

Eighteenth-Century Black Executioners in Place Royale and Place Vauquelin

Lucy Brown

Introduction

The first public execution in Montreal took place in 1669 when three soldiers from the Carignan Regiment murdered a Seneca chief and dumped his body in Lake St. Louis.¹ When the Montreal authorities were made aware of their crime, the soldiers were executed in Place Royale (figs. 2 & 3),² which would eventually become a common site for executions in the city.³ Within the study of punishments and executions, the figure of the “hangman” or “executioner” has often remained shrouded in mystery and controversy, especially because it has always been considered a position of ill-repute. This cloak of mystery should lead us to question who these figures were and why they chose to perform such violent acts?

Unfortunately, while enslaved and free black people were entirely absent from the judicial and political systems of Montreal (fig. 1) and the province of Quebec during the eighteenth century, the role of “common hangman” was available to black people during both French and British rule. Already considered outcasts of society, enslaved and free black people were thought to be ideally suited for the job by Quebec authorities. The enslaved men and women picked to fill the role of “executioner” were required to punish and execute others.⁴ Therefore, not only were enslaved people policed, surveilled and disciplined by colonial powers in Montreal and Quebec, they were also required to enact punishments on one another. Colonial authorities were more than satisfied to offer the job of executioner and “master of torture” to enslaved people in the region, which ensured that all white people of Montreal were protected from the shameful duties of murderer and torturer.⁵

French Rule: The First Black Executioner

The first black enslaved executioner was a man named Malgein, baptized as Mathieu Léveillé.⁶ In 1728, the French Minister of Marine, Jean Frédéric Phélypeaux, Comte de Maurepas, advised Montreal Officials to find a “Negro Man from the Islands” because it was too difficult to find a white man willing to take up the position within the colony. However, it was not until 1731 that Intendent Hocquart finally took Maurepas’s advice and began the process of finding a suitable candidate.⁷ Mathieu, an enslaved man from Martinique, was sold and eventually landed in New France in 1733 as a replacement for Gilles Le Noir, a white French executioner who was considered an incompetent drunk.⁸ Hocquart would later reinsert himself into Mathieu’s intimate as well as sexual life by buying and shipping an enslaved woman named Denise to Montreal, whom he intended to be Mathieu’s wife.⁹ However, Mathieu fell ill early on in Montreal and passed away in 1743 before being married.¹⁰ He would be remembered as the executioner given the task of torturing Marie Joseph Angélique, in order to extract a confession from the enslaved woman charged with burning the majority of Old Montreal in 1734.¹¹ Upon her confession to the crime of arson, he executed her by hanging and threw her body into a fire.¹² Following Mathieu’s death, French authorities in Montreal were dissuaded from finding another enslaved executioner from a tropical location for the rest of their rule in New France, because they believed that he had been weakened and killed by the harsh Canadian climate.¹³

English Rule

The transition of power in Montreal from the French (New France) to the British (Quebec) took place in 1760. Edward Gray, the sheriff of Montreal under British rule, was given

the task of his first execution in 1767.¹⁴ Newly appointed and only 25 years old, Gray was eager to find an executioner for the criminal Robber LaPoint, accused of robbery, and scheduled to be hanged on the 28th of October.¹⁵ Concerned that a delayed execution would damage his reputation as sheriff, Gray frantically wrote to Major Philip Skene, a British half-pay officer in New York, requesting a “Negro Man [he] promised [him] for an Executioner.”¹⁶ Gray stressed in his letter that the transfer of the enslaved man was to be as discreet as possible and for the man’s fate to remain hidden from the couriers who would transport him to Montreal.¹⁷ Gray’s desperation to find a suitable enslaved man who could perform the duty of executioner illustrates his desire to refrain from passing the dishonour of executing another onto a white citizen of Quebec.¹⁸ However, Rathass Coffee, most likely the enslaved man Gray intended to make executioner, never came to Montreal and John May, a white man was eventually given the position.¹⁹

Interestingly, black enslaved men were not the only ones chosen to act as executioners in Montreal. In 1777, the formerly enslaved black woman Ann Wiley and a French-Canadian man were accused of robbery and arson in Detroit, which at the time was part of the judicial district of Montreal.²⁰ Philippe Dejean, the Justice of Peace, tried and sentenced both of them to hang.²¹ Unable to find someone to perform the execution, Colonel Henry Hamilton suggested that they could pardon Ann Wiley if she executed her male accomplice.²² Wiley agreed to the conditions of her pardon and became the first black female executioner of Montreal.²³ It is unclear whether she would have been spared had she been white. However, since her race identified her as inherently “shameful,” her blackness allowed her to become eligible for the role of executioner, even as a woman.²⁴

There are several other mentions of black executioners in Montreal during the eighteenth century, including a man named “Bob” in 1795.²⁵ Meanwhile, Paschal Cerré, a resident of Montreal, also recorded that there had been another black hangman in the city between the years of 1781 to 1787.²⁶ Unfortunately, the specific name of this later black executioner is similarly challenging to determine, although he would have most likely been a convicted felon who was later pardoned to take on the role of “Hangman”.²⁷

The Role of Executioner

Under French rule, there was only one executioner within the province of Quebec, while the British preferred retaining an executioner in every judicial district.²⁸ Under British rule, many punishments were banned, such as burning at the stake and torture for a confession.²⁹ However, hanging, flogging, pillory, and branding were still considered suitable punishments to be carried out by the “common executioner.”³⁰ Typically, in the case of branding, the hangman would burn the prisoner’s hand within the privacy of the Montreal Jail (fig. 5).³¹ Meanwhile, punishments like the pillory would have been carried out in public, allowing an audience to throw rotten eggs or mud at the prisoner.³² The pillory consisted of placing the prisoner’s hands and head through a wooden frame that would spin on a pivot. Sentenced prisoners would be made to “stand in and upon the pillory” for a specific amount of time while the hangman whipped them and spun the wooden structure.³³ Similar punishments like whipping and executions by hanging also took place in public settings, performed for all Montreal citizens.³⁴

Location

The old Montreal Jail (fig 5.), which no longer exists, was built in 1768 and remained standing until 1803 in what is now called Place Vauquelin (fig. 4).³⁵ In some cases, the common

hangman would have held quarters within the jail and would have carried out a number of punishments and methods of torture within the prison walls. However, in the case of public executions and the pillory, they commonly took place in the “Market Place” or Place Royale (figs. 2 & 3). Prisoners would be made to face the river while the Montreal public watched.³⁶ There is also evidence of the pillory being used at the base of Horatio Nelson’s Monument (figs. 6 & 7), while again facing the river and Market Place.³⁷ Interestingly, punishments at the base of the monument, which was built in 1809,³⁸ would have been carried out following the demolition of the old Montreal Jail, yet the monument itself was built next to Place Vauquelin, or the old site of the jail. Place Vauquelin offers an interesting demonstration of how the infrastructure of a site can shift, and yet, still retain its social and political significance.

It is essential to understand that Place Vauquelin and Place Royale both represent complex sites of not only contemporary events, but of historical experiences as well within Montreal and Quebec. In order to prevent the erasure of knowledge through the passage of time, it is fundamental to acknowledge the history and controversy of these public spaces. By tracing the history of black executioners through Place Vauquelin and Place Royale, one can record Montreal’s often ignored ties to slavery as well as confront the domination, regulation, and surveillance of free and enslaved black people within Quebec and more broadly, Canada.

¹ John Kalbfleisch, “From the archive: By 1960, we’d had enough rope,” Montreal Gazette (date of last access 30 March 2020), <https://montrealgazette.com/sponsored/mtl-375th/from-the-archive-by-1960-wed-had-enough-rope/>

² Kalbfleisch, “From the archive: By 1960, we’d had enough rope” (date of last access 30 March 2020)

³ N.M. Hinshelwood, Montreal and Vicinity: Being a History of the Old Town, a Pictorial Record of the Modern City, Its Sports and Pastimes, and an Illustrated Description of Many Charming Summer Resorts Around (Montreal: Desbarats & Company, 1903), p. 67.

⁴ Frank Mackey, “The Colour of Justice,” Done with Slavery: The Black Fact in Montreal, 1760-1840 (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010), p. 238 .

⁵ Charmaine A. Nelson, unpublished manuscript, unpaginated.

⁶ Mackey, “The Colour of Justice,” Done with Slavery, p. 238.

⁷ André Lachance, “Léveillé, Mathieu,” Dictionary of Canadian Biography (date of last access 1 May 2020) http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/leveille_mathieu_3E.html

⁸ Mackey, “The Colour of Justice,” Done with Slavery, p. 239.

⁹ Nelson, unpublished manuscript, unpaginated

¹⁰ Enslaved people were generally not allowed to marry without direct permission from their owners. Mary Prince, an enslaved woman from Bermuda, records in her biography that her owners were enraged to find that she had married the free black man Daniel James. She notes that her punishments greatly increased afterwards and she was brutally beaten for having been married without their knowledge. Mary Prince, The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave: Related by Herself, ed. Moira Ferguson (The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), pp 32-33.

¹¹ Mackey, “The Colour of Justice,” Done with Slavery, p. 238.

¹² Mackey, “The Colour of Justice,” Done with Slavery, p. 238.

¹³ Mackey, “The Colour of Justice,” Done with Slavery, p. 239.

¹⁴ Nelson, unpublished manuscript, unpaginated.

¹⁵ Nelson, unpublished manuscript, unpaginated.

¹⁶ Nelson, unpublished manuscript, unpaginated.

¹⁷ Nelson, unpublished manuscript, unpaginated.

¹⁸ Nelson, unpublished manuscript, unpaginated.

¹⁹ Mackey, “The Colour of Justice,” Done with Slavery, p. 239.

²⁰ Mackey, “The Colour of Justice,” Done with Slavery, p. 240.

²¹ Mackey, “The Colour of Justice,” Done with Slavery, p. 240.

²² Mackey, “The Colour of Justice,” Done with Slavery, p. 240.

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- ²³ Ann Wiley appears to have only been the executioner in this one particular incident. There are no other mentions of her working as a “common hangman.” Mackey, “The Colour of Justice,” Done with Slavery, p. 240.
- ²⁴ Mackey, “The Colour of Justice,” Done with Slavery, p. 400.
- ²⁵ Bob’s exact identity is uncertain because there may have been more than one black executioner living in Quebec at the same time with a similar name. Mackey, “The Colour of Justice,” Done with Slavery, pp. 240-41.
- ²⁶ Mackey, “The Colour of Justice,” Done with Slavery, p. 241.
- ²⁷ Mackey, “The Colour of Justice,” Done with Slavery, pp. 401-02.
- ²⁸ Mackey, “The Colour of Justice,” Done with Slavery, p. 238.
- ²⁹ J. Douglas Borthwick, History of the Montreal Prison for A.D. 1784 to A.D. 1886 (Montreal: A. Feriand Publisher, 1886), pp. 2-3.
- ³⁰ Borthwick, History of the Montreal Prison for A.D. 1784 to A.D. 1886, pp. 2-3.
- ³¹ Borthwick, History of the Montreal Prison for A.D. 1784 to A.D. 1886, p. 3.
- ³² Borthwick, History of the Montreal Prison for A.D. 1784 to A.D. 1886, p. 5.
- ³³ Borthwick, History of the Montreal Prison for A.D. 1784 to A.D. 1886, p. 4.
- ³⁴ Borthwick, History of the Montreal Prison for A.D. 1784 to A.D. 1886, pp. 4-5.
- ³⁵ Avid du Conseil du Patrimoine de Montréal et du Comité Jacque Viger, Conseil du Patrimoine de Montreal (2015), p. 2.
- ³⁶ Borthwick, History of the Montreal Prison for A.D. 1784 to A.D. 1886, pp. 1-5.
- ³⁷ Borthwick, History of the Montreal Prison for A.D. 1784 to A.D. 1886, pp. 1-5.
- ³⁸ “Monument à La Mémoire De L’amiral Horatio Nelson,” Place D’Armes - Répertoire Du Patrimoine Culturel Du Québec, (date of last access 31 January 2019), <http://www.patrimoine-culturel.gouv.qc.ca/rpcq/detail.do?methode=consulter&id=114790&type=bien#.XoKRzdNJHaY>

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Plate List

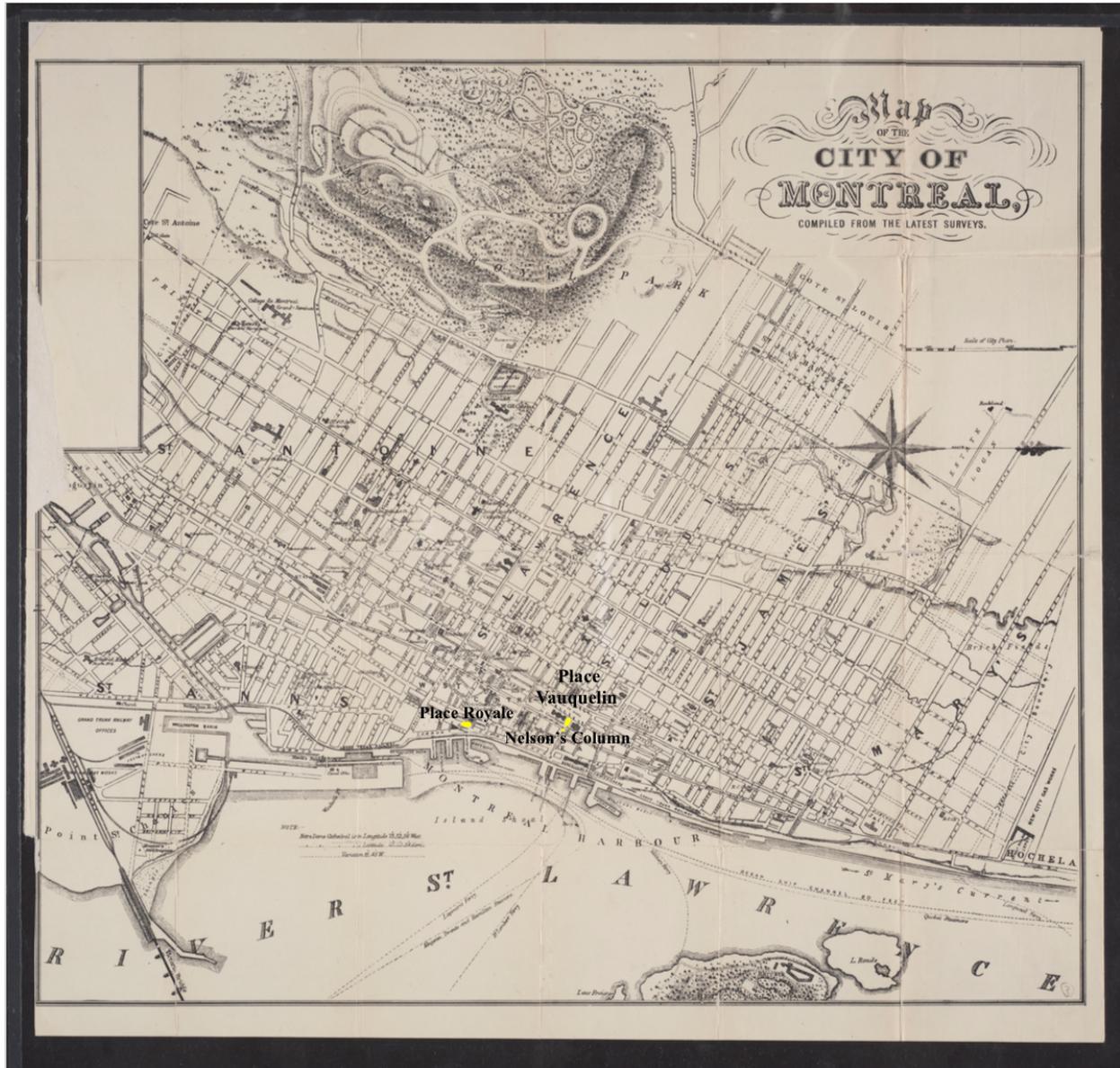


Fig 1. Dawson, Samuel Edward, Map of the City of Montreal (1888), McGill University Library. G3454 M65



Fig 2. “Place Royale” and “Old Custom House,” [Wikipedia Commons](#)



Fig 3. Ostell, John, [The Custom House of Montreal](#) (1836), Bibliothèque centrale de Montréal



Fig 4. “Place Vauquelin,” [Wikipedia Commons](#). It is possible to see Nelson’s Column in the background. The Square and the Monument are divided by Notre-Dame Street.

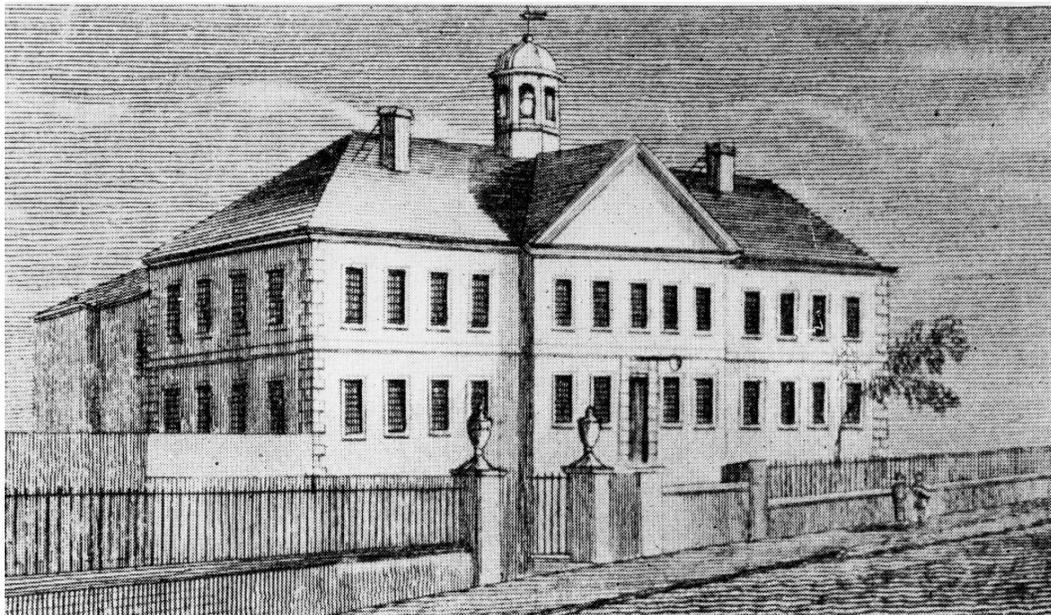


Fig 5. “Old Montreal Jail” (1803), Borthwick, John Douglas, [From Darkness to Light: History of Eight Prisons Which Have Been, or Are Now, in Montreal](#) (1907)



Fig 6. "Nelson's Column," on Notre Dame Street (1809), [Wikipedia Commons](#)



Fig 7. Robert Sproule, [Notre-Dame Street Looking West](#) (1830), McCord Museum, Montreal M302