
Mongoula, Nicolas

(1720–2 May 1798),

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master mason, militia captain, and property owner in colonial Mobile, Alabama, was a prominent free black man whose last name meant “my friend” in Mobilian Jargon, a major Native American pidgin used throughout the region during his lifetime. His first name used the French spelling “Nicolas.”

Born in roughly 1720 according to his burial record, the exact place and date of Mongoula's birth are unknown. Nor is much certain about his parentage. He was possibly one of two children named “Nicolas” born the same year to enslaved black mothers in Mobile, which is now a port city of Alabama but which in the colonial era changed hands among France, Great Britain, and Spain. Just as little is known of Nicolas Mongoula's early life; how he came to be identified—and to identify himself—with Mobilian Jargon remains unresolved.

This pidgin, also known as the Mobilian Trade Language, was used primarily by diverse Indian groups to communicate with one another, but Africans and Europeans also learned to use the language to communicate with the Native Americans in and around Mobile. In French Louisiana, Indian slavery and African slavery overlapped, especially in Mobile during the 1720s. Almost half of colonial Mobile's households owned slaves in this decade, and slave owners usually employed a combination of both Indian and African slaves. In daily contact, owing to shared labor and household arrangements, Africans and Indians in Mobile formed sexual unions, intermarried, and often served as godparents for one another's children. Indian slavery was officially outlawed in the region following Mobile's incorporation into Spanish West Florida in 1780, but the social patterns formed during the early eighteenth century continued throughout the colonial period. Nicolas Mongoula's familiarity with Mobilian Jargon could be explained by his having spent his childhood or early adulthood in close proximity to enslaved Native Americans. We are left to speculate, however, as to how he received the name “my friend,” and why he continued to use the name throughout his life.

As suggested by his roles as godfather, master mason, and militia captain, Mongoula attained a position of considerable responsibility among people of color in Spanish Mobile. Appearing at three Catholic baptisms in Mobile between 1764 and 1781, Mongoula served as godfather for an enslaved African man, and for two children born locally to enslaved black women. The women who appeared alongside Mongoula as godmothers were two enslaved black women, and one free *mulata*. One reason for Mongoula's popularity as a godfather was his social status as a free, black, property-owning artisan. Described in Spanish pay records as a “master mason,” Mongoula may have built the house that he sold to a man named Hugh Krebs for thirty-six dollars in 1792. Located on Royal Street, the house appears eleven years later on an 1803 map of Mobile. A further indication of Mongoula's prominence, and his role as an authority figure, among people of color in Spanish Mobile was his status as captain of Mobile's *Pardo* militia. Like free black militia officers in Spanish cities all along the

Gulf of Mexico, from Veracruz to Havana to New Orleans, Mongoula was commissioned by the Spanish government to lead a local militia composed of free people of color in the defense of Mobile, should the need arise.

Historical records uncovered thus far reveal few details concerning Mongoula's personal and family life. He married a free black woman named Francisco Mimi, a marriage fully recognized by Mobile's Catholic parish, though the actual date of the marriage is still unknown. The couple had two children, both described as "legitimate," named Santiago and Luisa. Employed as a carpenter in New Orleans in the 1790s, Santiago was also enrolled as a non-commissioned officer in New Orleans' free black militia. Little is known of Luisa except that she was unmarried and was still living in Mobile when her father was on his deathbed in 1798.

On 1 April 1798 Nicolas Mongoula dictated his last will and testament in Mobile. At seventy-eight years old, he had seen his city claimed by three different European empires, passing from French Louisiana, to British West Florida, to Spanish West Florida (Mobile would be claimed by the United States in 1813, only fifteen years after Mongoula's death). His wife, Francisca Mimy (as her name was variously spelled), was to assume control over all their possessions: a plot of land and a cabin in Mobile, ten or twelve head of cattle, and a concession of land by St. Stephens creek, where he and his family had grown rice, corn, and beans. Mongoula died one month later, receiving a Catholic burial with full rites in Mobile's parish church on 2 May 1798.

Known records mentioning Nicolas Mongoula offer no direct evidence that he interacted with Native Americans, but his name alone—"our friend"—remains an important clue. Furthermore, people described as "black" or "mulato" in colonial-era Spanish and French documents often had a Native American parent, or may have been familiar with indigenous practices in other ways. It remains a possibility that Mongoula might have had an Indian parent himself. Though we ultimately know little about his life, Mongoula nonetheless provides insight into relations between Africans, Indians, and people of color in the colonial Gulf South, particularly during the French period. His life also bears testimony that during the late eighteenth century, Mobile was much like other Spanish American societies, in which free men and women of African descent played significant and visible roles in their city's economy and defense.

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