

NC CROSSROADS

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Uncovering Sarah Dudley Pettey's Life

On the first day that I began to research North Carolina's African American women, I immediately met the most remarkable woman I had ever encountered.

In 1896, Sarah Dudley Pettey penned her first ever "Woman's Column" in *The Star of Zion*, an African Methodist Episcopal Zion newspaper published in Charlotte.

As her initial column filled the screen on my reel of microfilm and I read her militant words, I knew I could never stop until I found her family. It was a quest that would last four years. I placed newspaper ads, made embarrassing telephone calls to strangers, and knocked on doors.

Finally, I found a yellowed clipping on Edward Richard Dudley, III, a Johnson C. Smith graduate and New Yorker, who bore the same name as Sarah Dudley Pettey's father. A call to the university yielded remarkable results: a telephone number for Dudley. But was his name just an amazing coincidence? I rang; he answered. "I'm looking for descendants of a woman named Sarah Dudley Pettey," I explained. And then, miraculously, I heard, "Yes, she was my aunt, a woman suffragist in the 1890s."

In uncovering Sarah Dudley Pettey's life, I stumbled upon a hidden and intriguing chapter of history about African Americans in North Carolina. Dudley Pettey and her peers occupied a very different place in society than their children would, a place where they enjoyed much greater equality both with whites and with African American men.

Before the turn of the century, Dudley Pettey and her peers saw themselves not as a marginalized group but as the vanguard of their race and sex. As members of a small but rapidly growing black middle class in the South, they were prepared for leadership by their education, professional positions, and voluntary work. They did not call themselves feminists, but equality for women grounded their thinking as they championed strategies to benefit all African Americans. Although they could not vote, they took seriously their responsibilities as citizens.

Yet, despite their efforts to fight back, a white supremacy movement around the turn of the century crushed their hope. The efforts of these African Americans lay unrewarded for a longer time than Dudley Pettey ever dreamed possible.

Adapted from Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920 by Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, University of North Carolina Press, 1996.



THE STAR OF ZION

ORGAN OF THE AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL ZION CHURCH IN AMERICA

The Up-To-Date Woman

There has been a tendency for centuries remote to crush the aspirations of womanhood, if those aspirations rose above the level of the common housewife. It was thought that her mission was to prepare the food, sweep the house, mend the clothes and rock the cradle. Well this may have been the height of the Colonial dame's ambition; but the nineteenth century chronicles the advent of the new woman. She is a creature to be admired, for she is an all round woman. She is becoming versed in all the elements essential to man's happiness. She no longer goes up to the temple veiled as did the women of Greece, Athens, Sparta or Bohemia; but she is called unveiled to the front to act her own part in life's great drama. Yes, she realizes that there is a work to be done, and she must do her share or forever succumb to man's supremacy.

Because the woman of to-day is progressive, some would laugh her to scorn; others would call her masculine; but it is not true,—she is only up-to-date. Who would not pay a ransom for the invention of any modern appliance? Who would not bow at the shrine of the man whose capabilities and environments fitted him to be the foremost among men? Then who would not admire the charms, graces and genuine adjustability of the up-to-date woman?

She is not trying to leap across the broad chasm of nature and change her sex; but she is striving to keep pace with modern civilization. She has been a student of domestic economy, and at home is truly domesticated; from garret to pantry she understands her business and performeth it well. Those persons who are disposed to criticise the advanced woman

reason from the same analogy as that Anglo-Africans ought to be educated only for menial labor. In other words, they would put a limit to the capabilities and possibilities of certain classes of humanity; while for the more favored sex or class they would bequeath them the unlimited territory of the universe as a field for adventurous exploits, and then offer as a reason for this sexual limitation "woman's inferiority and native inability to cope with man." Two things are requisite to prove true heroism and meritorious leadership, viz., innate ability and an opportunity.

The up-to-date woman claims the ability and only asks the so-called lords of creation for the opportunity of clearly demonstrating her merits, and thus prove herself worthy of a place in the front rank of the thinkers of the age. Some would say that woman is good in her place. This reminds me of what some white people say of the Negro; that "He is good in his place;" and for two hundred and fifty years America has been trying to define our place; but the Afro-American seems never to be content in the position circumscribed for him by the more favored race.

His manhood will not allow him to rest contented within the limits of sentimental boundary, and God forbid that he should. And as he struggles upward and onward toward the temple of fame and grandeur, renting the bands of prejudicial circum-scription, the world stands watching and waiting to see if he will take his place on the top. So with woman. For nearly six thousand years the various races have differed as to woman's true position in society. Some have made her but a serf, while others have crowned her

queen. Where is her place? It is acknowledged by the leading teachers of to-day that the influence of cultured, Christian motherhood has moulded modern civilization. If this be true, at what stage in man's life does woman become incapable as an associate, counselor or advisor among men?

Political economy and civil government have at last found favor in her sight. She is no longer ignorant of the doings of her government; but is alive to all its workings. Should circumstances warrant it, she is qualified to legislate and arbitrate with statesmen of no mean ability. Some States recognize their stateswomen and allow them the right of suffrage; and they are not much in advance of to-day. Woman was destined to go side by side with man in all life's struggles. In this spurious era of irregular party lines and populist gore with fusion as the unknown quantity, woman is a silent but potent factor in moulding sentiment for the approaching campaign. The new woman is thoroughly conversant with the various platforms offered. She has the love of her country at heart and has a right to hoist a gold, silver or bimetallic standard, if she chooses, in her own community.

Church polity has in her a staunch advocate. She is the backbone and sinew of the Christian Church; but notwithstanding this, some think that she is good enough to labor hard in building the temple but when it is completed that her work is finished. Such inhumanity to woman makes countless Christians mourn.

Sarah Dudley Pettey

Newbern, N.C.

*From The Star of Zion,
August 13, 1896.*

*We've many brilliant women,
With intellectual life—
Just take for example,
Our Bishop Pettey's wife.*

"Some would say that woman is good in her place. This reminds me of what some white people say of the Negro: that 'He is good in his place.'" The person who penned this thought, Sarah Dudley Pettey, challenged the idea of "place," not simply through her words, but through her acts. She was an African-American woman, the daughter of slaves, who lived in obscurity in a small North Carolina town.

In 1896, when she wrote these words, Dudley Pettey thought that she saw the day coming when a person's place would depend not on sex or color, but on energy and ability. Sarah Pettey and her husband, Charles, represent the extraordinary potential of ordinary African Americans in the first three decades of freedom.

Sarah, born in 1869, was named for her slave grandmother, Sarah Pasteur. Baby Sarah was the first member of the Pasteur-Dudley family born in freedom. Edward Dudley, her father, was a farmer who took home prizes for his produce, including an eggplant two feet across and pumpkins five feet tall. As the years passed, the family grew; Sarah's mother gave birth to two boys and five girls after Sarah.

Her mother and grandmother taught Sarah Dudley to read and write before the little girl was six. The family certainly needed no coaxing to enter the schoolroom when American Missionary Association teachers flocked to New Bern in the late 1860s and established at least five private schools. Education had given hope to the Dudleys in slavery, gave them an advantage in Reconstruction, and would propel them into the future.

Sarah learned her political lessons at her daddy's knee. Edward Dudley served as a state representative, and the year after Sarah's birth, Dudley went to the legislature, returning home most months to farm and to teach school. When she completed the available six grades, Sarah Dudley attended the coeducational New Bern State Colored Normal School, a state-funded teacher-training school that mixed high school work with education courses.

One year later, 13 year-old Sarah left home for Scotia Seminary, a Presbyterian school for women in Concord, 200 miles to the west. There the biracial faculty oversaw a curriculum calculated to give students the knowledge, social consciousness, and sensibilities of New England ladies. Mary McLeod (who would become Mary McLeod Bethune), who followed Sarah Dudley to Scotia five years later, recalled that there her northern white teachers taught her that "the color of a person's skin has nothing to do with his brains, and that color, caste, or class distinctions were an evil thing."

The school was founded as a place where students learned to do as well as to think. The cooking, music, and fancywork that students learned along with their Latin should be employed to their own ends, the founders believed, not in domestic service for white people. When Sarah arrived, she greeted 139 other young women students, who ate, lived, and worked with a faculty of white and black female teachers. Her roommate was Lula Pickenpack, a slightly older girl from Charlotte, who already had a serious suitor, Charles Calvin Pettey.

Sarah Dudley graduated with distinction from Scotia in 1883 and returned to New Bern as an assistant principal in the public school. Her first year of teaching the average monthly salary of the state's 700 black teachers was \$22, a little less than that of white teachers, but the highest paying position a black woman could find anywhere. Terms lasted only four months, and, in the summer, Dudley attended a month-long teacher training session at New Bern Normal School. The next year, she moved up to vice principal in the public schools and associate principal of the summer normal school under George White, who would soon become her congressman.

Sarah Dudley kept in touch with Lula Pickenpack and Charles Pettey, who were now married. Pettey, born in 1849, stood 5'8" tall, "with short arms and legs, a long body, a prominent receding forehead, cheeks indicative of Indian descent, complexion of an Indian; his black hair was nearly straight." Pettey had a piercing, direct gaze, a dashing mustache, and a beautiful singing voice. Despite his probable triracial mix, Pettey's racial identity was always African American, and he had been born in slavery in 1849.



About the Author of *Gender and Jim Crow*

Glenda Gilmore is a native of Greensboro and earned her Ph.D. in history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1992. A seventh generation North Carolinian (on both sides of her family), she graduated from Wake Forest University in 1970. Since 1995, she has been assistant professor of history at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, where there is some good barbeque, but no good grits.

Her book, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920*, was published by the University of North Carolina Press in 1996. *Gender and Jim Crow* won the Frederick Jackson Turner Prize for the best first book by an author in American history and the James A. Rawley Prize for best book in race relations, both given by the Organization of American Historians. In addition, it won the Julia Cherry Spruill Prize for the best book on southern women's history given by the Southern Association for Women Historians and Yale's Heyman Prize for the best book by a junior faculty member.



NC CROSSROADS is a new publication of the North Carolina Humanities Council (NCHC). Serving North Carolina for over twenty-five years, NCHC is a non-profit foundation and state-based affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. NCHC's mission is to support public programs that address fundamental questions about who we as human beings are and how we can live together in the world we share.

In 1998, **NC CROSSROADS** will continue to explore the theme of "Democratic Vistas: Citizenship and Communities in the 21st Century," as well as issues related to cultural identity and community. We hope you enjoy this second issue of **NC CROSSROADS**.

To comment on **NC CROSSROADS** or for more information about NCHC and public humanities programs, please contact us at:

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For more information on the lives of African American women and their society after the Civil War...

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Petty studied Latin and Greek at Biddle Memorial Institute. On the weekends, he began preaching in the countryside, making "appointments," first at one crossroad and then another. Starting out on a Friday night, he would walk more than 50 miles in 48 hours. Petty had worked barely four months after graduation as head of a black public school in Charlotte when he became an elder in the AME Zion church and found he would have to move to South Carolina to assume his new post. There he established a normal school, built a national name for himself in the church, and with John Dancy, a prominent churchman, began to publish *The Star of Zion*, a denominational newspaper that soon became one of the 12 most important black newspapers in the nation.

Sometime after 1881, Lula Pickenpack and Charles Petty departed on a great adventure. With Alexander Walters, who would later help found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Petty led a band of colonists to California. They settled near San Francisco, founded a community named Petteville, and spread out to start AME Zion churches. Petty became pastor of the downtown Stockton Street church.

After Lula died in 1887, Charles found himself responsible for their two young daughters. Soon, he became Bishop with responsibility for Texas, and an 1888 conference brought him back to North Carolina and a reunion with Sarah Dudley. Within a year, they married and set up their home in New Bern.

Like many other successful black families in North Carolina's urban areas, the Petteys lived a deliberately conspicuous life. "There are plenty of carriages in New Bern," the black-owned *Raleigh Gazette* noted, "owned principally" by African Americans. Sarah Dudley Petty went about town in a black carriage pulled by a high stepping mare. Charles Petty sported silk top hats.

Along with roast bear, Dudley Petty served lobster cutlets, Russian salad with sauce tartare, and provided finger bowls at her table. The trappings of their lives particularly annoyed white New Bernians, who called the Petteys' society "colored swelldom." Despite white disapproval, the Petteys and their society rented reception rooms at the town's best "white" hotel, shopped in the best stores, and hosted white townspeople at special programs in St. Peter's AME Zion church. African Americans also had prominent professional roles in the community. All eight barbers in New Bern were black, as were three butchers, two carpenters, and two general merchants. Three black lawyers practiced in the city, and eight black leaders organized the Mutual Aid Banking Company, the first black private bank in the state.

Blacks were emerging as powerful partners in the governance of the community; in response, whites tried to order the world to prevent African Americans from rising. Whites preferred Uncle Remus on the farm to "colored swelldom" in the cities, and it was in North Carolina's cities that black success showed most. After 1879, the percentage of black-owned urban property in the state increased at a time when the value of farms decreased and town lots grew more valuable. Wilmington ranked second in the South in black property ownership among cities 10,000 to 25,000.

Only 5.6 percent of North Carolina's African Americans owned homes in 1870; 26 percent were homeowners in 1910. To some, it must have seemed as if African Americans were cornering the real estate market in North Carolina's towns and cities. In Wilmington, for example, many African Americans lived in "fine" houses with "pianos and servants and lace curtains to their windows."

Because her husband served as bishop of the Texas, Alabama, and Louisiana district, Dudley Petty spent little time looking through her lace curtains and much time traveling. Their honeymoon took them to Europe, California, and Mexico. In England, the Archbishop of Canterbury received them and the minister Robert Lincoln presented them at the Court of St. James. Their visit to rural Ireland prompted Charles to write an article comparing the South's racial situation to Ireland's ethnic strife caused by British rule. When Petty became Bishop of the Allegheny-Ohio Conference in 1896, they spent several months each year in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and the District of Columbia.

Their five children came at two-year intervals, two boys and three girls, and Charles' two daughters from his first marriage also lived with them in New Bern. Traveling extensively, serving as her husband's secretary, caring for their children, and, beginning in August 1896, writing a bimonthly column for *The Star of Zion*, Sarah Dudley Petty had to be extremely organized. One of Sarah's sisters and one of Charles's cousins lived in their house to help care for the children, and Sarah's brother, George, lived next door with his own growing family.



Bishop Charles Calvin Petty, circa 1895.

Charles and Sarah made each other happy, and their devotion to one another spilled over in public. He was extraordinarily proud of her, saw her as his equal, and bragged about her to his colleagues. Once, after a long theological debate with readers of *The Star of Zion*, Petty bowed out, but promised, "Madam Petty, who has been reviewing the Greek testament scriptures will remain at my desk; I am quite confident that she will be able to keep off all intruders." Dudley and Petty made a formidable team.

Charles encouraged Sarah to go forward, even on his own ground. Sarah traveled with Charles to churches in his district, where they gave remarkable performances. First Charles would preach. Then Sarah would take the pulpit and deliver a speech on woman's rights, either "Woman the Equal of Man" or "Woman's Suffrage." One of her male listeners called her "a power with the pen, clearly demonstrating the possibilities of a woman." Dudley Petty regularly reported in *The Star of Zion* on women's accomplishments that she believed would "be of historic interest a century from now." "What position is there," she asked rhetorically, "that woman cannot fill?"

Dudley Petty's belief in woman's equality was not unusual in her church, but it may have been a minority opinion. In 1867 church leaders deleted the word "male" from the church officers' qualifications list, at a time when other denominations argued that women had no place "teaching or preaching." Thirty years later Mary Small, a bishop's wife and recent deacon who had taught Sunday School in Fayetteville, sought ordination as an elder. Bishop Charles Petty created a huge controversy when he made Small an elder in 1898. Sarah was delighted.

To Sarah Dudley Petty and Mary Small, it was no longer enough for AME Zion women to experience spirituality individually. Calling could not be held within, a woman must follow where it led, even if the road seemed steep. If God called on a woman and filled her with the spirit, she should speak it aloud, and her responsibility was not simply to save her own soul, but to save others' as well.

Mary Small's ordination as an elder, which seems to be the first of a woman in any denominational body in the United States, set off a firestorm of controversy in the AME Zion church. One minister devoted his column, "Red Hot Cannon Ball," to fears of a "petticoat ministry," arguing that "women's work in the church from the earliest dawn till now has been in subordination to man." God could not have turned this hierarchy upside down; the women must be bearing false witness. The minister concluded, "I as much doubt a woman's call to the ministry as I do my ability to fly."

Such negative remarks merely spurred Sarah Dudley Petty to greater rhetorical heights. Small was an "eloquent and forcible preacher," Dudley Petty argued. If the clamor did not subside, she threatened, "I have almost gotten in the notion of being ordained myself."

Oppression, whether on account of race or sex, was all the same to Sarah Dudley Petty since it violated Christian teaching. She linked race and sex discrimination tightly: "Those persons who are disposed to criticise the advanced woman reason from the same analogy as that class of Anglo-Saxons who believe Anglo-Africans should be educated only for manual labor." It was wrong to "put a limit to the capabilities and possibilities of certain classes of humanity," she wrote. Her feminism was not just a response to patriarchy, but to racial oppression as well. Women, Sarah Dudley Petty argued, stood poised to enter "every door of usefulness." For those doors to slam shut was simply wrong.

Together Charles and Sarah created a world in which, it seemed, anything could happen. Prior to 1898, the Petteys saw racial and gender progress everywhere. "This is an age of evolution, an age of development, an age of restlessness and commotion," Sarah wrote. "The day is past when the world will bow to any one man's theory." While some took issue with her controversial columns on economics, politics, and woman's place, no one challenged Sarah Dudley Petty's right to be heard, and some male readers stepped up to support her.

From the haven of New Bern and the cocoon of their love, the Petteys put the best possible face on the ominous stirrings of segregation and federal abdication of their rights. They saw national issues such as the Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that upheld "separate but equal" segregated facilities as temporary setbacks. Despite "frowns in the highest courts of the land," Charles Petty argued, "we as a race are enjoying the brightest rays of Christian civilization."

But Petty read the future wrong. In 1898, a group of white Wilmingtonians pledged, "we will never again be ruled by men of African origin." They led a white supremacist army through the streets and killed more than ten of the city's black leaders. By 1900, the state legislature took the right to vote away from black men through a series of legal and illegal tricks and segregated transportation. Black North Carolinians would begin moving out of the state in large numbers to northern destinations: Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, New York, and New Haven, CT.

Sarah Dudley Petty died in 1906 before women gained the right to vote. It was another 60 years until the kind of freedom and prosperity the Petteys enjoyed would once again be possible for African-American women and men in North Carolina.



Sarah Dudley Petty and her children, circa 1900.



Thought by her great-grandchildren to be a portrait of Sarah Pasteur, this is more likely to be a photograph of her daughter-in-law Caroline Dudley, taken in the late 1860s.



Unlike all-female Scotia Seminary where Sarah Dudley Petty was a student, Livingstone College in Salisbury, North Carolina was a co-educational institution where African American men and women taught together and learned together. Livingstone was controlled and financed by the AME Zion Church, in which the Petteys took active leadership roles, and is home to many original documents describing their life and society.

When I reached Sarah Dudley Petty's granddaughter, Corine Petty, and she listened over the telephone as I related the story of the grandmother she never knew, she became quiet. Finally she said, "When I was growing up in New York City, my [father and aunt] would start telling tales about their lives as children in the South—about riding around in horsedrawn carriages, and such things—and we children would try hard to keep a straight face, because we didn't dare laugh in front of Daddy. But when we got in the other room, we would laugh. We were sure that they were making it all up for our sakes."



Glenda Gilmore, from *Gender and Jim Crow*

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