

# Solitude

(c. 1772–1802),

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commonly referred to in the history of the island of Guadeloupe as *la mulâtresse Solitude*, or “Solitude the Mulatto Woman,” has become one of the legendary figures in the antislavery liberation struggles of blacks in the Caribbean in the early nineteenth century. Solitude was a member of a group of women who supported the resistance movement under Louis Delgrès in an armed conflict to reclaim their freedom. Her legend was born from the extreme courage she displayed, which has led her to be caricatured by whites as mad. The Guadeloupean Solitude should not to be confused with Solitude of Martinique, a 61-year-old field slave owned by Pierre Lagodièrre of Lamentin, Martinique, who in 1847 paid five hundred francs for her freedom.

Solitude’s existence as a real-life person has been authenticated in authoritative historical accounts of the events that transpired in the period immediately following the French Revolution’s Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen in 1789, the subsequent proclamation of the abolition of slavery by the revolutionary Convention in 1794, and Napoleon Bonaparte’s later reestablishment of slavery in the French colonies in 1802. While reliable details of her early life are unavailable, it has been speculated that she was born around 1772.

At the time of Solitude’s birth, Guadeloupe was a French colony, and enslaved Africans, including Solitude’s mother, provided the labor force for the Guadeloupean economy. For the first eight years of her life, the girl who was to be known as Solitude is thought to have lived with her mother, who had fled from the plantation, refusing to work as a slave. It is believed that it was during her adolescence, while living as a Maroon (the designation given to Africans who refused to work on plantations and formed communities of resistance to slavery), that she took the name of “Solitude.” In her later life and in accounts of the battles for freedom that took place in Guadeloupe in the opening years of the nineteenth century, the young woman known as Solitude was called *la mulâtresse Solitude* because of her light skin color, and it has further been speculated that she was the product of the rape of her African mother by a white sailor on a ship sailing to Guadeloupe.

The news of the 1794 proclamation of the abolition of slavery in the French empire soon reached the colonies, and blacks left the plantations in droves. From the perspective of the planters and many continental French, Guadeloupe was now in a state of chaos, and a restoration of “order” was imperative. In the early months of 1802, Napoleon Bonaparte sent a large military expedition of fourteen ships and some 4,000 men, under the command of General Antoine Richepance (also spelled Richepanse), to restore order in the colony and reimpose slavery. The law reinstating slavery in Guadeloupe was formally signed by Bonaparte on 20 May 1802. A number of officers of color in the French Republican Army, including Louis Delgrès and Joseph Ignace, rejected the official French

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decision and led a vigorous resistance in Guadeloupe against the reimposition of slavery. According to the account given by the historian Auguste Lacour, Richepance used Magloire Pélage, an officer of color in the French Republican Army, to attempt to secure the compliance of black troops in Guadeloupe. As a result, Richepance was able to disarm half of the black troops and imprison them in the holds of his ships.

Solitude played an active role in the armed resistance movement, bearing arms as she participated in the battle of 8 May 1802. When Delgrès received news of the French control of Grande-Terre and the humiliations suffered by the black regiments in Pointe-à-Pitre, he met with his fellow officers of color, including Ignace, and issued a proclamation to the black resistance troops against Richepance and in defense of the liberation of blacks: “My friends, they are threatening our liberty. Let us defend it bravely and let us choose death to slavery. Resistance to oppression is a natural right.” Although Delgrès was able to inspire a fierce determination to resist among the black population, a double-pronged attack by the French forces—under Richepance on one position, and under General Jacques Nicolas Gobert and Magloire Pélage on the other—proved too much for the resistance forces, which numbered only in the hundreds.

It was the battle in May 1802, characterized as one of the most terrible in Guadeloupean history, that saw the emergence of women on the battlefield, both participating in the actual fighting and inspiring the men to greater feats of resistance and valor. The historian Oruna Lara relates that in the battle of 12 May 1802, women came down into the front lines to encourage the fighters, mingling with the gunners, preparing their arms, comforting the wounded, and transporting the dead—all under the hail of bullets. They functioned as liaisons among the troops, carrying orders, and showing no fear of the gunfire. Lara describes these women as “sublime,” for they incited the men to greater fervor, intensified their courage, showed as much bravery as the men, and faced death with them.

One of these heroic women was the *mulâtresse Solitude*, who, though pregnant, participated in all the battles in the Dolé post. According to Lacour, Solitude had come from Pointe-à-Pitre to Basse-Terre and was at this time in the camp led by Palerme, one of the resistance leaders supporting Delgrès. She was, Lacour observes, prone to expressing her hatred and rage, particularly to the prisoners taken by the resistance fighters. She kept rabbits and once, as Lacour relates, when one of them escaped, she armed herself with a skewer, ran and caught it, speared it, held it up, and using the most insulting language told the prisoners: “Look, this is how I’m going to treat you when the time comes.” Solitude never used her pregnancy as an excuse to separate herself from the rebels. Instead, she stayed close to them, spurring them on to even greater feats of courageous resistance.

On 22 May 1802, Pélage led a furious attack against his fellow black resistance troops in Fort Saint-Charles. The freedom fighters were forced to retreat in two groups, with Delgrès taking up a position in Matouba, and Ignace taking one up in Dolé. Ignace’s group was finally overwhelmed in an encounter in Baimbridge that left 675 people dead and 250 as prisoners, almost all of whom were shot dead over the next couple of days. On 28 May 1802, Louis Delgrès blew up himself and his remaining small band of freedom fighters at Matouba, rather than surrender and be subjected to enslavement. Solitude was apparently a witness to the heroic martyrdom of Delgrès and Ignace. For this reason, Lacour has named *la négresse Solitude* (interestingly, “Solitude the Negress,” and not “the Mulatto Woman”) alongside Delgrès, Ignace, and several others as “heroes and martyrs of liberty.”

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Solitude was wounded in the conflict, but not fatally. She survived but was finally captured along with a band of insurgents. She was imprisoned and condemned to death. However, because of her pregnancy, her execution was delayed for six months until she gave birth, since the ironic logic of the slave society required that the unborn child should be saved as a possible new member of the enslaved class. On 29 November 1802, the day after she delivered her child, Solitude was hanged. She was 30 years old.

Solitude's role in Guadeloupean history and legend has been most famously represented in the fictional account by André Schwartz-Bart in his novel *La Mulâtresse Solitude*. Her contribution to the liberation struggle in Guadeloupe was commemorated in 1999 by the erection of a statue by Jacky Poulrier on the Boulevard des Héros in Abymes, Guadeloupe, and in 2007 by another statue in Bagneux (Hauts-de-Seine), the twin of the town of Grand-Bourg on the island of Marie-Galante.

[ See also Delgrès, Louis and Ignace, Joseph .]

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### See also

Delgrès, Louis <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-73770>>

Ignace, Joseph <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-74186>>