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# Couvent, Marie Bernard

(c. 1757–29 June 1837),

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.35548>

**Published in print:** 15 March 2013

**Published online:** 31 May 2013

A version of this article originally appeared in *African American National Biography*.

philanthropist and founding benefactor of the oldest continuously operating black Catholic school in the United States, was born Justine Fervin in Guinea, West Africa. In early childhood she was brought to San Domingue and enslaved. Little is known about her youth or at what stage in her life she began calling herself Marie. What is known is that she received no formal education and was brought to New Orleans as a slave before securing her freedom. By the 1820s she was living as a free woman in the Faubourg Marigny district of the city, the wife of a carpenter, a free black man named Gabriel Bernard Couvent.

A devout Catholic, Couvent and her husband regularly attended Mass at St. Louis Cathedral. There she established a relationship with Constantine Manehault, a priest who was to become her lifelong friend and religious director.

With no children to support, the Couvents lived comfortably and amassed substantial savings. They owned several properties around the city as well as a small number of slaves. Yet despite their prosperity—and though protected by Louisiana's comparatively progressive legal and economic codes—they could not overcome their social status as free people of color, which in the eyes of many of their white neighbors rendered them little better than slaves.

When Gabriel died on 22 May 1829 at the age of seventy-one, Marie seized the opportunity to use his wealth to improve the situation of free blacks in Louisiana. Gabriel had left the entirety of his considerable estate to Marie who, on the advice of Father Manehault, began to entertain thoughts of establishing a Catholic school for poor free-born orphans of color. In 1832 she dictated her will to reflect this ambition, leaving the majority of her real estate holdings to serve as school buildings: “I bequeath and order that my land at the corner of Grand Hommes (Dauphine) and Union (Touro) Streets be dedicated and used in perpetuity for the establishment of a free school for orphans of color of the Faubourg Marigny. This said school is to be operated under the direction of Reverend Father Manehault ... or under the supervision of his successors in office” (Hine, 288).

Establishing a school for indigent people of color was a pioneering feat in antebellum Louisiana. The state's public schools did not admit black students, and before Reconstruction only a handful were educated in private schools or by private tutors. Even the wealthiest black families had to send their children to New England or Europe in search of a formal education.

What little is known of her intentions suggests that Couvent saw the school as a tool to uplift people of color. Certainly her own lack of formal education—she remained illiterate throughout her life—marks a powerful contrast to the skills and knowledge her school was founded to impart.

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Couvent died in New Orleans at the age of eighty. Henry Fletcher, a free man of color, was named executor of her will. However, over the next few years he appeared uninterested in fulfilling those duties. Nothing was done to further Couvent's wish to establish the school. After more than a decade of delays Father Manehault decided the project could wait no longer and finally solicited the help of François Lacroix, a prominent citizen of New Orleans, to put pressure on Fletcher and restore momentum to plans for the school. Lacroix assembled notable free men of color such as Emilien Brule, Adolphe Duhart, Nelson Fouche, and Barthelemy Rey, who in 1848 formed a lobbying group known as the Society for the Instruction of Indigent Orphans. The Society soon succeeded in bringing Fletcher to court to explain the delays. Manehault, Lacroix, and the members of the Society insisted that Fletcher account for the several small houses Couvent had specified in her will as the site for the school and eventually succeeded in forcing the executor to turn over these properties to them. With these buildings finally in their possession, things finally began to move quickly. Within months, the *École des Orphelins de Couleur* was opened at the corner of Union and Grand Hommes streets, in New Orleans's Third District.

While most accounts blame Fletcher for the prolonged stagnation of Couvent's plan, others have noted the prejudice of the city administration, a prejudice Fletcher may have been intimidated by. Even the oversight of Father Manehault, a respected leader in the Catholic church, was not enough to overcome local officials' reservations about establishing a school for free people of color within the city's limits. Indeed in the eleven years between Couvent's death and the opening of her school in 1848, the city had continued to restrict access to education for people of color even as it expanded educational opportunities for its white residents. In 1841 New Orleans had established its free public school system, yet systematically excluded people of color from it.

The Couvent School's opening, then, marked the end of a long period of conflict and opposition and the school's first governors had to fight hard to maintain it in its first years. As Couvent's will had dictated, the orphanage was placed under the supervision of Father Manehault, who quickly set about soliciting bequests to enlarge the original financial endowment. Uniquely, its initial endowment grew largely from the donation of free black benefactors such as Arisitide Mary who left five thousand dollars to the school in his will. It was only as its reputation grew that the school began to receive grudging financial support from the city and state, including an 1854 state appropriation of two thousand dollars.

In step with the school's growing financial security the number of students attending Couvent grew steadily throughout the antebellum period. It expanded its student population, accepting orphans and non-orphans alike and extended its catchment area beyond the Third District. While wealthier families were encouraged to make a donation, the school was free of charge for most of its students. Yet despite rarely charging tuition, the school quickly gained a reputation for the quality of its instruction. Classes were taught in both French and English, and additional courses were offered in Spanish language and literature. Its first teacher was Félicie Cailloux, who was soon joined by four or five other full-time instructors, all persons of color drawn from prominent families. In 1852 Armand Lanusse, the first African American to compile an anthology of poetry, became its principal. In time its alumni could boast a number of distinguished civic leaders such as Ernest N. Morial, the first African American mayor of New Orleans.

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The outcome of the Civil War eroded some of the school's purpose. During Reconstruction the New Orleans school system began to accept black students and so attendance at the Couvent School began to decline and then dwindle. By 1884 things had fallen so far that the school was in serious danger of closing, only saved from ruin through the efforts of a group of civic leaders who stabilized its finances and helped it to adapt to the new postwar realities.

The Couvent School operated as the Holy Redeemer School and was the oldest continuing black Catholic school in the country until it at last closed in 1994. Its founder, Marie Bernard Couvent, lies buried in the nearby St. Louis Cemetery.

## Further Reading

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Hine, Darlene Clark, ed. *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia* (1993).

Logan, Rayford W., and Michael R. Winston, eds. *Dictionary of American Negro Biography* (1982).

### See also

Lanusse, Armand <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-37326>>

Morial, Ernest Nathan "Dutch" <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-37554>>