before 28 March 1687 in France: PRDH Individual # 67112.

[10] Trudel, 164-165.

female Indian from Québec City.[11] There is no mention of the *Renard* Nation origin of the mother; nor is she called an *esclave*. The baby was buried in the cemetery.

We have to be careful with the word *Panis*. It is true it came to be synonymous with *esclave* / slave, but that does not mean that every individual identified as a *Panis* was, in fact, a slave. And we must not think that the status of slaves in New France ever came close to the same conditions of life as those practiced in the American South. As horrible as it is to be "owned" by others, slavery in New France, including at *Le Détroit du Lac Érié*, was much more benevolent. For example, New France slaves, both Indian and Black, lived with their owners and their families, not in slave quarters; and often they were freed when they came of age or later in life. See Gail Moreau-DesHarnais's "Marie Joseph / Marie Josette / Josephte, Panise du Sieur Charles Moran: 1766-1796 Detroit" for the documentation of the emancipation of a slave at Detroit.[12] The records have examples, too many to list here, of *Panis* who were hired to work in the fur trade and were paid the same wages as Europeans. Some married French Canadians, again too many to identify in a short article. It's a complicated subject that, as I see it, has often been treated without enough understanding of the distinctive society of New France.

The following 1774 act recorded at Ste. Anne de Detroit in the period after Canada and Detroit came under the control of the British is also enlightening, helping us in the twenty-first century to gain insight from an actual example of the attitudes of French Canadians in the eighteenth century:

> In the year of Our Lord seventeen hundred seventy-four, the twenty-first of November, having learned of the condition [status] accorded to Jacques, *sioux de Nation*, belonging to *Sieur* Claude Gouin by an acquisition that he made from *des sauvages* who had taken him [Jacques] in war, and [the condition accorded] to Louise, *Sauvagesse cy devant esclave* [Indian woman formerly a slave, and] formerly belonging to *sieur Cuillerier*, under the same kind of acquisition from *des Sauvages*, and since declared free by her last master *le sieur* ……[left blank], her last master [*sic*], as it appears according to the inquiries we have made, and especially from the testimony given by *sieur Porlier Benak* [*sic*, Benac], at whose home [Porlier's] after [leaving] the aforesaid *sieur* …..[left blank], actually a *juge a paix* [justice of the peace] at *quebec*, she [Louise] dwelled in the status of a *servante*, as well as at several other homes in Montreal, which has determined us to act in her favor in regard to this marriage, after nevertheless having inquired of *sieur* Claude Gouin, master of the said Jacques Sioux, about the conditions under which he consents to the marriage of the said Jacques, who [Claude Gouin] has replied to me in the affirmative that he [Jacques] will be obliged to serve him as formerly, as much him, Claude Gouin, as *la dame desieur* [? word is hard to read] *Cuillerier*, his wife, during their lifetime, but that after the death of one and the other, he [Jacques] will be perfectly free [*libre*], without him Claude Gouin, nor *Dame Cuillerier*, having the right under any pretext whatsoever either to sell him or exchange him or give him away under any pretext that there might be, nor, after their deaths, can their children nor can anyone having cause from them [inheritance rights] have any right to take back [this] freedom from the said Jacques Sioux.[13]

---

[11] https://familysearch.org/ Quebec, Catholic Parish Registers, 1621-1900, Ancienne-Lorette, Notre-Dame-de-l'Annonciation 1676-1741, image 97 of 171: Burial: 25 January 1728. PRDH #79116 does not record the comment written in the margin of this act, nor does it do so for most marginal entries on a record.

[12] Gail Moreau-DesHarnais, "Marie Joseph / Marie Josette / Josephte, Panise du Sieur Charles Moran: 1766-1796 Detroit," *Michigan's Habitant Heritage*, Vol. 31, #1, Jan 2010, 53.

[13] www.ancestry.ca Early U.S. French Catholic Church Records (Drouin Collection), 1695-1954, D > Détroit, Ste-Anne 1702-1780, images 195 and 196 of 238, 24 November 1774. See the burial record for Claude Gouin in Part III of "People Buried from Ste. Anne de Detroit," *MHH*, Vol. 31, Oct 2010, 215: "Claude Thomas Gouin, former

The record concludes by saying the marriage was witnessed by Claude Gouin and by *parents et amis* (relatives and friends). Only *C. Gouin* and *noel Chouvin* signed with the priest, Father Simple Bocquet. Porlier Benac[14] was not said to be present.

There is so much we do not know, and it is dangerous to assign to the past beliefs and practices from other historical societies or from the present, as some have done. What we do know with certainty is that many *panis* and *panisse* were buried in consecrated ground in the cemeteries of Ste. Anne de Detroit as Children of God. This is a documented fact. The subject of slavery is always painful. None of us, though, is responsible for the actions and beliefs of our ancestors; nor will our descendants be responsible for ours of the twentieth or twenty-first centuries. I wonder: How will we be judged 200 to 400 years from now?

Ordonnance de M^r^ Raudot intendant de Canada qui ordonne que les panis et negres acheptez et qui le seront par la suitte appartiendront a ceux qui les auront acheptez, 13 avril 1709.
FR CAOM COL C11A 30 fol. 334-335

Ordonnance of Mr. Raudot intendant of Canada who has ordained that the panis and negroes who were purchased and who will be purchased hereafter will belong to those who bought them, 13 April 1709.

Page one from http://www.champlain2004.org/html/07/03_f.html

lieutenant in the French militia, royal surveyor under the French Government, had been sick for several months, a *commerçant* [merchant] who lived on his land on the *coste du Nord Est*; son of **Joseph Gouin**, a *commerçant*, living in the parish of Sainte Anne, bishopric of Quebec, Government of Trois Rivieres in Canada, and Marguerite Roy; husband of Marie Joseph Cuillerier, daughter of Antoine Cuillerier and Angelique Gerard; about 60 years, 29 May 1776, buried in church" Some sources say Madame Cuillerier died around 1773. Based on this record, she was alive in 1774.

[14] Étienne Joseph Porlier Benac appears at least ten times as a witness for weddings and burials or as a godfather at Ste. Anne de Detroit and also at L'Assomption across the river and at Fort St. Joseph (Niles, Michigan). His mother was Marie Angelique Cuillerier. After the death of his wife, he fathered a son by a Potawatomi woman. He was buried 21 November 1810, at *Rivière aux Raisin*, photocopy from the Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, Michigan, microfilm of St. Mary (Monroe) St. Antoine, BHG #1286, Reel #41, Marriages and Burials. Further details about Joseph Porlier Benac, as he is usually identified, are in my work-in-progress.