

The Mysterious Marie Laveau: Voodoo Queen of the Bayou

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(originally appearing in *Dark Realms* magazine, Summer 2006)

Marie Laveau – the Voodoo queen of New Orleans whose reputation is infamous to some, revered by others. Over a hundred years after her death, many stories of her life are still paraded as truth, often simply due to their repetition. Yet, scratch the surface by simply examining her name, and her complex and contradictory personal history can begin to be seen; there were five “Marie Laveau’s” spanning three generations in her immediate family alone. Myriad court documents, birth certificates, marriage contracts, deeds of ownership and records of the purchase and sale of slaves still exist for the intrepid researcher, but the numerous, contradictory facts point to one inevitable truth: Marie Laveau was a woman of great mystery whose reputation of supernatural power lives on.

Facts and fiction

How to understand the many faces of Marie? The more one delves into her life, the more anomalies that immediately appear. She was variously described as light-skinned, red, golden, mahogany, brown and ebony-black by those who bore her witness, none agreeing on what they saw, save for her beauty, which was renowned. Marie’s acquaintances were the rich and poor, free and enslaved, from all races, as well as every Creole combination thereof; the people knew Marie did not discriminate when meeting with those who sought her help.

The port city of New Orleans, where Marie resided her entire life, made her the citizen of many countries without her ever having to move. Having already been Spanish and French, lastly, at the age of two Marie became an American with the Louisiana Purchase, the nationality she kept for the rest of her life, although her native tongue was always French.

While the structure is no longer standing, even the location of Marie’s house spoke metaphorically of her life’s contradictions. Situated on St. Ann’s street, her French Quarter home was equidistant from the St. Louis Cathedral, where she was a baptized Catholic member in high standing, and the Congo Square, where her weekly snake dances as a Voodoo priestess gained her legend. Even the nature of her influence cannot be agreed upon – some insist her Voodoo powers had made her powerful while others refuse the supernatural, pointing to Marie’s significant sway amongst New Orleans’ judges, court officials, and attorneys who often obliged her will for reasons of their own.

At the very least, Marie Laveau was, and still is, a difficult woman for people to define.

The woman commonly known as Marie Laveau, or Marie the First, was born within the “Crescent City” during the fall of 1801, although some date her birth as early as

1796. Her father, Charles Laveaux, was a plantation owner and his mistress was Marguerite Darcantel, a free woman of color, and possibly also Native American descent. Marie had two half-sisters with whom she kept close relations during her life – both of her sisters also carried the first name “Marie,” which makes for three “Marie Laveau’s” records, all born to the same parents, for the modern researcher to untangle.

And yet, it is within Louisiana’s surviving court documents that Charles’ heartfelt affection for his lover Marguerite remains plainly evident – as an infant, Charles took Marie to a public notary to be recognized as his “natural” daughter. This singular legal action secured Marie’s lifelong social station as a free woman of color, and allowed her many privileges commonly denied to a non-white woman during her time. By acknowledging his paternity, Charles ensured his daughter’s lifelong freedom, allowed her to legally use his last name, and granted her the ability to own and sell property, including slaves. Charles later deeded a house on Love Street, from his own estate, as part of his daughter’s dowry upon her wedding, such was his continuing devotion. Marie later gave this same house to her first-born, Marie Eucharist Heloise Laveau, later known as Marie the Second.

The Widow Paris

Marie’s life is a patchwork quilt of incredible tales filled with many stubbornly unsolvable mysteries. One early enigma occurred while Marie was in her mid-twenties when she inexplicably became a very young widow. The circumstances of her husband, Jacques Paris’, death are as mysterious as their marriage, which seems to have lasted somewhere between two to four years. We know the union’s beginning; their marriage contract was signed by the bride’s father and her betrothed, a young carpenter and free man of color, in July 1819.

But, when exactly did the marriage end? Within a few years, Jacques was considered a missing person – some believed he returned to his home, the island of St. Domingue-Haiti; others speculated he was unfaithful or abusive, and Marie had rid herself of him, perhaps even unnaturally. A death certificate for Jacques Paris was later filed, although no body was ever evidenced. And so, as a young woman and after only a few years of marriage, Marie had earned the title “the Widow Paris,” a self-chosen moniker she used when about town. For the rest of her life, Marie never took another man’s name as her own. On her tomb, a bronze plaque reads *Famille vve. Paris, nee Laveau* (“The family of the Widow Paris, born Laveau.”)

However, Marie’s first love, if Jacques was indeed an affair of the heart, was certainly not her last. Within a year or two of Jacques’ disappearance, Marie Laveau and Jean Louis Christophe Duminy de Glapion, a white man and descendant of one of the first families of Louisiana, fell deeply in love. Despite the many social obstacles, Marie and Christophe desperately wanted to live together as man and wife. However, spiritually Marie had been widowed; a church wedding for the two was impossible. And, racially, laws against intermarriage were stringent. A miracle would be necessary to bring them together.

That miracle manifested itself by Christophe's self-proclaimed change in social identity when he posed for the rest of his life as a free man of color, even swearing to the fact in court documents, and thereby becoming the common-law husband to his beloved Voodoo queen. Despite his skin's pale tone, by posing as a free man of color, Christophe had managed to successfully cross the previous social and legal boundaries that existed during his time to be with his Marie. He had become a black man.

And, the couple's love was fruitful. Marie and Christophe are, even today, rumored to have had 15 children, although the actual number of offspring is believed to be five, only two of which grew to adulthood: Marie Eucharist Heloise Laveau (or, Marie the Second) and her younger sister Marie Philomene Laveau. Both of Marie's daughters later bore five children of their own, hence the confusion of 15 children born to a "Marie Laveau." Like so many events throughout Marie's life, the facts and hyperbole blended seamlessly into a singular misinformed, and oft repeated, legend.

Raised with their parents' permeable membrane of legal truth, Marie's children continued to protect them both by confirming and even extending the campaign of misinformation. Philomene purported many false tales as pure fact to future reporters and curious interviewers who came calling in the years after her mother's death. With so many misleading details purposefully supplanted into their children's oft-repeated accounts of their parents' lives, today even the most intimate of details about the couple remains stubbornly inscrutable.

Legends of paranormal power

If the truth about Marie eludes us, her legends certainly do not: the story of Marie's ownership of the St. Ann's house is still one of her most-repeated, and most-embellished upon, tales. It begins when a wealthy white man's son was arrested and the distraught father turned to the Voodoo priestess for help, begging her to secure his son's freedom. Despite the compelling evidence against him, Marie promised the father she would help.

At dawn, Marie walked to the end of her block to visit the St. Louis Cathedral... some say for three days, or seven, or even nine. Kneeling in prayer, she placed three hot peppers in her mouth, holding them for hours, offering her pain as a token of her devotion and her prayers' sincerity. The peppers she left beneath the judge's chair, in the government offices conveniently located next door to the cathedral.

When the judge later dismissed the case, Marie was awarded with the St. Ann's property as payment for her services. Few can agree on exactly *what* took place to secure this young man's freedom – was it Marie's Voodoo at work, or was it, as some have guessed, the fact that she had privileged information from the police, as well as personal contact with the judge himself? Regardless, the young man walked away free, and Marie moved from Love Street into her new home on St. Ann's in the fall of 1832, where she lived until her dying day. After the move, the Love Street property

from her father Marie immediately deeded to her first-born, Marie the Second, who was then only five years old.

Another well-circulated tale of Marie's life opens at the gallows on July 2, 1852. Marie was part of a crowd who gathered to witness the double execution of two white men, Jean Adams and Anthony Delille, found guilty of murdering a slave girl. One of the condemned spoke aloud his hatred of America as the ropes were tightened around his neck, the other was reportedly silent. As was Marie. Suddenly, the sky turned an unnatural color of rust-red as storm clouds rolled in. Blinding flashes of lightning cracked the air as the cathedral bells chimed noon, and a lawyer witnessing the sudden and violent storm described it as an obvious sign of an offended Deity.

When the trapdoors opened, the crowd looked up to see two nooses swinging empty. The guilty had fallen through the ropes; bruised and bleeding, they were yet alive. Still, this strange accident did not deter the executioners. Both men were promptly taken back to the gallows, and hanged again – successfully.

And yet, the crowd was certain they had witnessed Marie's supernatural powers at work. But, what would the Voodoo priestess gain in calling forth such a storm? Both men were still put to death. Yet, Marie's presence electrified the crowd, and when the executions were so grossly mismanaged, a plea came up from the people to stop the public hangings. Louisiana became the first state in the union to outlaw public executions, banning the gruesome spectator sport from ever taking place there again.

Marie's motivation for attending this hanging is unknown; her temperament was certainly not one given to assisting slave murderers. And yet, with public executions banned afterwards... had Marie found a way to get her ultimate wish? Marie's faithful followers believe so.

Doctor John

Marie's reputation as a Voodoo priestess has its own air of mystery. Researchers often point to a man variously known as Doctor John, or John Bayou, as the instructor of Marie's Voodoo powers, however, others recall her lifelong connection to Pere Antoine, a local Catholic priest known to assist and accompany Marie when tending the locally infirm. So, who exactly was this "John" who gave Marie her powers?

Zora Neale Hurston, who extensively researched and wrote on Voodoo as well as on Marie Laveau's life, tells of "Big John," or High John the Conqueror, a supernatural man who could magically intercede with the spiritual plane to make miracles manifest in the material realm. Big John's stories are sprinkled throughout the South, a mystical man and conjurer from Africa, whose work wouldn't be done until emancipation came to his people, Hurston records.

Marie the Second commonly used the name “John” as her spiritual intermediary in her Voodoo incantations that others witnessed, but was John a symbol, or a spirit? Perhaps the source of Marie’s Voodoo training matters less upon inspection – what remains indisputable is her reputation of great power in assisting the common folk with Big John’s work.

Sadly, one aspect often curiously absent from Marie’s amazing life stories are her years of humanitarian efforts. As a nurse, Marie treated victims of the deadly cholera and yellow fever outbreaks, fearlessly airing out the bedding, changing patients’ soiled garments, dressing wounds, and treating them with her knowledge of Voodoo, and herbal, medicine. Marie’s courage in the face of the city’s most deadly diseases brought hope to the sickrooms she visited; her healing powers and medicinal skills were renowned within the infested port city, securing her reputation as a woman whose powerful faith and magic could cure.

Conjuring freedom for the enslaved

Another aspect of Marie’s charitable deeds also remains shrouded in secrecy, obscurely hidden for years within the dusty files of Louisiana’s state documents, waiting to be discovered. As a free woman of color, allowed to own property, it was certainly legal for Marie to purchase her own slaves. And so, she did... to set them free.

Marie and Christophe ran a house full of revolving visitors; friends, family, those needing help and those paying their respects, men and women of all colors and all social identities regularly passed over their threshold. This in itself assisted their Underground Railroad efforts.

How did the Voodoo priestess manage to conjure freedom for the enslaved? More legal trickery, a network of trusted witnesses, judges and court officials, and a pinch of magic of course. One slave’s story is endearing and memorable. Records show Alexandrine was purchased in 1838 by Marie’s husband under the pseudonym “Jean Jacques Christophe Paris,” an amalgamation of both of Marie’s husbands’ names.

Upon Alexandrine’s purchase, ten days later, she was resold to a Monsieur Dumartrait with the legal obligation to repay him the 1000 Spanish *piasters* of his purchase price after which she would be emancipated; the task would be impossible though, as *piasters* were a Spanish tender no longer in use for several decades at the time of the contract’s writing. Also written into the document was the stipulation that Alexandrine’s children would be born free, and would not be held against their mother’s financial debt, regardless if the debt was paid in full at the time of birth.

What the court document doesn’t reflect is that Dumartrait was a white man in love with an enslaved woman of color and wanted most to be with his beloved; a story Christophe and Marie knew well. Legally, Alexandrine and Monsieur Dumartrait had found a way to live together; the Voodoo priestess had worked her magic, spreading the messages of freedom and love.

Marie the Second

Marie was rumored to have had an unnaturally long life, a superstition that Marie the Second perpetuated, fooling others into believing she was the younger incarnation of her mother. With her mother's advancing age and a long seclusion within her St. Ann's home, Marie the Second re-entered the New Orleans scene, continuing her mother's Congo Square dances and meeting with those who needed the help of Marie Laveau. For the people of New Orleans, many saw the transfer of power as complete – so complete that the folk rumor Marie Laveau had conjured a spell to grow young was born.

Many sources report Marie the First was a hairdresser, however it was actually her daughter who cut and styled her way into many fashionable homes of the times. This occupation was as beneficial to securing Marie the Second's reputation of power as her mother's miraculous nursing efforts had been a generation before – as a confidant to many of the most wealthy and powerful families of Louisiana, Marie was regularly invited into their homes, hotels and parlors, making her privy to all sorts of sensitive information that she could later use to her own advantage. This network of connections, coupled with Marie the Second's shrewd bargaining power, allowed her to continue the efforts of her mother in assisting others – be that by Voodoo or by political influence, none can agree.

Marie's Legend

The stories of Marie Laveau's life were primarily a matter belonging to the *gumbo ya-ya*, or local legends of Louisiana, until the publication of a book in 1946 by New Orleans newspaper reporter Robert Tallant. Upon its release, Voodoo in New Orleans was wildly popular. With its sensationalist tales of primitive and bloody Voodoo rituals, Marie Laveau was described as a leader of a Satanic cult whose members reportedly smeared their lips with the blood of freshly-slaughtered animals while taking oaths to Lucifer himself.

The book, now considered an unreliable exaggeration in its portrayal of Marie and the followers of Voodoo, was a melodramatic conglomeration of fiction, fact and opinion that paraded as truth. However erroneous it might have been, it was read around the world, and secured Marie's reputation once and for all as America's foremost Voodoo queen. Even still, false tales such as Marie's 15 alleged children can be traced to Tallant's original work.

Although deceased, Marie may have been greatly displeased by what the careless journalist chose to report of her beloved faith and legendary life. In 1957, ten years after the book's publication was met with worldwide acclaim, Tallant was alone in his apartment when he chose a clean, clear glass from his kitchen cabinet, and held it beneath his sink faucet. After only three sips of water from the glass, he dropped dead. Newspapers reported Tallant's autopsy declared he died of "natural causes," while his contemporaries speculated his hard-drinking habits had finally done him in. In any case, Tallant lived to tell no more tales of Marie Laveau.

The Wishing Tomb

An 1835 portrait by George Catlin hangs in the Louisiana State Library, allegedly capturing Marie's image. It shows an unsmiling woman wearing a black dress, a red and gold shawl and a multi-colored *tignon* of yellow, white and red about her head; her somber countenance is one of quiet elegance. Marie the First's home is gone; sold off in the years after her daughters' deaths, the building was later destroyed.

And yet, Marie has never stopped receiving visitors. Today, the Laveau family tomb within the St. Louis No. 1's cemetery remains standing, although the site was severely flooded during August 2005 when Hurricane Katrina broke the city's levees and flood walls, temporarily submerging the area. Thankfully, many of New Orleans' tombs above ground, such as the Laveau family's, were spared from harsh damage, and still hold the remains they were entrusted to keep.

The Laveau tomb goes by another name when the tour guides shepherd the curious here; called "The Wishing Tomb," for years it has been scarred with numerous X's that others inscribe upon its sepulchral walls. The practice of defiling Marie's gravesite comes from the belief that to do so is to call on Marie herself, summoning her spirit into attendance so one may petition the Voodoo priestess of a favor. Regardless, whether the X's are made with chalk or charcoal, it is a practice that is sternly frowned upon by city locals, although it may be the strength of Marie's legend that perpetuates the unwanted behavior.

And, why an X, or as often seen, three X's in a row? The symbol of the X, long an ancient African symbol denoting the crossroads between the worlds of the living and the dead, was also the same mark Marie Laveau used on legal documents as her personal signature. The power of Voodoo is potently understood by examining its use of esoteric symbols – anything belonging to a person retains their essence.

Here, to inscribe the X is to symbolically call out Marie's name in a way she is sure to recognize, and doing so at the crossroads of mortality, where she is sure to receive the message. Three X's might better insure a spirit hears the petitioner; there are Voodoo rituals that incorporate the number three, or repeat actions and words three times, in order to invoke and imbue the most power during an incantation.

Today, those who wish to summon Marie's spirit are told by tour guides to knock three times instead of adding to the site's graffiti, a far less damaging way to still call forth her spirit, yet considered equally effective for spirit communication. Even over a century after her death, the belief in Marie Laveau's compassion and spiritual power remains strong enough to inspire regular pilgrimages to her tomb by Voodoo's faithful, as well as draw the attention of the visiting curious.

In the grand Southern tradition, it seems Marie Laveau may eternally be receiving her callers.