from the Teche News ran the first Black History Month article in 1986, there was little local history to highlight. Louisiana, unfortunately, did little in the past to preserve records and archives of Black and Acadian histories.

Today's local historians, fortunately, are diligently building an archive that can be celebrated in St. Martin Parish as it is in other areas of the state. Melba Braud, Marie Pierre and Helnetta Lala are three who dedicated themselves to researching and recording available information. With their help and recollections of descendants, St. Martin Parish residents, particularly in the St. Martinville area, can look upon their own past with more knowledge of their history.

Black History Month officially began in February 1976, but the idea was born in 1926 when Carter G. Woodson, a black historian, organized Negro History Week through the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History, which he founded in 1915. The celebration was initially designed to commemorate the birthdays of Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass. In the 1970s it first celebrated as Black History Week in the early 1970s and expanded shortly after.

St. Martin Parish Black History dates back to the 1700s when Louisiana was under French rule. According to Melba Braud in "A Brief History of Black in St. Martin Parish," the result of avid research she began some 25 years ago, "Black history is really a misnomer. At least in this area, and should be referred to as Black and Creole in mixture history." Braud says.

"There was such a mixing of cultures, from French, to Spanish, and even Chinese. I know my great-grandfather who had to get on the boat back to Asia for information. There is still a lot to be discovered and I hope the research will continue. I don't think we Americans should dwell on the past in a way that separates us, but it is good to know the positive things that happened, the perseverance and accomplishments. Too few of the middle and younger generations realize the good and positive aspects of their history," Braud writes.

Braud's research book continues to explain that French slave owners of earlier days had brought in the black slaves from West Africa and Haiti, or bought them in Georgia and the Carolinas as the result of records. Andre Marie Denez Grenoble, France, brought 20 black slaves here with him to tend his rich. As farming on large plantations became the main industry of the area, the numbers continued to grow over the years.

The settlers first thought that white servants from France and other Indian or French Indian could supply their needs, but were disappointed and turned to the physically strong slave labor and found that "their strong build and dark skin were ideal for working the hot and humid land in this ruggedly wild region of Louisiana," Braud writes.

A few slaves worked for merchants and artisans or as house servants. They were all clothed and fed by the master of the house for work done. They were well suited to work the hot and humid land in this ruggedly wild region of Louisiana. Some of these servants were freedmen and freedwomen who could work for themselves. They were mostly skilled laborers.

The area also drew immigrants of color who came as free, educated people to build up farming and other enterprises. They were never enslaved people. Many of the first freedmen and freedwomen who arrived here as uniformed soldiers from France during the War of 1812 and who Tintin was one of the founders married into the prosperous Pratt family and together became big property owners. Their descendants were also accomplished as dentists, merchants, statesmen, lawyers, doctors and attorneys.

Victor Rochein was born into that family, the son of Nicholas Rochein Basile Castille, at Doyes Church on March 23, 1843. He studied law at Straight University in New Orleans and became a successful St. Martinville attorney. He established a law office in St. Martinville in 1869. Many field hands migrated to town to work for businesses as helpers and domestics. Settling in small communities and centers, many freedmen and freedwomen became skilled tradesmen, shopkeepers, teachers, educators, doctors, lawyers and doctors.

Lester Journet, whose father was one of the community's first Black blacksmiths, became a prominent St. Martinville businessman and civic leader, owning the first Black furniture store and ran the first Black History Month program in the area. He was noted as a successful businessman.

In "Creoles of Color" by Carl Brasseaux, it is noted that, for the first time, free colored people were allowed to vote in the 1870s. Those who remained worked for small wages and lived on plantations as well as farms. Their life in this era was drastically for all men of color in the New World, providing an opportunity for people of color to have a place in society. Many of the mid-1700s Creoles of Color were skilled laborers, mechanics, carpenters, boatmen, and became skilled tradesmen, shopkeepers, teachers, educators, doctors, lawyers and doctors.

The publication pointed out that "the old free-colored population, of whom Mr. Detiege is a type, have been rather independent and free, and have never been enslaved people. Many of the first freedmen and freedwomen who arrived here as uniformed soldiers from France during the War of 1812 and who Tintin was one of the founders married into the prosperous Pratt family and together became big property owners. Their descendants were also accomplished as dentists, merchants, statesmen, lawyers, doctors and attorneys.

The 400 Club was formed to provide a support system for the disfranchised mulattoes. They held meetings, socials and gave dances in the True Friends Hall.

Those who stayed maintained a low profile for many years and gathered their families together, setting up enclaves as a man of character, honesty and integrity on the Catholic Church. He was known as a successful businessman and a civic leader, owning the first Black furniture store and ran the first Black History Month program in the area.

In 1892, St. Martinville native was a butcher, merchant and planter, and served as a member of the 1892 Democratic State Convention, representing St. Martin, St. Mary, and East and West Baton Rouge parishes. He served on the Committees for Auditing and Supervising the Expenses of the Senate, Banking and Banking, Finance. He was also president of the St. Mary State Bank in St. Martinville.

Hypolite Charles, a world-renowned cornetist, and his followers often provided entertainment as the leading musicians of their time. Charles, born in 1891 in Parks to August Charles, a school teacher, gained fame as one of the best of Louisiana's pioneer jazz musicians. Charles was enjoying a successful career when he became ill and had to give up the music. He then sold his car and returned to Parks to take over his father's grocery store. In his final days he was encouraged by his father to be a musician. He was raised in St. Martinville, was an officer in the Union Army during the Civil War and was a prominent St. Martinville businessman and civic leader, owning the first Black furniture store and ran the first Black History Month program in the area.

by Charlene Harrison mj

MARTHA PIERRE is one of several parish residents working to compile a more complete Black History of St. Martin Parish. She often participates in Black cultural events, such as the Zucoo Festival (above) in Plaisance. She is available to speak about Black History Month.

LESTER JOURNET, whose father was one of the community's first Black blacksmiths, became a prominent St. Martinville businessman and civic leader, owning the first Black furniture store and ran the first Black History Month program in the area.
concert band. Young Potier easily found work around Acadia but left during World War II to play in the 352nd Regiment Band for the Army, providing the opportunity to perform all over the world and with such greats as Duke Ellington’s orchestra. Potier was inducted into the Louisiana Black History hall of Fame in Baton Rouge in 1991 for his role in creating and preserving music made in Acadia.

Education became even more important and available after the birth and accomplishments of Adam Carlson on March 1, 1876, in St. Martinville. Carlson, the son of Jacob Carlson and Louise Williams and the eldest of five children, received his first training through private tutoring and later enrolled in Gilbert’s Academy in Baldwin. His formal education ended when his father died in 1892 so that he could help his family, but he continued to study and read at home. During these times, he was a barber, a grocer, and later, an insurance agent.

Carlson rose from agent to state superintendent of one of the largest Black insurance companies in Louisiana. He married Winnie James in 1896 and had five children before she died in 1918. Although marrying Regina Thibodeaux in 1920 helped in caring for his children, he was concerned about their education, especially as they approached high school age with no high school available in the area. They had to commute to New Iberia, the first known effort of this kind for a higher education status in the parish.

Carlson became active in local efforts by serving on committees that asked for nine months of school instead of five for the Black children, asking for more teachers so that school could be conducted all day, finding a building to house teachers and classes until a new school was built, and establishing a high school for blacks. His persistence continued until his death in 1940, and he was honored for those efforts when the first Black public high school in St. Martinville was built. Carlson also started the first Masonic Group in St. Martinville.

Dorothy Selby of Cade found in the 1905 parish school board minutes that the parish had "five good colored schools." St. Martinville Colored School was staffed by Althea Rochon and Mae Vavasseur. Cade Colored School’s teacher was Antonia Daniels, Parks Colored School’s teachers were P.O. Potier and O.H. Butler, and the Fifth Ward Colored School was taught by A.R. Butler.

Lester Journet, born in 1883, was the son of Gustave Journet, one of the first Black blacksmiths in St. Martinville. Lester became a prominent St. Martinville business man and civic leader, owning the first Black furniture store and Black funeral parlor in town. The Journet family was influential in their church, Notre Dame Catholic Church, and Lester donated the original north and south altars, which were built by his brother, Eunis, according to Martha Pierre. His contributions to Black culture and education were honored when a branch of the St. Martin Parish Library was named after him in 1955.

It remained open until 1978. Early prosperous Black farmers in the parish included Robert Orphe III and his wife, Isadore, and Marshall Thomas. Orphe’s business grew in the late 1800s and continued with his sons. In 1948, Robert IV was considered the largest farmer among Blacks in Louisiana by the state. Thomas was a successful sugar cane and rice farmer with a big operating mill until the Great Depression in the 1920s. His daughter, Euricie Roberts, became an active midwife during the early 1900s and was a respected figure in the community and church. Her efforts earned her the Bishop’s Medal.

Research on Black history in other areas of the parish is underway, but it is known that a Dr. Butler, a Black physician in 1905, provided the land to rebuild what was the first public school for Blacks. A.J.O. Martinet was the first teacher, followed by Mesdames McKay, Mildred Broussard, Olympia Garrett and Lorena Silas.