

Newsletter of the LCHR

Louisiana Council on Human Relations

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America's Forgotten Slave Revolt by Daniel Rasmussen

Two hundred years ago this month, three slaves gathered in a small rundown cabin on a plantation about 30 miles upriver from New Orleans. Charles Deslondes was the son of an enslaved woman and a French planter; Harry Kenner an unassuming 25-year-old carpenter; and Quamana a warrior captured in the militant Asante kingdom and imported to Louisiana.

On January 8, 1811, these three brave men, along with eight other slave leaders, launched the largest slave revolt in American history, rallying an army of nearly 500 slaves to fight and die for freedom. No slave revolt—not Nat Turner, not John Brown—has rivaled the 1811 Louisiana revolt in terms of the number of participants or the number of slaves slaughtered in the aftermath.

The revolt was meticulously planned, politically sophisticated, and ethnically diverse—and a fundamental challenge to the system of plantation slavery. Dressed in military uniforms and chanting “On to New Orleans,” they rallied a rugged army of around 500 slaves to attempt to conquer the city, kill all its white inhabitants, and establish a black republic on the shores of the Mississippi.

In a dramatic battle in the cane fields, the slave army faced off against the twin forces of the American military and a hastily assembled planter militia. “The blacks were not intimidated by this army and formed themselves in line and fired for as long as they had ammunition,” wrote one observer. But the slaves’ ammunition did not last long, and the battle was brief. Soon the planter militia broke the slave line and the slaughter began.

The planters, supported by the U.S. military, captured Charles Deslondes, chopped off his hands, broke his

thighs, and then roasted him on a pile of straw. Over the next few days, they executed and beheaded more than 100 slaves, putting their heads on poles and dangling their dismembered corpses from the gates of New Orleans. “Their Heads, which decorate our Levee, all the way up the coast . . . look like crows sitting on long poles,” wrote one traveler. The rotting corpses were grim reminders of who owned who—and just where true power resided.

The American officials and French planters then sought to cover up the true story of the revolt, to dismiss the bold actions of the slave army as irrelevant and trivial, and write this massive uprising out of the record books. They succeeded. And, in doing so, they laid the groundwork for one of the most remarkable moments of historical amnesia in our national memory.

The revolutionaries of 1811 were heroes who deserve a place in our national memory. Their actions are a testament to the strength of the ideals of freedom and equality—and every man’s equal claim to those basic rights. Their acts are an inspiration to all people who strive for freedom. On the 200th anniversary of the start of this great revolt, we must listen to their voices and study their stories, for only through understanding the passions and beliefs that resonated through the slave quarters can we begin to comprehend the true history of Louisiana, and with it, the nation.

DANIEL RASMUSSEN is the author of the recently published book *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt.*

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Low-Income Residents Get \$10.5 Million to Help Pay Power Bills

As bitter cold swept over the region this Winter, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services announced that Louisiana will receive an additional \$10.5 million to help low-income residents pay their utility bills. The new funding brings the total amount released since October under the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program to \$3.9 billion, including \$46.1 million going to Louisiana.

“Much of the country has already experienced a very cold winter,” HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius said in a statement Wednesday. “Today’s additional funds will help struggling families keep safe and warm for the remainder of the season.” Although that figure represents an 11 percent drop in financing from the federal government compared with the last fiscal year, advocates and local housing officials said the state fared better this year than the national average, which saw a 13 percent reduction in funding. This latest round of financing will keep the program going through early March.

In December, Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La., joined more than 30 of her colleagues in signing a letter to Senate leaders urging that energy assistance be extended through the end of the fiscal year. The assistance program runs from October through September. In fiscal year 2009, the grants helped 48,841 households in Louisiana pay their heating bills, and 36,693 households pay their air-conditioning bills, according to federal estimates.

Residents who earn at or below 150 percent of the federal poverty level can qualify for a subsidy once every six months. Each time, income-eligible households in St. John the Baptist Parish have received an average of about \$600 to help pay their utility bills, said Elois Joseph, director of the parish’s office of health and human services. Joseph expects that the parish’s piece of the funding will be able to help 285 to 300 households. Since the new year began, more than 780 households in Jefferson Parish have received energy assistance.

~ Richard Thompson, *The Times-Picayune*

Group Alleges that Low-Income Louisianians are Denied the Opportunity to Register to Vote

Citing clear evidence that numerous low-income Louisiana residents have been denied the opportunity to register to vote, attorneys from Project Vote, the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF), and New Orleans attorney Ronald Wilson, have issued official notice to Secretary of State Tom Schedler, the state's Department of Children & Family Services, and its Department of Health & Hospitals regarding the state's non-compliance with the federal requirements of the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (NVRA).

The notification letter, sent on behalf of the Louisiana State Conference of the NAACP, calls on Schedler and the agencies to take corrective action necessary to bring Louisiana into compliance with federal law. The NVRA requires public assistance agencies that provide services to low-income residents, to offer voter registration services to their clients. The letter cites evidence showing that agencies around the state are failing to fully carry forth their responsibilities under the law.

"The National Voter Registration Act was designed to ensure that all citizens have access to our democracy," said Dale Ho, Assistant Counsel with LDF's Political Participation Group. "By defaulting on its obligations under the law, Louisiana is denying substantial numbers of eligible low-income and minority voters equal access to the ballot box," said Ho.

The evidence cited includes Election Assistance Commission reports, which show that registrations originating from Louisiana public assistance offices have plummeted 88 percent since the law was first implemented: from nearly 75,000 in 1995-1996, to a mere 8,688 in 2007-2008.

"It is clear that Louisiana is violating the NVRA, and neglecting tens of thousands of low-income residents as a result," said Nicole Zeitler, Director of the Public Agency Voter Registration Project at Project Vote. Recent surveys of agency offices confirm that the state is defaulting on its federally required obligations. Agencies are required to offer the opportunity to register to vote along with every application for benefits, recertification, or change of address trans-

action. However, numerous individuals reported that they had not been offered the opportunity to register to vote while receiving services from the agencies. The surveys also revealed that agency staff and personnel at many offices around the state were wholly unfamiliar with their obligations under the NVRA, and a number of the offices failed to make voter registration application forms available altogether.

"The agency can't comply with a law requiring distribution of voter registration applications if they don't even have the forms on hand," said Zeitler.

In the past several years, lawsuits filed by Project Vote and other groups have forced other states that had been disregarding the NVRA to comply, with dramatic results. For example, applications from Missouri public assistance agencies skyrocketed, from fewer than 8,000 a year to over 130,000 a year, following settlement of a suit in that state in 2008. More than 200,000 low-income Ohioans have applied to register since a similar case was settled there in the end of 2009.

The letter's signatories are eager to work with state officials to bring the state into compliance with the NVRA to ensure that all Louisianians have an equal opportunity to register to vote.

Project Vote is a national nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that promotes voting in historically underrepresented communities. Project Vote takes a leadership role in nationwide voting rights and election administration issues, working through research, legal services, and advocacy to ensure that our constituencies are not prevented from registering and voting.

The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. is America's premier legal organization fighting for racial justice. Through litigation, advocacy, and public education, LDF seeks structural changes to expand democracy, eliminate disparities, and achieve racial justice in a society that fulfills the promise of equality for all Americans. LDF also defends the gains and protections won over the past 70 years of civil rights struggle and works to improve the quality and diversity of judicial and executive appointments.

~ PRNewswire-USNewswire

Two of Everything: The Legacy of Segregation?

In most American communities there are two of everything: two movie theaters; two malls; two of each type of school and two of most types of church. This is not a modern day Noachian tale, rather it is the lingering effect of *de jure* segregation.

In most cities, the segregative trend not only exists in places of worship, in fact it is in America's churches, synagogues and mosques that the trend is most apparent. Dr. Martin King famously lamented, "At 11:00 on Sunday morning when we stand and sing and Christ has no east or west, we stand at the most segregated hour in this nation. This is tragic. Nobody of honesty can overlook this." Katrina however, in her destruction, caused two New Orleans churches to confront their role in American segregation in a very real way.

Grace Methodist, a 155 year old African-American congregation was rendered homeless when Katrina ravished their historic church. Mostly white First Methodist church, walking distance from Grace, was flooded with five feet of Katrina flood waters. Further, it's membership had waned from 1200 to 700 people pre-storm. In fact in the days immediately after Katrina, as few as 30 people attended weekly Sunday service.

Neither church exists today. Instead, there is only First Grace United Methodist Church. The two congregations overcame America's most persistent divider: race. The congregations took the courageous step of forgoing their separate racial identities in favor of an integrated oneness. It was no easy task. First Methodist had a storied near two century history. And, Grace Methodist, like so many black churches had a key role in the New Orleans' black political and civil rights communities. Merging the churches meant a perceived end to each of these valiant legacies in favor of a new joint identity.

It also meant members had to address more corporeal matters like will the choir continue with the more traditional and classical sound that First was accustomed to or the rhythmic soulful syncopation more common at Grace. Or what cooking style will the new congregation adopt at church dinners: Grace's soul food or First's Italian and Irish comfort food.

The questions and concerns were plentiful. But the congregation and its leaders stayed focused on unifying the churches, for, before them laid an historic opportunity to recommit themselves to the tenants of their faith through racial integration. The final decision to unify was made in 2008.

~ James Perry, New Orleans Advocate

Obama Signs Law For Native Americans and Black Farmers

American Indians and black farmers will be paid \$4.6 billion to address claims of government mistreatment over many decades under landmark legislation President Barack Obama signed in December. The legislation "closes a long and unfortunate chapter in our history," Obama said. "It's finally time to make things right."

At a signing ceremony at the White House the president declared that approval of the long-delayed legislation "isn't simply a matter of making amends, it's about reaffirming our values on which this nation was founded: the principles of fairness and equality and opportunity." Obama promised during his campaign to work toward resolving disputes over the government's past discrimination against minorities. The measure he signed settles a pair of long-standing class-action lawsuits. The measure also settles four long-standing disputes over Native American water rights in Arizona, New Mexico and Montana.

Elouise Cobell, a member of the Blackfeet Tribe from Browning, Mont., and the lead plaintiff in the Indian royalties case, called the signing ceremony "breath-taking," adding that she did not expect it to happen in her lifetime. Cobell filed the suit nearly 15 years ago and led efforts to reach the \$3.4 billion settlement a year ago and then push it through the House and Senate. At least 300,000 Native Americans say they were swindled out of royalties overseen by the Interior Department since 1887 for oil, gas, grazing and timber rights. The plaintiffs will share the settlement. Cobell said she was driving her car in Montana when she learned the Senate had approved the measure last month. "I pulled over and I cried," she said.

Even with Obama's signature, the settlement must still go through a gauntlet of court hearings, a me-

dia campaign to notify beneficiaries, waiting periods for comments and appeals. The first check is not expected to reach tribal plaintiffs until August. Even so, Cobell said the day was historic. "This day means a lot to the elders, because it basically means they receive justice," she said. "The money is secondary. They got justice. The United States government gave them justice."

Sen. Blanche Lincoln, D-Ark., used similar language to describe the black farmers case, which marks the second round of funding from a class-action lawsuit originally settled in 1999. The case, which involves allegations of widespread discrimination by local Agriculture Department offices in awarding loans and other aid, is named after Timothy Pigford, a black farmer from North Carolina who was an original plaintiff.

The new settlement, totaling nearly \$1.2 billion, is intended for people who were denied payments in the earlier settlement because they missed deadlines for filing. Individual amounts depend on how many claims are successfully filed. "The time is long overdue to fund the discrimination settlement for farmers who have experienced decades of injustice," Lincoln said. The settlement will not erase the anxiety and frustrations many black farmers experienced, Lincoln added, but "it will help compensate their financial losses and begin laying the foundation in restoring their faith in the United States government."

Some Republicans have warned that black farmers might make up stories of discrimination that are hard to prove. Rep. Steve King, R-Iowa, likened the program to "modern-day reparations" for African-Americans and argued that the claims process is rife with fraud.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack and Attorney General Eric Holder said the bill includes new safeguards to prevent fraud, including an extended court approval process and government audits. Holder called fraud concerns "legitimate," but he said the settlement rights a historical wrong.

~ Matther Daly, Associated Press.

Reporter on Quest to Close 1964 Civil Rights Case

Stanley Nelson writes for a small weekly newspaper in the Louisiana delta. For the past four years, he has been obsessed with one story: who threw gasoline into a rural shoe repair and dry goods shop in 1964 and started a fire that killed Frank Morris?

No one disputes that the death of Mr. Morris, a well-liked businessman who served both black and white customers, was connected to the Ku Klux Klan. The case is on a list of unsolved civil rights murders the F.B.I. released in February 2007, the day Mr. Nelson first heard of the story. But for a lengthy article that appeared earlier this month in *The Concordia Sentinel*, Mr. Nelson, 55, put together what he believes is a key piece of the puzzle. He names the last living person he says was there that night.

In the article, both a son and a former brother-in-law of Arthur Leonard Spencer, 71, a truck driver from Rayville, La., say Spencer admitted to being involved in the fire. Spencer's ex-wife said she heard the same story from another man who was also there.

Spencer, by his own account, was a member of the Ku Klux Klan. But in interviews with Mr. Nelson, he denied knowing or having been one of two men suspected of burning the shop in Ferriday, La.

Spencer has not been charged, and the F.B.I. has not said whether it is investigating him. However, he told journalists after the article appeared that the F.B.I. had interviewed him within the last two months.

Bettye Spencer, 67, who was married to Mr. Spencer at the time of the fire, said in an interview by phone from her home in Rayville that she had never heard anything about the case. The F.B.I. visited her a few months ago and she told them that she had been a young mother when Mr. Spencer left her for another woman. That woman and her son are both sources in the article linking Spencer to the fire.

Bettye Spencer is still close to her former husband and said that he was surprised that people were trying to connect him to the fire. "I'm telling you he had nothing to do with this," she said. "We're just old country people and I don't understand where this is coming from. This is 46 years ago and now people are digging up bones?"



Fire that killed Frank Morris in Ferriday, La.

(continued from page 5)

Unlike many of the 110 civil rights murders being investigated by both the F.B.I. and journalists who operate under the umbrella group called the Civil Rights Cold Case Project, the story of Mr. Morris's death stands out because it is one of a handful in which someone believed to be connected to the episode is still alive.

The F.B.I. investigated the killing of Mr. Morris, who was 51, twice in the 1960s, and took up the case again in 2007. Since the most recent investigation, *The Sentinel* and other organizations have criticized the speed with which the F.B.I. and the Justice Department have approached the old cases. Cynthia Deitle, chief of the F.B.I.'s civil rights unit, indicated that federal officials were actively working on the case and that she believed people were still alive who knew who killed Mr. Morris. She reiterated her agency's dedication to what she called "one of the most horrific and troubling of all the F.B.I.'s civil rights era cold cases."

The link to Spencer is based in part on the newspaper's interviews with his son, William Spencer, known as Boo. William Spencer told Nelson that he was trying to turn his life around after getting out of prison and finding religion. He said he heard his father speak of the fire more than once. The elder Spencer was one of at least two white men who headed there in the early morning hours, intending to burn the shop as a message to the black owner, whom Klan members believed was too friendly with white female customers. The men did not expect the shop owner to be inside, the son told *The Sentinel*.

"My dad said they could hear a stirring in the place, then a man came out," William Spencer said. Mr. Morris apparently had come out of the store to find men splashing gasoline and was forced back inside. Burned so badly that nurses could not recognize him, Mr. Morris lived for four more days. He gave interviews to the F.B.I. but never identified his attackers.

"Son, it was bad," the younger Mr. Spencer recalled his father saying. "I'll never forget it."

Arthur Spencer's former brother-in-law, Bill Frasier, told the newspaper that he, too, had heard the story from Spencer. The newspaper reported that both William Spencer and Frasier had told their stories to the F.B.I. The agency would not comment on the case, but a spokesman pointed out that prosecuting an arson case in federal court might pose challenges. The arson would have had to involve something that was a federal crime at the time, like interstate kidnapping or the use of a specific type of explosive, or it would have had to have happened on federal property.

It was Rosa Williams, Mr. Morris's granddaughter, who moved Nelson to dedicate himself to this and the other cold cases. After he wrote his first article on the subject in 2007, in which he revealed that the owner of the shoe shop was on the F.B.I.'s list of unsolved civil rights murders, Williams called. She told him she had never known what had happened to her grandfather, and she thanked him. She also asked Nelson to help figure out who killed her grandfather. "I told her I'm going to try," he said. From that moment on, Nelson has reported on little else. With the help of the Cold Case Justice Initiative at the Syracuse University College of Law, he went on to file more than 150 articles on the subject, culminating in this one, which he hopes will lead to an arrest.

But he is also motivated by the curiosity of a newsman. "What kind of human being could set another man on fire?" he said. "I was just curious about something that happened in our community that I never knew about. I just wanted to find out who did it."

~ Kim Severson, *New York Times*

Newsletter of the BRCHR

Baton Rouge Council on Human Relations

Paul Y. Burns, Assistant Editor

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Joyce Robinson Receives the Sojourner Truth Award

Our congratulations to Ms. Joyce Robinson, who received the Sojourner Truth award at the Louisiana Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church in 2010. Each year the award is sponsored by the conference's Commission on the Status and Role of Women. It is given to the woman who has exemplified the ideals of Sojourner Truth in her life and faith. Recipients of the award are chosen for their efforts in the areas of service to others, breaking barriers, peacemaking, and making changes to improve the lives of others, especially where there are inequities for certain groups. A member of the Baton Rouge Council on Human Relations, Ms. Robinson is a former secretary of the Council's Board.

Editorial: Probe Leaves Questions from the Opinion Staff of the *Baton Rouge Advocate*

A decision by the U.S. Department of Justice to close an investigation of alleged wrongdoing by the Baton Rouge Police Department (BRPD) leaves many questions unanswered. The Department of Justice confirmed in March that it was investigating complaints that the New Mexico State Police made about the BRPD after Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

The New Mexico State Police and Michigan State Police sent officers to Baton Rouge after Katrina to help the BRPD with patrols. Officers from those out-of-state police agencies claimed in reports that Baton Rouge police officers routinely harassed black people, resorted to unnecessary violence and conducted illegal searches in the days after Katrina.

The BRPD initially refused to release records of those complaints. The department released records of those complaints last year after a lengthy court battle in which *The Advocate* sued for access to the records and eventually prevailed in a decision by the

Louisiana Supreme Court.

In a brief e-mail from U.S. Attorney Donald Cazayoux to the BRPD, Cazayoux said the Civil Rights Division of the DOJ closed its investigation of the allegations "after a full and thorough review."

BRPD officials initially refused to release that e-mail for public review. Instead, they offered their own summary of the e-mail, saying the Justice Department found no wrongdoing by BRPD officers after Katrina.

When asked whether closure of the investigation means that Baton Rouge officers were cleared of all alleged civil rights violations, a Justice Department spokesman declined further comment. The Justice Department's reticence regarding this case begs for specifics. Did DOJ officials find conduct among BRPD officers that was unprofessional, yet did not rise to the level of criminal wrongdoing? Did the investigation begin too late to effectively gather evidence and witness testimony? Why would out-of-state police officers from two separate agencies make such accusations? Did an unfettered investigation determine that local police were blameless?

The public cannot get conclusive answers to these questions without more information. The Justice Department can advance that cause by releasing records involving the investigation. The BRPD should also be more transparent in its response to such investigations rather than resorting to secrecy.

Police agencies are given broad powers in keeping law and order. The best check on the abuse of such power is transparency regarding the operations of these agencies. That transparency also should extend to agencies such as the U.S. Department of Justice that are supposed to be watchdogs of local law enforcement institutions.

The public that police officers are supposed to protect deserves no less.

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