
PREFACE

Black Texas Women: 150 Years of Trial and Triumph is a history focusing on the prolonged and still continuing struggle of black Texas women who have resisted oppressive institutions, people, and laws and built their families, communities, and careers from the ground up. Their story weaves two strands of history that are only now being told—black history and women’s history. Because black women have been so largely left out of both these stories, a special focus is obviously needed.

Brave Texas women have used violence, stealth, the legal system, and political strategies to protect themselves and their loved ones. While the private lives of most women occur within their family settings, those stories remain closed to the public eye. This book concentrates on the bold and creative initiatives women have taken primarily in the public sphere. Here you can read about the “ordinary” women and the headline-makers, the forgotten and the famous. But this is not just a compensatory or remedial history—it is history as viewed from the perspective of black women, in their own words, wherever possible, using their ideas, their writings, and their actions to illuminate their lives.

Black Texas Women actually covers a bit more than 150 years. During the Spanish colonial period, free women of color lived, owned land, and worked in Texas. Their status changed radically when the antislavery Mexican regime gave way to the proslavery Republic of Texas. Some of the first and most poignant documents about black Texas women are their petitions to the Texas Congress and later the legislature for the right to remain and work in Texas

under laws that limited their freedom. The signatures of white citizens on their petitions show the importance of the work the women did as nurses, cooks, and laundresses—traditional women's jobs which have been so undervalued, so underpaid, so ignored by history.

Domestic labor is a theme that recurs often in *Black Texas Women*. When other economic avenues have been closed to them, black women have fallen back on essential skills such as caring for children, washing, and cooking. Such work was parlayed into access to food and goods, into income for a move to town, into an independent small business, into a salary and perhaps benefits at an institution. It could even become the basis of labor organization—as in Galveston in 1877 or Nacogdoches in the 1970s and 1980s. The importance of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 in ending job segregation can be gauged by a startling statistic: three-fourths of black Texas women worked at service jobs before the act; by 1980, that figure had fallen to one-third.

The ways that black women have prepared themselves to break out of the domestic labor ghetto are also very important in this history. From female house slaves who learned to read and taught slave preachers to read the Bible, to the vast numbers of black women who founded and ran schools at all levels from emancipation to the present, to black cultural leaders and artists, black women have shaped a mass movement to lift their own communities by their bootstraps (or apron strings).

The need for blacks to improve conditions for themselves and for their own communities has been very great. With few exceptions, white society not only gave the black citizens of Texas nothing during all this history, but also conspired to take everything from them—their freedom, the profits from their labor, their land, their civil rights, and their dignity and self-respect. At every turn, black women with their men and children have resisted in whatever ways came to hand. Free women of color who were forbidden to stay in Texas remained anyhow. Slave women sometimes ran away, sometimes killed their enslavers, and resisted by keeping as much of their culture and family together as they could. One of the great acts of resistance after emancipation was the refusal of freedwomen to return to work in the fields under an overseer; their insistence on spending time at home with their families led to transformation of the plantation system.

Anyone who thinks government has done too much for black people in the United States need only examine this history to see that the reverse is true. Even during the brief flowering of Reconstruction, the federal agents whose job it was to protect freedpeople and negotiate labor contracts for them were very few and almost powerless. Most of the courts were so biased that a black woman could be sentenced to two years of forced labor for failing to return

a nightgown from a load of wash. When white supremacists conducted guerrilla warfare against blacks trying to exercise the franchise, government turned its back for a hundred years.

During this long period of injustice, black women were far from passive. They protested Jim Crow by sitting in “whites only” railroad cars; they demonstrated against lynching; they worked for women’s right to vote and against the all-white Democratic primary; they struggled to integrate public schools, colleges, and all public facilities; and they pressed for better jobs. Less dramatic than the wars beloved by male historians, the community-building contributions of women and women’s organizations have been seriously underrated. They established institutions like churches, community centers, old folks’ homes, nurseries, lodges, mutual insurance companies, mothers’ clubs, civic and voters’ leagues, and whatever others they recognized were needed. Their club movements paralleled the white women’s club movements from which middle-class black women were barred, but with the added focus enshrined in the National Association of Colored Women’s motto: “Lifting As We Climb.” For black women, with few resources and little political clout, this very persistence toward their major goals has been heroic.

I first came to appreciate in some detail this heroic quality of many black women’s lives more than ten years ago. This book is the result of my growing commitment to including black women in the history of Texas. From 1978 to 1981, I was research director for the Texas Women’s History Project. When Ann Richards, now governor of Texas, visited the Institute of Texan Cultures in San Antonio with her children, she noticed the near-total absence of women in the multimedia show projected on the ceiling. She tapped Mary Beth Rogers to remedy that gap in popular history. The result was *Texas Women—A Celebration of History*, a 500-running-foot museum exhibit that toured the state for two years and is now permanently housed at Texas Woman’s University’s Mary Evelyn Blagg Huey Library. Portable versions of the exhibit are still available from the Institute of Texan Cultures.

One of my primary concerns was to make sure the exhibit reflected the multiculturalism of Texas. I was especially aware of black women’s history because of my experience writing an oral history with Mrs. Annie Mae Hunt of Dallas. Mrs. Hunt’s recollections encompass not only her own varied life, but her parents’ and grandparents’ histories, dating back into slavery. Our collaborative work, *I Am Annie Mae: The Personal Story of a Black Texas Woman*, has taken on a life of its own, selling thousands of copies. Naomi Carrier, a black composer from Houston, and I began working together to fashion a musical from the book in 1984, and that, too, continues to be popular with audiences both in Texas and out of state.

The exhibit staff for *Texas Women—A Celebration of History* had such difficulty finding information about black women that I realized the need for a book and archives, too, and started collecting materials. We not only made a special effort to conserve and preserve information about black women but about Hispanic, Native American, and immigrant women, as well. Part of our organizing strategy included making a timeline of cards, so we could see the sweep and development of women's history as a process. Associate curator Frieda Werden and I began keeping a second set of the timeline cards relating to black history and black women's history, so we could make sense of that strand in the web. By the time the exhibit was completed, we realized we had a unique resource—the spine for a future publication on the history of black women in Texas. Some of our preliminary findings were included in my next book, *Texas Women, a Pictorial History: From Indians to Astronauts* (Austin: Eakin Press, 1986; rev. ed. *Governor Ann Richards and Other Texas Women: From Indians to Astronauts*, 1993). However, we thought there was enough material to begin a major history of black Texas women.

In 1986, as curator for a sesquicentennial exhibit sponsored by the Museum of African-American Life and Culture in Dallas, I next had the opportunity to focus on the lives of black Texas women. That exhibit, *They Showed the Way*, featured some one hundred women from around the state and continues to travel throughout the area. Research for the exhibit indicated the need and the possibilities.

One of the difficulties in compiling the research for this book has been the scarcity or unavailability of information on which to draw. The fragments are scattered and often difficult to obtain. Here is a challenge for today—to locate those records still hiding in attics, dresser drawers, antique chests, and musty suitcases, to preserve records of churches, clubs, and institutions, and to deposit these materials in accessible libraries. The life stories of many of the most significant women in our state's history cannot usually be found in public archives. It is also important to begin a systematic oral history program to interview the older members of the community before their stories are lost forever.

This has been a labor of love. What black Texas women have wrought in their "150 years of trial and triumph" is truly fascinating, and the job of piecing their story together has been uplifting. *Black Texas Women: 150 Years of Trial and Triumph* is of necessity an incomplete document. No one book, certainly not the first, can include every significant woman or get everything right. My attempts to get beyond my own cultural framework can only go so far, as well. I hope that what follows may inspire some readers to recognize the richness and importance of black Texas women's history and to go forward with in-depth scholarship, as well as stories for

children, biographies, curriculum units, plays, films, television and radio programs, and more.

There is a crying need for full-length scholarly (and popular) biographies of many of the women highlighted here, along with articles, theses, and dissertations about specific topics, such as the black women's club movement. There is enough work to keep dozens of graduate students occupied for decades. The materials I have collected over the past fifteen years are deposited at the Center for American History (formerly the Barker Texas History Center), part of the University of Texas at Austin library system. Major archival searches of black Texas women's records should be made at the headquarters of the National Association of Colored Women, the National Council of Negro Women, and the NAACP in Washington, D.C., and in the papers of Mary Church Terrell at the Library of Congress. All the historically black colleges in Texas have materials which are worth examining. Surveys could be made of records housed in community institutions like YWCAs, churches, and sorority houses.

Black women represent a tremendous resource for this society. To neglect or downplay the significance of their history and the breadth and wealth of their talents is a luxury we can ill afford. They confronted one of the harshest systems the world has ever known and survived with their spirits intact, bringing others along with them and showing the way for still more to follow. They serve as role models for all of us.

Ruthe Winegarten

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