

An Omitted History of Oppression: Public Slave Auctions at Place Royale, Montréal

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In 1785, two public slave auctions were held at Place Royale in Montreal.¹ (fig. 1) Yet, this information, along with the history of slavery in Canada, is too often omitted from history books, museums or even simple commemorative plaques in public spaces. Although public slave markets were not as common in Canada as they were elsewhere,² there were still some instances when the enslaved were bought and sold as commodities in public spaces rather than in the more habitual private sales. Although public auction spaces are still accessible in Montreal, most people remain unaware of the city's connection to slavery. Now part of the Pointe-à-Callière Museum, the site is used to entertain tourists and families with its problematic annual reenactment of the eighteenth-century marketplace. (fig. 8)

First and foremost, it is important to refer to this urban space accurately considering that the name has changed on multiple occasions. It was referred to as the Place du Marché or "the Market place" throughout the eighteenth century when it was the economic hub of the city.³ The name changed to Place du Vieux-Marché (Old Marketplace) in 1808, when the marketplace was moved east to present-day Place Jacques-Cartier.⁴ Thirty years later, the government of Lower Canada built a Custom House and the space was consequently renamed the Custom Square (Square de la Douane) in 1850.⁵ (fig. 2) Finally, for the 250th anniversary of Montreal in 1892, the square was given its current appellation, Place Royale.⁶ (fig. 3)

Place Royale is located in the square contained between Saint-François-Xavier, Saint-Paul, Saint-Sulpice, and de la Commune streets, right in front of the old Custom House,⁷ which is now part of the Pointe-à-Callière museum. (fig. 4) The space was given by the Sulpicians for the inhabitants to use as a public space.⁸ The judge d'Ailleboust des Musseaux then ruled in favor of the space being used as a marketplace twice a week: every Tuesday and Saturday from dawn until eleven o'clock in the morning were market days.⁹ According to Devin Alfaro, "It was also the location where public punishments were inflicted upon convicts, attesting to the fact that Montrealers of that era viewed it as *the* gathering spot of the community." (*italics mine*)¹⁰

Public auctions or sales were not frequent and were usually smaller in Canada than in the American South or the West Indies.¹¹ (fig. 5) Nonetheless, they were still traumatizing events for the enslaved who were routinely separated from their families. Martha King, enslaved in Virginia and Alabama remembers being sold at five years old. As King recalled, "A white man caried me off just like I was an animal or varmint or something."¹² (sic) Similarly, Mary Prince born in Bermuda and enslaved in various Caribbean islands, recalled her mother's words, evocative of a funeral when she was dressing her children to be sold at the market: "See, I am *shrouding* my poor children; what a task for a mother!"¹³ As Robin W. Winks has asserted, the chattel status of the enslaved was secured through the process of sale,¹⁴ when they were sold "side by side with livestock, since no public market was set apart expressly for their sale" in Montreal.¹⁵ The process of sales whether private or public, were further dehumanizing due to the physical inspections to which the enslaved were subjected.¹⁶

In his book L'esclavage au Canada Français (1960), Marcel Trudel emphasized the complicity of newspapers with the open air slave market; the Montreal Gazette and Quebec Gazette would frequently advertise enslaved individuals to be sold.¹⁷ From 1767 until 1798,¹⁸ 137 advertisements were published, but they concern only thirty enslaved people, only one of whom was a *panis*, a word used for an enslaved Indigenous person.¹⁹ It is notable that the last Black person sold at Montreal's slave market was sold to the highest bidder in 1800,²⁰ two years after the last sale advertisement was published.

On 1 April 1785, Elizabeth Cady sold four enslaved people to William Ward from Vermont: a twenty-four year old man named Toby, a twenty year old man named Joseph, a

nineteen year old woman named Sarah as well as Sarah's six month old son for 250 louis.²¹ On 26 April 1785, William Ward sold Toby, Sarah and the infant to William Campbell at the public market in Montreal (Place du Marché) for \$425.²² This means that Ward probably kept Joseph for his own use. The following month, Campbell sold the trio again at the public market to Charles Blake for \$300.²³ The histories regarding the sale of enslaved people in public in Montreal are not currently commemorated at Place Royale, denying Montrealers and tourists the ability to learn about Canadian participation in Transatlantic Slavery.

Place Royale is now part of the Pointe-à-Callière Museum. (figs. 6 & 7). In 1982, while doing excavations, the archeologists found multiple indigenous artifacts and pieces of the ancient fortifications which revealed that the site was used centuries before the arrival of Europeans²⁴ and the enslavement of both Indigenous and Black people. Multiple layers of history can be witnessed by tourists at Place Royale. Yet, the museum does not provide any information regarding the site's connectedness to slavery whether *in situ* or online. Although the museum uses the space to reenact a day at the marketplace in the style of the 1750's with hundreds of actors in costumes, "where you can experience what life was like in New France in Place Royale in Montreal," slavery is wholly erased from the reenactment.²⁵ (fig. 8) It is problematic that the Pointe-à-Callière Museum considers this reenactment as "stunningly authentic"²⁶ considering that it omits several important pieces of the city's history.

Furthermore, when the museum was questioned about excluding the site's role in the slave market in Montreal, the museum staff replied that their reenactment was not the right place to learn about slavery,²⁷ further suppressing the enslavement of both Black and Indigenous people across centuries and empires. In an interview, Francine Labrosse, an employee of the museum argued that "this increasingly popular event is better suited to creating an *ambiance* of a time and not a suitable place to teach about difficult history."²⁸ Following this flawed logic, if every organization thought in a similar manner, Canadian Slavery would never be properly explained, explored, or studied if even museums - public education institutions - choose to omit "difficult" histories. Pointe-à-Callière Museum's mission is "to bring visitors to know and appreciate the Montréal of yesterday and today through outreach, education, conservation and research activities revolving around Montréal's archaeological and historical heritage."²⁹ Can its mission be considered fulfilled if the retelling lacks crucial pieces of Canadian history? Labrosse argued that they just "have not yet found an appropriate way to discuss this difficult history."³⁰ However, educating visitors is a duty that should not be selective.

Despite the museum's omission of the "difficult past" of Place Royale, it is important to recognize the part that it played in Canadian Slavery. Enslaved people were bought and sold at the public market, in the heart of the city. Montreal inhabitants held both Black and Indigenous people in bondage for centuries. This is our history. Although it can be difficult to address, the complexity of slavery will never be a valid reason for its erasure.

¹. Jessa Alston-O'Connor, "What Lies Beneath: Erasure and Oppression at Place Royale, Montreal," Montreal as Palimpsest III: The dialectics of Montreal's Public Places, ed. Cynthia Hammond (Montreal: Concordia University, 2010), p.14.

². Marcel Trudel, L'esclavage Au Canada Français: Histoire Et Conditions De L'esclavage (Quebec: Presses universitaires Laval, 1960), p.112.

³. Sylvie Dufresne, "Coeur historique de Montréal: La place Royale," Encyclopédie du Patrimoine Culturel de l'Amérique Française (date of last access 30 March 2020) http://www.ameriquefrancaise.org/fr/article-727/Coeur_historique_de_Montr%C3%A9al:_la_place_Royale.html#.XoObQY7YrnE

⁴. Dufresne, "Coeur historique de Montréal" (date of last access 30 March 2020).

⁵. Dufresne, "Coeur historique de Montréal" (date of last access 30 March 2020).

⁶. Dufresne, "Coeur historique de Montréal" (date of last access 30 March 2020).

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7. "Répertoire du Patrimoine Culturel du Québec : Place Royale" Culture et Communications, Gouvernement du Québec (date of last access 29 March 2020) <http://www.patrimoine-culturel.gouv.qc.ca/rpcq/detail.do?methode=consulter&id=115101&type=bien#.XoOUPi7YrnE>
 8. "Répertoire du Patrimoine Culturel du Québec : Place Royale" (date of last access 29 March 2020).
 9. "Répertoire du Patrimoine Culturel du Québec : Place Royale" (date of last access 29 March 2020).
 10. Devin Alfaro, "Old Montreal's Forgotten Public Square," *Spacing Montreal* (date of last access 30 March 2020) <http://spacing.ca/montreal/2011/01/03/old-montreals-forgotten-public-square/>
 11. Maureen Elgersman Lee, "To be a Woman: Production, Reproduction and Material Culture," *Unyielding Spirits: Black Women and Slavery in Early Canada and Jamaica* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1999), pp.74-75.
 12. Daina Berry, "Breaking Up Families of Colour, an American Tradition as Old as the Slave Trade," *Beacon Broadside* (date of last access 30 March 2020) <https://www.beaconbroadside.com/broadside/2018/06/breaking-up-families-of-color-an-american-tradition-as-old-as-the-slave-trade.html>
 13. Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave; Related by Herself*, ed. Moira Ferguson (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), p.15.
 14. Charmaine A. Nelson, "A tale of two empires: Montreal slavery under the French and the British," *Slavery, Geography and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Marine Landscapes of Montreal and Jamaica* (London: Routledge, 2016), p.61.
 15. Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History*, 2nd ed. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), p.15.
 16. Elgersman, "To be a Woman," pp.74-75.
 17. Trudel, *L'esclavage Au Canada Français*, p.108.
 18. According to Marcel Trudel, 1767 and 1798 marks the first and last years of the publications of such advertisements in the newspapers.
 19. Trudel, *L'esclavage Au Canada Français*, p.108.
 20. Normand Charest, "Blacks in Quebec History: A Forgotten Legacy," *The Social Eyes* (date of last access 30 March 2020) <http://tse2015.ca/2015/06/11/blacks-in-quebec-history-a-forgotten-legacy/>
 21. William Renwick Riddell, "After the Peace," *The Journal of Negro History*, vol. 5, no. 3 (1920), p. 295
 22. Trudel, *L'esclavage Au Canada Français*, pp. 108-12.
 23. Elgersman, "To be a Woman," pp. 74-75.
 24. Dufresne, "Coeur historique de Montréal" (date of last access 30 March 2020).
 25. "Marché public du 18e siècle," *Musée Pointe-à-Callière* (date of last access 30 March 2020) <https://pacmusee.qc.ca/fr/calendrier/evenement/marche-public-du-18e-siecle/>
 26. "Marché public du 18e siècle," *Musée Pointe-à-Callière* (date of last access 30 March 2020).
 27. Alston-O'Connor, "What Lies Beneath," p.19.
 28. Alston-O'Connor, "What Lies Beneath," p.19.
 29. "Marché public du 18e siècle," *Musée Pointe-à-Callière* (date of last access 30 March 2020).
 30. Alston-O'Connor, "What Lies Beneath" p.19.

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Plate List



Fig. 1: Samuel Edward Dawson, Map of the City of Montreal: Compiled from the Latest Surveys (1888), McGill University Library, Montreal, Quebec.

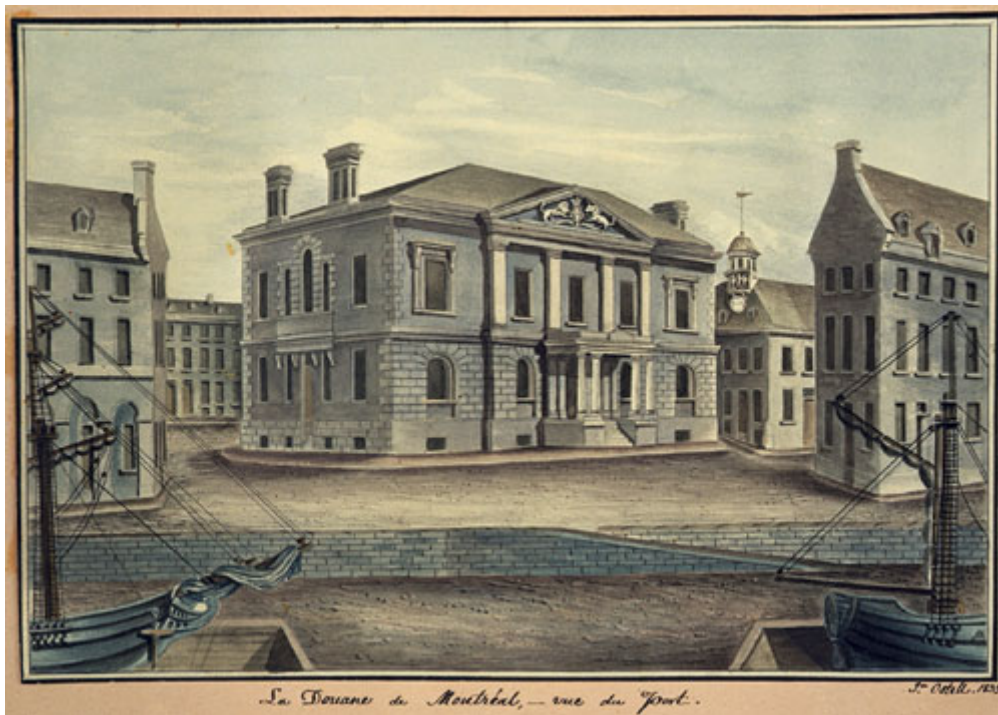


Fig. 2: John Ostell, La Douane de Montréal, vue du port (1839), Watercolour from Jacques Viger's album *Souvenirs canadiens*, Bibliothèque et Archives Nationale du Québec, Québec, Canada.



Fig. 3: Sailors Institute, Inland Revenue Office (1890), photograph, Albums Massicotte, Bibliothèque des Archives Nationales du Québec, Montreal, Canada. Public Domain.

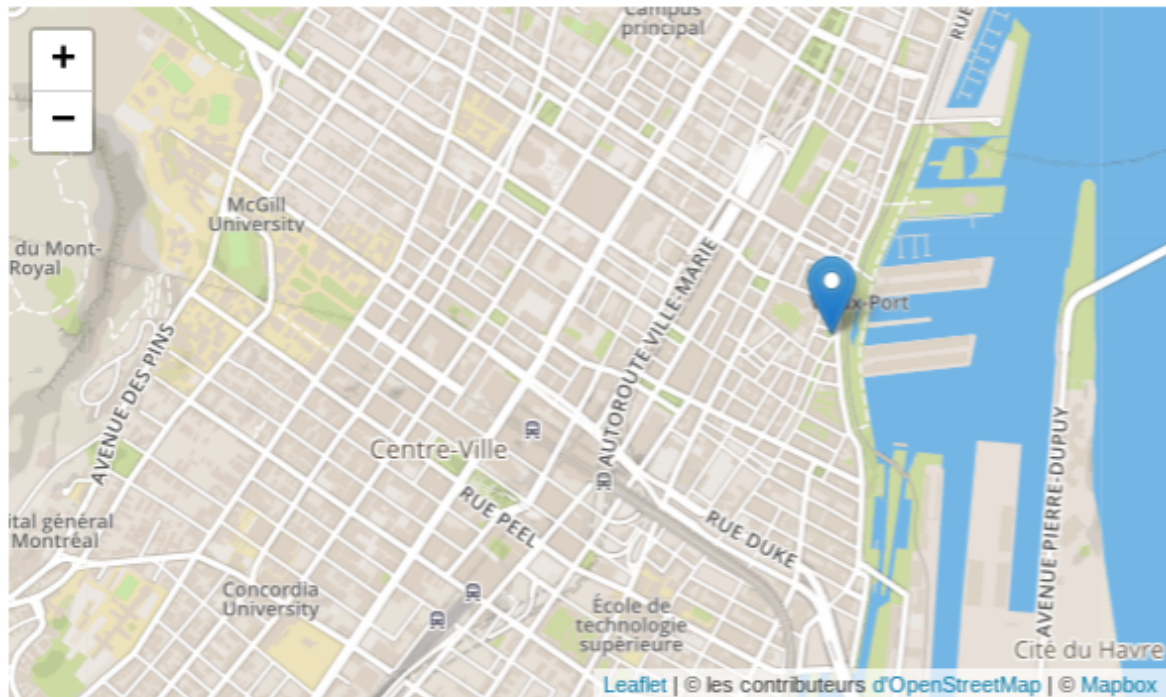


Fig. 4: “Location of the Place Royale” (2020), [Google Maps](#).

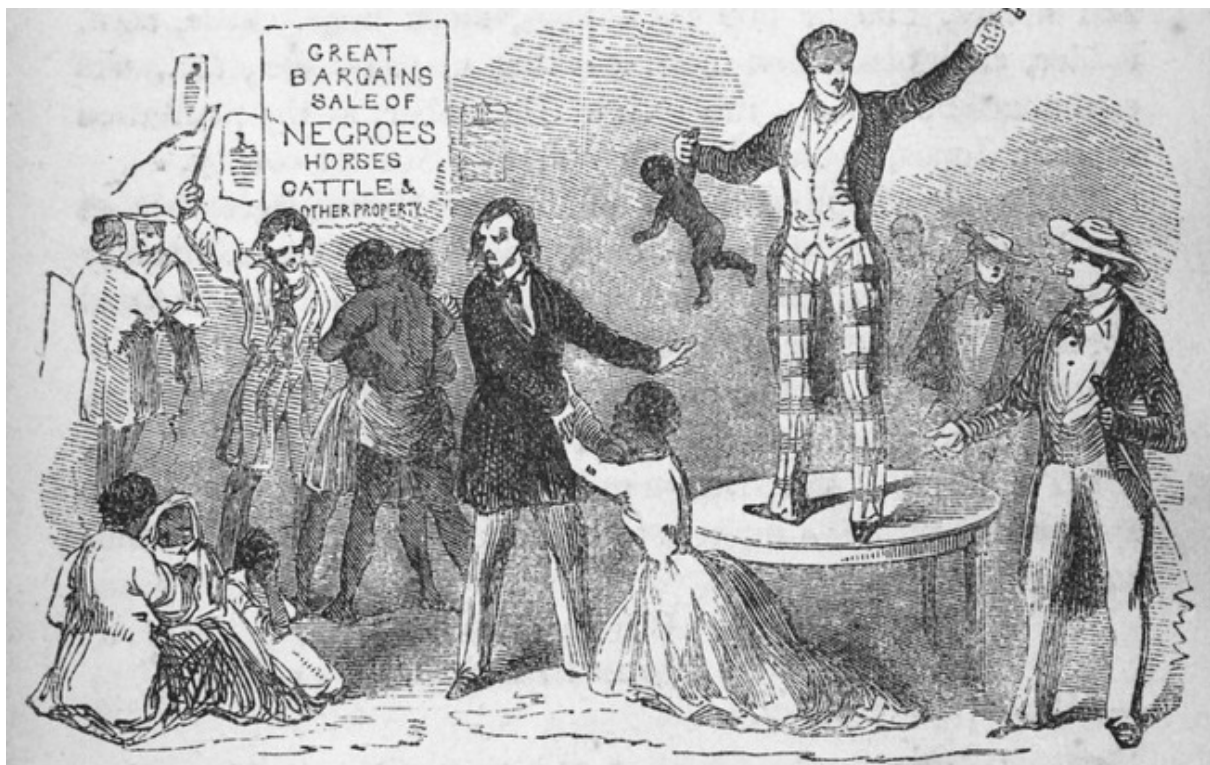


Fig. 5: Anonymous, [Great Bargains Sale of Negroes, Horses, Cattle & Other Property](#) (1853), New York Public Library, New York, U.S.A.



Fig. 6: Christian Lemire, Place Royale, Vue d'ensemble (2008), photograph, Ministère de la Culture et des Communications, <http://www.patrimoine-culturel.gouv.qc.ca/rpcq/detail.do?methode=consulter&id=115101&type=bien#.XoYh12jYrnF>



Fig. 7: Christian Lemire, Place Royale, Vue d'ensemble, (2008), photograph, Ministère de la Culture et des Communications, <http://www.patrimoine-culturel.gouv.qc.ca/rpcq/detail.do?methode=consulter&id=115101&type=bien#.XoYh12jYrnF>



Fig. 8: Marc-Antoine Zouéki, La place Royale lors de l'activité Le Marché public dans l'ambiance du XVIIIe siècle, (2010), photograph, collection Pointe-à-Callière
[.http://www.ameriquefrancaise.org/fr/article-727/Coeur_historique_de_Montr%C3%A9al:_la_place_Royale.html#.XoObQY7YrnE](http://www.ameriquefrancaise.org/fr/article-727/Coeur_historique_de_Montr%C3%A9al:_la_place_Royale.html#.XoObQY7YrnE)