

**Living in Paris in the French Revolution:  
The Story of an Ordinary Citizen**

*Timothy Tackett*

In the heat of the early summer of 1797 Adrien-Joseph Colson lay dying in his upstairs apartment in the center of Paris. For decades he had been something of a fixture on his street. You could always spot him: the elderly citizen, a confirmed bachelor, walking about in his powdered wig, his waistcoat and knee breeches, his Swiss pocket watch and copper knobbed cane – or green umbrella in inclement weather. Even though most citizens in this very popular neighborhood had never worn such dress, and even though he spoke like someone who had spent time in school, a bourgeois of sorts, no one had ever suspected him of being an aristocrat. For he had always been a good patriot, attending the meetings of his section and even marching with the local national guard, despite his age. And he had always been kindly, never condescending, stopping to chat with those he encountered in the street, whatever their profession; forever curious, forever interested in what his neighbors thought or imagined of the extraordinary events they were all experiencing.

But now one of the priests, who had only recently been allowed to return to his pastoral activities, had been spotted entering his building to administer the Last Rites. Colson's landlord, the candlemaker Jean-Louis Ladoubé with whom he had rented his apartment for over twenty years, had brought in two elderly widows to care for his needs during his sickness. And it was Ladoubé who would soon take charge of his funeral.

In many respects, Colson had led a very ordinary life, similar to that of tens of thousands of other Parisians whose existence we scarcely know beyond a few references to their names in birth and death registers, or tax rolls, or notary records. He had never published, he had never been elected to any office, nor had he ever had his portrait painted. Like the tens of thousands of others, his day-to-day existence, his hopes and fears, his struggles and ambitions in life, would normally have remained utterly unknown to us, “swallowed up by history and erased by the passage of time,” as Alain Corbin has put it.<sup>1</sup> Except for one fact: the near miraculous preservation of over a thousand letters written to his closest friend, letters spanning a period of some eighteen years before and during the French Revolution.

And indeed, those letters – along with a few other complementary documents dredged from the archives – can offer fascinating insights not only into the life of one individual Parisian, but also

---

Timothy Tackett is an emeritus professor of History at the University of California, Irvine. Among his more important books are *Priest and Parish in Eighteenth Century France* (1977); *Religion, Revolution, and Regional Culture* (1986); *Becoming a Revolutionary* (1996); *When the King Took Flight* (2003); and *The Coming of the Terror* (2015).

<sup>1</sup> Corbin, *The Life of an Unknown*.

into the movement of opinion of a whole small neighborhood at the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup> This is true, first, because Colson had spent many long years in that neighborhood, residing in his small apartment in central Paris, living amidst artisans and shopkeepers and a great many even poorer folk, many who would come to call themselves “sans-culottes.” And second, because even though he was well educated and trained in the law, he originated in a relatively humble artisan family, and his personal income and style of life were at the lowest level among lawyers of his day. He was well familiar and comfortable with the habits and the manner of speech of the common people. To some extent he had even adopted the candlemaker, his wife, and two daughters as a surrogate family. In addition, Colson provides us with an interesting example of an elderly citizen confronting the Revolution. Although we commonly think of revolution as being the work of the young, the itinerary of Colson reveals the extent to which an ordinary senior citizen could also be swept up in and radicalized by the events unrolling in France after 1789.

It would be impossible to share all aspects of Colson’s life as revealed in the letters. I can only rapidly allude to how he made his living, to his culture and religious values, to his relations with the nobility, to his attitude toward women, and to a number of other important themes. These will have to be the topics of future presentations. Here I can only present a rapid overview of Colson’s biography and of his experience and that of his neighbors before and especially during the early Revolution.

Adrien Colson was born the son of a tanner in the small town of Varennes, in the far northeast corner of France, not far from the border of Luxembourg. It was a frontier zone, not only politically, but in terms of both language and religion. Although the population of his hometown had long spoken French and had remained staunchly Catholic during the wars of religion in the 16th and 17th centuries, German-speaking and Protestant zones were not far away. A frontier mentality may well have affected Colson, in his strong adhesion to Catholicism and in his intense sentiments of French identity.

Unfortunately, however, an air of tragedy hovered over his early family life. All eight of his brothers and sisters had died in infancy or in early childhood. And his mother had succumbed when Colson was only twelve. Thereafter, he grew up an only child alone in his household with his father.

As was so often the case under the Old Regime, it had probably been the parish priest, who resided just across the town square from the family house, who had first recognized Colson’s intelligence and who had urged the father to promote the education of his son. The records have now been lost, but circumstantial evidence suggests he had initially planned a career in the clergy and may well have spent time in the seminary. But as many other young men of the period, he must have concluded that he did not have a sufficient vocation for such a career. In any case, Colson was ultimately able to convince his father that he could make what was always a huge step upward within the value system of the Old Regime, from the manual occupation of an artisan family into the professional class, and thus begin preparation in the law. And with no other sons to support or dowries for daughters to put aside, it was possible to concentrate all of the family’s disposable revenues on Adrien-Joseph’s legal education.

---

<sup>2</sup> A total of 1080 of Colson’s letters to Roch Lemaigre, dated from Dec. 12, 1778 through 16 Germinal year III (1795), are found in the Archives départementales de l’Indre, 2J 10-12. A small selection of these for the Revolutionary period have been published in Colson, *Lettres d’un bourgeois de Paris à un ami de province, 1788–1793*. Two additional letters, addressed to the local agent of the lands of the Longaunay family in Normandy have also been located in the Archives départementales du Calvados, 2 L 175, letters of July 31 and Dec. 16, 1789. Hereafter, all of Colson’s letters will be cited only by date.

So it was that Colson had arrived for the first time in Paris in the year 1750, at age twenty-three, to begin the commonly accepted “apprenticeship” for such a career, serving as a clerk in the office of an established notary or barrister. He was proud of these years and of the training they had afforded him, a training which he considered far more important than a formal legal education. “University studies,” as he would write many years later, “led to nothing more than learning definitions by heart [ ... ] and it was only through actual experience in law offices that one could learn the profession in all its details.”<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, a formal university degree did carry an element of prestige, necessary for finding a better position or going it alone as a lawyer. And in 1755–56 he would register in the University of Reims, obtaining a diploma that would allow him to earn the coveted designation of “*avocat en Parlement*,” lawyer attached to the Parlement of Paris, the most important law court in the kingdom.

It is not entirely clear how Colson obtained his position as legal advisor and business agent for the Longaunay family, a family of the middling aristocracy living and renting residences in Paris since the early eighteenth century. Like many nobles in the capital at the time, there was an effort to centralize the administration of the family’s possessions, in this case lands and seigneurial rights in both Normandy near the Atlantic coast and in the province of Berry in central France. Colson himself was convinced that it was through “Divine Providence” that he had been offered the position, and he always treated his duties and loyalty to the family with total dedication. In any case, by the last decade of the Old Regime, he had become the key legal advisor and accountant for the family, a family whose fortunes were now in the hands of two young men, the Marquis of Longaunay and his younger brother the “Count,” both still in their twenties. Colson kept track of all aspects of the family’s finances and endless court suits, and he coordinated revenues and payments from their far-flung possessions. The task was no easy matter, since the Marquis, in particular, chronically over-spent, and it was always a major challenge to borrow more money to pay his debts and keep the wolf from the door.

It was not long after Colson had begun his work for the Longaunay family that he met Roch Lemaigre, another young man who had come to Paris to pursue a law career. The two may well have lodged in the same apartment and we know that they shared the same Paris physician. It seems likely that Colson helped his friend obtain his position as local steward for the Longaunay lands in Central France. Over the years the two men frequently exchanged gifts and various medical concoctions, and they took great interest in the lives and health of one another. Lemaigre sometimes traveled to Paris, where he roomed with Colson; and on at least three occasions Colson would make the five- or six-day trek south to visit Lemaigre and his family. He could never afford a horse and he usually traveled by coach. But it was not always possible to find a vacant seat and on at least one occasion he was forced to make a portion of the journey on foot.

The neighborhood in which Colson lived was centered on the Rue des Arcis in central Paris. The street itself no longer exists – most of it was plowed under in the nineteenth century during the construction of the wide Rue de Rivoli – but it was an extension of the Rue Saint-Martin, which since Roman times had been the major route out of the city to the north. It was here that Colson resided in his modest three-room apartment, just upstairs from the candlemaker and his family, sharing common facilities in the stairwell – a seat and a pot – with other tenants higher up in the building. He could not afford a servant or a cook, and he took all his meals in a nearby café. The apartment served as an excellent platform for observing the world go by beneath his window. During the Revolution, he would have a fine view of many of the demonstrations and other crowd

---

<sup>3</sup> Letter of Jan. 19, 1790.

activities – making their way from the Palais Royal and the central market place of Les Halles to the nearby Place de Grève in front of the City Hall.

Much of Colson's day was spent in his apartment, working over his account books and court briefs. But he went out daily on foot to mail his letters at the central post office and to visit his noble clients in the upscale Saint-Germain district across the river, or in one of newly developing western sections of Paris. During the Revolution, he had to make his way even further, after the Marquis de Longaunay moved to Chaillot, "in the countryside" – as Colson described it – close to today's Arc de Triomphe.<sup>4</sup>

When he did walk out his door, he stepped into a whole vibrant small world in one of the most densely populated and popular districts in the city. The Rue des Arcis itself had a certain number of shops cultivating customers of somewhat greater means – two goldsmiths, a jeweler, a stationery shop, a purveyor of fine chocolates, and a cluster of "tabeletiers" (specialized in a variety of fine wooden, ivory, and horn objects for luxury consumption). But most of the neighborhood was anything but prosperous, with a large number of humble folk and single women struggling to hold their lives together, crowded into one-room, unheated apartments on the upper floors within the labyrinth of unpaved passageways and back alleys.

When Colson penned his letters to Lemaigre, some of his "news" came from newspapers or the cries of royal heralds under his window. But both under the Old Regime and after the Revolution had begun, he realized that such news was by no means reliable. And he often fell back on the stories he heard from others: from chats with his noble clients, or conversations with those he met in the Palais Royal – where he sometimes went to sit in a café. Yet he also relied heavily on rumors circulating in his neighborhood. Sometimes such rumors came to him from the café across the street where he took his meals; or from fellow parishioners in his church of Saint-Jacques, just around the corner, where he regularly attended mass. The most frequent source of rumor, however, derived from the candleshop itself. As he walked through the shop to reach his stairway, he often stopped to chat with the Ladoubé family and the two adult daughters, who seem to have been a particularly rich mine of gossip and true or less-true stories of all sorts circulating among the population.

In early 1787 events began unrolling in France that would change forever Colson's life and the lives of those residing in his neighborhood, and his correspondence provides a fascinating record of the process of politicization that would soon touch almost everyone. As far as we can surmise, the events in question were utterly unanticipated. Although over the years he had frequently recounted rumors of events at court, of the changing of ministers, and of the prospects of war and peace in Europe, there was never an inkling of the financial difficulties the king was encountering or of the increasingly desperate efforts of various finance ministers to balance the royal budget. Moreover, there had never been even the slightest criticism of the king or the queen, no sign whatsoever of the "desacralization of the monarchy" sometimes proposed by historians.<sup>5</sup>

He first mentioned the convocation of an Assembly of Notables in January 1787 – news that probably came to him through a short entry in one of the heavily censored newspapers. He knew enough history to realize that such an assembly was exceptionally unusual, and that one had not been called since the days of Richelieu in the seventeenth century, but he and his friends in central Paris had absolutely no idea *why* it had been called. It was not until early April that the proceedings of the Notables were published, and that Colson realized the extent of the fiscal crisis, the king's program for reforming and to some extent equalizing the tax system, and the concerted opposition

---

<sup>4</sup> Letter of May 3, 1791.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Merrick, *The Desacralization of the French Monarchy in the Eighteenth Century*.

toward the king of the great nobles and clergy. And he was clearly amazed when first the Notables and the Parlement of Paris and then the king himself began talking of a meeting of the Estates General. At first, in his letters, he only recounted the situation with the voice of an outside observer. But then, from the spring onwards, the tone of the letters seemed to change and he began taking a position himself. Thus, when the minister Calonne was dismissed by Louis XVI, he announced that he and all those he spoke to hoped that Calonne would be replaced by Jacques Necker, the celebrated Swiss banker and financier.<sup>6</sup>

During the following months, two events in particular seemed further to raise Colson's political consciousness. First was the exile and then the temporary dismissal of the magistrates in the Parlement of Paris after their refusal to accept all of the king's decrees. Each time the judges were sent away, the lower Châtelet court and nearly all of the lawyers and barristers who worked closely with the two courts went on strike. As the whole Parisian justice system ground to a halt, all of the court suits that Colson was following for his noble employers had to be put on hold. On occasion he walked across the river to the Parlement to watch the scene as it unfolded: the young law clerks marching in opposition to the royal decrees, the soldiers sent to surround and secure the premises, the violence against one or two lawyers who tried to break the strike, and the desperation of the food merchants selling their wares near the two courthouses and whose normal clientele had now disappeared.

The second event was the extraordinary circular letter sent out by the king in the summer of 1788, asking for advice on how the coming Estates General should be organized. With censorship on individual publications now eased, hundreds of printed opinion pieces began appearing. It was above all in the Palais Royal that Colson encountered the great flood of publications that ensued. The lawyer had long frequented the large rectangular colonnade of boutiques and cafés a short walk from his apartment, in order to shop or to sit with a drink and watch the parade of people of all conditions stroll by. But now the Palais became one of the principal centers for the sale of the latest political pamphlets. Colson went there almost daily and he was amazed by the extraordinary number of new publications regularly placed on display in the booksellers' stalls. He counted no less than thirteen on a single day in February, and thirty-two on another day in March. Sometimes he only stopped to browse, but he might also purchase several to take home with him to show and read to his friends – pamphlets often promoting what was for them a rather new vocabulary: words like “liberty”, “constitution”, “equality” of taxation and representation. Based on the crowds he encountered in the Palais Royal, he was convinced that “it was the only thing people were now reading” in Paris.<sup>7</sup>

As the crisis progressed, news of the various political events took up ever more space in his correspondence, until on occasion it entirely filled his four-page letters. At the end of the winter of 1789, he was moved to pen an extraordinary prophecy to his friend in Central France on the possible futures that might arise for the French from the situation they were living through. “France,” he wrote, “is on the eve of either the most wonderful or the most disastrous fate that might ever arise. For over ten centuries there has been no crisis of such magnitude, a crisis that may, by the end of the year, bring the nation either to the height of power and grandeur, or reduce it to the lowest degree of calamity.”<sup>8</sup>

There is not the space here to explore all the events of the Revolution and their impact on Colson and his neighborhood. Here we can only broach some of the major elements in the

---

<sup>6</sup> See letters of Apr. 10, 1787 and Oct. 12, 1788.

<sup>7</sup> Esp. letters of Feb. 1789 [no precise date] and Mar. 17 and 31, and Apr. 5, 1789.

<sup>8</sup> Letter of Feb. 17, 1789.

Revolutionary experience. As we do so, we must constantly remind ourselves that Colson and his neighbors on the Rue des Arcis had absolutely no foreknowledge of what would happen, of where everything was leading, or of what it all meant. We must also remember that however they might glory in the events transpiring that summer, Colson and the other citizens living in central Paris were altogether unprepared for them. To some extent, it was this very suddenness, the unanticipated sweep of the transformations of the kingdom that engendered such intense emotions, emotions both “positive” and “negative.” There would be a continual oscillation between hope and fear, between joy and anxiety from letter to letter, and sometimes within the same letter. As he would describe his feelings in early September 1789, “this Revolution, as sudden and unexpected as it has been, both amazes me and greatly moves me.”<sup>9</sup>

But, in fact, it was by no means simple to follow what was happening during the first sessions of the Estates General in Versailles. Colson regularly forwarded to his friend in Berry the latest information he had heard of debates in the Estates, some of it accurate, some of it not. But in general he and his neighbors were all well aware of the confrontation over the issue of voting between the nobles of the First and Second Estates, on the one hand, and the Third Estate, on the other. And they were increasingly impatient with the nobles’ “stubborn refusal” – as he phrased it – to meet with the commoners even to verify the deputies’ credentials. By June Colson’s vocabulary was expanding further, as he denounced the “despotism” and “oppression” of the nobility and their refusal to consider “the welfare of the nation” that could only be achieved through an equal suffrage of all members of all three estates.<sup>10</sup>

Colson and his neighbors, however, seemed to have learned almost immediately when the Third Estate voted on June 14 to go it alone if necessary, with or without the deputies of the other two estates, “comme représentant lui seul la nation.”<sup>11</sup> And Colson would write at considerable length and with growing excitement when on June 17 the Third declared itself to be a National Assembly, henceforth to have control over all taxation. He described the moment, as he heard it reported, when all the deputies of the new Assembly rose and swore a first solemn oath. Significantly, he made no reference to the “Tennis Court Oath,” on June 20, which may well have been more important to later historians than to those living through the events. Everyone was thus all the more shocked and profoundly disillusioned on June 23 when the king came to the Assembly and in a formal declaration “revoked and annulled everything the National Assembly had done,” and essentially embraced the position of the nobles. It now seemed as if they had all been living in a dream, and that they must squarely face reality. Up until then they had assumed it was a group of conservative nobles who formed the principal force of opposition, that the king himself was the ally of the Third Estate, and that the “prejudice” of the nobility would eventually be overcome. In sharing this opinion, Colson was clearly thinking of the liberal position of the two young nobles for whom he worked. Never previously in Colson’s long correspondence were such bitter remarks uttered against Louis XVI. The king had committed “a pure act of despotism,” a veritable “lit de justice,” as when he had forced his will on the Parlement under the Old Regime.<sup>12</sup>

Colson’s breathless accounts over the next two months described the anxiety in the city as everyone attempted to confront and react to a series of harrowing crises, during what was clearly one of the most terrifying periods for the people of Paris in the entire Revolution. Though

---

<sup>9</sup> Letter of Sept. 1, 1789.

<sup>10</sup> See esp. letters of May 5 and 25, and May 2 and 7, 1789.

<sup>11</sup> Letter of June 14, 1789.

<sup>12</sup> Letter of June 28, 1789.

on June 27 the king had ostensibly reversed himself and ordered the three estates to meet together in Versailles, rumors spread rapidly that soldiers, many of them German or Swiss mercenaries, had been pulled back from the French frontiers and were encircling both Paris and Versailles. From letter to letter Colson's estimation of the number of troops involved expanded from 6,000 to 40,000, to as many as 100,000. Citizens were heartened somewhat when many of the French-speaking soldiers sent to quell riots in the city began refusing to attack the people, putting down their arms, and going over to the popular cause. In fact, it was in characterizing these large-scale mutinies that Colson first used the word "revolution," a term that had never before appeared in his letters and that he only gradually expanded over the coming weeks to describe all the events taking place.<sup>13</sup>

By the second week in July the entire population of the city, both the popular masses and the middle-class leadership had fallen, in Colson's words, "into a state of extreme agitation and movement" everywhere. He continued to walk to the Palais Royal to hear the latest rumors. And he watched there as one noble accused of inappropriate language was unceremoniously tossed into a fountain, and as a suspicious clergyman was stripped of his breeches by the crowd and publically spanked. Many nobles, including even the two liberal nobles whom Colson represented, now began fleeing the city for fear of the violence that might be directed against all nobles, regardless of their political positions.

The events that followed are well known, leading to the popular attack on the great medieval fortress of the Bastille on July 14. In the face of the growing chaos, the dismissal of the liberal minister Necker, and the perceived danger of an invasion by a mercenary army, the electors of Paris, who had never ceased meeting after having chosen deputies to the Estates General, pushed aside the Old Regime municipal administration and took de facto control of the city. On July 12 they issued a general call for volunteers to converge on the city hall and help create an emergency "citizen's militia." Colson watched from his window as hundreds of people from all over Paris marched toward the *hôtel de ville* to join up: law clerks from the principal courthouses, students from the Sorbonne across the river, even parish priests placing themselves at the head of processions to lead their parishioners to the city hall. Colson himself, despite his age, would also join this improvised paramilitary force in his own district.

Almost no one from Colson's neighborhood was involved in the attack on the Bastille, nearly two kilometers away, but he and his neighbors were outraged by the stories they heard of the "perfidiousness" and "treachery" of those defending the Bastille: the soldiers on the parapets who were said to have displayed their bare behinds to the crowds as a symbol of their scorn; the commander's decision to open fire on the people after luring them into an outer courtyard; the rather incredible but widely believed story that the Bastille was linked by an underground tunnel to the château of Vincennes – some five kilometers away – and through which 20,000 mercenaries were said to be preparing to pour into the city.<sup>14</sup>

In any case, for Colson it was impressive indeed that the besiegers, most of whom had never carried arms in their lives, were able to capture a fortress that everyone believed to be impregnable and that even the great king Henry IV, it was said, had been unable to take by force. "It's incredible," Colson wrote, "with what boldness and courage, crowds of individuals, by small unordered groups, individuals who had never seen a siege in their lives, moved together to confront such a dangerous situation." And given the widely believed stories of the "treachery" and "the infamous barbarism" of the Bastille commander and soldiers, Colson showed absolutely

---

<sup>13</sup> Letters of June 28 and July 5, 1789.

<sup>14</sup> Letter of July 19; also Archives départementales du Calvados, 2 L 175, letter of July 31, 1789.

no remorse as he watched crowds near the City Hall decapitate the commander and several other defenders and place their heads on the tip of pikes to be paraded through the streets.<sup>15</sup>

But the population's anxiety was scarcely allayed by the fall of the Bastille. Even if the people of Paris were beginning to accumulate arms and powder, would they really be able to resist the concerted attack by professional soldiers that everyone feared? A veritable tsunami of rumors now swept up the Rue des Arcis of the imminent dangers threatening the city, of the artillery said to be positioned in the suburbs with cannons aimed toward several of the major avenues of Paris, and of troops supposedly poised to attack through Saint Martin's gate and down Colson's street. The fear was all the greater for people cowering in the narrow lanes and alleyways in and around Colson's street, people who had great difficulty discerning what was happening elsewhere in the city and when and how the enemy might strike. People overturned wagons at Saint-Martin's gate to block the entrance of troops, they filled barrels with earth to help barricade the smaller streets, and women carried cobblestones in their aprons to the upper floors of buildings, ready to rain them down on the soldiers they feared might arrive at any moment below their windows.

As we know, hopes were raised on July 15 when the king entered the National Assembly in Versailles and seemed to accept its transformation from an Estates General, and when he traveled to Paris two days later to appear before the people on a balcony of the City Hall. Yet no one could be certain whether the "aristocratic plot," a phrase that was now spread far and wide among the population, might not still be very much alive and whether or not the king might again fall into its grasp. In any case, the fall of the Bastille by no means brought an end to popular violence in the city. Colson witnessed the brutal torture and decapitation of two more Old Regime officials on July 22 before the City Hall. Once again he seemed to show complete sympathy for the lynchings of the men, widely rumored to have contributed to the grain shortages in Paris.

In Colson's own neighborhood, the chaos and near anarchy only slowly subsided through the month of August. Excited by the very word "liberty" that was now on everyone's lips and with no real grasp of the limits of liberty, whole cohorts of citizens began banding together and claiming the freedom to "legislate" for themselves and determine their own destiny. Colson was stunned when apprentice carpenters, tailors, and wigmakers, young notary clerks, and even contingents of servants from great houses all began uniting to demand higher pay and better working conditions. Deserters from the army, some of whom had adapted their own conception of "liberty," were wandering the streets and sometimes threatening civilians. It was in this same spirit that local neighborhood districts – originally created only for electoral purposes – continued to meet and claimed ever greater powers, even asserting the right to direct democracy and to the ratification of decrees by the National Assembly.

Colson was also concerned with the shortage of bread, with the high price and poor quality of the bread that *was* produced, and with riots taking place in front of the bakeries, including the one just around the corner from his apartment. In the midst of the anxiety the parish priest in his church of Saint-Jacques called for a special ceremony of Forty Hours of Devotion. The Blessed Sacrament was exposed continuously at the altar as Colson and many of his fellow parishioners, men and women, took turns in a vigil, praying day and night for the return of calm in the parish and in the city.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Letters of August 30 and Sept. 14, 1789.

Yet through all the turmoil and fear, the enthusiasm of Colson and his neighbors never diminished for the extraordinary achievements of the early Revolution, achievements that no one would have imagined possible only a few years earlier. It was impossible to forget, in his phrase, the “tears of joy” that had been shed with the creation of the National Assembly, and “this glorious day” when a crowd of simple citizens had managed to break into the Bastille and seize the arms and powder they needed to defend themselves.<sup>17</sup> And who could not but be overwhelmed by the great foundation decrees promulgated by the National Assembly in the month of August? In the celebrated nighttime session of August 4, the deputies had largely abolished the seigneurial system and a whole range of oppressive institutions of the Old Regime monarchy. And toward the end of the month they had issued a Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, built on the principal – as Colson put it – of the “natural liberty” of all men, a phrase that few in the neighborhood would ever previously have conceived.<sup>18</sup>

Colson described with obvious pride the funeral oration delivered in his own parish church of St. Jacques by the well-known orator, the Abbé Claude Fauchet, in honor of those who had lost their lives during the attack on the Bastille. Fauchet, who himself had been present at the Bastille, took up the words of Saint Paul, “you have all been called to liberty.” Colson was also quick to recount the monetary sacrifices made almost daily by citizens faced with the continuing fiscal crisis of the nation. There was a great outpouring of national devotion, as people from all walks of life offered donations to the public treasury: the wealthier women who donated their jewels for the coffers of the fatherland; the clergymen who deposited their sacred vessels; the merchants and legal clerks, wigmakers, even seamstresses and washerwomen who chipped in whatever they could. He was hopeful that soon “this great example of generosity will spread far and wide throughout France.”<sup>19</sup>

And perhaps above all, there was the extraordinary enthusiasm experienced by Colson with the creation of the citizens’ militia, the “national guard,” as it soon came to be called. The militia, as he wrote, “is forming up everywhere like a military force.” But unlike the situation in the military, the guardsmen democratically elected their own officers. And the elderly lawyer described to Lemaigre in the greatest detail and with obvious pride the uniform he was having made for himself to wear as he marched in formation with his neighbors in the district. He carefully enumerated the color and form of each portion of the coat and vest and collar, the breeches and hat, and the style of every button, buckle, and badge. He would even purchase a saber, which he would hardly have known how to use, but which he now hung on his wall at the ready near his door.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the saber would still be there at the time of his death, a symbol of the days of glory in the early Revolution.

There is not the space to describe all of Colson’s experiences through the later Revolution. I would only note that the mixture of enthusiasm and fear, of hope and terror continued ever present in his letters to Lemaigre. His fear of plots and of a ubiquitous “aristocratic conspiracy,” first appearing in early July 1789, soon became a veritable obsession, especially after the October Days -- when first women and then men marched to Versailles to force the king to move to central Paris, and which Colson was convinced arose from a conspiracy. Thereafter, he would mention in his letters close to a hundred rumors of plots of one sort or another, swirling through the neighborhood from late 1789 through 1792. Almost

---

<sup>17</sup> Letter of June 21, 1789.

<sup>18</sup> Letters of June 30, July 19, Aug. 23, and Sept. 15, 1789.

<sup>19</sup> Letters of Sept. 14, 27, and 29, 1789.

<sup>20</sup> Letters of Aug. 9 and 11, 1789; and *Inventaire d'après décès* of Colson: Archives nationales de France, MC/ET/XLV/660 (Aug. 1, 1797).

everything that seemed to go wrong in the Revolution was attributed to the vaguely defined “aristocrats” and the nefarious “brigands” supposedly in their hire: from bread shortages and popular uprisings to monetary inflation and factional divisions among the patriots. On several occasions there were predictions of terrible aristocratic schemes to bring fire and blood to the city and kill all the patriots -- conspiracies which Colson sometimes believed and sometimes doubted, but which had a powerful and terrifying effect on the two young women downstairs in his apartment and on many other women and men in his neighborhood. Curiously however, even as he railed against the “aristocrats” in general, he continued to distinguish between good and bad nobles, and he never waivered in his devotion and concern for the two young aristocrats he had so long represented.

But at the same time, many moments of joy and fraternity powerfully affected the lawyer and his friends on the Rue des Arcis. There were patriotic sermons preached in his parish church, a whole series of collective oaths sworn first in the National Assembly and then in almost all the Parisian neighborhoods; there was the great Federation ceremony of July 1790, and the celebrations after the new Constitution of 1791 was decreed and seemingly accepted by the king. And there was the extraordinary enthusiasm with which young men enrolled in the army, after France found herself at war. Throughout it all, Colson seems to have faithfully attended meetings of his section of les Lombards – which in fact met in the very parish church of Saint-Jacques he had so long attended, along with a great many of his fellow parishioners. He also continued to serve in the local national guard unit. Indeed, both the section and the guards were no doubt important sources of news – both accurate and “improvised” – and played a role in the veritable radicalization of his ideas that we can observe developing over time. He was on duty with his unit on August 10, 1792, even though he did not participate in the combat around the Tuileries Palace that overthrew the king. After that event, the latent sympathy for Louis XVI which he had maintained so patiently over the months seemed entirely to fade, and he did not object to the king’s execution, even if he was sobered by its significance. Along with his section, he would also strongly support Maximilien Robespierre and his supporters of “the Mountain”. He castigated the young Girondin firebrand, Jean-Baptiste Louvet, who in fact lived only a few houses south on the Rue des Arcis; and he would march with the guardsmen of his section to demand the arrest of many of the Girondins in the Convention on June 2, 1793.

Yet not long after the June 2 “revolution”, the letters seemed to grow silent. We know from the police reports for his section that in September of 1793 a whole series of nighttime raids would take place in his neighborhood – some twenty in three days in the middle of the month -- in which the police broke into the apartments and rifled through the papers of individuals – and that several of his neighbors were then carried off to prison.<sup>21</sup> Colson would certainly have known of these arrests, and it was no doubt in the face of the police repression, that he began carefully to watch his language, and to cease altogether his comments on events in his letters to Lemaigre.

And the period from mid-1793 onward also entailed elements of great sadness and disappointment. First, and particularly distressing, was the breakdown of his friendship with Lemaigre. Marisa Linton has explored the ways in which the intensity of the Revolution could sometimes tear apart longtime friends.<sup>22</sup> In Colson’s case, we never learn the origins of the break. But in a letter of March 1794, he lamented that Lemaigre – who had now become a radical leader in his small town in Central France – “could have conceived the false and cruel

---

<sup>21</sup> Archives de la Préfecture de Police de Paris, AA 163 (1793).

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Linton, “Fatal Friendships: The Politics of Jacobin Friendship.”

impression that I have offended you.” Only a few final letters are preserved after this, entirely formal and businesslike, signed with cold precision by “the Republican Colson.”<sup>23</sup>

And second, and equally depressing for Colson no doubt, was the movement of Dechristianization. As we have seen, he was a practicing Catholic, perhaps a former seminarian, who on several occasions mentioned his attendance at Mass and participation in the various events of the liturgical year, both before and during the Revolution. Indeed, none of the Revolutionary changes were followed and described more closely in his earlier letters than those transforming the Church. With the great majority of his section, no doubt, he had strongly supported the Civil Constitution of the Clergy enacted by the National Assembly, and through the summer of 1793 he never seemed to conceive of a conflict between religion and revolution. As late as July of that year, he took part in a Corpus Christi procession along with a substantial number of his neighbors, many of whom considered themselves good “sans culottes” – this despite the efforts of the Municipal Government to block all such processions. And though he never mentioned it, the forced closing of his church of Saint-Jacques and the expulsion and sometimes arrest of the local pro-Revolutionary clergy in the fall of 1793 – including the arrest of his own parish priest – could only have had a devastating effect. He watched as the bells in that church – bells of which he had always been particularly proud – were taken down to be melted into cannon balls.

And as Colson lay dying in the summer of 1797 in his upstairs apartment, he would certainly have heard the picks and hammers just next door, destroying the church he had attended faithfully for so many years, now sold off and being torn down for scrap limestone. Today only the great “Tower of Saint Jacques” (near the Metro stop Châtelet) is the lone survivor of what must once have been a magnificent Gothic church.

Having lived with Adrien Colson and his correspondence these last few years, I sometimes imagine meeting him and chatting with him near the end of his life. While I would sympathize with his dejection over the turn the Revolution had taken by 1797, I would try to convey to him the legacy of that Revolution for future generations. I would do my best to persuade him that partly because of his efforts and those of the other ordinary citizens on the Rue des Arcis and throughout Paris, most of the values of the Revolution they had supported would one day come not only to be widely accepted in France but would eventually circle the world.

Whether or not he would believe me, is difficult to say.

## References

- Colson, Adrien-Joseph. 1993. *Lettres d'un bourgeois de Paris à un ami de province, 1788–1793*, edited by Chantal Plantier-Sanson. Paris.
- Corbin, Alain. 2001. *The Life of an Unknown: The Rediscovered World of a Clog Maker in Nineteenth-Century France*. New York.
- Linton, Marisa. 2008. “Fatal Friendships: The Politics of Jacobin Friendship.” *French Historical Studies*, no. 31: 51–76.
- Merrick, Jeffrey. 1990. *The Desacralization of the French Monarchy in the Eighteenth Century*. Baton Rouge, LA.

---

<sup>23</sup> Letter of 6 Germinal, Year II.