

Louisiana Black Women: An Ignored History

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There is an aspect of the history of Louisiana that has been essentially neglected. The role of women, particularly the contributions of the black woman, is all but eliminated in the texts that attempt to outline the achievements of explorer, governor, and merchant in the development of Louisiana. Historian Gerda Lerner notes that "the modern historian is dependent on the availability of sources. The kind of sources collected depends to a large extent on the interests, prejudices and values of the collectors, archivists and historians of an earlier day." <1>

This observation was also made by W. E. B. DuBois in 1951 when he wrote, "We have the record of kings and gentlemen *ad nauseam* and in stupid detail, but of the common run of human being . . . the world has saved all too little of authentic record and tried to forget or ignore even the little saved." <2>

Such has been the case with the role of women in history. Arthur Schlesinger Sr. wrote in 1922 that "from reading history textbooks one would think half of our population made only a negligible contribution to history." <3> The black woman has been ignored even more; she has been considered historically inferior to the white female in the United States and at the same time a member of an entire family of people that was considered little more than chattel for more than 200 years.

"None of the names of the first women in New Orleans have survived. They have left no written history.... [B]ut we can imagine how hard life was for the early French women who kept house and raised families in the fetid swamp, the Indian women who brought their wares to market or the African women sold on the slave blocks to serve local wealthy families or work on plantations upriver." <4> When Sieur de Bienville brought 300 men to build the city of New Orleans in 1718, 272 were bachelors. For this reason, some of the Native American women were sold to whites and lived a quasi-slave existence in their own homeland.

In the 1720s French girls who were in disfavor with their families or who were orphans, prisoners or inmates from asylums were shipped to Louisiana. Whether "correction girls" or "casket girls," their primary purpose was to satisfy the sexual desires of the French settlers. As a further insult, the *commissaire ordonnateur*, Jean Baptiste de Bois Duclos, logged an official complaint to the Company of the West for a 1713 shipment of 12 young women who were "too ugly and ill-favored" to marry. <5>

As New Orleans became established as the slave center of North America, black women by the thousands were sold into bondage. For one group of the women, the assigned price depended upon their beauty and subsequent use to the master who could lease them to wealthy white men. For another group of slaves, bondage meant learning that "white men considered every slave cabin a bordello." <6>

Strong black women were sold as breeders valued for their reproductive as well as productive capacity. In a similar manner, a system that came to be known as *placage* was established in New Orleans to enable wealthy white men to set up a double household. The young women of the *placage* system were persons of French or Spanish plus black parentage. *Placage* was essentially a type of common-law marriage, or "the best-known institutional arrangement for miscegenation." <7>

A number of sources have been utilized by the historian to describe the system of *placage* and related Quadroon Balls in New Orleans. Fewer sources have dwelt on the system of rape and forced "breeding" that was part of the black woman's experience. And despite the fact that most of the Louisiana historians were white males, even the sources that would consider the role of white women were omitted from the official story of the state.

Yet it can be argued that at least the relationship of women in terms of maintaining a home or nurturing a family should be included in any analysis of the development of a state or region. This has not been the case in the study of Louisiana history. For the purpose of this paper, there will be an examination of some of the background biases that appear to have affected the manner in which black women have been recognized. Further, there will be a survey of individual and group efforts that give evidence of the black woman's contribution to the history of Louisiana.

First, it must be recognized that it is difficult to locate black female leaders in traditional history texts. For example, *Louisiana Studies* by Alcee Fortier has been a commonly referenced background text. Consider some of his observations regarding blacks: "[Slaves] were, as a rule, well treated by their masters, and, in spite of their slavery, they were contented and happy." In addition, "the negroes, as all ignorant people, are very superstitious."

Fortier's comments were not limited to New Orleans: "St. Martinville was the home of a true hero. Alcibiade DeBlanc, ex-justice of our Supreme Court. It was he who started the White League movement which was to save Louisiana from carpet-bag and negro rule."

In describing the 1870 legislation that required the integration of public schools, Fortier had this to say: "Colored children, instigated to apply for admission to white schools, were firmly refused.... In several instances, where the colored pupils had been admitted, upon a concerted movement, large companies of parents visited the school and required the obnoxious classes to withdraw." However, conscious of exhibiting a reasoned viewpoint, he acknowledged the establishment of Southern University. "The establishment of the Southern University is a proof of the good will of the whites toward the colored people and of their desire to see them as well educated as possible." It could be inferred that this historian did not expect too much of this education. <8>

It can be argued that reference to a history text written in 1894 requires too much of the author's ability to distance himself from his environment. However, there is not a considerable change by 1965. E. A. Davis writes a narrative history of Louisiana that essentially continues to ignore the role of blacks and the role of women.

In a search for women of any color in this text who were considered noteworthy, the index was reviewed. Grace de la Croix Daigre was cited because "she took notable pictures of places and people along the lower Mississippi and gave *one-man* shows throughout the state." In addition, after 1920, "the Louisiana Negro, unlike the Negro of other Southern states, was not used as a political issue and although he benefited from the extensive social legislation took little interest in politics. As late as 1940, when there were over 700,000 white registrants, there were fewer than 1,000 Negroes registered to vote." <9>

Such an analysis fails to consider the role of the White League movement extolled by Fortier. It neglects the reality of the "grandfather and grandmother clauses" that were used by the state to eliminate the black vote. Further, Davis' analysis can be refuted by examining the pieces of information that have managed to survive the historians' selections.

At the beginning of the 19th century, there were 500,000 black women, slave and free, in the United States. They had forefathers and foremothers who had come from every stratum of African society. Most of the American black women came from the "maintaining class," the people who are the foundation and grassroots of a society. Some were warriors and artisans, others were queens and princesses. <10>

Despite the statements of Fortier, black slave women were not contented and happy. "in general, the lot of black women under slavery was ill every respect more arduous, difficult and restricted than that of the men. Their work and duties were the same as that of the men, while childbearing and rearing fell upon them as added burden. Punishment was meted out to them regardless of motherhood, pregnancy or physical infirmity. Their affection for their children was used as a deliberate means of tying them to their masters. . . . The chances of escape for female slaves were fewer than those for males. Additionally, the sexual exploitation and abuse of black women by white men was a routine practice." <11>

Many black slave women resisted. Their awareness of the political and economic implications of resistance to the sexual exploitation of the masters was summarized in the narrative *Memoirs of Margaret Jane Blake*. "If all

bond women [resisted pregnancy] how soon the institution could have vanished from the face of the earth and all the misery belonging to it." <12>

One slave who resisted in Louisiana was "Patsey," a woman documented in Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*. His history of life as a slave in Louisiana is often used as a source for the otherwise untold life stories of women who worked the cotton fields, experienced their child being sold away from them or died as a result of being whipped by a master who had raped her or a mistress who sought revenge. <13>

Black women worked alongside the men in both the cotton and cane fields of Louisiana. "In the bayou region, women planted sugar cane cuttings, plowed and helped to harvest and gin the cane. During the winter, they performed a myriad of tasks necessary on a 19th century farm: repairing roads, pitching hay, burning brush and setting up post and rail fences." <14>

They did more than work the fields, however. The music of the black slave women helped to keep the family and community together. The lullabies of Afro-American women kept the African past alive: They crooned babies to sleep and also functioned as freedom and protest songs.

As the contemporary historian attempts to gather source material on the role of black women, the importance of music-making among the slave women is being re-examined. "A cursory survey of various modes of music-making among black women demonstrates that their traditional power as women who have authority over literal and symbolic life and death extends to an importance that scholars have not previously recognized." <15>

Black historian John Blassingame further clarifies some of the reasons that were involved in the oversight regarding black women. Because women were seldom mentioned in any type of writing, they were not specifically studied as contributors in their own right to the historical development of the United States.

It is necessary to recall that Louisiana had a high slave population figure relative to the South because it was an agricultural and slave-trading center. Approximately 50 percent of the population of Louisiana was black around the time of the Civil War. Approximately 50 percent of that figure would have been female.

One of the major channels for communicating daily events was the local newspaper. Blassingame gives a review of the newspapers' slant in the post-bellum period.

The chief defenders of white supremacy in New Orleans were the white-owned newspapers which continually vilified and ridiculed the Negro. Describing blacks as "niggers," "darkies" and "Sambos," white journalists generally depicted Negroes as speaking in almost incomprehensible dialect, and as an instinctively stupid, immoral, criminal, debased, dishonest, lazy, brutal and lustful subhuman species. According to whites, there was nothing in the historical record of blacks which proved their capacity for advancement; they had contributed nothing to civilization or to the art of government. <16>

If such was the slant of the newspapers, it should not be surprising that little mention of the achievements of black women would be available to the reading public.

The population of black readers had already been severely limited. Slaves were denied access to any kind of schooling by a law of 1830 that forbade teaching them to read or write on pain of imprisonment for between one and 12 months. <17> Despite such a law, a black slave woman by the name of Milla Granson conducted "midnight school" in her cabin.

The historical sources that tell her story vary as to whether Granson's home was in Natchez, Louisiana, or Natchez, Mississippi. <18> However the storyline remains the same: Granson taught slaves to read in her cabin in class sessions that began at 11 p.m. and ended at 2 a.m. She taught hundreds of slaves to read over the years, each in a group of 12 classmates. Some of the slaves learned how to write their own passes and set out from Natchez to Canada. When her activities were discovered, enough discussion was generated to affect the Legislature; a law was passed making it legal for a slave to teach a slave to read.

The school had a central role in the black community and black women had leading positions in the determined effort to provide an education for the children as well as the adults. In 1850 there were 1,000 free Negroes attending private schools in Orleans Parish. By 1860, there were only 336 black students in school. The 1875 state census indicated that 65 percent of the blacks in New Orleans were illiterate. <19> After the Civil War, the Freedmen's Bureau sponsored schools throughout Louisiana. More than half of the students were women and girls. <20>

The letters that were written by Edmonia Highgate, a teacher sent to Louisiana through the American Missionary Association after the war to serve the needs of the illiterate blacks, reveal the teaching conditions in New Orleans as well as those of Lafayette, La.

Highgate taught a class in New Orleans in a former slave pen. She noted the financial difficulties experienced in the black schools: Between Feb. 1 and Feb. 8, 1866, the number of teachers dropped from 150 in New Orleans to 28 in the Freedmen's Bureau Schools. At the same time, when tuition went up to \$ 1.50 a month, 3,000 children had to drop out of school because their widowed mothers were too poor to pay. <21>

In Lafayette, the problems were further complicated by the fact that the students spoke Creole French (and Highgate spoke English) while local whites objected to the entire notion of blacks being in schools and registered their beliefs by firing two shots into Highgates' room.

Despite these difficulties, black women managed to establish a significant system of education for black children throughout Louisiana. There were many obstacles that they had to overcome. Their story has not been fully told because it has been so poorly recorded.

One of the earliest "benefactresses of black education" was Marie Bernard Couvent, a black African woman who had been a slave in her youth. According to her will, which was probated in 1837, she gave a lot to "be in perpetuity devoted to the maintenance of a free school for the colored orphans of the Faubourg Marigny." <22>

According to the Creole historian, R. L. Desdunes, the Couvent school was the best attended school during the time of slavery. It also boasted an all-black faculty. However, Desdunes gives a further clue to the lack of data on the role of black women: He saw that there was "a grave error on the part of her contemporaries to have neglected transmitting to us the precise details in the life story of this generous person." <23>

Other women have been overlooked. It is difficult to find even Henriette Delisle listed in any Louisiana history. In 1842, at the age of 30, she founded the religious order of nuns, the Holy Family Sisters. They have staffed many schools and orphanages and homes for the elderly in Louisiana as well as in other parts of the world. <24>

A recently published volume on women in Louisiana simply lists the following black educators: Fannie C. Williams, Valena C. Jones, Sylvanie Williams, Mrs. Gaudet and Mother Mathilda Beasley. <25> There is no mention of the work of Frances Joseph-Gaudet, black philanthropist and founder of a school for children in New Orleans. <26> Nor is there mention of the specific contribution of Sylvanie Williams.

Sylvanie Williams represented Louisiana at the First Conference of Colored Women that was held in July 1895 in Boston. She knew that the black women of Louisiana were also in support of the rationale of that conference, recognizing that "all over America there is to be found a growing class of earnest, intelligent, progressive colored women" who might lack in opportunity to achieve but who did not lack in the ability to do so.

Williams was involved in a national effort that utilized working departments to address post-bellum needs: Women's Suffrage; Patriotism; Education; Conditions in Rural Life; Music, Art and Literature; Better Railroad Conditions; Mothers' Meetings; and Night Schools, as well as others. <27>

Williams was probably involved in the first Committee of 500 Women of New Orleans, headed by Mary Jane Garrett, that in 1878 published an address demanding "every right and privilege that the Constitution guarantees" . . . and called upon husbands and brothers to "take them where they could live in security and peace and get homes for themselves and education for their children." <28> (This document was sent to Congressman

Benjamin Butler of Massachusetts who had been the military governor of New Orleans in 1862 and who "was trusted by the blacks and detested by whites.")

It is also probable that Sylvanie Williams was involved in the city-wide Young People's Forum when Nannie Burroughs spoke to a crowd of 2,500 black youngsters: "Organize yourself inside. Teach your children the internals and externals, rather than the externals." <29>

Contrary to the opinion expressed by the historian E. A. Davis, black women (and men) did take an interest in political issues. They were concerned with the fact that black children in Louisiana had only a four-month school term. They were concerned enough with the denial of their full Constitutional rights to form "an emigration society."

Women such as Marie Bernard Couvent exemplify that "black women credited with making some of the earliest contributions to American education possessed the qualities of initiative and industriousness which would be associated with the role of black women in American education throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Though illiterate in the modern sense, they valued the pursuit of learning not only as an exercise which separated slave from master but also as an act of personal liberation." <30>

Such acts of initiative, industry and personal liberation were not limited to the scope of education. During the cane harvest of 1862, the female fieldhands in a Louisiana sugar plantation on Union-occupied territory engaged in a work slowdown. They finally refused to work until the white landowner met their demand for wages. The men struck within a week. The planner finally agreed to pay them. <31>

The Negro Women's Campaign for Equal Rights began in Louisiana in 1871. In 1971, Dara Abubakari (also known as Virginia Collins) was interviewed regarding her evolution toward a position as a Black Nationalist . <32> She was from a large family, the oldest of 15 children. Her father was a Baptist minister. She was the mother of 10 children (and by 1970 had 23 grandchildren). She was a registered nurse; her husband was employed with the city of New Orleans.

In 1953 Abubakari had thought that there was hope that blacks would be recognized as the contributors they are to American society. She worked throughout the 1960s with voter registration and as a parent and community worker aiding in the transition toward an integrated public school system in New Orleans.

It would seem that today's student of Louisiana history would need to search for this woman and her children and to document her observation from 15 years further down the road. Would she still advocate a total separation of the rive southern states into a black-lead unit? Certainly there would be enough facts in printed history books to justify that as a possible response from a woman honestly tired from being too-long ignored. Dara Abubakari is a part of Louisiana history, too.

Mary McLeod Bethune had comments to make on woman as a part of history. "To Frederick Douglass is credited the plea that, 'the Negro be not judged by the heights to which he is risen, but by the depths from which he has climbed.' Judged on that basis, the Negro woman embodies one of the modern miracles of the New World," she says. Bethune sums up "A Century of Progress of Negro Women" with this: "The black woman has made and kept her home intact - humble though it may have been in many instances. She has made and is making history." <33>

The fact also remains that the woman's place in the history of Louisiana cannot be appreciated if it is not acknowledged. There is a need for historians who can make use of the oral and written histories that have been considered insignificant when compared to battlegrounds or treaty dates. The observation of Frances E. W. Harper, a poet who campaigned for educational and voting rights for black women in the late 1800s is apropos to contemporary citizens: "The world cannot move without woman's sharing in the movement. . . . China compressed the feet of her women and thereby retarded the steps of her men." <34>

Notes

- 1 Gerda Lerner, *Black Women in White History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), p. 211.
- 2 Lerner, p. xxii.
- 3 Lerner, p. xxii.
- 4 Mary Gehman and Nancy Ries, *Women in New Orleans* (New Orleans: Margaret Media Inc., 1985), p. 5.
- 5 Liliane Crete, *Daily Life in Louisiana, 1818-1830* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), p. 9.
- 6 John W. Blassingame, *Black New Orleans: 1860-1880* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), pp. 82-83.
- 7 Blassingame, pp. 17-18.
- 8 Alcee Fortier, *Louisiana Studies* (New Orleans: F. F. Hartsell & Bro., 1894), pp. 126, 129, 175, 267, 300.
- 9 Edwin Adams Davis, *Louisiana: A Narrative History* (Baton Rouge: Claitor's Book Store, 1965), pp. 368, 334.
- 10 Ebony Magazine (Nov. 1985), p. 242.
- 11 Lerner, p. 15.
- 12 Filomina Chioma Steady, ed., *The Black Woman Cross-culturally* (Cambridge: Seckenman, 1981), p. 2%.
- 13 Solomon Northrup, *Twelve Years A Slave* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), pp. 125, 53, 57-60, 119-120, 196.
- 14 Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1985), p. 15.
- 15 Steady, p. 398.
- 16 Blassingame, p. 174.
- 17 Jones, p. 16.
- 18 Sylvia Dannett, ed., *Negro Heritage Library, Profiles of Negro Womanhood, Vol. 1, 1619-1880* (Yonkers: Educational Heritage Inc., 1964), p. 74.
- 19 Blassingame, pp. 11, 107.
- 20 Dannett, p. 55.
- 21 Dorothy Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1994). p. 299.
- 22 Steady, p. 263.
- 23 Rudolphe Lucien Desdunes, *Our People and Our Heritage* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press translation, 1973), pp. 104, 105.
- 24 Desdunes, p. 99.
- 25 Gehman and Ries p. 64.
- 26 Violet Harrington-Bryan. "Frances Joseph-Gaudet: Black Philanthropist." (Paper delivered Sept. 28, 1985, at Tulane University conference on "Southern Women: Portraits in Diversity.")

27 Lerner, pp. 440-43, 445.

28 Sterling, p. 374.

29 Lerner, p. 552.

30 Steady, p. 262.

31 Jones, p. 56.

32 Lerner, pp. 553-58.

33 Lerner. pp. 578-84.

34 Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter* (New York: Bantam Books. 1984), p. 96.

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