

French Women and the Founding of Kansas City

Dr. Kathy M. Krause

Emerita Professor of French, UMKC

Definitions of “Creole” (from Merriam-Webster)

- a person of European descent born especially in the West Indies or Spanish America
- a white person descended from early French or Spanish settlers of the U.S. Gulf states and preserving their speech and culture
- a person of mixed French or Spanish and Black descent speaking a dialect of French or Spanish

My Initial Question:

Who were the women “Chez les
Kansa” ?

Bérénice Ménard Chouteau

- 1801 – 1888
- Born in Kaskaski, IL to Pierre Ménard and Marie Thérèse Michelle Godin



A Missouri river keelboat



Chez les
Kansa --
Kansas City



1855
NOW



A typical letter from Bérénice to her family

St Louis, May 19, 1827

Cher frère,

I learned with pain that you were still ill. I wish to receive news of you upon the next occasion and I advise you to come to St Louis to consult a French doctor who is here. Gesseau (*François*) has arrived and we await Cyprien (*his brother*) who will be here in a few days to take us to Kansas. I have received news from Alzire (*Bérénice's sister*) through Mme Kennerly. She did not write because she plans to be here within two or three weeks. My compliments to grandmother, to Odile,

Believe me to be, for life, your affectionate sister,

Bérénice Chouteau

Typical last paragraphs from François's letters

We are all in good enough health. Berenice must have written to you. I beg you to extend my affection to my aunt and because she is able to believe that we have forgotten her, to tell her that we speak often of her. Menard is growing much, and little Benjamin speaks French and English and runs everywhere. Give my love to Peter and to Francis.

July 15, 1830

We had some children sick with a disease of the mouth that was catching here and that was very bad. Measles has killed many children in the country and apparently it is of a bad variety. Tell Menard that his mother as well as myself beg you that if the cholera comes to St. Louis, to have Gesseau leave college and to put him at the Barrens (a school) with Menard.

September 7, 1832

Bérénice to her father, January 1827

I am on the verge of delivering which torments me much. I'm worried about death on account of my little children. If God wants it this way, I recommend, dear Papa, to you as well as my dear mother, my little Ménard. I do not desire for him to go anywhere except to your house. Perhaps God will allow me myself to raise my children, but at last I take the precautions necessary so that this poor little children [sic] may be happy. Recently, several women in my condition have died. [...] Kiss the whole family for me.

“Chouteau’s Church”

- Aka St Francis Regis Church
- Artist: Nicolas Point, S. J.
“Départ de Westport”

- Now in the collected papers of Father Pierre Jean de Smet at Washington State University Library



Father Roux to Bishop Rosati, Feb 12, 1835

Je suis persuadé j'eusse qu'avec toute ma bonne volonté de faire ici le bien
je ne réussirai pas. Je pourrais dire avec l'Épître St. Paul. mais dans une autre
application: Non enim quod solo bonum, hoc facio, sed quod nolo malum, hoc ago, mais
j'espère que Dieu ne m'imputera pas des fautes qui proviennent uniquement de leur
entêtement et non de mes principes Théologiques, car vous le savez, Monseigneur,
je suis ennemi déclaré du Jansénisme et du Probabilisme, mais par pitié
les Probabilistes c'est ce que bon m'a enseigné. Le Probabilisme je
le sais qu'avec parfaitement avec vous. Un tel langage, Monseigneur,
je n'en doute pas, vous donne à penser que j'ai ici bien des obstacles à surmonter.
Je m'estime moi-même de rencontrer tant de difficultés dans une Congrégation aussi
petite qu'est celle de la Rivière des Kans. Elle consiste comme je vous l'ai déjà
écrit plusieurs fois en 12 familles françaises, et cinq familles Américaines, et deux
Sautages. Toutes, exceptées deux familles françaises, encore faudrait-il cent fois
moins qu'elles ne fussent pas ici, pour le bien des autres, sont incroyables de soutenir
le Péché. Toutes, exceptées les Américaines et les Sautages qui font ici mon
unique consolation, regardent et traitent la Religion comme une affaire peu
importante. Assouvis leurs passions, passent leur temps en visites, festins
et plaisirs que l'on appelle Bals; celles sont les jouissances mondaines qui les
occupent entièrement. Le croiriez-vous, le 1^{er} jour de cette année deux Bals se sont
donnés dans cette pauvre petite Congrégation. J'ai cru qu'il était de mon devoir
de prêcher sur ces assemblées et sur les abus funestes qui en résultent. Vous savez
combien de pareilles assemblées paralysent le ministère d'un Prêtre. Vous ne
pouvez pas leur en dire avec force, servir deux maîtres, soyez surtout de côté de
Dieu ou tout du côté du monde. La Religion que J. C. a établie est un des plus grands
et vous nous en faites un monde en prétendant allier les maximes du monde, de la loi
avec celle de l'homme Dieu, ou leur en dire avec l'Épître dans le nomme: Nolo
autem vos socios fieri demoniorum; non potestis calicem domini bibere et calicem
demoniorum; non potestis munda domini particeps esse et munda demoniorum. Ces paroles
ont été un coup de foudre pour l'orgueil de la famille Chouteau et surtout pour
celui de Madame qui met tout son plaisir à donner bal le plus
somp tueusement quelle peut et à y assister; elle que j'ai vue assister à la messe deux

Assouvir leurs passions, passer leur temps en visites, festins et plaisirs
que l'on appelle Bals; telles sont les jouissances mondaines qui les
occupent entièrement. Le croiriez-vous, le 1^{er} jour de cette année deux
Bals se sont donnés dans cette pauvre petite congrégation; j'ai cru qu'il
était de mon devoir de prêcher le dimanche suivant sur ces assemblées et
sur les abus funestes qui en résultent. ... Vous ne pouvez pas leur ai-je dit
avec force, servir deux maîtres... Ces paroles ont été un coup de foudre
pour l'orgueil de la famille Chouteau et surtout pour celui de Madame qui
met tout son plaisir à donner bal le plus somptueusement qu'elle peut et à
y assister; elle que j'ai vue assister à la messe deux fois en tout depuis que
je suis à la Rivière des Kans. Si je ne craignais pas de vous donner une
trop mauvaise opinion de ses sentimens religieux, je vous ferais part de la
désagréable et pitoyable conversation que j'ai eu à soutenir devant son
mari au sujet de ce bal, ... According to her I ought not to preach about
Balls, because, says she, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Methodist Preachers
do not do it; let us suppose this as to be true, indeed what a pity!!! Or if I
preach against them I ought to do it but according her views. What a
nonsense!! You, Monseigneur, acknowledge it, you and not women have a
control upon me. You alone and not women can hinder me from preaching
a doctrine taught by all the holy Fathers of the church. It is enough on
such a subject. Let me say to you finally that she leads all the French
people here by the nose!!! Comme elle ne remplit point ses devoirs de
piété, il s'en suivra que les autres ne le feront point aussi.



Father Bernard Donnelly

- c.1810 – 1880
- Ordained in 1845 in St Louis, and immediately moved west
- Did not speak French, but impressed the French of Chez les Kansa with his linguistic abilities

Kawsmouth

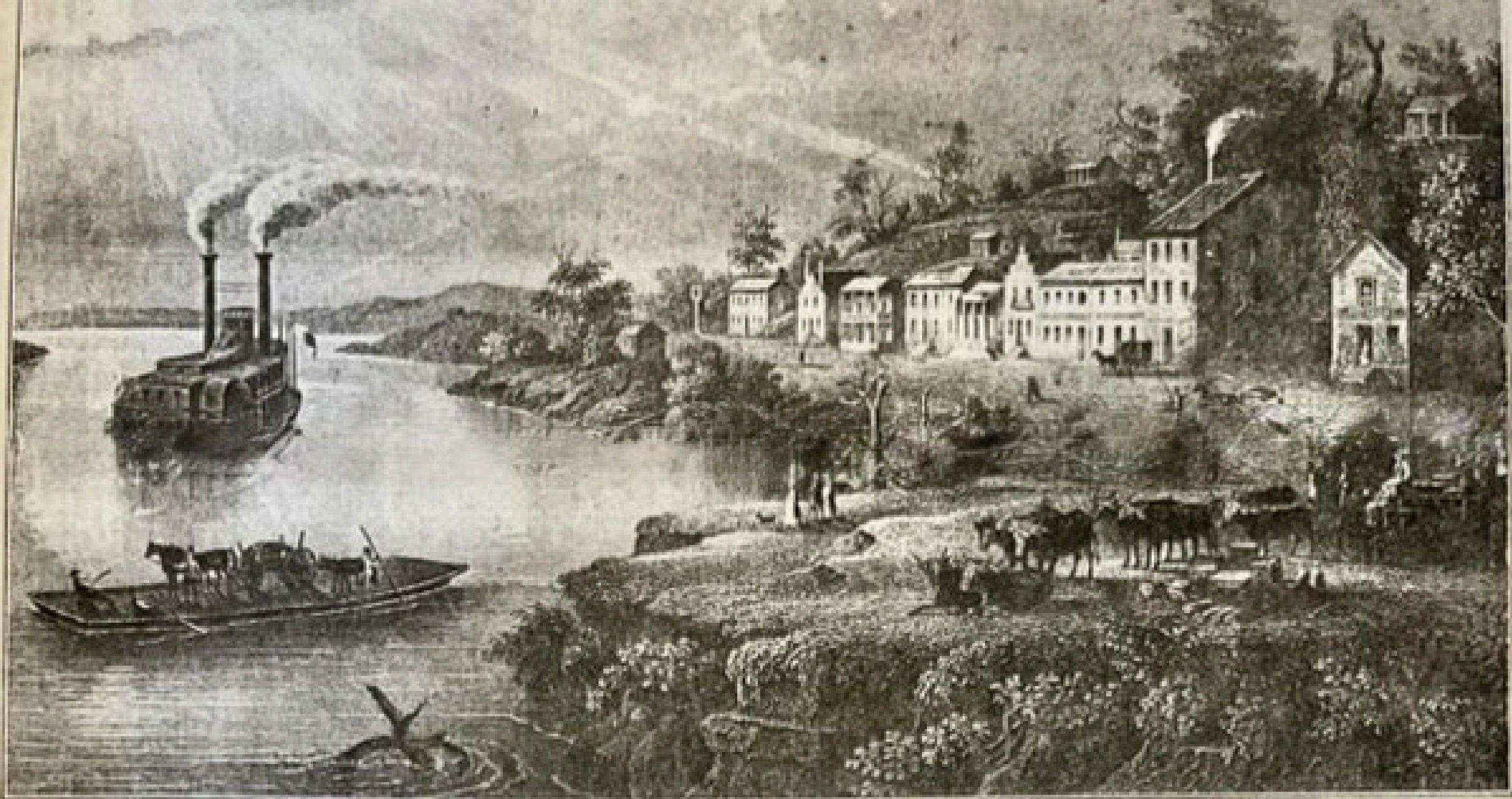
The West Bottoms c. 1850



6-11
View from the West Bottoms 1850

Father Roux to Bishop Rosati

The names of the children baptized on this occasion, their ages being seven years or under, were Martha **Roy**, Adelina **Prudhomme**, Martha **Lessert**, Amelia **Roy**, Charles Ravalet, Mary **Lessert**, Martin **Prudhomme**, Peter Napoleon **Prudhomme**, Francis Sasson Essassinary (Iroquois-Flathead), Louis Sasson Essassinary (Iroquois-Flathead), Lewis, slave of Francis Chouteau, and a slave of Lisa McGillis, name unknown.



KANSAS CITY, 1849.

The Fourteen members of the Town Company

- John C. McCoy
- Fry P. McGee
- William M. Chick
- Oliver Caldwell
- William Collins
- Abraham Fonda
- William Gillis
- Russell Hicks
- Samuel C. Owens
- Jacob Ragan
- James Smart
- George W. Tate
- Moses G. Wilson



The original 1839
plats from
Prudhomme's
lands.

A Shawnee woman

Kah che qua
(The Female Eagle)

George Catlin, c. 1830

She lived near what is today
Antioch Park

National Gallery of Art,
Washington D.C.



African-American Slave Women

Court cases to the rescue (of the researcher)

William Gillis



Mary Ann Kennerly Troost



A dog-trot cabin



By Chris from U.S.A. - John
Looney House, CC BY 2.0,
[https://commons.wikimedia.org
/w/index.php?curid=9448270](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=9448270)

Woodlawn

William Gillis's home

- 2727 Holly Street in 1909
- The only known photograph of the house

Diane Euston, "A Kansas City Founder "Proud of his Position:"
Race, Exploitation, and the Rise of William Gilliss," MA
Thesis, Missouri State University, 2023.



To the Honorable the Circuit Court of
the County of St. Louis, Nov Term 1827

The petition of Aspasia, a free woman
of colour represents, that she was born (as she
has always understood and believes to be true & is
ready to prove) of a negro woman in the town
of Kaskaskia in the state of Illinois, about the
year 1806 - which said negro woman was
held in slavery in said state by one Baptiste
Gindreau, who held her till her death
that your petitioner was held and claimed as
a slave by said Baptiste Gindreau as
his slave from her birth until a few years
since, when she was sold by him to Peter
Menard then & now an inhabitant of the
state of Illinois - that soon after said men-
ard purchased your petitioner, he gave your
petitioner, as a slave, to his daughter Bernice
who married Francois Chouteau & that
said Chouteau has ever since exercised
ownership & authority over your
petitioner as a slave in the city & county
of St. Louis, where he now lives & has lived &
held your petitioner as aforesaid for several
years past; And your petitioner represents
that she is advised and truly believes, that
according to the laws of the land she is a
free person and always has been - that she
has been for several years and still is
held & claimed by said Chouteau as his slave
against her natural rights & personal
obligations to law, equity & good conscience
by said Chouteau - your petitioner therefore
prays that she may be permitted to
sue as a poor person for her freedom
in the circuit court of St. Louis county -
according to the form of the statute in
such case made and provided, and that
she be permitted to make the said Fran-
cois Chouteau and all other persons -

To the Honorable the Circuit Court of the County of St. Louis , Nov. Term 1827

The petition of Aspasia, a free woman of colour represents, that she was born (as she has always understood and believes to be true & is ready to prove), of a negro woman in the Town of Kaskaskia in the state of Illinois, about the year 1806 - which said negro woman was held in slavery in said state by one Baptiste Gindreau, who held her till her death that your petitioner was held and claimed as a slave by said Baptiste Gindreau as his slave from her birth until a few years since, when she was sold by him to Peter Menard then & now an inhabitant of the state of Illinois - that soon after said Menard purchased your petitioner, he gave your petitioner, as a slave into the possession of his daughter Bernice who married Francois Chouteau & that said Chouteau has ever since exercised ownership & authority over & held your petitioner as a slave in the city & county of St. Louis, where he now lives & has lived & held your petitioner as aforesaid for several years past; And your petitioner represents that she is advised and verily believes, that according to the laws of the land she is a free person and always has been - that she has been for several years and still is held & claimed by said Chouteau as his slave deprived of her on natural rights & privileges contrary to law, Equity & good conscience by said Chouteau - your petitioner therefore prays "that she may be permitted to sue as a poor person" for her freedom in the Circuit Court of St. Louis County - according to the form of the statute in such case made and provided, and that she be permitted to make the said Francois Chouteau & , Peter Menard and all other persons -whatsoever claiming your petitioner as a slave, parties to her said suit & your petitioner will ever pray &c. Aspasia her X mark

Pierre Ménard's home, built c. 1815



Summary of Aspasia's suit

- Aspasia complains of Francois Chouteau & Peter Menard of a plea of trespass with force and arms
- on June 1, 1826, Francois Chouteau, Peter Menard an assault did make upon the body of Aspasia & then and there did beat, bruise & ill treat her and imprison her, and they still detain her in prison and confinement contrary to the laws of this state,
- Aspasia avers, that before and at the time of the grievances, she was and still is a free person, and that the defendants held & detained her & still hold & detain her in slavery,
- wherefore Aspasia saith she sustained damage from Francois & Peter to the sum of one thousand dollars, wherefore she sues.

Returning to High Society

A Belgian woman comes to the City of Kansas

Guinotte Home,
c. 1907



Aimée Brichaut Guinotte

- 1823-1909
- Her Children: Jules Edgar, Lydia, Emma, and Joseph Karl

From her Kansas City Star obituary. a copy of portait painted in Brussels before her marriage





The First "Quality Hill" (Pearl Street) of Kansas City





Bérénice, Kah che qua, and Charlotte Garrett
(an enslaved woman who lived near Liberty, MO)