

No

Circuit Court March Term  
1837.

Aspasia a woman of color  
vs  
Joseph Rosati  
Declaran  
tion.

This is an action in  
for false imprison-  
ment in forma pan-  
peris for the recovery  
of freedom. Damages  
of 300. The clerk will  
issue a summons.

J. M. Risque

p. 90

Courtesy of the Missouri State Archives.

# Aspasia LeCompte Room

Room 300 | John T. Richardson Library  
2350 N. Kenmore Ave. Chicago, Illinois

This room was re-named in 2023 to honor the memory of Aspasia LeCompte (b.1804), her family, and the men and women who were held in bondage by Vincentian priests.

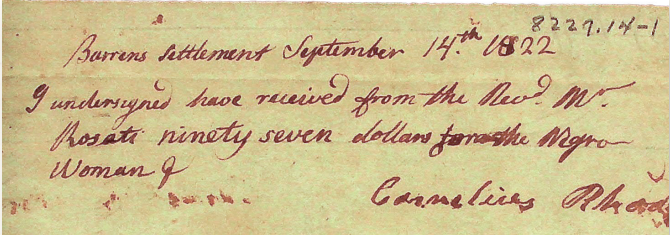
LeCompte won her liberty in 1839, after having filed multiple freedom suits against Bishop Rosati and other enslavers over a period of twelve years.

# Vincentians and Slavery

Vincentians began enslaving people almost as soon as they settled in Missouri. In 1815, the Bishop of Louisiana, Louis William DuBourg, recruited Fr. Felix De Andreis, a Vincentian from Rome, to found the Congregation of the Mission in the United States.

De Andreis came to the country in 1816 with a handful of others, among them Fr. Joseph Rosati; they arrived in Perryville, Missouri, in 1818, at which time DuBourg provided them with a number of enslaved persons. Rosati also began to purchase slaves shortly thereafter, increasing the number of enslaved people at St. Mary's of the Barrens to 27 by 1830.

By 1860, records show that Vincentians had owned, traded, and used the labor of at least fifty enslaved persons of African descent in the building and operations of a seminary, school, church, and other property. They also controlled the lives of dozens of other enslaved people whose labor they rented from neighboring enslavers, many of them parishioners.



Receipt dated September 14, 1822, documenting the purchase, by Rev. Joseph Rosati, C.M., of an enslaved woman for St. Mary of the Barrens's Seminary. St. Mary's of the Barrens, Perryville, MO. Vincentian Archives, DePaul University, Special Collections and Archives.

The Vincentians sold enslaved people to fellow Catholics and relocated others to various religious sites in the South. For example, in 1853 Peter Byrne, a layman in Cape Girardeau, paid \$2250 to the Vincentians for five people. One of them, Zeno (Fenwick) Byrne, went on to enlist as a soldier in the United States Colored Troops in the Civil War.

On the eve of the Civil War, Vincentians continued to hold in bondage ten persons in Cape Girardeau and two persons in Perryville. Research into and documentation of the identities and experiences of the enslaved persons who lived and labored at Vincentian sites is ongoing.

No. [redacted]

COLORED VOLUNTEER DESCRIPTIVE LIST of  
 service of the United States under General Order, No. 135, Head  
 Claimed to have been the slave of *Peter Byrne* a citizen of *Cape Girardeau* County, State of Missouri.

*Zeno Byrne* Colored Volunteers, enlisted in the  
 Quarters, Department of the Missouri, St. Louis, November 14th, 1863.

Name.	Description.							Where		Occupation.	Enlisted.			
	YEARS OF AGE.	EYES.	HAIR.	COMPLEXION.	FEET.	HIGHER.	State.	County.	When.		Where.	By whom.	Period.	
<i>Zeno Byrne</i>	<i>21</i>													

REMARKS.

Zeno (Fenwick) Byrne Enrollment Record, 1863. Recruitment Lists of Volunteers for the United States Colored Troops for Missouri, 1863-1865. Roll 2, Frame 17, M1894, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington DC.

# Recovering the Past

Archival, sacramental, and government records provide glimpses into the lives of some of these enslaved people and directly link them to priests who held them in bondage.

The 1840 Census and other Vincentian documents, for instance, show that Harry and Minty Nesbit and their daughter, Juliana, were

owned by St. Vincent's College in Cape Girardeau. The Vincentians had moved them away from family and kin in Perryville to work at the newly-established college.

Vincentian records also reveal that many years later, Juliana and her husband, Hamlet Rodney, arranged to purchase the freedom of Juliana,

their two daughters, and Minty Nesbit for \$500. Records show that the Rodneys made numerous payments toward this price. Although evidence for the family's complete emancipation has not yet been located, it is believed Juliana Rodney gained her freedom through self-purchase in 1858.

Throughout the antebellum period, the Vincentians reduced the number of people they held in slavery, but they did so mostly by selling those persons to white Catholics, rather than through emancipation.

The Catholic Church in the United States did not oppose slavery during the antebellum era, but defended the racist hierarchies of slavery as productive of social order, while at the same time urging Catholic slaveholders to ensure that Catholic sacraments such as baptism and marriage were made available to enslaved people.

Though these facts were known among Vincentian scholars, the full scope and meaning of this history is only now being documented and broadly appraised.

		Received		\$	ct.	\$	cts
1853	May. 1	Balance on hand from last month.				502	26
	4.	Cash for 2 Hh <sup>d</sup> Sugar at 4.50 per cwt		86	30		
	" 12.	Cash on deposit for W <sup>m</sup> Keeny		2	00		
	" 13	Cash in deposit for B & N Blanchard		25	00		
	" 15	Cash from W <sup>m</sup> Genelli for		100	00		
	" 17	Cash in deposit for do.		12	00	225	30
	" 19	Cash from Julianna in part payment for her freedom		50	00		
	" 19	Cash rec <sup>d</sup> for Sugar &c		1	00		

"Cash from Julianna in part payment for her freedom." This St. Vincent's College ledger entry dated May 19, 1853, documents a \$50 payment to the College by Julianna Rodney, made as part of a self-purchase agreement she and her husband negotiated with the Trustees of the College. St. Vincent's College, Cape Girardeau, MO. Vincentian Archives, DePaul University, Special Collections and Archives.

# About This Room

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The Aspasia LeCompte Room was formerly named for Bishop Joseph Rosati.

In 1993, the Western Province of the Congregation of the Mission—the Catholic order also commonly known as the Vincentians, who founded DePaul University as St. Vincent's College in 1898—made a donation to the University that included naming rights to two rooms in the newly constructed John T. Richardson Library. They named Room 300 after Bishop Joseph Rosati, C.M., one of the founders of the Vincentian Mission in the United States.

Archival records held at DePaul University, the University of Notre Dame, and the Archdiocese of St. Louis show that Rosati and other Vincentian priests owned, rented, traded, and used the labor of enslaved persons in the building and operations of a seminary, school, church, and other property in Missouri from 1818 through the early 1860s.

In 2021, the University removed Bishop Rosati's name when this history of enslavement

became more widely known. In May 2023, this room was renamed to honor Aspasia LeCompte, one of the many people held in bondage by Bishop Rosati and the Vincentians. In an interfaith ceremony at DePaul, the Vincentians publicly acknowledged and apologized for the order's enslavement of Black people.

For more information about this history and the work of DePaul University's Task Force to Address the Vincentian Relationship to Slavery, please scan this QR code.



*Brochure Credits: Margaret Storey, Lori Pierce, Jamie Nelson, Morgen MacIntosh Hodgetts, and Aman Dembe (designer)*

# Aspasia LeCompte

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Aspasia LeCompte was born into slavery and baptized by the Catholic Church in 1804. She and her mother and siblings were held in bondage by multiple, and different, Catholic enslavers during the subsequent decades, including Bishop Joseph Rosati.

Some of what is known about LeCompte comes from an unusual source. She and members of her extended kin network successfully sued for their freedom.

Under a principle of Missouri law known as “once free always free,” enslaved people could sue for their freedom if they could prove that they had ever lived in a free state and were therefore being kept in bondage against their will in Missouri, a slave state.

Freedom suits were difficult to pursue and even harder to win. Of the approximately 300 enslaved people who sued, fewer than half were successful. In 1827, LeCompte filed her first freedom suit. Despite being declared free by one court, her enslavers appealed the decision to various higher courts, only to have the case

returned to lower courts for adjudication. During this lengthy appeal process, LeCompte remained imprisoned by the city of St. Louis or enslaved to various people, even though her case was found to have merit in multiple courts.

It was sometime during this period, in or around 1834, that Bishop Joseph Rosati purchased LeCompte. In 1837, LeCompte sued Rosati for her freedom on the same basis as she had filed previous suits. Rather than accede to her demand for freedom, or to fight her in court, Rosati sold LeCompte to Hardage Lane, a professor at Saint Louis University. LeCompte then filed suit against Lane later that same year. She finally gained her liberty in April 1839. LeCompte went on to support the successful efforts of several family members in their own freedom suits.

By 1844, LeCompte and five of her family members had managed to obtain their freedom through their determined use of the courts and deep solidarity with one another, despite sustained resistance, trickery, and subterfuge at the hands of those who enslaved them.