Black Expressions of Dillard University How One Historically Black College Pioneered African American Arts

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Black Expressions of Dillard University
How One Historically Black College Pioneered African American Arts

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
Public History

by

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Abstract

The proposed public history project, *Within These Walls (WTW)*, will be one component of a larger exhibit produced by Dillard University’s, Library Archives and Special Collections entitled *The Star Burns Bright: History of Dillard’s Theatrical and Musical Arts, Faculty and Students*. WTW will focus on Dillard’s historic African American faculty, students and alumni who became prominent painters, musicians, writers, actors and directors among them Adella Gautier, Randolph Edmonds, Ted Shine Frederick Hall, Theodore Gilliam and Brenda Osbey. This exhibit will also highlight the many art programs, across genres, offered at the university between 1935 and 1970. This exhibit will demonstrate that arts education at Dillard was key to student resilience and empowerment in the face of segregation and the racial struggles of the 1930s through the 1970s. The exhibit is scheduled to open at Dillard University’s Will. W. Alexander Library in Gentilly in June of 2020 and will run through September 2020.

Keywords: African American, musical theater, Dillard University; New Orleans Louisiana, black culture; black actors; black writers; black poets; education; Civil Rights Movement; Historically Black Colleges and Universities; Xavier University.
Project Overview

The Star Burns Bright

...all seeking and seeking together the same ends-disciplined minds, disciplined spirits, and disciplined manners....an achievement entirely consistent with most creative leaps of the imagination and one that is necessary to that ordered pursuit of insight which is the foundation of all happy and useful living...

~ Dr. William Stuart Nelson - President, Dillard University (1937 - 1941)

Definition of Project

The forthcoming exhibition The Star Burns Bright demonstrates the successes of many African American students and faculty from Dillard University, as documented in the holdings of the Dillard University Archives and Special Collections. Within These Walls (WTW), a subsection of the larger exhibit, focuses on the university’s arts programs, namely theatre, poetry, painting and music. The exhibit will document the struggle and determination of a small African American liberal arts institution to excel in a challenging environment, starting with the opening of Dillard University in 1935 through 1970. A university that prioritized students advancement above all else, in the face of segregation and oppression, Dillard also nurtured creativity and imagination among its students. This exhibit will note prominent African American artists that matriculated through Dillard University and had a profound effect on the university and the world. Many of these former students not only became locally recognized, but also gained national acclaim in Hollywood, and within the, black entertainment realm. The work will make available primary source materials for future research, especially projects focusing on twentieth-century African American theatre (playwrights, musicians, actors) and the humanities.
Project Objective

The exhibit showcases the innovations brought about by Dillard University in the realm of African American expression primarily those within art, music, theater and poetry and stresses the importance of the arts to African American education. Locally and nationally these entertainers created the blueprint for future African Americans with ambitions to work as professional artists. In the 1940s, in fact Dillard was one of only two historically black colleges in the South with an advanced theatre program.1 One of Dillard University’s primary aims is to "produce free and responsible men and women" to nurture creative minds that would ultimately interpret the meaning of blackness and black identity in a racially divided society.2 WTW explores these aims, through the biographies, professional work and legacies of its arts alumnæ. The institution's legacy of providing a liberal education for African Americans spans 150 years and will be reflected in WTW. The Dillard University Archives and Special Collections house a diverse collection reflecting over a century’s worth of efforts to ensure educational opportunities for African Americans and for the city of New Orleans. These collections serve as the foundation for this project.

2 Straight University, Straight University Catalogue, 1897-1898 (New Orleans, LA: University Press, 1898).
HBCUs and the History of Dillard University

For over 150 years, historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have shaped how African Americans gained access to education. With these schools many African Americans found access to higher education for the first time, and with that access to skills needed to succeed economically. These schools fostered a culture of activism that included not only science and literature but also the arts and entertainment, becoming activist within these fields by breaking barriers within academia and their professions. HBCUs created an environment founded upon racial equity, justice, and resilience. In so doing, they built sanctuaries for young people and for the university community. Dillard University was a leader among HBCUs in recognizing a growing need for advocacy in the form of black expression through art, music, poetry and theater, which served to foster community among students and faculty.³

African American Higher Education in New Orleans

New Orleans played a significant role in African American education with multiple historically black colleges after the Civil War. These included, over time, Straight College, New Orleans University, Leland University, Xavier University and Dillard University. In addition to addressing the occupational needs of freed people - particularly in the medical profession, where a high demand for African American doctors, nurses, and pharmacists - these schools offered a cultural space for African American students to express and explore black identity and the meaning of blackness in a post-slavery society.

Dillard has its origins in the missionary work of abolitionist in the South after the Civil War. The Freedmen’s Aid Society of The Methodist Episcopal Church was among the first agencies to concern itself with the conditions of the newly emancipated people during and immediately after the Civil War. On July 8, 1869, The Union Normal School was incorporated under the auspices of this society. The school opened in New Orleans on November 1, 1869. The scope of the work was enlarged in 1873 when the Louisiana Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church authorized the organization of New Orleans University, the charter dated March 22, 1873. With many of these HBCUs being established to serve African American students, another university in the city was also making a way for newly freed African Americans to thrive and excel. Xavier University of Louisiana located also in New Orleans, was founded by the Sisters of Blessed Sacrament which was a Catholic order established to serve African Americans through the Roman Catholic Church. Xavier as a high school in 1915 and transitioning into a four-year university that attracted African American Catholic students in 1925. The opening of Xavier offered higher education to those African American students interested in pursuing the religious life but over time it also became a leader in medical education. With strong programs in education and science, today Xavier is one of the top producers of African American doctors and pharmacists in the country.

From the earliest decades, Dillard University also sought to fulfill the region’s need for African American nurses. Dillard’s medical department opened on November 4, 1889, together with a nurse training department. The medical school was given the name “Flint Medical College” in 1901, honoring John D. Flint, one of the school’s benefactors, and offered instruction in medicine, surgery, and pharmacy. Although the Medical College closed in 1911, the

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4 Straight University, *Straight University Catalogue, 1897-1898* (New Orleans: University Press, 1898)
Department of Pharmacy and the Nurse Training School (renamed “Sarah Goodridge Hospital and Nurse Training School” in 1901, in honor of the generous donor) continued, and the Medical College building converted into a fifty-bed hospital. The hospital closed in February 1932, upon the opening of a new hospital, Flint-Goodridge Hospital of Dillard University.5

**Straight University**

Dillard also has origins in another historically black institution. Straight University was founded by the American Missionary Association of The Congregational Church, chartered June 12, 1869. At a regular meeting of the Board of Trustees in 1915, the name changed to Straight College. Named for Seymour Straight, President of the Board of Trustees and gracious donor, Mr. Straight held this position until his death. The college was located on Esplanade Avenue. and N. Derbigny Street. The United States’ Freedman’s Bureau gifted a building to the college.6 Unfortunately, in 1877, arson destroyed the campus buildings. The action led to the resignation of many teachers, as well as, the college’s president. A new building was constructed on Canal Street housing classrooms, administrative offices, a library, laboratories, a chapel, as well as music, sewing, and domestic science rooms. These buildings served as reminder to all that despite attempts to derail African Americans’ efforts to educate themselves, they would not be denied.

Straight was a pioneer institution of higher learning for African Americans in the South. From its founding, the university offered the opportunity for an education coupled with the spirit of the Gospel. The religious grounding of the university was firmly expressed in its charter, stating that the

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5 New Orleans University, *Seventy Years of Service*, (New Orleans, 1935).
6 Straight University, *University Catalogue*, 4.
“purposes and objects of the corporation are the education and training upon Christian principles of young men and women...”

The flourishing of Straight College’s academic programming was a testament to the adherence of the principles outlined in its charter. The college offered: law, theology, medicine, grade school courses, commercial training, music and normal (teachers) training. Straight’s Law Department’s first graduation was held in 1876. The program lasted until 1886, along the way producing roughly 80 graduates. The program was designed to train students in matters of Louisiana state law as well as federal law. Upon completion, the student received a Bachelor of Law degree. Straight’s Theological Department sought to train its students to fulfill the local pastoral needs and to place students of strong character and ability in pulpits across the South. Students received training in biblical exegesis and systematic theology, ecclesiastical history, pastoral theology and homiletics. In 1930, Straight College and New Orleans University agreed to a merger, which formed Dillard University. The first operating component of this merger was the new Flint-Goodridge Hospital. The campus of Dillard University opened in 1935.

**Dillard University**

Dillard University was named in honor of James Hardy Dillard, whose distinguished service in the education of African Americans in the South form a significant chapter in the history of American education. It represents, respectively, the two religious’ institutions of its predecessors, namely The American Missionary Association and The United Methodist Church. The success of Dillard University also reflects the joint efforts of the African American

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7 Straight University, *University Catalogue*, 10.
8 The Rosenwald fund provided 70 million dollars in funding to many historically black colleges and universities before all the funds were exhausted in 1948. Dillard University. *Dillard University Catalog 1943-1944;1944-1945.* (New Orleans, Louisiana: University Press, 1945).
community of New Orleans, alumni of Straight College, and alumni of New Orleans University. It also received the support of the Julius Rosenwald Fund, chartered by Sears, Roebuck and Company in 1917 and, dedicated to insuring African Americans equal opportunities in education. Dillard’s founders developed a space where African Americans could be educated with Christian foundations. The campus was constructed in the Georgian architectural style or modified classical design. This design has become a symbol throughout Dillard’s history, reflecting the school’s emphasis on classical, liberal higher education for African American students.

**Pioneering in Theatre Arts**

Over the course of its existence, Dillard has worked to fulfilled long-standing need for cultural institutions rooted in the community that reflect the aspirations and concerns of African Americans. Black theatre, in particular, has offered a means of speaking about and challenging racism in the face of segregation and oppression. Representing African Americans as universal characters, many theater companies that arose in the 1960s with the Black Arts movement began to break new ground in the portrayal of African Americans through characters that mirrored their lives. Performers portrayed dignified characters with a full range of emotions rather than stereotypes of African Americans often performed by white entertainers. With the uncertainties of black and white relations, plays and theater production was the “vital genealogy of African American performance.” Throughout the Black Arts movement, African American artists squarely addressed racial issues, while continuing to shape American culture through their creative work.

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10 Ibid, 69.
Dillard’s predecessors, just after the Civil War into the early twentieth century, followed the pattern of many historically black institutions with an emphasis on law and medicine. Yet from its founding, Dillard University embraced the arts in ways that made it a pioneer among HBCUs. Beginning in 1935, Dillard president Albert Dent, along with his wife Jessie, an educator at the university, chose to emphasize the arts in the Dillard curriculum. According to Jessie Dent’s memoir, “proven within the negro students shall prove that many are more than sharecroppers, taking heed to explore more, engage more an advance more.”\(^{11}\) This new emphasis not only broadened opportunities for students at Dillard, it also enriched the university’s relationship with the New Orleans community. Soon prominent African American scholars were choosing Dillard as a place to teach because it represented something of an oasis for the study of black culture and black artistic production.\(^{12}\) Dent and her husband sought to use their professional position to mold Dillard University into an institution that could offer black students a sanctuary from the staggering racism they encountered and allow them to explore creative subjects that were interesting and relatable. Jessie Dent gives a direct insight on the struggles and hardships at Dillard and her realization that notion that the arts were a critical part of student success and for the growth and betterment of the institution and the neighborhoods and communities served. “Having a greater notion of arts theory, rather it be music, or plays can center the black notion that this is needed, and make way for this new found tooling of education.”\(^{13}\) It was under the tenure of the Dents that Dillard professor Randolph Edmonds formed the Players’ Guild, and on-campus theater group. A 1936 issue of Dillard’s yearbook, The Courtbouillon spotlighted the newly formed group, which led to the founding of Dillard’s

\(^{12}\) Ibid, 20.  
\(^{13}\) Ibid, 37.
Theatre program, the first such program at an HBCU in the United States. The Players’ Guild, active from 1935 to 1940, served to build a strong theatrical culture at Dillard and provided entertainment for the students and city alike. Directing many plays by both and white writers, Edmonds also showcased his own work at Dillard.\textsuperscript{14}

It was also under the Dent’s leadership that Dillard students launched the Festival of Afro American Arts (FAAA) in February 1968 for students, by students, to showcase the talent on and around campus. The FAAA ran from 1968 to 1971. The festival was a weeklong celebration in February to promote and shape the new emerging black cultural identity in the era of the Civil Rights movement and Black Power.\textsuperscript{15} The FAAA attracted attention citywide, showcasing the talents of influential black entertainment of singers, poets, actors, visual artists, filmmakers, and culinary artists. It featured Amiri Baraka, LeRoi Jones IV and Maulana Karenga (who started Kwanza) as well as local artist such as Lady BJ and Tambourine and Fan, an arts group prominent in local civil rights activism. Both the national and the local acts reflected the increasing significance of black artists to the on-going struggle for civil rights for African Americans. As if to underscore the growing ties between Dillard and the city of New Orleans via the arts, musician Danny Barker led a second line through campus to end the week festivities.

\textsuperscript{14} Crawford, Traverse. “Players’ Guild Activities.” \textit{Courtbouillon}. 1936
\textsuperscript{15} Louise Bernard and Clytus Randiclani, \textit{Within These Walls: A Short History of Dillard University} (New Orleans, LA: Offices of the President, Dillard University, 2000) 15.
Research Method and Designs

The history of Dillard is well documented in the archives of the Will W. Alexander Library. I was given the opportunity to become the assistant archivist to Mr. John Kennedy, Head Archivist in Special Collections, as my internship. Working with Mr. Kennedy gave me a “backstage” look into the operations of a privately-run archive that serves the public. I worked with Mr. Kennedy to help improve the archival life of preserving and collecting inventory of processed and unprocessed materials donated by alumni of the university within the walls of the Will W. Alexander Library in the Special Collections and Archives for Dillard. Together, we were tasked with many different projects requested by the various departments on campus and within the community of past alumni. One such project was creating a finding aid for Dillard’s sorority chapter of Delta Sigma Theta, Inc. This finding aid was created so that the current chapter might access the history of the chapter on campus and be able to direct past and future members to the collection. The creation of this finding aid gave me the opportunity to better understand the history of Dillard and the organizational structure of the archive. As I continued my internship with the DU Archives, I learned about the challenges of operating a university archive. We worked with little to no funding, so I also gained experience in learning how to write grants and procure donors. In both cases, we pressed the argument that The Star Burns Bright project would provide an important perspective to historians as well as the Dillard community alike. Solving problems like these together was a task within itself. Other challenges included getting the approval of the university administration and waiting on available funds to begin work on a project.

The documents in the archives at the Will W. Alexander Library range in size and importance, from yearbooks, to university catalogs, magazines, school newspapers, music
collections and books by prominent authors who matriculated from Dillard University. I began looking to these documents to better understand Dillard University and the contributions the school has made to the city of New Orleans, to education and to black culture. In addition to general information on the history of Dillard University, the many archival holdings shed light on specific periods of time throughout the university and the city’s history. The collection that includes much of the source information for this project contains the Dillard University, and Straight University catalogs. These catalogs, in three volumes, tell the rich history of Straight, from its founding narrative to the schedules that structured the school day during the first years of the school. Showcasing day-to-day tasks such as grammar, and mathematics classes, these sources gave me an insight on the daily lives of black students between 1930 and 1970 and those who educated them. Some of the most valuable collections within the Dillard University Archives and Special Collection were student-authored publications. These include The Courtbouillon Newspaper Collection, and the student yearbook Le Diable Bleu which contains articles and reviews on the arts within the black community and the city of New Orleans. Looking at these documents, I see people who wanted more for themselves; and more for their community. I discovered personal stories that reflect how Dillard and its students strived despite economic hardship and racial discrimination. These stories reflect what life was like for young African Americans living in the Jim Crow South and how they succeeded in acquiring an education despite daily adversities. Student-run publications also focused on the vibrant social life of Dillard students. Many of the stories being told offer, insight on how African Americans survived life within the segregated South. One opinion piece written for the Courtbouillon by student a student named Arthur Zebbs in the 1949, for instance, called for the “complete
destruction of segregation and discrimination.”\textsuperscript{16} Zebbs advocated the destruction of Jim Crow laws and the Ku Klux Klan, insisting that more than ever before there needed to be a mass attack on these racist forces of “fascism,” which threatened the freedom that many African Americans before him had achieved. African Americans should unite to protect their civil rights, he wrote, and assure decent housing, economic security and peace for black communities. Indeed, Zebbs implied that even though they were students, they were not blind to the great injustices African Americans continued to face. He noted that even then African Americans were being lynched—detailing fifteen lynching’s in Louisiana. He also noted that even in the North African Americans, were not being treated equally and that they, too, confronted Jim Crow segregation. Zebbs called for a liberation that many knew would not happen if they did not join together and fight a system that was keeping them marginalized.

It is important to consider the leisure time of students within this broader context, too—that is, as a way to claim space for themselves in a society that gave them little room for freedom and expression. In the 1964 \textit{Le Diable Bleu}, for instance, an entry titled “Sadie Hawkins Day,” showcased how arrived in some of their best dressed attire and courted one another on the dance floor. These students would spend all day prepping for the evening dance held on campus. The students would then meet up at the dining hall, and split up by gender. Once students were split up, music would start to play and that would be when the young men would causally go up to the young ladies and ask them to dance. These students would dance the night away (usually until 12 midnight) but for them this was their time to break free of the outside world and just enjoy each other. For these students, this would be a night to escape and unwind. This was one of many

\textsuperscript{16} Arthur A Zebbs, “You Know Your Place; So Keep It,” \textit{Courtbouillon}, November 1949, XIV edition, p.5)
examples of how African Americans created their own experiences during a challenging time, and then documented those experiences in their own publications.

Many items within the Dillard University Archives and Special collections are donated pieces from families of past alumni who attended Dillard University. One item that stands out, is the full outfit worn by Matthew Henson, the first African American explorer to reach the North Pole, on his 1909 excursion to the pole. This item, a full fur suit, was donated by his great-grand-daughter to the university but is not on display. Even though it is a symbol of African American determination, it remains in storage for lack of funding to stabilize and display it. This piece of history, when funding becomes available, will be showcased in the Will W. Alexander library. For now the suit just sits in the archive on a shelf. Mr. Kennedy has written multiple proposals for funding to be used to showcase and highlight the history of the suit.
Literature Review

Decades of work by historians makes clear that in the aftermath of the Civil War, African Americans demanded access to education and did not rely solely on the assistance of white northern abolitionists, missionaries, and philanthropists. They sacrificed their lives and their families lives in order to design and fashion a school system that would best fit their vision as a newly freed people. The work of scholars such as Hilary Moss and Heather Williams, focused on the antebellum period, has documented the efforts of African Americans to educate themselves and their youth as well as to negotiate with and oftentimes reject the influence of white abolitionists, local officials and philanthropists.\textsuperscript{17} According to Moss, white northerners pressed religious and vocational training for black students in northern cities, all the while taking advantage of the black labor force. But African Americans saw education as a cornerstone of citizenship and a means to strengthen themselves politically. Similarly, Williams uncovers the struggles of enslaved and recently freed people in the South to ensure that they and their children achieved literacy, as a means of both political survival and autonomy from their former enslavers.\textsuperscript{18}

James Anderson’s \textit{The Education of Blacks in the South: 1860-193} discusses freed blacks’ desire for education, despite a white power structure that often denied them access to learning. Anderson explores the roots of black education, including the work of white northern philanthropists and missionaries and African American activists, some of the latter without formal education of their own. While many white northerners supported the idea of the industrial education, African Americans pressed for both practical “industrial” training and schooling in


classical education. White northerners were so focused on industrial schools that many of them came into conflict with white southerners who feared that any educational opportunity for blacks would give them advantages over the poorest white population across the South. The method of industrial education, according to Anderson, “was inherently opposed to the political and economic advancement of black southerners and therefore oppressive.”\textsuperscript{19} Industrial schooling, according to Anderson’s research, trained the formerly enslaved for a life of subordination. Anderson argues that through this emphasis on industrial education, white northern philanthropists sought social control over the black population in the South. The key to understanding the history of black education after the Civil War, however, according to Anderson, lies within local black communities, and their persistent belief in the centrality of education to the success of African Americans as they fought to define freedom for themselves from the late nineteenth into the twentieth century.

Venessa Walker’s work highlights the challenges to rural black schools under segregation. In \textit{Their Highest Potential: An African American School Community in the Segregated South}, Walker demonstrates how the operation of rural southern schools transformed educational opportunities for African Americans, but also how black children and their communities suffered from lack of resources. Walker points up the unequal distribution of supplies in order to reject the notion that African Americans could not, and should not be learning.\textsuperscript{20} Without inadequate funding for curriculum development, proper equipment and teachers making an affordable wage, black children’s education was inherently unequal. Ironically, Walker argues, the scarcity of material resources pushed black children to learn in

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, 53.

spite of the racism they were faced. With the materials given to them, they made the best of the situation. Walker focuses on how many of the black scholars went above and beyond to uplift and prepare their students for the social atmosphere of the segregated South. Community involvement and faculty involvement served as another source for students to transform their prospects for the future.

Dillard’s history underscores both Walker and Anderson’s argument about local black communities’ efforts to shape the educational system to their needs. The most useful history of Dillard’s role in the development of African American higher education is Clytus Randiclani and Louise Bernard’s *Within These Walls: A Short History of Dillard University*, which offers up a narrative of black educational excellence in the South during and after segregation. *Within These Walls* highlights the determination of freed black families after the Civil War in New Orleans to seek an education, and how many of these same families longed for their children to receive a classical education. The authors describe the origin of the university in 1869, when the American Missionary Association founded Straight University. This moment marked the beginning of higher education for African Americans in New Orleans, when a dire need existed for African American educational resources.\(^{21}\) The authors argue that Dillard’s relationship with the city at large was vital to the continuation of black higher education in New Orleans and that despite modest budgets and pervasive racism, Dillard provided a world class education to its students.\(^{22}\)

Marybeth Gasman and Roger L. Geiger’s *Higher Education for African Americans before the Civil Rights Era 1900-1964* focuses on the efforts of HBCUs to establish themselves


\(^{22}\) Ibid, 17-18.
in the American academic landscape, despite racial discrimination.\textsuperscript{23} The authors stress the ways in which African Americans overcame obstacles to obtain and maintain an education at institutions founded and created out of racist ideologies. According to Gasman and Geiger, white educators went out of their way to hinder African Americans from obtaining the same level of education as whites. Gasman argues that southern HBCUS, especially in urban areas, were the impetus for achievements in black higher education while also being influential in the move to desegregate public schools, through court cases like \textit{Sweatt v. Painter} (1950) and \textit{McLauren v. Oklahoma} (1950).\textsuperscript{24} At the same time, the conflicts surrounding the admission of African American students to southern universities underscored the continued need for HBCUs. Strong administrations and curriculum innovations were key dynamics to the success of HBCUs over time.

In \textit{America’s Historically Black Colleges and Universities: A Narrative History, 1837-2009}, author Bobby Lovett provides a deep narrative of HBCUs. He chronicles the founding of the first black college, Cheyney University, in 1837 and the role that HBCUs played in higher education and the improvement of the lives of African Americans despite economic hardship. Lovett narrates the history of these institutions from their development during the antebellum period, through Reconstruction, and the Jim Crow era. HBCUs, according to Lovett, became the centers of intellectual and political life in black communities, fostering a sense of collaboration and shared ideas. Lovett discusses how black students relied on each other and on local communities, the latter of which shored up HBCUs with a focus on improving for the well-being of African Americans. With the faculty and collaborative spirit of its scholars, HBCUs


\textsuperscript{24} Ibid, 35.
built a legacy of academic achievement and fostered the expression of black cultural forms.\textsuperscript{25} In Lovett’s interpretation, HBCUs were developed to uplift and inform the educational advancement of African Americans, but these institutions also served as a source of guidance for African Americans during times of oppression. Notwithstanding their dependence on the support of white philanthropic and political agencies, the survival of HBCUs relied upon creative responses, from generation to generation, of their administrators and faculty who helped shape a culture for black expression in higher learning.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid, 117.
Design

The exhibit concept was developed with the sponsoring institution Dillard University and within the Archives and Special Collections housed at the Will W. Alexander library, where I worked as archival intern. The Archive’s mission statement and protocols for exhibitions and digital collections stipulated, the design and framework for *The Stars Burn Bright*. The Archives mission statement is “to support the University in all endeavors of producing a quality educational experience.” 26 The Archives also provided specific guidelines for the creation of their physical and digital exhibits. Aiming towards a wide audience, the guidelines encourage exhibits to be relevant to both researchers and students who visit the Special Collections and Archives.

In addition to the physical exhibit, a digital online exhibit on a Wix platform chronicles the history of those students who have matriculated from Dillard University and made a name for themselves in art, music, theater, and poetry. This website, which can be found at [The Stars Burn Bright](http://www.dillard.edu/_academics/library/library-archives-and-special-collections.php), consists of four tabs featuring the exhibit, resources related to Dillard University, a gallery of historical pictures showcasing photos of happenings at Dillard University and an “about” section with a short history of the founding of Dillard University along with a page for guests to contact the archives directly. The exhibit provides viewers with a short description of each artist and the impact they have had on black culture at Dillard University and the entertainment industry. After the completion of the digital web exhibit, it will be donated to the Dillard University Archives and Special Collections and sustained by the Will W. Alexander Library on campus.

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Since its opening in 1935, Dillard University has pioneered many major innovations for African Americans. From its earliest years, Dillard created and nurtured a spirit of excellence among students, including students of the arts. This spirit of excellence is what gave birth to the Dillard University Players Guild and Drama Department and many of the accomplished artists who graduated from Dillard University. For eighty years, the Dillard University Theatre and Arts Department committed to preserving the art and tradition of African American artistic expression. With countless classics and numerous original works performed, directed and showcased, the ingenuity of The Dillard University Theatre and Arts Program is a testament to the academic excellence and commitment to the arts that Dillard has fostered. These major pieces are featured in the exhibit.

Panel #2

Randolph S. Edmonds: Father of HBCU Theater and Drama

Playwright Randolph S. Edmonds contributed much of his life to the creation of opportunities for African Americans in theatre. Edmonds devoted twelve years of service to Dillard University as a Professor of Drama, and not only helped the Dillard University Players Guild gain a sterling reputation, but also solidified himself as a major figure in the field of dramatic arts. In the 1930s the United States saw a burgeoning of educational theater and Edmonds played a key role in that growth. In 1936, he organized African American colleges across the South and Southwest into the Southern Association of Dramatic and Speech Arts. The interscholastic theatre organization he created for Louisiana High School drama groups joined the Louisiana Interscholastic Athletic and Literary Association. Edmond’s experience extended
beyond being a promoter of theatre arts at African American institutions; as a playwright he championed the use of African American materials in his plays. He wrote numerous essays and articles in the *Messenger, Opportunity, Phylon, Crisis and Arts Quarterly* to argue the importance of educational theater. Edmonds recognized three necessities in African American theater: playwrights, trained and talented guidance, and an audience. This was reflected not only in the performance of his plays but also in two anthologies of his work, “Shades and Shadows” (1930) and “Six Plays for Negro Theatre” (1934).²⁷

Panel #3

**Frederick D. Hall: Dean of Modern HBCU Music Program**

Dr. Frederick D. Hall’s work as a teacher, composer, performing musician and music historian demonstrated the highest standards of musical excellence. Born in Atlanta Georgia, and becoming a skilled pianist at five years old, he grew to learn several styles of music all the while creating his own compositions. In high school, he joined the Atlanta Theatre orchestra which cultivated his love for music. Once out of high school he attended Morehouse College in Atlanta where he received a B.A. His leadership throughout the years led to many dynamic collaborations with historically black colleges, including Dillard University. His legacy at Dillard University is staggering. He served Dillard University from 1936 to 1941, then again, 1960 to 1974. His commitment to the university shows greatly in the many programs Dr. Hall initiated. He also penned the University’s school hymn, “Fair Dillard” further immortalizes his legacy at the university. He favored Dillard University, he said, because “the vocal talent among the students was above average.” Dr. Hall also formed the first university choir. He went on to serve at other historically black colleges and established schools of conservatory music with

²⁷ Louise and Clytus, *Within These Walls* 6.
departments of theory, piano, vice and music education at Jackson College in Jackson, Clark College in Atlanta, Alabama State Teachers College in Montgomery and Southern University in Baton Rouge. During his tenure at each school, he served as chairmen of the music department, composer and arranger, choral conductor and faculty researcher. His continued musical studies landed him at institutions worldwide, where he performed extensive research on “American Negro” music.

Panel #4

Theodore Gilliam: Fostering Modern Black Arts and Cultural Expression

Another individual who devoted many years to Dillard University Theatre is Dr. Theodore Gilliam. Dr. Gilliam fostered the African American Arts through his commitment to drama, none greater than his Dashiki Project Theatre. The Dashiki Project Theatre embodied the 1960s Black Arts Movement and like it, sought to redefine the place of African Americans within American culture and politics. This project’s was relentlessness in its efforts to black aesthetic, in the era of Black Power when students, in particular, were becoming more militant in their confrontation with a racist political system and more fervent in their commitment to racial solidarity. Dillard University Theatre was a major contributer to two unique festivals held at the university: The Afro-American Arts Festival and The Black World Expression Festival. These festivals were held between a three-year span, with the first festival opening in the spring of 1969 and the last festival ending in 1971. The famed Afro-American Arts Festival was dedicated to celebrating the various forms of African Art. Above all, The Dillard University Theatre presented a safe and welcoming environment for African Americans to experience many forms of art, that would otherwise be unavailable. The Black World Expression Festival, was dedicated to understanding the “Black Experience” in Africa, the Caribbean, and the United
States, and provided yet another successful Afro-Centric celebration through the support of the Dillard University Players and supporting administrators. These festivals came during a time when black arts creativity flowed, and while African American throughout the city came together to bring peace within the black arts community.

Panel #5

**Ted Shine: Celebrating Black Pride in the Theatrical Arts**

Playwright Ted Shine was committed to using the African American Theatre to discard the negative images that haunted the black community and provided a more positive outlook on how African Americans are perceived throughout the world. He devoted years in time and effort in guiding players to wonderful performances. He also created original material that catalyzed the Players’ Guild, which was a historical theater in Canton, Ohio and one of the first theaters to allow African American produced work to be featured to African American audiences. Shine began his career at Dillard University in 1960. Teaching drama at Dillard he introduced plays that dealt with the hardships that hit African Americans within the South. Through his career at Dillard University he maintained a positive outlook and insured that his plays related to the times. Shine directed one of the first theater programs within a historically black college in the South. With this he created a legacy that has lived on within many historically black theater programs and Black repertory programs alike.

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Panel #6

**Brenda Marie Osbey: Louisiana Poet Laureate**

Brenda Marie Osbey, who became Louisiana’s first peer-selected poet laureate in 2005, was born in New Orleans, LA. She became a pillar within the black literature scene as a poet, essayist focusing on black art, music and culture. Born in 1957, her poetry explores her Creole ancestry giving her work a haunting sense of place within southern life and the city of New Orleans. Her work offers a look into local southern life and historical struggles of people of color throughout the cultural and geographical history of Louisiana. In 1978, she earned a Bachelor of Arts from Dillard University and a Master of Arts from the University of Kentucky in 1986. While at Dillard University she taught French and English, studying with Charles Powell all the while forming her poetry to the masses and creating accessible literature for students to relate to, as she showed her writing skills for the African American community and students at Dillard University.\(^{31}\) Osbey published four volumes of poetry: *Ceremony for Minnecourt* (1983, 1985), *In These Houses* (1988), *Desperate Circumstances, Dangerous Women* (1991), and *All Saints: New and Selected Poems* (1997). Her work has appeared in *American Poetry Review, American Voice, Southern Review*, and *Women’s Review of Books*. Her narrative poetry won her the Academy of American Poets Loring-Williams Prize in 1980.\(^{32}\) Osbey’s poetry is filled with a sense of place and time passing. With the past and present mingling in the lives of the people within New Orleans and her southern heritage she uses this to recreate what she knows. She highlights the contributions of women and studies the cultural parallels between other parts of the African diaspora and the southern United States.

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\(^{32}\) Ibid, 34.
Adella Gautier: The Storyteller

Also known as “Adella Adella the Storyteller,” Gautier has educated many on African and African American folklore using her unique and passionate methods. Born in New Orleans Louisiana, she is an actor, storyteller, arts educator and administrator with over 40 years of experience. Her career in theater began at Dillard University with the Dillard University Players Guild. Earning a Bachelor of Art in English from Dillard University, she has used her time at Dillard University to train students and work within the film industry. She has worked with theatrical companies throughout New Orleans, including the Free Southern Theater and the Dashiki Project Theater. With these groups, she immersed herself within the acting world and honed her skills, using both collaborations as a platform to enhance the black experience. Using listener participation, and her emphasis on the importance on personal contact she engages with her audience in performance drawn stories from her personal experience of living in New Orleans. As the self-proclaimed “Adella Adella the Storyteller,” she shares with her audience her animated personal life as an African American woman passing down African folklore traditions. Gautier also has toured nationally and internationally, with lead roles in August Wilson’s Fences and Gem of The Ocean, Law and Order, and Tremé. She is also a member of the Screen Actors Guild and The American Federation of Radio and Television working with some of the greatest black actors in Hollywood to date. She transformed the lives of Dillard University graduates showing them how one can thrive in Hollywood. She taught and trained many and continue to educate future generations on the black history of film and theater.

34 Ibid, 78.
Figure 1: Opening homepage of “The Stars Burn Bright”, with title of exhibit, a short informational on what will be in the digital exhibit and the opening hours of the exhibit at the Will W. Alexander Library on the campus of Dillard University.
RANDOLPH EEDMINDS

One of the most prolific pioneers in black playwright was also a drama teacher, director and organizer of drama organizations and festivals among black colleges in the South and Southwest. Known as the "Tie Jinx of local" the author, a black community theater, "The Black Drama" proved to the faculty of Dillard University where he was influential in starting up the Dillard University Theater Department. During his tenure at Dillard, his plays became a growing success within the Dillard University Players.

FREDERICK D. HALL

Frederick D. Hall, a key figure in the black music world was a poet, composer and historian of music. Dr. Hall, a native of Atlanta, Georgia, began his piano study at the age of five. He went on to study at Meharry Medical College and then at Hamlin-Evans College. Here he became faculty and taught music. He also served as director of the music program at Jackson College located at Jackson Mississippi. His music was taught at all public schools in Jackson making sure music was available to all. In 1950 he served as director of the Dillard University School of Music and transformed the arts within Dillard. Forming and leading the choir into national prominence during his years as a professor at Dillard.

THEODORE GULIAM

Another individual who devoted many years to Dillard University Theatre and Arts is Dr. Theodore Guliam. For many years Dr. Guliam led the African American Arts through his commitment to drama. None greater than his Solo Project Theatre. The Solo Project Theatre emphasized the 60's Black Arts Movement and gave it strength to redefine the image of African Americans, which for so long had been defined by others. This project's exhibitions in establishing the black aesthetic showed in many avenues.
Figure 2: This webpage will feature a short description of each historical figure who has transpired through Dillard University within the aspects of the arts, rather music, theater, poetry or acting.
EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

Learning is an ongoing process. At Dillard University, we believe that education is infinite. Our university offers dynamic educational opportunities for our students and members of the community. We highly prioritize providing learning opportunities for ALL! Please explore some of the resources below that we have provided for you.

Figure 3: This webpage gives additional information on how to apply to Dillard University, a link to the homepage of the Archives and Special Collections and a donation link.
Figure 4: This webpage has a gallery of past photos of artist, students and staff who have visited Dillard University.
Figure 5: This web page provides insight on what the Archives and Special Collection mission is to the students, faculty, staff and community of Dillard University.
Figure 6: The final webpage has the direct contact information and location of the Will W. Alexander Library on the campus of Dillard University. Along with the name, email and phone number the head Archivist Mr. John Kennedy. Viewers can directly send an email.
Impact

*The Stars Burn Bright* combines the past with the present, demonstrating the impact African Americans have had, historically, within the arts and entertainment industry in New Orleans and worldwide. It is important to Dillard students to learn about these black artists, painters, poets, musicians and actors and the role that Dillard played in their success. With this exhibit, the archives at Dillard University showcases a glimpse of the past, with narratives from affluent leaders, students and the community around New Orleans. The goal of this project is to demonstrate that Dillard, and historically black institutions, has played a vital role in the development of the arts locally, regionally, and nationally.

As a graduate of an HBCU (Jackson State University), I want these students to feel a sense of pride. Educating those who are not familiar with historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), serves to showcase the sacredness of the education of African Americans, who at a times advanced all the while struggling with racism and segregation that were a daily part of their everyday lives. This exhibit, in physical and digital form, will engage the general public and shed light on the history of those who have transformed Dillard University into a great educational institution.
Audience

The exhibit is designed to be relevant to past, present and future students of Dillard University. Written for a tenth-grade reading level, this also allows for the exhibit to be understood by visitors who are high schoolers and above. The topic of historically black colleges and universities is interesting for past HBCU students and future HBCU students and for the citizens of New Orleans. The Dillard community is dedicated to keeping the history and tradition alive. Working with Mr. John Kennedy, head archivist at Dillard University, we will bring *The Stars Burn Bright* to the faculty, staff, students and alumni of Dillard University. The information will also add to the growing history of historically black colleges in the city of New Orleans.

In order to connect to a wider audience, the digital website will be placed on the homepage of the Archives and Special collections. This web presence will also inform scholars researching on historically black colleges, and the history of education and entertainment in New Orleans. The exhibit and the digital website will appeal to a diverse audience from areas of the city interested visitors from across the nation seeking insight on the history of black entertainment and education.
Bibliography

I. Primary Sources

A. Archival


B. Printed


C. Digital

HBCU Library Alliance Digital Collection. [https://hbcudigitallibrary.auctr.edu/digital/](https://hbcudigitallibrary.auctr.edu/digital/).

III. Secondary Sources

A. Articles


B. Books


Vita

Makenzee Brown was born in Saint Louis, Missouri. She received a Bachelor of Arts in history from Jackson State University in 2014. She is currently working as the intern Archivist for Dillard University, Archive and Special Collections. In addition, Makenzee was the assistant curator for the exhibit *The Stars Shine Bright* that will be located at the Will. W. Alexander Library on the campus of Dillard University. Her interest includes, collecting candles, Instagram scrolling of black archival content, and attending music festivals throughout the year.