

The Trailblazers Who Guide Me

by Patricia Smith Prather

I am often asked about my motivation for spending the past two decades researching and writing about Texas African American history. My answer is that I want to help fill the void in Texas literature by adding the vital contributions that African Americans made to the state's development. Another and equally important reason is that I want to pay tribute to my ancestors and the others who blazed trails for me while I grew up in Houston, Texas.

One ancestor who had a major influence on my development was my maternal grandmother. She was Adeline Mueller Dugar to the community, but she was simply "momme" to me. My grandmother was born in 1893, and throughout her 88 years she created the clearly marked trails that I still follow. Momme never complained that she had to scrub floors as a maid to help poppee send their two daughters to Prairie View A&M University to prepare for a better life. One daughter was my mother, a community activist and housewife who continued the college tradition by saving money every week in order to educate my sister and me.

Slavery, segregation, or the fact that people who looked like us were never featured as heroes in our history books were seldom discussed. Instead, my grandparents, parents, teachers, and scout leaders prepared us for a world that would "open doors of oppor-

tunity" that had been closed to them. The history books left us out, so we looked up to our own heroes. Elise LeNoir Morris, our Girl Scout leader, taught lessons of leadership and citizenship to prepare her future leaders of America. When I went to college, our biology teacher, Miss Mildred Brooks, encouraged me to continue my high school interest in science. My mother, Hortense Dugar Smith, kept in close contact with relatives and shared stories about our ancestors. Our heroes surrounded us in a community that was segregated and almost entirely self-contained. We admired our teachers, ministers, music teachers, scout leaders, and business owners.

However, it was not until 1977 when Alex Haley's book, "Roots" hit me like a thunderbolt that I really believed it was possible to research and find my ancestors. That search began my life journey to study not only my ancestors but also the African American leaders who helped develop Houston and Texas. I began to seriously question why African Americans were excluded from Texas history books. I thought the answer was that historians did not know our history, but I knew the reason was not that simple. The truth is that African American communities became isolated during segregation when the law forbade us from going to school and other public places with Anglos. We had been separate and unequal for decades, and Anglo historians did not consider our history worth researching.

It was time to help make Texas history complete. I began documenting my discoveries about the role of African Americans in Houston and Texas. I first sat down with the elders, including my grandparents. I asked them to describe the "old days" when they grew up, and also the time when their parents grew up, many as slaves. I began creating my own pathways to historical knowledge. I began to study the community where I grew up in Houston, known as "Fifth Ward." I found that every school in the community with the exception of the high school was named in honor of an African American Texas leader. When it opened in 1893, Charles Atherton Elementary was named in honor of the first principal of the high school for the "colored" in Houston. E. O. Smith Middle School was named in memory of its first principal. Emmett J. Scott Elementary was named for the Houstonian who was the secretary for Booker T. Washington in the early 1900s. Nat Q. Henderson Elementary honors one of the first principals in Fifth Ward. The Fifth Ward high school, established in 1927, was named for Phillis Wheatley, an educated slave who became internationally famous as a poet in the late eighteenth century and as one of the first female published authors in America.

I continued the survey of Fifth Ward and found that the Julia C. Hester House was named in honor of a Houston educator who established after-school activities in her home in Fifth Ward. The Kelley Courts Housing Project was named for A.K. Kelley, an ex-slave who became a Fifth Ward leader. The early church pastors



Patricia Prather displays some of the items in the African American Archives in her office at the University of Houston. Photograph by Thomas Shea, University of Houston.



The Houston Place, 1303 Bayou Place, in 1992. Constance Houston Thompson shared her home with the Texas Trailblazers Association until her death. Photograph by Earlie Hudnall, Jr.

were trailblazers who served not only religious needs but educational needs, since their structures housed the first public education for ex-slaves after freedom was announced in Texas on June 19, 1865. Rev. Toby Gregg, for example, founded Mt. Vernon United Methodist Church one year after slavery ended. In 2002 the church celebrated 137 years in the Fifth Ward. Segregation, as horrendous as it was, forced the Fifth Ward and other communities to establish their own support systems: schools, churches, businesses, and recreational opportunities, as well as civic and political organizations. These institutions and their leaders were the basis for my early research. They were the heroes that my generation emulated.

I first published articles about my findings in 1986, when I authored a series of articles for the *Houston Chronicle* newspaper. One story featured profiles of the first African American leaders to emerge in Houston after slavery ended. Another featured the Houston Place of the Fifth Ward, the family home of Constance Houston Thompson. This beautiful Victorian home opened its doors for social activities for African Americans, who were prohibited by law from socializing at hotels and other public places. The home provided space for weddings, teas, and debutante parties. Rooms at the home were opened for traveling dignitaries who were barred from “white only” facilities.

Another article was about the Frenchtown community located within Fifth Ward. Its Creole speaking residents came from Louisiana to seek work in Houston and settled in an area just north of old Highway 90 (now Liberty Road). They kept the French patois language alive, as well as unique Creole recipes, such as red beans and rice and gumbo with okra. The Creoles helped

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build one another’s homes and worshipped at Our Mother of Mercy Catholic Church. The *Houston Chronicle* series caused excitement and pride among African American Houstonians because of its positive message about our communities. The articles were displayed at churches and other public places. This excitement also encouraged my quest for additional stories.

In 1990, I co-founded a formal institution for historical research. The Texas Trailblazer Preservation Association began at the Houston Place, at that time still the home of 93-year-old Constance Houston Thompson. Fifth Ward sociologist Bob Lee agreed to help set up the organization. Within a year the Texas Trailblazer Preservation Association formed a board of directors, chaired by A. I. Thomas, Ph.D., President Emeritus of Prairie View A&M University. We also launched the “Texas Trailblazer Series,” one-page biographies of little-known Texas African American leaders. The first profile was the grandfather of Constance Houston Thompson, Joshua Houston. Joshua Houston was servant to General Sam Houston. He became a leader after slavery ended because he had traveled Texas roads with one of the state’s great heroes. We distributed thousands of copies of these one-page biographies with photographs to school students in Houston and throughout Texas.

Researching and writing about unsung African American heroes was a tedious process, but the personal empowerment kept us going. How could historians have missed these incredible men and women who were successful during the hostile climate of lynchings and other horrendous acts of violence launched against African American men, women, and children? These were heroic stories about people who overcame incredible obstacles.

The Series was questioned. Many wanted to know the sources for the "Texas Trailblazer Series." One critic actually described the profiles as "fairy tales." How were we finding information that historians had not found? The answer was twofold. One, we specifically searched for African American leaders, and, two, we began much of our research through oral histories. We then verified information through African American newspapers, obituaries, church and school histories, as well as traditional primary sources such as census records and land records. It has been a privilege to be a part of such trailblazing research and to be able to share this information with students. In a ten year period we published sixty-five profiles with photographs and compiled a book. The *Texas Trailblazer Series* is now on the shelves of libraries throughout Texas. By 2000, three editions had been published, incorporating the ever-growing collection of biographies. And, the research continues to date.

My role in this project would not have been possible without the trailblazers who have guided me throughout my life: Adeline Mueller Dugar, Hortense Dugar Smith, Elise LeNoir Morris, Mildred Brooks, and a long list of others, including my father, C. F. Smith, who is profiled in the *Texas Trailblazer Series*. Among the many who assisted are Thelma Scott Bryant, Houston's 97-year-old living encyclopedia of history, and Bernice McBeth, who has compiled the most about the history of African American Methodists in Texas.

The men and women who blazed trails during segregation sowed the seeds for the *Texas Trailblazer Series*. The faculty at Texas Southern University educated us when Rice University forbade African Americans to attend. Carter Wesley, C. A. Dupree, Hobart Taylor, and J. H. Jemison purchased Camp Robinwood to give African American Girl Scouts a camping experience in Houston when we were excluded from camping at nearby Agnes Arnold. The Houston Negro Hospital (now Riverside General) delivered thousands of babies when hospitals would not admit our African American mothers. The mothers of the Jack and Jill, Inc., an organization founded to provide social enrichment activities for youth, persuaded Houston's Alley Theater to hold a special performance for the organization during segregation. The *Houston Informer* newspaper wrote positive stories about African American civic, social, and religious activities when *The Houston Post* completely ignored our communities. The Julia C. Hester House offered a swimming pool and other recreational activities when other recreational centers were closed to African Americans. Hattie Mae White integrated Houston's school board and endured unbelievable hostility when she attended her first meeting in 1958. Community activist Nellye Joyce Punch keeps the spirit of Wheatley High School alive and helped to coordinate its 75th Anniversary Celebration in 2002.

For those who are not aware that Texas African Americans have documented our history, I want to share a few sources that are not widely known. Perhaps the most valuable for Houston is *The Red Book of Houston*, compiled in 1915 by Emmett J. Scott. It is a compendium of achievements made during the first fifty years following the end of slavery. It contains the histories of Houston's most vital African American institutions: churches, schools, and civic

associations. J. Mason Brewer, a Texas folklorist and historian, taught at Huston-Tillotson College in Austin and authored books and short stories. George R. Woolfolk, Ph.D., authored the history of Prairie View A&M University. He was Dean of the history department at the University. Several Houston women have published histories. Thelma Scott Bryant documented her memoirs of Houston pioneer families. Hazel Hainsworth Young, co-founder of the Houston chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha, authored a history of the sorority. Likewise, Lullelia Walker Harrison wrote a history of her sorority, Zeta Phi Beta.

Trinity United Methodist Church celebrates over 150 years of history. It began as an African mission of First Methodist Church of Houston and has produced numerous souvenir booklets about its history, including trailblazers such as founding pastor, Rev. Elias Dibble. Bernice McBeth has collected the history of this and other Methodist churches. Antioch Missionary Baptist Church was founded six months after slavery ended in Texas. Pioneer pastor Rev. Jack Yates has a high school in Houston named in his honor. Both churches have historical markers on their sites. More than thirty African American churches in Houston celebrate 100-plus years, and many have documented their histories in souvenir booklets. Most of these histories are unknown because of limited printing and lack of marketing. As Ralph Ellison wrote in his classic novel, *The Invisible Man*, the role of African Americans in American society has been mostly ignored and, therefore, thought non-existent.

The trailblazers that guide me have taught me otherwise. They encouraged me to ask questions and they taught me to seek answers and to formulate opinions. My background in science taught me to formulate hypotheses. The *Texas Trailblazer Series* began with a question. How did ex-slaves survive physical and mental abuse, such as lynchings, discrimination, and segregation; and who were the leaders in that struggle? We profiled sixty-five Texas leaders in the *Texas Trailblazer Series*, and we identified hundreds more. Among 254 Texas counties, there are numerous communities with a sizeable African American population that have schools named in honor of pioneer educators who taught hundreds of students. These were the trailblazers. Other trailblazers were pioneer pastors, business owners, and elected officials. The list is growing.

My motivation for researching, writing, and speaking about African American trailblazers clearly comes from community trailblazers and my ancestors. Were it not for their support and guidance during formative years, when I was openly called and treated like a nigger child in Houston, I would not have the self-confidence to undertake this research. Today I continue this work and broaden its audience in my work as archivist for the African American Studies Program at the University of Houston. In creating an archive, I preserve not only the stories of the trailblazers, but also the sources of their history, making them available for other students and scholars. The future is in motivating young people to ask questions about their own communities so that they might continue to add to Texas history and make it inclusive of everyone who made a contribution to the development of this great state.