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Mary Glass and the Meaning of Freedom in the Revolutionary Gulf South

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Using legal records written by officials of the Spanish and British Empires, this article examines the 1780 trial of Mary Glass, a free woman of color accused of murdering a young white indentured servant named Emilia Davis. Both Glass and Davis lived near Baton Rouge in the British colony of West Florida, which was invaded in February 1778 by an American raiding party that burned and looted the homes of loyalists. In the aftermath of the raid, Davis was placed in the home of Mary Glass, where she remained until her death in December 1779. By that time, Baton Rouge had been conquered by Spain, and the new Spanish commandant of the region began an investigation into Davis's death in February 1780, an investigation that led to Glass's trial, conviction, and execution. Comprised of hundreds of documents in Spanish, French, and English, the records of the Glass trial reveal in harrowing detail the violence that Glass inflicted on Davis. Declaring that "Emilia was her slave and that she had a right to do with her as She pleased," Glass not only emulated the behavior of white enslavers but invoked the language of the American Revolution to justify her actions.