

## Mapping Enslaved Catholic Faith Communities

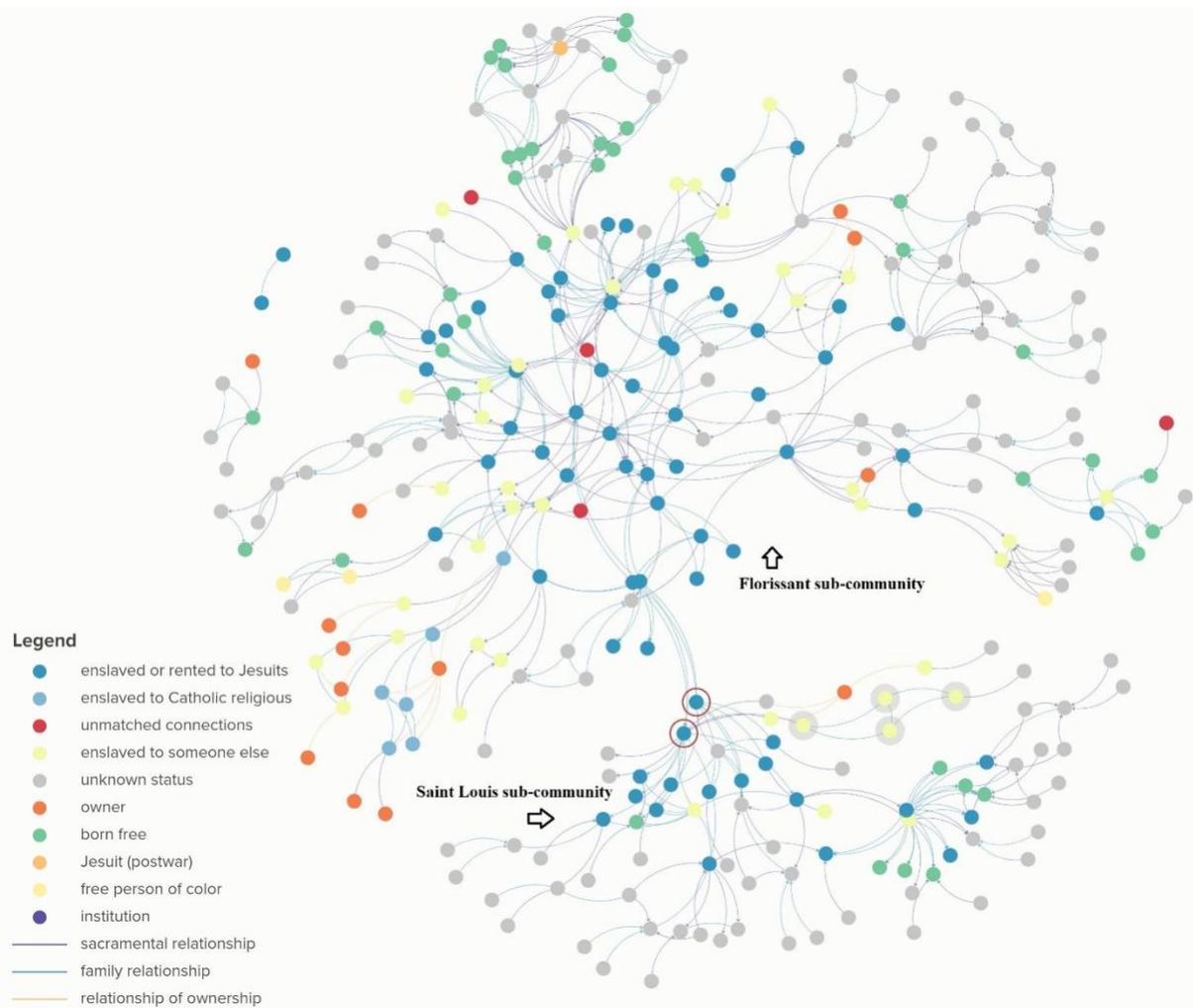
Kelly L. Schmidt

Beyond pockets of scholarship on enslaved Black Catholic populations in New Orleans, Louisiana more broadly, and Maryland, limited research has been done to examine how people enslaved to Catholics in the antebellum United States approached their faith. Was it imposed on them? Was it something they embraced? Or some combination?

Historians have cited the challenges of the dearth of resources in engaging in this work. Enslaved people were systematically prevented from learning to read and write, from being able to leave records about their own lives or maintain archives centered around themselves, their families, and their experiences. Those records which do survive were often created by the people who held them in slavery, who often portrayed bondspeople's attitudes toward, and practice of, their faith differently than how bondspeople may have regarded their religious and spiritual lives themselves.

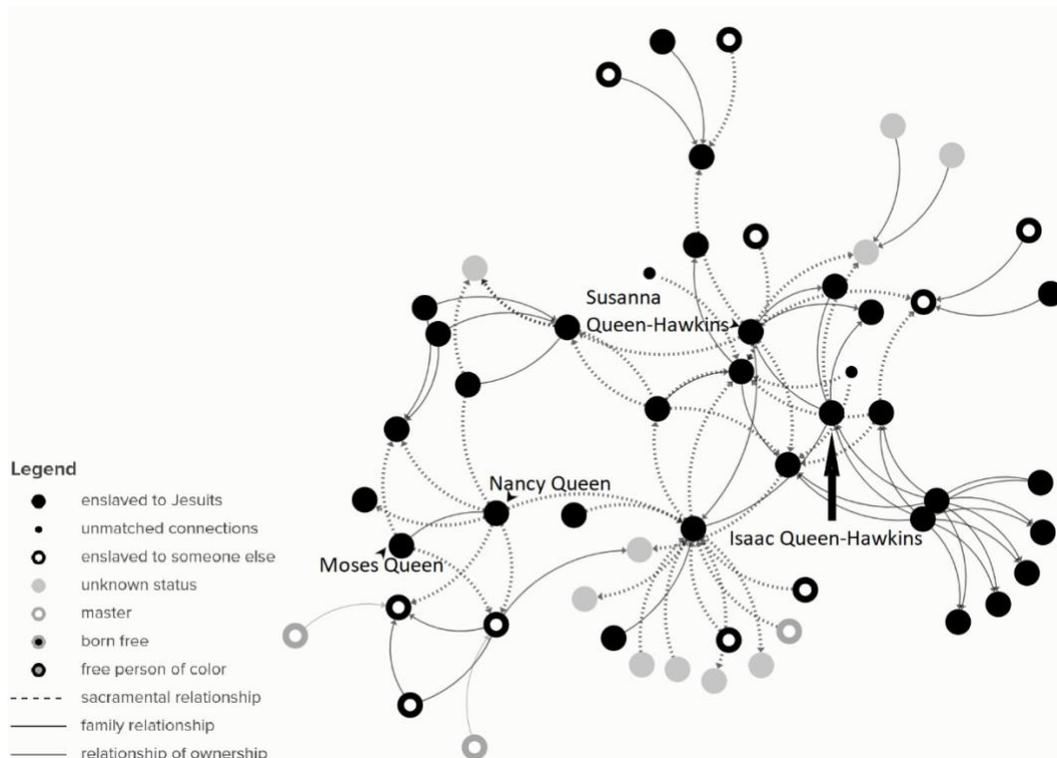
My work delves into a largely untapped resource—Catholic sacramental records—to better understand how Catholic enslaved people and people enslaved to Catholics approached their faith. Although the formulaic entries do not at first glance appear to offer any revealing new insights or profound revelations about enslaved faith lives, deeper engagement with patterns that emerge in the records can disclose important information about the extent to which enslaved people exerted agency over their conversions, their marriages, their children's baptisms, and the selection of godparents and marriage witnesses. To see these patterns more fully, I use digital network visualization technology to better understand what forces were exerted over enslaved people's faith, family, and community lives, and what choices enslaved people made themselves as they entered into the Catholic faith and approach the sacraments. View the network visualizations at: <https://kumu.io/KLS/jesuits-enslaved-communities>.

I began this work by studying a community of people enslaved to the Jesuits in Missouri. What I learned, and as I published in “Enslaved Faith Communities in the Jesuits’ Missouri Mission” in the *U.S. Catholic Historian*, is that while early in the region's history a greater amount of coercion was involved in the conversion and Catholic practice of enslaved people, by the time Missouri had transitioned from colonial land to statehood, enslaved people in the area who had been Catholic for generations took advantage of the cultural legacy of the French *Code Noir* (Black Code), which had once enforced baptism and Catholic practice among enslaved people and forbade the separation of enslaved couples married in the Church, to preserve their families and build kin communities to surmount the disruptions they experienced through forced sales and relocations. Gaining greater control over who stood as their marriage witnesses and as godparents for themselves and their children, enslaved people used sacramental sponsorships to build a community network. They used Catholic recognition of the sacraments to define, strengthen, and protect fictive kinships they had formed with bondspeople in the area as they rebuilt community in the wake of the ruptures and separations of forced migrations.



### *Missouri Enslaved Community Network*

Network analysis in Missouri has shown that people enslaved to Catholic religious, such as the Jesuits and the Sisters of Loretto in Florissant, Missouri, were central within their communities. Neighboring enslaved people often chose people from among those enslaved to the Jesuits and to the sisters as their sponsors, perhaps considering them to have an elevated spiritual role within the community or greater access to components of religious life. Among these central figures, certain individuals were chosen more often than others. [Nancy Queen](#), one of the first bondswomen brought to the Jesuits' seminary and plantation in Florissant, and an elder within the Jesuits' enslaved community, was most frequently chosen as a sponsor. Over time, as [Joseph Hawkins \(Queen\)](#) and [Peter Hawkins](#) came of age and became renowned in the community for their faith, wisdom, and influence, they succeeded Nancy Queen as community elders as enslaved people both on the Jesuit property and on neighboring farms chose them as sponsors.



The Lived Religion in the Digital Age fellowship enabled me to expand this research on faith and community life among Catholic enslaved communities by mapping neighboring populations and communities in other regions to see whether the same patterns existed or different ones emerged. Through the fellowship, I have been able to begin comparing the Florissant-St. Louis community of people enslaved to the Jesuits to communities where people were enslaved to the Jesuits in Bardstown, Kentucky, in St. Mary’s near Lebanon, Kentucky, and in Grand Coteau, Louisiana. I also began to expand my mapping of enslaved communities in Missouri by developing visualizations of family and sacramental ties in records of the Old Cathedral of Saint Louis and in sacramental records documenting the community enslaved to the Vincentians and their enslaved neighbors in Perryville, Missouri. This enabled me to learn whether the patterns in Florissant-St. Louis held true in other places, or whether there were differences in how these regional enslaved communities approached their faith. These undertakings are large and still in progress, but initial results have revealed important trends of continuity between each enslaved community as well as regional differences. Before delving into what I found, I will outline some of my methodology, scope, and some limitations so as to better demonstrate what my findings do and don’t reveal.

## Methodology

Although this network analysis seeks to overcome gaps and silences in the historical record, it does so in conversation with manuscript records, oral histories, and other accounts of enslaved religious, family, and community life so that enslaved people’s qualitative experience is

not lost in the quantitative. I further seek to avoid and overcome, or at least counterbalance, the risks inherent in network visualization of further anonymizing a community by reducing their lives and identities to dots, lines, and numbers, by gradually incorporating as much as can be found about the lives of each enslaved person (visible when one clicks on their node, see [Matilda Hawkins Tyler](#) or [Peter Hawkins](#) for a preliminary example), and to use the data in my scholarship in a manner that only more fully details the contours of their identity and lived experience.

In the visualizations:

- *Nodes* represent people.
  - My research primarily focuses on people enslaved to the Jesuits, as well as to other clergy and religious orders within the Catholic Church, who lived and labored in community with a larger Catholic population. Thus, I distinguish people who labored in slavery to the Jesuits, as well as others enslaved to Catholic religious but not to the Jesuits, from other Catholic bondspeople.
  - Many people in the region shared the same names. Sometimes multiple people in the same family shared a name, or an enslaved person shared the same name as one of their owners. So, where I could, I made inferences using contextual evidence about who a person was in order to strengthen the analysis the network visualization software provides (and labeled those inferences in case new evidence changes them later). Where I was completely unsure of a person's identity (primarily, Black or white, bonded or free), I labeled them as “unknown status.”
- *Edges* represent relationships between people.
  - Family relationships = ‘blood’ relationships—nuclear and extended family relationships defined by marriage and birth. Subcategories include spouses, parent and child, siblings.
  - Sacramental relationships = relationships forged by spiritual bonds, such as serving as a godparent at a baptism or a witness at a wedding. Sacramental relationships signify an extended family network that is not necessarily bound by blood. Subcategories include godparent and marriage witness.
  - Relationships of ownership = “master-slave” relationships that do not constitute kinship, but rather are unequal relationships of power and coercion.

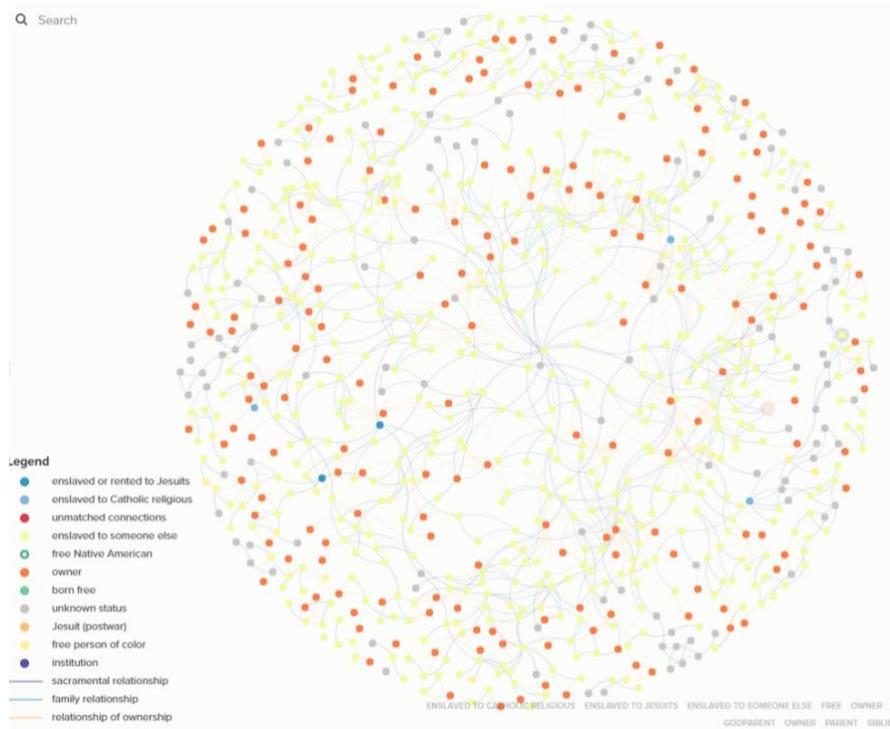
### **Some Preliminary Findings and Comparative Analysis**

#### [Missouri](#)

- Jesuits held more people in slavery in Missouri than they did in Kentucky or Louisiana, even though Kentucky and Louisiana had larger total enslaved populations. Thus, the community of people enslaved to the Jesuits was larger in proportion to the broader enslaved community around it. The Missouri Jesuits’ enslaved community also had the largest number of families that remained intact for several generations, without as much disruption due to forced relocation or sale as in other regions. Network analysis of sacramental records show that the community of families enslaved to the Jesuits in Missouri had a strong pull factor among the surrounding community, showing the influence they had in their network. This is

substantiated by surviving records which comment that the community enslaved to the Jesuits at St. Stanislaus Seminary in Florissant were so influential among their enslaved and free African American neighbors that their neighbors began building huts in the forest near the seminary to be near the Jesuits' bondpeople.

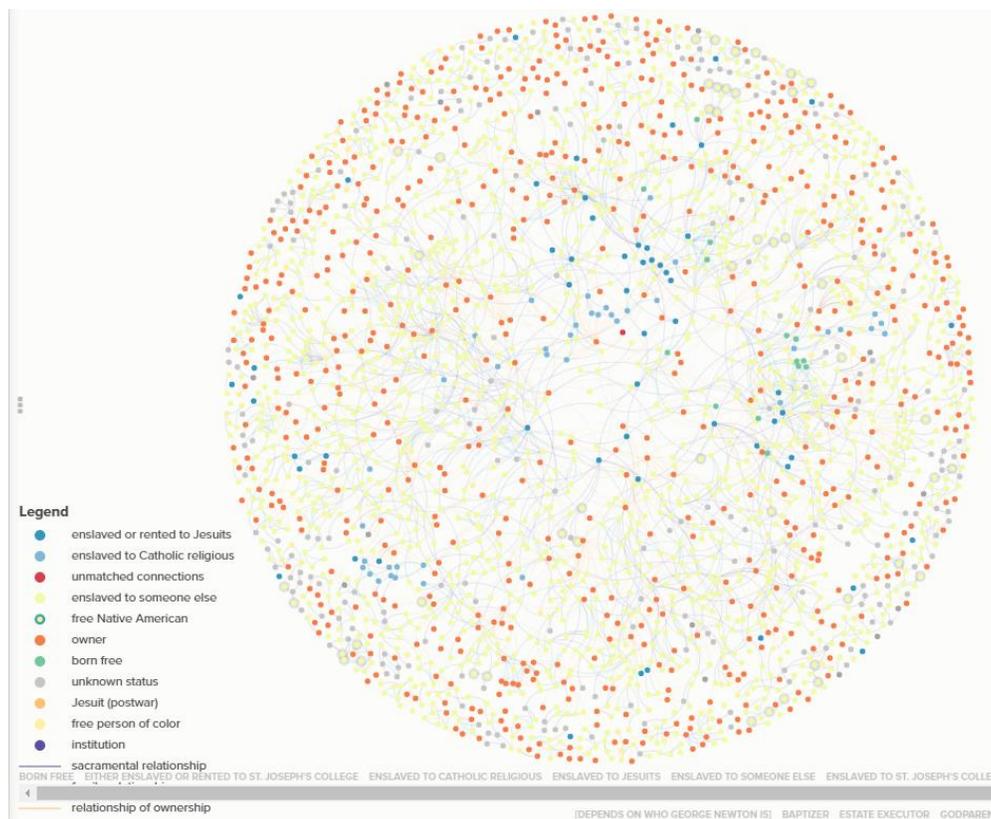
*Kentucky*



*St. Mary's, Kentucky Enslaved Community Network*

- The enslaved communities in semirural Bardstown and St. Mary's, Kentucky, were much larger than the enslaved community in Florissant (and the limited portion of the St. Louis Catholic enslaved population mapped for this project). Thus, the number of people enslaved to the Jesuits is proportionally smaller and did not hold as strong a pull factor within the larger community. One limiting factor to the St. Mary's network is that although at least seventeen people are known to have been enslaved to the Jesuits at St. Mary's College, only two are at this time known by name and thus appear in this network. In Bardstown, the Jesuits held between twelve and twenty people in slavery directly but relied more often on hiring enslaved people from neighbors. These individuals who labored both on their owners' plantations and at the Jesuit-run college and church connected multiple communities, as the sacramental ties they forged show in the network visualization.
- A closer look at the sacramental relationships of those who labored for the Jesuits and other Catholic clergy and religious in Bardstown show that people who labored for members of the Catholic Church were still the most often chosen as sponsors. Rather than having a tight inner network with a strong pull, they had looser ties that spanned multiple communities broadly across the Bardstown enslaved population:

- [Magdaline](#), enslaved to St. Joseph College, sponsored 12 baptisms.
  - [Zara, or Sarah](#), enslaved to Miss Fanny Harrison, who rented her to St. Joseph College, sponsored 10 baptisms.
  - [Sarah Ann](#), enslaved to John Speak, sponsored 10 baptisms.
  - [Dorothea](#), enslaved to Bishop Flaget and Saint Joseph College, sponsored 9 baptisms.
  - [Mary](#), enslaved to Stanislaus and Susanna Hayden, sponsored 9 baptisms.
  - [Sarah](#), enslaved to John Rogers, sponsored 9 baptisms.
  - [Mary Speak](#), enslaved to John Speak and rented to St. Joseph College, sponsored 8 baptisms.
  - [Anna Cashot](#) was enslaved to a Mr. Cashot, but obtained her freedom, and helped to free others. She sponsored 8 baptisms.
  - [Dolly](#), enslaved to St. Joseph College, sponsored 7 baptisms.
  - [Monica](#), enslaved to Jasper Muir and later to his daughter, Margaret Muir, sponsored 7 baptisms.
  - [Melinda](#), enslaved to Bishop Flaget and St. Joseph College, sponsored 6 baptisms.
  - [Sophie](#), enslaved to Roger Smith, sponsored 5 baptisms.
  - [Martha](#), enslaved to members of the Muir family, sponsored 6 baptisms.
- Notably, all of the sponsors listed above are women, and almost all had some connection to St. Joseph College and Cathedral and the clergy who ran both through their enslavement. Whereas in Missouri and Louisiana baptisms typically listed both a godmother and a godfather, both the baptism records for St. Joseph Cathedral in Bardstown, Kentucky, and St. Mary's Chapel and St. Charles Church near Lebanon, Kentucky typically only listed a godmother, resulting in a very women-centered set of leading sponsors. I am still seeking to understand what accounts for the regional difference of the presence of usually only one godparent, typically a godmother, in Kentucky, but more regularly both a godfather and a godmother in Missouri and Louisiana.
  - More slaveholders and their family members appear as godparents in these records, suggesting that bondspeople in Kentucky had less choice in their conversion and selection of sponsors than in Missouri.

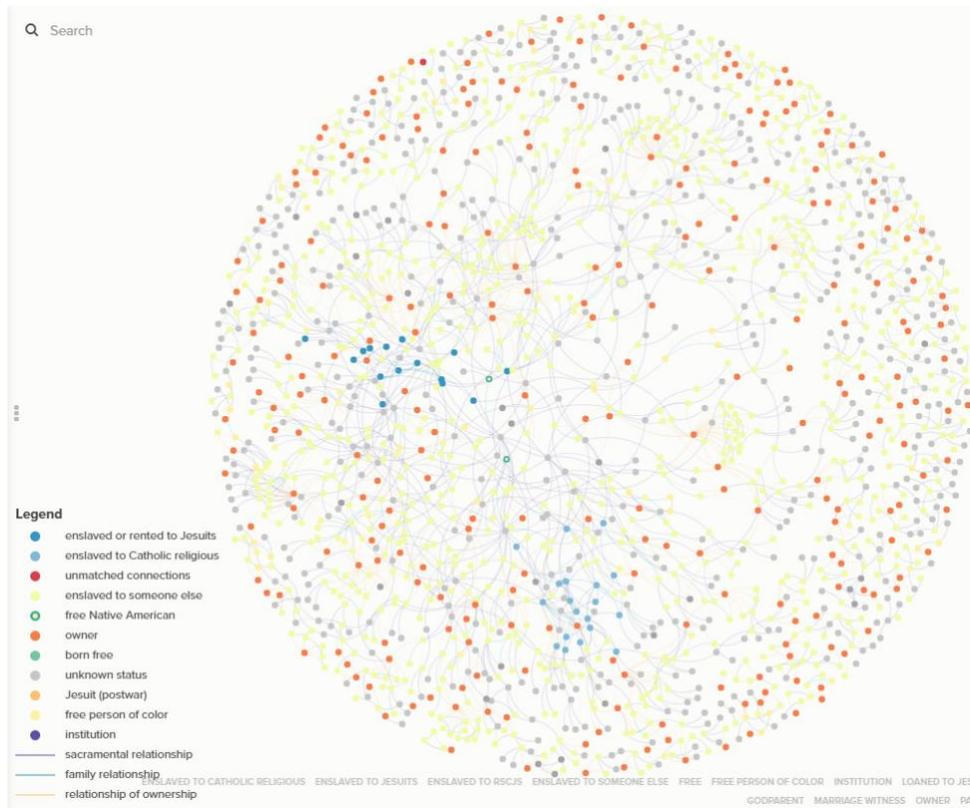


*[Bardstown, Kentucky, Enslaved Community Network](#)*

### Louisiana

- Network mapping for the enormous plantation-based Catholic slave society of Grand Coteau Louisiana is still largely incomplete (see more in Some Limitations and Areas for Further Development below). However, even though the data is not complete enough to be representative at this time, certain patterns are emerging that are comparable to findings in Missouri and Kentucky and suggest a blend between the practices in both regions. As in Bardstown, the Jesuits in Grand Coteau held only a few families in slavery and relied more extensively on the enslaved labor of people borrowed from neighbors and from the Religious of the Sacred Heart (RSCJ). Thus, there is both a stable core community (like that in Missouri) consisting of the Gough family, Philadie and her daughter Rachel, and the Hawkins and Eaglin families who were enslaved to the Jesuits and the sisters, while at the same time a more fluid community of people who connect the communities on their plantations and the Jesuit and RSCJ enslaved communities through their rental and transfer between these sites of enslavement (like that in Kentucky).
- Louisiana, a place that like Missouri remained heavily influenced by the French *Code Noir* long after its transition to U.S. statehood, reveals similar patterns suggesting that while owners and priests sometimes imposed themselves or their family members and neighbors as godparents and marriage witnesses for their enslaved people early on, enslaved people increasingly wrested from their owners the ability to chose sponsors for themselves. This can be seen in the Gough family, where Sally Grayson Gough's owners initially stood as her godparents and godparents to her first children, but in

- time the Goughs began selecting godparents for their children from among enslaved people in their community.
- As with the Jesuits, Loretines, Vincentians, and local bishops' bondspeople in Missouri, the families enslaved to the Jesuits and the Religious of the Sacred Heart in Grand Coteau created a tight kin network among one another through overlapping sacramental sponsorships.



*[Grand Coteau, Louisiana, Enslaved Community Network](#)*

## Some Limitations and Areas for Further Development

These network visualizations, and the analyses that stem from them, continue to be a work in progress and will change as new information is found and added. Due to the pandemic, my access to records was limited. For instance, both the Bardstown and St. Mary's maps are graphed purely on baptismal records, as I was not able to access marriage records at this time. In Bardstown, I am missing baptismal records after the 1850s. Moreover, the Grand Coteau enslaved community was immense. Mapping just a portion of the first of four sacramental ledgers resulted in nodes representing more than 1,769 people and edges signifying at least 2,373 connections. Work on this thus remains ongoing, but even initial mapping has revealed important patterns.

At this time, the network visualizations are chronologically static, showing every person and relationship from the earliest entity entered to the latest, and thus does not represent change over time well. Thus, it is necessary to manually analyze the network visualization and the

chronologically organized sacramental entries to understand how enslaved faith communities grew over time and the degree to which they claimed control over who sponsored their sacraments from their owners. Someone who has worked with the records and visualizations intimately will recognize that chronological patterns do exist within the visualizations, but they are not visible to the casual observer. For instance, in the Missouri visualization, the earliest generations are those clustered in the center, tightly connected by several relationships, while later generations span out to the edges. There are even geographic patterns embedded in each visualization, as people enslaved at each site of enslavement are typically clustered together (in Missouri, for instance, there are distinguishable Florissant and Saint Louis sub-communities, connected by a few people who bridged each community as they were transferred back and forth). However, the static visualization remains misleading, and does not clearly display how the fledgling community grew into a full network. A representation of the Missouri enslaved community in 1823, for instance, would only display six people enslaved to the Jesuits who, while tightly connected to one another, had barely begun to establish relationships with the broader community. By 1865, a number of these six people had died and would no longer appear in an 1865 instance of the network, but their children and grandchildren had formed even tighter relationships with their extended kin and vast connections across the surrounding community.

*Kumu.io*, the program I used to develop these network visualizations, has a way to filter networks by date through tagging, but this requires manually entering every year a person lived into each node, and every year a relationship existed into each edge. Although I envision developing this timeline in the future, it will never be perfect, as I will never know every person's birth and death date, length of their relationships with others, or how long they were present in one place.

Due to the nature of enslavement and the fractured historical record of enslaved people, this research will never be complete, but new finds and innovations gradually help achieve further accuracy. Even a digital humanities project that strives toward accuracy but cannot fully achieve it grants new insights into the faith, family, and community lives of enslaved people in the absence of more personal and descriptive records. In fact, creating these network visualizations has helped bridge and fill in gaps in the historical record and have revealed new members of the community and familial relationships that would not have otherwise been known through their proximity to other kin in the visualization (for more on this, see my forthcoming "Matilda Hawkins Tyler: Mapping One Woman's Geography of Kinship and Perseverance," in *the Journal of Auto|Biography*).