

H-France Salon
Volume 16, Issue 1, # 4

**Beyond Belonging:
Rethinking Domestic Space in Imperial Histories**

Gregory Valdespino

“All my children died in France, I am practically alone now and without support.”¹ In August 1919, Fatou Samba Fall wrote this plea in a letter to Senegal’s Lieutenant Governor as she tried to make a new home in the neighborhood of N’Dar-Toute in N’Dar, or as it is known in French, Saint-Louis-du-Sénégal. Two years earlier, her home was one of thousands of dwellings incinerated by state-sanctioned flames. Between 1914 and the early 1920s, outbreaks of the bubonic plague led colonial health authorities to condemn African homes along Senegal’s coast as disease vectors that they had to destroy.² Thousands of homeowners like Fall filed indemnity petitions with the French government to get funds to rebuild their homes. In these petitions, people described lost homes and goods to representatives of the very state that caused their destruction. To make her particular case, Fall invoked relatives’ patriotic sacrifices and her struggles to survive “without support.” By invoking these losses, people like Fall hoped to create a new space to call their own.

Fall’s evocation of her family’s military service in petition to get the French state to help her build a new home seems to fit perfectly into scholarly views of homes in the French empire. Often time, scholars use homes to explain the changing nature of political belonging and the associated claims this belonging can justify within France’s 20th century empire. These histories begin with the same war Fall described in her petition. During World War I, France mobilized over 160,000 West African men to fight in Europe. Often dubbed *tirailleurs sénégalais*, these men became symbols and proponents of a belief that France had a so-called “blood debt” toward its colonial troops. Fall’s call echoes histories that reveal how *tirailleurs* and their relatives invoked this debt and the special attachment to France it implied to make political demands.³ However, to make her case, Fall did not just invoke patriotic service. She also said she was living “without support,” drawing attention to the life she was trying to recover. Shifting our attention from the first part of Fall’s request to the second highlights how people turned to the French government in part out of a need to literally build a new life. Focusing on this dimension of

¹ Fatou Samba Fall to Monsieur le Lieutenant Gouverneur du Sénégal à Saint-Louis, August 15, 1919; Archives Nationales du Sénégal (ANS), H 78.

² Gregory Valdespino, 2021, “Plague, Housing, and Battles Over Segregation in Dakar, 1914” *Epidemic Urbanism: Contagious Diseases in Global Cities*, ed. Mohammad Gharipour and Caitlin DeClercq (Bristol, UK: Intellect Books): 297-304.

³ Sarah Zimmerman, 2020, *Militarizing Marriage: West African Soldiers’ Conjugal Traditions in Modern French Empire* (Athens: Ohio University Press); Gregory Mann, 2006, *Native Sons: West African Veterans and France in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press); Marc Michel, 2003, *L’appel À L’Afrique: Contributions Et Réactions À L’effort De Guerre En A.O.F. (1914-1919)*. (Paris: Karthalla).

domestic spaces can reveal a new angle on the political meaning of home in France's West African empire, one focused less on abstract notion of belonging than the concrete acts of homemaking.

Dwellings like Fall's structured many Africans' relationship to themselves, their communities, and the colonial system writ large. Aware of these deep political meanings, scholars have gone within walls to understand the everyday bases of colonial politics. At the heart of many of these studies lies a key word: belonging. The notion of belonging has become central to histories of modern imperialism. While used in various ways, belonging captures peoples' affectively charged attachment to particular communities as well as the duties and obligations that attachment produces. Scholars of modern imperialism often invoked belonging to explain the social and affective underpinning of political divides between citizens and subjects, as well as the racialized divides those labels depended upon.⁴ Across colonial Africa censuses, treaties, and quotidian bureaucratic forms determined what communities "non-Europeans" belonged to by creating racialized identity markers like "bantu," "indigene" or "indigenas." Through these labels, colonial institutions managed access to that vague yet powerful category of citizen and the changing array of rights and obligations that title carried. When colonial administrations had to clarify the basis of this political belonging, homes often took center stage. As Ann Stoler argues, European colonists saw the domestic sphere as revelatory of "what is racially 'innermost'" for its inhabitants.⁵ Homes thus marked and made inhabitants' communal attachments within racially divided imperial societies. Stoler and many other scholars have demonstrated the central role that domestic norms played in reproducing the racialized political and economic arrangements that imperial societies depended upon.⁶ To know where people belonged, one need only look through their front door.

Many scholars of the French empire have taken up this approach to explain how racial inequalities have been reproduced in a "color-blind" republic where race is theoretically a forbidden legal category. Historians have demonstrated how domestic habits associated with idealized bourgeois family life became markers of French citizenship.⁷ Hygienic and private homes sheltering nuclear families lead by a male breadwinner became seen as the proper places

⁴ For examples see Emily Marker, 2022, *Black France, White Europe: Youth, Race, and Belonging in the Postwar Era*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press); Krista A. Goff and Lewis H. Siegelbaum (eds.), 2019, *Empire and Belonging in the Eurasian Borderlands* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press); Daniel Gorman, 2006, *Imperial Citizenship: Empire and the Question of Belonging* (Manchester: Manchester University Press); for an example of work on imperial belonging in Early Modern empires see April Lee Hatfield, 2023, *Boundaries of Belonging: English Jamaica and the Spanish Caribbean, 1655-1715* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press).

⁵ Ann Laura Stoler, 2010, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press) : 9.

⁶ Lisa Lowe. 2015. *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. Durham: Duke University Press; Frances Gouda and Julia Clancy-Smith (Eds.) 1998. *Domesticating the Empire: Race, Gender, and Family Life in French and Dutch Colonialism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia); Anne McClintock. 1995. *Imperial Leather : Race, Gender and Sexuality In the Colonial Contest*. New York: Routledge.

⁷ Françoise Verges, 2017. *Le Ventre des Femmes: Capitalisme, racialisation, féminisme* (Paris: Albin Michel); Amelia H. Lyons, 2013, *The Civilizing Mission in the Metropole: Algerian Families and the French Welfare State During Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press) ; Emmanuelle Saada, 2012, *Empire's Children: Race, Filiation, and Citizenship in the French Colonies*. Trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press); Elisa Camiscioli, 2009, *Reproducing the French Race: Immigration, Intimacy, and Embodiment in the Early Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press).

to create French citizens who could claim full legal, political, and economic rights within the French Republic and its colonies. The events in plague-era Senegal seem to confirm this notion. Official associations of Senegalese homes with disease justified unprecedented segregationist policies in cities like Dakar, despite the nominally equal status of enfranchised residents in Dakar and Senegal's other *Quatres Communes* as well as the "blood debt" mentioned earlier. Colonists used "insalubrious" homes like Fall's to justify disenfranchisement and displacement. While nominally organized along the lines of citizenship and subject, political belonging in France's imperial regime seemed to really be about who could feel at home and where.

While this focus on home and belonging has provided invaluable insights to French imperial and postimperial historiographies, it has its limits and oversights. Belonging as a concept draws scholars' attention to the affective and embodied nature of political categories, showing how racialized marginalization could persist despite nominal juridical equality. Furthermore, historically-inclined anthropologists like Aissatou Mbodj-Pouye have used the concept of belonging in the context of studies on domestic space to explain how the domestic lives of many African migrants in postimperial France forges political communities and forms of political claim-making that elide or transcend the borders of contemporary nation-states.⁸ However, the framework of belonging presents politics as largely about markers of identity or feelings of attachment. This perspective occludes the practical basis of many political demands and obligations. Furthermore, using homes to study political belonging presses up against the limits of colonial archives.

Archival records can say a lot about how people use claims of belonging, but not as much about the feelings beneath these claims. Fall could have referenced her children's sacrifice because she believed that they were part of the French imperial nation-state or had become part of it through their citizenship or wartime service. She may have also used this reference to get the resources she needed to rebuild a lost home. Of course, these possibilities are not mutually exclusive. Yet we cannot be certain how she felt about France from these records. As black feminist and postcolonial scholars have shown, colonial archives often erased non-European intimate lives in ways that dehumanized these populations, fueling their political marginalization and economic exploitation.⁹ Many scholars working on French Africa respond to this silence by leaving colonial archives behind. Physical remains, Islamic treatises, family records and oral histories have all helped reconstruct the kinds of political attachments people in Senegal and across Francophone Africa formed under French rule.¹⁰ This approach expands our field of inquiry and sources to capture histories that happen beyond the boundaries of the French state.

⁸ Aissatou Mbodj-Pouye, 2023, *An Address in Paris: Emplacement, Bureaucracy, and Belonging in Hostels for West African Migrants* (New York: Columbia University Press).

⁹ For highlights of these vast literatures see Jessica Marie Johnson. 2020. *Wicked Flesh : Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom In the Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press); Saidiya Hartman, (June 2008), "Venus in Two Acts" *Small Axe*, Vol. 12 No. 2: 1-14; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 1999, "History" *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 198-311; Michel-Rolph Trouillot. 1995. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press).

¹⁰ For examples see Burrill, Emily. 2015. *States of Marriage: Gender, Justice, and Rights in Colonial Mali* (Athens: Ohio University Press); Jean-Baptiste, Rachel. 2014. *Conjugal Rights: Marriage, Sexuality, and Urban Life in Colonial Libreville, Gabon*. Athens: Ohio University Press; Cheikh Anta Babou, 2005, "Contesting Space, Shaping Places: Making Room for the Muridiyya in Colonial Senegal, 1912-45," *The Journal of African History* 46, no. 3: 405-26.

Yet they still leave an underlying assumption untouched: modern political participation has depended on a sense of belonging. In this view, the dearth of records attesting to Africans' senses of belonging to France stands as proof that they could not engage with the colonial political system. However, Fall's declarations sat alongside hundreds of other similar demands. In these documents, people detailed the homes that simultaneously provided the basis of their disenfranchisement and dispossession. Rather than renounce these homes to get favor from French bureaucrats, people like Fall documented what these pathologized homes contained and called on the French government to help rebuild the very homes it destroyed. Petitioners did not tell bureaucrats, or curious historians working decades later, what attachments or resentments they had toward the French state. They did need to do so to make their claim. What they did reveal was a more central fact: they needed a new home, and they wanted the French government to pay.

Focusing solely on domestic spaces as lenses into political attachment limits our understanding of both homes and political participation in modern imperial societies. Seeing homes as windows into historical forms of belonging assumes that the primary historiographic value of Africans or other non-European homes to research on the French empire lies in what they reveal about citizenship or its absence. However, this view risk repeating the liberal political frameworks they seek to critique. Historians thus unintentionally recycle rather than question the connections between political belonging and domestic space when they only see homes as signifiers of affective political attachments. This approach closes us off from other ways of seeing how colonized peoples' homes fit into the political landscape of France's former empire.

I do not make this point to discourage historians from using homes to know if people like Fall felt that they belonged to France, its empire, or any of the various polities that rose and fell along Senegambia's coast. Archaeologists and more materially-minded historians have sifted through homes to explain how the royal *damel* of the Kayor kingdom, Serer villagers in the Siin-Saloum region, and *métis* signares in Gorée island forged new local, regional and global ties as Senegambia became a key node in the early modern Atlantic system.¹¹ Similarly, historians have shown how powerful women and men in colonial Senegal adapted their domestic spaces to assert separation from or influence over the French colonial state.¹² These studies make it clear that homes have a lot to tell us about the attachments people in Senegal had to various political, religious, or ethnolinguistic communities over the past five hundred years. However, politics is not just about a sense of belonging. It is also about practice.

I make this point to push scholars to use homes to ask new questions about how and why colonized communities engaged with French political institutions, regardless of whether they felt

¹¹ François Richard, 2018, *Reluctant Landscapes: Historical Anthropologies of Political Experience in Siin, Senegal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press); Mark Hinchman, 2015, *Portrait of an Island: The Architecture and Material Culture of Gorée, Sénégal, 1758-1837* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press); Ibrahima Thiaw, 2008, "Every House Has a Story: The Archaeology of Gorée Island, Sénégal," in *Africa, Brazil, and the Construction of Trans-Atlantic Black Identities*, eds. Livio Sansone, Elisée Soumonni, and Boubacar Barry (Trenton: Africa World Press), 45-62.

¹² Mamadou Diouf, 2013, "Islam, the 'Originaires,' and the Making of Public Space in a Colonial City: Saint-Louis du Senegal," in *Tolerance, Democracy, and Sufis in Senegal*. Ed. Mamadou Diouf (New York: Columbia University Press), 180-204; Hilary Jones, 2012, *The Métis of Senegal: Urban Life and Politics in French West Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press; Babou, "Contesting Space, Shaping Places."

attached to them or not. Homes were and are concrete spaces of shelter, work, and survival. Everyday needs and practices within these spaces structured how and why many people like Fall interacted with colonial institutions. Sitting with the records these engagements produced sheds new light on how homes and their gendered divisions of labor structured the relationship many Senegalese populations formed with various organs of the French colonial state.

To demonstrate the new perspective this focus on homemaking provides, let us return to the *tirailleur sénégalais* mentioned earlier. These men's service, and the French government's denial of citizenship and full veteran benefits to these men after the war, has turned them into symbols of France's inability or refusal to treat Africans as equal citizens. Academics, artists, and activists have pointed out that vague promises of political or economic benefits remained unfulfilled as thousands *tirailleurs* returned to lives of colonial inequality after the war.¹³ However, probing where and how *tirailleurs* tried to make homes during their deployment reveals new perspectives on *tirailleurs'* relationship to the French state that excluded them from full political belonging.

As *tirailleurs* moved across West Africa and Europe, they had to find new ways to survive. As Sarah Zimmerman explains, before World War I survival often depended upon the labor of so-called *mesdames tirailleurs*.¹⁴ Either by choice or by force, African women provided the domestic labor these men and their commanders needed to sustain troops' minds and bodies. *Mesdames* cooked, cleaned, and provided the various domestic labors upon which these men depended. As the Senegalese veteran Bakary Diallo put it when describing the women he lived with during his deployment to Morocco, men needed them to "support hunger, thirst or any other privation, to replace their wives with complete devotion and courage."¹⁵ However, French officials decided in 1914 that these women could no longer follow these men into military camps. Suddenly, *tirailleurs* had to find new ways to survive. At the same time, the army had to find new ways to keep soldiers healthy and ready to serve France.

Soldiers responded by trying to adapt barracks and their surroundings to sustain themselves from day to day, transforming government plans and spaces along the way. Near Dakar, *tirailleurs* based at a camp in the village of Ouakham regularly defied commanders' orders and left barbed wire fences to go to the *abbatoir* neighborhood where dozens of West African women sold meals and comfort.¹⁶ Similar conflicts arose when these men began arriving in France. Yet in France, these issues now occurred in a European environment that French racial science had long declared a danger to black bodies.¹⁷ This raised further concern about how to sustain *tirailleurs*.

¹³ Gregory Mann, 2003, "Immigrants and Arguments in France and West Africa" *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 45 (2): 362-385. This legacy continues to this day, most recently with a film titled *Tirailleurs* starring one of the Francophone world's biggest stars, Omar Sy. For more on the film see, <https://www.senepius.com/culture/le-film-tirailleurs-fait-tache-dhuile-au-festival-de-cannes>

¹⁴ Sarah Zimmerman, 2020, *Militarizing Marriage: West African Soldiers' Conjugal Traditions in Modern French Empire* (Athens: Ohio University Press).

¹⁵ Bakary Diallo, 1926, *Force Bonté* (Paris: Rieder): 97.

¹⁶ Zimmerman, *Militarizing Marriage*.

¹⁷ Richard Fogarty and Michael Osborne, 2003, "Constructions and Functions of Race in French Military Medicine," in *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France*, eds. Tyler Stovall and Sue Peabody (Durham: Duke University Press) : 230-236

To see how these conflicts turned out, we can simply follow the food. While stationed in French camps, many *tirailleurs* cooked for themselves. In fact, cooking outdoors appeared in some popular representations of colonial troops life on the front or in camps, like this photograph of several *tirailleurs* in the Somme and their commanders in front of a mobile kitchen that appeared in a special issue of the illustrated colonial newspaper, *Depeche Illustré Colonial* (Fig. 1). Yet as these men cooked in these makeshift kitchens, they adapted and transferred common West African culinary practices. While *tirailleur sénégalais* had diverse origins, many of these men came from communities where women cooked most meals outdoors. Military mobilization and World War I camps' newly homosocial dynamics raised issues over whether and how to carry these habits across continents.

These cooking conflicts shaped the haphazard military landscapes of Fréjus, the southern Mediterranean town that became the epicenter of France's colonial army during and after World War I. Commanders in the area anxiously noted *tirailleurs*' insistence on cooking next to, rather than within, military kitchens. French officials feared that this practice would spread fires or dangerous fumes. Yet rather than ban outdoor cooking, commanders designed outdoor stone kitchens with a smokestack. One official called this adaptation a sign of respect for "customs that we cannot suppress."¹⁸ Similarly, when confronted with West African soldiers' preference to eat outside, camp planners attached hangers or heating equipment to kitchens rather than trying to convince soldiers to move indoors.¹⁹ They even put these hangers into the blueprints for new kitchens (Fig. 2). Physical adaptations like these emerged in dialogue with soldiers' own practices and preferences. Official imperatives to preserve "customs" opened pathways that West African men used, if only indirectly, to shape their domestic spaces.

While these cooking conflicts may seem small, they occurred at camps across France and Senegal. Together they reveal a different way of thinking about the politics of home and homemaking. Mobilization placed these men, and their bodily needs, in direct contact with French officials committed to seeing them as racially foreign outsiders. The spatial adaptations seen in Fréjus reflected that othering was evoked in the reference to "customs that we cannot suppress." However, commanders' decision to remove *mesdames tirailleurs* from barracks raised questions about who would provide for these men whose bodily health was now directly tied to France's own survival. This necessity allowed *tirailleurs* to get away with disobeying official orders and remaking their military abodes. Engaging with state agencies and getting their domestic preferences into government archives thus did not depend solely on belonging to France. In fact, these efforts succeeded in part because *tirailleurs* were seen as *not* belonging. The fundamental motor for these adaptations was soldiers' need to find the comforts of home in a new homosocial landscape. Unable or unwilling to provide these services themselves, French officials let *tirailleurs* make their own meals, and in the process, their own kind of homes.

Fatou Samba Fall, however, had less negotiating power than the unnamed men cooking outdoor in Fréjus. Like these *tirailleurs*, Fall needed to create a new home. Yet she did not need to do this

¹⁸ Rapport Particulier de Monsieur le Médecin-Major LOUSTE, Adjoint Technique de la IV^e Région, à Monsieur le Sous-Secrétaire d'Etat du Service de Santé sur l'INSTALLATION DES CAMPS SENEGALAIS de FREJUS-St RAPHAEL, Mars-Avril 1918 ; Service Historique de la Defense (SHD), GR 9 NN 7 1152.

¹⁹ Ibid.

because of military displacement. Rather, she wrote this letter because her home had been destroyed by the very state to which she now turned. Fall said public health agents had destroyed, “a cabin where all my furnishing was locked in, all of that cost me at least 2000 francs.”²⁰ She then named two local Wolof “notables” who could corroborate her claims before invoking her families’ wartime sacrifices. In doing so, she linked her domestic travails to France’s “blood debt” to make sure that her “cabin and furniture destroyed by sanitary measures will be indemnified.”²¹ Unlike *tirailleurs* eating outdoors in Fréjus, colonial archives do not indicate whether Fall received the payment she demanded. But like these men, governmental interventions gave French bureaucrats new reasons to be concerned about this Senegalese dwelling.

Fall said the state had to help her build a new place to call home. This obligation rested on the fact that the French government had isolated her in multiple ways, first by depriving her of children that could support her and then destroying her home. In this way, she echoed claims by the millions of metropolitan French widows. These women became a powerful political constituency after World War One in part by claiming that since the male breadwinners France’s natalist regime sought to produce died serving the nation, the government had to provide for these women and their families.²² Thousands of West African women like Fall invoked a similar script after the war. However, their invocations of the “blood debt” should not be taken as a clear sign of an attachment to France or its empire. Rather, these claims and the senses of obligations that grounded them emerged in specific sites structured by particular interactions between French officials, West African soldiers, and their relatives. Attention to this specificity helps explain Fall’s case.

Fall said French bureaucrats had to take responsibility for her domestic well-being not just because of her children’s patriotic service, but because the state they served ruined the dwelling she relied upon. While living under patriarchal rule within male run compounds, Wolof women like Fall had long had the right to hold on to their own earnings and space within familial compounds.²³ Like other corners of France’s West African empire, French patriarchal and depoliticized visions of the domestic sphere undermined these kinds of avenues for relative female empowerment.²⁴ Yet as Fall’s case shows, this very loss necessitated new kinds of political engagement. Like soldiers cooking under Fréjus’ open sky, Fall pushed French officials in N’Dar to give her the resources she needed to live comfortably. She did this regardless of the fact that colonial officials had turned the home she was trying to get indemnified for into a marker of exclusion. In so doing, she implicitly said that state obligations were not rooted merely in one’s ability to claim belonging. They also stemmed from French colonialism’s impact on peoples’ everyday lives. Fall and other dispossessed Senegalese dwellers made claims that reveal that in many cases, political engagements rested more on the ability to make a home than to become a citizen.

²⁰ Fatou Samba Fall to Monsieur le Lieutenant Gouverneur du Sénégal à Saint-Louis, August 15, 1919; ANS, H 78.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Peggy Bette. 2017. *Veuves françaises de la Grande Guerre: itinéraires et combats*. Berne: Peter Lang.

²³ Abdoulaye Bara Diop, 2012, *La Famille Wolof: Tradition Et Changement* (Paris: Éditions Karthala), 160-177.

²⁴ Emily Lynn Osborn. 2011. *Our New Husbands Are Here: Households, Gender, and Politics in a West African State From the Slave Trade to Colonial Rule* (Athens: Ohio University Press).

By examining homemaking efforts by women like Fall, I have tried to model how historians can decenter belonging when studying the politics of domesticity and domestic space in France's African empire. Belonging is still important, even in the examples I chose. *Tirailleurs'* supposed lack of belonging in France led French commanders in Fréjus to let *tirailleurs* cook as they want. In coastal Senegal, African homes' apparent inability to belong to a "modern" colonial city justified their violent destruction. Yet in these cases belonging or its absence did not determine how homes structured colonial populations' engagement with colonial bureaucracies. Even as Senegalese abodes fueled colonial visions of African otherness, Senegalese dwellers used these same spaces to make political demands. The success of these claims varied widely, depending on how much French bureaucrats felt it was in their interest to give particular claimants the comforts of home. Yet focusing on homemaking, rather than belonging, shows us new ways to think about intimate space in France's African empire. In doing so, we can uncover political actions not based on abstract ideas of belonging, but everyday efforts to make homes.

Gregory Valdespino is a scholar of domesticity, everyday life and governance in West Africa and the Francophone world, with special interests in Senegal and West African communities in France. His research examines Europe and Africa's entangled histories in the 19th and 20th century to understand historically changing definitions of and access to daily necessities. He received his Ph.D. in History from the University of Chicago and holds a B.A. in History from Stanford University.

Appendix



Figure 1: Photograph with caption “In the Somme – Group of *tirailleurs sénégalais* in front of the kitchen” from *La Dépêche Colonial Illustré: Comité d’Assistance aux Troupes Noires*, February 1917.

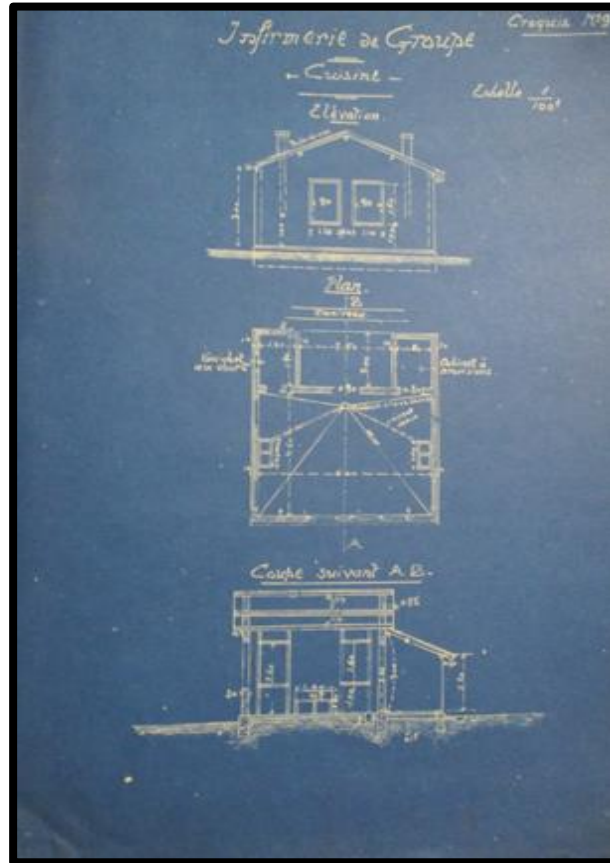


Figure 2: Depiction of a kitchen for *tirailleurs* in the Fréjus camp, bottom design shows an outdoor awning attached to this structure for soldiers to eat outside (Service Historique de la Défense, GR 9 NN 7/1152).

Gregory Valdespino

H-France Salon

ISSN 2150-4873

Copyright © 2024 by the H-France, all rights reserved.