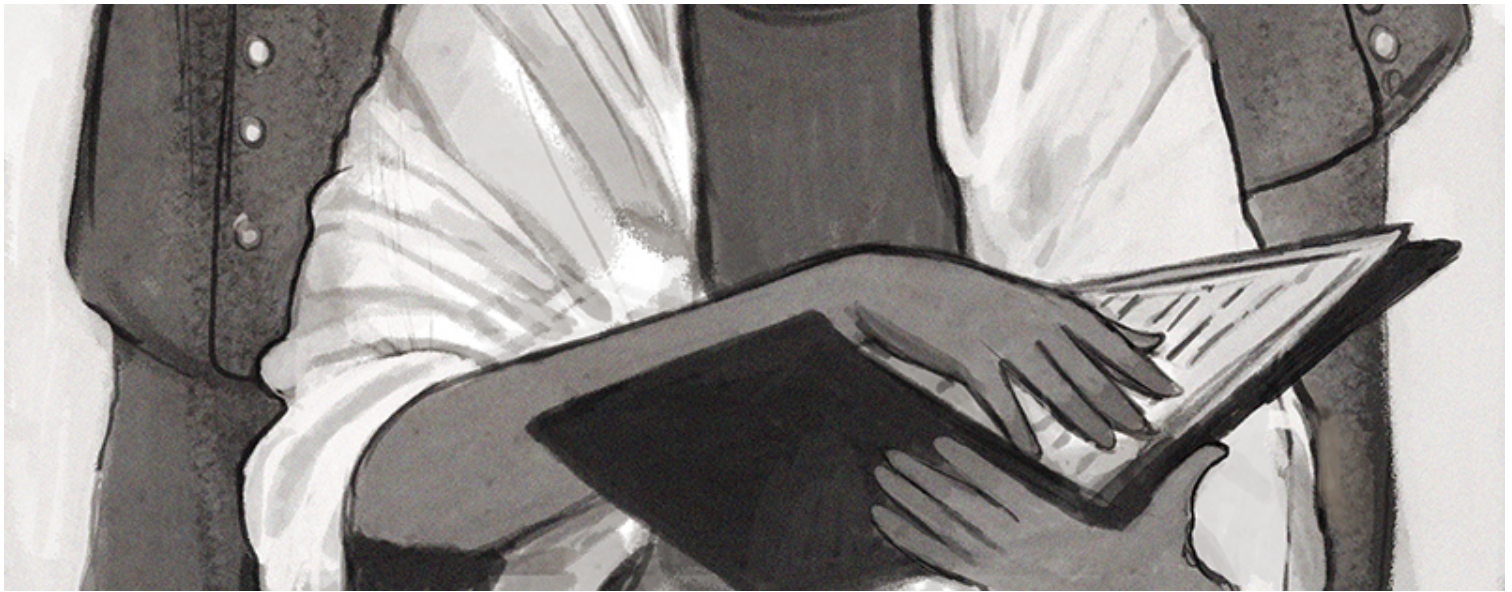

Lettres d'amour: Uncovering History

Discovering the roles of African Americans in New Iberia's (and Louisiana's) past and healing the present and future

01/30/2020 by Illustration by Christina Brown (<https://www.myneworleans.com/author/christina-brown/>),
Dr. Phebe Hayes (<https://www.myneworleans.com/author/drphebehayes/>)





After retiring from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette in 2013 as Dean of the then-College of General Studies and Professor of Communicative Disorders, I assumed that my retirement years would be a period of extended leisure and relaxation. Instead, I discovered a latent passion for local history particularly as it applies to African Americans of Iberia Parish. The more I studied my community's history, the more fascinated I became by the roles African Americans played in that history. For example, I discovered that Iberia Parish was the home of the first Black woman (Emma Wakefield-Paillet, M.D.) to earn a medical degree in Louisiana (1897) and to establish a medical practice in the state. Her father, Samuel Wakefield, represented Iberia Parish in the state senate (1876-1878) and her brother, Adolph J. Wakefield, was elected Clerk of Court for Iberia Parish (1884 to 1888). To uncover evidence of the history of African Americans in Iberia Parish, I spent (and continue to do so) many hours in libraries, archives and courthouses. Along the way, I learned that black men (including several of my ancestral grandfathers) enslaved on St. Martin and St. Mary Parish plantations escaped those plantations and joined the Union Army in Brashear City (i.e., Morgan City) not as "contraband" but as "men" who like other men craved freedom for themselves and their loved ones.

In our parish library, I discovered books written during the Jim Crow period (in 1963) that celebrated the "Great Doctors of Iberia Parish, from 1859-1959." Unbelievably, all were white and male. Growing up in New Iberia, I knew this was false because I personally knew Dr. George W. Diggs whose office was only a block away from my childhood home. I passed his office every day on my way to and from Florence A. Pemilton Elementary School. Dr. Diggs established his medical practice in New Iberia in 1946, only two years after four other black doctors had been violently expelled from the parish for daring to defy Jim Crow and advocating for the civil rights of Blacks in Iberia. I proceeded to search for evidence of blacks practicing medicine in Iberia and to my surprise found over 20 black doctors (including two dentists) associated with Iberia Parish from 1859-1959. Some were from Iberia Parish and practiced medicine in Iberia; some were

from Iberia but practiced medicine elsewhere; and the others were born elsewhere, but came to Iberia Parish to practice medicine. Incredibly, four of the 20 black doctors found so far were women: Drs. Emma Wakefield-Paillet, Margaret Johnson Vital, Myra Elise Chatters and Viola Johnson Coleman.

In addition I've found other Jim Crow-era books that celebrate the veterans of Iberia Parish and like other books of the time, omitted the service and sacrifices of its black veterans. The inherent danger of such books is obvious. Uncorrected they misrepresent the military service of veterans based on skin color. I approached historically black and white veterans' groups of Iberia Parish (VFW 12065, VFW 1982, American Legion Post 335, American Legion 533) about the lies represented by these books. The Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints congregations of Iberia Parish and Lafayette Parish offered their help and together we placed over 300 flags in the historically black cemeteries on Fulton Street in New Iberia: A visual representation to the public of the service of black veterans from the Civil War to the Vietnam War. Recently, these same veterans' groups went a step further. With the assistance of Hon. Rep. Terry Landry, Rep.-elect Mr. Marcus Bryant and community volunteers, they erected a flagpole at the site of one of the Fulton Street cemeteries (St. Matthew Benevolent Society Cemetery) in honor of those veterans.

So, you may wonder how I, a child of formerly enslaved humans, can pen what amounts to a tribute to Iberia Parish with its history of racism and suppression? As founder and president of The Iberia African American Historical Society, I work closely every day with community and civic leaders who have embraced the truths our research uncovered and are committed to including those truths (some extremely painful, such as beatings and lynchings) in the narratives told to the public. We have received strong support from city and parish political leaders allowing us to teach large segments of the public about that history. Their support has been priceless as we continue to commemorate our history with state historical markers in the city and parish. In addition, support has come from local businesses and individuals excited about our efforts to uncover the previously unknown history of Iberia Parish African Americans. Our work has led me to understand that, although we cannot undo the horrible inhuman acts of the past, we must acknowledge that those acts did occur and we must use that knowledge to heal the deep wounds that still exist. How? By providing lots of opportunities for civil discourse and by using history as evidence of the need to do things differently. So, if a community has the practice of naming its streets, bridges, overpasses, buildings, schools and so forth after prominent citizens who have made substantial contributions to that community, shouldn't we see the names of African Americans on some of those streets, bridges, overpasses, buildings, schools and the like?

I strongly encourage all formerly segregated communities to consider establishing historical societies such as ours aimed at researching the history of its African American communities before that history is lost forever.

About the author *Dr. Phebe Hayes is a retired University of Louisiana at Lafayette dean and professor and founder and president of the The New Iberia African American Historical Society.*

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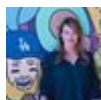
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Elise Ballard

Amazing, invaluable work! Thank you so much.

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Elise Ballard

I just messaged you on FB, Dr. Hayes.

Like · Reply · 25w



Jack Ferstel

Thank you for all of your excellent work in uncovering the lost history of a very large segment of Iberia Parish's history. I hope that in the future that our educational institutions in the parish will make this research available to our school children so they can appreciate all of the good work of our citizens.

Like · Reply · 1 · 26w



Phebe Hayes

Thank you Jack!

Like · Reply · 26w



Patricia Wesley

Beautiful Article! Thanks for all you are doing, Dr. Hayes!

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Phebe Hayes

Thanks for your kindness and support Pat!

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