

Baker's Long-Gone Leland College was Uptown New Orleans' First University

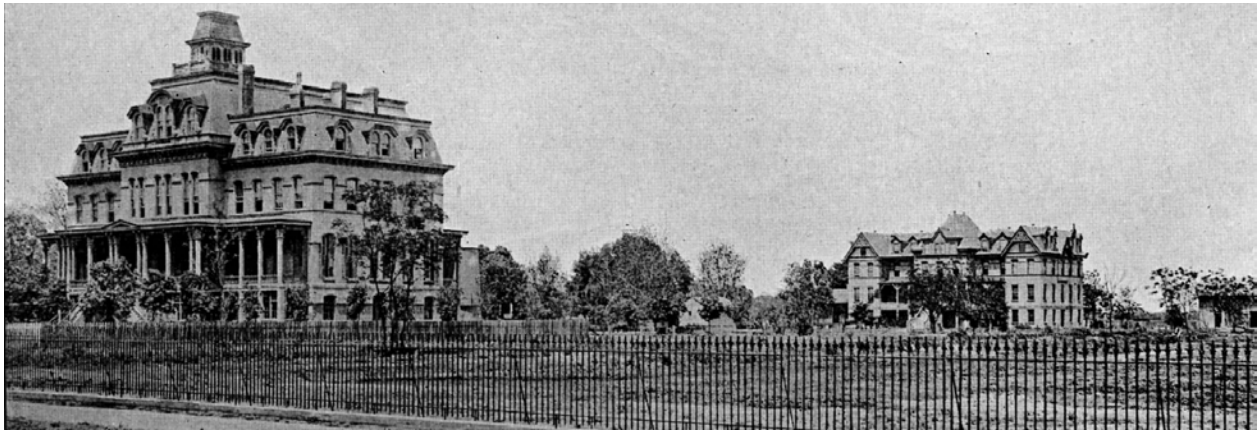
Richard Campanella, Contributing writer, GEOGRAPHIES OF NEW ORLEANS

Published in the *Times-Picayune/New Orleans Advocate*, Sunday December 6, 2020, page A1

In recent articles about Louisiana-born diplomat Linda Thomas-Greenfield, readers may have noticed mention of a small African American college called Leland in Thomas-Greenfield's hometown of Baker, north of Baton Rouge. Born in 1952 into a strictly segregated society, young Linda, herself African American, had one of her first international experiences at Leland College. "As a young girl growing up in Baker," wrote Thomas-Greenfield in a guest editorial for *The Advocate*, "I became enamored with the idea of the Peace Corps from joining a group of trainees who were stationed at nearby Leland College for their language training, and learned to speak Swati along the way."

Many years later, Thomas-Greenfield became the U.S. ambassador to Liberia, Director General of the Foreign Service and Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs. Last month, President-elect Joe Biden nominated her to become the next U.S. ambassador to the United Nations.

Thomas-Greenfield's rise from small-town adversity to the top of the nation's diplomatic corps stands in stark contrast to the story of Leland College, which began with great hope in a big city, but ended in an overgrown field.



Leland University's New Orleans campus on St. Charles Avenue, seen here 1899; courtesy Louisiana Black History Hall of Fame.

The inspiration for Leland developed in the years after the Civil War, when progressive Protestant denominations in the North mobilized to educate recently emancipated people in the South. These religious institutions helped launch hundreds of elementary and secondary schools throughout formerly enslaved areas, often in collaboration with the federal Freedmen's Bureau.

They also created a number of institutions of higher learning for emancipated people, among them what is now Fisk University in Nashville, Howard University in Washington, D.C. and Dillard University in New Orleans.

In 1869, the New York-based Baptist Free Mission Society committed to help educate African Americans in New Orleans, using a \$65,000 gift from retired Brooklyn shoe merchant Deacon Holbrook Chamberlain and his wife Izanina Leland Chamberlain.

In her honor, the institution would be named Leland University, and in the words of its charter, it would educate men and women "irrespective of race, color or previous condition of servitude." Additional financial support came from other Baptist mission societies as well as the Freedmen's Bureau.

Geographies of New Orleans

At this early stage, the term “university” was largely aspirational. Curricula of this and similar schools in postbellum New Orleans had to meet the students where they were academically, and most classes were really more preparatory or secondary than collegiate. So too were their first “campuses,” which were little more than borrowed rooms.

That was the case of Leland, which held its first classes in the Free Mission Baptist Church just off Common Street, where the LSU School of Medicine now stands on present-day Tulane Avenue.

Seeking more tranquil environs for a permanent campus, Leland’s New York-based trustees looked to the former plantations of what is now Uptown New Orleans, which by now were mostly subdivided, but lightly developed and reasonably priced.

In 1873 the trustees spent \$20,000 for a 10-acre parcel on St. Charles Avenue in the Greenville subdivision, just down from Broadway. This property had been surveyed out of the Foucher plantation in 1836 as part of Jefferson Parish, and in 1870 had been annexed into the city of New Orleans. In 1871, other parts of the Foucher tract became Upper City Park, today’s Audubon Park, whose open fields and overgrown vegetation gave the area a semi-rural ambience.

The parcel made for a lovely campus. Well-drained and accessible by streetcar, it spanned 300 feet along St. Charles Avenue and extended back 1,400 feet along what is now Audubon Street (Chestnut at the time), to what is now Freret Street. Overlooking St. Charles was Leland’s Main Building (or University Hall), a stately edifice of the Second Empire style, built in 1873 “of brick, 100 by 80 feet, three stories above the basement,” according to an 1897 catalogue. “Here are the chapel, recitation-rooms, library, museum, offices and rooms for the president, professors and male students, besides accommodations in the basement for industrial shops, printing-offices, etc.”

Holbrook Chamberlain willed another \$100,000 to Leland after his death, which helped fund a new dormitory, designed by Thomas Sully and completed in 1884. “Chamberlain Hall is also of brick, three stories high, 100 by 50 feet, in which are the rooms of the preceptress and lady teachers and the young lady pupils; also music rooms, boarding, laundry, and industrial rooms for the girls.” Around both buildings were lawns, walkways, ornamental gardens, shade trees, as well as experimental crops, orchards and mechanical labs. With University Hall’s towering belvedere and Chamberlain Hall’s Tudor gables, Leland’s landscaped campus stood salient among the largely empty fields of this part of Uptown. “No more beautiful or healthful location could be found in New Orleans,” extolled Leland’s catalog, “while its retirement from the crowded part of the city renders it peculiarly adapted to study.”

Academic tracks at the university were organized into a College, through which were offered four years of higher-level classes; a Normal School, for teacher training; a Minister’s Class, for Baptist theology and pastor training; and a College Preparatory School, which was essentially a high school. Enrollment ranged from 200 to 250, with “80% of the students...in precollege classes,” according to historian John W. Blassingame, who noted the school’s challenges in regard to equipment, books, and operating funds. “Still, in spite of its shortcomings, Leland provided some professional skills, to the Negro community in New Orleans.”

Leland’s impact extended statewide. Administrators oversaw a network of regional auxiliary schools, to create a pipeline of future Leland students as well as a source of employment for Leland-educated teachers. By the 1890s, Leland’s auxiliary schools included the Howe Institute in New Iberia, Leland Academy in Donaldsonville, the Industrial High School in Monroe, and the Normal Institute at Ruston.

But by this time, Uptown New Orleans was changing. Catalyzed by the World’s Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition, held at what is now Audubon Park in 1885, properties came into high demand, and expensive townhouses and mansions were being built all around Leland.

Geographies of New Orleans

There were also new institutions of higher learning moving in. The Jesuits of the College of the Immaculate Conception bought a parcel in the remaining section of the Foucher tract in 1889, followed in 1891 by Tulane University, and both institutions aimed to relocate their downtown campuses to leafy Uptown.

Two years later, a St. Louis real estate firm acquired the adjacent parcel to create a prestigious “residential park,” to be called Audubon Place, just a stone’s throw from Leland. That same year (1893), the St. Charles streetcar line was electrified, making Uptown all the more accessible and desirable.

Tulane started erecting its new campus in 1894, and over the next decade, Audubon Park would get landscaped, and the Jesuits would start building today’s Loyola University campus.

Land that Leland trustees had purchased on the cheap in 1873 was now rising in value, and other benevolent institutions found themselves getting squeezed out. The Touro-Shakespeare Alms House on Danneel Street, for example, relocated to rural Algiers to make room for big new houses, while the Asylum for Destitute Orphan Boys at Valence Street moved to an upriver farm — “another evidence of the gradual tendency to remove such institutions from St. Charles Avenue,” the *Picayune* observed, “where at present they are occupying tracts very valuable indeed as residential sites.”

Additionally, in this post-Reconstruction era, with racial segregation and Black disenfranchisement on the rise, African American institutions came to be viewed with increasing hostility by white neighbors. There was also some discord within the Black community over Leland University, as well as New Orleans University, located further down on St. Charles Avenue, because their staff, according to the historian John Blassingame, “remained lily-white for so long that the *Louisianian* [a black newspaper] frequently chided them for being too paternalistic and prejudiced to hire blacks.”

With a limited endowment, Leland operated mostly on tuition dollars, scant as they were. Funding became an issue. The trustees in New Orleans began to realize that the university’s most valuable asset was really its land, and that Leland’s future might be elsewhere, should they decide to cash out while the market was hot. How hot? Tulane University itself expressed interest in the Leland property, as a new home for its Garden District-based sister school, Sophie Newcomb College. Tulane ended buying land behind Leland for that purpose in 1908, today’s Newcomb Hall and Quad.

What forced the trustees’ hand—or perhaps gave them cover—was the Great Storm of 1915. Gale-force winds from the Sept. 29 hurricane wreaked havoc on landmark buildings throughout the city, among them University Hall and Chamberlain Hall on Leland’s campus.

Administrators estimated damages at \$3,500 and aimed to make repairs so as to resume classes on Nov. 18. But the trustees came to a very different assessment, as reported in the *Item* on Oct. 10, 1915: “Leland university...will be abandoned and...sold for building lots [as per] receipt of an order from New York.” The article went on to note that “real estate men regard it as one of the choicest locations in New Orleans and it will no doubt sell for fancy prices.”

It did, in 1916, to Robert Werk, for \$175,000, nearly nine times the original cost. *The Item* called it “the largest single adjudication [in New Orleans, and] probably the largest single tract of its nature ever sold for so much money at the auction exchange,” and predicted Werk would “clean up \$100,000 at least.”

A newspaper in Kansas ran the story under the headline, “Famous Negro University Is Sold,” and marveled at “the increase in value since the emancipation fifty years ago when this property was bought for several hundred dollars.”

Alumni and other supporters stridently advocated to keep Leland in New Orleans, but their arguments fell on deaf ears. The trustees instead purchased 212 acres near Alexandria for the new campus—but decided to sell it too, because, according to a Leland historical monograph, “whites thought that there would be a conflict between their children and the Black students of Leland.”

Geographies of New Orleans

Other African American universities encountered similar resistance. The original Southern University, located on Magazine Street since 1885, sought relocation to become more of an agricultural college—only to be rejected from three rural Louisiana sites on account of explicitly racist White resistance. It finally found a home, in 1914, on the Scotland Plantation north of Baton Rouge, where it operates today. When the Leland trustees considered buying land from Southern University for their new campus, “the Baton Rouge ladies in charge of circulating the petition asking that the Leland university for negroes be not placed [there]” had obtained more than 200 signatures, reported the *State Times Advocate* on May 18, 1921.

Finally, in 1922, the trustees settled on 160 acres at the former Groom Plantation in nearby Baker. Builders got to work promptly, and in 1923, the institution reopened as Leland College.



Leland College's Baker campus, c1940, courtesy Louisiana Black History Hall of Fame

The new campus was spacious, and its buildings attractive. But its geography proved to be a problem. The college now found itself in a rural location, far removed from its alumni base and its traditional urban student pool. Additionally, it was only five miles from Southern University, which had already established itself among the Baton Rouge-area Black population, and, as an agricultural and mechanical college, had both state and federal funding streams, however limited.

As for Leland's old campus in Uptown New Orleans, that 10-acre space would become the upriver side of Newcomb Boulevard, where affluent residences were erected starting in 1919. An article about developer Robert Werk, published in the *Times-Picayune* on Sept. 25, 1927, recounted that “another of his visions focused upon the Leland university campus on St. Charles avenue, [which] ran far back, thus wedging off the spread of the high-class residential section, and the fact that it was a negro institution was another handicap not only upon growth, but also upon the prospects of the college.”

Leland College operated in Baker for 37 years before finally closing in 1960, due mostly to declining enrollment and diminishing tuition revenue. Its facilities were used for training and other purposes throughout the 1960s, which is when Linda Thomas-Greenfield, as a teenager, would have met the Peace Corps volunteers and learned Swati with them.

Afterwards, Leland's empty buildings fell into ruin, and by the late 1980s, only their walls remained. The former campus is now an overgrown field abutting a working-class subdivision called the Leland College Community, through which runs Chamberlain Avenue, named for Leland's original Brooklyn benefactors.

Today, most people think of Tulane and Loyola when they think of Uptown New Orleans universities. But Leland University was there first, predating both by decades. No trace of its St. Charles Avenue campus remains, though Baptists are still active nearby, at the St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church just across the intersection.

While Leland University in New Orleans and Leland College in Baker are both long gone, their influence endures—in the lives of the last living alumni, in the contributions made by previous generations of graduates, and in the formative years of the nominee to become this nation's next ambassador to the United Nations.

Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture, is the author of “The West Bank of Greater New Orleans,” “Cityscapes of New Orleans,” and other books. Some material in this piece was drawn from Campanella's previous writings on Leland. He may be reached at rcampane@tulane.edu, <http://richcampanella.com>, or @nolacampanella on Twitter.