

5-20-2011

Just like Ole' Mammy used to Make: Reinterpreting New Orleans African-American Praline Vendors as Entrepreneurs

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“Just like Ole’ Mammy used to Make”: Reinterpreting New Orleans African-American Praline
Vendors as Entrepreneurs

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
History

Chanda M. Nunez

B.A. University of New Orleans, 2009

May 2011

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ABSTRACT

Women commonly sold goods on the streets of New Orleans throughout the city's colonial and antebellum history. Forming a significant presence among the city's market places, they sold various food items which included coffee, calas, and pralines. Perhaps the most popular of the African-American street vendors was the praline women. They attracted the attention of visitors as well as residents. Despite the popularity of these treats, the highly visible and enterprising praline vendors were simultaneously celebrated and caricatured by white observers who depicted them as "mammy" figures not only in store advertisements and logos, but also in everyday annotations.

Pecan Candy, Plarine, Praline, Mammy, Loretta's, Aunt Sally's, New Orleans, Labor, French Quarter, African-American, Marcus B. Christian, Street Vendor

“After Emancipation, the selling of sweets became a time-honored way of earning a small but honorable living.”

-Jessica B. Harris,
The Welcome Table: African-American Heritage Cooking

Introduction

During the early 1900s, a praline vendor named Mary Louise served as a regular presence on the campus of H. Sophie Newcomb College¹ in New Orleans. She typically stationed herself at the front gate asking “you wan’ praline?” to faculty and students and all other passers-by. Sometimes she would not have to ask because crowds, which often included Newcomb College President B.V.B. Dixon, would flock around her to purchase her delicious pecan-filled sweets. She always sold all of her pralines before the end of the day.

Known around campus as the “praline mammy,” Mary Louise cooked large batches of candy each morning in the kitchen of her St. Antoine Street home. An enterprising woman, she made sure she had several variations of pralines. She sold not only the traditional pecan pralines, but also several other varieties, including peanut, pink, and white coconut. Her “office” extended

¹ Beginning in the late 1800s, Newcomb College served as the women’s college for Tulane University.

beyond the Newcomb and Tulane campuses. Mary Louise also sold pralines at school-related events. In November 1900, when Tulane’s football team played Louisiana State University (L.S.U), the Newcomb administrators told the students, “Girls, save up your nickels. Pass by Mammy without looking at her or her pralines, for Tulane is to play L.S.U....”²



Mary Louise, Praline Woman, circa 1917, Newcomb College Archives.

When Mary Louise died, her daughter Azelie became the “praline mammy” who sold the confections to Newcomb and Tulane students. A white woman once offered her \$5.00 a day plus expenses to make pralines in her kitchen in order that she could give the candy as Christmas gifts.³ Azelie declined her offer. Perhaps the notion of working in a white woman’s kitchen was a bit off-putting for her, or, possibly the self-determined Azelie generated enough income that she

² *TheTimes Picayune*, November 17, 1900, 3.

³ *The Times Picayune*, March 21, 1920, 51.

did not need the additional revenue. Another sign of Azelie's independent streak is captured in a newspaper account that stated if the Newcomb girls bothered Azelie too much "she would leave the college craving for sweets for a week until she considered them punished sufficiently."⁴

Like the many black women who made a living as washerwomen in the South after emancipation (rather than as domestic servants), Azelie may have prized her status as a self-employed person, free from the surveillance that working in white households brought with it. Her independence reminds one of the washerwomen described in Tera Hunter's study of 1800s and early 1900s Atlanta; Azelie, too, sought to "to achieve freedom, equality, and a living wage against tremendous odds."⁵ Like her mother, Azelie did not limit herself to college campuses. She stationed herself in front of the St. Charles Hotel, selling her sweets to New Orleans visitors. Azelie's "baskets of lusciousness drew tourists as thickly as flies about honey."⁶ Though Mary Louise, Azelie, and many other enterprising women took to the streets to sell pralines in an effort to support themselves and their families financially, they were not viewed as businesswomen; they were instead stereotyped as mammies. This is evident from the numerous newspaper articles, short stories, and drawings referring to them as a "praline mammy."

Dating back to seventeenth century France, the praline was named for Marchel de Plessin-Pralin, who suffered from indigestion and ate almonds to alleviate the pain; his butler suggested that he cover the almonds with sugar. Sugar-coated almonds soon became a treat in France. The French settlers of Louisiana brought the praline with them.⁷

⁴ *The Times Picayune*, March 21, 1920, 51.

⁵ Tera W. Hunter. *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *The Picayune's Creole Cook Book*. (New York: Dover Publications, 2002), 375.

More than simply vending sweets, African-American women also were responsible for the creolization of the praline, which continue to be sold in France as sugared almonds. African-American cooks replaced the almonds with pecans, which were abundant in New Orleans. They also added large amounts of Louisiana sugar as well as milk to thicken the candy. Therefore, the culinary genius of African-American women created the New Orleans praline, as we know it.

The candy held very different meanings for the customer and the vendor. “Pralines,” as white consumers often referred to them, were a treat. They symbolized a piece of the Old South, lovingly prepared by someone depicted as a faithful “mammy.” Generally known as “Pecan Candy” or “Plarines” by African-Americans, the candy represented a path to economic freedom and additional income as well as a treat. Mary Louise turned over to her daughter what can be described as a family business; instead, white commentators praised the candy while typically reducing the women to demeaning caricatures. This thesis examines the heritage of entrepreneurship long hidden behind the “mammy” image during the Antebellum and Jim Crow eras. This study also surveys the prominence of praline street vendors in New Orleans from the colonial period until the rise of early twentieth century praline shops that marketed the “mammy” image to tourists while employing African-American candy makers in commercial kitchens. It then considers the return of a more prominent, entrepreneurial role for African-American praline vendors in the later part of the twentieth century.

New Orleans Markets

The tradition of African-Americans selling goods in the New Orleans community dates from the colonial period. Enslaved Africans initially took part in the market economy to provide financial relief to their masters and to earn additional income to provide their own food, clothing,

and shelter. While New Orleans was under French rule, the *Code Noir* was established in an effort to control the slave population. Article V of the code excused slaves from work on Sunday; as a result, slaves used this day to their economic advantage by selling goods in the market. The laws of the *Code Noir* were loosely enforced because the slave merchant sold goods that were considered necessities to the white population of New Orleans. According to historian Jerah Johnson, “by the end of the French Period slaves regularly held a Sunday market on the edge of the city at the end of Orleans Street.”⁸ The slave market continued under Spanish rule and when the Americans took control of New Orleans, the slave market was maintained. This area would eventually be known as Congo Square.

Slaves, free people of color, Indians and whites congregated on Sundays, and Congo square acted as an open-air market. During the eighteenth century, “only a handful of slave peddlers occasionally sold goods up and down New Orleans’s few short streets and along its riverfront, which served as the city’s main food market.”⁹ When enslaved Africans arrived in New Orleans, they encountered an already existing Indian market, which sold bear grease, game, fish, and baskets. According to Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, “two-thirds of the slaves bought to Louisiana under French rule came from Senegambia.” Specializing in the buying and selling of goods, the people of this area have been described as merchant princes.¹⁰

Coming from a long mercantile tradition, the West African women were the stand-out vendors. Enslaved African women and free women of color soon dominated New Orleans markets. In port cities around the Atlantic World, the idea of working outside of the home was

⁸ Jerah Johnson. “Colonial New Orleans: A Fragment of the Eighteenth-Century French Ethos,” in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, ed. Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 42.

⁹ Jerah Johnson, *Congo Square in New Orleans*, (New Orleans: Louisiana Landmarks Society, 1995), 9.

¹⁰ Ibid.

attractive to these women because they were able to escape the watchful eyes of their white masters and generate additional revenue. During the Spanish period, these women would be in a position to purchase not only material necessities; they would be able to procure their freedom through the Spanish legal system *Coartacion* (“freedom purchase”).¹¹ One historian argues that “African-American women became perhaps the most influential buyers and sellers of food in New Orleans” a position they would hold for centuries.¹²

In 1784, the Cabildo¹³ vowed to build a market especially for the street vendors in an effort to tax the increasing number of New Orleans street peddlers. In exchange for market stall usage, the Cabildo would receive rent from the vendors.¹⁴ According to Kimberly S. Hanger, very few enslaved and free African-American women rented stalls from the Cabildo, yet they continued to sell their goods on the streets. The street vendors remained an important part of New Orleans under American rule. Merchants sold an array of food items, in addition to pralines: calas, cakes, ice, waffles, pies, and coffee. The New Orleans City Council began to regulate “the extent to which a slave could barter or sell any commodities, goods, wares, or articles in excess of \$5” in 1817.¹⁵ According to African-American historian and poet Marcus

¹¹ For more regarding the freedom purchase, see Kimberly S. Hanger, “Landlords, Shopkeepers, Farmers, and Slave-Owners: Free Black Female Property –Holders in Colonial New Orleans,” in *Beyond Bondage: Free Women of Color in the Americas*, ed. David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2004), 218-236 and Gilbert C. Din and John E. Harkins, *The New Orleans Cabildo: Colonial Louisiana’s First City Government, 1769-1803*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), 12 and 161*n*.

¹² Daniel Usner, *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves: The Lower Mississippi Valley Before 1783*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 202.

¹³ Spanish colonial government system and officials.

¹⁴ Hanger, 218-236. See Robert Olwell, “Loose, Idle and Disorderly’: Slave Women in the Eighteenth-Century Charleston Marketplace,” in David Barry Gaspar, and Darlene Clark Hine, (eds.) *More than Chattel: Black women and slavery in the Americas*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 97-110.

¹⁵ Marcus Christian, “Street Vendors and Street Cries,” *The History of the Negro in Louisiana*, Unpublished Manuscript. Louisiana and Special Collection. Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

Christian, any slave found in violation, had to pay fines ranging from \$10 to \$25.¹⁶ Slaves continued to control the New Orleans market well into the nineteenth century.

The Treme Market, which opened in the late 1830s, proved to be tough competition for Congo Square. The newness of the Treme Market lured away many of the Congo Square merchants. A sparse number of street vendors, both enslaved and free women of color, remained “to peddle gingerbread, rice cakes, and pralines to the Sunday afternoon crowds.”¹⁷ According to one account, “a few aged black women on the outskirts of Congo Square, sold “pralines ... to the few tourists.”¹⁸

After Emancipation, African-American and white women sold sweets and desserts on New Orleans streets. Evidence shows that many of these women were heads of their household, financially supporting children and sometimes husbands. As street vendors, these women had to secure business licenses to sell their goods. Many were not able to pay for the necessary permits; in such instances, they had to apply for a fee waiver. According to Police Inspector Records, in March 1899, G. Porteous wrote the following letter to D.L. Gaster, Supervisor of Police: “Sir, the applicant Mrs. E. Murphy residing at 3906 Magazine near Austerlitz St. is doing small business in cakes, pies, and bread at above numbered residence. I would recommend a Free Permit [fee waiver] granted her.”¹⁹ Mrs. Murphy is one of several small businesswomen to receive fee waivers. Laura Anderson applied for a fee waiver in May 1899. A resident of the 3rd precinct, Anderson worked as a washerwoman and ice cream vendor to generate extra income to

¹⁶ Ibid., 4.

¹⁷ Johnson, Congo, 41.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ New Orleans Public Library City Archives, New Orleans Police Department Collection, Office of Inspector of Police Correspondence, 1899-1913, Box 1. March 1899.

take care of her invalid husband. Mrs. E. Hogan lived in the 5th precinct and applied for a fee waiver in May 1899. A widow with two kids to support, Mrs. Hogan worked as a cake vendor. Valle Astor of the 4th precinct applied for a fee waiver in May 1899; she worked as a street vendor selling ice cream. Mrs. Edward Raymond of the 4th precinct, applied for a fee waiver in May 1901. She was a widow who sold bread and cake on the streets. Josephine Bourgeois also applied for a fee waiver in order to sell candies and cakes. Two of the four women were widows, which underscored the importance of additional wages to support their families.²⁰

Praline women left behind few written records; however, their presence was such that observers often wrote about them. In her short story entitled “The Praline Woman,” African-American writer Alice Dunbar-Nelson describes a day in the life of a praline vendor. The *praliniere*²¹ is described as sitting “by the side of the Archbishop’s quaint little old chapel on Royal Street.”²² The “praline woman,” named *Tante Marie*, is described as speaking a dialect mixed with French and what was probably the local African-American vernacular; this suggests that she may have been Creole. *Tante Marie* could be heard calling out to potential customers:

“Pralines, pralines.
Ah, ma’amzelle, you buy?
S’il vous plait, ma’amzelle,
ces pralines dey be fine, ver’ fresh.”²³

²⁰ New Orleans Public Library, City Archives, New Orleans Police Department, Office of Inspector of Police Correspondence, 1899-1913, Box 1. May 1899 - May 1901.

²¹ One who sells pralines.

²² Alice Dunbar-Nelson, “The Praline Woman” in *Southern Local Color: Stories of Region, Race, and Gender*, ed. Barbara C. Ewell and Pamela Glenn Menke (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002), 300.

²³ *Ibid*, 299.

Marcus Christian wrote of the *pralinieres* as well. In his unpublished manuscript entitled “The History of the Negro in Louisiana,” Christian describes the “rich basses and shrill trebles, whining, pleading, cajoling, screaming” voices of the street vendors. He also remembers that the praline vendors were perhaps “the best known of all the street-vendors of New Orleans” and standing out among them was Zabet, a praline vendor who “sold her cakes and pecans in and around Jackson Square, and Moreau Lislet, Livingston, Mazareau, Grymes, and Judge Francois-Xavier Martin stopped” to buy pralines. The State Supreme Court was located in the adjacent Cabildo building, so Zabet came in frequent contact with prominent judges and lawyers.²⁴

African-American Entrepreneurs

African-American women have sold many food-items in the streets of New Orleans, and not all of them have been denigrated by the mammy image. Perhaps the first documented African-American street vendor was Rose Nicaud, an eighteenth-century slave who sold coffee in New Orleans. Local lore suggests that she also sold sandwiches and calas. Nicaud accumulated enough money to purchase her freedom, and she gave birth to the tradition of New Orleans coffee houses. A true entrepreneur, “she set up a portable stand and became an immediate success.”²⁵ Her customers included parishioners of St. Louis Cathedral, who would stop at her stand for a cup of hot coffee before or after mass. Initially, her patrons either had to stand and drink or get their coffee to go; Nicaud later acquired enough money “to get a permanent stand in the French Market and could offer seating for her customers.”²⁶ She set the

²⁴ Marcus Christian, *The History of the Negro in Louisiana*, Unpublished Manuscript. “Street Vendors and Street Cries,” 5.

²⁵ Mary Gehman, *Women and New Orleans*, (New Orleans: Margaret Media, 1985), 16.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

trend of women of color selling coffee in and around the French Market. Before long, several African-American women sold coffee, but each selling their own variation of the beverage.²⁷

Side-by-side with the praline and coffee vendors were the cala vendors. Calas are a breakfast fritter served with hot coffee. Like pralines, calas were made from inexpensive, readily-available ingredients. In *Gumbo Ya-Ya: Folk Tales of Louisiana*, Robert Tallant and Lyle Saxon write about the process of making calas from day-old yeast and cooked rice. Butter, milk, eggs, and flour were added to the mixture, and a ball was formed by dropping a spoonful of the batter into a pan filled with hot grease. According to food historian Jessica B. Harris, the calas are presently sold on the streets of Liberia by the Bong women.²⁸ Like the praline and coffee hawker, the cala vendors were almost always older African-American woman. The cala woman was also a daily sight in the New Orleans streets well into the early 1900s. Clementine was a New Orleans cala vendor who sold the fritters and dressed like “mammy” in a tignon²⁹ and long gingham skirt.³⁰

Another parallel between the cala and praline vendor was the form of advertisement or “street cry” used to notify potential customers of the goods they were selling. The calas vendor boasted of her sweet treats: “*Belle cala! Tout chauds!*” (*Beautiful rice fritters! Nice and hot!*).³¹ According to Marcus Christian, everything the street vendor sold was “belle” or “bon” (beautiful

²⁷ For more regarding African-American coffee street vendors, see Marcus Christian, *The History of the Negro in Louisiana*, Unpublished Manuscript. “Street Vendors and Street Cries,” 6-8. Despite working closely with Irene Wainwright and Greg Osborn at the New Orleans Public Library’s Louisiana Division, no additional information regarding Rose Nicaud could be located.

²⁸ Jessica B. Harris, *Beyond Gumbo: Creole Fusion Food from the Atlantic Rim*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 318.

²⁹ Scarf, usually bright in color, worn wrapped around the head covering the hair.

³⁰ Harris, *Beyond Gumbo*, 313.

³¹ Jessica B. Harris, *African-American Heritage Cooking*, 196.

or good).³² The two cala women who sold their treats side-by-side could be heard alternately calling out:

1st: Calas, Calas,--all nice and hot
Calas, Calas,--all nice and hot

2nd: Lady, me I have calas! Laaa-dy, me I have calas!
All nice ‘n hot—all nice n’ hot—all nice ‘n hot....³³

In a February 1940 WPA interview conducted by Ora Mae Lewis, eighty-five year old Mrs. Cecelia Williams recalled “that calas originated somewhere near 1860”³⁴ but it likely had developed well beforehand in Africa. Maybe Lewis remembered an increased presence following the end of slavery as women sought additional ways to make money. Lewis stated that calas did not reach their full popularity until 1864 when it became “a necessary part of the First Communion breakfast, the first breakfast in Lent, or Sunday breakfast.”³⁵ The fritters were also sold at cemeteries on All Saints Day.³⁶

The last documented calas vendor continued to peddle his fritters well into the 1940s. Richard Gabriel was said to be a dark-skinned fellow with curly hair and always neatly dressed. He pushed his calas cart throughout city’s downtown neighborhood.³⁷ In one of his street cries,

³² Marcus Christian, *The History of the Negro in Louisiana*, Unpublished Manuscript. “Street Vendors and Street Cries,” 9.

³³ Edward Dreyer, Lyle Saxon, and Robert Tallant, *Gumbo Ya-Ya*, (Gretna: Pelican Publishing, 2006), 35.

³⁴ Louisiana Digital Library. Louisiana Works Progress Administration Collection. *The Cala Vendor*. <http://louisdl.louislibraries.org/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/LWP&CISOPTR=1362&REC=2>, accessed March 15, 2010.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Interview with Emeritus Professor of History Raphael Cassimere, Jr., April 2011.

³⁷ Marcus Christian, *The History of the Negro in Louisiana*, Unpublished Manuscript. “Street Vendors and Street Cries.” “He would go “down Claiborne [Avenue] until he reaches St. Bernard [Avenue], and then up Derbigny

he called out: “We sell to the rich, we sell to the poor, we give it to the sweet brownskin, peepin’ out the door. Tout chaud, Madame, toud chaud! Git ‘em while they’re hot! Hot calas!”³⁸ Gabriel, a male street vendor, sexualizes his wares, stating that “we give it to the sweet brown-skin.”

Berenice Moret grew up in New Orleans’ Seventh Ward neighborhood and has childhood memories of Gabriel from the 1930s and 1940s, recalling that he sold his hot calas mostly on Sunday mornings. Selling street food provided many Black New Orleanians with enough economic freedom to care for their families. Like many of the praline women, Gabriel had a family to support, which included three daughters.³⁹ Despite these highly visible examples of street vendors working hard to care for themselves and family, praline vendors – more than any other entrepreneurial African-American – endured endless public scrutiny that almost invariably led to negative depictions of them as mammy figures.

Mammy

The idea and myth of “mammy” was a hold-over from the pre-Civil War South. But who was mammy and why was she so desirable to white customers? In the minds of southern whites, mammy was the enslaved and loyal servant who tirelessly cooked, cleaned and cared for their families. Working primarily in a domestic capacity, mammy encountered and interacted more with the women of the family. As a result, white women were often the ones who wrote about mammy. Historian Deborah Gray White states that “Mammy was a woman, who could do anything, and she could do it better than anyone else” and “Mammy is especially remembered

[Street] to Lapeyrouse [Street]. Upon reaching Lapeyrouse he turns down Prieur Street and proceeds to Annette [Street], and from then to Galvez [Street] finally ending at Pauger Street.”

³⁸ Dreyer, Saxon, and Tallant, *Gumbo Ya-Ya*, 34.

³⁹ Interview with Berenice D. Moret, March 2011.

for her love of her young white charges.”⁴⁰ According to historian Grace Elizabeth Hale, “at the turn of the twentieth century, mammy became an important part of popular culture as they appeared in books, magazines, and films, in advertisements, on menus, in the names and iconography of restaurants and cookbooks...”⁴¹ Consequentially, many artistic interpretations of the “praline mammy” emerged. Some recall the delicious, sweet praline; most chose to interpret the women who sold the candy as either nostalgic connections to their own childhood memories of nannies or the embodiment of the antebellum period. Whites most frequently referred to the praline vendors using some variation of the term “mammy.” One New Orleanian recalls as one of her most precious childhood memories in the late 1890’s that she had “bought a pecan praline from an old Negro Mammy on the banquette with a basket.”⁴² In *Social Life in Old New Orleans*, Eliza Ripley “remember[s] the colored *marchandes* who walked the streets with trays, deftly balanced on their heads, arms akimbo, calling out their dainties” which included pralines.⁴³ In a 1910 edition of *The Newcomb Arcade*, Lois Janvier comments that “Mammy will take her place by the gate and remain there with her basket of pralines...”⁴⁴ The author of a 1917 piece in a Newcomb publication does not neglect the candy and asks “have you ever tasted pralines? I do not mean the kind you find wrapped in oil paper under the glass case of the candy shops! I mean

⁴⁰ Deborah Gray White. *Ar’n’t I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 47.

⁴¹ Grace Elizabeth Hale. *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South: 1890-1940*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 98.

⁴² Marion S. O’Neal, 1964. *Growing up in New Orleans: Memories of the 1890’s*. Louisiana History: The Journal of the Historical Association 5, no. 1 (Winter). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4230746> (accessed June 5, 2010).

⁴³ Eliza Ripley, *Social Life in Old New Orleans: Being Recollections of my Girlhood* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1912), 24-25.

⁴⁴ Lois Janvier, “In the Shadows,” *The Newcomb Arcade* (1910):18.

the real kind, the kind that used to be on Newcomb's steps hidden under that purple striped bandana in the big old basket, carefully guarded by "old black mammy."⁴⁵ One cannot trace the exact moment that the pralines became associated with the mammy figure, but the connection was long lasting. Over centuries, these women served as a prominent part of the city's economic and cultural history, selling their sweets to tourists and New Orleans locals.

According to historian Herbert Gutman, mammy was an older black woman "who remained in her antebellum place out of loyalty to a white family..."⁴⁶ In "Cracker Prayer," Harlem-Renaissance poet Langston Hughes writes of a poor white man's final appeal before his impending death: "Lord, Lord, dear Lord, since I did not have a nice old colored mammy in my childhood, give me one in heaven, Lord. My family were too poor to afford a black mammy for any of my father's eight children. I were mammyless as a child. Give me a mammy in heaven, Lord."⁴⁷ This man does not wish to see his birth mother in heaven; instead, he is consumed with the idea of having a mammy to take care of him in his afterlife. Some mammy, any mammy will do for this "mammyless" man.

Like praline recipes passed through generations, so were the tasks of domestic workers or "mammies." African-American mothers often allowed their daughters to work on a part-time basis in their employers' homes to produce supplementary income. In addition to being caretakers, the younger women were allowed to serve food and beverages at the parties in the

⁴⁵ Author Unknown, "Mammy," *The Newcomb Arcade* (1917): 210.

⁴⁶ Herbert G. Gutman, "The Black Family" in *Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York, 1976), 632.

⁴⁷ Langston Hughes, "Cracker Prayer," in *Simple's Uncle Sam* (New York: Aeonian Press, 1965), 124-125.

homes of whites. To become skilled at serving parties was invaluable because such work would always be available.⁴⁸

Despite these essential roles, the salaries of domestic workers were often inconsistent. Some women were paid a decent wage; others were sometimes paid partially in cash and the other portion of their wages would be paid to them as food or clothing. This did not sit well with the employees because they had financial responsibilities that required cash payments. By contrast, the praline woman was able to earn cash each day selling her candies. Some would add to their wages by selling dolls and other small items. Some of the domestic workers often worked for white families until death and literally carried the title of “mammy” with them to the grave. In an Alabama cemetery, domestic worker Malinda Battle James is buried under a tombstone that reads “Our Mammy.”⁴⁹

Artistic Renderings

Perhaps because she was poor, African-African, and a woman, the importance of the praline woman in New Orleans history has been overlooked. However, her physical image -- dark-skinned, heavysset, and dressed in mammy-attire remained visible within white New Orleans society. The 1904 volume of *The Jambalaya*, Newcomb College’s yearbook, contains a picture of a praline vendor. Not buried in the back pages of the book, her image appears among other prominent Newcomb College images in the front of the book, including college president Professor B.V.B. Dixon. This speaks to the praline woman’s prominent role on the college campus. A similar depiction of a “praline mammy” serves as a page border throughout the 1923 issue of Tulane University’s yearbook. Complete with a *tignon* and a basket filled with pralines,

⁴⁸ Susan Tucker, *Telling Memories Among Southern Women: Domestic Workers and Their Employers in the Segregated South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988).

⁴⁹ Tucker, *Telling Memories*, 279.

her image is on every other page of the yearbook. Yet another artist interpretation of the “mammy” appeared at the Fine Arts Club of New Orleans Annual Luncheon. Amidst the elite, lunching ladies and crisp linen table clothes filled with carnations were “... place cards [that] contained the delightful representation of the well-known Creole mammy vending her pralines.”⁵⁰

The Works Progress Administration (WPA) program in Louisiana helped to document at least three praline women through black and white photographs. Founded by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1935, the WPA and the Farm Security Administration (FSA) were branches of the New Deal policy whose wide variety of projects were carried out by local and state governments.



Praline Woman, New Orleans 1940. Louisiana Digital Database.

The clothing of the women in the photographs is almost identical. Yet, each image tells a different story. In the first image the praline woman stands in Jackson Square smiling, hands on her hips, and a corn pipe in between her lips. She is holding a basket filled with pralines that

⁵⁰ *The Times Picayune*, November 30, 1909, 7.

feature the following notice: “*Creole Pecan Pralines. 3 for \$.25.*” This raises several issues. There are several types of pralines, including coconut, peanut, and pecan. Pecan pralines were the most costly variety and were usually purchased by the wealthiest customers. This vendor seems to be catering to a specific clientele. She seeks to conduct business with a class of people who would have no problem paying her asking price. This sign not only lets potential customers know what variety of candy she is offers; it also lets potential customers know whether they can afford her treats. Market vendors were renowned for bartering; however, this sign is an indication that this praline woman does not compromise. Possibly she has some of the cheaper ones, such as coconut, for those not able to meet her price. Though she is dressed in “mammy” attire, her impish grin, hand-on-the-hip stance, and pipe tell a tale of independence and pride that differs from the loyal mammy stereotype. She is one of the few only vendors that advertises the prices for her candies. One also cannot know if this woman is one of the few remaining independent vendors or if she is working for one of the praline shops. The printed sign suggests the latter. Through my research, I have discovered approximately five images of this particular praline vendor. All of the photos were taken by different photographers on various occasions. None of the images mention her name, but all five refer to her as a “mammy.”

The next photograph records a praline woman dressed in the same manner as the woman in the first picture, but this woman is seated, which suggests that was not as mobile as the first. Therefore, she has to wait for clients to approach her, as opposed to the woman in the first picture who was standing and able to move from one corner to the next in her quest for potential clients.



Praline Woman, New Orleans 1930. Louisiana Digital Database.

Also, the woman in the second picture is wearing dark glasses. This hints that she may be blind or have vision problems. This photograph plays more to the stereotype of mammy because this woman looks like a sweet, feeble grandmother as opposed to the strong, emboldened look of the woman on the first picture. Nevertheless, this woman set out to make her living on the streets each day as a businesswoman, regardless of her physical appearance.

The last two photographs feature “Quincy Mae.” These pictures are unique because Quincy Mae is the only vendor to be photographed and identified by name. The first photograph shows her near the entrance of Bultman Funeral Home and a bus stop at the corner of Louisiana and St. Charles Avenues. The second photograph shows her sitting at the bus stop. She is neatly dressed in a white apron, flowered cotton blouse, and dark-colored head scarf. Some sold candy fulltime, but many women sold on a part-time basis. Quincy Mae is wearing an apron associated

with a domestic servant and standing near the entrance of Bultman funeral home.



Quincy Mae, New Orleans 1930s. Louisiana Digital Database.

She may have worked for the funeral home or in one of the nearby homes in a domestic capacity. Perhaps she was employed full-time and sold pralines on the way to and from work to supplement her income. As a bus passenger, she was far more mobile than the previous praline vendors, which allowed her to sell her pralines to New Orleans residents as well as tourists.

The dress of the African-American praline vendors is historically significant, and one element harkens back to the days of slavery. All of these women dressed in a similar manner: *tignon* on their heads, scarf draped around their necks, and a long skirt and apron. The *tignon*, in particular, is important. In an effort to control the dress of Louisiana's non-white female population, Governor Esteban Miro, enacted a mandatory law in 1785. "The *Tignon Law*" made it obligatory for all female slaves and free women of color of the city to wear a *tignon* in public. The *tignon* acted as a tell-tale sign one's race because a number of light-skinned free women of color were mistaken for white women and received romantic attention from white men.

Hair has long been used as a form of individual expression in the African and African-American communities, and "elaborate hair designs, reflecting tribal affiliation, status, sex, age, occupation, and the like were common" as were "the cutting, shaving, wrapping and braiding of

hair.” Being made to cover one’s hair is comparable to silencing one’s creative voice. The enslaved and free women of color had no choice in the matter. Conceivably Louisiana’s black female population had likely been expected to wear plain and unflattering head scarves that made them appear unattractive to white men. However, as a sign of artistic resistance, the women wore brightly colored, boldly printed *tignons* adorned with elaborate jewels and feathers.⁵¹

Prior to “The *Tignon* Law,” slave women wore simple cotton head coverings called bandanas. These acted as “protection from the sun, kept the hair clean, helped preserve patterns of braiding and wrapping...” African-American women may have lacked the financial means to purchase fine clothing, but adding brightly colored bandanas was a simple and inexpensive way to spruce up their wardrobe. New Orleans was not the only place in the south where African-American women wore bandanas. In Georgia, African-American women wore gaily-colored handkerchiefs and in South Carolina women wore gaily colored turbans...” Consequently, the praline women came from a long line of women who covered their hair with *tignons*, bandanas, and scarves.⁵²

The praline women’s choice of clothing reflected how most working-class African-American women always dressed. For example, Azelie the Newcomb College praline vendor dressed in a similar fashion to her mother Mary Louise dressed: *tignon*, a scarf tied around her neck, and an ankle-length skirt and apron. Presumably, Mary Louise’s mother dressed the same way. Therefore, the style of clothing worn by these women represented an part of their working-class culture and not a gimmick, according to historian Dr. Raphael Cassimere. Growing up in early 1940s New Orleans, Cassimere remembered his older women relatives wearing the same

⁵¹ Shane White and Graham White. *Stylin’: African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 41.

⁵² *Ibid.*

style of clothing.⁵³ This manner of dress may have appealed to white tourists who believed they were purchasing a piece of the “old south” from “mammy.” On the contrary, they were buying candy from entrepreneurs who dressed like their mothers and grandmothers before them.

Collectively, these Great Depression-era images establish that when jobs were likely scarce, African-American women decided to work for themselves. The street vendors had husbands, children, and perhaps even grandchildren to care for and took to their own kitchens out of necessity to make ends meet. The ingredients were items readily available even in the barest of cupboards: milk, sugar, and butter. In addition, pecan trees were abundant in many of the African-American neighborhoods of New Orleans. As a result, pralines may have been the obvious choice when the decision was made to sell something that was delicious and in high demand, yet inexpensive enough to turn a quick profit.

The candy hawkers would call out to potential customers, and the sound of the praline vendors is immortalized on the album *Street Cries and Creole Songs of New Orleans*, which was recorded by folksinger Adelaide Van Wey. The song listing includes “Praline Seller,” which is only thirty-seconds long and consists of the same five words sung repeatedly: “Pralines! Pralines! For your sweet-toothy! For your sweet toothy!”⁵⁴

The Marketing of Mammy

The mammy caricature played a prominent role as the tourist industry developed in the early twentieth century and white business owners began to take over the praline business. In an effort to capitalize upon the “mammy” image, New Orleans businesses used it to assist with the sale of

⁵³ Interview with Raphael Cassimere, Jr., April 2011.

⁵⁴ Adelaide Van Wey, Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, *Street Cries and Creole Songs of New Orleans*.

their commercialized pralines. Katz and Bestoff, a New Orleans drug store during the twentieth century, placed an advertisement in a 1918 issue of the *Times-Picayune* boasting of delicious Creole pralines “Just Like Ole’ Mammy Used To Make.”⁵⁵ Later that same year, Grunewald Caterers enticed customers with “Real New Orleans old-fashioned Pralines, like Mammy used to make.”⁵⁶



Katz & Bestoff advertisement, 1918. The Times Picayune

In addition to advertisements in newspapers, many candy shops used a mammy image on their packaging. Praline vendors were being displaced by small and large businesses that contributed to the further distortion of these street-level entrepreneurs. Located at 300 Royal Street, Kate Latter’s candy shop used a praline package that depicted a smiling African-American woman dressed in a tignon, long skirt, and apron seated beside a basket of pralines.

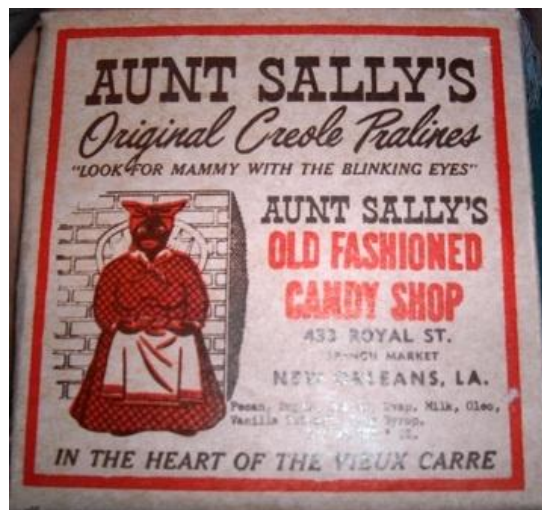
⁵⁵ *The Times Picayune*, February 17, 1918, 6.

⁵⁶ *The Times Picayune*, December 22, 1918, 35.



Kate Latter's praline box, mid-1930s. Courtesy of Michelle Benoit and Glen Pitre. Photo by Chanda M. Nunez.

Nearby at 433 Royal Street, the more popular Aunt Sally's Creole Praline shop engaged in the same manner of “mammy marketing.” Their box of pralines depicted an overweight African-American woman dressed in “mammy garb.” The front of the box reads



Aunt Sally's praline box, mid-1930s, Courtesy of Michelle Benoit and Glen Pitre. Photo by Chanda M. Nunez.

“Look For Mammy With The Blinking Eyes.” The tipped lid of the box reads “On The Site Of The Old Slave Box.” which refers to the former site of the St. Louis Hotel and Exchange. By

devaluing the praline vendors with Old South phrases such as mammy and slave, the praline stores sought to appeal to white tourists with images of a faithful servant and a time when African-Americans “knew their places.”



Aunt Sally's Praline Box, mid-1930s. Courtesy of Michelle Benoit and Glen Pitre. Photo by Chanda M. Nunez.

Such images of the old South lasted well into the twentieth century.”⁵⁷ In a November 1974 article entitled “Pralines Shipped in Cotton Bales,” Aunt Sally Praline’s recommends that customers send pralines as a Christmas gift. The advertisement also states that pralines are made fresh daily at 9:00 a.m. in front of an open window and invites readers to come to the store and “See how Mammy does it!”⁵⁸ This advertisement appeared a minimum of seven times within that month. These and similar advertisements were printed in the *Times-Picayune* throughout the 1970s. Over one hundred years after emancipation, the term “mammy” remained appealing to many white business owners and customers. The “See how Mammy does it” articles were discontinued in the 1970s. However, Mammy remained a part of Aunt Sally’s promotional efforts well into the 1980s. In 2011, Evans Creole Candy factory is the one praline company yet to discontinue the offensive image. A praline store located in the French Quarter, Evans

⁵⁷ *The Times Picayune*, December 19, 1949, 54.

⁵⁸ *The Times Picayune*, November 21, 1974, 6.

continues to use a smiling, African-American woman with a *tignon* as a part of its logo. Their mammy also bears the name “Dixie.”⁵⁹



Evans Creole Candy, 2011. Photo by Chanda M. Nunez.

The commercialization of “praline mammy” led at least once to the court house. In a 1962 court case *American Decalcomania* brought suit against storeowner Morris D. Lorber, who refused to pay for labels he ordered to be printed.⁶⁰ The defendant owned a gift shop, which sold among other items, pralines. He ordered decals from *American Decalcomania* to be affixed to “a multicolored cardboard box which heralds the pralines to be ‘Plantation Flavor from Old New Orleans.’” The packaging should have also contained “pleasant brown-skinned mammy with black eyes and red lips, wearing a bandana handkerchief as a headdress.” The mammy depiction figured at the center of the court case, which was disputed for ten years.⁶¹

The *American Decalcomania* salesman who processed the order says he showed the defendant a sketch of the mammy, which a Lorber representative approved. The salesman

⁵⁹ Several of the images in this paper are also a part of a museum exhibit I curated, entitled “Pecan Candy.”

⁶⁰ *American Decalcomania Co., Inc v. Morris D. Lorber*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

produced a signed receipt that read “sketch approved as is.” The sketch would remain in Lorber’s store for more than two weeks. However, the store’s representative states that he never saw, approved, or signed the mammy sketch. He claims to have signed and approved another sketch that looked more like a mammy figure. The court ruled in favor of the defendant, essentially stating that the sketch did not sufficiently resemble a “mammy” and therefore the store was not responsible for payment of the shipment of labels. This court case is significant because it centers upon what white businessmen believed a true “mammy” should look like. Although her image was placed on the packages of pralines, that particular representation did not look enough like mammy — a fat, smiling, dark-skinned reminder of the past.

Once the corporations took over and the praline women were no longer seen on the streets of New Orleans, their images moved not only to the praline boxes but also to the store front. Many praline shops placed life-sized mammy dolls in front of their establishments. In 1941, Aunt Sally’s Canal Street location offered a fifty dollar cash reward for the return of the praline mammy that had been stolen.⁶² On a separate occasion, a child saw a praline mammy in front of a shop on Chartres Street and was “so charmed by it that she threw her arms around it, put its arms around her neck, and tried to lift it from the sidewalk.”⁶³

The store front praline mummies became such a phenomenon that white tourists commonly took pictures posing with the life-size dolls. This is evident in a set of 1957 photographs taken of 5-year-old Yvonne Benoit. The trio of photographs document the child posing with three different praline mummies in a single day, which speaks to the abundance of praline store dolls in New Orleans. The first and second images show Yvonne lazily leaning

⁶² *The Times Picayune*, April 1, 1941, 25.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

against a smiling black mammy.⁶⁴ Ironically, the mammy in the second photo is chained to the store.⁶⁵ The chains may symbolize slavery and the south’s tourist economy being “chained” to the past. The main reason, however, was to ensure that the doll would not be stolen. The next photograph shows Yvonne standing next to a “praline mammy” holding her hand.⁶⁶



Yvonne Benoit with store front Praline in 1957 New Orleans. Courtesy of Michelle Benoit.

Ten years later in 1967, Yvonne’s 10 year-old sister Michelle is photographed twice with life-sized mammy dolls. The first photograph shows the smiling child, standing next to a dark-skinned, red-lipped, store-front mammy. The second photograph shows Michelle standing next to a grotesque, paper-mache mammy with a menacing grin on her face.

⁶⁴ 1957 photograph taken from the collection of Michelle Benoit.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.



Michelle Benoit with storefront praline mummies in 1967 New Orleans. Courtesy of Michelle Benoit.

In the late twentieth century, some African-American artists took notice of the negative image of the storefront “praline mammy.” Poet and writer Tom Dent, in the mid-1970s, included the following lines in his poem “Secret Messages” with: “. . . as we move past/ stuffed black mummies/ chained to Royal St. praline shops/ check it out.”⁶⁷ Poet Brenda Marie Osbey also remembers the candy makers in her poem “Litany of Our Lady.” Osbey recalls harmful stereotypes “. . . in praline mummies, cigar shoppe Indians, in dwarf nigger jockeys . . .”⁶⁸

Pralines as a Commercial Enterprise Controlled by Whites

The relative decline of the African-American praline vendor can be traced, through the classified advertisements in newspapers, to the maturation of the tourist industry in the 1900s. African-American women continued to sell candy to community members and co-workers to

⁶⁷ Tom Dent. “Secret Messages,” *Magnolia Street*, 1976, (2nd edition, 1987), 28.

⁶⁸ Brenda Marie Osbey, *Southern Literary Journal*, Volume 40, Number 2, Spring 2008, page 14.

supplement their income; one woman remembers that in the 1930s her grandmother regularly made pralines to sell to her co-workers at the Haspel Clothing factory.⁶⁹ While African-Americans never lost control of business within their community, the rising tourism industry caused more white-owned businesses to cater to visitors. As the entrepreneurial praline women become less common, French Quarter praline shops began to hire praline makers.

Many stores placed advertisements in the *Times Picayune*. In February 1941, a local candy store placed an ad for a “colored mammy, experienced praline maker.”⁷⁰ In May 1964, Kate Latter’s candy shop placed an advertisement for a “colored girl to learn to make pralines and candy.”⁷¹ In May 1965, an unnamed store placed an ad for a praline maker, specifically seeking a “refined colored girl with references.”⁷² In October 1968, a classified ad is placed for a “young colored woman. Must have excellent references as to honesty and ability.”⁷³ The hiring of truck drivers to deliver pralines to stores, packers to assemble praline boxes and gift baskets, and cashiers to work at the counters of the praline stores are some of the signs of this change. The newspaper advertisements calling specifically for African-American women demonstrates they were hired to be the face of the white-owned businesses while cooking pralines in industrial kitchens instead of their own.

Aunt Sally’s Creole Pralines is one of the oldest companies in New Orleans, and it was founded over 75 years ago by a Creole French couple, Pierre and Diane Bagur. They were said to have purchased a praline recipe and business from an old Greek man who sold the candy around

⁶⁹ Interview with Berenice D. Moret, March 2011.

⁷⁰ *The Times Picayune*, February 19, 1941, 26.

⁷¹ *The Times Picayune*, May 20, 1964, 12.

⁷² *The Times Picayune*, May 2, 1965, 7.

⁷³ *The Times Picayune*, October 12, 1968, 13.

the French Quarter. Until 2010, their website marketing stated that Aunt Sally had been a family servant.⁷⁴ Extremely creative, Diane Bagur, along with her sister, Yvette Rolufs, made miniature dolls to sell with the pralines, according to Mary McDonald, granddaughter of the Bagurs, The dolls depicted some historic figures as Marie Laveau and Jean Lafitte; nevertheless, it was the praline mammy dolls that were her biggest sellers.⁷⁵

Mary McDonald acknowledges the significant position that mammy had held in the development of her family's business. While working in Aunt Sally's as a teenager during the 1960s, she discussed the racist images on the praline boxes and states that a store manager who was not a family member ordered those boxes. In the midst of his being ousted from his position, the manager ordered a large number of the stereotypical mammy designs on their gift boxes. Unable to absorb the financial loss of ordering more boxes, McDonald explains that the family continued to use the praline boxes. Regardless of how accurate or inaccurate the family's explanation might be, the present-day owners acknowledge the damaging role their company's marketing played for decades. As recently as the 1980s, McDonald would give pralines to friends as gifts, but she was so embarrassed by the image of the mammy that she would remove the candy from the box.⁷⁶ Her sister, Pat McDonald-Fowler, designed the current store logo, which features just the name "Aunt Sally's Creole Pralines" in red letters. Nevertheless, the term "Aunt Sally" alone conjures images of the days of slavery when the terms "Aunt" and "Uncle" were often tied to the enslaved.

⁷⁴ The history was recently changed, and no mention of the origin of the name is currently available. The author possesses page printouts of the previous company history. See the Aunt Sally's company website for the revised company history: <http://www2.auntsallys.com/about-us.html>

⁷⁵ Interview with Mary McDonald, November 2010.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

McDonald believes that African-American women were “rock solid” within Aunt Sally’s and essentially the “true history of the company.”⁷⁷ Throughout the store’s past, the family employed only African-American women in the kitchen. McDonald-Fowler suggests that is because of Aunt Sally’s hiring process. When looking for additional staff, Bagur asked the kitchen employees if they knew of any experienced praline makers. As a result, the employees’ relatives and friends, who were other African-American women, joined the company. Additionally, “coming off of the end of the Depression, women were working more than ever before.”⁷⁸

McDonald and McDonald-Fowler recall one of the praline makers who was “key to the success in Aunt Sally’s.”⁷⁹ Iola Francis, also known as “Doll Baby,” was a “backa-town”⁸⁰ resident who worked in Aunt Sally’s kitchens for over thirty years. McDonald remembers Doll Baby as an outgoing, petite woman with a beautiful heart-shaped face. She would give candy samples to children, often remembering tourists who had visited the previous summers, and received additional income from the tips she collected from the vacationers by chatting them up and posing for photographs. Referred to as a “candy artist” by McDonald-Fowler, Doll Baby worked in the Aunt Sally’s kitchen from 1938-1969. According to McDonald-Fowler, the praline makers employed in her commercial kitchen had the potential of additional earnings by posing for pictures with tourists. In a sense, the actual candy makers could function as human props for photographs, much like the life-sized mammy dolls.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Interview with Patricia McDonald-Fowler. December 2010.

⁷⁹ McDonald Interview.

⁸⁰ African-American neighborhood in New Orleans.

⁸¹ McDonald-Fowler interview.

The company's kitchen consisted of a tight-knit society of sisters, cousins, and friends. The African-American women showed a form of resistance by stating openly they "did not want to work with white girls" and no white woman ever penetrated their close circle. In the 1980s, a Hispanic woman was hired to make pralines but she "did not last long amongst the Black sisterhood" of the kitchen. The African-American women tended to be employed by the store for many years. According to McDonald-Fowler, this could be in part due to the benefits the company offered the women. The praline makers received transportation to and from work, medical and dental benefits, and assistance with opening bank accounts.⁸²

As with the Newcomb College praline vendors, Mary Louise and Azelie, the tradition of praline making passed down in Aunt Sally's kitchen. After Doll baby died, her daughter, Edna Francis, took her place in the kitchen. Francis did not like candy making and she worked hard to make sure that she would not remain in the kitchen. Francis earned a position in management, pushing back against the "mammy" myth in an individual way. She remained an Aunt Sally's employee from the late 1940s until her death in the 2002.⁸³

Freelines

The Black Panther Party created a sharp juxtaposition of the mammy stereotype. Where "mammy" was put in a position of silence and submissiveness, the Black Panther Party voiced their opinions on the mistreatment of African-Americans. The founder of the New Orleans chapter of the Black Panther Party, Robert King Wilkerson used a derivative of the praline to

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

bring attention to his political cause. His candies, called “Freelines,”⁸⁴ are used to shed light on the plight of the Angola 3, three African-American men who were imprisoned for trying to expose abuse and corruption that occurred at Angola State Prison in Louisiana during the 1970s. These three men are Wilkerson, who was released in 2001, and Albert Woodfox and Herman Wallace, both of whom are still serving time in prison. Freelines wrappers list the ingredients, and feature a picture of a black panther, Wilkerson, and the words “benefits the Angola 3 defense fund.”



Freelines label, 2010.

As a child, Wilkerson watched his mother make pralines using pecans, water, and sugar. While imprisoned at Angola, he worked as a cook in the kitchen. He befriended the kitchen's baker, an inmate named “Cap Pistol,” who would not share his praline recipe. Wilkerson watched and later developed his own recipe. He invented Freelines, which could be considered the little sister of the praline as they share many of the same ingredients: pecans, milk, butter, and sugar. Just as he made up his own recipe for the candy, King had to make his own stove, which he improvised from aluminum cold drink cans and lighted toilet paper to provide the heat

⁸⁴ Pronounced free-leens.

source. King used his candies as a bartering tool while an Angola inmate, giving candy to inmates in return for favors. At times, Wilkerson had some of the ingredients smuggled in, but generally the items he needed to make his candy were readily available. Prisoners received milk, butter, and sugar with all of their meals. A few generous inmates saved the ingredients for Wilkerson to use for his Freelines. Pecans were a little harder to come by. However, helpful prison guards often provided pecans to Wilkerson. Many pecan trees grew near Angola, and after tasting Freelines and enjoying them, the guards would bring Wilkerson pecans. Freelines ushered in a new role for the pralines. Wilkerson renamed and transformed the candy, associating its image with a decidedly political meaning through its connection with the Black Panther Party and the Angola 3.⁸⁵ Despite the association of pralines with women, men are also responsible for making and selling the candy.⁸⁶

Post-Mammy Praline Entrepreneurs

A less radical and jarring type of change, yet a significant one nonetheless, was the more recent transformation of the praline vendor into entrepreneurs unencumbered by the mammy image. Pralines still hold a place in the hearts and minds of many African-American New Orleanians; most grew up with pralines the way kids in other parts of the country grew up with cookies and milk. If a family member did not make the candy, then a neighbor did. Mrs. Parline Brent, also known as "Pearly" was a resident of the New Orleans suburb named Harvey.⁸⁷ She sold her homemade pralines and pies during the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. Located on the West Bank,

⁸⁵ Orissa Arend, *Showdown in Desire: The Black Panthers Take a Stand in New Orleans*. (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2009).

⁸⁶ The male role in making and selling the candy is an element that I am starting to explore in more depth.

⁸⁷ Suburb of New Orleans, located "across the river" in Jefferson Parish.

Mrs. Brent catered only to locals since few tourists travel across the Mississippi River. In contrast to the long skirts and *tignons* worn by the “Praline Women,” Pearly always wore neat dresses, carrying her purse and basket full of goodies. Although her style of dress differed, her method of advertising in post-Civil Rights New Orleans beckoned back to the traditional street vendors. In the market, Pearly would call out to potential customers, almost begging them to buy her candies. Through her entrepreneurial efforts, she was able to accumulate enough money to care for her blind husband and four children. Over the years, the sale of her pralines made it possible to send her youngest daughter, Sherika, to nursing school. Pearly took her job as a praline vendor very seriously; selling candy was her only means of income.⁸⁸

Nannan B., whose real name is Beatrice Gibbs, was originally from Port Allen, Louisiana, but eventually settled in New Orleans’ Gert Town⁸⁹ area. Nannan B. sold pralines out of her home during the 1960s and 1970s. She sold pecan and coconut pralines. According to Efrem Scott Sr., who was a regular customer of Nannan B.’s, she placed a sheet pan covered with wax paper on the kitchen table and the pralines would be put on it to cool. An enterprising woman, she also sold frozen cups⁹⁰ and coconut candy that “would melt in your mouth.”⁹¹ Nannan B. knew how to get repeat customers. She would wrap a quarter in foil and place it on the bottom of a few select cups before she poured the juice in. When neighborhood children would come to buy the frozen cups, they would be none-the-wiser until they got to the very

⁸⁸ Interview with Shenna Scott., a former neighbor of Mrs. Brent, April 2010.

⁸⁹ Section of New Orleans’ Carrollton neighborhood.

⁹⁰ Paper cups of frozen fruit juices that are a traditional and inexpensive treat for New Orleans children on a hot summer day.

⁹¹ Interview with Efrem Scott, Sr. April 2010.

bottom and found a shiny circle of foil remaining. Scott remembers the kids would almost immediately run back to Nannan B.'s house for another frozen cup or praline.⁹²

Present day praline vendor Judy Lambert has been making and selling pecan candy for almost thirty years. The forty-two year old businesswoman learned to make the confection when she was in the seventh grade. Later, as a freshman at Warren Easton High School, Lambert wanted spending money but was too young for a job, so she began to make and sell pralines. An older relative who had a pecan tree in her backyard gave her the pecans and Lambert sold pralines at school to classmates and teachers for \$.50 per piece.

Lambert never sold candy as a street vendor and did not take the praline business seriously until 2006, when she made candy for a cousin. This cousin gave the candy as gifts to her daughter's teachers. Soon after, the teachers began to request the pecan candy on an almost daily basis and this prompted Lambert to start a small business. She has become creative in marketing; last year when she took orders for Mother's Day, her customers were pleasantly surprised when they received cellophane-covered pecan candies on a stick, placed in an inexpensive vase, so that they would resemble a bouquet of flowers. This past Valentine's Day, Lambert used moldings to create heart-shaped pecan candy. The candy was placed in a red container decorated with yellow, pink, and white hearts.

Instead of the street cries from the days of old, Lambert has kept up with technological advances in marketing and advertising. She uses emails, text messages, and Facebook to reach customers. A typical message from her might read:

Celebrate Mother's Days in an especially sweet way.....treat her to some good ole creamy pecan candy from Ms. Judy. Sold in bouquets of 3 @\$10, 6@ \$20 or Mini order of candy for \$5, Small-\$8, Medium-\$14, Large-\$20. Deadline to order is May 4, 2010.⁹³

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Message received from Lambert via Facebook, April 2010.

Lambert, who was taught to make pralines by her best friend’s father, has not taught anyone else how to make them. She loves making the candy and says that the process acts as a form of therapy for her. She makes it at night when everyone else in the household is asleep. This is her favorite time to make candy because it gives her time to relax and clear her thoughts.



“Ms. Judy” and a basket of her homemade pralines, 2010. Photo by Chanda M. Nunez

Loretta Shaw Harrison is the embodiment of an African-American praline entrepreneur, and she certainly defies the stereotype of the “mammy.” The owner of Loretta’s Authentic Pralines, Harrison started making the candy when eight years old. Like many of the *pralinieres* from the days of old, she uses a formula passed down from an older female relative, in this case, her great-grandmother. Harrison surmises that “all poor black people had [to pass down to their

children] was a recipe.⁹⁴ Similar to the praline women at Newcomb College, Harrison initially sold her candy to college students. While working as a night-shift librarian at the Louisiana State University School of Medicine’s library, she made pralines and sold them to the students. Within a few years, Harrison began taking classes at Tulane University to help with strategies in running a successful business. One class in particular helped her to redevelop the marketing of her candies; she selected more effective colors and a new box design as well as an improved company name. Harrison sees no need to use mammy to market her candies. Her company logo consists of her first name “Loretta” and a parade of pralines second-lining.⁹⁵



Photo by Chanda M. Nunez.

In the early 1980s, Loretta’s Authentic Pralines made its debut at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival (Jazz Fest). In one weekend, the company profited \$1,500, which was more than double what Harrison made selling the pralines to the college students in one month. Shortly after the Jazz Fest, Harrison opened her first store in Jackson Brewery, which is located

⁹⁴ July 2010 interview with Loretta Shaw Harrison.

⁹⁵ A second-line is a traditional New Orleans dance.

in the French Quarter. Decades later, Loretta's Authentic Pralines are known world-wide. She has shipped pralines to Switzerland, Paris, and Afghanistan and has made her delicious candies for the likes of such iconic African-American actors as Denzel Washington and Danny Glover. Each year, she sells her confections at the city's most important festivals, including Jazz Fest, French Quarter Fest, and the Essence Festival. Additionally, Loretta appeared in a 2010 Superbowl Commercial, further establishing herself as a businesswoman.

Conclusion

Creating and distributing a product once tethered to the Old South and a mammy image, Loretta Harrison represents the most successful African-American praline entrepreneur in New Orleans history. Located in the same Jackson Square vicinity where African-American women once could only sell items in the street, Loretta's Authentic Pralines is sited at the center of the city's tourist economy. Harrison's achievement, along with that of other modern praline vendors, represents a triumphant statement regarding African-American entrepreneurialism in the culinary arts.

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Images

(Figure 1) Photo of Mary Louise. Newcomb Archives at Tulane University. *Jambalaya*, 1904: page 60.

(Figure 2) Photograph of Praline Vendor. LOUISiana Digital Library, http://louisdl.louislibraries.org/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/LWP&CISOPTR=3343&CISOBOX=1&REC=5.

(Figure 3) Photograph of Praline Vendor. LOUISiana Digital Library,

(Figure 4) Photograph of Praline Vendor. LOUISiana Digital Library,

(Figure 5) Photograph of Praline Vendor. LOUISiana Digital Library,

(Figure 6) Katz and Bestoff advertisement. The Times Picayune, February 17, 1918, page 6.

(Figure 7) Photograph of Kate Latter's praline box. Collection of Chanda M. Nunez.

(Figure 8) Photograph of Aunt Sally's praline box. Collection of Chanda M. Nunez.

(Figure 9) Photograph of Aunt Sally's praline box. Collection of Chanda M. Nunez.

(Figure 10) Photograph of Evans Creole Candy. Collection of Chanda M. Nunez.

(Figure 11) Freeline label. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4989099>

(Figure 12) Photograph of Yvonne Benoit. New Orleans, 1957. Photograph from the personal collection of Michelle Benoit.

(Figure 13) Photograph of Yvonne Benoit. New Orleans, 1957. Photograph from the personal collection of Michelle Benoit.

(Figure 14) Photograph of Yvonne Benoit. New Orleans, 1957. Photograph from the personal collection of Michelle Benoit.

(Figure 15) Photograph of Michelle Benoit. New Orleans, 1967. Photograph from the personal collection of Michelle Benoit.

(Figure 16) Photograph of Michelle Benoit. New Orleans, 1967. Photograph from the personal collection of Michelle Benoit.

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This work is dedicated to her mother, Gail Ann Stemley and her son, Jacobi D. Hobson II. "It is because I have strong and beautiful roots, that I create strong and beautiful branches."

A special dedication goes to the late Joe Louis Caldwell who ignited my love for African-American history. Rest in Power.