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**Our History: The education of black New Orleans - Gilbert Academy: A look back**

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When Gilbert Academy opened its doors in New Orleans as the elite school for young black students seeking college preparatory education, it had come a long way from its modest beginning as a colored orphanage.

In 1863 when the country was in the midst of the Civil War many children were left orphaned when their parents went away to fight. The tragedy was particularly hard for black children, because there were no orphanages established for them. The Colored Orphans Home was established to take care of these children.

Louise DeMortie, a free woman of color from Virginia, was sensitive to the plight of the children and relocated to Louisiana to help run the Colored Orphans Home. She became one of the primary forces behind securing adequate accommodations for the orphanage. Her efforts were successful when she secured a building to house the orphanage, a large mansion on Esplanade that had been abandoned during the war.

Racial tension and resentment forced them to have to move out of the former confederate mansion after the war, however. DeMortie began to raise money and with the help of the Methodist church, the orphanage was relocated to Baldwin, Louisiana in 1867.

The home started to accommodate the children's educational needs and in 1875 opened a seminary on the same campus in Baldwin. The La Teche Seminary was the name given to the orphanage school and the neighboring high educational facility.

The school complex continued to grow in spite of funding problems and had plans to continue operating until a hurricane in the late 1870s devastated the already financially strapped school and orphanage.

At that point the seminary was forced to close because of the financial difficulties. State support had been denied to the school and during this economically depressed period, private support was scarce.

A bright spot came in the early 1880s however when a wealthy philanthropist from Connecticut, W.L. Gilbert, gave the school \$5,000 to rebuild the campus. He later contributed another \$5,000 for a building that was named Gilbert Hall and in his will donated another \$40,000 to the school.

A few years later in 1884, after the campus reopened, it was renamed Gilbert Academy in honor of his support.

Gilbert Academy was incorporated into New Orleans University in 1919. New Orleans University, along with Straight College, were the two higher education institutions for blacks in Louisiana during this period.

After more than 60 years in Baldwin, Louisiana the school was relocated to New Orleans in 1935. Gilbert Academy occupied a site vacated by New Orleans University on St. Charles Avenue for the next decade.

Gilbert Academy had grown from being an orphanage for black children from the Civil War period to the premier private school for blacks in the city.

After World War II, Gilbert was sold in 1949. The school was closed and eventually torn down. The needs of the

community had begun to shift as public high schools for blacks had become available such as McDonogh 35 and lat Booker T. Washington.

Elise Cain, a 1945 Gilbert alumnae and author of a history of the school, remembers her time there well and the most important thing with which she came away from the school. "I got a very, very good education," Cain said. "We had some of the best instructors and got a well rounded education."

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