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## **The Life and Entrepreneurial Exploits of Simon Durand**

### Life Story

What follows is the story of Simon Durand. Simon is born in 1815 on a sugar plantation outside New Orleans, Louisiana. His mother is an African American slave named Arelia, and his father is a Caucasian sugar planter named William Durand. James is the master's white son, Simon's half-brother, whom he grows up with and builds a bond with. Marthe is Simon's younger sister who is adopted by Arelia after the girl's parents are sold to other plantations.

Simon's mother, Arelia, spends any extra time outside of housework that she can in hiring out her own time from master Durand for her independent laundering work. She is saving to buy her family's freedom. It is exhausting and dirty work, but Marthe also helps her out as much as she can. Finally, when Simon is eleven years old, just before he comes of a socially more acceptable age for potential sale to another plantation, Arelia has saved enough. She is lucky enough that master Durand let her buy all three of them their freedom. Master Durand also knows that his son James is fond of his half-brother Simon, and is inclined toward keeping James happy. Granting their freedom, means he does not have to put Simon to hard labor or make an example of him.

Arelia continues her independent work as a laundress with Marthe and Simon to help her. They save everything that they can, and Simon learns a bit of basic needle working along the way. Through his father's connections, two years later he gets an apprenticeship with a tailor at the age of thirteen. The old tailor was an educated and free Creole man of color. Simon spends

seven years working for the tailor, and earning his tailor mastery. As Simon is exposed to the tailor's clientele and larger society, his curiosity for the world grows. He finds a paper called *The Liberator* which discusses topics relevant to his life, and discusses the abolitionist movement. Simon realizes the scope of racism he is going to have to work against to make his way in the world, and this sets his determination.

In 1835, having achieved Master Tailor at the age of twenty, he gets help from his half-brother, James Durand, and opens his own tailoring business. James assists him in gaining access to credit that would otherwise be unavailable to a person of color. Arelia and Marte also support Simon with whatever they can spare. Simon additionally does a bit of trading in goods on the side when profitable. He tries to save his money so that he can own his own land someday, like one of the free African American planters in Louisiana. His half brother, James, again helps Simon with credit for his expanding trading business prior to the Panic of 1837.

The Panic of 1837 hits and causes the loss of the majority of his tailoring customers, so he focuses on his business in trade goods which barely keeps him afloat. Simon manages to avoid a complete loss of his hard earned money of the past two years. Being only twenty-two and without a family to support, Simon bounces back and realizes that he needs to increase his assets as well as diversify his business in order to find the stability necessary for weathering future economic storms. Realizing that Louisiana's economy is not recovering very quickly after another poor year, he diversifies his trade business further, while his family tries to save all they can.

Nine years later in 1846, at the age of thirty-one, Simon has rebuilt his tailoring business and expanded his trading business. He marries a young mulatto woman named Henriette, who works as an independent seamstress. They join forces in building their tailoring and trading

businesses. However, there is an increase in restrictive legislation against black business participation, and their concern for their economic stability grows. Two years later they see the end of the Mexican-American War, and America gains the western territories. Shortly thereafter, in the *North Star* Simon reads Frederick Douglass' descriptions of the successes found by black men in California. The gold rush has begun, and many are seeking their fortunes out West. The less expensive land in the West is also tempting.

Simon saves enough money by 1849, at the age of thirty-four, and moves West along with his mother, sister, and wife. So very many people were going West for the gold rush that he figured the new development and increasing demand should increase the earning potential of his trading and tailoring businesses. Simon saw his opportunity, not in the possibility of gold, but in the increasing human demands that someone would have to fulfill, and he was determined to be the supplier.

After a long and arduous journey across the Great Plains and mountain ranges, Simon and his family arrive safely in the San Francisco area. Simon offers supplies and services to the many new Californian prospectors via his trading and tailoring businesses, and everything is sold at a premium because the demand is so high. Simon does so well in his first year in California that in 1851, at the age of thirty-six, he buys a large section of land on which he adds a lumber business to his portfolio. To this he adds a couple of small claims, and his wealth continues to expand right along with his landholdings. Just before this expansion, California is officially admitted as a free state in 1850. More good news follows in 1851 when his wife has their first child, followed by two more in the following two years.

Simon is far more economically stable when the Panic of 1857 hits. Now, Simon is forty-two with three young children. He has more land and diversified investments and

businesses, so he manages to maintain his wealth. He goes on to build a theater, a church, and a school. Simon contributes to the popular idea of the “uplifting” of his race. Simon Durand and his family happily live as free persons in comfort and security.

#### Historical Note

*ON BEING A FREE AFRICAN-AMERICAN ENTREPRENEUR IN THE EARLY AND MID-19TH CENTURY:* This is an uncommon yet plausible tale of a young free African American man who had some advantages which he built upon, and who had a keen entrepreneurial spirit which lead to sound business decisions, and ultimately to his success. Before the Civil War the economy was expanding, which opened up space and opportunities for new business (Walker 1986, 345). Participation in capitalism was supported despite the influence of socioeconomic restrictions (Walker 1986, 345). The intense support for the protection of private property, which supported the institution of slavery, also formed the basis for black entrepreneurship (Walker 1986, 345). Despite the institutional racism, restrictive legislation, and absence of political freedom which limited development of free black businesses, free African American entrepreneurs managed to create businesses in just about everything, and not simply in marginalized areas (Walker 1986, 345). My character, Simon, had the advantage of being half white and having a half-brother and father that were willing to provide some connection to opportunity. Simon additionally had a mother who worked independently to save for their freedom, and had a father willing to permit the purchase of their freedom. His access to a skilled tailor of color is likely to be unique to his region of Louisiana, additionally granting him access to opportunity. The very large Louisiana population of African Americans also supports the growth of black business. His is an uncommon story, but follows a path that was supported by

the successes of other free African American entrepreneurs.

*ADOPTION IN SLAVE FAMILIES:* The pressures on the slave family required that it be more inclusive, and so it included adopted family members (Owens 2009, 244).

*MULATTO WOMEN:* A mulatto woman was far more likely to attain skilled work than a darker skinned woman. In New Orleans, “mulatto women generally held three times as many skilled and professional jobs as their black counterparts. Black women, on the other hand, were twice as likely as mulatto women to hold service positions” (Dabel 2000, 224-5).

*COMPOSITION OF NEW ORLEANS FREE BLACK POPULATION:* There were almost twice as many free black women as there were free black men (Dabel 2000, 221). This was due to the higher value of the male field hands, the greater cost of slave men, and the white perception of “African American women as being less threatening” (Dabel 2000, 221). Another influence was white men arranging for manumission of their African American slave mistresses and children, “most manumission in New Orleans resulted from concubinage” (Dabel 2000, 221). Mulattoes formed a majority of the free black population, and interracial relationships were common enough that mulattoes made up “75% of the African American population in New Orleans” (Dabel 2000, 221).

*CONTRASTS WITH THE EAST:* In Virginia, well into the 18th century, white servant women bore children by African American fathers, and were the cause of an increase in the free African American population of that region (Heinegg 2004, 2). The increase in free African Americans in Louisiana resulted from interracial relationships between white slave owners and their African American slaves. The master-slave relationships in Louisiana contrast the population growth in Virginia by demonstrating the great differences in social relationships producing the same effect of an increase in free African Americans. This also highlights the uniqueness of Louisiana’s

socioeconomic structures which produced a large free African American population, alongside the prevalence of master-slave relationships.

*JOB OPPORTUNITIES IN NEW ORLEANS:* Free blacks formed and built the economy of New Orleans from 1840 to 1860 (Dabel 2000, 223). Some black men held skilled positions, like carpenters and shoemakers, but the majority held unskilled and service positions (Dabel 2000, 223). The majority of free black women worked in service, such as domestic service, and washing (Dabel 2000, 223). The few professional areas women found space in were boarding house keeper and nurse (Dabel 2000, 223). Some free black women managed to work in a skilled position as a seamstress, however, the large majority had unskilled, and poorly paid work (Dabel 2000, 224).

*WASHERWOMEN:* This low skill job was common among both free and enslaved African American women as it was work they were already familiar with, however it did not earn enough to keep them comfortable. Some women did managed to save enough to purchase their own slaves and property (Johnson 1992, 273).

*EARLIER MIGRATIONS OF SKILLED MEN OF COLOR:* Migrations of skilled Haitian and Creole men occurred in the 1790s and early 1800s and established “free men of color in both skilled and white-collar occupations” (Walker 1986, 362).

*SOCIOECONOMIC ADVANTAGES OF WHITE RELATIONS:* The earlier Spanish caste system in Louisiana created a unique socioeconomic system in which people of color could inherit wealth from white relations, such as father, common-law husbands, or lovers (Walker 1986, 362). These white family relations provided capital and access to credit, which helped free African Americans establish and develop businesses (Walker 1986, 362). This was also the reason that Louisiana was home to the majority of the most successful black businessmen

(Walker 1986, 362).

*PASSING AS WHITE:* The first African American millionaire was William Leidesdorff, whose father was Dutch (Walker 1986, 355). He did not portray himself as black and in California he didn't look much different from the broader Mexican population (Walker 1986, 356). Lighter skin provided additional advantages.

*RESTRICTIONS ON BLACK BUSINESS:* In the South, legal and social restrictions were made for black men working in marginal enterprises like gardening and blacksmithing, and some laws made hawking, peddling, and tavern-keeping outright illegal (Walker 1986, 358). In the North, racism additionally discouraged blacks from working in skilled businesses (Walker 1986, 358).

*WILLIAM LLOYD GARRISON:* A journalist and reformer who first published *The Liberator* in 1831. Using moral suasion he detailed the evils of slavery, called it a national sin, and argued for its immediate end (Corbett 2014, 431).

*TREATY OF GUADALUPE-HIDALGO and MEXICAN CESSION:* The Treaty was signed in 1848, bringing an official end to the Mexican-American War. It gave the United States nearly half of Mexico's lands and included California, Colorado, Arizona, Wyoming, Utah, New Mexico, and Nevada for \$15 million and drew the boundary at Rio Grande (Corbett 2014, 327).

*COMPROMISE OF 1850:* Firstly, the 1850 compromise admitted California as a free state, secondly, that in New Mexico and Utah slavery is to be determined by popular sovereignty, thirdly, removal of the slave *trade* in the District of Columbia, and finally, the strengthening of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 which permits Southern slaveholders to retrieve escaped slaves (Corbett 2014, 334). It also established the Texas - Mexico border (Corbett 2014, 334).

*THE "UPLIFTING" OF FREE AFRICAN AMERICANS:* Early free African American leaders such as Paul Cuffee, James Easton, and John Teasman, "drew common inspiration from the

prospect of free people of color ‘uplifting’ themselves to conditions of ‘respectability,’ an approach to securing equality that stressed patient incrementalism, strenuous self-improvement, deference from ordinary community members, and the guidance of patriarchal leaders. Such aspirations permitted free African Americans to build autonomous institutions that nurtured their sense of themselves as both ‘African’ and ‘American,’ and which acted as ‘uplifting’ agencies by which they could interject their egalitarian voices into the nation’s political discussions” (Stewart 1999, 694-5).

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