





Clyde C. Robertson

[Southern University at New Orleans]

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0334-4872>

Jennifer Edwards

[Paralegal and Attorney - Hebbler and Giordano]

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-0541-3457>

Pontchartrain Park Pioneers: An oral history of New Orleans' civil rights era segregated black 'suburb in the city'

DOI: 10.26774/wrhm.376

Submitted on: 25 May 2023

Accepted on: 22 August 2023

Published on: 3 November 2023

The work is original and has not been published anywhere before.



Abstract

The article was inspired by the Pontchartrain Park Pioneers Oral History Project which began in 2019. Ten Pontchartrain Park pioneers who purchased their homes in this middle class, African American community between 1955 and 1965 were interviewed. This innovative oral history project allowed the interviewees to share their unique stories of pursuing the 'American Dream' of home ownership, while living in a racially segregated country and city.

Keywords

segregation, integration, discrimination, Pontchartrain Park, Pontchartrain Park Pioneers, redlining, Civil Rights Movement, Southern University at New Orleans, American dream, oral history, Timecode Indexing Module, Virtual Teaching Module



Pontchartrain Park Pioneers

The *Pontchartrain Park Pioneers: An Oral History of New Orleans' Civil Rights Era Segregated Black Suburb in the City Project* (also referred to as the *Pontchartrain Park Oral History Project*) conducted and utilized oral histories of ten New Orleans African Americans who achieved the American dream of homeownership in the second oldest American all-black 'suburb in the city' in the 1950s and early 1960s, the first in New Orleans to tell a larger story. Denied by 'redlining' from buying homes in the rest of the city, they formed their own community. This oral history project has strengthened the teaching and study of the humanities at Southern University at New Orleans (SUNO) by developing new resources through these oral histories, creating a digital Teaching Module for sharing them in humanities courses, teaching them in humanities courses, and preserving them digitally.

The *Pontchartrain Park Pioneers Oral History Project*, a 2021 recipient of a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Grant, has documented the original homeowners in a beautiful African American neighborhood in New Orleans, formed in the era of segregation. Pontchartrain Park was a destination of choice for a rising black middle class – professionals in teaching, law, business, and medicine, as well as workers supported by a strong labor movement. Many were deeply committed to the Civil Rights Movement and integration efforts locally and leaders in New Orleans city-wide politics. Yet these young families chose to buy homes, often enabled by the GI Bill,¹ in an all-black neighborhood, they could call their own. Pontchartrain Park Pioneers are people who purchased their homes between the years 1955–1965. Ten Pontchartrain Park Pioneers were interviewed during the summer of 2019: Margaret B. Adams, Elvira Henry, Yolanda Henry, Stephen S. Johnson III, Josie Young-Lewis, Sybil Haydel-Morial, Ruth Oubre, Edgar Poree, Velma Slack, and Velez White. This oral history project told the complex story of these pioneers. Moreover, the innovative venture has demonstrated new digital tools and approaches that leveraged the power of oral history for widening circles of community uses, curricular materials for schools, documentaries, interactive exhibits, and more.

Mapping Inequality: Redlining in New Deal America has newly exposed America's history of 'redlining,' racial discrimination that hit at the very heart of the dream of homeownership.² It embedded Home Owners' Loan Corporation maps, used from

1 GI Bill benefits help Veterans pay for college, graduate school, and training programs. Since 1944, the GI Bill has helped qualifying Veterans and their family members get money to cover all or some of the costs for school or training.

2 R. Nelson [et al.], *Mapping Inequality: Redlining in New Deal America*, Digital Scholarship Lab, University of Richmond, Richmond, Va. Audio, <https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/#loc=10/34.005/-118.529&city=los-angeles-ca> (accessed: 14.03.2019).

1933 to 1968 to categorize neighborhoods for mortgage lending purposes, into a single, interactive map. The neighborhood lending designations were based blatantly on the presence or absence of minorities. Map 'redlining' meant minorities were either denied home loans or charged predatory interest rates. Such racially explicit policies of federal, state, and local governments defined where whites and African Americans should live until the last quarter of the 20th century. The effects continue today.³

While legalized racial housing discrimination was rampant, segregated black 'suburbs in the city' arose. Collier Heights in Atlanta was developed exclusively for affluent African Americans. In 2009 the National Register of Historic Places recognized it as the first neighborhood developed, financed, designed, and constructed by African Americans for African American residents.

Between 1955 and 1969, New Orleans developed Pontchartrain Park around a 200-acre green space consisting of a golf course and park on land reclaimed from low-lying swamps surrounding Lake Pontchartrain. It was built under Mayor de Lesseps 'Chep' Morrison's administration during a period when desegregation was becoming a social and political force.

Pontchartrain Park gave something unknown at the time to New Orleans' African American middle and upper-class residents: like Collier Heights, it was just for them. More than a decade before the Civil Rights Act, it offered two or three-bedroom ranch-style houses with ample entertaining space and open floorplans. There was a school, churches, the golf course, a tennis court, and the park. For the new residents, it seemed like the American dream was in reach. The neighborhood was settled in part by veterans who could afford housing on the GI Bill, but couldn't obtain home loans because of redlining. Pontchartrain Park was marketed to a professional African American public. Despite their income, they had been subjected to inferior housing all their lives. Pontchartrain Park welcomed them. Residents formed strong communal bonds, shielding them from the injustice they endured outside their neighborhood.

Southern University at New Orleans, a Historically Black University, opened in Pontchartrain Park's northwest corner in 1959. Black students could not attend the nearby all-white state University of New Orleans, or Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. Tuition at private black schools like Dillard University and Xavier University of New Orleans was often unaffordable. SUNO gave these young people a chance for an education, a mission it continues. This project was closely tied to SUNO's cultural identity. The community and the university have been interrelated for the last sixty years. The oral histories of the local original settlers reflected what was happening to African Americans nationally. Even as the country moved

3 R. Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How our Government Segregated America*, New York 2018.

painfully toward integration, Pontchartrain Park created a safe haven for African Americans. The *Pontchartrain Park Pioneers Oral History Project* exposed the wider significance both of the persons who were interviewed and the neighborhood they helped build.

The Pontchartrain Park Pioneers Oral History Project

The Oral History Association (OHA) has defined oral history as “a field of study and a method of gathering, preserving and interpreting the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events.”⁴ Dr. Clyde C. Robertson, the project’s principle investigator (PI), collected ten video oral histories of elderly ‘pioneers’ of Pontchartrain Park. Sybil Haydel Morial, widow of Ernest Dutch Morial, the first Black Mayor of New Orleans, and mother of the city’s second, Marc Morial, and others shared stories of their life in the early part of the 20th century and how Pontchartrain Park changed it. “We were sold on raising our children there [Pontchartrain Park],” asserts Sybil Morial, “we didn’t consider any other place.”⁵ The freedom they gained in Pontchartrain Park may have stopped at the neighborhood boundaries, but it created a sense of self-pride that raised them up. In the words of Edgar Poree, “It [Pontchartrain Park] was simply beautiful. Driving in there and seeing kids playing... Just the beauty, serenity of it [Pontchartrain Park] and you were close to everything...”⁶ The project has preserved and interpreted these voices for SUNO students and for the public, as they are preserved digitally at Amistad Research Center (ARC) and the Preservation Resource Center (PRC).

Thematic excerpts and stories drawn from the oral interviews of the Pontchartrain Park Pioneers’ have been incorporated into the curricula of six existing courses: The United States Since 1865; World Civilizations since 1500; Introduction to African American Studies; African American Humanities; African American Politics; and Urban Governments. This project introduced the stories, and their significance nationally, to approximately 190 SUNO History, Political Science, and African American Studies students, and virtually to even more through a ‘Teaching Module.’ The *Pontchartrain Park Pioneers Oral History Project* has been included in the HUMA 315 African American Humanities Course, since 2020. Through the local history of Pontchartrain Park, students have connected with larger issues in national American and African American history. They have gained greater understanding of their own lives from learning how their forebears battled engrained discrimination.

4 Institute of Oral History, College of Liberal Arts, UTEP, <https://oralhistory.org/about/do-oral-history/> (accessed: 05.03.2020).

5 Preservation Resource Center, New Orleans, LA (further as PRC), Interview with Sybil Morial, 16 July 2021 (recorded by C. Robertson); see *Pontchartrain Park Pioneers: Mrs. Sybil Morial – YouTube* (accessed: 16.07.2021).

6 PRC, Interview with Edgar Poree, June 2019 (recorded by C. Robertson); see *Pontchartrain Park Pioneers: Mr. Edgar Poree – YouTube* (accessed: 16.07.2021).

The *Pontchartrain Park Pioneers Oral Histories* have explored topics of discrimination in the United States against African Americans, focusing specifically on education, employment and housing. The project has addressed effects of institutionalized lending practices precluding African Americans from owning homes and acquiring wealth like their white counterparts.⁷ The unique enterprise examined this broader history. Students have gleaned how immediacy of access to otherwise unheard voices can broaden knowledge, learning history through the voices of those who created and lived it. Moreover, the project has studied the current racial situation in New Orleans and the United States and leveraged it through oral history that can interest young people in what otherwise may seem irrelevant to their lives.

These uses were made much easier through a collaboration with an oral history leader, Dr. Michael Frisch, and his Randforce Associates, LLC team out of Buffalo, New York. They provided the initial transcription and then refined it for our use, employing the TheirStory platform and its unique Timecode Indexing Module ('TIM').⁸

The process began with a voice-to-text auto-transcript corrected and formatted for legibility into a verbatim 'Transcript of Record.' This unique collaboration helped shape a groundbreaking 'three transcription-indexing method' Frisch has come to call 'indexing for use.' Here, the 'transcript of record' was consolidated into broad 'unit digests' – each interview segmented into 10–15-minute units – and 'story digests' on themes of interest. The verbatim transcript of record provided users of the course module with an exact record of what was asked by the interviewer and what was said by the interviewee. The two levels of digests (unit and story) gave a focused distillation of the consolidated content, all in the speakers' actual words. These levels were keyworded and connected at specific time-code points for immediate access to the source video at that point of interest.

Students have generally found the concise unit and story digests especially effective for bringing the content of the *Pontchartrain Park Pioneers Oral Histories* into their work and discussions, as well as for leading to closer engagement with the full transcript and the video itself. An accompanying essay by Professor Frisch appears

7 R. Rothstein, *op. cit.*

8 For recent work at the Randforce Associate's oral history consulting office, and Talking Pictures LLC, developers of the PixStori short-form photo/oral history tool, see www.rebrand.ly/OHA2022 (accessed: 09.07.2023); TheirStory is at www.theirstory.io (accessed: 09.07.2023). For more information, contact the principals directly: Randforce's Michael Frisch (mfrisch@buffalo.edu), and TheirStory's Zack Ellis (zack@theirstory.io). Elsewhere in this Yearbook, Dr. Frisch has contributed an informal essay reflecting on his methodological collaboration with this New Orleans project: *The Pontchartrain Park Pioneers and the Path to 'Indexing for Use(s)*.

elsewhere in this Yearbook, exploring the (appropriately!) 'pioneering' approach to oral history content management that emerged through our collaboration on this project.

In addition to revising content of two History, two African American Studies, and two Political Science courses, the project has presented a workshop sponsored by the Center for African and African American Studies (CAAAS) for three partner high school teachers. The Pioneers were invited to speak, giving the educators an engaging method of teaching history to their students. The workshop strengthened humanities teaching at SUNO through faculty's participation as presenters; it strengthened CAAAS' involvement with its partner schools, and helped to disseminate the project to a larger audience.

The *Pontchartrain Park Oral History Project's* curriculum was also reinforced with oral histories, texts, and articles that covered a wide array of historical agendas and topics impacting Pontchartrain Park and its citizens such as oral histories of New Orleanians following Hurricane Katrina, which gave voice to otherwise unknown individuals who were part of a larger history. Moreover, students were introduced to articles and books concerning housing discrimination's role in racial equality relating Pontchartrain Park's development to the overall context of American race relations and African American history, including *New Orleans Neighborhoods: A Cultural Guide* for its history of Pontchartrain Park and adjacent Gentilly Woods. Finally, a book on migration of African Americans from the South afforded insight into social conditions prevailing for southern African Americans at the time Pontchartrain Park was built. Texts were chosen based on their application to racial discrimination in housing and education, and the sociological and political reasons for the development of Pontchartrain Park.

A project of this magnitude and importance required a dynamic team of researchers and scholars to create and preserve the *Pontchartrain Park Pioneers Oral History Project*. This innovative oral history venture created opportunities for collaborative research pedagogies across different university departments and units. The following scholars, communication professionals, and student comprised the *Pontchartrain Park Pioneers: An Oral History of New Orleans' Civil Rights Era Segregated Black 'Suburb in the City'* team: Clyde C. Robertson, PhD, (PI) Associate Professor/Director, Center for African and African American Studies at Southern University at New Orleans; George Amedee, PhD, (Researcher) Professor of Political Science, Southern University at New Orleans; Mike Meehan, PhD, (Videographer) Director of Satellite Communications at Southern University at New Orleans; Ms. Connie Abdul-Salaam, MA, (Researcher) Assistant Professor of History at Southern University at New Orleans; Mr. Chauncey Cammon, BA, (Videographer/Editor) Southern University at New Orleans; Ms. Francis Helena, BS, (Video Assistant) Southern University at New Orleans.

The goal of this project was to collect the voices of the Pontchartrain Park Pioneers and have them share their struggle, perseverance, and triumph with a larger

audience. Ultimately, the *Pontchartrain Park Pioneers Oral History Project's* purpose was to edify those who had not experienced the challenges of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, or for those who do not grasp the Civil Rights era's significance. The project's team pursued this mission by adhering to the following schedule:

1) 1 February 2021 – 31 March 2021

Robertson, Meehan, and Cammon edited the ten videotaped interviews. Robertson, Amedee, and Salaam revised the content of six courses to include the Pontchartrain Park Pioneers' oral histories and redesigned the syllabi of the following courses:

- a. Introduction to African American Studies;
- b. African American Humanities;
- c. U.S. History since 1865;
- d. World Civilization since 1500;
- e. Urban Governments; and
- f. African American Politics.

2) 1 April 2021 – 30 August 2021

Robertson, Amedee, and Salaam produced video lectures and introductions incorporating a survey of racial discrimination in the U.S. related to education, urban planning, and housing. In addition, the talks emphasized the people and organizations involved in developing Pontchartrain Park. Furthermore, Amedee recorded a second lecture that launched this innovative oral history project into the courses mentioned above. During this lecture, he copiously explored how the debilitating practice of redlining and gerrymandering negatively impacts African Americans' growth and development. Robertson presented a *Pontchartrain Park Pioneers: An Oral History of New Orleans' Civil Rights Era Segregated Black 'Suburb in the City'* workshop to invited teachers and members of the Pontchartrain Park Neighborhood Association.

3) 31 August 2021 – 15 December 2021

Robertson, Amedee, and Salaam incorporated the edited oral history interviews and curricula virtually into the six courses. Hurricane Ida forced all classes to be offered on line. The interviews were inserted into Robertson's, Amedee's, and Salaam's Moodle Course Shells.

4) 20 December 2021 – 31 January 2022

As part of a major NEH initiative, The National Humanities Alliance (NHA) worked with Dr. Robertson to evaluate the use of oral history with a major curriculum development project. The evaluation of six courses incorporating the Pontchartrain Park Pioneers oral histories was conducted by the Alliance's

Community Development Research Manager, Dr. Ayesha Casie Chetty. Her detailed January 2022 report is significant in addressing the very processes and uses this essay has explored, but from an independent outside perspective. On 31 May 2022, she posted a blog summarizing the findings of her study. Because it speaks to these matters in considerable detail, we include Dr. Chetty's blog in its entirety (see Appendix no. 1).

Conclusion

This groundbreaking project has improved the quality of humanities teaching and learning at SUNO for faculty and students, enhancing faculty's ability to engage students with oral history as a methodology for 'shaping history,' both in person and virtually. For students, the interviews have delivered richer and fuller accounts of important historical events than textbooks because of the interviews' personal nature. The voices preserved in these oral histories have rarely been heard, even at an Historically Black College or University (HBCU) like SUNO. The oral histories have opened a wider dialogue about the relationship existing between pre- and early Civil Rights era racial discrimination and today. By creating a virtual 'Teaching Module' of the histories, the project has engaged students beyond physical classrooms. For the university itself, the connection between the neighborhood and SUNO, sharing the same history and neighborhood, has been strengthened. Moreover, the relationship the project has built with both the ARC and PRC supports SUNO's institutional mission to empower and promote the upward mobility of diverse populations of traditional and nontraditional students through quality academic programs, teaching, and research.

Dr. Chetty stresses the importance of providing all students with an accurate and inclusive education that provides them with examples of average African Americans who, against all odds, succeed in achieving their goals and objectives. This 'blueprint' challenges the current practice of educational exclusion and denial that avoids conversations about the hard-won victories of past African American generations. "That is why the lessons of these voices are so important," says Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer. "Nothing is more disturbing than to listen to young men and women who appear to have no sense of what brought us to where we are."⁹

The stories found in the *Pontchartrain Park Pioneers: An Oral History of New Orleans's Civil Rights Era Segregated Black 'Suburb in the City'* project resonated in the voices of men and women who, in the 1950s and 1960s, dared to live the American Dream. Their shared experiences reflected determination, dedication, and defiance. According to Stephen Johnson, III, "Everyone was proud and concerned and if you went through the [Pontchartrain] 'Park' you would be able to see and feel

9 H. Hampton, S. Fayer, *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s.*, New York 1991.

that. There was a certain amount of pride that was expressed in the activities in the way the 'Park' was handled by the people who were responsible, the parents in particular."¹⁰

For the Pioneers, Pontchartrain Park became a beacon of hope and symbol of success. More importantly, their stories can serve as both example and inspiration for all who are yearning to succeed. "The greatest legend is the fact that we could have a sub-division as a people, and one that could be recognized throughout the country and the world, for that matter, and it turns out that it's still there." Johnson asserts, "It's [Pontchartrain Park] gonna serve its purpose because we have a younger generation coming along and it's an opportunity for us to help them to get their bearings and move on."¹¹

The oral histories of Pontchartrain Park Pioneers are more important than ever because of the age and health of the elders. Pontchartrain Park Pioneers' Mr. Stephen Johnson and Mrs. Josie Young Lewis are both diseased. Their triumphs and travails must be preserved, shared, and examined by this and future generations. After all, through their stories the Pioneers, and their beloved neighborhood, live on.

Appendix no. 1

Pontchartrain Park Pioneers: Incorporating Oral Histories into Humanities Curricula¹²

As part of our NEH for All initiative, NHA worked with Southern University at New Orleans (SUNO) to document the impact of a program they implemented in 2021. Titled *Pontchartrain Park Pioneers: An Oral History of New Orleans's Civil Rights Era Segregated Black 'Suburb in the City,'* this program integrated local oral histories into six existing courses. Southern University at New Orleans is a Historically Black College located in the northwest corner of Pontchartrain Park – the first neighborhood in the city that was developed, financed, designed, and constructed by African Americans for African American residents. The oral histories integrated into the humanities courses at SUNO are those of some of the initial residents of Pontchartrain Park and reflect the social and cultural changes that they went through as this area was developed.

Incorporating the voices and stories of people who had battled discrimination and created a space for themselves into humanities courses provided students

10 PRC, Interview with Stephen Johnson, III, 12 June 2019 (recorded by C. Robertson); see: *Pontchartrain Park Pioneers: Mr. Stephen Johnson III - YouTube* (accessed: 16.07.2021).

11 PRC, Interview with Stephen Johnson, III, conducted by C. Robertson, 12 June 2019; see: *Pontchartrain Park Pioneers: Mr. Stephen Johnson, III - YouTube* (accessed: 16.07.2021).

12 A.C. Chetty, *Incorporating Oral Histories into Humanities Curricula*, *National Humanities Alliance*, 31 May 2022, <https://nhalliance.org/pontchartrain-park-pioneers-incorporating-oral-histories-into-humanities-curricula/> (accessed: 03.10.2023).

a powerful way to learn history, make connections to their own lives, and reflect on the connections between local issues and broader national issues. This program filled a much-needed gap in students' education and surveys demonstrate that they were extremely appreciative of the opportunity to learn about the local history through oral histories. 95 percent of the respondents said they knew very little or nothing about the historical significance of Pontchartrain Park prior to the course. One student said "I was unaware of Pontchartrain Park and that it once was an all-Black neighborhood. My perspective was changed, I just wanted to obtain a psychology degree but with this course I inform and educate so much of my family who were too unaware of the significance of the Park."

Qualitative responses demonstrate that the program had a personal impact on students and helped them think about their own lives within the context of history. 82 percent of respondents reported feeling a sense of pride in being a part of the history of Pontchartrain Park through attending *SUNO*. One student reflected "I understand more of where I come from now. Being a Black woman, I now have more knowledge of my history from Africa as well as New Orleans." Another wrote "it gave me more confidence in my heritage and who I am, and where I came from." The program also helped students feel more connected to the local area. As one respondent wrote, "The individuals that shared their story gave you examples of how much different society is from what we know it today when you went to public places and where people of color went and where they did not go. It really makes you think about what you could have done if you were alive back then to change the way that things were and what you could do to help the current state of Pontchartrain Park." Another wrote "it made me proud to know that this community was shaped by a lot of well-known Black professionals that did not allow the laws and policies of Jim Crow era that [were] in place to hold people of color back."

Finally, 87 percent of respondents acknowledged the importance of this program that highlighted Black history to their overall education. One student said "We need programs like this to teach us Black students where we come from and our history. I personally feel like programs like this will inspire students to strive for greater things and become better students because us students will know the history and know that people like us made real difference in these same communities we live in." Another student said "It is important for the stories of African Americans to be told but also to be taught. For too long African American history has been watered down and stripped away from the next generation. For that reason alone, more authentic history projects should be integrated into the curriculum at universities across the country."



Bibliography

- Chetty A.C., *Incorporating Oral Histories into Humanities Curricula*, National Humanities Alliance, 31 May 2022, <https://nhalliance.org/pontchartrain-park-pioneers-incorporating-oral-histories-into-humanities-curricula/> (accessed: 03.10.2023).
- Frisch M. [et al.], *Randforce Associates, LLC / Talking Pictures LLC Resources*, Oral History Association 2022 Annual Meeting, Los Angeles, www.rebrand.ly/OHA2022 (accessed: 09.07.2023).
- Hampton H., Fayer S., *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s.*, New York 1991.
- Johnson S., *Pontchartrain Park Pioneers: Mr. Stephen Johnson, III*, *Pontchartrain Park Pioneers: Mr. Stephen Johnson, III - YouTube* (accessed: 16.07.2021).
- Nelson R. [et al.], *Mapping Inequality: Redlining in New Deal America*, Feb. 2-14, 2019. Digital Scholarship Lab, University of Richmond, Richmond, Va. Audio. <http://dsl.richmond.edu/mappinginequality.html> (accessed: 14.03.2019).
- Rothstein R., *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How our Government Segregated America*, New York 2018.



Summary

In New Orleans, Louisiana, racial segregation and housing discrimination have had a deleterious impact on African Americans. This American 'Apartheid' system negatively impacted African Americans' ability to secure employment, education, political representation, and public accommodations. However, during the Jim Crow era, nothing was more difficult for African Americans to acquire than affordable and adequate homes in which to live. Educated and gainfully employed African Americans were regularly frustrated by the lack of decent abodes and neighborhoods in which they could reside. However, during the 1950s, political and business leaders in the USA began to build middle class communities, specifically for their African American citizens. *Pontchartrain Park Pioneers: An Oral History of New Orleans' Civil Rights Era Segregated Black 'Suburb in the City'* explores the history of housing discrimination in New Orleans and the struggles to dismantle it. Moreover, this article uses the voices of 10 Pontchartrain Park Pioneers to probe the long and protracted trek towards the building of Pontchartrain Park, New Orleans' first middle class, African American neighbourhood. Furthermore, the authors highlight how this innovative oral history has been integrated into Humanities, History, and Political Science courses at Southern University at New Orleans.