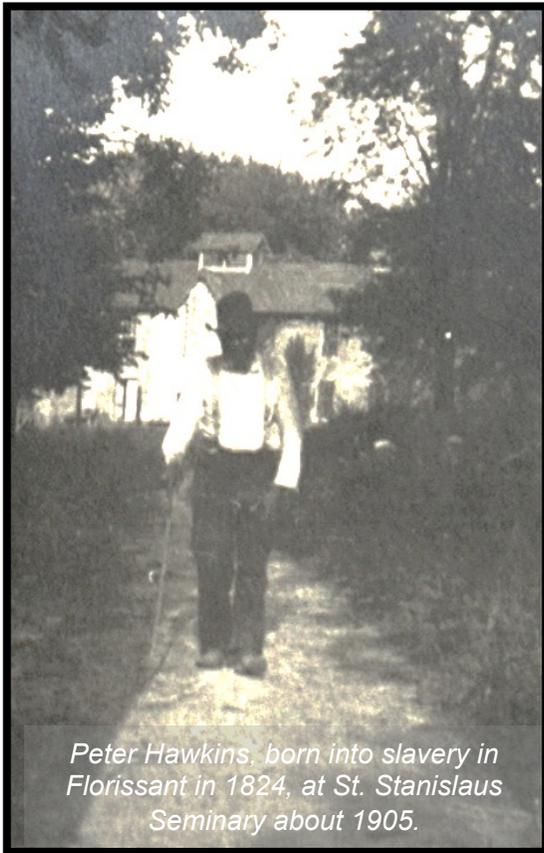


## Peter Hawkins and the Enslaved Community of St. Stanislaus

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**PETER HAWKINS** was the first child born into slavery at the Jesuits' Saint Stanislaus Novitiate and Farm in Florissant, Missouri, and the last formerly-enslaved person to leave the seminary after emancipation. He witnessed and lived through almost the entirety of enslaved people's presence at Saint Stanislaus. As an adult, his wisdom, experience, and devotion to the Catholic faith led several Black Catholics in the Florissant Valley area to choose him as their godfather at baptisms and as witness at their marriages.

Peter's parents, Isaac Hawkins and Susanna (often called Susan, or Succy) Queen, were newlyweds of only four months when they were forced along with two other enslaved couples to aid in founding the Jesuits' new Missouri mission. In May 1823 they endured a month-long journey of over a thousand miles by foot and flatboat along the Ohio River from the Jesuits' plantation in White Marsh, Maryland, to Florissant, Missouri. Isaac frequently navigated the flotilla out of trouble when caught in a current, and steered the boats at night. After arriving in Florissant, Isaac and Susan settled into a crowded, one-room log cabin that doubled as the kitchen and laundry, which they shared with the other two enslaved families. Isaac and Susan Hawkins, Thomas and Molly Brown, and Moses and Nancy Queen were forced to commence the difficult work of constructing the novitiate's new buildings, farming, and sewing, laundering, and cooking for the Jesuits.

**ON MAY 8, 1824**, Susan Hawkins gave birth to Peter in their crowded cabin. Peter was baptized conditionally the day of his birth because he was in danger of death. The full ceremonies were performed in June. Records show that Peter and Susan remained sickly over the following years. At age twenty, again in danger of death, Peter received the Catholic sacrament of anointing of the sick. Peter's brother, William, born in April 1834, lived only six months.

Through births, purchases, and the transfer of two more families from the White Marsh plantation in Maryland—including some of Peter's relatives—the enslaved community at Saint Stanislaus grew from seven to about 35 people during Peter Hawkins' lifetime. After the Jesuits became administrators of Saint Louis College (now Saint Louis University), several of Peter's kin were sent to labor at the college. Many enslaved people were transferred back and forth to labor between the Florissant farm at Saint Stanislaus, the downtown university, and the College Farm north of the city over the following years.

Peter and his kin built relationships with and became influential among the enslaved and free African American communities in the Florissant Valley. Enslaved people visited one another across plantations and properties in evening hours. They took advantage of feast days and mass attendance at Saint Ferdinand Church to gather together.

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They sold produce from their own garden plots and worked extra hours at night for pay to obtain funds to make their own purchases or to buy their freedom. Many bondspople used some of the money to buy better-quality materials than what the Jesuits supplied, so that when they gathered with kin for services, they could show off their finest clothing. People of color gradually began building shanties in the woods near Saint Stanislaus in order to be nearer to the Jesuits' enslaved community, and to join them in attending religious services at the chapel later designated on the property for enslaved people.

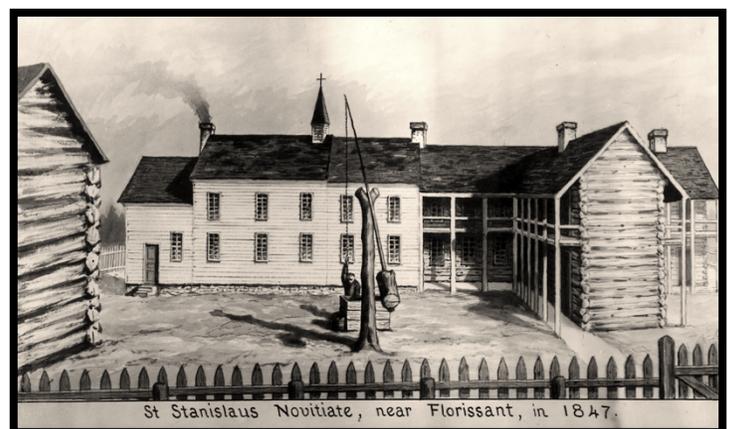
**WITH HIS KIN COMMUNITY,** Peter experienced the brutality of enslavement at the hands of his Jesuit masters, and participated with fellow bondspople in resisting their treatment. Peter may have watched as Jesuits prepared to have an enslaved man flogged, until the man's wife rescued him by throwing herself in front of the whip and flinging her arms around her husband. This couple could very well have been Peter's own parents. Peter may have been present on another occasion when enslaved women prevented another person's beating by picking up rocks to hurl at the inflictor. Peter was only about eight years old when, because a woman refused to remove her own clothing to be whipped, the Jesuit superior ordered a layman to strip and tie her, calling Jesuits to view the whipping as the woman's sister cried out "My sister is naked!" Peter was also severed from relatives and loved ones when Jesuits sold them away as punishment.

Jesuits lauded Peter Hawkins for his religious piety and for being "the best slave," but Peter's faith did not stop him

from resisting his enslavement to the Jesuits and pursuing freedom. In fact, he leveraged his perceived devotion as a strategy to negotiate with the Jesuits toward his own goals. He arranged with the Jesuits to allow him to work for hire in Florissant and Saint Louis to begin buying his freedom. Later, in 1862, Peter convinced the Jesuits to purchase a woman named Margaret, whom he wished to marry, from Charles G. McHatton, to prevent them from being separated. Jesuits agreed to this purchase as a supposed "reward" for Peter's loyalty, but stipulated that Peter, by his own labor, must pay them the \$800 price for Margaret's purchase before the couple could be free.

**FOR TWO YEARS** after marrying Margaret, Peter labored day and night to earn the funds for their freedom. Still, he could not make enough to pay off Margaret's purchase price—an estimated equivalent of \$20,308.04 today—from the meager tips he received from being hired out. In May 1864, Peter came to the Jesuits demanding that the price they were asking him to pay for his and Margaret's freedom was too much. The Jesuits, in turn, grumbled that Peter must have been prodded on by fellow bondspople to have become so dissatisfied. Many were already running away or expressing their discontent. They complained, "Peter, a black slave in our house of Probation [Novitiate], like almost all the other slaves these days, who have gone giddy, wants to leave us and live of his own right. But he had promised to repay us the money that we spent to buy his wife two years ago."

Peter's persistence forced the Jesuits to compromise. The consultors agreed to absolve half of Margaret's \$800 purchase price. They gave Peter a choice about how he would pay the remaining \$400: he and Margaret could either take whatever possessions they had and go live as free



*Left: Mr. Peter Hawkins at St. Stanislaus taken by William Grace, S.J., c. 1905. Above: St. Stanislaus in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The cabin in foreground at left is where Peter Hawkins likely was born, and where his family lived. The white frame building in the center eventually became a chapel for the enslaved people, while the smaller frame building attached to it at right became the laundry.*

people, paying the remainder over time, or, Peter could remain laboring for the Jesuits on their property for another two years, after which he and Margaret could then leave as free people without financial obligation. Peter and Margaret chose to stay.

**LESS THAN ONE YEAR** into this agreement, Missouri legislators abolished slavery on January 11, 1865. Yet Peter and Margaret continued to labor without compensation for two more years. Several days after the abolition legislation, Missouri Jesuits had decided to make contracts “with regard to pay” with all other remaining free people to continue working on the Jesuits’ farm for a salary. However they held Peter and Margaret in a state of debt peonage (debt slavery), as they continued to labor unrecompensed to pay off the imposed debt for Margaret’s purchase. In 1866, Peter requested that the Jesuits grant him a ten-acre plot of farmland on which he could live and work. The Jesuits said no—they claimed it would be inefficient. Peter did not receive a salary until January 15, 1867, two years after the abolition of slavery. Peter’s wages were \$14.00 per month; Margaret’s, \$5.00 per month.

Debt peonage and low wages were just a few of the tactics used by former slaveholders, including the Jesuits, to oppress Black Americans immediately after the abolition of slavery. Such practices did not end in the years following the Civil War and Reconstruction. From the Jim Crow era until today, as their oppressors have continued to find new ways to perpetuate structural violence and systemic racism—voter suppression, housing discrimination, mass incarceration, to name only a few—Black Americans have continued to struggle for civil and human rights. The struggle to achieve

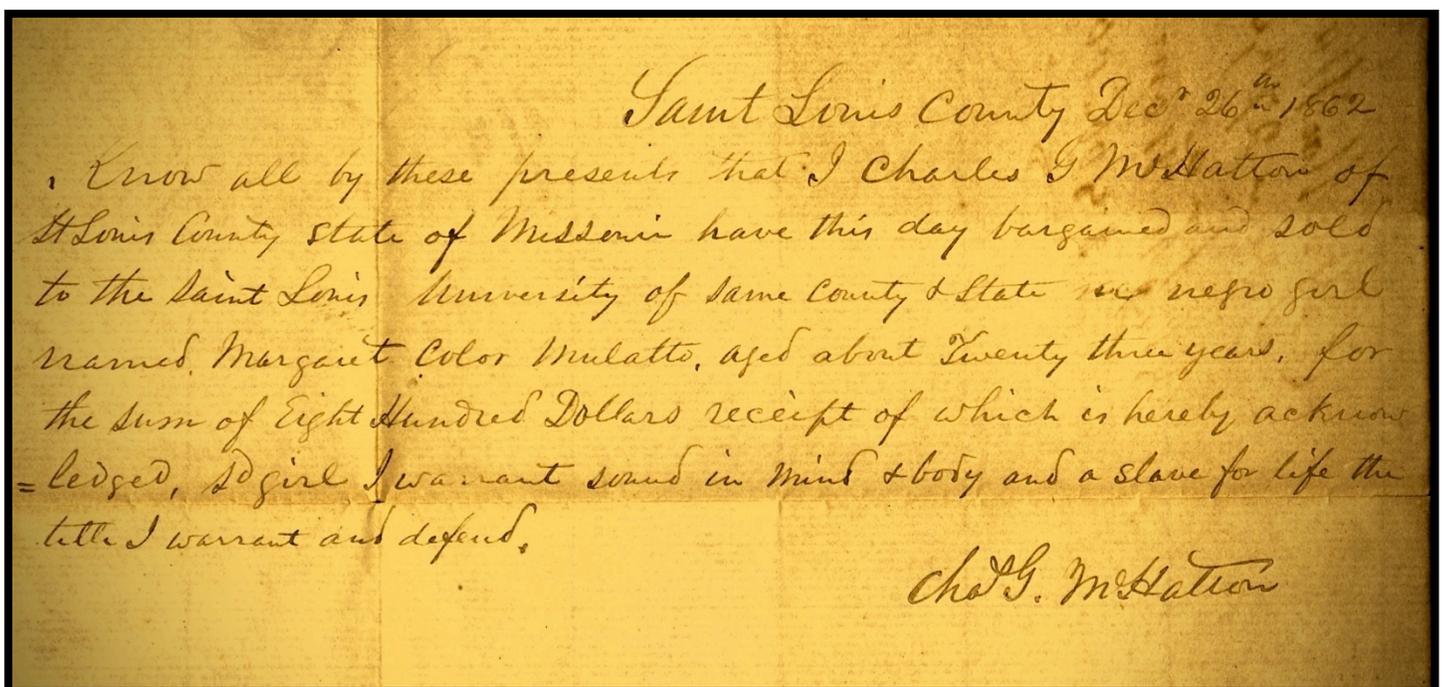
racial justice and dismantle white supremacy continues today, including in the mass protests that have emerged in response to ongoing police brutality throughout the United States.

**DESPITE EVERYTHING HE ENDURED**, Peter remained with the Jesuits until about the time of his death in 1907, having spent his entire life in service to the Jesuits even though they had so mistreated him. Perhaps Peter and Margaret remained at Saint Stanislaus so they could continue to be near the close kin community they had known for most of their lives. Peter and Margaret Hawkins had become central figures in the enslaved and free African American community around Florissant. As sponsors at baptisms while in bondage and after freedom, they continued to draw members of their community together, building stability in the uncertain aftermath of slavery.

Peter Hawkins was one of many people held in bondage by the Society of Jesus who resiliently shaped their own cultures and communities as they resisted their enslavement. For more about them, visit [shmr.jesuits.org](http://shmr.jesuits.org). ■

*This article is the fourth in a series that began in October 2019 to honor the “1619 Project”—recognizing the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of slavery. The October 2020 Quarterly will conclude the series.*

*Below: The bill of sale for the purchase of Peter Hawkins’s wife, Margaret. Images for this essay are courtesy of Jesuit Archives and Research Center, St. Louis. Used with permission.*



Saint Louis County Dec<sup>r</sup> 26<sup>th</sup> 1862

Know all by these presents that I Charles G. McHatten of St. Louis County State of Missouri have this day bargained and sold to the Saint Louis University of same County & State one negro girl named Margaret Color Mulatto, aged about Twenty three years, for the sum of Eight Hundred Dollars receipt of which is hereby acknowledged, the girl I warrant sound in mind & body and a slave for life the title I warrant and defend.

Chas G. McHatten