1995

Arna Bontemps's Creole Heritage

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By Paul J. Archambault, Professor of French, Syracuse University

The renowned historian Le Roy Ladurie discusses his influences, his writing, his career as scholar and director of the Bibliothèque Nationale, and his views on Europe’s religious, economic, and political inheritance.

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By Cleota Reed, Research Associate in Fine Arts, Syracuse University

Reed sheds light on the important role played by Irene Sargent, a Syracuse University fine arts professor, in the creation of Gustav Stickley’s Arts and Crafts publications.

An Interview with Thomas Moore
By Alexandra Eyle, Free-Lance Writer Introduction by David Miller, Professor of Religion, Syracuse University

Moore talks about readers’ reactions to his best-selling books, the contemporary hunger for meaning, his “nonmodel” of therapy, and his own circuitous path to success.

Dr. Freud and Dr. Spock
By James Sullivan, Doctoral Candidate, Rutgers University

Sullivan explains how Benjamin Spock translated psychoanalytic ideas about adults into practical advice for raising healthy children, and how Freud’s ideas also influenced Spock’s political philosophy.

Arna Bontemps’s Creole Heritage
By Charles L. James, Professor of English, Swarthmore College

James traces the lives of Bontemps’s central Louisiana ancestors and the social upheavals they endured before, during, and after the Civil War.
Peaks of Joy, Valleys of Despair: The History of the Syracuse University Library from 1871 to 1907
By David H. Starn, University Librarian, Syracuse University

Drawing on a variety of sources, Starn presents engaging samples of life in the early days of the Syracuse University Library.

The Planning and Funding of the E. S. Bird Library
By John Robert Greene, Professor of History, Cazenovia College and Karrie Anne Baron, student, SUNY Geneseo
Greene and Baron tell the story of how Chancellor William P. Tolley willed the E. S. Bird Library into existence.

Belfer Audio Archive: Our Cultural Heritage in Sound
By John Harvith, Executive Director of National Media Relations, Syracuse University

Harvith reveals how romance led to his discovery of the Belfer Audio Laboratory and Archive, and what he found therein.

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By Terrance Keenan, Special Collections Librarian, Syracuse University Library
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Dedicated to William Pearson Tolley (1900–1996)
Arna Bontemps’s Creole Heritage

BY CHARLES L. JAMES

Young Arna Bontemps arrived in New York City during the summer of 1924 when the Harlem Renaissance was beginning to peak and the jazz age was hitting its stride. A year out of college, he had journeyed by train from Los Angeles, determined to find a place for himself as a writer.

Arna Wendell Bontemps was born in Louisiana in 1902, but when he was three, his father, a bricklayer and itinerant musician, and his mother, a school teacher, took him and his sister to California, the racial climate in the South having become intolerable. Bontemps grew up in California and, while attending Pacific Union College, began to write poetry. After college he accepted a teaching position in Harlem, where his writing talent blossomed.

In that colorful upper Manhattan community he met Langston Hughes, who became a lifelong friend and collaborator, and other important figures of the Harlem Renaissance, including writers James Weldon Johnson, Countee Cullen, Jean Toomer, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, and the painter Aaron Douglas. By 1927 Bontemps had won several awards for his poetry.¹ During the next half-century, he would write many books of poetry and fiction, most notably the novel Black Thunder, about a failed slave insurrection.² Through juvenile stories, histories, and


¹. Twice he won the Alexander Pushkin prize offered by Opportunity (the journal of the Urban League edited by Charles S. Johnson): in 1926 for “Golgotha Is a Mountain” and in 1927 for “The Return.” In 1927 he also won first prize for “Nocturne at Bethesda” awarded by The Crisis (the NAACP magazine edited by W. E. B. DuBois).
². Black Thunder, Gabriel’s Revolt: Virginia, 1800 (Macmillan, 1936). A later edi-
biographies, he made young blacks aware of their own rich her­
itage. As head librarian (1943–64) at Fisk University he developed a
significant collection of archives of black authors and statesmen.
He also edited compilations of poetry, fiction, folklore, essays, and
slave narratives. After his retirement from Fisk, he received two

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tion (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992) includes a new introduction by Arnold Ram­
persad and Arna Bontemps’s introduction to the 1968 edition. The first draft of
the novel and the initial reviews after publication are housed in Syracuse Univer­
sity Library as part of the Arna Bontemps Papers.
honorary degrees and distinguished professorial appointments at the University of Illinois, Yale University, and, again, Fisk, as writer-in-residence. He died in 1973.

Bontemps began to write fiction out of a need to order and comprehend the accumulated fragments of his Louisiana origins, passed to him from his relatives. First, he completed the autobiographical "Chariot in the Cloud" late in 1929, but the work never found a publisher. The second effort was published as God Sends Sunday (1931), written in celebration of his favorite uncle, Buddy.

He had become fascinated by his bloodline—a gumbo mix of French, African, Native American, and British—in part because of his appearance, about which total strangers would often query him. On the train journey east, for example, a white couple from Denver commented that he looked like something other than an American or African Negro. Bontemps knew that he could allay most curiosity about his dusky complexion, his severe Roman nose, and his dark curly hair by saying that he was born in Louisiana.

Arna Bontemps was born in Alexandria, Louisiana, on 13 October 1902. The southern cottage in which his mother, Maria Caroline Pembroke Bontemps, gave birth first to Arna and then to his

4. Uncle Buddy—Joseph P. Ward Jr.—was the youngest brother of Arna's maternal grandmother, Sarah Ward Pembroke. Both figures were influential in Arna's life. Uncle Buddy's death occurred around the time the novel was published, and Arna deeply regretted that Uncle Buddy never read the book. The title God Sends Sunday (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1931) provoked stormy criticism against Bontemps by his church and his employer, both Seventh-Day Adventist institutions, and strained relations with his father, then an Adventist elder. Adaptation of the novel in collaboration with Countee Cullen subsequently led to the 1945 Broadway musical Saint Louis Woman, the script for which (in its several variations) is in the Syracuse University Library.
5. In June 1971 tape-recorded interviews by the author at the Bontemps home in Nashville, Arna Bontemps related several instances when questions of his identity were advanced by total strangers.
6. This article is based on excerpts from the first chapter of my work in progress about the life of Arna Bontemps.
sister Ruby two years later, sat at the upper end of Alexandria’s ex-
tensive black community. The cottage was spacious enough to
shelter an extended family: Arna’s grandparents, Sarah and her hus-
band Joseph, their two sons and five daughters, and their children.

Her home suited the disposition of Sarah Ward Pembroke, for
instead of conforming to the common style of the black commu-
nity, it gave the appearance of irregularity in construction and
eclecticism in taste. In fact the style of this Queen Anne cottage was
an aesthetic and economic step above the standard shotgun cot-
tages that were constructed in large numbers during the 1880s
when the regional railroad network was evolving in the South and
throughout the Red River waterways. Unlike many other houses
of black people in the area, the cottage boasted two brick chimneys
serving four fireplaces and a kitchen.

Arna would someday think of the Louisiana of his childhood as a
lost Eden and write about his memories—for instance, the after-
noon when his several handsome aunts emerged from the cottage
where they were working as seamstresses, extending their aprons to
collect falling pecans being shaken from a front-yard tree by a genie
of an uncle. There was a large stone that doubled as a bench for him
and his grandmother on sultry evenings after the sun had gone
down, or as a waiting post when his young uncles were due to re-
turn from school. He would recall the times when they hitched up

22–3; Virginia and Lee McAlester, A Field Guide to American Houses (New York:
Knopf, 1986), 163–4; and John A. Jakle et al., 212b, c. According to Jakle et al.
(145) and Vogt (23), the shotgun house with its rooms arranged directly behind
one another, front to back, was associated with blacks and poor whites in and
around Alexandria. Its name probably derived from the notion that if a shotgun
were fired through the front door all the pellets would leave through the rear
door without hitting anything. These slender constructions, which may be Hait-
ian or West African in origin, began to appear in New Orleans during the first
quarter of the nineteenth century and became popular in the rural communities
north and west of New Orleans after the Civil War.

8. In 1992, under the auspices of the Arna Bontemps Foundation, the house
was moved from its original site out of the path of an interstate highway, refur-
bished, and converted into the Arna Bontemps African-American Museum and
Cultural Arts Center, the only one of its kind in the State of Louisiana.
the rig to Daisy the mare and crossed the Red River on the new wooden bridge to visit Grandmother Pembroke’s friends in the woods beyond Pineville.⁹

From Texas the Red River cuts southeasterly across Louisiana and meets with the Old and the Atchafalaya rivers east of Alexan-

dria, which together seek the Mississippi before that great river falls past New Orleans into the Gulf of Mexico. For many years the Red River was the principal link of commerce between the ports that sprang up along its shorelines. Alexandria was the last sizable community on the river before it joined the Mississippi, and its location allowed it to serve the surrounding agricultural communities. The city sits just below the rapids for which Rapides Parish—the municipality in which Alexandria is situated—earned its name, and its site on the south bank of the river made it at once susceptible to the annual floods and indispensable as a port of commerce. During the early nineteenth century, sprawling plantations to the north, south, and west, with their black slave labor, produced rich crops of cotton and sugarcane that were shipped through the port of Alexandria to the New Orleans markets. Alexandria was for many years prior to Arna Bontemps’s birth a place of ethnic and cultural confluence.

The city is an oval island formed at a point where the Bayou Rapides breaks away south from the Red River for some fifteen miles before rejoining it once again. Pineville sits on the opposing bank, a sloping highland bereft of the alluvial soil that enriches Alexandria, but spared the annual threat of rising flood waters that led some years later to the erection of a levee along the south bank. The two communities coexisted in a state of congenial reciprocity that continues to this day. Arna’s buggy journeys across the bridge with Grandma Pembroke to visit friends and kin carried him over the rising bluffs, past Pineville’s cemeteries and into the picturesque pine hills.

For Sarah Ward Pembroke, journeys into the piney woods with Arna in tow recalled the days of her own childhood and adolescence when she was a privileged offspring of a well-to-do white entrepreneur. Like her own grandchild, she once had little knowledge of her special status or of how precarious, after all, it would prove to be. She was born on 4 July 1854, less than thirty miles north of Pineville in what was then Catahoula Parish at the White Sulphur Springs resort and health spa. While it is true that her mother was a slave there, a fact that officially made Sarah and her

10. I have drawn this conclusion based upon the 1850 Louisiana census and in the absence of any evidence to the contrary. Arna Bontemps noted on 8 November 1970, “I did not have a white father. I did not have a white grandfather.
Louisiana (Map by D. Michael Kirchoff, Syracuse University Cartographic Lab.)
siblings slaves as well, Sarah, as the child of the proprietor, Joseph P. Ward, was never treated as such and she never saw her mother or her siblings treated as slaves at the time. She met other slaves daily at White Sulphur Springs, and they were of many complexions and temperaments, but it appeared that none was held in the same estimate as members of her family.

Many slaves lived in the immediate vicinity. Some arrived at the springs with their masters and slept in the outlying quarters provided for that purpose. But for Sarah, most slaves seemed too crude to warrant the privilege of her association. After all, her mother was well regarded as much for her ability as the resort cook as for her relationship to the proprietor. Sarah did not become self-conscious about her own status until the Civil War was nearly over. It was not until after the mysterious disappearance and death of Joseph Ward just ahead of the federal troops' entry into Catahoula Parish that her family felt the sting of her mother's status.

Joseph P. Ward, an adventurer from the state of Georgia, had managed to parlay a mineral spring in the remote region of Catahoula Parish into a lucrative retreat. In 1830, while making his way by wagon train from Warm Springs, Georgia, to the sparsely

I had two white great-grandfathers, and neither raped my black great-grandmothers. I can prove that these couples lived together as families and bore lovely children. The white men emancipated their black helpmates and their offspring were born free in Louisiana in 1835 (Bontemps Family Papers, Fisk University). Evidence does exist for the Bontemps of Avoyelles Parish through records of the Catholic church, but local court records at Catahoula Parish (then the jurisdiction for White Sulphur Springs) shed no light on this matter with regard to the Wards.

11. There is controversy about Ward’s origins. The Ward-Pembroke clan contended that he was of British descent, if not, indeed, titled; at times they referred to him as Lord. According to the 1860 Louisiana census, Ward’s place of birth was South Carolina. The otherwise useful histories shed little light on the proprietor; they include Ann McClendon-Lukens and Christy Lukens, The History of Lasalle Parish (privately published, March, 1985), 9-10; and Ruth Irene Jones, “Antebellum Watering Places of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Arkansas” (master’s thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1954), 47. As Jones’s study reveals, there were many popular mineral spring retreats throughout the urban and rural regions of Louisiana prior to the Civil War, 1-5 passim.

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settled Texas territory, Ward happened upon a bubbling sulphur spring that seemed unclaimed and unappreciated, except by some Indians native to the region. He knew that such springs back East attracted the wealthiest and most influential citizens, and Ward’s own former community of Warm Springs, Georgia, thrived nobly. In the South the most highly regarded health resort was White Sulphur Springs, Virginia, and Ward aimed to replicate its success. He declared the spot the White Sulphur Springs of the Southwest.

In time he erected a two-story hotel and a tavern replete with a bar for dispensing glasses of spring water along with more potent concoctions. A gambling house, a dance hall, a general merchandise store, and extensive quarters for slaves soon followed. By 1850 White Sulphur Springs boasted two large hotels facing each other on opposite hillsides, a livery stable, a cotton gin, a grist mill, a school, and even its own United States post office. 12

Sarah was the second of five children born to Charlotte Chlotilde La Crenton. Family history asserts that Charlotte was an adult when she was purchased by Ward at the New Orleans port of entry sometime late in the 1840s when the importation of slaves was illegal and risky. The derivation of her French name is unknown, but her descendants maintain that her own mother came from Madagascar. 13 Arna alluded to her as “a crude half-Indian, half-African woman.” Charlotte Chlotilde herself is believed to have been born in Martinique, Haiti, or Guadeloupe. She was conversant in French and she spoke a broken English, probably a patois. Statuesque and very dark of complexion, she cut a striking and handsome figure. So long as Joseph Ward controlled the resort, Charlotte Chlotilde was mistress of the estate.

Charlotte had five children, not all of them Ward’s. First she mothered a son named Philo by a father who remains unnamed. Sarah Ward, Joseph Ward’s first child by Charlotte Chlotilde, was born in 1854. Some two years later, Charlotte had a third child,

13. Anna J. Stokes (Aunt Anna of the Pembrokes, then living at 1955 18th Street in Santa Monica, California) to Arna Bontemps, [September 1953?], Bontemps Family Papers, Fisk University.
who was named Jane Brown. The father of this child, for reasons not clear, currently remains unnamed as well. There was no mystery about Charlotte’s fourth child, however. Joseph P. Ward Jr. was born in 1862. Nearly nine years passed before Charlotte Chlotilde gave birth to her fifth and final child, Charles Green, born in 1871, long after Ward’s death, when Charlotte Chlotilde LaCrenton had become Charlotte Green. The fifth child was the offspring of an unhappy marriage to one Stephen Green, a black resident of Catahoula Parish. Apparently feeling resentment towards Charlotte Green’s other children, especially the mulattos, Stephen Green refused to provide for them.\textsuperscript{14}

The year before Joseph Ward Jr. was born, the 9 June 1861 \textit{Picayune} of New Orleans reported,

There is more than the usual stir and animation in our streets, considering the time of year, and we are not without out-of-town visitors. We have, and are likely to have, more stay-at-homes and can’t-get-aways with us, this summer, than has been usual heretofore, the minds of our citizens being preoccupied with something more serious and real than pleasure seeking at distant watering places.\textsuperscript{15}

By 1 May of the following year the city of New Orleans surrendered to the Union forces, and federal occupation and control of this thriving port set the entire state on edge. Most of all, the prospect of military forays into the interior was the cause of deep concern among the citizenry up and down the Red River as far north as Shreveport, the site of confederate headquarters in Louisiana. The first invasion into central Louisiana happened in the spring of 1863. Federal troops seized cotton and livestock and slaves from local people and sent wealthy planter families fleeing into Texas with any valuables they could salvage, including costly

\textsuperscript{14} Ruby Bontemps Troy to Arna Bontemps, October 1941, Bontemps Family Papers. The letter is in response to Arna’s request that she elicit details of family history from their grandmother, Sarah Ward Pembroke, for a projected biography. Arna was then living in Chicago; his sister Ruby was living in Los Angeles close to the eighty-seven-year-old matriarch.

\textsuperscript{15} Quoted in Jones, 4.
slaves. Contraband slaves, meanwhile, joined with federal troops and were removed to New Orleans, some to labor for the occupying forces, some to be conscripted into military service. This treatment of slaves as *contraband of war*—in the same category as captured guns and ammunition—had become Union policy beginning in May 1861, when a Union Army general refused to give up three slaves who had fled to his side after they had been forced to build confederate defenses.

The first incursion, intended to affirm the vulnerability of the region, merely set the stage for the next more devastating episode. It came in March 1864 and led to the burning of Alexandria. It was called “the most impressive display of military might in the Southwest,” with troops, cavalry, and artillery on land, and naval troop transports, including ironclad and tinclad vessels, commanding the Red River. Both the army and the navy foraged for supplies along the way, robbing and burning dwelling places as they went and meeting only scattered resistance from depleted confederate troops.

The federal fleet and the mass of troops eventually wended their way upriver, despite the fact that for the first time since 1855 the river’s level failed to rise. This invasion above the shallows and rapids was the most threatening incident since the start of the conflict for the inhabitants north of the rapids, including White Sulphur Springs. As the federals approached, family descendants report that Joseph Ward frantically sought to secure his valuables by burying them in the surrounding woods. Many years later, in an unpublished novella, Arna Bontemps brought his imagination to play on this episode and portrayed his ancestor frenetically burying and exhuming his cache.

18. Bontemps Family Papers. Also find references to the hidden treasure incident in Anna J. Stokes’s unpublished autobiography (1953?) in the Arna Bontemps Papers, Syracuse University Library; and in Kirkland C. Jones, *Renaissance*
The further north the federals moved the stronger the resistance they met from the confederates. They also encountered frightened and hostile inhabitants, especially women and children. Most slaves, on the other hand, were delighted to see the blue uniforms, and crowds of contraband flocked after them. Union troops ranged into White Sulphur Springs and, after foraging for food and valuables, left the resort intact. By the third week of April, however, the exhausted federal forces began a retreat to the relative security of Alexandria, leaving the plantation country, from the Cane River south to Alexandria, in smoke and ruins.\textsuperscript{19} It was during this frenzied episode that Joseph Ward disappeared from Catahoula Parish.\textsuperscript{20}

As the federal troops retreated down the Red River, scattered confederate troops peppered the retreat and kept the staggered Union forces in a constant state of unbalance all the way to Alexandria. By the time they entered the town, they were “accompanied by crowds of contraband of every age and complexion who had joined the column.” It was an act of instant urbanization that would affect life and politics in Alexandria throughout the rest of the century. But most troublesome for the federals was the fact that the Red River proved to be even less cooperative in the retreat than it was in the advance. Because the water level was so low, the ironclad and tinclad gunboats now were trapped and could not go down over the rapids; but because the vessels could not be abandoned without “a stunning blow to Northern naval prestige,” movement of all the forces was delayed.\textsuperscript{21}

This predicament for the federal forces added yet another dra-

\textsuperscript{19} Johnson, 223–35 passim.
\textsuperscript{20} There are conflicting family reports about this matter. In her October 1941 letter (see n. 13), Ruby Troy reported that Ward died at White Sulphur Springs just before the end of the war. Arna’s contention that Ward fled to New Orleans, where he took up with a woman before he died there, so far has not been affirmed. Anna Stokes reported that with great trepidation Charlotte Chlotilde and others plowed the area around the spa without success in their search for the buried treasure.
\textsuperscript{21} Johnson, 235–49 passim.
matic episode to Sara Ward Pembroke’s inventory of memories. Early in May 1864, word reached White Sulphur Springs that the Union forces were actually laboring round the clock to construct a temporary dam on the river, and that “many of the men, mostly colored troops, [were] standing neck deep in the water” as they worked. This astonishing piece of news brought thousands of spectators from far and wide, and they were able to observe the felling of pine trees, the sinking of barges, and soldiers and civilians scouring the region for heavy materials of any sort to accomplish the feat. Bricks and heavy timbers were torn from buildings, including the seminary in Pineville where Union General William Tecumseh Sherman had been superintendent just before his call to active duty; rails from a primitive railroad were ripped from their roadbed and the very engine and cars that traversed them were confiscated for the project.22

Spectators were stunned by the sheer audacity of the effort, and when the first of the heavy ironclad vessels eventually found a deep enough level to escape the shallows and reach easy water downstream, cheers of admiration resounded from the shorelines. But cheers turned to sorrow when departing federal forces set Alexandria ablaze.23 Most of the town was leveled.

For nine-year-old Sarah Ward, the burning of Alexandria was the climax of two years that had altered the only way of life she knew. The conflict had brought whites, free people of color, and slaves into association with each other in ways that broke down the “Black Code” of Louisiana, which had long set the terms for their social and legal conduct. The social chasm between free people of color and slaves now expanded enormously, especially as the hue and cry against slavery grew.24

The Black Code in part stipulated Catholic instruction and bap-

22. Ibid., 261–3; and Eakin, 39.
23. Johnson, 268–70.
tism for everyone; it forbade marriage or concubinage of whites or freeborn or manumitted blacks with slaves; and it fixed penalties for free persons of color who gave refuge to runaway slaves. The existence of such a code was testament to the anxiety aroused by free persons of color. As early as 1830 their numbers had increased to nearly 17,000 and they had reached a high social mark, "owning extensive sugar and cotton plantations with numerous slaves; maintaining thriving industrial and commercial establishments; practicing various trades and professions; and educating their children in private schools, through private tutors." But in many locales, even such solid economic footing did not shield them from ordinances that interfered with their freedom. Several parishes, for instance, actually prohibited free persons of color, under penalty of a fine, from being in the company of slaves at any time. By 1860, after many had fled the state to reside more securely in the North or in Europe, there were still more than 18,000 free people of color in Louisiana. Their numbers then compared with more than 331,000 slaves.

The term free persons of color (homme de couleur libre or femme de couleur libre) broadly referred to any persons of mixed blood. Persons of presumed pure African ancestry were recorded simply as free Negroes (negre libre or negresse libre). And the term negre without qualification meant "slave" and would have so designated Charlotte Chlotilde and her first three children, including Sarah, all born before emancipation. Little matter that Sarah was in fact a mulatta, as were most of the free Negro people of Louisiana. It did matter, for the time being, that she was not born free.

It mattered too that a society of free persons of color took shape along rigid class lines consequent upon shades of complexion and, to some degree, the condition of hair. The lighter the color and the straighter the hair the higher the social status. Among people of color, this living dictum remained as insistent after the Civil War as before, a fact that must be borne in mind if we are to understand

25. Rousséve, Negro in Louisiana, 22 and 44.
27. Rousséve, 50 and 55.
Sarah Ward’s adult social attitudes. At the bottom of this social hierarchy was the person of “pure” African ancestry, identified simply as a Negro. Such, perhaps, was the case of Charlotte Chlotilde and her children Philo Ward, Jane Brown, and Charles Green. The offspring of a Negro and a mulatto, on the other hand, was known as a “griffe” and stood a social notch above his or her pure African parent. The mulatto followed next in ranking, for he or she was the progeny of one white and one Negro parent. Sarah Ward and her brother Joseph Ward Jr. represent this combination. The offspring of white and mulatto parents were held in still higher order and were distinguished by the designation of “quadroon.” But most eminent of all was the “octoroon,” the child of a white parent and a quadroon. From this latter group one could pass from the status of “colored” to white.28

Many members of the Pembroke family of Rapides Parish appeared to be mulattos or quadroons. Their true origins are as shadowy as Sarah Ward’s, but in the main they reflected a mixture of Caucasian, Cherokee, and Negro. Nathan Pembroke, Arna’s great-grandfather, was usually taken as the patriarch of the family, meaning that he was the only clearly distinguishable progenitor. It was rumored in the family that he was himself the offspring of an eccentric steamboat captain and his slave mistress, that the master ate at table with his servants, and that he openly accepted his children by his slave mistress. Census records for Alexandria indicate that in 1870 Nathan Pembroke was a forty-one-year-old tenant farm laborer whose birthplace was the state of Maryland. Thirty-nine-year-old Betsy, who was born in Mississippi, appears to have been his wife. Six children are listed, but Joseph, Arna’s grandfather, is not among them.

Joseph Pembroke was born 27 December 1849, to Nathan Pembroke and a full-blooded Cherokee Indian woman whose name is now unknown. He was raised in the Methodist church by his mother. The 1870 census shows a twenty-one-year-old farm laborer named “Joe Pembroke,” residing in the Hines household at Alexandria, in all likelihood the home of his half brother Hogan

Hines. Along with the other members of that circle, Joseph is listed as a mulatto. He was swarthy, his hair was short-cropped and curly, his deep hazel eyes were intensified by generous eyebrows, and his broad forehead converged on a rather severe, Semitic nose. He was of medium height and solid build. Joe, as he was called, could not read and write, but he was known to be resourceful, frugal, and dexterous with tools. 29

Joe was thirteen when the federal troops first entered Alexandria in 1863, and he was thrilled by the excitement and disruption caused by the aggressive blue-uniformed soldiers. But the return of the Union forces the following year was, for Joe, a very different story. First, word that naval warships were making their way up the Red River with a vengeance excited concern that nothing would be spared. During this time, the town rapidly filled with fleeing slaves. Some were the most ragged and hapless field workers, others were mothers with two or three children in tow; most were black but many were of mixed ancestry. All were hoping to find freedom or refuge within the Union military garrison and none were turned away. Fifteen-year-old Joe Pembroke observed unselfish, humanitarian behavior by ragged slaves, by black and white military men, and by many of the local citizenry. He also observed, among those same groups, shocking displays of selfishness, greed, and depravity. At this early age, Joe Pembroke learned to judge men and women by their actions, a legacy he passed on to Arna, his first grandson. Nearly eighty years later, in an oblique tribute to his grandfather, Arna wrote of Henri Christophe, the Haitian revolutionary leader and king of Haiti, that “he had learned that there is a Cause that makes men brothers. He never seemed to believe . . . that being black or brown or white was in any sense a measure of one’s worth.” 30

The source of the Bontemps family baptismal records is St. Paul

29. The source of many of these family observations is Anna J. Stokes and her [September 1953?] letter (including photos of Joe Pembroke, Hogan Hines, and Mirra Hines Gla) to Arna Bontemps. Bontemps Family Papers.
the Apostle Church at Mansura, where the family first lived. It was this church on the Avoyelles Prairie, formerly Our Lady of Mount Carmel, that attended to Arna’s ancestors’ spiritual needs for at least two generations prior to the Civil War. Dark, straight-haired, French-speaking black men and women were “very common” throughout this part of Avoyelles Parish.

Indian inhabitants lived along the lower banks of the Red River when French exploring expeditions entered the old parish during the early eighteenth century. One explorer in 1718, for instance, described them as a friendly and generous lot, who brought them food and “brought the French in Louisiana horses, oxen, and cows.” It is unclear when the first white settlers established themselves, but the Avoyelles Post received its first commandant about 1780 and the first church, said to be located between present-day Marksville and Mansura, was not built until 1796. It is the same church in which Arna Bontemps’s ancestors were baptized.

Arna spoke of a legend in his father’s family that two Frenchmen came to the Louisiana Territory at the same time, and one of them settled in the part that is now Louisiana and one of them settled just across the river in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. The one who settled in Bay St. Louis, as the legend goes, had a white wife and raised a white family. It may very well be that the one who came to Louisiana did also. His name was Noel Bontemps. “Between my father’s best knowledge and my own putting together recorded data, the speculation is that he must have lost his [first] wife sometime after the birth [in 1824] of his daughter, because a little more than ten years later he gave freedom to one of his slaves named Pauline, and he lived with her thereafter.” The family legend, he resumed, described him at the time as an old white man. “Pauline had a son whose name was Hyppolyte, born couleur libre in Mansura on March 6, 1835 . . . . This was my grandfather.”

The State of Louisiana had long since enacted provisions for dealing with the emancipation of slaves. Those statutes were

amended and tightened from time to time, for manumission usu­
ally required legislative approval by a police jury within the parish;
but these laws did not govern the choice of surnames.\textsuperscript{33} Insofar as
Arna Bontemps’s family legend is true, Noel Bontemps likely peti­
tioned the parish for Pauline’s freedom; it was not unusual for a
master who was cohabiting with a slave woman to do so, both for
the sake of the woman and the resultant children. However, a
white person who wished to leave a legacy to an illegitimate child
had first to acknowledge paternity before a notary public in the
presence of two witnesses. Such an act deemed an illegitimate
offspring a “natural child,” as opposed to a “bastard.”\textsuperscript{34}

By 1860, according to the Louisiana census, there were at least
three households of Laurents in the parish; two were mulattos, the
third was white. In April of the next year, twenty-six-year-old
Hyppolyte Bontemps married Euphemie Laurent. Witnesses to the
ceremony were male members of the Laurent family, including
Joseph, a forty-one-year-old mulatto carpenter, who owned land
and personal property impressively valued at better than three
thousand dollars, and his brother Louis, a brick mason. There were
several carpenters and an equal number of brick masons among the
adult males in the Laurent families at the time, a notable representa­
tion of skilled laborers for a single black family in a farming com­

Hyppolyte Bontemps and Euphemie Laurent’s first child was a
son born on the 11 November 1861. He was named Louis Fenelon
Bontemps (probably in honor of his uncle) and he was baptized in
St. Paul the Apostle Catholic Church in Mansura. Three other sons
and one daughter followed. Arthur was born one year later. Seven
years passed and the Civil War had ended before Victor was born
sometime during October 1869. Paul Bismark, Arna’s father, was

\textsuperscript{33} Sterkx, 118–23.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 179.
born on 3 May 1872 at a small river port near Marksville named Barbin’s Landing. The only daughter in this marriage was named Pearl. Euphemie did not survive this birth.

These Marksville-Mansura mulattoes were among the French-speaking free families of color who witnessed the military events up and down the Red River with profound apprehension during the spring of 1864. As dark descendants of “the émigrés who sought shelter under the tricolor of France” when the Union army passed on its way to Alexandria and on its return as well, they had a feeling of being spectators rather than participants in the conflict. They witnessed the skirmishes around Marksville, but were spared the pitched battles that left other communities in a shambles. Foraging troops were naturally unbiased about their sources of food, and one family was as susceptible to being robbed as any other. Furthermore, the fields were thoroughly trampled and a season of growing was interrupted. Thus, as some federal military observers admired the beauty of Avoyelles’ prairie lands, many locals—including Union sympathizers—in turn perceived them as they did the army worm that devoured the cotton plant: a temporary but inevitable infestation. Others worried about dangerously errant shells from the federal fleet that bombarded Fort De Russy, just three miles beyond Marksville. And everyone was frightened out of their wits in the dead of one night when someone “badly botched” the detonation of the Fort’s magazine and set off “an earthshaking roar.”

Just as some Union officers had noted, apart from its gentle, undulating beauty, emerging into the Avoyelles Prairie region around Marksville and Mansura was like entering an altogether different culture. Since most Catholics in Louisiana before the Civil War generally were found in south Louisiana, and the area north of the Red River was largely Protestant country, this part of Avoyelles represented a kind of religious as well as cultural buffer zone. The very existence of a church at Mansura testifies to the substantial presence of devout communicants on the prairie, and as scrutiny of its records reveals, extramarital unions between white men and

35. Johnson, 93.
36. Ibid., 92–4.
37. Ibid.
black women, similar to the examples we have seen among the Bontempses, had become commonplace. Add to this knowledge the fact that the Catholic church did not formally segregate black worshippers before, during, or immediately after the Civil War, and it appears reasonable to contend that the condition of free people of color here generated less antagonism than in other parts of the state or, for that matter, the slavery system in general. These “congenial” interrelationships would not last.

Perhaps the greatest impact of the war in this parish was the uprooting and dispersal of these proud people and their unique culture—a dispersal that proceeded inexorably into the twentieth century. By that time, in the Avoyelles prairie lands, the name Bontemps virtually disappeared into the phonetic hybrid “Bontons.” Descendants of this branch still reside in Marksville and other parts of the Avoyelles Prairie under the “Americanized” spelling of the name. But by and large, members of the family eventually found their way to New Orleans, south to Big Cane or St. Martinsville, to Oklahoma, and to California. Some others would make a temporary interlude out of nearby Alexandria after Reconstruction. The records at St. Paul’s Catholic Church in Mansura note the death of Noel Bontemps sometime during the month of October 1880 at the age of seventy-five years.

Slavery was abolished in all of Louisiana in January 1864, but the force of the declaration was predictably uneven and unenforceable where Union troops did not maintain jurisdiction. More than a year would pass before the Appomatox Court House surrender on 9 April 1865. The end of the hostilities and the postwar efforts to adjust to a social order without institutionalized slavery exposed a tension between well-to-do former free persons of color and the greater population of freed persons, benefactors of the general emancipation.

It has been said that the slave family was the most unstable institution imaginable. Nonetheless, Charlotte Chlotilde was able to keep her family intact and to instill in them strong values, particularly her daughters Sarah and Jane. Despite her own experiences (or because of them) with the end of slavery, Charlotte Chlotilde inveighed against cohabitation and casual mating arrangements. She might have been aware of the 1865 Freedmen’s Bureau pamphlet *Address to Masters and Freedmen* that urged former slaves to contract legal marriages to support their families and to cast off slavery’s licentiousness and adultery, even though she could not have read it. But both of her daughters had reached attractive adolescence, and she was taking no chances.

Since Alexandria had rebounded remarkably from the devastation of the war, businesses were thriving along Second and Third streets, and housing was being constructed to accommodate a growing populace. Heavy steamship traffic up and down the river evidenced spirited competition. The farmers, who were able to shake off the two disastrous years of 1866 and 1867 when heavy flooding was followed by infestations of voracious army worms, were finding strong markets for their cotton. Twenty-year-old Joseph Pembroke was himself farming cotton on the outskirts of town, where he occupied one of the five rooms in a house with a husband-and-wife team of tenants named Ambler. The young bachelor furnished the single room and the Amblers managed his board and kept house for him. During the growing and harvest seasons, he moved between the farm and a residence in town with the Hines family, his half brothers and sister. Over the previous two years, the middling price of cotton had been holding at the estimable figure of twenty-four cents a pound, but Joe knew that even if the price did not hold in 1870, he could look to the promise of a high yield per acre that would more than compensate for a

41. Ibid., 85.
42. Taylor, 344–5.
43. Ruby Troy to Arna Bontemps, 13 October 1941 (Arna’s thirty-ninth birthday), Bontemps Family Papers.
This generally cheerful outlook, reinforced by the increasing value of land, gave Joe the security and confidence to propose marriage to Sarah Ward.

The planned match met with approval by family and friends on both sides. Despite her youth, Sarah did not approach wedlock lightly; the very marriage license symbolized her deep hunger for the stable family life her mother had been unable to sustain. For his part, Joseph attributed to Sarah “a typical nineteenth-century view of woman” that, according to Blassingame, was widely held in the black community: “Her gentle nature and ennobling spirit . . . were the major forces for good in society.” It was her destiny to “calm man’s savage nature and inculcate morality in his children.” In essence, the wife was not only called upon to sustain the sacraments, she was charged with civilizing man and (notably) uplifting the race. Sarah was willing to embrace these provisions within limits and on modified terms, for she had her own ideas about what constituted uplift of the race—ideas that were based upon ancestry and the value of skin tone. Sarah gave ascendancy to her father’s culture, to his religion, and to his race. Therein lay a simple caveat that was to give many of Sarah’s own children and her grandchildren much unease: “Bring the family up, don’t bring it down,” by which she meant, Make sure that your children won’t be any blacker than you are.

These and similar sentiments were espoused by many people within Sarah and Joe’s circle of Creole friends. The observation that blacks with white forbears led a more privileged existence compared to their “pure black” counterparts was not new. Actually, the relationship between skin color and privilege appears to have emerged during slavery as an extension of the kinship bonds

44. Taylor, 351.
45. Blassingame, 87.
46. Arna Bontemps, taped interview by author, Nashville, 18 June 1971. This point was reinforced, with gentle sarcasm aimed at Grandma Sarah Pembroke, by Ruby Troy, Arna’s married sister. In a letter to Arna, dated 13 October 1941, in the Bontemps Family Papers, Ruby teases Arna about the work she did for his book: “I think when [your] book is written, after all my work, it should be dedicated to ‘My Darling Sister.’”
Paul Bismark Bontemps and Maria Pembroke Bontemps with child Arna in Alexandria, Louisiana, ca. 1903 (courtesy of Paul B. Bontemps).
between mulatto children and their white fathers. Following the Civil War, elite positions in the black community depended strongly on family background, light skin color, and a heritage of freedom before emancipation. Generally speaking, then, fair-skinned blacks were granted advantages over other blacks in obtaining education, higher-status occupations, and property.

Shortly after her daughter's marriage in 1871, Charlotte Green brought the rest of her family from White Sulphur Springs and settled with her daughter and son-in-law in Alexandria. In time, Sarah's own children added to the extended family. Arna's mother, Maria Caroline, born in 1879, was the third offspring in a succession of five daughters and two sons. Before long, and probably with initial assistance from her mother, Sarah Pembroke managed a successful seamstress business out of her home. Joe abandoned farming and became an assistant to a white funeral director in town. By the early 1890s Sarah was able to purchase, in her own name, the very house at Ninth and Winn streets in which Arna and his sister Ruby were born. The seamstress business thrived until the family moved to California.

Maria was a delicate, fair-complexioned, and bookish young lady who eschewed work as a seamstress to become a school teacher. The circumstances under which she and Paul Bontemps met are unclear, but the De Lavallades of Avoyelles Parish were then living as neighbors of the Pembrokes at Ninth and Winn streets. The Bontempses and the Laurents, of course, were well familiar with this Creole family from the Mansura-Marksville region, and it is likely that Maria and Paul struck up an acquaintanceship through the common family association with the De Lavallades. Indeed, by this


48. Charlotte Chlotilde LaCreenton, from this point, was identified by the name Charlotte Green in the census and in legal documents, including the joint purchase of property with Sarah in Alexandria in 1883.
time Sarah Ward Pembroke and Emma DeLavallade were both friends and fellow business women.⁴⁹

Paul was born in 1872 near Marksville at a small site known as Barbin’s Landing. He was a strapping young man, and with his rich dark complexion and his straight black hair, he was considered fine looking. He managed English with a heavy inflection, though he preferred his Louisiana French. By the time he met Maria, he was a trained bricklayer-stone mason and a part-time jazz musician.⁵⁰ Both of these pursuits kept him in frequent motion throughout the Red River region and probably fostered his spirit of independence.

By the mid-1890s Paul Bismark Bontemps’s mother had been deceased more than twenty-five years, and his father had long since started a new family; his brothers had scattered throughout the state and his only sister had moved to Oklahoma. He was beginning to disengage from Catholicism, which, like the surrounding culture, had incorporated Jim Crow laws and other forms of racial insult. Fresh out of college, he was abandoning the now-inhospiteplace of his birth. He typified the disaffected and dispersed Creole figures of the era, especially those who had spent several “privileged” generations in and around the Avoyelles Prairie region. The overwhelming condition of the moment was uprootedness—similar to what his yet-unborn son would feel during the summer of 1924 when he emerged from the subway at 125th Street and Lenox Avenue in Harlem.

⁴⁹. Mrs. Emma DeLavallade operated a successful millinery shop from her home. Both businesses catered largely to white patrons.

⁵⁰. Paul mastered bricklaying and stone masonry at Straight University in New Orleans. The institution was chartered in 1869 and supported thereafter by the American Missionary Association (AMA). It’s not certain how long Paul attended Straight, but he probably left Avoyelles Parish for New Orleans sometime during 1886 when two of his brothers lived there. No doubt he learned to play the valve trombone and the baritone horn during this time. Jazz became the exciting avocation that he carried out with band leader Claiborne Williams, who worked the rural regions west of Baton Rouge. Perhaps it was the play of Arna’s imagination on this period of his father’s life that inspired the wonderfully haunting little tale for children about a lonely river boy from Barbin’s Landing who blew a silver trumpet: Lonesome Boy (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1955).