

## Paillé, Suzanne Amomba

(c. 1673–1755)

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was a formerly enslaved African who became one of the wealthiest women in French Guiana. Her surname is sometimes given as Paillet. The date and place of her birth are both uncertain. Before her marriage, she was an enslaved worker of François de La Motte Aignon, who freed her when she wed Jean Paillé, a soldier, master mason, and carpenter, on 29 June 1704. After his discharge, the couple remained in French Guiana and steadily built up their wealth. In 1709 their total assets were modest: six enslaved workers, one horned animal, plantings of food crops (“milh,” manioc, and yams), and one rifle. However, by 1737, they possessed sixty-seven enslaved workers, forty-six horned animals, plantings of export crops (rocou, indigo, coffee, and cacao) as well as food crops, one sword, two rifles, and a townhouse in Cayenne, wealth which equaled that of some of the richest of the colony’s families.

The Paillés had no children, and when Jean Paillé died in 1739, Suzanne Amomba Paillé’s sizable inheritance made her the object of greed and contention. Although some men sought to gain control of her fortune by marrying her or convincing her to transfer her property to them, the colony’s administrators tried to preserve her wealth for the eventual benefit of the state by placing a guardian in control of her affairs.

As a wealthy freedwoman of color, her status challenged the racial and gender norms of the colony and her story illustrates the increasing racism in the French Empire during the eighteenth century. The marriage proposals she received in particular resulted in a blanket ban against marriages between whites and blacks in Guiana, which was issued in December 1741. Authorities also raised the question of whether or not, as a former slave, Amomba Paillé should have the ability to dispose of her assets, citing her advanced age and “feble-mindedness.” They deprived her of the right to manage her own affairs. For her part, Amomba Paillé accused her guardian of mismanagement and, in 1742, sued for the right to control her own affairs. She also drafted a will that reflected her understanding of her ability to dispose of her own assets as she wished. In 1744 the right to control her own property was returned to her; however, her 1742 will was never probated.

On 30 April 1748 Paillé donated her plantation and all of her assets, including fifty-five enslaved workers, to the colony for the education of both boys and girls. Ironically, her wealth was combined with that of her former master in the support of a school in Cayenne. Though some historians have suggested that this donation was coerced, it is also possible that, thwarted in her other aims, she chose this means of asserting her will and deciding the ultimate destination of her wealth. Suzanne Amomba

Paillé died on 27 January 1755 and was buried in the church of Saint-Sauveur in Cayenne. Her life demonstrated the limits and strictures that the growing racism of the eighteenth century placed on free people of color and also her will and ability to challenge those limits.

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