

Florence E Borders: Archivist, Librarian, and Scholar (1924-2018)

Florence Edwards Gray Borders was born February 24, 1924, to Sylvanus and Julia Gray in New Iberia, Louisiana, a Reconstruction-era parish that included a significant population of formerly enslaved Africans. She was one of five children born to that union. New Iberia saw a significant rise in Ku Klux Klan lynching and racial terror at the end of the Civil War and in the early 1900s. Many African Americans moved to more friendly environments including the Gray family, who moved to New Orleans eighteen months after her birth.¹

Borders flourished during her time in New Orleans, where she graduated from McDonogh #35 High School and went on to earn a BA in English with honors from her father's alma mater, Southern University in Baton Rouge. She earned additional bachelor and master degrees in Library Science from Rosary College in River Forest, Illinois. She also received a post-graduate fellowship to Louisiana State University's Graduate School of Library & Information Sciences (LSU SLIS) for additional credit, training, and expertise. Always looking to upgrade and extend her knowledge, Borders further studied at the Library and Archives Institute at the Ohio Historical Society; Atlanta University's School of Library Science; Case-Western Reserve University's School of Library Science; the Ford Foundation Institute at Hofstra University; the National Archives; the Library of Congress In-Service Institute in Philadelphia; and the Society of Southwest Archivists Institute in Dallas.

¹ [Michael James Pfeifer, *Rough Justice: Lynching and American Society, 1874-1947*, University of Illinois Press, 2004; pp.79-80.](#)

Borders began her career in 1946 at the University of Chicago as a library assistant, the first African American in such a position. She worked there for only one year, moving on to become the assistant librarian in charge of cataloging at Bethune-Cookman College in Daytona Beach, Florida, from 1947-1958. There, she met her husband James Buchanan Borders III, a musician and educator. They had three children: two sons, James B. Borders, IV, and Sylvanus Edwards Borders, and a daughter, Thais Borders. She moved on to Tennessee State University as a catalog librarian from 1959-1968, then worked as a Technical Services Librarian at Grambling State University in Louisiana from 1969-1970. She returned to her home city of New Orleans in 1970 to become the reference archivist for the Amistad Research Center in its new home at Dillard University, where it had recently moved from Fisk University in Tennessee. At Amistad, she found her calling, and the Center is still replete with the legacy of her tenure.

The Amistad Research Center moved three separate times during her tenure, from Dillard University to the US Mint Building and finally to Tulane University. Borders was a well-known and respected scholar who actively engaged in promoting New Orleans, Creole, African American, and South Louisiana culture. She worked at the Amistad Research Center until her retirement in 1989. In the *Amistad Report* (the Center's newsletter), the front page feature on her retirement notes that Borders joined Amistad when it first moved to New Orleans in 1970. Hired as the reference archivist "serving researchers and directing library work, she introduced many of the procedures ...at Amistad for accessioning, arranging, and describing manuscript collections."

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² "Florence E. Borders: 19 Years of Service." *Amistad Reports*, New Orleans, LA: The Amistad Research Center at Tulane University, Vol. II, No. 3, (March 1989): 1-2.

While at Amistad, Borders was a constant advocate for the archival collections, but her greatest legacy was championing the papers of women housed in the Center. She wrote in her paper *Amazons at Amistad: Selected Collections Pertaining to Black Women* that there were three categories of collections pertaining to women in Amistad, “those created by females and named for them, those created by other individuals or organizations and bearing the names of the respective persons or groups... and finally those women about whom relatively little documentary evidence is available...”³ Borders worked tirelessly to highlight all three categories, always with the knowledge that these women’s stories had to be told. In the paper, she details the history and papers of prominent individuals who fit in her first category, such as Mary McLeod Bethune (educator), Fredi Washington (actress), and Marguerite Cartwright (journalist). Those fitting within the second category included American Missionary Association teachers such as Mary Smith Peake, Edmonia Highgate, and Mary Ann Shadd. The women in the third category, those needing more exposure because they were often buried within other collections within the Amistad holdings, included Zora Neale Hurston, Dorothy West, Jessie Fauset, and Alice Dunbar Nelson. She also included religious women who had significant materials in other collections, such as Justine Fervin Convent, Henriette Delille, and Frances Joseph Gaudet, each who worked to educate the poor, feed the needy, and uplift the spirits of all. These last three women were also the subject of an article by Borders titled “Black Louisiana’s Legacy from Three Women of African Descent”⁴ that she wrote for *The Chicory Review: A Journal of Afro-Louisiana History*

³ *Amazons at Amistad: Selected Collections Pertaining to Black Women* (unpublished paper) by Florence Borders, unprocessed papers.” The Amistad Research Center, New Orleans LA.

⁴ Florence Borders.” Black Louisiana’s Legacy from Three Women of African Descent,” *The Chicory Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2, (Spring, 1989): 10.

and Culture. This source emerged out of the Chicory Society, a group she founded in 1983 to highlight the contributions of Black people in Louisiana. These women exemplified all the characteristics that Borders embodied, and she always looked for opportunities to enlighten others about remarkable women and their papers housed at Amistad.

The Chicory Review published works by a stellar group of New Orleans' leading activists and scholars. Some of these individuals who have gone on to greater fame include Rebecca T. Cureau (academic), John T. Scott (artist), Dr. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall (academic/scholar), Ulysses S. Ricard, Jr. (Creole scholar), Kalamu ya Salaam (poet/artist), Sybil Kein (academic) and Arthur J. Pfister III (writer/poet). This roster was testament to the respect, honor, and influence that Borders garnered and received. *The Review* published articles, poetry, and reviews of books. Borders, always the archivist/librarian, also included an annotated list of resources called "Gems from the Chicory Bookshelf."⁵

The Chicory Review and the Chicory Society allowed the convergence of two of Borders' passions, revealing information on women and her love of music. Her article titled *Centennial of Camille Nickerson* reveals her outstanding scholarship and her longtime interest as a musician.⁶ Camille Nickerson had established the B-Sharp Music Club in 1917. One of the oldest organizations in New Orleans founded by African Americans, the club and its members traveled all over the South performing piano and organ concerts. Borders became a longtime member and

⁵ Florence Borders." Gems from the Chicory Bookshelf," *The Chicory Review*, Vol. 1, No. 1, (Fall, 1988): 45.

⁶ Florence Borders." Centennial of Camille Nickerson," *The Chicory Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2, (Spring, 1989): 23.

served as the president of the New Orleans' chapter. In 2000, she helped shepherd it to becoming a branch of the National Association of Negro Musicians, Inc.

Borders served as consultant on numerous documentaries, film, and television programs, including Creole New Orleans for the Cable News Network (CNN). She was a frequent lecturer, exhibit curator, published bibliographer, and research consultant for several documentary films and oral histories. She appeared in *Liberty Street Blues*, a documentary movie about the history of New Orleans jazz, and worked as a researcher for *The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow*. The late filmmaker Marlon Riggs drew on her expertise for his documentary, *Black Is, Black Ain't*, and she was consulted for the film *House Divided* and coordinated many interviews for the oral history project *Behind the Veil: The Jim Crow Era*.⁷

Borders also published works for other journals, allowing the reach of the Center's holding to expand to readers all over the country. She published the article "Researching Creole and Cajun Music in New Orleans" for the *Black Music Research Journal*.⁸ She published an essay on the letters of Zora Neale Hurston to Countee Cullen housed at Amistad for the influential journal *Callaloo*.⁹ Other published essays included "Amistad Research Center for the *Louisiana Library Bulletin*"¹⁰ and two essays for the publication *New Conversations II*.¹¹

⁷ Florence Borders. Wikipedia page [Florence Borders - Wikipedia](#), July 15, 2021.

⁸ Borders, Florence E. "Researching Creole and Cajun Music in New Orleans." *Black Music Research Journal* VIII (1988): 15-31.

⁹ Florence Borders. "Zora Neale Hurston: Hidden Woman [Including a Letter from Zora Neale Hurston to Countee Cullen]." *Callaloo* 6 (1979): 89-92.

¹⁰ Florence Borders. "Amistad Research Center" *Louisiana Library Bulletin*, VI, (May 1975): 318.

¹¹ Florence Borders. "Storehouse of Treasures: Amistad Research Center." *New Conversations II* (Winter/Spring 1989): 16-22.

The Chicory Society, with Borders as its leader, continued to highlight Black women, including an exhibit she curated, “Dishwater Images, Twentieth Century Afro-Louisiana Women: Their Legacy.” The exhibit featured twenty-five unsung Black heroines, whose lives and work made a significant impact on their communities. The Society also sponsored a book signing party and reading of Fatimah Shaik’s book *The Mayor of New Orleans*. Borders also served as a consultant for the Neighborhood Revitalization Project of the Claiborne Corridor and for the Louisiana World Exposition Afro-American Pavilion, among many other positions of community service.

Borders loved to provide tours to groups interested in Amistad holdings. Some groups she hosted included the United Church of Christ’s Council for Higher Education, the African American Museums Association, the U.S. Information Service, and the New Orleans Chapter of the Friends of the Amistad Research Center. She was an invited conference speaker on numerous occasions, including at a program in Delray Beach, Florida, where she spoke on “Relevance to Contemporary Issues-Toward Total Concern for Human Beings;” at the 65th Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH 1980), where she spoke about Amistad Research Center & Documentation of the Black Experience; the Society of American Archivists, Southern Conference on Afro-American Studies, and Louisiana Black Cultural Commission. She was a charter member of 100 Black Women.

———. “What Hath God Wrought! The Amistad Research Center.” *New Conversations II* (Winter/Spring 1989): 32-35.

After her retirement from the Amistad Research Center, Borders saw a need for a trained archivist at Southern University at New Orleans's (SUNO) Center for African and African American Studies. She began her work there less than five months after retirement in 1989 until her second retirement in 2005. At SUNO, Borders worked to arrange archives that included an impressive African Art collection and the records of the university. Borders continued her outreach efforts to encourage students to consider archives for research and as a profession. Toward this end, she was a regular participant in SUNO's Career Day activities. At SUNO, she recruited students to help install exhibits and offered to mentor them. Her tireless work on behalf of SUNO has resulted in a petition to name the newly renovated space in her honor as the SUNO-CAAAS Florence E. Borders Archive.¹²

Borders was a devoted parishioner at Holy Ghost Catholic Church (now St. Katharine Drexel Church), Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church, and served as Vice President of their school board. Her faith meant a great deal to her, and she loved to speak about Black church women, as noted earlier, who were inspirational and spiritual. She was also a member of Court 52 of the Knights of Peter Claver, Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, the Block Rosary Group, her monthly Bridge group, the Po-Ke-No Pleasure Players, and Kinship Senior Center. A cursory pass through her papers at Amistad shows her dedication and love of religion. All throughout the collection, one can find inspirational notes and Catholic saints with uplifting sayings.

Borders was the recipient of many honors and awards, among them the following:

¹² Email from Linda Hill. Attached documents related to Mrs. Borders work at SUNO, July 2, 2021.

Unsung Heroes Plaque from the Crescent City Chapter of Links, 1987

Mayor's Certificate of Merit, The City of New Orleans, 1987

Callaloo Award, University of Virginia, 1988

Vital as a Heartbeat Award, Urban League, 1988

Certificate of Appreciation, Society of American Archivists, 2000

Certificate of Merit, Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc., 1969

Who's Who in Library and Information Services, 1982

Trophy, Louisiana World Exposition, Afro-American Pavilion, 1984

Certificate of Recognition, Black Chorale, 1986

Certificate of Appreciation, Equal Opportunity Advisory Council, 1986

Trophy, Calvary CME Church, 1988

Who's Who Among African Americans, 2000.¹³

Archivist Kathryn M. Neal's profile of Borders for the Society of American Archivists'

Archivists and Archives of Color Newsletter¹⁴ was a fitting tribute to her work and dedication.

When asked if she had any regrets about pursuing her chosen work, she said she was "destined to have become a librarian or an archivist. I like books and I like people...so I think that the two things would have made me think that library science was a right vocation,"¹⁵ representing the type of person Borders was. The Amistad Research Center holds the Florence Borders Papers,

¹³ Florence Edwards Borders, Mrs." Who's Who Among African Americans, 21st ed. Gale, 2008.

¹⁴ Kathryn M. Neal. "Bordering on Excellence: Florence Borders Carves Out Career in Libraries and Archives." Archivists and Archives of Color Newsletter, Vol. 12, No. 1, (Spring 1998): 6-7.

¹⁵ Neal. Bordering on Excellence, 7.

1933-2007, which includes many of her personal papers, essays, archival aids, interviews, and research.