

Negotiating Race and Status in Senegal, Saint Domingue, and South Carolina

Marie-Adélaïde Rossignol and Her Descendants

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ABSTRACT This article tells the story of a young Charleston physician, John W. Schmidt Jr., whose medical license was revoked in 1831 because he was accused of being of “mixed blood.” The physician’s ancestry was unusual: his grandmother Marie-Adélaïde Rossignol Dumont was born in Gorée, West Africa; she was not a slave but a wealthy merchant who came to the United States in the 1790s via the French colony of Saint Domingue, which she left in the wake of the Haitian Revolution. The grandmother used various strategies of social and racial self-reinvention as she roamed the Atlantic world. Her acceptance into the Charleston elite was consistent with a traditional definition of race that was social and political rather than biological. The decision by the Medical Society of South Carolina to revoke her grandson’s license following a denunciation by a fellow refugee from Saint Domingue and fellow physician, Vincent LeSeigneur, was a manifestation of the rising “scientific racism” whose early advocates were members of the medical profession.

In 1772 two wealthy women from Gorée in West Africa, a mother and a daughter, moved to the French colony of Saint Domingue in the Caribbean. Twenty years later they settled in Charleston, South Carolina, where they became part of the local elite, although by 1831 one of their descendants would have his medical license revoked because of his African ancestry.

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Over several generations, this family of West African origin employed various strategies of adaptation and self-reinvention to preserve and augment their wealth while roaming the Atlantic world in an era of fast-changing political and economic circumstances.

Their story thus offers an excellent opportunity to test the analytical power of Ira Berlin's work on "Atlantic creoles," a powerful historical intervention that questions commonly held assumptions regarding the experience of race and slavery in colonial America. In the traditional narrative, captives from West Africa who were forcibly taken to the Americas were stripped of their original "African" identity and took on a new "creole" identity that was a mix of African, European, and Native American influences. Berlin argues, however, that the enslaved people of the "charter generations" were already creole. They came from European trading posts on the western coast of Africa (Elmina and Gorée, for example) that had developed a distinctly cosmopolitan culture, whose most striking feature was the presence of a "substantial cadre of Euro-Africans . . . men and women of African birth but shared African and European parentage, whose swarthy skin, European dress and deportment, acquaintance with local norms, and multilingualism gave them an insider's knowledge of both African and European ways."¹ According to Berlin, because the enslaved people of the "charter generations" came from those coastal enclaves, their experiences and attitudes "were more akin to [those] of confident, sophisticated natives than of vulnerable newcomers."²

Berlin explains his choice of the term *creole* by referring to the etymology of the Portuguese word *crioulo*, meaning, according to him, "a person of African descent born in the New World." He uses *creole* to mean, among the many contested definitions of the term, "black people of native American birth." He coins the term *Atlantic creole* to designate "those who by experience or chance, as well as by birth, became part of a new culture that emerged along the Atlantic littoral—in Africa, Europe, or the Americas—beginning in the 16th century."³

When he discusses the Atlantic creoles who circulated between coastal

1. Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 19.

2. Ira Berlin, "From Creole to African: Atlantic Creoles and the Origin of African-American Society in Mainland North America," *William and Mary Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (1996): 254. See also Linda M. Heywood and John K. Thornton, *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585–1660* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

3. Berlin, "From Creole to African," 254.

enclaves, the population Berlin has in mind were enslaved or formerly enslaved people who were likely to be multilingual and highly skilled. Marie-Adélaïde Rossignol Dumont's situation was different, although not unique: she and her mother were African women who crossed the Atlantic and made new lives for themselves in America but were never subject to bondage.



On January 6, 1831, members of the Medical Society of South Carolina resolved at their monthly meeting to inform Dr. John W. Schmidt Sr. that his son's license to practice medicine in South Carolina as issued by the society the previous June was to be revoked. The reason for this action concerned "certain rumors . . . that he [Dr. Schmidt Jr.] is of mixed blood."⁴ In April 1831 Dr. Schmidt Jr., having received word of the society's action, responded that he was being deprived of his civil rights and demanded that his license be reinstated. The society reviewed the matter and refused to reissue his license, asserting that it was Dr. Schmidt's responsibility to prove he was not of mixed blood.

The allegation of "mixed blood" was surprising. Dr. Schmidt Jr., recently established in New York City after studying medicine in New York State, was the son of a prominent physician who owned a plantation on the Ashpoo River, several buildings in Charleston, and numerous slaves.⁵ Dr. Schmidt Sr. had enjoyed a successful practice in Charleston for nearly forty years, specializing in diseases of the urethra, although he never sought a license from, or membership in, the Medical Society of South Carolina.

In response to the action of the Medical Society, Dr. Schmidt Jr. and his maternal grandmother, Marie-Adélaïde Rossignol Dumont, initiated slander proceedings against Dr. Vincent LeSeigneur, the Medical Society member who they presumed had made the charges against them. Two lawsuits were brought against Dr. LeSeigneur. One trial took place in which Schmidt Jr.'s grandmother was ruled to be a white woman. The second case

4. Minutes of the Medical Society of South Carolina, minutes, January 1, 1831, Waring Historical Library, Medical University of South Carolina, Charleston.

5. "Daniel W. Schmidt vs. John W. Schmidt, et al.," in *Reports of Cases in Equity Argued and Determined in the Court of Appeals and Court of Errors in South Carolina* (Charleston: McCarter and Co, 1855), 7:201–18. According to the account book of the Charleston slave trader Alonzo J. White, the estate of J. W. Schmidt from his plantation in St. Bartholomew's Parish, Colleton District, consisted of 101 slaves; his city slaves numbered 12. List book of Negroes for sale by Alonzo J. White, 1853–63, 34/0350, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston.

was discontinued on account of the verdict in the first case. The medical license was never reissued, however. Schmidt Jr. returned to New York City, where he developed a very successful practice.

Schmidt's parents were John W. Schmidt Sr. (1784–1853) and Ursule Dumont (ca. 1791–1822). The father, born in Emden, Prussia, moved to Charleston in the late eighteenth century and became a U.S. citizen in 1816.⁶ The mother, Ursule, was of French descent. Ursule's father was Guillaume Dumont (ca. 1745–1806), a physician who appears in the Charleston directory as early as 1796.⁷ Guillaume Dumont was born in Mont d'Astarac, a small village in the province of Haute-Guyenne, in southwest France. Ursule's mother was Marie-Adélaïde Rossignol Dumont (ca. 1756–1833), who became a U.S. citizen in 1829.⁸ In her naturalization record, Rossignol Dumont indicated that she was born in Paris.

At first sight, we have a relatively common story of German and French immigrants with professional and ethnic ties and a patrilineal transmission of professional skills: a German physician married a French woman who was the daughter of a French physician, and their son became a physician. Examining the archives more carefully, however, reveals an alternative, Atlantic creole genealogy, where the transmission of wealth was matrilineal, and ethnic identities, far from being a given, were claimed or assigned in different ways across time and place. In turn, this raises the question of whether the expression “passing for white” adequately represents the strategy and the experience of a family like theirs.

Schmidt Jr.'s maternal grandparents, Guillaume Dumont and Marie-Adélaïde Rossignol Dumont, had been living in Charleston since the mid-1790s, when they moved there from the island of Saint Domingue as refugees from the Haitian Revolution, which broke out in 1791. French colonists from Saint Domingue moved in successive waves to various coastal points in the Caribbean and on the American continent, including Santiago

6. Record of Admissions to Citizenship, District of South Carolina, 1790–1906, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington D.C. (hereafter cited as NARA), series M1183, roll 1, vol. 1, Aliens Admitted as Citizens, 1790–1860, 68.

7. “Dumont, William, Physician, George Street,” in James W. Hagg, *People and Professions of Charleston, South Carolina, 1782–1802* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1999), 52.

8. Marie-Adélaïde Rossignol Dumont was admitted to U.S. citizenship on November 28, 1829; NARA, Record of Admissions to Citizenship, District of South Carolina, 1790–1906, series M1183, roll 1, vol. 1, Aliens Admitted as Citizens, 1790–1860, 19.

de Cuba, New Orleans, Baltimore, Norfolk, and Philadelphia. More than five hundred of them landed in Charleston in the early 1790s, and a few hundred more arrived in 1809 following their expulsion from Cuba.⁹ The “New Market,” built in 1790–91, was refitted as a dormitory for refugees from Saint Domingue in 1793.¹⁰ As late as 1817, a French traveler who visited Charleston then wrote that French Creole could be heard on every street corner.¹¹

Guillaume and Marie-Adélaïde arrived in Charleston with their young children, Blaise (ca. 1790–1819) and Ursule. The couple had been married in 1786 in Cap Français, a large city on the northern coast of Saint Domingue. Their marriage record identifies Guillaume Dumont as a widower and a surgeon by trade, born in France. Guillaume’s father was deceased, but his mother was present at the ceremony, and she authorized the marriage. Marie-Adélaïde Rossignol attended her nuptials with her mother, Anne, “known as Rossignol,” who also authorized the marriage. The bride was identified in the marriage contract as a “free quadroon” (*quarteronne libre*) born not in Paris, as she claimed forty years later in her naturalization certificate, but in the Saint-Louis parish of the island of Gorée in West Africa. Her mother was recorded as a “free mulatress” (*mulâtresse libre*) who had had her daughter out of wedlock. The father was not mentioned.

Some fragmentary information about the earlier lives of the two women appears in studies of Saint Domingue and Gorée: Dominique Rogers and Stewart King include Marie-Adélaïde Rossignol and her mother in their study of free women of color in port cities in colonial Saint Domingue,¹²

9. Winston Chandler Babb, “French Refugees from Saint Domingue to the Southern United States, 1791–1810” (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 1954), 69–71; Margaret Wilson Gillikin, “Saint Dominguan Refugees in Charleston, South Carolina, 1791–1822: Assimilation and Accommodation in a Slave Society” (Ph.D. diss., University of South Carolina–Columbia, 2014).

10. Nic Butler, “City Market Housed Refugees in 1793,” *Charleston History Advocate*, January 27, 2010, <http://charlestonarchive.org/2010/01/27/refugees/>, accessed August 26, 2014. See also Gillikin, “Saint Dominguan Refugees in Charleston,” 78–79.

11. Lucius Gaston Moffatt and Joseph Médard Carrière, “A Frenchman Visits Charleston, 1817,” *South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine* 49, no. 3 (1948): 131–54, esp. 140.

12. Dominique Rogers and Stewart King, “Housekeepers, Merchants, Rentières: Free Women of Color in the Port Cities of Colonial Saint-Domingue, 1750–1790,” in Douglas Catterall and Jodi Campbell, eds., *Women in Port: Gendering Communities, Economies, and Social Networks in Atlantic Port Cities, 1500–1800* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 357–97.

indicating that the mother and daughter were not manumitted slaves but belonged to a select group of Senegalese women, the *signares* (figure 1), who had locally valid marriages (*mariages à la mode du pays*) with French officers and traders, and who controlled a good deal of the trade that took place between Senegal, Europe, and the Americas. Jean-Luc Angrand traces the women's earlier life in Gorée, identifying Marie-Adélaïde Rossignol's father as Louis Armand Aubert, an employee of the French Company of the Indies¹³ who, according to the company's ship rolls, was born in Digne, France, and sailed from Lorient to Senegal on the *Henriette* in 1743 at the age of twenty-two.¹⁴ Mother and daughter thus belonged to a very powerful family network with ties to the highest levels in the French colonial administration in Senegal. Anne Rossignol's elder sister, Marie-Thérèse Rossignol, was the concubine¹⁵ of Blaise Estoupan de Saint-Jean, who was the French commander of Gorée from 1747 to 1758,¹⁶ and whose brother, Jean-Baptiste, served as governor of Senegal from 1746 to 1758.¹⁷ Louis Aubert himself had a powerful position: he was a *garde-magasin* for the French Company of the Indies, a title that translates literally as "warehouse manager" but meant in practice, thanks to the monopoly the company enjoyed until 1769, that he was in charge of all merchandise, including enslaved captives, coming out of Gorée.

The power of *signares* like Anne Rossignol came from their status as economic and cultural intermediaries. On the one hand, they had a native command of one or more African languages, as well as family ties to local ethnic groups.¹⁸ On the other hand, they professed the Catholic faith and spoke French as well as French Creole.¹⁹ Their marriages with high-ranking colonial officers were mutually beneficial: the *signares* obtained political,

13. Jean-Luc Angrand, *Céleste ou le temps des signares* (Paris: Editions Anne Pépin, 2006), 58.

14. Service Historique de la Marine, Lorient, France, Company of the Indies records, rolls of the ship *Henriette* (1743–45), 2P 31-I.10.

15. Angrand, *Céleste ou le temps des signares*, 58.

16. Jean-Bernard Lacroix, *Les Français au Sénégal au temps de la Compagnie des Indes de 1719 à 1758* (Vincennes: Service Historique de la Marine, 1986), 204.

17. Ibid.

18. Angrand, *Céleste ou le temps des signares*, 80–123.

19. The French Creole that was spoken in Saint Domingue and New Orleans in the eighteenth century is thought to have originated from a French pidgin with a Wolof and Mandingo substrate that was spoken on the coast of Senegal in the seventeenth century. See John H. McWhorter, *The Missing Spanish Creoles: Recovering the Birth of Plantation Contact Languages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 172–76.



Figure 1. *A Distinguished Negress from the Island of Saint-Louis in Senegal, Accompanied by Her Slave* (1796). Etching by Jacques Grasset de Saint-Sauveur (1757–1810). © RMN–Grand Palais / Art Resource, New York. Signares owned household slaves (*esclaves de case*) as a symbol of their high social standing.

legal, and military protection for their commercial activities, while colonial administrators used the *signares* as native informants and shared in the profits of their businesses.

Rogers and King suggest that Anne and Marie-Adélaïde Rossignol moved from Gorée to Cap Français in 1772, by which time they were probably quite wealthy. In the 1786 marriage contract between Marie-Adélaïde Rossignol and Guillaume Dumont,²⁰ the wife brought greater assets than her husband: her contribution was evaluated at 78,907 livres (approximately \$170,000 in 2016 dollars)²¹ against 29,386 livres from the husband. These were considerable sums, characteristic of the upper echelons in French colonial society. Real estate, however, was excluded from these calculations; Marie-Adélaïde Rossignol's assets also included a house valued at 50,000 livres that belonged to her and her own lineage. The marriage contract has several revealing details. The list of the husband's assets includes a small boat with its equipment and an enslaved crew (a coxswain and a crew member), which suggests that the husband, like his wife, was engaged in commercial activities. The small boat probably ferried goods between large ships and the docks in Cap Français. The list of the wife's slaves suggests that several of them had been her mother's household slaves (*esclaves de case*) in Gorée and had accompanied the family when it moved from there to Saint Domingue. It includes a seventeen-year-old Senegalese boy named Diamougara (a Wolof nickname meaning "slave belonging to the in-laws")²² and a twenty-one-year-old Senegalese laundress named Corinne.²³ The list also includes a fifteen-year-old "creole from Gorée" named Léonore. Probably some of these people, still enslaved, would accompany Marie-Adélaïde Rossignol Dumont again when she moved with her husband and her mother from Cap Français to Charleston in the mid-1790s.²⁴

20. Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer (hereafter cited as ANOM), Aix-en-Provence, France, DPPC NOT SDOM 195, Jean-François Bordier jeune, notary, August 31, 1786.

21. This is the estimation in terms of historic standard of living. In terms of labor earnings (a multiple of the unskilled wage), the sum would be \$4,900,000 today. See <https://www.measuringworth.com>.

22. E-mail communication with Prof. Mamadou Diouf, June 18, 2013.

23. "Senegalese" usually designated someone who came from Saint-Louis, on the mouth of the Senegal River, or from the upper-river region.

24. It is known that many refugees from Saint Domingue came with their household slaves because unsuccessful attempts were made to bar the slaves from entering the United States. See the case of Louisiana in Nathalie Dessens, *From Saint-Domingue to New Orleans: Migrations and Influences* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007), 22–45. In South Carolina things were easier, as the law

The expression “creole from Gorée” deserves further analysis. In colonial America the word *creole* was used most often in the expression *creole negroes* to designate slaves born in the colony (as opposed to Africa). This is the meaning of *creole* that Berlin referred to (“black people of native American birth”) when he coined the expression *Atlantic creoles*. In Spanish and French areas, however, *creole* usually meant any person (enslaved or free, black or white) born in the colony (as opposed to Africa or Europe). The etymology of the word is not totally clear, but it seems to have been used in the Portuguese pidgin that was spoken on the western coast of Africa in the fifteenth century to mean “a slave born in his master’s house” and to have taken the broader meaning of “slave born in the colony” or “any person born in the colony.”²⁵ A similar derivation can be found in the language of another slave society: in Latin the substantive *verna* (a slave born in his master’s house) gave the adjective *vernaculus* (vernacular, or native). Thus, a “creole from Gorée” was “a slave born in her master’s house in Gorée.” In this case, *creole* meant not someone born in America but in Africa. Although the word *creole* had multiple and often incompatible usages over time, and it cannot be assigned a coherent, univocal meaning, in this instance the fact that the word was being used in Africa as well as in America may in itself indicate social and cultural similarities between coastal places like Gorée in Africa and Cap Français as well as Charleston in the Americas.

Rogers and King speculate that the Rossignols may have been perceived, or perceived themselves, as “foreigners” when they moved from Gorée to Cap Français in 1772.²⁶ Yet they seem to have adjusted quickly, and when they moved to Charleston twenty years later, they successfully adjusted again to an entirely new setting. On the one hand, there were social and cultural similarities between the European enclaves on the coast of Africa and the European enclaves on the coast of America: a paradoxical combination of strong local ties and great openness to the outside, and also a practice

allowed the importation of slaves when the owner intended to become a U.S. citizen. See Babb, “French Refugees from Saint Domingue,” 130.

25. See Eva Martha Eckkrammer, “‘Creole’ Language and Identity in the Netherland Antilles,” in Gordon Collier and Ulrich Fleischmann, eds., *A Pepper-Pot of Cultures: Aspects of Creolization in the Caribbean* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003), 85–108; Dieter Woll, “Esp. criollo y port. crioulo: Volviendo a la cuestión del origen y la historia de las dos palabras,” in Annegret Bollée and Johannes Kramer, eds., *Latinitas et Romanitas: Festschrift für Hans Dieter Bork zum 65. Geburtstag* (Bonn: Romanistischer Verlag, 1997), 517–35.

26. Rogers and King, “Housekeepers, Merchants, Rentières,” 393.

of slavery that assumed proximity between enslaver and enslaved and allowed for relatively frequent manumissions.²⁷ Moving from Gorée to Cap Français and from Cap Français to Charleston did not mean moving to a completely unfamiliar setting. On the other hand, there were obvious and major differences between Gorée, Cap Français, and Charleston, and being successful in those three different places required hard work and adaptation. But it was precisely the skill set the Rossignol women had developed in their native Gorée on the coast of Africa that allowed them to succeed in two different places in the Americas. As Berlin contends, Atlantic creoles had a “genius for intercultural negotiations” that “was central to a way of life that transcended particular venues.”²⁸

King, in a throwaway remark, refers to the presence of Anne Rossignol in Cap Français as “that rarity in the eighteenth-century Americas, a voluntary African immigrant.”²⁹ The unusual nature of the case makes it hard to speculate about how the mother and daughter might have been perceived socially and racially when they settled in Saint Domingue. There is, however, a somewhat similar case of emigration from Gorée to the Americas that may offer some clues: the emigration of several Eurafrican³⁰ families from Gorée to French Guiana following the Seven Years’ War (1756–63). In this case, the migratory flow reached a critical mass and colonial administrators had to make decisions regarding how these new immigrants should be categorized racially.

Following the Seven Years’ War, French officials, dreaming of revenge against the English, set out to populate the remaining French colonies in the Americas with free citizens. The most prominent example of this scheme was the attempt to colonize Kourou, in French Guiana, but it ended in disaster, and thousands died of disease or starvation.³¹ Even after that failure, in the late 1760s, navy ministry officials managed to persuade several

27. Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 17–28; Berlin, “From Creole to African,” 253–54. See also Pierre Force “The House on Bayou Road: Atlantic Creole Networks in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” *Journal of American History* 100, no. 1 (2013): 21–45.

28. Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 23.

29. Stewart R. King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig: Free People of Color in Pre-Revolutionary Saint Domingue* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 188.

30. The term *Eurafrican* is from George E. Brooks, *Eurafricans in Western Africa: Commerce, Social Status, Gender, and Religious Observance from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003).

31. Emma Rothschild, “A Horrible Tragedy in the French Atlantic,” *Past and Present* 192 (2006): 67–108.

wealthy Eurafrican families from Gorée to emigrate to Guiana and take their slaves with them. These families found the offer attractive because trade from Gorée was hampered at the time by a strong English military and commercial presence in neighboring coastal locations. Indeed, Anne Rossignol's decision to emigrate from Gorée to Saint Domingue around the same time should also be understood in this broader context. As Barbara Traver has shown, French officials in Guiana had the greatest difficulty categorizing these African immigrants, who wished to be considered white.³² The officials hesitated between skin color and the absence or presence of slave ancestry as a marker of identity. Eventually a royal decision stipulated that the Eurafrican immigrants should enjoy "the same advantages and prerogatives" as the rest of the king's subjects.³³ A similar hesitation occurred when Anne Rossignol was categorized in the 1776 cadastral (property) survey in Cap Français. Appearing in two places in the document, she is listed as the renter of a house on rue du Conseil, a prime real estate location, where she is called *la nommée dite Rossignol, mulâtresse libre* (the free mulatress known as Rossignol). A few pages later in the same document, she appears as *la veuve Aubert* (the widow Aubert), without any mention of race and therefore assumed to be white. This time she is listed as the owner of a house in the Petit Carénage neighborhood in Cap Français. Thus, in the same document, presumably compiled on the basis of information gathered by the same group of people, the same person appears under two different names and two different racial categories. Grappling with the notion that an African living in America could be a free person without any slave ancestry seems to have proved difficult for colonial officials, intent on having a stable and coherent racial categorization system.³⁴

It is unclear how Marie-Adélaïde Rossignol Dumont and her husband were able to move their wealth from Saint Domingue to the United States. They may have carried some cash or jewels with them, and they may have come with a number of household slaves, some of whom were skilled workers (the list of slaves in the 1786 marriage contract includes the crew of

32. Barbara Jean Traver, "After Kourou: Settlement Schemes in French Guyana in the Age of Enlightenment" (Ph.D. diss., Washington State University, 2011). See also Traver, "'The Benefits of Their Liberty': Race and the Eurafricans of Gorée in Eighteenth-Century French Guiana," *French Colonial History* 16 (2016): 1–25.

33. Traver, "After Kourou," 230. See French royal decree of June 16, 1776, ANOM, C14 /43/182.

34. Cadastral Survey of Cap-Français, 1776 and 1787, ANOM, G1 495.

Dumont's small boat, a laundress, a seamstress, and a wig maker). In the 1809 Charleston directory, Dumont was listed as a seamstress.³⁵ Like other Saint Domingue refugees, she was making a living as a representative of French fashion,³⁶ although it was her enslaved workers who probably made luxury dresses and other high-priced fashion items for well-to-do Charlestonians. Thanks to this lucrative activity and her husband's medical practice, the couple acquired considerable property and were accepted into the city's upper class, a status that was confirmed by the marriage of their daughter Ursule to a well-established physician in 1810.

When Guillaume Dumont died in Charleston in 1806, his personal assets (including several slaves) were valued at \$2,654 (about \$53,000 in 2016 dollars).³⁷ In his will he laments "the disasters which have taken place in St. Domingo in consequence of the French Revolution" for depriving him of his fortune. Nevertheless, his family was well enough provided for with income from real estate holdings in Charleston and the surrounding areas.³⁸ The probate inventory of his mother-in-law, Anne Rossignol, who had been living at 17 Wall Street³⁹ and died in 1810, shows she left fourteen slaves, worth a total of \$4,900, household furniture and silverware worth \$952, and \$2,149 in cash (total assets worth about \$160,000 in 2016 dollars).⁴⁰ Although these inventories do not take real estate into account, they show considerably greater wealth accrued by the female line of the family.

When Marie-Adélaïde Rossignol Dumont died in 1833, her inventory, which did include real estate, showed a considerable fortune valued at \$27,168 (about \$800,000 in 2016 dollars).⁴¹ The real estate included a three-story brick house on King Street, a vacant lot, three more houses on

35. "Dumoit [*sic*] Adelaide, seamstress, 15 Wall-st," *Directory for the District of Charleston, Comprising the Places of Residence and Occupation of the White Inhabitants* . . . (Charleston, S.C.: John Hoff, 1809), 30.

36. Babb, "French Refugees from Saint Domingue," 107.

37. Probate inventory of William Dumont, July 21, 1806, South Carolina Estate Inventories and Bills of Sale, 1732–1872, <https://www.fold3.com/image/265614601>. The sum would be \$570,000 today in terms of labor earnings.

38. Will of Guillaume Dumont, Will Book, 1800–1807, Book D, p. 644, South Carolina Room, Charleston County Public Library.

39. U.S. census, 1801, Charleston, S.C.

40. Probate inventory of Anne Rossignol, March 14, 1810, South Carolina Estate Inventories and Bills of Sale, 1732–1872, <https://www.fold3.com/image/265611436>. The sum would be \$1.7 million today in terms of labor earnings.

41. Probate inventory of M. A. R. Dumont, March 31, 1834, South Carolina Estate Inventories and Bills of Sale, 1732–1872, <https://www.fold3.com/image/265615142>. The sum would be \$7 million today in terms of labor earnings.

King Street, a store on Crafts Wharf, and a house on Wall Street. The deceased owned thirteen slaves, as well as \$1,273 in gold and silver, and \$284 in paper money. In the year of her death, Marie-Adélaïde Rossignol Dumont also successfully obtained an indemnity for the property her mother had owned in Saint Domingue before the Haitian Revolution. The French Ministry of Finance allocated a sum of 6,303 francs for two houses at numbers 93 and 94 rue Picolet in Cap Français (in the Petit Carénage neighborhood, where Anne Rossignol had been listed as an owner in the 1776 cadastral survey). This money came from the large indemnity the Haitian government had agreed to pay in exchange for the recognition of the island's independence by King Charles X of France, which was supposed to cover about 10 percent of the value of the property lost. Accordingly, the houses in Cap Français would have been worth about 60,000 francs (approximately \$300,000 in 2016 dollars).⁴²

The family had been claiming this property even before Haitian independence, since the houses had been sequestered by the French Republic under Toussaint Louverture's authority in the late 1790s. On February 20, 1802, Guillaume Dumont had begun filing an application on behalf of his wife with the French consulate in Charleston to have the sequestration lifted,⁴³ but the Haitian Constitution of 1805, which forbade land ownership by former colonists as well as all foreigners, would make his claim moot.⁴⁴

This matrilineal transmission of wealth is consistent with what has been observed for *signares* in Gorée and free women of color in Saint Domingue. According to George Brooks, "By 1749, ten of the thirteen private properties on Gorée belonged to Eurafricans, nine of whom were women."⁴⁵ Similarly, Stewart King has shown that in marriage contracts involving free

42. *Etat détaillé des liquidations opérées pendant l'année 1832 et les six premiers mois de 1833 par la commission chargée de répartir l'indemnité attribuée aux anciens colons de Saint-Domingue, en exécution de la loi du 30 avril 1826* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1834), 6:82–83. The sum would be \$3 million today in terms of labor earnings.

43. Power of attorney signed by Guillaume Dumont, with proxy's name left blank, Consulate of France in Charleston, February 20, 1802, ANOM, 6SUPS-DOM 8.

44. Article 7 stipulated that émigrés as well as anyone who acquired the citizenship of another country would be stripped of his or her Haitian citizenship, and any of the émigré's properties would be confiscated (emigration was also punishable by death). Article 12 forbade land ownership in Haiti by "white persons of any nation." Constitution Impériale de 1805, haiti-reference.com/pages/plan/histoire-et-societe/documents-historiques/constitutions/constitution-imperiale-1805/.

45. Brooks, *Eurafricans in Western Africa*, 211.

colored women in Saint Domingue, wives brought significantly greater assets to the marriages than their husbands.⁴⁶

When John W. Schmidt Sr. wed Ursule Dumont in 1810, he married into a wealthy family, whose fortune had originated in Gorée and had grown in Saint Domingue. Their oldest son, John W. Schmidt Jr., was born in Charleston in 1811. Although Charleston boasted the recently established Medical College of South Carolina, founded in 1824, Schmidt Jr. elected to pursue the study of medicine at the Geneva Medical College in New York (later known as Rutgers Medical College), from which he graduated on March 2, 1830. A protégé of a prominent New York surgeon, Dr. Valentine Mott, Schmidt Jr. established his practice in New York at St. Vincent's Hospital, where Dr. Mott was chief of staff. In June 1830, after his graduation, Dr. Schmidt Jr. petitioned the Medical Society of South Carolina for a license to practice medicine in his home state, which was approved without incident,⁴⁷ and he returned to New York to assume his post at St. Vincent's Hospital.

But six months later, the Medical Society's minutes of its January 1831 meeting recorded a decision to appoint a committee of five members "to call on Dr. Smidth [*sic*], and Inform him that certain rumors are affloat concerning his son, who has recently received a license from the Medical Society to practice Medicine in this State, it being circulated that he is of mixed blood." The committee, comprising Drs. Isaac Motte Campbell, Francis Y. Porcher, Thomas Y. Simons, Isaac A. Johnson, and Jacob De La Motta, would investigate these rumors and recommend a course of action. Upon notification of the situation, Schmidt Jr. vigorously defended what he called his civil rights: "I am resolved to resist this attempt thus made to deprive me of my civil rights, and demand the License as granted to me on 1st June, last."⁴⁸ The following week the committee reported its findings. Although the minutes are silent about the evidence, after a short discussion the following resolution was adopted and carried: "The committee of the Medical Society, appointed on the 1st instant to call on Dr. Schmidt, respecting his son, convened for that purpose, recommend, that the Society should rescind their resolution granting Dr. Schmidt a license, refund his money, and notify him of the act of the Society."

46. King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig*, 197.

47. Minutes of the Medical Society of South Carolina, June 1, 1830, Waring Historical Library, Medical University of South Carolina, Charleston. As of 1817 the South Carolina General Assembly had empowered the Medical Society to grant licenses to practice medicine, including midwifery and apothecary.

48. *Ibid.*, April 18, 1831.

The Medical Society would meet frequently over the next three months for further discussion regarding Schmidt Jr.'s license, and members were conflicted and divided about what to do; some voted to restore the license and then later voted to uphold the revocation. Before making its final decision, the Medical Society of South Carolina solicited an opinion from the South Carolina attorney general to determine the liability of the society and its members in regard to withholding or granting Dr. Schmidt's license on the grounds of his race. Attorney General Hugh S. Legare declined to answer, but Isaac Edward Holmes, a state representative for the Charleston District, offered an opinion in his stead. Holmes came from a prominent political and legal family in Charleston, and he was among the founding members of the South Carolina Association, which was "created for the express purpose of countering abolitionist influences from the North."⁴⁹ A friend of John C. Calhoun, and an outspoken advocate for nullification, Holmes provided a legal opinion that stood in contrast to the prevailing jurisprudence in matters of race. He allowed that neither the society nor its individual members were liable for slander, as they were undertaking their action in good faith and in the best interest of the Medical Society. Indeed, Holmes stated the charge of mixed race against a potential member "deeply affect[s] the dignity of the Medical Profession in South Carolina, and involv[es] most important results to the Community in which we live." He went on to opine that, "if the Society have reason to believe that Dr. Schmidt is not entitled to the privileges of a white person, they will be fully justified in refusing the License—and there is no Law to make them suffer for so doing."⁵⁰

At a special session of the Medical Society, on May 5, 1831, Holmes's opinion was read and the decision to revoke the license was upheld: "it was moved and seconded that the Society adhere to their former resolution in refusing the License to Dr. Schmidt."⁵¹

The timing of the initial move to revoke Dr. Schmidt's license is significant. Just a month before their vote, the Medical Society had inducted Dr. Vincent LeSeigneur, who was among those who escaped Saint Domingue with Dr. Dumont and his family.⁵² Separately, they had settled in Charleston and made their fortunes. The Dumonts and LeSeigneur had been

49. Entry for Isaac Edward Holmes, *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York: Scribners, 1928), 5:165.

50. Minutes of the Medical Society of South Carolina, May 5, 1831, Waring Historical Library, Medical University of South Carolina, Charleston.

51. *Ibid.*

52. *Ibid.*, December 13, 1830.

members of the French refugee community in Charleston, and for several years Schmidt Sr. and LeSeigneur lived within a couple of doors of each other on Church Street. Indeed, LeSeigneur attended the Schmidt family during a medical emergency involving Schmidt's infant son from his second marriage and even certified the child's death.⁵³ Forty years after arriving in his adoptive home, LeSeigneur had become a member of the Medical Society of South Carolina, but the very next month, that same group revoked Schmidt Jr.'s license because of "rumors of mixed blood."

According to South Carolina jurisprudence, accusing someone of being a mulatto was slander, not primarily because it was an assault on someone's reputation, but more precisely because if the accusation was true, "the party would be deprived of all civil rights, and moreover would be liable to be tried in all cases under the negro act, without the privilege of a trial by jury."⁵⁴ This fact made an accusation of mixed blood "actionable."⁵⁵ Through his father, Schmidt Jr. engaged the legal support of a noted Charleston jurist, James L. Petigru, a former attorney general of South Carolina, who had met with the Medical Society committee before its members made their decision, and who would later represent Dr. Schmidt Sr. "about that old scandal of the base blood of his wife, in an action against Dr. LeSeigneur."⁵⁶ The phrase "that old scandal" suggests previous knowledge of the Rossignols' African ancestry, but a formal accusation did not take place until LeSeigneur joined the Medical Society. Petigru, who decades later would oppose secession, was known for aggressively cross-examining witnesses, and he seems to have effectively neutralized testimony against Schmidt. During the trial, Lewis Chupein, a defense witness and refugee from Cap Français, claimed to have seen Marie-Adélaïde Rossignol sit in church in a "space set apart for other classes." But when Petigru asked Chupein if he had ever actually attended church to see such seating arrangements, Chupein beseeched the judge to dismiss the question, and upon

53. Jane E. Schmidt v. J. W. Schmidt, filed June 29, 1831, Charleston District, Equity Bills, 1833, no. 28 (CH 225), South Carolina Department of Archives and History (hereafter cited as SCDAH), Columbia. Jane E. Schmidt died November 11, 1836.

54. *Eden v. Legare*, I Bay 171, May 1791, in Helen Tunnicliff Catteral, ed., *Judicial Cases concerning American Slavery and the Negro*, 5 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1926–37), 2:274.

55. *Ibid.*

56. Joseph Blyth Allston, *Life and Times of James L. Petigru: Brilliant Lawyer, Staunch Patriot, a Citizen True to His State* (1900; repr., Spartanburg, S.C.: Reprint Co., 1981), 123.

being told to answer it, “said he was in a serious dilemma, for if he replied to the question that he had never been at church he would become odious in the eyes of his countrymen as an atheist and despiser of religious rites. ‘But if I answer that I have been at church, then my friends will know that I tell one little lie.’”⁵⁷

LeSeigneur averred that he “knew Madame Rossignol [Marie-Adélaïde Rossignol Dumont’s mother, Anne] well in the Cape that she was a negro and Mrs. Dumont meaning the Plaintiff was Madame Rossignol’s daughter, and Mrs. Schmidt was the daughter of Mrs. Dumont and Dr. Schmidt’s son must be a mulatto his mother being a mulatto and that he the said defendant by writing to the Cape could get proof of it.” It was also alleged that LeSeigneur “before several persons said that Mme Rossignol was an African Negro and nurse in the Hospital in Goree and that the Governor of Goree got her with child and that Pff [plaintiff, Mrs. Dumont] was that child.”⁵⁸ Thus, according to LeSeigneur’s testimony, Marie-Adélaïde Rossignol’s father was the commander of Gorée himself, Blaise Estoupan de Saint-Jean, who kept Marie-Adélaïde’s aunt as his concubine.⁵⁹ And there was indeed a small French military hospital in Gorée in the 1770s.⁶⁰ Whoever the real father may have been (Estoupan de Saint-Jean or Aubert), a close connection undoubtedly existed between the *signare* Anne Rossignol and the highest levels of French colonial power in Senegal.

Marie-Adélaïde Rossignol Dumont and her mother assumed different racial and ethnic identities at different times. When the 1800 U.S. census was taken, the Dumont household included one free white male (Guillaume Dumont) and three “other free [i.e., neither Indian nor slave] persons” (presumably Marie-Adélaïde Rossignol Dumont and her two children).⁶¹ By 1810, however, Rossignol Dumont, then a widow and head of the household, was designated as white, along with her daughter

57. William J. Grayson, *James Louis Petigru: A Biographical Sketch* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1866), 157; Sally Edwards, *The Man Who Said No* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1970), 73; James Petigru Carson, *Life, Letters and Speeches of James Louis Petigru, the Union Man of South Carolina* (Washington, D.C.: W. H. Lowdermilk & Co., 1920), 125–26.

58. Charleston District Court of Common Pleas, Judgment Rolls 1833, no. 114A, pts. 1, 2, SCDAH.

59. Angrand, *Céleste ou le temps des signares*, 58.

60. Evrard Duparel, *Map of the Island of Gorée*, ca. 1780, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Department of Maps and Plans.

61. U.S. census, 1800 (Ancestry.com database online), Charleston, S.C., roll 48, p. 99, image 136; Family History Library Film 181423.

and her mother.⁶² It is hard to know whether racial identification was based on self-reporting or on the census workers' opinions, but the fact is that following her husband's death in 1806, Marie-Adélaïde Rossignol Dumont assumed a new racial identity that helped her survive without her family's white male protection. In summary: in Gorée, the Rossignol women were natives, with ties to local ethnic groups (possibly the Serer, as was the case with many *signares*);⁶³ in Saint Domingue, they were French and "free-colored"; in Charleston, their identity shifted from French and "free-colored" to French and "white," and eventually, in the daughter's case, a "white" U.S. citizen.

LeSeigneur was clearly well informed: in small, face-to-face communities like Gorée and Cap Français, everyone's ancestry would have been common knowledge and a matter of some interest. But, unfortunately, he had no proof. On June 14, 1833, the court ruled that Marie-Adélaïde Rossignol Dumont was "a good true faithful and honest white woman, an inhabitant of the city of Charleston, and citizen of the state of South Carolina, and as such has always carried governed and demeaned herself, and has always been taken held and reputed by all her friends and neighbors dealers and other good and worthy citizens of this state and of the United States to be a white woman of good name fame credit and reputation." This ruling made her whiteness official. Curiously, although the case was decided in favor of Marie-Adélaïde Rossignol Dumont, the jury ruled that because "the words proved were not spoken by him [LeSeigneur] with any malice," Mrs. Dumont had to pay the court costs.⁶⁴

Present understandings of what was at stake in the claim of "mixed race" are informed by the "one-drop rule," which had two principal components: first, it defined race in terms of ancestry and biology; second, it categorized as black any person who had an African ancestor somewhere in his or her family tree. According to this line of thinking, when Marie-Adélaïde Rossignol Dumont and her mother arrived in Charleston in the 1790s, they would have hidden their "true" African identities, and at least by the 1810 census they had "passed for white." But this concept of "passing" seems somewhat anachronistic when applied to the behavior of the Rossignol women, at least in the early stages of their South Carolinian experience.

62. U.S. census, 1800, roll 60, p. 373, image 0181419; Family History Library Film 00201.

63. Angrand, *Céleste ou le temps des signares*, 82.

64. Charleston District Court of Common Pleas, Judgment Rolls 1833, no. 114A, pts. 1, 2, SCDAH.

In nineteenth-century literary representations of “passing” (for example, Frank J. Webb’s *The Garies and Their Friends*⁶⁵ and Mark Twain’s *The Tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson*⁶⁶), people of color who pass for white have tricked their neighbors into thinking that they are entirely of European descent, and when their “true” identities are revealed, the consequences are tragic. In Webb’s novel, a wealthy man of color who passes for white is shunned by white society when his African ancestry is revealed, and he hears these scathing words from his white father-in-law: “There are laws to punish thieves and counterfeits but such as you may go unchastised, except by the abhorrence of all honourable men. Had you been unaware of your origin, and had the revelation of this gentleman been as new to you as to me, you would have deserved sympathy; but you have been acting a lie, claiming a position in society to which you knew you had no right, and deserve execration and contempt.”⁶⁷

In the case of the Rossignol women, there was arguably no active deception involved initially, since their African ancestry was probably common knowledge, at least within the French refugee community. Even the “white” designation in the 1810 census would not have necessarily meant a denial of African ancestry in the minds of the Rossignol women, if we recall that Eurafricans from Gorée in French Guiana, whose African ancestry was public knowledge, considered themselves white. The only clear act of deception was Marie-Adélaïde Rossignol Dumont’s declaration that she was born in Paris when she applied for U.S. citizenship in 1829. But precisely at that time the definitions of whiteness and blackness had shifted, and being “white” was increasingly deemed to be incompatible with having African ancestry.

The one-drop rule was a relatively late development in some parts of the antebellum South. As Joel Williamson has shown, in eighteenth-century South Carolina, the door to whiteness was kept open to free people of color on the basis of their behavior and reputation as well as the size of their property holdings.⁶⁸ This was also the case in Jamaica and Brazil.⁶⁹ In that sense the definitions of “whiteness” and “blackness” were social and political rather than biological. According to Williamson, until the Civil War, “the authorities of South Carolina, unlike those of Virginia, steadfastly refused

65. Frank J. Webb, *The Garies and Their Friends* (London: Routledge, 1857).

66. Mark Twain, *The Tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson* (Hartford: American Publishing Co., 1894).

67. Webb, *The Garies and Their Friends*, 268.

68. Joel Williamson, *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 17–20.

69. John D. Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 6–7.

to attempt a fractional definition of blackness for mulattoes.”⁷⁰ Such thinking found its way into an 1835 ruling by Judge William Harper, who declined to decide whether a person was black or white simply on the basis of his or her ancestry: “We cannot say what admixture of negro blood will make a colored person,” he ruled, because “the condition of the individual is not to be determined solely by distinct and visible mixture of negro blood, but by reputation, by his reception into society, and his having commonly exercised the privileges of a white man.”⁷¹

In that sense, then, the verdict in the slander cases brought by Schmidt Jr. and his grandmother Marie-Adélaïde Rossignol Dumont against LeSeigneur was consistent with South Carolina jurisprudence. A person’s ancestry or physical appearance was not the deciding factor. The overriding consideration was “behavior and reputation.” Schmidt Jr.’s grandmother was white, therefore, simply because she had “always been taken held and reputed by all her friends and neighbors . . . to be a white woman.” From this perspective, the advice given by Isaac Holmes to the Medical Society was a legal innovation that went against precedent, albeit one that was in ascendancy by the 1830s. It shifted the burden of proof by asking Schmidt Jr. to present evidence of his European ancestry in order to have his medical license reinstated.

Although Marie-Adélaïde Rossignol Dumont had been categorized explicitly as white as early as the 1810 census, one possible alternative would have been to assume the “free-colored” status she held in Saint Domingue, since Charleston, like New Orleans, had moved from a two-tiered to a three-tiered system, in which free blacks sat between whites and slaves as an endogamous caste.⁷² Indeed, some free-coloreds in Charleston were wealthy and prosperous, but as Cynthia Kennedy has noted, no matter how wealthy, the “brown elite” had to hear a frequent “wake-up call, [which] manifested itself . . . in the form of the free negro capitation tax, or a court’s refusal to hear their testimony.”⁷³ Marie-Adélaïde Rossignol Dumont had identified herself with white society sufficiently early that her status could not later be successfully challenged.

The fact that a challenge to the jurisprudence on race came in the 1830s

70. Williamson, *New People*, 18.

71. Quoted *ibid.* See Catteral, *Judicial Cases concerning American Slavery and the Negro*, 2:269.

72. Paul F. Lachance, “The Formation of a Three-Caste Society: Evidence from Wills in Antebellum New Orleans,” *Social Science History* 18, no. 2 (1994): 211–42.

73. Cynthia M. Kennedy, *Braided Relations, Entwined Lives: The Women of Charleston’s Urban Slave Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 93.

from the medical profession is not coincidental. In 1830 a physician named Charles Caldwell had published a book entitled *Thoughts on the Original Unity of the Human Race*, challenging the biblical account of Creation and arguing that Africans were an intermediate species between Caucasians and apes.⁷⁴ In 1837 a Frenchman named Joseph Henry Guenebault, recently established in Charleston as a teacher of French, published his *Natural History of the Negro Race*,⁷⁵ a compilation of earlier European authors, including J.-J. Virey⁷⁶ and Samuel Sömmerring.⁷⁷ Advance praise for Guenebault's book in Charleston's *Southern Literary Journal* pointed clearly to the political agenda underlying the publication. The principal claim of the book, according to the *Journal*, was that blacks were "absolutely incapable" of "republican liberty in government," a fact confirmed by the continuing political turmoil that had followed the abolition of slavery in Haiti, and which meant that abolitionists were seeking something that was "physically and morally impossible."⁷⁸ Meanwhile, the rise of "scientific racism" is usually associated with the publication of *Crania Americana* by Samuel Morton in 1839, who argued that Africans were not only an inferior race, but also a distinct human species.⁷⁹ Morton himself was no stranger to Charleston's medical community, since before 1825 many Charleston physicians received their medical education at the University of Edinburgh or the University of Pennsylvania.⁸⁰ Morton's affiliation with both of these institutions meant that he was well known to members of the Medical Society and to faculty members of the Medical College. In the 1830s Morton was corresponding with two faculty members, Samuel Henry Dickson and Edmund Ravenel, with whom he had graduated from the University of Pennsylvania

74. Charles Caldwell, *Thoughts on the Original Unity of the Human Race* (New York: E. Bliss, 1830).

75. Joseph Henry Guenebault, *Natural History of the Negro Race: Extracted from the French by J. H. Guenebault* (Charleston, S.C.: D. J. Dowling, 1837).

76. Julien Joseph Virey, *Histoire Naturelle du Genre Humain*, 2 vols. (Paris: Dufart, 1801).

77. Samuel Sömmerring, *Über die körperliche Verschiedenheit des Negers vom Europäer* (Mainz: G. Fischer, 1785).

78. Guenebault, *Natural History of the Negro Race*, i.

79. Samuel Morton, *Crania Americana; or, A Comparative View of the Skulls of Various Aboriginal Nations of North and South America . . .* (Philadelphia: J. Dobson, 1839). See also Ann Fabian, *The Skull Collectors: Race, Science, and America's Unburied Dead* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

80. In 1824, when the Medical College of South Carolina opened, six of the seven faculty members were graduates of the University of Pennsylvania.

in 1820,⁸¹ and upon his death in 1851, the *Charleston Medical Journal and Review* eulogized Morton by stating, "We can only say that we of the South should consider him as our benefactor, for aiding most materially in giving to the negro his true position as an inferior race."⁸²

The fact that the accusation of "mixed blood" against Marie-Adélaïde Rossignol Dumont came from a fellow refugee from Saint Domingue is also noteworthy. Little is known of LeSeigneur's life before his arrival in Charleston. His naturalization record listed his profession as veterinarian, though he was said to have studied medicine in Paris before emigrating to Saint Domingue: "He had not been there [Saint Domingue] many years, before the influence of the French Revolution produced that terrible revolution in that ill-fated island."⁸³ He then practiced medicine from his arrival in his adoptive city in December 1793 until his death on January 6, 1846, at age eighty-four.⁸⁴

In his memorial before the Medical Society of South Carolina, Dr. T. Grange Simons repeated the narrative of LeSeigneur's escape from Saint Domingue as he had heard it from LeSeigneur himself: "He was with many others doomed to be shot, he witnessed the fate of many of his friends and his destiny was near at hand when the wife of the principal officer, whose obstetrician he had been, recognized him and saved his life."⁸⁵

LeSeigneur and Guillaume Dumont had held roughly the same social standing in Saint Domingue. The former was a veterinarian and the latter was a surgeon, two professions that enjoyed considerably less prestige than

81. Finding aid and inventory for the Samuel George Morton Papers, American Philosophical Society, www.amphilsoc.org/collections/view?docId=ead/Mss.B.M843-ead.xml;query=Morton;brand=default, accessed March 24, 2017.

82. "Death of Samuel George Morton, M.D." *Charleston Medical Journal and Review* 6, no. 4 (1851): 597.

83. Minutes of the Medical Society of South Carolina, February 2, 1846, Waring Historical Library, Medical University of South Carolina, Charleston.

84. Babb, "French Refugees from Saint Domingue," 134. LeSeigneur first appears in the Charleston City Directory of 1796. He never married or had any children. His will identified a number of Charleston friends, mostly doctors, to whom particular bequests were made. The residue of his estate was to be divided equally among Mary Elizabeth Touvelle, Louis Alexander Touvelle, and Beatrice Juliette Touvelle, though their relationship to him is not clear from his will. They do not appear to be residents of Charleston. See Will Book 44 (1845–51), Will of Vicent le Siegneur [*sic*], p. 1, South Carolina Room, Charleston County Public Library.

85. Minutes of the Medical Society of South Carolina, February 2, 1846, Waring Historical Library, Medical University of South Carolina, Charleston.

the profession of medical doctor. Like Dumont, LeSeigneur does not appear to have owned real estate there, since he arrived in the colony from Caen, in Normandy, just a few years before the beginning of the Haitian Revolution, and his name does not appear in the register of property owners who received an indemnity following the recognition of Haitian independence by the French government. LeSeigneur remained single, and his social standing was probably just above that of a prosperous craftsman (at some point he even made a living for himself as a cake and candle maker).⁸⁶ Dumont, on the other hand, “married up” by joining a family of free-coloreds, the Rossignols, whose assets were comparable to those of wealthy white families.

One of the main social divides in eighteenth-century Saint Domingue had been between *grands blancs* and *petits blancs* (the long-established white planter elite versus the recently arrived white immigrants). According to John Garrigus, until the 1760s wealthy free-coloreds were generally treated as belonging to the white planter elite. After the Seven Years’ War there was an influx of poor white immigrants who resented the creole social hierarchy and demanded social equality among colonial whites. To preserve the political unity of the colony, the colonial government began to give symbolic preference to poor whites over wealthy free-coloreds by treating free-coloreds as a biologically defined caste. Free-coloreds continued to conduct business and own property, and their economic interests were for the most part not affected, but they were barred from some professions, including law and medicine, and they had to endure the humiliation of being treated as in some ways inferior to poor whites.⁸⁷

What Garrigus calls “the new ideology of white purity” was well established in the 1780s when LeSeigneur, a white man of relatively modest origins, arrived in Saint Domingue.⁸⁸ Marie-Adélaïde Rossignol Dumont and her mother were recent immigrants as well, but they probably saw themselves as occupying an elevated position in the creole social hierarchy, having family ties with the former French governor of Senegal. They had moved from one Atlantic enclave to another, so they remained within somewhat the same culture, as opposed to LeSeigneur, who came from Normandy and was unfamiliar with traditional creole society. If LeSeigneur held any animus against his fellow French refugees, it would have fit the pattern of poor whites resenting the privileges of wealthy whites and using wealthy free-coloreds as scapegoats.

86. Babb, “French Refugees from Saint Domingue,” 134. See also Gillikin, “Saint Dominguan Refugees in Charleston,” 133.

87. Garrigus, *Before Haiti*, 141–70.

88. *Ibid.*, 161.

Since they arrived in Charleston in the aftermath of the Haitian Revolution, these two families had coexisted, apparently without previous altercations. By his own account, LeSeigneur had known the Rossignol/Dumont/Schmidt family to be of mixed race for nearly forty years, but he had made no public comment until then. The immediate cause of his accusation was perhaps related to LeSeigneur's admission to the Medical Society. As a new member eager to fit in, he may have wanted to burnish his credentials by helping the society screen out mixed-race members. In so doing, LeSeigneur may have felt he was upholding a rule that had been in vigor in Saint Domingue: the discriminatory measures enacted against people of African descent following the Seven Years' War included a prohibition against the practice of medicine and surgery.⁸⁹ LeSeigneur's eagerness to be included perhaps also had a religious component. The Rossignols and the Schmidts were Catholic (Schmidt Sr. and Ursule Dumont were married by Simon Felix O'Gallagher, the pastor of St. Mary's Catholic Church of Charleston, an Irish-born priest who had studied theology in Paris and was fluent in French).⁹⁰ LeSeigneur was almost certainly Catholic when he moved from Saint Domingue to Charleston, but there he became a member of St. Philip's Episcopal Church, the congregation of the white, Protestant establishment of Charleston. Catholics had an ambiguous status in Charleston in the early nineteenth century. They were generally well accepted and treated as equals by the Protestants, but there was a lingering suspicion that they might have abolitionist leanings.⁹¹

In his study of family networks in the French Atlantic, R. Darrell Meadows discusses the role of "weak" social ties (distant kin, acquaintances, "vaguely known compatriots") in providing support to immigrants.⁹² Initially, the Dumont-LeSeigneur relationship would have fit that pattern,

89. French royal decree of April 30, 1764, regarding surgery in the American colonies, article XIV, in Louis-Elie Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Loix et constitutions des colonies françaises de l'Amérique sous le vent*, 6 vols. (Paris, 1784–90), 4:724.

90. *City Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, Charleston, S.C., January 25, 1810, 3. See Gillikin, "Saint Dominguan Refugees in Charleston," 201.

91. According to Randall Miller, *Catholics in the Old South* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1999), Catholics were seen with deep suspicion. Andrew Henry Stern, *Southern Crucifix, Southern Cross: Catholic-Protestant Relations in the Old South* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2012), on the other hand, argues that for the most part they had good and cooperative relations with the Protestant elite.

92. R. Darrell Meadows, "Engineering Exile: Social Networks and the French Atlantic Community, 1789–1809," *French Historical Studies* 23, no. 1 (2000): 72.

both families belonging to a cluster of “vaguely known compatriots” who could be counted on for mutual support. But long after the emigration from Saint Domingue, LeSeigneur found it to his advantage to break those ties, in a gesture that he may have considered the price of admission into Charleston’s white, Protestant upper class. The increasing popularity of “scientific racism,” which was advocated by other members of the Medical Society, facilitated his move.



The case of the Rossignol women is rare but not unique. There is at least one other documented case of a *signare* from Senegambia who landed in Charleston in the eighteenth century: Fenda Lawrence, who “voluntarily hath come,” and eventually settled in Georgia.⁹³ But by the 1830s such trajectories had become simply unimaginable, as was the idea that someone could be from Africa and not be a slave or a descendent of slaves. When Euraficans in French Guiana in the 1770s asked to be categorized as “white,” they were not “passing”: they did not mean to deny the well-known fact that they were born in Africa. Being “white” meant simply having the same rights and privileges as the colonists who were born in Europe. In Charleston in the 1830s, however, being “white” had acquired a different meaning. Marie-Adélaïde Rossignol Dumont had to claim Paris, France, as her birthplace, a city and a country she had never seen, to protect herself and her children from accusations of having African ancestry.

One of the most important conclusions of Berlin’s work on Atlantic creoles, as well as those of Heywood and Thornton in their work on Central Africa and the slave trade in the seventeenth century, is that there was a major difference between the plantation system of the nineteenth century and the slavery of the “charter generations.”⁹⁴ The plantation system of the nineteenth century was the foundation of a slave society in which a natural and necessary relation was assumed between race and slavery: slavery was the destiny of all persons of African descent in the Americas, a fact that was construed as naturally preordained. The earlier regime (societies-with-slaves, as opposed to slave societies) was not necessarily less brutal, but it did not assume this essential connection between servitude and race, and it

See also Mark Granovetter, “The Strength of Weak Ties,” *American Journal of Sociology* 78 (1973): 1360–80.

93. Lilian Ashcraft-Eason, “She Voluntarily Hath Come: A Gambian Woman Trader in Colonial Georgia in the Eighteenth Century,” in Paul Lovejoy, ed., *Identity in the Shadow of Slavery*, 2nd ed. (New York: Continuum, 2009), 202–21.

94. Heywood and Thornton, *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles*.



Figure 2. Dr. John W. Schmidt Jr. (1811–58), portrait presented to the New York Academy of Medicine by Dr. Lewis A. Sayre in the name of Schmidt's daughter Mrs. James Edward Andrews (Emily Southgate Field), February 20, 1897. John W. Schmidt Jr. was the grandson of Marie Adélaïde Rossignol Dumont, a *signare* from Gorée, West Africa. Courtesy of the New York Academy of Medicine.

allowed for more frequent manumissions. According to Berlin, within the Atlantic creole world it was perfectly conceivable for a free person of African descent to roam the Atlantic, conduct business, and accumulate wealth. When Berlin uses the phrase *Atlantic creoles*, he is referring to enslaved or formerly enslaved persons who circulated between the western coast of Africa and the Americas. He thus historicizes the synonymy between blackness and slavery that provided the ideological foundation for the nineteenth-century plantation system (and kept informing debates about race long after emancipation). The small but documented presence of Africans without any slave ancestry in these migratory flows, although not mentioned explicitly in Berlin's work, makes his point even more vividly.

Although Marie-Adélaïde Rossignol Dumont and her grandson won their case, his South Carolina license was never restored. Schmidt Jr. never lived in Charleston again but enjoyed a successful career in New York City. He was a founding member of the New York Academy of Medicine (figure 2). And although he had left his native city behind, he did return to consult on medical

cases with his father from time to time, although even Schmidt Sr. left Charleston for good, dying in New York in 1853. When Schmidt Jr. died in 1858, his colleagues eulogized him, noting that the “profession has lost one of its eminent members.”⁹⁵ The Schmidt family would continue to flourish in New York. Schmidt Jr.’s grandson, Mott Schmidt (1889–1977) was a renowned architect who built town houses in the Georgian style for wealthy New Yorkers, including Anne Morgan and Anne Harriman Vanderbilt. A website dedicated to his work describes him as a “fourth-generation American of German and Irish ancestry.”⁹⁶ The erasure of his African ancestry is paradoxically the consequence of the Rossignol women’s success in navigating changing notions of blackness and whiteness as they moved across the Atlantic.

95. *The Scalpel* 36 (1858): 312–13.

96. Mark Alan Hewitt, “Mott Schmidt Biography,” www.mottschmidt.com/about_mott_schmidt/view/youth-and-schooling, accessed March 24, 2017.

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