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INTRODUCTION

New Orleans at 300: Documenting the African American Experience, 1718–2018

Mary Niall Mitchell and Connie Zeanah Atkinson

The city of New Orleans held its Tricentennial celebration beginning in early 2018. The mayor's Tricentennial commission organized and sponsored numerous events—from tall ships docking in the port of New Orleans and museum exhibitions attended by King Felipe IV and Queen Lutzia of Spain to food festivals and a citywide scholarly symposium on “Making New Orleans Home.” While the overall tone of many of these official events has been one of celebration, the Tricentennial has also been an opportunity for a reckoning with the city's past, including its roots in slavery and the slave trade and its long history of African American resistance to racial oppression and legalized discrimination. Scholars, activists, and various cultural groups have insisted that these critical chapters of the city's history should become shared knowledge for the residents of New Orleans as well as visitors.

The most prominent example of this reckoning was the removal of four Confederate monuments from prominent spaces in the city in 2017. Mayor Mitch Landrieu received national recognition for the removals and explicitly linked them to the city's Tricentennial out of concern for how the city would be per-

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ceived by the world in 2018.¹ Yet the removal of those symbols of white supremacy had been the objective of African American organizers for decades. On its website, the group Take 'Em Down NOLA made it clear that Mayor Landrieu would not have succeeded without the many years of protest work by its members: "The removal of four prominent Confederate and white supremacist monuments in New Orleans this summer resulted from years of community organizing, change that local politicians would never have initiated or stuck behind without sustained pressure from the grassroots."²

Groups such as Take 'Em Down NOLA demonstrate what historian Leslie Harris, a New Orleans native, recently described as the city's "enormous capacity for change." Harris was the closing speaker at a three-day citywide symposium sponsored by the Tricentennial commission, "Making New Orleans Home," which also featured conversations with local civil rights activists such as A. P. Tureaud Jr., Dodie Smith Simmons, and Raphael Cassimere. Harris is clear-eyed about the city's long history of discrimination and its failure to support its African American residents. While she stressed that the city remains burdened by racial inequality with a class system shaped by slavery and its legacies, Harris also insisted that black New Orleanians "are rooted in the history of enormous resilience."³

It is to this history of resilience that we pay tribute in this Special Issue of the *The Journal of African American History*. As co-directors of the Ethel & Herman L. Midlo Center for New Orleans Studies, we are especially invested in telling stories of African American agency and protest. The Midlo Center's core mission is to share and promote the history of civil rights, broadly defined, in New Orleans. Herman Midlo was a successful civil rights attorney in New Orleans, and under segregation he was one of the few lawyers who would represent African American clients in the city. His daughter, Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, is a leading historian of colonial slavery in eighteenth-century Louisiana, whose work highlights the struggles of enslaved people and the importance of African people and their culture to the development of this region. As Midlo Hall wrote recently, "Amnesia about black history cuts us off from the past and undermines our self-image and our confidence that we can bring about important, constructive change in the world." Through her own activism in the integrated New Orleans Youth Congress

1. Eileen Fleming, "Landrieu Wants Review of City's Historical Monuments," WWNO New Orleans Public Radio, 24 June 2015, <http://www.wwno.org/post/landrieu-wants-review-citys-historical-monuments>; Katherine Sayre, "Confederate Monuments: Mayor Landrieu Envisions 'Tricentennial Circle' to Replace Lee," Nola.com, 28 April 2017, https://www.nola.com/politics/index.ssf/2017/04/lee_circle_tricentennial_circl.html

2. See <http://takeemdownnola.org/>.

3. Leslie M. Harris, "The Future of a Great American City," remarks delivered at "Making New Orleans Home: A Tricentennial Symposium," 11 May 2018, University of New Orleans.

in the late 1940s, and with the inspiration of scholars such as Herbert Aptheker, she “came to understand the power of history to change consciousness and inspire the struggle for equality.”⁴

The articles that follow, taken collectively, present black New Orleanians’ long history of activism, a history that often placed them in the vanguard of national struggles against racial oppression and inequality. William Horne’s essay on musician and Republican politician Victor-Eugene Macarty illustrates through one man’s career the struggles of formerly free people of color to secure civil rights for African Americans in the Reconstruction era and its aftermath in New Orleans. Macarty’s life “illustrates the outer limits of equality following emancipation” and the persistence of New Orleans’s Afro-Creole activists even in the face of unfettered white supremacy in the late nineteenth century.

Public schools were another key focus of civil rights struggles, and here New Orleans was without question in the vanguard within the American South. Walter Stern’s contribution underscores the role that public schools have long played in New Orleans, from the early nineteenth century forward, as a battleground over the rights of black residents to equal treatment and equal opportunity under the law. Stern traces the fate of the Bayou Road School, an institution that became the focal point for struggles over equal access to schooling for African American children for generations. In New Orleans, long before Ruby Bridges’s famous walk into William Franz Elementary on 14 November 1960, “race and education fueled and inflamed the politics of white supremacy,” and black families and community leaders fought to secure the best possible conditions in which their children could attend school.

The long view of what began as the Bayou Road School and became Joseph Clark High School is given a personal perspective in this issue, as well, with the remembrances of Raphael Cassimere, who attended Clark between 1956 and 1959. Now emeritus professor in history at the University of New Orleans, Cassimere explains how influential educators at Clark instilled in their students a commitment to academic excellence and social justice that inspired many of them—among them A. P. Tureaud Jr., Oretha Castle Haley, and Johnny Jackson Jr.—in local civil rights protests in the 1950s and 1960s.

Hospitals, too, were important institutions and vital physical spaces through which black New Orleanians sought equal access and treatment as well as improved health care. At the center of Kevin McQueeney’s essay is the Flint Goodrich Hospital, a health-care center that served African Americans in the city between 1894 and 1985 despite multiple obstacles, both “intentional” and “unin-

4. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, “The Southern Negro Youth Congress: A Participant Recalls Its Past,” <http://www.blackpast.org/perspectives/southern-negro-youth-congress-participant-recalls-its-past>. This article is an excerpt from Midlo Hall’s forthcoming memoir.

tentional,” and the debilitating effects of US apartheid and its aftermath. The story of Flint-Goodrich highlights the relationship between health care and community and the tragedy of a “two-tiered” system and illuminates the role of hospitals as “driving engines of twentieth-century urban life, affecting education, labor, and land usage” (582).

Finally, Lynnell Thomas looks at activist storytelling and the need to address the silencing of African American history by the local tourist industry. She compares two very different campaigns to present and interpret New Orleans history, with a special focus on the notable career of Leon Waters, who for decades has pressed for more accurate and just interpretations of the city’s French Quarter through his Hidden History Tours. In Thomas’s view, the French Quarter “has never been a neutral ground in New Orleans, but it continues to be an important site to wage the battle over public memory and spatial (in)justice” (636). The work of Leon Waters and other reinterpreters of the city’s French Quarter has borne fruit in recent years, as historians, institutions, the community, and visitors have all pressed for African American public history based on scholarship rather than myth.

In that spirit, we have included here a group of essays in tribute to John W. Blassingame and his foundational history *Black New Orleans: 1860–1880*, first published in 1972. These essays are adapted from remarks given by panelists at the Organization of American Historians annual meeting in New Orleans on 7 April 2017 during a tribute to Blassingame, who was honored as one of the most significant chronicler of the city’s history. The reflections of the panelists—Lawrence N. Powell, Jessica Johnson, Erin Greenwald, and Leslie Harris—demonstrate both the importance of Blassingame’s study (at a time when many historians dismissed the city as “unrepresentative” of the South as a whole) and the significance of New Orleans to past and present struggles for racial justice in the United States.⁵ The distinctive cultural creativity of Black New Orleans is revealed in recent scholarly works reviewed in this Special Issue. The skills that free and enslaved Africans brought with them to “Slavery’s Metropolis” from the early eighteenth century are examined. The unfair treatment of Black New Orleanians by the judicial system in the post-emancipation period is documented through court records and newspapers accounts, as well as the racialized response to the yellow fever epidemic that hit the city in 1879. “New Orleans Jazz” inside and outside the United States is explored, along with the African cultural retentions from the Kongo region in the traditions and musical practices of the Mardi Gras Indians. The unique culture of the “second line” of the New Orleans social, aid and pleasure clubs has been documented by photographer Eric Wa-

5. For a video of Blassingame’s “Black New Orleans” event, held 7 April 2017 at the Ashé Cultural Center’s Powerhouse Theater, see <https://youtu.be/QWCvnYXneGU>.

ters in his recent book *Freedom's Dance*; and what we know and don't know about the practice of voodoo among Black New Orleanians also comes under scrutiny. African Americans' campaigns for equal rights and equal treatment in the nineteenth century continued in twentieth-century New Orleans, and the changing objectives and outcomes are assessed by several authors.

The most significant campaign for racial justice in New Orleans in recent memory followed Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The city's African American population was especially hard hit by the disaster. The city's resurrection post-Katrina became an important chapter in black New Orleanians' long history of struggle, and it continues to shape the political landscape today. One of the most effective activists on behalf of black residents in that period was the president of the Broadmoor Neighborhood Association, Latoya Cantrell. Broadmoor, which was majority black and low income, was one of the neighborhoods designated to become green space rather than to be rebuilt according to a controversial plan drafted by Mayor Ray Nagin's Bring New Orleans Back Commission. Through community activism and the leadership of Cantrell and others, Broadmoor did come back. This year, New Orleans elected Cantrell, an African American, the city's first female mayor. The struggle against racial injustice and disparity in New Orleans continues, and after 300 years, the city's black population remains resilient and creative.