

First Advocates: The Daughters of Charity and the Louisiana Leper Home

Editor's note: My interest in the story of Carville began with my desire to learn my grandfather's (Edmond Landry, patient 1924-1932) story. When I did that, my mother made only one request, "I hope that whatever you do, you won't forget the Daughters of Charity. This is an attempt to honor that request with an article by Reagan Laiche whose historical studies have focused on the work of the Daughters of Charity at Carville.)

The Louisiana Leper Home, the National Leprosarium or simply Carville. In 1894, this isolated place, surrounded by the Mississippi River seventy miles northwest of New Orleans, became home to those diagnosed with leprosy and outcast from society.

While much has been written about the stigma, isolation, the patients' reform movement and the eventual 'miracle' of the 1940's drug therapy success, less attention has been paid to patient advocacy by the Daughters of Charity. . Arriving in 1896 to the Louisiana Leper Home, the Sisters, through letters written to their Sister Superior, the Louisiana Board of Control and the Archbishop of New Orleans, expressed feelings of joy, sadness, isolation and frustration. Were it not for their steadfast dedication, the patients' reform movement and the 'miracle' may not have happened.

As their tenure turned from years to decades, the Daughters of Charity advanced the physical condition of the Home from run-down slave cabins to full-fledged research hospital.

Letters detailing the routine and often mundane daily chores help to establish how integral the Sisters were as patient advocates. They advocated not just for basic needs but for the medical treatment only a research hospital could provide.



Father Colton and the First Sisters. Sister Beatrice Hart, Chief Nurse and Sister Servant, Sr. Cyril Coupe (nurse), Sr. Annie Costello (nurse) and Sr. Mary Thomas Stokum (nurse).

–Ordinary conditions that are taken for granted were not so when the Sisters arrived. For instance, the Sisters saw to it that the patients had a suitable place for dining thus giving to them the dignity of human beings in a community. Sr. Beatrice wrote to her Sister Superior in Emmitsburg: “They looked comfortable compared with the dirty tables in the cabins.” The Sisters also brought a sense of dignity in death. As Sr. Beatrice wrote “... they were thrown like dogs into the grave the same day they died. I have insisted on a Christian burial...” For decades, the Sisters provided a voice for the patients to the outside world. They created space for the patients to plant gardens, direct in-house plays as well as eventually to find their own voices through the patient newsletter developed in the 1930’s.

Understanding the story of leprosy includes understanding the work done by the Daughters of Charity during their mission. The mission officially ended in 2005 but the dedicated service of the Daughters of Charity to sufferers of leprosy provides a different narrative which extends beyond the years of the Home. It built the foundation from which the patients’ rights movement was able to flourish.ⁱ

ⁱ For more information regarding the advocacy of the Daughters of Charity at the Louisiana Leper Home, please see the author’s master’s thesis. Laiche, Reagan, "Labor in a Hopeless Land: The Daughters of Charity and Hansen's disease Patients at the Louisiana Leper Home, 1896-1926" (2014). *University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations*. Paper 1928.
<http://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/1928>

The author grew up along the Great River Road in St. James Parish, where knowledge of Carville inspired curiosity about those who lived and worked there. The author received a Master of Arts degree in History from the University of New Orleans in 2014. Thanks to Elizabeth Schexnyder, Curator of the National Hansen’s Disease Programs Museum, for her enthusiasm and willingness to listen as I grappled with finding the Sisters’ voices to share. Without her continued support, this article and thesis would not have been possible.