Six Signatures: A Snapshot of Local Black Political Participation During Reconstruction in East Baton Rouge

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Six Signatures:
A Snapshot of Local Black Political Participation During Reconstruction in East Baton Rouge

by

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Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

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Introduction

Few eras in American history can match the Reconstruction era's impact on American life in the South. The end of the Civil War unleashed staggering uncertainty on the nation with the collapse of social and political frameworks constructed around the subjugation of an entire race and resulted in the emancipation of four million Black Americans. With the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment (1868), the Federal government guaranteed equality under the law for all male citizens regardless of race. In doing so, Black men gained the right to vote and hold office, creating the opportunity for a politically mobilized community that outnumbered many of their white counterparts in several places throughout the South.

During the period immediately after the war, 1865-1867, former slaveholders were largely successful in stifling Black political power. Exacerbated by the collapsed southern labor system that struggled to reshape itself into a new system outside the context of slavery, many former slaveholders sought to reestablish a system of white supremacy. As such, Southern states denied voting and restricted elective power to the newly freed Black community, and Black officeholders were nearly nonexistent.

This suppression lasted until the start of Congressional (or Radical) Reconstruction in 1867, when Congress intervened and brought widespread political and social changes by ordering the Southern states to form new governments compliant with laws granting suffrage to Black Americans. Under Congressional Reconstruction, Black participation in government increased dramatically, departing from political and social norms established since this nation’s conception. To that end, Reconstruction was effectively a revolution, the adjustment of American society to the end of slavery through an extreme advancement of civil rights, matched only by the American Civil Rights Movement in the mid-twentieth century. As such, historians
have studied this period for decades, trying to understand the implications Reconstruction has had on race and equality.

Before the Civil Rights movement of the mid-twentieth century, most white historians argued that Reconstruction was ultimately a failure and mistake because Black Southerners were ill-prepared for American political participation. However, since the publication of Eric Foner’s *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution* (1988), a new consensus provides for a more nuanced discussion of Reconstruction and emphasizes the role of Black Americans.

Conceptualizing Black Americans as the central figures of the era has been at the crux of modern scholarship regarding Reconstruction. Scholars point to Reconstruction as the first moment in American history where Black Americans asserted equal participation in society. Additionally, emphasizing the political actions of Black Americans solidifies the argument that Reconstruction was the start of an extended historical movement that disentangled American society from the legacies of slavery.¹

While recognizing that Black participation in politics is critical to understanding Reconstruction, scholarship has focused on Black elected or appointed politicians, especially Black Legislators and officeholders. Scholars have overlooked the local, grassroots political leadership, beyond the legislative hall, critical to organizing and recruiting Black civic participation on the ground, despite recent scholarship emphasizing the importance of Black local politics. In his compendium of Black Reconstruction Leaders, Eric Foner notes that local

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leaders remain obscured because those within the universe of grassroots political leadership exist beyond what historians have chosen to cover in their works.² A significant factor contributing to why we know so little about these political leaders and activists is the nature of the research such information demands. Uncovering the local leaders and organizers requires tremendous on-the-ground research within the local archives of each city, county, or parish.³

Historians of Reconstruction have devoted particular attention to Louisiana, where Black officeholders were elected or appointed at some of the nation’s highest rates.⁴ By the end of the Civil War, Black Americans comprised over half the state's population. Additionally, Louisiana possessed some of the largest communities of free Blacks in the nation. Over half of the delegates sent to the Louisiana constitutional convention of 1868 were Black. Twenty-two senators, one-hundred-five House representatives, and the first Black governor in the nation rose to power in Louisiana over the course of Reconstruction. As such, Louisiana existed as a uniquely active site for Black political participation during Reconstruction.

However, studies professing to explore Black political participation in Louisiana seldom look beyond New Orleans. Even as historians have acknowledged that Black grassroots political participation is fundamental to understanding Reconstruction, few have ventured beyond New

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³ Charles Vincent, *Black Legislators in Louisiana During Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), 71-75; There are arguments made for the importance of grassroots political operatives, but few actual local leaders in Foner, *Reconstruction*; see also, Foner, *Freedom’s Lawmakers*; Nearly all the essays discuss Legislators and Reconstructionists at the higher state level in Neiman, *African American Life in the Post-Emancipation South*.
⁴ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 355-58; see also, Foner, 666-668 for the complete index of his discussions concerning Louisiana; Tunnell, *Crucible of Reconstruction: War, Radicals and Race in Louisiana 1862-1877*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), 2 and 5-7; Foner, *Freedom’s Lawmakers*, xiii-xx; John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction After the Civil War*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 133-134; see also, Franklin, 265-266, for the complete index of his discussions concerning Louisiana.
Orleans in studying Black political activism during the era. Historians have also tended to assert that a Black “Creole elite” of wealthy, lightly complexioned men whose families had been free for several generations dominated Black political participation in New Orleans.

This critique of the current scholarship is not to say that there has not been a concerted effort by historians to find these local leaders. Texts as early as A. E. Perkins’ *Who’s Who in Colored Louisiana* (1930) or Charles Vincent’s *Black Legislators in Louisiana During Reconstruction* (1976) successfully identified several important Black figures from Reconstruction. Nevertheless, these works ultimately struggle to identify any local Black Leaders with the same ease as identifying the Governor or Senator. More recent works such as Eric Foner’s *Freedom’s Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders During Reconstruction* have made significant strides towards finding information about obscure Black leaders during Reconstruction. Even still, local leaders occupy little space here as well. At the center of the struggle to uncover these local leaders is the limited use of actual records that help identify an individual as a leader. Those with higher positions like House representatives are more likely to have paper trails of their activities more readily available. In contrast, local organizers or party functionaries exist with fewer documents connecting them with leadership and political activism.

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^5^ Tunnell, *Crucible of Reconstruction*, 2-7; Neiman, *African American Life in the Post-Emancipation South*, 397-409; see also, Neiman, 359-382; Justin A. Nystrom, *New Orleans after the Civil War: Race, Politics, and a New Birth of Freedom*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010). Cite books on Reconstruction in “Louisiana” that focus on NOLA.


By conducting archival research into Federal and state records, genealogical databases, Louisianan newspaper archives, and Louisiana Clerk of Court records, those whose records indicated a pattern of political participation and grassroots organization distinguished the following Black men as local leaders of Reconstruction. This thesis uses their records to establish each person’s profile and create a chronology of their personal, professional, and public lives. Each profile appears in order by which they signed the 1863 Petition—the first public act of political participation for many of them.

The archival evidence for each of these men primarily comes from government documents and newspaper archives. This project is limited to a variable degree by the lack of primary personal documents such as diaries and letters that would provide first-hand insight into the lives of local Black political leaders. That said, the sources that could be found provided vital information to understand their lives, in large part due to the underlying details extrapolated through thorough examination and cross-comparison between other documents related to the leader in question.

These men were not a homogenous group; however, they did share qualities emphasizing that they were not members of the “creole elite” that has dominated scholarship. They were self-made men. They were skilled laborers, businessmen, and artisans. None came from wealthy families, nor were they extraordinarily wealthy themselves. They were literate, but not all received formal education. None were personally slaveholders, and some were not far removed from slavery themselves—some were free men of color while others were freedmen. Some died tragically before their time. Others lived long lives. They rose with the support of their peers to

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8 The men listed here were either born free, as “free men of color,” or born enslaved, now “freedmen.” Some had family members who did own enslaved people; however, most did not enslave people themselves. The only potential exception to this claim would be Alphonse Arbour, who briefly owned his brother and mother as a means to emancipate them through the legal system.
become grassroots organizers and hold local offices. Some were appointed to positions; others were elected. They were Legislators, Sheriffs, Police Jurors, Party Leaders, War Veterans, and Activists. Some took positions at the forefront of Baton Rouge politics, while others worked behind the scenes. No two were the same, yet they all reflected the rapidly changing face of southern politics by making Louisiana politics responsive to Black Southerners.

This thesis began by examining a petition written by free men of color from East Baton Rouge (EBR). In 1863, Congress passed the Enrollment Act, requiring each state to draft and furnish a proportion of troops to fight in the Civil War. After seizing Baton Rouge in 1863, the Union Army arrested Black residents across the city, forcing them into military service by declaring them “contraband.” However, rather than simply hoping such treatment would not befall them, members of the free community of Baton Rouge resolved to address such injustice head-on. With a remarkable demonstration of organized political activism, these free men of color wrote, signed, and delivered a petition to the Provost Marshall of Baton Rouge arguing:

As loyal men we are ready and willing to comply with and obey the mandate of Congress, but we respectfully submit whether we should not be placed on the same footing with others who are subject to the draft—Let our names and ages be regularly registered, and placed in the wheel, and whoever of us that may be drawn will unhesitatingly shoulder arms.

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9 The Enrollment Act required every male citizen and male who had filed for citizenship aged 20 to 45 to be eligible for military service. The selection process was highly controlled and involved regularly registering and drawing the names of eligible men and then posting the names of draftees so they may report for service.

10 Enslaved individuals who sought refuge with the Union Army were identified as “Contraband,” effectively confiscating enslaved people as property so they would not have to return to their owners. However, in Baton Rouge, the Union Army declared free people of color as Contraband to forcibly conscript them into military service, circumventing the established draft system.
The thirty-six individuals who signed this petition provided the foundation for the following research.\textsuperscript{11}

This thesis, therefore, seeks to fill in the gap by examining some of those overlooked individuals outside New Orleans who led Black political participation at the grassroots level and rescuing them from historical obscurity. Their role in Louisiana's Reconstruction has been forgotten, often left in the shadows of the monuments and memorials erected by former Confederates and Democrats. These men were pioneers whose actions shaped the politics of their communities, yet you will not find public commemoration of the work they did. Understanding who they were sheds new light on Black participation in public affairs, as their striking and unique biographies diversify our understanding of who Black leaders were and could have been.

\textsuperscript{11} Joseph L’Official et al. to Don Albert Pardee, [November 1863], Letters Received, Civil Affairs, Department of the Gulf, Record Group 393, Part 1, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. See Appendix for a scanned copy of the original petition and transcription.
The Forgotten Local Leaders of the Reconstruction Era in Baton Rouge

“It ought to challenge our admiration and stimulate our pride to see men who have come up from obscurity, from humble homes, from lowly birth, and over seemingly insurmountable difficulties to places of genuine responsibility and distinction in community life.”

~ A. E. Perkins ~
Joseph L’Official

Joseph L’Official was born a free man of color in 1831. Born and raised in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, not much is clear about the earlier parts of his life. It is possible that L’Official attended school or received some form of education during his early years, but he did eventually learn to read and write English. L’Official made his way in the world as a carpenter and mechanic and spent most of his later teenage years working in and around EBR.12

Described as industrious, one can imagine a diligent young Joseph L’Official working hard as he navigates life in Antebellum Baton Rouge. He had already begun to make a reputation for himself as a sincere and gentlemanly character, and by 1857, L’Official was married and starting a family. Joseph and Leontine L’Official were married at approximately ages twenty-six and sixteen, respectively. They then continued to live in EBR, within the first ward of the City of Baton Rouge. In the years leading up to the Civil War, L’Official and Leontine had three sons: Joseph (b. 1857), Girard (b. 1858), and Roland (b. 1860). While Leontine kept the house in order and cared for their children, L’Official continued his work as a carpenter. As time passed, L’Official gained a reputation as a peaceable and honest man within his community.13

The outbreak of the Civil War doubtlessly brought many changes to L’Official’s life. One could speculate that the time before Baton Rouge was firmly under Union control was nerve-wracking for the free communities of Louisiana, including for L’Official and his family, as the Confederate army tried to hold back the advancing Union forces. However, the Union’s eventual capture of Louisiana brought tensions of its own to L’Official’s community. During the Union

occupation of Louisiana, it was common for the Union Army to take advantage of both free and enslaved people of color by indiscriminately and forcibly conscripting people of color into military service, regardless of if they counted as confiscated enslaved people. The free community of Baton Rouge believed this was an infringement upon their rights as citizens.

In 1863, motivated by a sense of civic responsibility and the fear of being forcibly conscripted into the war, members of L’Official’s community banded together. They petitioned Lieutenant Col. Pardee, the Provost Marshall of Baton Rouge. The petition outlined their hardships, explained who these men of color were to Baton Rouge, and discussed why they deserved to be drafted the same way as other men. Prominent free men of color signed the petition in November of 1863. Not too long after the birth of L’Official's fourth child, John, the petition was sent to Provost Marshall Pardee. The first name he saw listed was Joseph L’Official.14

Being the first person to sign the petition helps affirm that L’Official was a leader within his community, a person whose name would carry respect with whoever reads it. Between 1865 and 1870, L’Official and Leontine had three more children: Almina (b. 1865), Alice (b. 1868), and Raphael (b. 1870). By the 1870 Census in EBR, the couple had seven children and two relatives living in their household; and with an estate valued at only one hundred dollars, they were by no means wealthy. However, L’Official still resolved to send his children to school, and all of them learned how to read and write.15

By August of 1870, Joseph L’Official made it clear how he planned to lead his community. After getting nominated to attend the Republican Convention, the Republican Party

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14 Joseph L’Official et al. to Don Albert Pardee, [November 1863], Letters Received, Civil Affairs, Department of the Gulf, Record Group 393, Part 1, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.
announced that L’Official would be running for one of the two Louisiana House of Representatives seats. While it is not certain what he did in the months leading up to the election, L’Official likely prepared to run a competitive campaign against his opponents: J. Henri Burch, Joshua Wilson, and N. Wax. However, tragedy struck on Monday, November 7th, 1870. A riot broke out in front of the courthouse on election night, where officials were counting ballots. Tensions escalated, and several people fired into the courthouse, killing one man instantly and injuring several others, including L’Official. Joseph L’Official died two days later, on Wednesday, November 19th, at thirty-nine years old.

The Baton Rouge community remembered L’Official as a man who possessed all the traits of a desirable citizen in the community, struck down in the prime of his life. Those accused of perpetuating the riot were arrested and faced trial, receiving their verdict on December 2nd, 1870. Charged with election disturbance and consequent homicide, all six men accused were discharged for want of “competent testimony.” Two weeks after the verdict, the election results were released, showing that L’Official had received 2438 votes, granting him a posthumous victory by one over Wilson (2437) and five over Burch (2433), and handily over Wax (950).

Though his death was both tragic and sudden, the Republicans maintained a significant majority in the government, and the political composition of electors remained unchanged—J. Henri Burch would join Joshua Wilson as the Louisiana House Representatives for East Baton Rouge. A resolution was passed in L’Official's honor at the first session of the Second General

16 J. Henri Burch and Joshua Wilson were also nominees from the Republican party; N. Wax’s political affiliations are unknown.
Assembly of Louisiana, recognizing him as a member-elect and resolving to respect the memory of their colleague by adjourning until the following Monday. Additionally, after the community issued a petition on behalf of Leontine, the General Assembly agreed to pay the widow of Joseph L'Official the sum of one-thousand one-hundred and seventy-six dollars. Small restitution for a man whose value far exceeded any monetary sum.\(^\text{19}\)

Gustave LeBlanc

Born a free man of color in Louisiana in 1835, Gustave LeBlanc originally made a living as a carpenter in and around EBR. His life before the Civil War is vague; however, LeBlanc learned to read and write at some point in his early life, potentially by apprenticing as a carpenter. He married a Black woman named Amelia, and by the time they were in their early twenties, they had given birth to their first child. Between the birth of their first child (c. 1856) and the start of the Civil War, LeBlanc worked as a carpenter, welcomed the birth of his second child (c. 1859), and lived with his growing family within the first ward of Baton Rouge. After war broke out, LeBlanc heavily disapproved of the Union Army's tendency to forcefully and indiscriminately conscript men of color into service following the Union Army's control of Baton Rouge. He joined the coalition of free men of color petitioning Provost Marshall Pardee, and as the third to sign, one could postulate that Gustave LeBlanc was becoming a crucial character in Baton Rouge.20

On March 8th, 1865, Gustave LeBlanc was drafted into the Union Army. He returned to EBR as a war veteran, and LeBlanc worked as a carpenter in Baton Rouge until July of 1871 when Governor Warmoth appointed LeBlanc to be Police Juror for EBR—the city’s chief legislative and executive body. The following month, LeBlanc was appointed on his credentials to a committee within the Parish Republican Convention to decide who would be entitled to seats at the Republican Convention. Subsequently, LeBlanc was appointed again to a committee designated to apportion the Parish Executive Committee. Their decisions elected LeBlanc to the Parish Executive Committee for the 1st Ward of EBR. Here, LeBlanc and his fellow committee

20 “United States Census, 1870”, database with images, FamilySearch, Gustave Leblanc, 1870; Joseph L’Official et al. to Don Albert Pardee, [November 1863], Letters Received, Civil Affairs, Department of the Gulf, Record Group 393, Part 1, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.
members guided and organized the East Baton Rouge Republicans; LeBlanc would have also represented the interests of fellow Republicans from the first ward of Baton Rouge. The Parish Republican Convention then additionally named LeBlanc to the Sub-Executive Committee, where he would have helped pick parish party leadership.21

By September of 1871, Governor Warmoth appointed LeBlanc the Chief Constable of EBR. LeBlanc served as Chief Constable until November 4th of 1872, when he would successfully run for Sheriff of EBR. During his tenure as Sheriff, LeBlanc served as a Republican Election Commissioner from March 24th, 1873, to September 16th, 1874, ensuring the legitimacy of elections held in EBR. In January of the following year, he was appointed Vice President of a mass town hall meeting and represented the interests of his ward in EBR. In April of 1875, LeBlanc exercised his influence as Sheriff with a petition he spearheaded to the state government to pardon a convicted man.

In many communities, the pinnacle of local political power was the Sheriff, and LeBlanc's successful election to the post is significant for two reasons. First, records indicate that Gustave LeBlanc may have been the first black Sheriff in Baton Rouge, alongside nineteen other black sheriffs elected across Louisiana during reconstructions. Second, LeBlanc’s position as Sheriff emphasizes that Black political power had its most effective at the local level. The presence of Black men in these positions of authority gave the Black community a voice in the civil legal system that was not possible before the war.22

However, by January of 1876, LeBlanc and several other elected officials resigned from their posts. Though it is unclear precisely why LeBlanc resigned, the systematic intimidation of

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22 Foner, Reconstruction, 355-58.
Black officials that came with the end of Reconstruction had already become prevalent throughout the state as former Confederates and Democrats rose to power. LeBlanc took on a quiet life after his resignation, staying out of public affairs far more than in previous years. Sadly, three years after his resignation as Sheriff, Gustave Leblanc died at forty-five years old on February 11th, 1880.23

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Henry Connor

Henry Connor Jr. was born in West Feliciana in 1841 to Henry Connor Sr. and Ann Connor. He lived in West Feliciana for a time before moving to Baton Rouge in 1860. He was the second of five children, apprenticed under his father, and grew up to become a carpenter and member of the community of skilled free workers living in Baton Rouge. Information regarding Connor’s early life is vague. Early records suggest that Connor’s family name was originally "O'Connor" but changed it between 1850 and 1860 to "Connor." Under the context of this potential name change, it is then possible that Henry Connor Sr. was a veteran of the Mexican American War. It would additionally be possible that Henry Connor Sr. owned slaves, listed on the 1850 West Feliciana Slave schedule as owning five enslaved people. Whether these situations applied to Henry Connor Sr. has remarkable implications for the context of what life Connor—and his brothers John and Mitchel, as we will discuss later—would have had growing up. It would not have been out of the ordinary to be the child of a veteran or to be a person of color whose family possessed enslaved persons. Nevertheless, how Henry Connor Jr. came to view the world—especially going into the Civil War—could have been heavily influenced by his father's actions and the environment he grew up within.24

Connor and his three brothers signed a petition that spoke out against the treatment their community had received at the hands of the Union Army that occupied Baton Rouge by 1863. At the time, Connor and his younger brother Mitchell would have been among the youngest men to

sign, being only twenty-two and eighteen, respectively. However, despite his young age, the signing of this petition would mark the beginning of Connor's career as a grassroots organizer and leader within his community.²⁵

Just two years later, in 1865, Henry Connor presided over an election for delegates to send to the Convention of Friends of Universal Suffrage. Simultaneously, he had also opened and operated a cotton gin in downtown Baton Rouge. In doing so, Connor had begun developing a professional and political reputation within the community.²⁶

Connor was amongst other leaders of the Radical Republican Party as an organizer for a meeting of Radical Republicans in Baton Rouge in March of 1868. Connor helped facilitate discussions such as policy preferences and nominations for political office. At one such meeting, we can assume that Connor's name was a topic for discussion because, in April of 1868, Connor had run two campaigns: one for the Louisiana House of Representatives and one for East Baton Rouge Police Juror. Although he lost both elections, his attempt to run signifies that Connor stood out in his community and that the Republican Party viewed him as a leader.²⁷

Around this time, Connor married a young mulatto woman named Mary, and together they had a daughter named Anna, who was born in January of 1870. This document is the final census record available for Henry Connor Jr. and the only record available of his wife and child. We have a relatively brief view of his private life with limited records that provide any insight

²⁵ “United States Census, 1860”, database with images, FamilySearch, Henry Conner, 1860; Joseph L’Official et al. to Don Albert Pardee, [November 1863], Letters Received, Civil Affairs, Department of the Gulf, Record Group 393, Part 1, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.
into Connor's family. However, it stands to reason that Connor and his family continued to live in EBR, considering Connor's continued political activism.  

In March of 1870, two years after his first attempt at political office, Governor Warmoth appointed Connor to be a member of the Board of Control of the State Penitentiary—the governing body for the State prison system. Such appointment became the first government role outside of the Republican Party Connor came to hold and came because of the reputation Connor had built in his professional and political careers. In July of 1871, the Parish Republican Party chose Connor to fill a vacancy left on the Parish Republican Executive Committee made with the premature death of Representative-elect Joseph L'Official. However unfortunate the circumstance of his ascendancy, this new position made Connor a senior member of his party and further increased his political station in Baton Rouge.

The following month, Connor was appointed to a committee of three at the Parish Republican Convention and joined Gustave LeBlanc in selecting the delegates sent to the Republican Convention, among whom was Connor himself. Later, the party members chose a new Parish Republican Executive Committee and subsequently elected Connor unanimously to the Office of Secretary.

Henry Connor did not reappear in the public record until March of 1880, when newspapers listed him as the Senior Warden for Stone Square Lodge No. 8 in West Baton Rouge. One of the oldest Prince Hall Lodges in Louisiana, Stone Square Lodge No. 8, was chartered by the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Louisiana in 1879 to practice a branch of

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29 New Orleans Republican, March 13, 1870, 4; "Parish Executive Committee," New Orleans Republican, July 28, 1871, 1.
30 “Republican Convention,” The Weekly Louisianaian, August 27, 1871, 2.
freemasonry known as Black Masonry. By this point in time, Reconstruction in Louisiana and the political power of the Republican Party had waned. An organization like Prince Hall Lodge likely offered a sense of community that many found solace within. To that end, Connor’s position within this organization indicates that his peers respected him, further defining him as a community leader.31

**Alphonse Arbour**

Alphonse Arbour was born into slavery on a Louisiana plantation sometime around the 1820s. He was mixed race, with a very light complexion, and was frequently mistaken for a white man. As with many children born into slavery, Arbour's father was his owner, Frederick Arbour Sr., and his mother was an enslaved woman named Mary Frederick. On his father's plantation, Arbour grew up alongside his mother and brother, an enslaved boy named Alberic. Arbour eventually found his freedom through some means and set out as a free man. While it is unclear how he attained his freedom, it is possible that Frederick Arbour Sr. chose to emancipate Arbour.³²

Arbour likely found work in and around Baton Rouge during the initial years of his emancipation until he eventually ventured into the cigar-making industry. By 1847, he had earned enough money to purchase his brother, Alberic, for five hundred dollars in cash from their father. Having attained ownership of his brother, Arbour began the tenuous process of emancipating a loved one via the legal system. Alberic joined his brother as a free man just over a year later.³³

After petitioning for his brother's freedom, Arbour started his own family. Around 1850, he married a Black woman from West Feliciana named Eliza Hendricks. Whether or not Eliza was formerly enslaved like her husband is unknown, but records indicate she and Arbour were close in age. Together, Arbour and Eliza had two daughters named Fanny and Mary. By 1855,

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³² *1860 Free Inhabitants Census*, Alphonse Arbour, City of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, (Family History Library Film: 803408) pg. 472; “Arbour & Arbour Senior” *Conveyance Record Book A-1*, East Baton Rouge Parish, Louisiana, pg. 34.

Arbour had become an established businessperson with a successful cigar shop operating in the heart of Baton Rouge on the corner of Third and North Boulevard. On September 25th, 1855, Arbour expanded his business by opening a stand that sold hot coffee, tea, and chocolate outside his cigar shop.  

Arbour’s expanded business was doing well enough that he purchased his mother and began her emancipation by the following year. How Arbour came to purchase his mother or whether he could free her is unclear, but because Arbour made freeing his brother and mother a priority, we know that Arbour was a driven man who could emancipate his loved ones, start a family, and become an established business owner, all within fifteen years of attaining his freedom.

Shortly after Arbour became the sixth person to sign the Baton Rouge petition, the Union Army drafted Arbour into the Second Louisiana Volunteers regiment. Arbour was then enrolled in the military and served in the Union Army for the remainder of the Civil War. Little is known about Alphonse Arbour after he returned from the war. Sometime during the war, Arbour's wife, Eliza, passed away. By 1867, Arbour married his second wife, a Black woman named Alice, who was only a few years older than Arbour's eldest daughter. Together, Arbour and Alice signed a lease for a property near the Comite River. They maintained this property for the next three years before moving their family further south to Donaldsonville.

35 “Seeking March 7, 1856; 1860 Free Inhabitants Census, Alphonse Arbour; “Arbour & Arbour Senior”
Veterans and businessmen were often seen as pillars of the community, and they, along with formerly enslaved men, frequently became sources of guidance and leadership as the United States emerged from the Civil War. Arbour’s position as all three lifts him above many others in Baton Rouge society makes his role as a local leader evident. Moreover, Arbour stands uniquely among others discussed on this list because he did not hold any official position within the government or politics, appointed or elected, nor was his livelihood reliant on government connections. Rather, his leadership is better understood as a community leader in the truest sense—as a man who people knew through his business, respected for emancipating his family members, and esteemed for having fought in the Civil War. He would have been trusted by political operatives and members of the electorate alike and debated community issues with as much ease as the quality of the cigars he sold.
Albert Collins

Born in Florida c. 1826, Albert Collins was a free man of color and brick-mason. Federal records identified Collins as “mulatto” and this lighter complexion, also considering the names of his children and his Floridian birth, suggests that Collins potentially had Spanish heritage. Between 1826 and 1845, Collins likely acquired some form of education either in school or as an apprentice. He moved from Florida to Baton Rouge and embarked on building a life for himself.37

In the years following 1845, Collins married Mary A. Collins, and together they raised their family within EBR. Mary Ann Collins, born c. 1828, came from a French father and a Louisianian mother. For a time, they lived in modern-day downtown EBR on Grandpe Street. Records indicate that Collins and Mary had eight children, but only six would survive past infancy: their son Bartholomew (b. 1845); their son Hihugilis “Jules” (b. 1848); their daughter Euzabin (b. 1850); their daughter “Rosa” Albertina (b. 1857); their daughter Adelia (b. 1859); and their daughter Dulcina (b. 1862). Around 1880, the family also employed a young servant named William Johnson (b. 1869) from Louisiana, who could neither read nor write. His origins and life outside of the Collins' household are unknown. However, his age, illiteracy, and having been identified by federal records as “Black,” William was likely the child of formerly enslaved people who found himself on his own and, at some point, sought refuge with the Collins family. William's employment ended before the turn of the century.38

Tragedy struck the family in 1866 with a kitchen fire within the Collins' home that caught Euzabin and left her severely injured. Mary was significantly injured as well when she attempted to help her daughter, and although Mary did recover, whether Euzabin survived is unclear. After this incident, Collins's eldest daughter disappeared from the records; however, the 1900 census shows that only five of Mary's children were still living, suggesting that Euzabin did pass away. The rest of Collins and Mary's children’s lives are vague, comparatively. Collins's children attended school and gained some form of education. All knew how to read and write.

Bartholomew and Jules would follow their father's path and become apprentices under Collins and later brick masons. By 1880, Bartholomew had set out on his own, and Jules would follow suit before 1900. By the turn of the century, Dulcina had married and started her own family, leaving Rosa as the last child still residing with Collins and Mary.³⁹

As a craftsman and bricklayer, Collins received contracts to complete numerous significant projects. By December of 1860, Collins had completed a contract to enlarge the First Methodist Church of Baton Rouge, located at the time on the corner of Laurel and Church Street. That project gave Collins an “imperishable laurel to his crown” as a successful craftsman. His skills were called upon again in 1882 to do brickwork repairs on the historic Harney House in downtown, originally built in 1840 to accommodate Louisiana legislators. Six years later, Collins

took a repair contract on the Verandah Hotel—one of the largest hotels in the city. Shockingly, an archway collapsed on him during construction, knocking Collins unconscious. Fortunately, the injuries he sustained did not last long. Within two years of the accident, Collins took a contract from the City of Baton Rouge to complete work on cisterns. By 1896, Collins retired from brickwork at the age of sixty-eight. Records indicate that Collins spent his retirement with Mary and Rosa, moving into the turn of the century, running a small boarding house in Baton Rouge.40

Collins actively participated in the public affairs of Baton Rouge. His first recorded political act came in 1863 when he signed the petition for fair treatment in the draft. Records are unclear whether Collins's political engagement began before the Civil War; however, Collins’ high-profile contracts necessitated regular interaction with the government. Though Collins never held public office, he would still find himself politically involved in other ways.41

In 1879, not long after the end of Reconstruction in Louisiana, Collins was appointed by the Democratic Party to a committee tasked to wait upon gubernatorial candidates Louis A. Wiltz and General Fred Ogden, both former Confederate officers. Collins's role included escorting these men on stage, an outward expression of support for their candidacy. Though it is difficult to gauge the number of Black Democrats that existed during this period, it is crucial to understand why men of color like Collins would choose to support the Democratic party. To be sure, most Black votes for Democrats resulted from intimidation and coercion. Nevertheless, for

many others, voting Democrat came down to economics. For Collins, choosing to support the Democratic party—particularly as power shifted away from the Republicans—could have been an attempt to guarantee his financial situation. Collins was by no means a member of the elite but continuing to receive government contracts would have helped sustain him fiscally; Collins owned his home mortgage-free by the time he retired.42

Albert Collins’s life demonstrates two key points. First, his story shows that political participation can occur outside of holding an office. In Collins’s case, he participated in politics when he supported the politicians whose favor would benefit his business. More significantly, Collins participated in public affairs when he advocated on behalf of his community by petitioning for better treatment from the Union Army. These actions lead to the second key point that Collins was one of the few individuals in the free community of Baton Rouge whose influence extended beyond the Black community. He established a professional reputation that conveyed excellence; he made a name for himself that carried respect. Though he remained nearly lost to historical oblivion, the importance of Albert Collins’s life in Baton Rouge resonates in the buildings he worked on that still stand over a century later.

Antoine Lange

A native of Louisiana born around 1837, Antoine Lange was raised in a free household and was the eldest of six children. Lange spent all his adolescence and adult life in Baton Rouge. He attended school, ran a business, and eventually found himself within the higher echelons of free Baton Rouge society. Lange garnered respect from his community that would lead to positions of authority within Louisiana politics during Reconstruction. Though the rise of Democratic power in the state would end his rising political station and nearly erase him from history, there is little doubt that Antoine Lange was a leader and influential figure in Baton Rouge.43

The necessity for Antoine Lange to lead came early in life. Lange's father—a carpenter, named Charles Lange—died between 1850 and 1860. His death left Lange and his mother, Felicity Lange, responsible for the rest of his siblings: Leon (b. 1840); Robert (b. 1842); Vigil "Charles" (b. 1845); Joseph (b. 1846); and Mary (b. 1848). Additionally, The 1860 slave schedule lists Felicity as the owner of an unnamed twenty-year-old enslaved woman. The duration of the enslaved woman's ownership, if there was a specific purpose to her ownership, and what eventually happened to her is unknown.44

The decade between 1860 and 1870 details significant achievements for Lange. Though records do not indicate if he fought in the Civil War, Lange participated in his first recorded

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political activity in 1863 at twenty-six as one of the youngest signers of the petition to Pardee—but the next ten years would bring much more participation in public affairs.\textsuperscript{45}

In August 1865, he became the owner of a grocery and commission firm, "Chas. Becker & Co.," located on 3rd and Main in downtown Baton Rouge. Around this time, Lange married a mulatto woman named Wilhelmina. As his wife kept the house, Antione ran the Chas. Becker & Co., where he employed Vigil and a fifteen-year-old white boy from Iowa named Edward Reagan as a clerk in the grocery. While under his employ, Edward lived with Lange and Wilhelmina and attended school.\textsuperscript{46}

By 1868, the EBR Second Ward Club of Radical Republicans elected Lange as President. In a February meeting the same year, Lange and several other party leaders confirmed a list of candidates for an upcoming election. Lange ran for Recorder later that year; however, the Democrats garnered more votes for their candidates, and all Republican candidates—including Lange—lost in EBR. In August 1868, Lange served as secretary for an EBR Republican Party meeting with Governor Warmoth, and Lange waited upon Warmoth after his arrival. The following month, Governor Warmoth appointed Lange to serve on the Board of Control of the State Penitentiary at Baton Rouge—the governing body for said institution. This appointment, among others, that Governor Warmoth made was not well received by the former slave-owners and democrats, such as one newspaper in Port Allen who referred to the new Board of Control as

\textsuperscript{45} Joseph L’Official et al. to Don Albert Pardee, [November 1863], Letters Received, Civil Affairs, Department of the Gulf, Record Group 393, Part 1, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

\textsuperscript{46} The Tri-Weekly Advocate, August 21, 1865, 2; "United States Census, 1870", database with images, FamilySearch (https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:M8Q1-5X3), Antoine Lange, 1870.
the “Motley Crew” of the “so-called governor.” However, despite any resistance to his rising political station, Lange continued unabated.47

By 1870, Lange had risen to Inspector of the Penitentiary. Not long after he stepped into the role, a bill was introduced in the Louisiana House of Representatives to pay Lange one-thousand five-hundred dollars for his services as inspector. The bill passed after brief contestation, possibly because the bill's proposer was related to Lange. Four months later, on July 23rd, Lange was accused by The Baton Rouge Courier of being complicit in a plot to divide the Republican Party. Lange published a response two days later, defending his reputation. He demanded the editor newspaper that published the accusation provide proof or "sink as you will do under the execration of an honest and intelligent public, where I shall leave you to perish in the rottenness that produced you."48 Almost as evidence that such allegations were false, Governor Warmoth appointed Lange in April of the following year to serve as a Police Juror of EBR—a legislative and executive position of authority within the parish.49

Two months later, Lange temporarily served as Vice-President of the Parish Republican Executive Committee. Interestingly—though perplexing—Lange was documented as "Esq" at this meeting, an honorary title that denotes someone as a practicing lawyer. Though there is no record that Lange ever earned a legal education, we could speculate that his career in government gave him enough of an education to justify such a title. However, no other records provide Lange with this title and thus provide no further context to its meaning. That following August, Lange

48 "To the Editor of the Baton Rouge Courier," The Tri-Weekly Advocate, July 25, 1870, 2.
49 The Tri-Weekly Advocate, February 9, 1870, 2. A “Mr. Lange” introduced the bill to pay Antoine and noted as a relative of his, but who exactly this was and what relation they had to Antoine is unclear; “Appointments by the Governor of Louisiana,” The Times-Picayune, April 30, 1871, 3.
was granted a seat at the Republican Convention and recommended to serve on the Executive Committee for the Parish Republican Committee. All of this occurred while Lange continued to run the Chas. Becker & Co.\textsuperscript{50}

Lange's extensive career developed further in May of 1872 when he was selected to serve as a delegate for EBR to the Educational Convention, a body dedicated to promoting the educational interests of Louisiana. Later that year, Lange was nominated by his peers twice more in August. First, by Governor Warmoth to be a member of the Board of Trustees for the Baton Rouge Institution for the Blind. Second, by the Liberal Republican Party to run for a seat as Police Juror of EBR. With his tenure as Police Juror ending, Lange would need to run for his seat to maintain his position. As his current term was an appointment, this campaign would be his second attempt to win an election to take public office.\textsuperscript{51}

Tragically, Antoine Lange was shot and killed by a man named George Provest not long after the Liberal Republican Party announced their nominations. What led to his killing is unknown, but Lange's murder in proximity to announcing his candidacy for Police Juror suggests his death was politically motivated. No record of any trial held against George Provest or information about who Provest was exists either. Antoine Lange's community remembered him as a mild-mannered gentleman whose many friends mourned his sudden death. He was thirty-seven years old.\textsuperscript{52}

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Even by the standards of other men listed here, Antoine Lange's life and career are astonishing, especially considering his unfortunately short life. Lange's rise in Free society helped him gain his own business and eventually aided his ascendancy into public life. From 1870 to 1872 alone, Lange held seven distinct positions of political authority in Baton Rouge, either within the government itself or as a member of the Republican Party. He was repeatedly called upon to represent his community and serve his city. Antoine Lange was a vital part of Louisiana politics both with his involvement in the Republican Party and as a continual representative of his Ward in Baton Rouge.
Conclusion

Joseph L’Official, Gustave LeBlanc, Henry Connor, Alphonse Arbour, Albert Collins, and Antoine Lange were all free men of color from Baton Rouge. Together, they were pioneers who helped shape the politics of their community and led their peers through the adjustment of American society to the end of slavery. Individually, they were unique men whose lives diversify our understanding of who Black leaders were in Louisiana by demonstrating that they were not part of a homogenous group or elite members of society. They came from all walks of life, from former slaves to businessmen, triumphing over seemingly insurmountable obstacles to find themselves in genuine responsibility and distinction in their community.

The lives of these men ultimately prove the importance of local political activism during the Reconstruction era because their actions changed the face of Louisiana politics by making it responsive to Black Southerners. For the first time, Black men participated actively in government, mobilized their neighbors to vote for their nominees for office, and engaged with political actors at higher levels to have their community’s voice heard. Their grassroots activism got people elected to local offices that dominated their political landscapes. Local officials like LeBlanc and L’Official won their elections because of the political maneuvering from people like Lange and Connor. They worked with people like Arbour and Collins, who were well respected in the community and convinced their peers how to vote.

However, these are just six of an unknown number of Black leaders and grassroots organizers that remain shrouded in historical obscurity. The profiles found here help establish a preliminary understanding of local Black leadership and grassroots organizing for Baton Rouge but can by no means speak for the entire state of Louisiana. To fully grasp the scope and diversity of Black Americans' participation in Louisiana—and the South—similar endeavors
should be made within other local communities to uncover as much of their history that remains shrouded in obscurity. We shed new light on Black participation in public affairs, challenging any myths that may persist and further establishing a more nuanced understanding of Black leaders that bolsters the argument that American Reconstruction was the start of an extended historical movement.
Appendix

Transcription of Baton Rouge Free Men of Color to Pardee

To lieutenant Col. Pardee Provost Marshall of the City of Baton Rouge

The memorial of the undersigned free men of color residing in the City of Baton Rouge beg leave most respectfully to call your attention to a hardship to which we are subjugated and at the same time to ask you to apply the remedy.

The evil we complain of is that we are heisted up in the streets, in the market house, and other places whilst engaged in our daily associations and marched off to the penitentiary, where we are placed with Contraband and forced into the service. Now we claim to be freeman— we were born free, have lived free, and wish to be treated as freemen.

We are aware that the Congress of the United States has passed an act requiring each state to furnish a certain proportion of troops to be regularly drafted, the ages of said troops being specified in the act— As loyal men we are ready and willing to comply with and obey the mandate of Congress; but we respectfully submit whether we should not be placed on the same footing with others who are subject to the draft—Let our names and ages be regularly registered, and placed in the wheel, and whoever of us that may be drawn will unhesitatingly shoulder arms, or furnish a substitute or pay the sum required by the act of the Congress. In conclusion we beg leave to state that as a class we have always been law-abiding and have never been backward in contributing our share towards the support of the Government under which we have lived, State, or National. We are still prepared to do so and do assure those representing the government to whom we owe fealty that we shall always be ready to respond whenever called upon, but at the same time claim the same privileges extended to other freemen, so far as the draft is concerned.

Respectfully Submitted
J Lofficial
W. Magruder
Gustave LeBlanc
Henry Conner
John W. Connor
Alphonse Arbour
Adolphe Leblanc
M. Connor
A. Collins
J. A. Barron
James Taloon
L. Whinggold
L. Dummouil
Nina Charmels
Antoine Lange
Joseph Leon Leblanc
A Dubois
Charles Victor

Robert Hangs
John Perkins
[illegible]
Joseph [illegible]
James John
Eloi Guidry
Felix Guidry
Michel Gusman
Joseph Leclere
Paul Gessy
Jacob [illegible]
M. Lange
George Bird
A. Prunell
Ewond Prunell
L. Francois
A. Lafitar
Selected Bibliography

Listed here is the collection of primary and secondary sources used to conduct the research crucial to completing this thesis. While not all the listed sources in section one yielded records worthwhile for constructing the profiles, consulting these sources was nonetheless critical to finding as many relevant documents as possible in a no-stone-left-unturned approach. Additionally, this bibliography intends to highlight the substance and range of research conducted in hopes that it can guide those who may also wish to explore the opaque universe of grassroots political leaders. Section two, alternatively, contains the list of Historians and Social Scientists whose published works helped inform my understanding of the Reconstruction Era.

1. The Archives, Databases, and other Primary Sources Consulted


*Conveyance Books (1846-Present).* Baton Rouge, LA: East Baton Rouge Clerk of Court.


*The Daily Delta, (1846-1863).* New Orleans, LA: America’s Historical Newspapers.


L’Officiel, Joseph, W. Magruder, Gustave LeBlanc, Henry Connor, Alphonse Arbour, Adolphe LeBlanc, Mitchell Connor, et al. to Don Albert Pardee, [November 1863], Letters Received, Civil Affairs, Department of the Gulf, Record Group 393, Part 1, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.


2. The Published Histories of American Reconstruction Consulted


