

An Examination of Present-Day Speakeasy “Le Couvent” for its ties to Grey Nuns’s Marguerite d’Youville and the Hôpital Général of Montreal’s History of Slave Ownership

Lucia Bell-Epstein

Situated between Rue McGill, Rue Marguerite d’Youville, Rue des Soeurs Grises, and Rue de la Commune, “Le Couvent” currently exists as a speakeasy attached to Bistro-Brasserie Les Soeurs Grises in the heart of the Old Port of Montreal, Quebec (figs. 1, 2, 3). “Le Couvent” is French for “the Convent” and is both named after and situated directly upon land belonging to the former site of the Grey Nuns Congregation also known as, “The Sisters of Charity of the Hôpital Général of Montreal.”¹ (figs. 4-7). In 1737 Marie-Marguerite d’Youville, the widow of François Youville, founded this “charitable lay association” in secret to help the sick and poor of Montreal.² At the time, new religious communities could not be founded in New France and those that already existed had come directly from France and were dependent on the King for financial support.³ Paradoxically, Marie-Marguerite founded Grey Nuns to serve God’s purpose through charitable acts of helping the disenfranchised, but used enslaved labour to do so.

Marie-Marguerite d’Youville descended from a prominent family, her father being François-Christophe Dufrost de La Gemaerais, who left his noble family in France to settle in Canada in 1689.⁴ Marie-Marguerite’s status was emphasized by those present at the signing of her marriage contract to François: “its signatures show that nearly all those eminent in the colony were present, among them Governor Philippe de Rigaud de Vaudreuil, Claude de Ramezay, governor of Montreal, and Charles Le Moyne de Longueuil, first Baron de Longueuil and the governor of Trois-Rivières.”⁵ Furthermore, not only did Marie-Marguerite have financial means, but she also held a high social standing among the powerful, upper-class white men of New France.

In Marcel Trudel’s ground-breaking book, Canada’s Forgotten Slaves: Two Hundred Years of Bondage originally published in French in 1990, he exposed Marie-Marguerite and the Grey Nuns for having owned enslaved people.⁶ Trudel described how the d’Youville family were erroneously stated in historical records as simply a “trading family,” but that they were, in fact, prominent slave owners.⁷ Cambridge historian William Foster argues that the hospital’s physical foundation was built by, “an impressive variety of unfree laborers: female and male convicts, Indian slaves, self-indentured Canadians, and at least 27 British soldiers taken prisoner in the Seven Years’ War.”⁸ Marie-Marguerite acquired an enslaved person from her husband François, revealed in a notary’s 1731 inventory that detailed the estate of her deceased husband, “noting a Panis slave who became his widow’s property.”⁹ In addition, Marie-Marguerite owned other enslaved people herself: a Sioux woman baptized in 1739 and buried in 1742; in Lachine in 1766, another Panis woman...was baptized without the usual rites,” as well as one or two others, in addition to three that were owned by the Hôpital Général.¹⁰ (fig. 8)

Trudel’s documentation clearly indicates that the Grey Nuns owned more enslaved people than other religious institutions at the time in Quebec. (fig. 8) In fact, according to Trudel, the “Hôpital Général de Montreal had more slaves than any other women’s religious community.”¹¹ Trudel also claimed that the number of enslaved people that he tallied was not absolute and that more enslaved labour was probably used but not documented.¹² Marie-Marguerite d’Youville practiced slavery as a prominent member of the society of New France and as a female founder of a central Canadian religious congregation. She aligned herself alongside figures like the fur trader and West Indian merchant James McGill who also partook in the practice of eighteenth-century slavery in Montreal, Quebec.¹³ When James McGill died in

1813, his will included the Sisters of Charity of the Hospital General (Grey Nuns) as a beneficiary.¹⁴ While d'Youville is described to have owned Indigenous enslaved people, her financial links to James McGill also tie her and the hospital to the history of enslaved black people in Montreal who arrived through the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

In a phone interview with the archives of Grey Nuns, I asked if the congregation and hospital recognize the history of enslaved labour and if in their archives they have any evidence of Marie-Marguerite's personal ownership of enslaved people or that of the hospital. The staff replied that the Grey Nuns did not buy or use any slaves at the hospital and instead described the congregation as a charitable, historical landmark.¹⁵ In an email response hours later after I requested archival illustrations, Grey Nuns also followed up on my question regarding their ties to slavery.¹⁶ They then acknowledged that the hospital and d'Youville both "owned over the years several Panis," but that, "[s]ooner or later [d'Youville] characteristically liberated them all, although it is not known if any made their way back to their respective nations."¹⁷ Also, they mentioned that they are in possession of an "Ancien Journal" in which there is an allusion to a donation from Peter McGill to the Grey Nuns in 1814.¹⁸ Formerly Peter McCutcheon, Peter McGill was a prominent Montreal merchant, bank and company director for the Bank of Montreal, a justice of the peace, and politician.¹⁹ The Grey Nuns had previously sold Peter McGill some land, a possible reason for his donation when he died in 1860.²⁰ It is unclear whether James McGill and Peter McGill had any biological familial ties, which are not stated on either of their Canadian biographies, suggesting they probably coincidentally shared the same last name. Ultimately, Grey Nuns and the Hôpital Général of Montreal's history have direct ties to various powerful Montreal men, which includes the McGill lineage.

In *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities* (2013), Craig Steven Wilder exposed the rhetoric of white, European superiority in Christianity and other devout religious groups in America during the eighteenth century.²¹ The notion of "God's good providence" was used to justify the vanishing of non-white people not because of God's will, but as a calculated, targeted cleansing by the white, powerful men that came to found major educational institutions such as McGill, Yale, and Harvard Universities, and many more.²² Christianity and religion (Christianization) was not only used as a tactic by slave owners to justify the practice of slavery itself, but religious practices were forcibly imposed upon enslaved people. Christianization also caused creolization, which occurred under duress and left enslaved persons no choice but to practice Christianity, whether or not they believed in a Christian God, but as a mode of survival. An excellent example is Mary Prince, who was baptized and taught by Moravian women in Antigua how to read, which helped her attain literacy and provided her with a strong belief in God. But it is unknown if this was perhaps Mary's strategy for survival.²³

Marie-Marguerite d'Youville's use of enslaved labour for her personal benefit, the documentation of enslaved labour in the Hospital General, as well as the financial links to James McGill and Peter McGill forever tie her, the hospital, and the congregation to the history of slavery in Montreal. This site, now a speakeasy, also bears this history both on the land on which it is situated and in the bar's naming practice fashioned after the Grey Nuns. It is absolutely crucial to expose the history of slavery in Canada specifically Montreal, and to state how this present-day site has clear ties to the exploitation of enslaved labour, which can easily be dismissed through religious rhetoric and the notion of "God's good Will".

¹ Mylène Laurendeau, Directrice, Service des archives et des collections, Les Sœurs de la Charité de Montréal "Sœurs Grises", Maison de Mère d'Youville, telephone conversation and email correspondence, 5 March 2020;

“Please note that the Brasserie des Soeurs grises has nothing to do with the Grey Nuns. In fact, they use the name without our consent. They mentioned in a few places that they are occupying a former monastery which is completely false. The land, however, has belonged to the Grey Nuns in the past.”

² Anne-marie Pedersen, et al, “Grey Nuns,” The Canadian Encyclopedia (date of last access 31 March 2020)

<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/grey-nuns>. After her husband François passed away, the widowed Marie-Marguerite d’Youville turned to her belief in God’s presence and undertook charitable work as a sister of the church.

³ “Our History, 1737-2010,” The Grey Nuns of Montreal (date of last access 31 March 2020) <https://sgm.qc.ca/en/>.

⁴ Claudette Lacelle, “Dufrost De Lajemmerais, Marie-Marguerite,” Dictionary of Canadian Biography (date of last access 31 March 2020) http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/dufrost_de_lajemmerais_marie_marguerite_4E.html.

⁵ Lacelle, “Dufrost De Lajemmerais, Marie-Marguerite” (date of last access 31 March 2020).

⁶ Marcel Trudel, Canada’s Forgotten Slaves: Two Hundred Years of Bondage (Montreal: Vehicule Press, 2013), p. 107.

⁷ Trudel, Canada’s Forgotten Slaves, p. 107.

⁸ Foster, William Henry, The Captors’ Narrative: Catholic Women and Their Puritan Men on the Early American Frontier (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 91.

⁹ Trudel, Canada’s Forgotten Slaves, p. 114.

¹⁰ Trudel, Canada’s Forgotten Slaves, pp. 114-15.

¹¹ Trudel, Canada’s Forgotten Slaves, p. 114. “Mother d’Youville, superior of this community, accepted gifts of slaves from Widow Simblin and Monsieur Grasset de Saint-Sauveur.”

¹² Trudel, Canada’s Forgotten Slaves, p. 114.

¹³ Trudel, Canada’s Forgotten Slaves, p. 115.

¹⁴ J. I. Cooper, “McGill, James,” Dictionary of Canadian Biography (date of last access 31 March 2020) http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/mcgill_james_5E.html.

¹⁵ Laurendeau, telephone conversation and email correspondence, 5 March 2020.

¹⁶ Laurendeau, telephone conversation and email correspondence, 5 March 2020.

¹⁷ Laurendeau, telephone conversation and email correspondence, 5 March 2020.

¹⁸ Laurendeau, telephone conversation and email correspondence, 5 March 2020.

¹⁹ Robert Sweeny, “Peter McGill,” Dictionary of Canadian Biography (date of last access 26 April 2020) http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/mcgill_peter_8E.html.

²⁰ Laurendeau, telephone conversation and email correspondence, 5 March 2020.

²¹ Craig Steven Wilder, “Part II: Race and the Rise of the American College,” Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America’s Universities (New York City: Bloomsbury Press, 2013), p. 179.

²² Craig Steven Wilder, “Part II,” p. 179.

²³ Mary Prince, The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), pp. 93, 84; Mary Princes described her faith: “I still live in the hope that God will find a way to give me my liberty, and give me back to my husband.” It is important to note that not all churches welcomed enslaved blacks. Mary Prince understood that she and her husband Daniel James could not be married in the English Church: “English marriage is not allowed to slaves; and no free man can marry a slave woman.” Instead, Mary Prince and Daniel James were married in 1826 at the Moravian Chapel in Spring Gardens in Antigua.

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Plate List

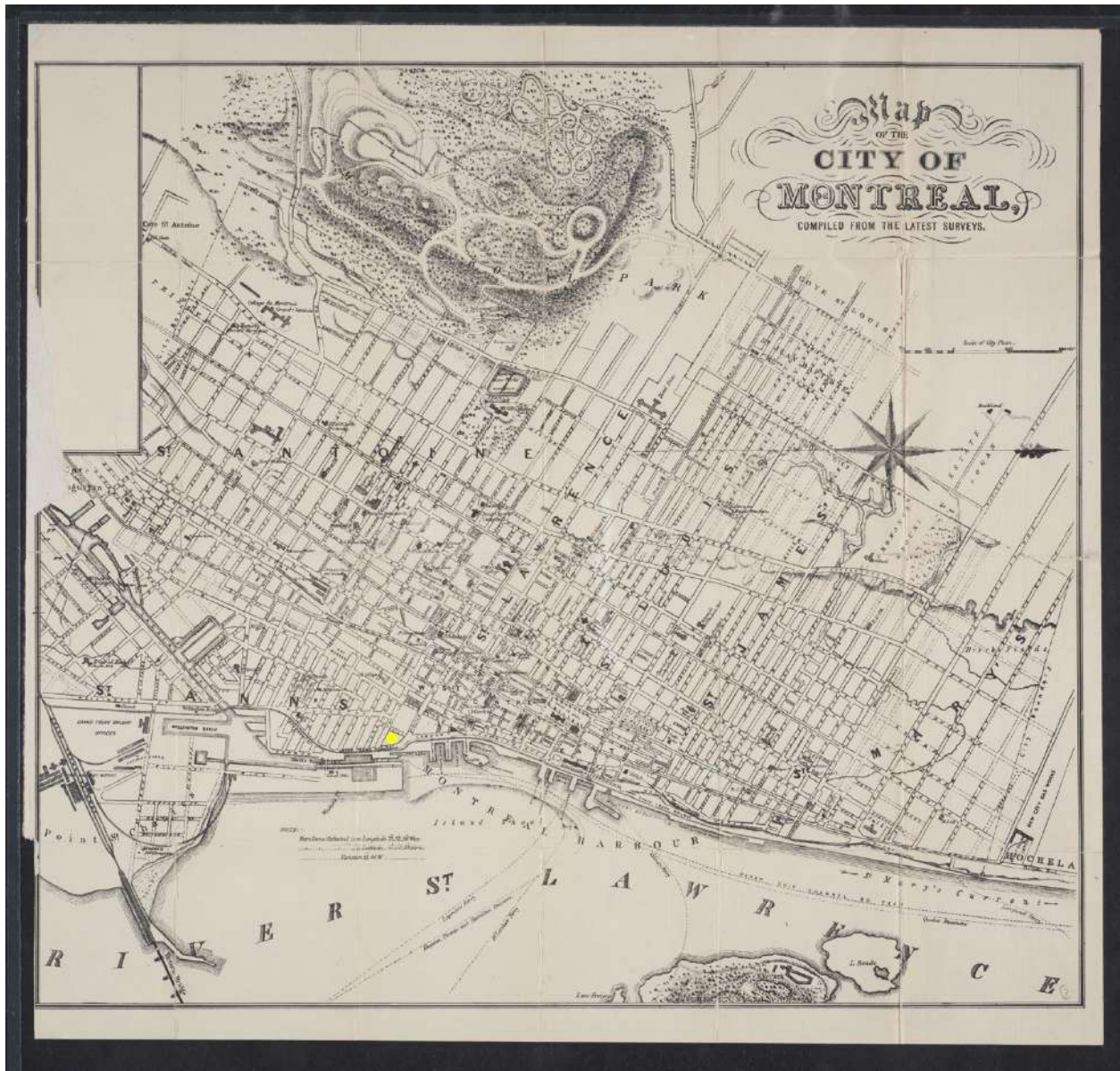


Fig. 1: Samuel Edward Dawson, “Map of the city of Montreal” (1888), 49 x 59 cm, Hand-book for the city of Montreal, McGill University Library, Montreal, Quebec.

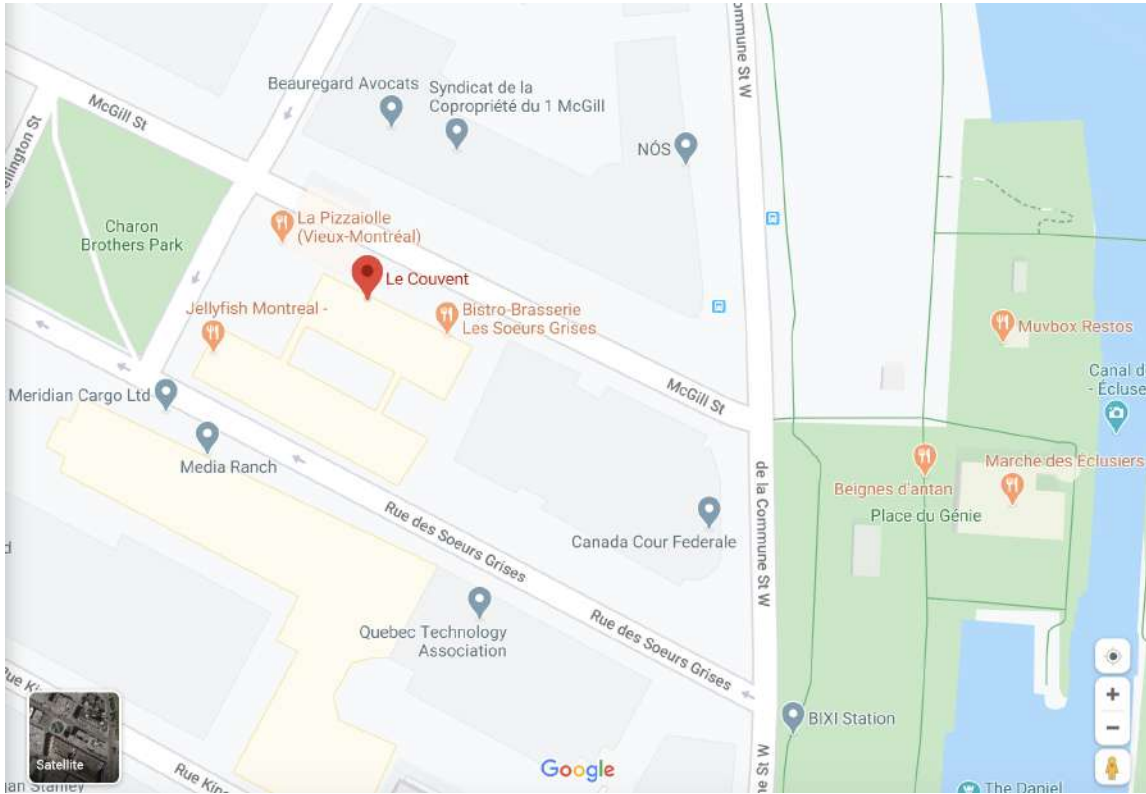


Fig. 2: “Le Couvent,” Google Maps, 31 March 2020, Screenshot, Montreal, Canada.

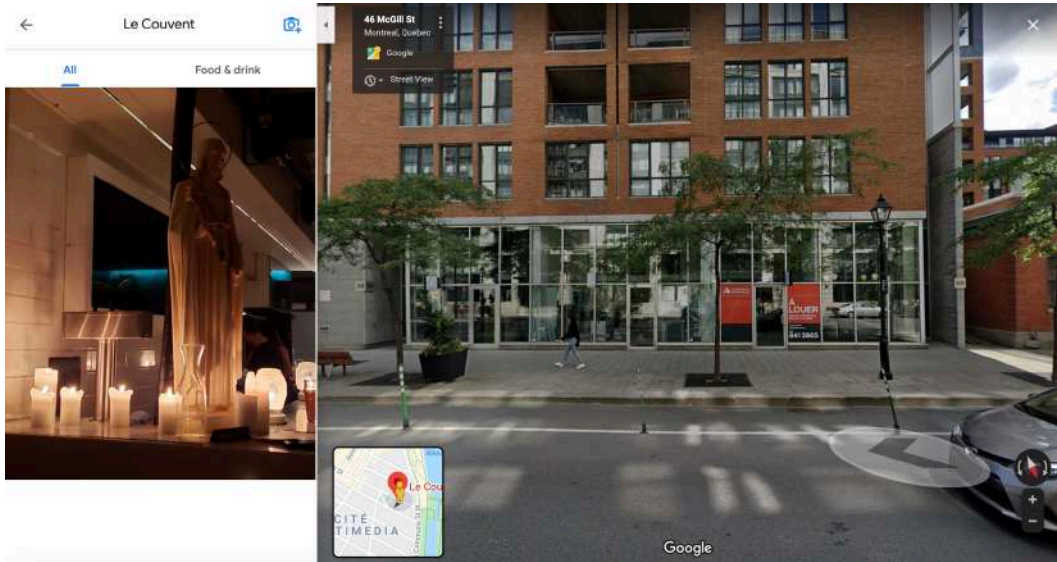


Fig. 3: “Le Couvent,” Google Maps, 31 March 2020, Screenshot, Montreal, Canada.



Fig. 4: Figure 4: Les Soeurs Grises, (1747), Illustration, Service des archives et des collections, Les Sœurs de la Charité de Montréal “Sœurs Grises”, Montréal, Canada.

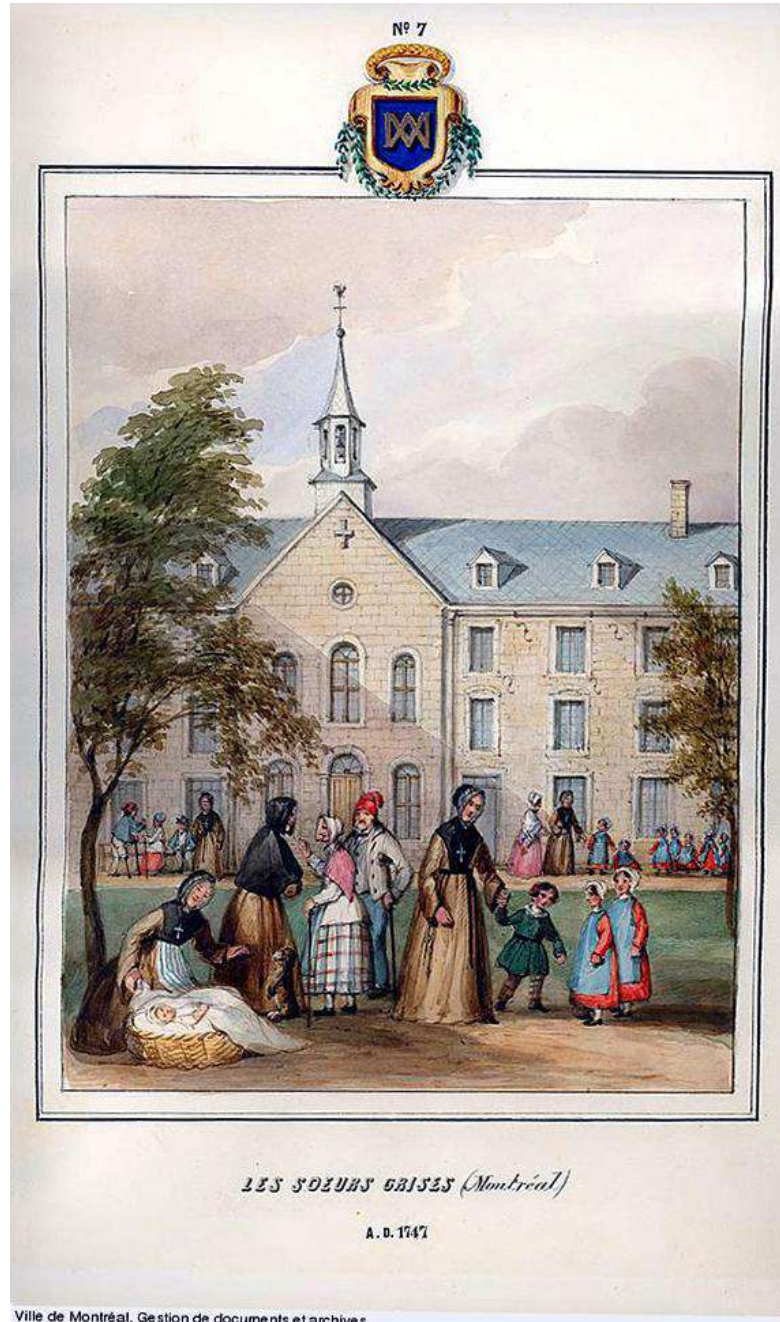


Fig. 5: Les Soeurs Grises, (1747), Illustration, Service des archives et des collections, Les Sœurs de la Charité de Montréal “Sœurs Grises”, Montréal, Canada.



Fig. 6: William Notman, Couvent des Soeurs Grises, rue d'Youville (1867), Albumen print, 12 x 17 cm, McCord Museum, Montreal, Canada. <http://collections.musee-mccord.qc.ca/scripts/large.php?Lang=2&accessnumber=I-26332.1&idImage=141339>.



Fig. 7: William Notman, Jardin potager, couvent des Soeurs Grises, rue d'Youville (1867), Albumen print, 12 x 17 cm, McCord Museum, Montreal, Canada. <http://collections.musee-mccord.qc.ca/scripts/large.php?Lang=2&accessnumber=I-26334.1&idImage=141341>.

	Slaves
Hôpital-Général de Québec	1
Hôtel-Dieu de Québec	1
Hôtel-Dieu de Montréal	4
Congrégation de Notre-Dame	2
Hôpital-Général de Montréal	3
Mother d'Youville	3 or 4

Fig. 8: Marcel Trudel, “slave ownership by bishops, priests, nuns and religious communities,” Canada’s Forgotten Slaves: Two Hundred Years of Bondage (Montreal: Vehicule Press, 2013), p.114.