My love affair with New Orleans--and my obsession with Marie Laveau--began in the spring of 1978. A Florida/Georgia native and long-time denizen of Alabama and Mississippi, I was living at the time in rural Vermont, terminally sick of the six-month winter and the dismal cold and slush of "mud season." I escaped to New Orleans for a two-week visit and wanted to stay forever--I had never felt so at home. This "Crescent City" on the Mississippi River was the South and yet not the South, close to my roots and yet irrevocably foreign. People said "y'all" and called me "dawlin" just like they did where I came from, but the similarity ended there. In New Orleans, there were fortune tellers and fire eaters at the cathedral; second-line parades and jazz funerals; nuns on the bus; John the Conqueror and Stop Evil Floor Wash in the grocery store; chicory coffee and *beignets* at the French Market and okra gumbo at the Napoleon House; St. Expedite in the mortuary chapel and the Blessed Virgin Mary in the front yard. You could buy beer in a go-cup and drink it on the street, sit on the stoop and eat crawfish out of a paper bag and listen to the calliope from the riverboat. It was funky and decadent and beautiful and slightly dangerous. It was Bourbon Street, the Cities of the Dead, and Voodoo--or *Voudou*, as it was spelled in the nineteenth century. I have returned to this magical city again and again.

On August 29, 2005, just as this book was going to press, Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans, causing unprecedented damage, flooding, and misery. In the days that followed I listened in horror to news reports of the devastation of my beloved city and its people. As I write this, the future of the place I knew remains uncertain.

Back in 1978, like most other first-time visitors, I made the obligatory pilgrimage to New Orleans' oldest above-ground cemetery, St. Louis No. 1, paying my respects at the three-tiered, white-stuccoed brick tomb inscribed "Famille Veuve Paris née Laveau" (Family of the Widow Paris born Laveau). A bronze plaque states cautiously that this is the "reputed burial place of Marie Laveau, the notorious Voodoo Queen." Tourists and locals alike visit the tomb to carry out the prescribed ritual--rap three times on the wall, draw a cross mark with a bit of soft red brick, place your hand on the marble slab, ask Marie to grant your wish, and leave a small offering of coins, fruit, candy, or flowers.

According to the legend told and retold in newspaper and magazine articles, popular histories, tourist guide books, three novels, an opera, a film, a play, a musical, and on the World Wide Web, Marie Laveau was an extraordinary woman, a Voudou priestess and a highly successful entrepreneur capable of both good and evil. Descended from foremothers

who served the Voudou deities, her combination of spiritual power, clairvoyance, healing abilities, beauty, charisma, showmanship, intimidation, and shrewd business sense enabled her to assume leadership of a multiracial religious community and accumulate wealth and property. Her influence is said to have extended to every segment of New Orleans society, from slaves to upper-class whites, and she is believed to have controlled the actions of policemen, judges, and city officials through magic or blackmail. She supposedly acquired her cottage on St. Ann Street by extricating a client from the clutches of the law. It is claimed that she led the Voudou dances in Congo Square and the orgiastic St. John's Eve ceremonies on the shores of Lake Pontchartrain, kept a gigantic snake named Grand Zombi, and procured young women of color for white men at an infamous house of assignation. On the other hand, we hear of her devotion to the Roman Catholic church, her kindness and charity, her nursing of yellow fever victims and ministry to condemned prisoners, her anti-slavery activism, and her leadership in the struggle by woman of African descent against the hierarchy of white men.

The legend tells us that Marie Laveau was the daughter of a wealthy white planter and his beautiful mulatto mistress, that she was married first to Jacques Paris and then to Christophe Glapion, and that she was the mother of fifteen children. She is said to have been nearly a hundred years old at the time of her death in 1881. As she aged, one of her daughters, known as "Marie II," is supposed to have secretly taken her place, giving the impression that the Queen of the Voudous reigned, perpetually beautiful, until the end of the nineteenth century.

Standing before the tomb of Marie Laveau, the curious visitor is moved to question just whose bones are interred here and why, more than a century after her death, she has become an internationally renowned cult figure. Looking for answers, I read everything available on the famous priestess. Although a great deal had been written, I found nothing of substance. Finally, in 1995, I decided to undertake this project myself.

I began my research with the reports and interviews submitted in the late 1930s-early 1940s by the Louisiana Writers' Project (LWP). The LWP was a local branch of the Federal Writers' Project, created during the Great Depression under the auspices of the Works Projects Administration to provide employment for journalists, creative writers, and other white collar workers. Under the leadership of project director Lyle Saxon, LWP fieldworkers made the first serious attempt to uncover the true story of Marie Laveau. They located and

transcribed civil and ecclesiastical records relating to Marie, her family, and her associates, translating those written in French or Spanish into English. They made typed copies of nineteenth-century newspaper articles on Voudou and compiled a bibliography of hundreds of others.

Most significantly, LWP fieldworkers interviewed seventy mostly black New Orleanians, born between 1853 and 1878, who remembered the famous Voudou priestess or her successor. Forty-seven of the interviews were of sufficient substance to be usable in this study. These informants are listed in the Appendix, with date of birth (if known), address, association with Marie Laveau, and category of information provided. In the interest of clarity, I have converted the "Negro dialect" in which the interviews were transcribed by Writers' Project workers to standard English spelling.

The interviews vary considerably in quality. These elderly people were recalling events fifty to sixty years past; they sometimes contradicted each other or even contradicted themselves. They held widely divergent opinions of Marie Laveau's character. The Writers' Project fieldworkers did not have the use of sound recording equipment, but took notes and wrote their reports from memory. Many of the informants spoke Louisiana Creole as their first language, and their English might have been difficult for the LWP workers to understand. Some errors undoubtedly crept in due to less than perfect interview methods. The best of the interviews nevertheless have a definite ring of authenticity. The descriptions of Voudou ceremonies can be correlated with newspaper reports and other printed sources, and information about Marie Laveau's extended family is substantiated by archival evidence.

In 1940, Writers' Project employee Catherine Dillon drew upon the archival documents, newspaper stories, and interviews collected by LWP fieldworkers to produce a 700-page "Voodoo" manuscript. In the most important chapters, "Marie the Great" and "Marie the Mysterious," Dillon interpreted these primary sources to create a narrative of the original Marie Laveau and her successor. Another book-length manuscript, a history of African Americans in Louisiana, was compiled by researcher Marcus Christian, director of the LWP's "Negro Unit" at Dillard University. Christian's chapter on "Voodooism and Mumbo-Jumbo" was based primarily on newspaper articles and other printed accounts.

The Louisiana Writers' Project, along with other Works Projects Administration programs, was abruptly shut down in 1943 when the United States entered World War II. Most of this valuable data remains unpublished and is not readily accessible to the general public. The greater part of the LWP collection, including Dillon's "Voodoo" manuscript,

resides in the Cammie G. Henry Research Center at the Watson Memorial Library, Northwestern State University of Louisiana at Natchitoches. Duplicates of some of the reports and interviews are found in the Robert Tallant Papers at the New Orleans Public Library. A small amount of material is included in the Lyle Saxon Papers in Special Collections at Howard-Tilton Memorial Library at Tulane University. Marcus Christian's manuscript, "A Black History of Louisiana," is housed in the Archives and Manuscripts Division, Earl K. Long Library at the University of New Orleans.

Armed with clues from the LWP files, I proceeded to Louisiana's archival repositories. I consulted primary documents at the Archives of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, the City Archives in the Louisiana Division of the New Orleans Public Library, the Notarial Archives Research Center, the Conveyance Office in New Orleans' Civil District Court building, the Historic New Orleans Collection, the Louisiana State Museum's Historical Center at the Old Mint Building, Special Collections at the libraries of Tulane University and the University of New Orleans, and at the Louisiana Division of Archives in Baton Rouge. I also found primary data at the Moreland-Springarn Research Center at Howard University and at the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, D. C. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall's CD-ROM, Databases for the Study of Afro-Louisiana History and Genealogy 1699-1860, was essential to my location of documents regarding slave sales, purchases, and emancipations. In later years I was able to do considerable research via the World Wide Web, particularly at Ancestry.com, the USGenWeb Orleans Parish Archives Index website, and at NUTRIAS, the website of the New Orleans Public Library.

I heard repeatedly that no accurate history of Marie Laveau could be recovered, that no records were kept for people of color, and that any Laveau documents that might have existed have been lost, destroyed, or stolen. This, like much of the Laveau Legend, is not true. Owing to the meticulous documentation of baptisms, marriages, and funerals in the sacramental registers of the Roman Catholic church, and the obsessive record keeping required by French and Spanish civil law and continued under the American administration, I was able to find a prodigious quantity of information on Marie Laveau, her ancestors, and her descendants. While my research has gone far beyond that of the Louisiana Writers' Project, I would not have known how to begin were it not for the foundation provided by LWP fieldworkers almost seventy years ago.

The purpose of this research has been to disentangle the complex threads of the

"Laveau Legend," separating verifiable fact from semi-fiction and complete fabrication. I have attempted to trace the evolution of the legend and uncover the truth regarding the life of the original Marie Laveau and her associates, and to identify her successor, the elusive "Marie II." This story is told against the backdrop of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century New Orleans, the unique social, political, and legal setting in which the lives of Marie Laveau's African and European ancestors became intertwined and Voudou evolved from the religious traditions of enslaved Africans, flourished in the early nineteenth century, was exploited for the denigration of black people during and after Reconstruction, and was eventually suppressed.

In the Prologue I have outline the development of the Laveau Legend in print and performance. The numerous permutations of this legend are woven throughout the subsequent chapters, where they are balanced against the LWP interviews and the archival evidence. Part One concentrates on Marie Laveau's personal life--her ancestors, parents, domestic partners, and children–and her place as an ordinary citizen of New Orleans. Part Two examines New Orleans Voudou as an Afro-Catholic religion, and Marie Laveau's role as a leader of the Voudou community. Part Three deals with the final years of the Voudou Queen and the fate of her descendants, and reflects on the identity of her successor.

Because Marie Laveau was illiterate, this cannot be a typical biography based on the writings of its illustrious subject. Marie left no letters or diaries and granted no interviews. She never speaks to us in her own voice. All we know is what was said of her by others: the journalists, popular historians, and novelists who spun ever more extravagant yarns about the celebrated priestess; the members of her own community who shared their remembrances with Louisiana Writers' Project fieldworkers; and the priests, clerks, notaries, and census enumerators who recorded the usual milestones of her life and the lives of her relatives and associates. Through a process of creative detective work I have attempted to construct an accurate narrative from the sources available, but gaps in the evidence have sometimes necessitated an educated guess about what *might* have happened. My speculations are always identified as such, and are never presented as fact. Marie Laveau's thoughts and feelings, her religious convictions, her motivations and ambitions, her triumphs and bereavements, remain unfathomable. She is a blank slate, a receptacle for our prejudices, our fantasies, and our desires.