

JSRI

JESUIT SOCIAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE
LOYOLA UNIVERSITY NEW ORLEANS

ESTABLISHED 2007

Follow us on social media!



2026 Guest Editor: Professor Christian Bolden, Ph.D.

JustSouth Editor: Scotty Wolffe, B.S.

Upcoming Events

In the Community:

Free Training for Formerly Incarcerated Individuals. If you are formerly incarcerated, Delgado Community College Regional Career Project is offering certification training in OSHA 10, CPR and Forklift Operation Training. **Class dates:** June 3-6, 10-13, 17-20, and 23-27. Contact (504) 671-6487 or email tjorda@dcc.edu. [See the VOTE Community Calendar here.](#)

Career Opportunities:

Investigator Internship with the Orleans Public Defenders, Fall 2026. OPD is seeking individuals interested in indigent defense to join their Investigative Internship program. Interns in OPD's program assist staff investigators with case preparation and investigation on misdemeanor and felony criminal cases in Orleans Parish Criminal District Court, Municipal Court, and Juvenile

Vanishing Women: Recovering Louisiana's Incarceration History as Collaborative Resistance

By Dr. Marianne Fisher-Giorlando; cowritten by Deidre Thomas and Stephanie King

I remember the day I found out Celeste died.

I had been teaching in prisons and researching incarceration since I was a PhD student in Ohio. When I moved to Louisiana in 1986, I continued to do volunteer work in and historical research on prisons. I spent hours in Louisiana's archives, combing official records to learn everything I could about the history of incarceration in this state.

I then used my archival knowledge to support [The Angolite](#) and the Angola Museum. I became a go-to resource for anyone learning about the history of incarceration in Louisiana while pursuing my own research on women's incarceration.

When I first examined early penitentiary records, I was shocked to learn that women – including women who were enslaved and their children – were incarcerated at the Louisiana State Penitentiary before the Civil War.

Officials during the antebellum era were sometimes shocked, too. In an 1853 report, the penitentiary's Board of Directors was surprised to meet an elderly woman named Celeste, who was enslaved in St. Landry Parish before being convicted by "ten slave owners" of "the crime of striking a white person" and sentenced to life in prison. The Directors were incredulous that Celeste "could be a proper subject for judicial action or for imprisonment" because she was "at least one hundred years of age" and "scarcely able to sit or stand." They recommended that she be "returned to the owners" and any payment for her be refunded; she was "of no value" in their eyes due to her infirmities.⁽¹⁾

I regularly returned to this passage – the longest quote I have found in official records about any single woman in the antebellum penitentiary. It was at least a year before I realized that Celeste was in the 1854 Board of Directors report, listed among the thirteen people who died that year.

"Slave. Date of death: September 27th."⁽²⁾

Court. Applications are open until June 26th for the Fall 2026 Term. [See more about this opportunity here](#) and [see the application here](#).



While the photograph was likely taken in the early twentieth century, the wash house pictured here (surrounded by a plank fence) was originally built after an 1856 fire at the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Baton Rouge. Incarcerated women lived and worked here during the antebellum era. Andrew David Lytle, Interior view of the Louisiana State Penitentiary when it stood between Florida and Laurel Streets in downtown Baton Rouge, 1900(?) - 1901(?), photograph, Andrew D. Lytle Collection, Mss. 893, 1254, C-113, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La., Louisiana Digital Archive, <https://louisianadigital.library.org/islandora/object/su-sc-p15140coll12%3A222>.

I called my dear friend and colleague, Billy, to share the sad news. Human connection is powerful even through the medium of historical records. I still feel a deep sadness that Celeste died in the penitentiary, though I know the alternative would not have meant freedom for her, either. As much as Celeste's death affected me, it was not until I shared her story with women who have experienced incarceration themselves that I began to flesh out the details of her life.

Deidre Thomas and Stephanie King were Tulane University students while they were incarcerated at the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women. There they took a course on the history of women's incarceration with Catherine Jacquet from Louisiana State University. The class was inspired by the [Indiana Women's Prison History Project](#); women corrected the history of the prison where they were incarcerated by reading primary sources "against the grain" based on their own experiences of life in prison.

In Dr. Jacquet's class, one of the class projects involved contributing to a database I created to catalogue all of the women incarcerated in the Louisiana State Penitentiary during the nineteenth century. Deidre, Stephanie, and fellow students used newspapers and other primary sources to add information about the women sent to the penitentiary from across the state.

When I shared Celeste's story with Deidre and Stephanie, we discussed the undeniable injustice of slavery. Celeste was convicted by ten slave owners and sentenced to life simply for striking a white person. She was considered a "proper subject of judicial action" but also reduced to the labor she performed – labor that left her unable to "sit or stand." She represents an unjust past but also reminds us of a present where hundreds of elderly people are dying in Louisiana prisons where they toiled for decades.

Deidre and Stephanie also raised further questions based on their unique perspectives as women who experienced incarceration:

Who brought Celeste to the attention of the Board of Directors in the first place? Who was Celeste's community inside the penitentiary and on the plantation where she had been enslaved? What happened to the women and children around her? Are there any accounts that might include their memories of Celeste?

Deidre and Stephanie said women often have no advocates except for other women who have been incarcerated alongside them.

They wondered if other women might have raised awareness about Celeste. Deidre remembered there was a ten-year-old girl among the records that she and her classmates examined, leading her to ask about other children in the penitentiary. When Deidre was incarcerated, older women serving life sentences took her under their wings and she shared how their legacy still motivates her today.

These questions immediately sparked ideas about where to look for answers. I know women who were incarcerated before the Civil War lived communally, and there were at least fifteen children in the penitentiary with them. Volunteer genealogists tracing their own family histories will have valuable insights about how to find these women and children in the historical record. I know telling Celeste's story could be a lifetime effort - one that requires multiple perspectives and areas of expertise.

For Deidre, illuminating Celeste's story is not a matter of historical curiosity. Taking Dr. Jacquet's class encouraged her to speak to her mother about her own family history in Opelousas - the parish seat of St. Landry, where Celeste was enslaved before she was incarcerated. Similarly, Deidre is driven to ensure women are not forgotten in broader discussions of incarceration today. Making the effort to understand Celeste's life and community can inspire us to do the same for women in the present. "Without these conversations," Deidre concluded, "more Celestes will vanish off the pages of history."

This is why I am committed to sharing my deep archival knowledge - so more scholars who have experienced incarceration can interpret the historical record from their own perspectives, unearthing insights that shape our understanding of the past in ways that encourage us to pursue justice now.

1. J. Perkins, Amos Adams, C.H. Davis, and Egbert Morgan, "Report of the Board of Directors," Report of the Board of Directors of the Penitentiary of the State of Louisiana, New Orleans: Emile LaSere, State Printer (1853), p. 4. Jones Hall Louisiana Research Collection (976.3(365) L925r), Tulane Special Collections, Tulane University.

2. William Hubbs, "Schedule C: Prisoners who have died at the Louisiana State Penitentiary, their term, crime, date of Death from January 1st, 1854, to 31st December, 1854," Annual Report of the Board of Directors, Clerk, and Officers of the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Baton Rouge for the Year ending December 31, 1854. New Orleans: Emile La Sere, State Printer (1855), p. 7. Jones Hall Louisiana Research Collection (976.3(365) L925r), Tulane Special Collections, Tulane University.

Dr. Marianne Fisher-Giorlando is Criminal Justice Professor Emerita of Grambling State University. She has been a member of the Louisiana State Penitentiary Museum Foundation Board since 1998 when it opened, presently serving as the Chair of the Education committee. Dr. Fisher-Giorlando has given numerous presentations and published articles about the history of women in the Louisiana State Penitentiary. She is the recipient of the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities 2023 Lifetime Contributions to Humanities Award, which honors citizens who have supported and promoted the public appreciation of issues central to the humanities.

Deidre Thomas is a paralegal at the Promise of Justice Initiative. During her time at the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women, she served as a counsel substitute (“jailhouse lawyer”) and pursued almost every form of education available, including a bachelor’s degree through Tulane University, in partnership with Operation Restoration. Along with other women serving life sentences who served as her role models, Deidre sought to understand and challenge incarcerated women’s convictions, sentences, and conditions of confinement. She is completing her degree in general legal studies at Tulane and continues to be a champion for incarcerated women.

Stephanie King is an investigator at the Baton Rouge Capital Conflict Office. While incarcerated at the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women (LCIW), she dedicated herself to education. Among her many educational accomplishments, she was one of the twenty students accepted in the first cohort of the bachelor’s degree program Tulane University and Operation Restoration partner to provide at LCIW. She was the first student to complete the program, graduating in December of 2024 with a bachelor’s degree in Social Sciences.

Monthly articles reflect the opinions of the authors and not necessarily those of Loyola University New Orleans. Please send feedback to jsri@loyno.edu.

LOYOLA UNIVERSITY NEW ORLEANS

As our prison education program continues to grow, we need to make sure that each and every one has access to an exceptional educational experience. We can't do it without your help. [Give today!](#)

Published by the Jesuit Social Research Institute

Office Phone: 504- 864-7746 | **E-mail:** jsri@loyno.edu | **Website:** www.loyno.edu/jsri

Mailing Address: 6363 St. Charles Avenue, Campus Box 94, New Orleans, LA 70118

6363 St. Charles Avenue | New Orleans, LA 70118

This email was sent to .

To ensure that you continue receiving our emails, please add us to your address book or safe list.

[manage](#) your preferences | [opt out](#) of all Loyola e-newsletters

Got this as a forward? [Sign up](#) to receive our future emails.

[Subscribe](#) to our email list.