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Slavery, capitalism and the law in old New Orleans

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Maria Montalvo, who recently earned a doctorate in history from Rice University, is a legal historian at Newcomb College Institute and the Dora Bonquois Ellis Postdoctoral Fellow in residence at Tulane University. Her work with antebellum court records from New Orleans will eventually be turned into a book. (Photograph by Sally Asher)

A Newcomb College Institute scholar is using antebellum court records to examine the experience of slaves and free women of color in the New Orleans court system.

[Maria R. Montalvo](#) is a legal historian whose work examines how the racial and gendered workings of New Orleans' courts shaped the lives of those individuals.

Montalvo, who recently earned a doctorate in history from Rice University, will spend the next year as the [Dora Bonquois Ellis Postdoctoral Fellow in residence at Tulane](#), where she will develop her

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dissertation, “The Slavers’ Archive: Enslaved People, Power, and the Production of the Past in the Antebellum Courtroom,” into a book manuscript. Montalvo has studied more than 18,000 civil court records from New Orleans’ local courts and the Louisiana Supreme Court to develop a history of slavery, capitalism and the law in the 19th-century United States.

Montalvo’s project is divided into three sections, focusing on enslaved people who were used as evidence in civil suits, free women of color who were illegally enslaved but sued for their freedom, and free women of color who filed lawsuits unrelated to their statuses as free women. While at Newcomb, Montalvo will mentor undergraduate research students and work with faculty in Tulane’s history department as she refines her manuscript.

“My time at Newcomb will allow me to not only immerse myself in the archival materials that are so essential to my research but also to move forward with my scholarship with the benefit of an incredibly supportive intellectual community,” said Montalvo. “I am especially interested in engaging with other scholars and students on campus.”

The Dora Bonquois Ellis Fellowship is funded by a gift from Mrs. Ellis to support projects focused on women’s history and/or women’s lives.