

The Early Life of the Original Voodoo Queen

by Zehara Nachash

It is nearly impossible to visit New Orleans without hearing or feeling the influence of Voodoo Queen Marie Laveau. She is one of the most influential historical females in New Orleans Voodoo history. Buried in St. Louis Cemetery, No. 1 in the Laveau-Glapion family crypt, her tomb is one of the most visited by tourists. And while most stories of Marie Laveau focus on her Voodoo practice, most hardly know her early history.

Most historians agree that Marie Laveau was born on September 10, 1801, in the French Quarter of New Orleans. Before I continue about her early life, let me explain a bit about what life was like in New Orleans during the 1800s. It was common in those days—only in New Orleans—for white men, usually affluent, to take on black mistresses. This is what was known as *plaçage* (pronounced *pla-sazh*), an extralegal system in which Spanish, French, and Creole men entered into civil unions with women of African, Indian, or Creole descent; the women of these marriages were free people of color and were often gifted with homes of their own, money and gifts.

Marie's grandmother Catherine Henry and her daughter Marguerite were both slaves of Henry Roche Belair, and stayed with him for many years, until they were eventually sold to a slave owner who gave them their freedom. While the exact date is unknown, Marguerite entered into a *plaçage* with Charles Laveau. While not much is known about Charles Laveau, most believe he was a relative of Charles Laveau Trudeau, a prominent politician at the time (both were Caucasian and of French descent).

On September 10, 1801, Marguerite and Charles welcomed baby Marie Laveau into the world, which made her a free mulatto (a person with a white parent and a black parent). While not much is known about Marie's childhood, it is believed she lived on St. Ann Street in a cottage with her grandmother Catherine Henry. Marie was a striking figure in the New Orleans community and often dressed in dark clothing with flashy rings, earrings, and gold bracelets on her wrists. She was said to be exceptionally stunning and beautiful.



A Prayer to Marie Laveau

Light a white candle and leave an offering of rum or a cigar. When you are ready, recite the following: *Benevolent Marie Laveau, who draws strength from the lwa. I trust in your protecting love, kindness, and power. Give me the strength to confront the misfortunes I meet and the power to overcome my weaknesses.*

On July 27, 1819, Marie entered into a *plaçage* with Jacques Paris, and the two were wed on August 4, 1819. It is not known whether they had any children, as one report said they had none but another said that there were two daughters from the marriage; neither have been verified. Jacques Paris' death was recorded in 1820, but with no official record of his death, the cause was unknown. Following his death, Marie was officially known as "The Widow Paris." At this point, Marie became a hairdresser who catered to the wealthy white families in the city in order to make a living.

Marie eventually began a relationship with Christophe Duminy de Glapion, a son of an aristocratic French family. Marie and Christophe were a couple for 30 years, during which time they had seven children together. Christophe died on June 26, 1855, and Marie would live another 30 years.

Catherine Henry, Marie's grandmother, was believed to be a descendant of a Voodoo priest in Africa. Marie began her Voodoo career, certainly under the tutelage of her grandmother, sometime around 1820. Marie did consultations, made *gris-gris* (also known as *mojo bags*), and helped those in need by using Voodoo spellwork and rituals. The stories of her powerful Voodoo work are in abundance, and you can read about those pretty much anywhere on the internet.

Later in life, Marie turned away from Voodoo and became a devout Catholic (though some say she was a devout Catholic her entire life). Marie then dedicated her life to the Church and to charitable works. Marie Laveau died in 1881 at age 79 in her sleep at her home on St. Ann Street, where she had lived for more than half a century. Her funeral was held at a Catholic church without any sign of Voodoo—although, I don't really believe that. I believe she always practiced Voodoo, especially since it is so entwined with Catholicism. But that's just my belief.

Marie Laveau was a Voodoo priestess, a hair dresser, a wife, a mother, a free person of color, and most importantly the epitome of a strong dignified woman. She still walks the streets of New Orleans, and she is always available to assist and guide those in need.

Author Bio

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