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FROM CAPTIVE TO CREOLE
María Rosa Villalpando

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FROM CAPTIVE MARÍA ROSA VILLALPANDO TO CREOLE

CAPTIVE STORIES FROM THE COLONIAL ERA IN THE UNITED STATES ARE FULL OF ROMANCE, MYSTERY, AND VIOLENCE, BUT THEY OFTEN LACK HISTORICAL FACTS AND NUANCE. MARÍA ROSA VILLALPANDO WAS A REAL WOMAN WHO LIVED IN THE NORTHERN RÍO GRANDE VALLEY OF NEW MEXICO UNTIL HER FAMILY'S COMPOUND WAS RAIDED IN 1760 BY COMANCHE INDIANS. SHE WAS TAKEN CAPTIVE BY THE TRIBE AND YEARS LATER SETTLED IN ST. LOUIS. AUTHOR AND EXPLORER JOSIAH GREGG FIRST INTRODUCED HER STORY, LIKELY AFTER READING CAPTIVE NARRATIVES AND HEARING ACCOUNTS OF MARÍA ROSA FROM MEN AND WOMEN WHO KNEW OF HER. AS IN MANY FOLK NARRATIVES, GREGG'S RETELLING MIXES HISTORY AND FANTASY WHILE DIMINISHING THE IMPORTANCE OF KINSHIP AND HISTORIC TRADE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN FRONTIER SETTLERS AND THEIR NATIVE AMERICAN NEIGHBORS. THOUGH SOME DETAILS OF MARÍA ROSA VILLALPANDO'S LIFE CAN ONLY BE SPECULATED UPON, LEGAL DOCUMENTS AND CENSUS RECORDS HELD IN OUR OWN LIBRARY & RESEARCH CENTER REVEAL A FASCINATING LIFE THAT NEEDS LITTLE EMBELLISHMENT.

By *Dr. Frances Levine*

The literature of the Santa Fe Trail is vast. For nearly two hundred years journals, diaries, guidebooks, and edited volumes have documented travelers' observations on the western exploration of North America and northern Mexico. Some of these early publications remain relevant today. Though it was published in 1844, Josiah Gregg's *Commerce of the Prairies* is still widely consulted by modern scholars across many fields for its

detailed descriptions of the geography and botany of the American Southwest and northern Mexico. Gregg was a keen observer and recorder of the logistics of travel, as well as the tactics and diplomacy of international trade. He dismissed St. Louis as a starting point of the trade, citing locations farther west in Missouri as gathering places for caravans. He linked St. Louis and New Mexico, however, in a fascinating incident that occurred before the Santa Fe Trail became a major North American route.

{ The pattern of vermilion paint on this Native American woman's face and the part of her hair may indicate an affiliation with the Osage or Missouri nations. Her blanket cloak and red leggings were surely trade goods. Watercolor painting by Anna Maria von Phul, 1818. Missouri Historical Society Collections. }

Gregg briefly relates how Comanches captured María Rosa Villalpando during a raid on the settlement of Ranchos de Taos in the northern Río Grande Valley in the summer of 1760. Gregg accents the story with romantic flourishes and a trope typical of many captives' tales in nineteenth-century American literature: He says María Rosa was to blame for the raid because she refused to marry a Comanche chief, a union her father had supposedly arranged when she was a child. After almost a decade in captivity—and a series of trades or purchases—she was eventually brought to St. Louis, where she became a well-connected member of the Creole community. Gregg recounted that “there are many people yet living who remember with what affecting pathos the old lady was wont to tell her tale of woe.”

María Rosa's decision to remain in St. Louis shows the agency she exerted as she evolved from captive to Creole. Although her captivity ended before the begin-

ning of the Santa Fe trade, she lived to see the French, Spanish, and American flags raised over the bustling mid-continent city, as well as the blend of customs, traditions, and laws that defined the expanding frontier.

THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY TAOS FRONTIER

Ranchos de Taos is located about four miles south of the Spanish colonial settlement of Taos in northern New Mexico, adjacent to the Pueblo Indian community of Taos. It was a settlement where hyphenated identities were common. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries communities of the valley were crossroads of cultures, places where Plains and Pueblo Indians, French fur trappers, and Spanish settlers gathered to trade. Comanches made their first appearance at the Taos trade fairs in 1706, as they extended their range out of the Northern High Plains west and south into the Spanish frontier. The fairs were, in many ways, precursors of the Santa Fe trade, though they benefited Native American groups more directly. Trade fairs at Taos Pueblo were encouraged by several New Mexico governors, endured by New Mexico's Spanish settlers, and abhorred by officials of the Catholic Church. These fairs were part of the alternating cycles of warfare and peacemaking that characterized the relationship between Pueblo Indian and Hispanic settlers in the Taos area and the Plains Indian groups that ranged into the Sangre de Cristo Mountains that straddle the border of present-day Colorado and New Mexico.

Comanche bands dominated the Southern Plains and exchanged goods with traders from all over North America, intensifying competition among French, Spanish, and British settlers and governments. Trading partnerships were essential, and they gave Comanches a way to publicly express their leadership qualities. As the Comanches acquired horses, their partnerships expanded geographically. Horses were a form of mobile wealth, and Comanches looked for opportunities to steal the animals from Spanish (and later, American) settlements. The Comanches enjoyed considerable social fluidity. Groups formed rapidly under new leadership, and their sizes could fluctuate in response to trade, subsistence, and geographic circumstances. Taking captives in raids gave Comanches human capital that could be used in several ways. Captives could be held for ransom, or they might



This painting of a Creole woman and boy captures the dress, landscape, and cultural milieu of St. Louis's French colonial community. Watercolor painting by Anna Maria von Phul, 1818. Missouri Historical Society Collections.

be adopted to replenish tribal numbers that had been depleted by disease and warfare. Certain adopted captives might allow Comanches to form kinship links with strategic trade partners. Between the late 1740s and the late 1770s, Comanche and Ute allied forces attacked northern New Mexico, including the Taos area, more than one hundred times. Some Spanish Colonial-era governors pursued the Comanches and Utes with retaliatory force, and others alternated between using trade to placate or punish the offenders. The raid on the Villalpando compound in Ranchos de Taos ended a fragile peace that had been brokered by New Mexico's diplomatically skilled governor Tomás Vélez Cachupín during his first term in office (1749–1754). Bands of Comanches attacked Ranchos de Taos on August 4, 1760, in response to a scalp dance that had been performed at Taos Pueblo that had allegedly used the scalps of Comanches. Though María Rosa was not named in the official report, her husband and mother were killed during this ferocious battle, and she was among the women who were captured thus.

[The Comanches] diverted, or provoked, [the settlers] from a very large house, the greatest in all the valley, belonging to a settler called Villalpando, who luckily for him, had left that day on business. But when they saw so many Comanches coming, many women and men of that settlement took refuge in this house as the strongest. And, trusting in the fact that it had four towers and in the large supply of muskets, powder, and balls, they say that they fired on the Comanches. The latter were infuriated by this to such a horrible degree that they broke into different parts of the house, killed all the men and some of the women, who also fought. And the wife of the owner of the house, seeing that they were breaking down the outside door, went to defend it with a lance, and they killed her fighting. Fifty-six women and children were carried off, and a large number of horses which the owner of the house was keeping there. Forty-nine bodies of dead Comanches were counted and other trickles of blood were seen.

Following the raid of Ranchos de Taos, New Mexico governor Francisco Antonio Marín del Valle and one thousand Spanish and allied Native troops pursued the Comanches. They reportedly covered more than five hundred miles in forty days until they ran out of food.



La Comanchita, a dancer portraying a young woman captive. Photograph by Miguel Gandert. Used with permission of Miguel Gandert.

The Native auxiliaries were dispirited and starving, and the troops returned to New Mexico.

In the year following María Rosa's capture, Fray Pedro Serrano wrote a report to the viceroy in Mexico City, Mexico, describing the shocking social conditions, immorality, and lax religious practices he found in New Mexico. He was appalled by the utter debauchery and frenzy that accompanied the trade fairs at Taos Pueblo. New Mexican officials—from the governor to local military officers—were among the greatest offenders and biggest beneficiaries of the trade. The governors brought farm implements, axes, knives, horse tack, and commodities to exchange with the Plains Indians for deer and buffalo hides. But, Fray Pedro noted, “what is saddest” were the Indian men, women, and children who were exchanged like so much chattel. Women and girls as young as ten years old were some of the most prized and the most horrendously victimized of the captives exchanged at the trade fairs. Fray Pedro was pained by

the obscene treatment they received, such as public rapes—ordeals that he described as “hellish ceremonies.” Once deflowered, the girls and women were considered ready for sale and the enjoyment of other men. Trade fairs also became venues for the ransom and return of men, women, and children who were taken in previous raids. The Spanish term *rescate*, or rescue, was often used to refer to the fairs.

In the winter of 1761, Comanche leader Onacama and ten others journeyed to Taos, bringing seven captives with them. Interim New Mexico governor Manuel de Portillo Urrisola and a small party of soldiers traveled to the Comanche camp not far from Taos Pueblo. The Comanches were refused entry to the trade fair, where they had planned to present the seven captives as a peace offering. Portillo demanded the return of all captives taken in 1760 before the Comanches would be admitted to the trade fair. When negotiations broke down, Spanish and Ute forces attacked the encampment and killed some four hundred Comanche men. The Utes ran off with more than one thousand horses and mules, and they captured three hundred Comanche women and children. Portillo considered this a victory, and in his letter to Bishop Pedro Tamarón relating the “glorious” details of the battle, he criticized Governor Tomás Vélez Cachupín for what he assumed would be the returning governor’s response to the battle. Surely Vélez Cachupín would have used more diplomacy than force to secure Comanche cooperation.

Vélez returned to New Mexico for a second term (1762–1767) in January 1762, equipped with his understanding of Comanche diplomacy to negotiate again for

peace. Using Comanche women as emissaries, he promised to restore the previous amity with generous terms for the Taos trade and the return of captives. Vélez sealed this peace when he brought thirty-one Comanche women and children to a council for the visiting Comanche leaders, allowing them to select relatives to be returned to the tribe. The restoration of trade relations between the Spanish and Comanche leaders represented what historian Richard White has referred to as a negotiation for a middle ground. The parties created more neutral positions brought about by a process of mediation, mutual invention, and shared production where Native peoples and governing authorities reached a kind of equilibrium and restored the trade valued by both sides.

María Rosa was not among the women and children returned to New Mexico in the 1761 or 1762 visits (although none of the documents named the women or children who were part of these negotiations). It’s possible she never returned to Taos because she adapted to life in the Native American villages—or because she found wealth and established a new family in St. Louis.



This City of St. Louis map from 1823 by Charles DeWard denotes property owners and the town’s settlement pattern. Missouri Historical Society Collections.

LIFE IN CAPTIVITY

Though María Rosa's fate was a notable exception to that of others who suffered in the raids and battles that took place between 1760 and 1762, evidently she never saw New Mexico again. She probably heard occasional reports from fur trappers and traders who traveled between New Mexico and Plains Indian settlements, and later from the parties that traveled to the Missouri and Mississippi river valleys.

María Rosa was a married woman and the mother of at least one son when she was kidnapped from her parents' home during the 1760 raid on Ranchos de Taos. Though her mother and her husband were killed in the attack, her infant son, José Julián Jáquez, miraculously survived and was not captured. How María Rosa was treated during her nearly ten years in captivity has gone undocumented, but the stories of other women and children held captive by the Comanches may provide some clues to her experience. Several biographies depicting the lives of captives have been written, and from them it's possible to imagine (obviously imperfectly) what María Rosa may have gone through during her time with the Comanches and, later, the Pawnees.

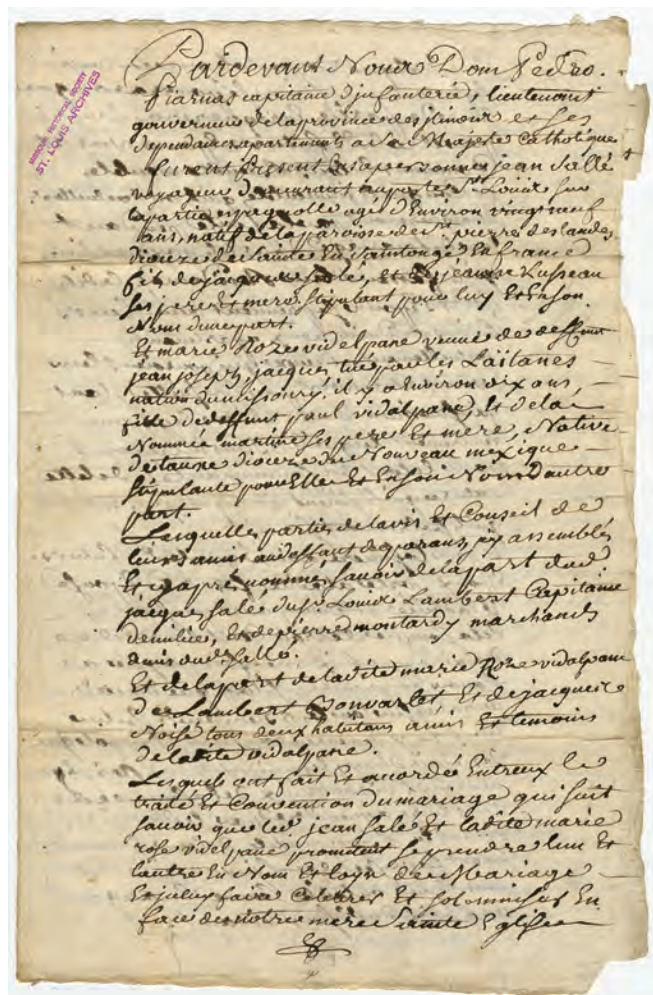
María Rosa would have most likely lived among the Comanches who camped along the Arkansas River, north and east of Taos, where French fur traders ventured from the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. She would have entered their camp following the pitched battles and frenzied pursuit, and she probably didn't know if she would be ravaged and killed or brought into the tribe. Though she would have endured a mournful period of indoctrination, María Rosa's status as enslaved or adopted might have changed over time. She became pregnant soon after she was taken captive. She brought her son along to St. Louis to raise him but never recognized the child as her legitimate heir. She would also have seen how both the Spanish governors and Comanche leaders used women as emissaries of peace. It's possible that she was beneficial to some of their peace talks and trade negotiations.

MAKING A LIFE IN CREOLE ST. LOUIS

Jean Baptiste Salé dit Lajoie took up with María Rosa while she was living in a Pawnee encampment on the Platte River around 1767. Lajoie, born in Saintes, France,

around 1741, was one of the men recruited by Pierre Laclède and Auguste Chouteau to come to St. Louis in 1764 from the Illinois settlements. He would have been about twenty-three when he arrived and about twenty-six when he met María Rosa. He had served as a voyageur with the founding party and seems to have begun his involvement with the fur and Indian trade quite promptly.

Lajoie and María Rosa evidently entered into a domestic arrangement while she was living among the Pawnees. Their son, Lambert, was born in St. Louis in November 1768. María Rosa became part of a community that would have shared some similarities with Taos. Both were frontier settlements inhabited by people of many cultures, such as mixed Native American and European



A marriage contract between Jean Baptiste Salé dit Lajoie and María Rosa Vallalpando, 1770. Missouri Historical Society Collections.

populations who engaged in intertribal and intercultural commerce based on the fur trade. Once again she would have lived in a community with a strong Catholic faith governed by the Spanish, although St. Louis's population was predominantly French. Among the five hundred settlers in St. Louis in 1770, María Rosa would have found a population of métis people, those of mixed European and Native American ancestry, as well as enslaved people of Native American and African heritage. She also would have met other women whose children had different fathers and mixed ancestry—whether they publicly acknowledged this fact or not.

Lajoie and María Rosa settled on a portion of Block 57, located on one of the original townsite lots that had been distributed among members of St. Louis's founding party. Their house, measuring twenty-five by twenty feet, was built in a French style with vertical posts set on a stone foundation, according to legal documents. On July 3, 1770, María Rosa and Lajoie married or at least signed their marriage contract, stating their intent to marry at some future, unspecified time. They identified twenty-month-old Lambert as their legitimate child, but Antoine, born to María Rosa when she was in captivity among the "savages," had no claim on their estate. Still,



The residence of Mrs. Manuel Lisa, "La Veuve Dodier," at the corner of Second and Myrtle (now Clark) streets, ca. 1850s. This house is an example of the local French colonial architecture and is one María Rosa would have seen across the street every day. Missouri Historical Society Collections.

they acknowledged their obligation to nourish and educate him. The timing of this marriage contract is interesting, as the Spanish lieutenant governor, Pedro Piernas, was charged with enumerating the Native American men, women, and children enslaved in Ste. Genevieve and St. Louis. On the enumeration completed on July 8, 1770, Lajoie is shown as the owner of "Indian slaves" boy and girl, each thirteen years of age and not baptized. Their tribal affiliation is not shown on the census, nor is Antoine's, whose ancestry was at least half Native American. Lajoie went on to acquire several pieces of property in St. Louis. On the 1791 census their St. Louis household included three enslaved people, two men of mixed race, and one woman said to be "negro."

In 1792, when he was about fifty years old, Lajoie returned to France with their son Lambert, leaving María Rosa behind. Their younger daughter, Héléne, had married into a well-connected family in St. Louis around the same time. Why he returned to Bordeaux may never be known, but María Rosa considered herself abandoned. She was not without resources, however, as he evidently left her with a store of supplies, wines, and pelts. She also began making her own bequests in a series of legal actions to distribute some of her property, including two young children of enslaved African American women in her household. She gave these children to her minor granddaughters but placed them in trust to Lambert and Héléne.

She was likely surprised, then, to receive a visit from the son she might have assumed was killed during the 1760 raid on Ranchos de Taos. José Julián Jáquez, who had been living with family members near San Juan Pueblo in New Mexico, appeared in St. Louis in 1802 seeking to exert his right to his maternal inheritance. How he knew his mother was still alive is unclear, but he might have learned about her from fur traders. María Rosa acknowledged him as her legitimate son. He brought legal action against Héléne and forfeited the rights to his mother's estate for the sum of \$200. It seems he may not have immediately returned home: In 1809 the governor summoned José Julián Jáquez on behalf of his wife, whom he had left behind in New Mexico.

"Marie Rose Vidalpando," identified as the widow of Jean Baptiste Salé dit Lajoie, is listed on the 1805 enumeration of St. Louis property owners with property valued at \$800. In the early 1800s, María Rosa took legal



Emile Herzinger's 1863 drawing of H el ene LeRoux, daughter of Jean Baptiste Sal e dit Lajoie and Mar ia Rosa Villalpando, was based on a daguerreotype made a few years before H el ene's death in 1859. H el ene's grandson, Judge Wilson Primm, was considered St. Louis's first historian. Missouri Historical Society Collections.



The Dance of the Captives is held each year in Ranchos de Taos and Talpa as part of a cycle of religious and social celebrations that recall the historic Comanche raids on northern New Mexico villages. Villagers are “held captive” in a circle of dancers until “ransomed” by family and friends. Photograph by Miguel Gandert. Used with permission of Miguel Gandert and Enrique R. Lamadrid.

action to clear the title to the property that had been in her possession since Lajoie left her. She also filed and received several claims for payments owed to her son Antoine, who likely died before 1806. Though she did not acknowledge Antoine as her legitimate heir, she did claim entitlement to the debts owed to him.

Exactly why María Rosa remained in St. Louis may never be known, but she undoubtedly built a successful life. The legal and social status of women in the eighteenth-century Creole communities along the Mississippi and Missouri river frontiers make a compelling case that it was her choice to remain and that she found good fortune. In a case study from Ste. Genevieve, located about fifty miles south of St. Louis on the Mississippi River, writer Susan Boyle found evidence that

women who lived in St. Louis around the same time as María Rosa enjoyed wide authority to establish and manage commercial enterprises; to buy and sell property; and to inherit and hold the titles to real and movable property from their families of origin, as well as their spouses. In 1812 the United States commandant of the Upper Louisiana Military District noted that the women of this relatively new territory seemed to have great influence over their husbands, and thanks to premarital contracts that set the terms of property rights and inheritance, they had more authority and respect in their marriages. Certainly, María Rosa had learned to manage her family affairs, protecting her property and her heirs through the courts under Spanish and American jurisdiction.

María Rosa died on July 27, 1830, at the home of her daughter Héléne on Elm Street, between Fourth and Fifth streets, not far from where she had first settled. María Rosa, a captive who became a Creole, was buried the following day in the Old Cathedral's cemetery. Her passing is mentioned in a brief obituary that notes she was well over one hundred years old, an unusually advanced age for the time. Though many details of María Rosa's life are speculative, the story of her captivity and her adaptation to Creole life over the formative years of colonial St. Louis remain a fascinating account of one woman's extraordinary resilience and cultural dexterity. Her experience has not been forgotten in Ranchos de Taos, either. On New Year's Day each year, dance troupes in the village honor the feast of St. Emmanuel, combining a Mass at the village church with the elements of their Comanche heritage, dressing in buckskins and dancing to a sustained drumbeat as they visit each home in the community where a Manuel or a Manuela resides. Though her name may not be spoken during this annual dance cycle, María Rosa and the memory of other captive men, women, and children are remembered. The music and oral traditions pay honor to the captives and the children of mixed ancestry who were born in captivity. ■

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