

Research Report:
AAHN's H-15 Grant

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During the second half of the eighteenth century, fears of depopulation and moral degeneration facilitated unprecedented governmental and medical intervention into childbirth in France and its colonies. Charges of incompetence and ignorance condemned midwives for the deaths and injuries of childbearing. Government administrators and medical men across the French Atlantic turned to midwifery courses as a national tool for social and physical rehabilitation. These courses emerged in the 1760s but became prevalent by the 1780s. I was honored to receive a 2021 H-15 research grant to expand the geography of my book project to include Saint-Domingue and colonial Louisiana. I traveled to archives in New Orleans, Baton Rouge, and Lafayette and explored online sources at the Archives nationales d'outre-mer and the Louisiana Colonial Documents Digitization Project. While I am still processing these materials, it is clear that these endeavors were very fruitful.

In 1704, when a special shipment of women intended for marriage arrived in Louisiana, Catherine Moulois, a master midwife from Paris, disembarked alongside these "Future Mothers of Louisiana." As France expanded its overseas holdings, the crown increasingly shipped midwives to Louisiana, Quebec, and Acadia, where they enjoyed pensioned positions (Madame Faguier, a midwife in Louisiana, received 600 *livres* a year). Many, though not all, had trained at the famous Hôtel-Dieu in Paris. Robust administrative infrastructure arose around selecting, shipping, and maintaining these women. These practices reveal the centrality of midwives to the settler colonial project.

In the Louisiana archives I was able to gather documents on the numerous midwives that followed in Moulois' footsteps. These women not only delivered babies, but argued for higher wages and challenged the political authority of the intendant. Despite significant archival attention to their activities, these white women were not alone in their medical practices. Enslaved Black nurses and midwives periodically appear, even if only briefly, in the archival materials. For example, when John Richardson sold Hetty in 1838 he described her as "an excellent nurse."

The stakes for maintaining a growing and healthy population only increased in Saint-Domingue, the most profitable colony in the world, after French losses in the Seven Years War. In order to maximize returns from their remaining colonies, the crown and administrators applied science and medicine to questions of colonial development. In 1790, Le Comte de Monthuley requested the establishment of midwifery courses in Saint-Domingue because, he claimed, the island lacked

midwives and surgeons required training in childbirth. Ultimately, he sought the position of instructor for himself. Despite his self-serving assertions, a multiplicity of midwives practiced in Saint-Domingue: European, African, and Creole; free and enslaved. Enslaved midwives practiced on plantations and many European women sought the care of midwives of color, believing them to be more knowledgeable about local diseases.¹ As noted by Karol Weaver, a 1764 project that sent white midwives to Saint-Domingue failed and local physicians argued that continental training did not prepare these women for colonial diseases and bodies.²

Plantation records obtained during my research trip reveal the names, ages, racial or ethnic designation, and families of enslaved Black women healthcare providers. Large estates frequently contracted with male medical practitioners, such as physicians and surgeons, but they enslaved full-time hospitalières and midwives. I hope to use these materials to extend the existing literature on reproduction in the Atlantic World and on plantations to include more focused attention on midwives themselves. My chapter on Saint-Domingue will ultimately explore how discourses about midwives and the practices of midwifery training programs reproduced myriad racial and legal identities.

Nuanced histories that embrace complexity take significant time and money. AAHN has positioned itself, through its research awards and grants programs, to be a key sponsor for such scholarship by students, early career researchers, and established scholars. I am deeply appreciative and honored to join the distinguished list of scholars supported by AAHN.

¹ Londa Schiebinger, *Secret Cures of Slaves: People, Plants, and Medicine in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017).

² Karol Kovalovich Weaver, "The King's Midwives: The 1764 Midwifery Expedition to Saint Domingue and Why it Failed," *Nursing History Review* 12 (2005); Karol Weaver, *Medical Revolutionaries: The Enslaved Healers of Eighteenth-century Saint Domingue* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).