

# Book Review

***A More Noble Cause:***

***A.P. Tureaud and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Louisiana***

by Rachel L. Emanuel and Alexander P. Tureaud, Jr.

(Published 2011, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, La.)

Reviewed by E. Phelps Gay



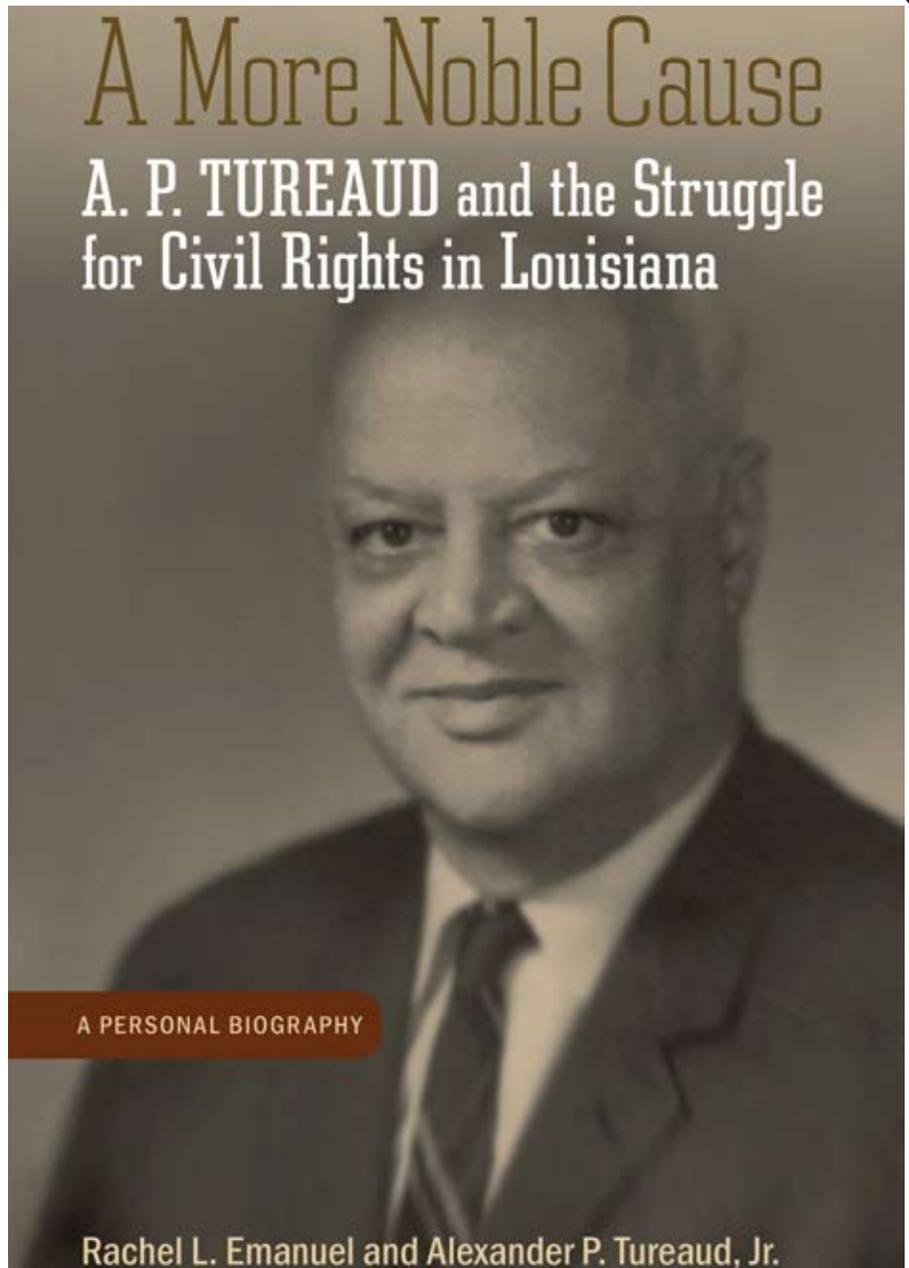
If, as Martin Luther King observed, “human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability, but instead comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of men willing to be co-workers with God,” then the great New Orleans civil rights lawyer A.P. Tureaud belongs in the pantheon of heavenly co-workers.

Many have heard the name A.P. Tureaud. At Louisiana State University (LSU), a building is named in his honor. (In 1953, his son, A.P. Tureaud, Jr., co-author of this “personal biography,” was, as a result of his father’s efforts, the first African-American undergraduate admitted to the university.) In New Orleans, a bronze statue stands at the entrance to A.P. Tureaud Civil Rights Memorial Park. On Pauger Street, not far from where Tureaud lived, one finds A.P. Tureaud Elementary School. During the mayoral administration of one of Tureaud’s protégés, Ernest (Dutch) Morial, London Avenue was renamed A.P. Tureaud Avenue to commemorate the legacy of this mild-mannered, courageous man. Visitors to New Orleans can view an impressive sculpture of Tureaud at the corner of A.P. Tureaud and St. Bernard Avenues. Scholars can pore over his papers at the Amistad Research Center on the campus of Tulane University.

In 2005, Louisiana Supreme Court Justice Bernette J. Johnson, serving as co-chair of the Louisiana State Bar Association’s Diversity Committee, created the A.P. Tureaud American Inn of Court. Chaired by Orleans Parish Civil District Court Judge Ethel Simms Julien, the Inn meets regularly on the fourth floor of the Royal Street court building.

But, until this year, we did not have a full-length biography of this inspirational leader. Thanks to the outstanding efforts of Rachel L. Emanuel, director of publications and electronic media at Southern University Law Center, and Alexander P. Tureaud, Jr., an artist and educational consultant in New York, now we do.

Born in 1899, Alexander Pierre Tureaud was the fifth son of a carpenter named Louis Tureaud, a mulatto born on a sugar plantation in St. James Parish, and a beautiful Creole woman from New Orleans named Marie Eugenie Dejan. The authors vividly portray what it was like for Alex to grow



up in Faubourg Marigny as a “downtown Creole” in the early 1900s—the sights and sounds of the French Quarter, the music of artists like trumpeter Joe (King) Oliver emanating from Creole dance clubs, the scent of fruits and vegetables at the French Market, gas lanterns along the banquettes at night, and the rich cuisine of gumbo and jambalaya, okra and étouffée cooked by Alex’s mother and sisters. Religious life revolved around St. Augustine Catholic Church in Tremé. Today, upon entering this venerable institution, one reads on a bronze plaque: “Alexander P. Tureaud, Attorney and Noted Louisiana Civil Rights Leader,

was baptized here April 2, 1899.”

Inquisitive and hard-working, young Alex proved to be a good student at Bayou Road School. In eighth grade, he attended Thomy Lafon School in uptown New Orleans, to which he had to travel on a segregated streetcar. “Negro” passengers were required to sit behind a partition with a sign reading “For Colored Patrons Only.” Young Alex would often stand, rather than sit, as an act of defiance.

The authors do not gloss over the racist world of the Jim Crow South. Schools, parks, restaurants, hotels, transportation, medical services—much of the city, indeed

the entire South, was simply closed off to persons of color. So oppressive were the times that eventually four of Alex's sisters decided to "cross the color line," cut off contact with the family, and live their lives as Caucasians ("*passé blancs*"). The resulting heartache on both sides of the family is movingly conveyed by the authors.

Attending high school at night, Alex went to work for his father as an apprentice bricklayer and cement finisher. Then his father left home, and his mother and the rest of the family struggled to make ends meet. Recruited to work in the railroad yards of Chicago, Alex left New Orleans in 1916 at the age of 17, part of what came to be known as the Great Migration. Before leaving, he took a civil service exam. If he did well, he might be able to work for the federal government.

In Chicago, Alex drove spikes for the Illinois Central Railroad and worked in a steel foundry, sending as much money as he could back home to his mother. At the invitation of his brother Adolph, he moved to New York, where he found a job washing dishes. In Harlem, a "Renaissance" was underway with artists and poets such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston celebrating racial pride and challenging racial discrimination. One day news arrived from New Orleans. Alex had passed the civil service exam. A new job awaited him in the nation's capital: junior clerk in the library of the United States Department of Justice.

In Washington, D.C., 19-year-old Alex met many interesting and accomplished people, including Oliver Wendell Holmes, J. Edgar Hoover and U.S. Supreme Court Justice Edward Douglass White. After attending St. John's College, he enrolled at Howard University Law School. He roomed with a classmate whose father, Shelby Davidson, was an accomplished lawyer and newspaper publisher. Active in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Davidson introduced Alex to the organization's co-founder, W.E.B. DuBois. On reading DuBois's writings, Alex agreed with his "manifesto" asserting that African-Americans should not be denied the right to vote and that segregation in schools and public accommodations should end.

At Howard, Tureaud — his professors

called him by his last name, and, henceforth, he was known simply as "Tureaud" (pronounced "Too Row") — came under the influence of remarkable teachers such as James A. Cobb, William Henry Harrison Hart and Charles Hamilton Houston. Houston famously pronounced: "A lawyer is either a social engineer or he's a parasite on society." As an ardent member of the Blackstone Society, Tureaud also liked to quote the British scholar's maxim: "Law is the embodiment of the moral sentiment of the people."

Here I would note that one of the hallmarks of this fine book is that it is, as noted on the dust jacket, a "personal biography." It relies heavily on two sources: family reminiscence and taped interviews with Tureaud conducted by the late University of New Orleans history Professor Joseph Logsdon. Thus, the reader gets an immediate sense of the man — what he looked and sounded like, the clothes he wore, the food he ate, how he acted in the courtroom and around the house. His voice, and the voice of his family, pervades the book, so that one "joins" this conscientious Creole lawyer as he navigates his way through a time of immense social change while also living a rich personal life in New Orleans with his beautiful wife, Lucille, and six children. Devotees of a certain kind of academic history might quibble that this is not a prodigiously-researched, excessively footnoted tome, weighted down with legal argument and constitutional theory. In this humble reader's opinion, this constitutes one of the book's virtues.

The first person in his family to finish college, A.P. Tureaud graduated from Howard Law School with honors in 1925. He passed the District of Columbia Bar, known to be among the most difficult in the country, and began working for a judge in Washington. But in 1926, he decided to return to his hometown. Not only was his mother ill, but Tureaud also felt drawn back to New Orleans by the example of Creole lawyers, Louis A. Martinet and Rodolphe L. Desdunes, whose work he had studied at Howard. He wanted to follow in their footsteps.

Tureaud found work at the U.S. Customs House on Canal Street where Walter Cohen, a successful Republican businessman, served as comptroller of

customs. Having to compute the value of merchandise entering the Port of New Orleans all day, Tureaud had little free time; but at night, the young lawyer got involved in his community, joining Seventh Ward social clubs and establishing civic leagues. His civic league work included appeals to the Orleans Parish School Board for better facilities and new schools for Negro students, appeals rejected by white politicians on grounds that Negro public schools were "separate but equal" in compliance with the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case. Tureaud "agreed they were separate but they were in no way equal."

Not long after his return, Tureaud met the love of his life, Lucille Dejoie, a fellow Howard University graduate whose family owned a pharmacy in uptown New Orleans. A pharmacist herself, she managed the family business for many years. The young couple moved into a two-story double on Rocheblave Street in the Seventh Ward and began raising a family. Eventually, they would have five daughters and one son.

While employed at the Customs House, Tureaud also practiced civil and criminal law in an office above a barroom on Iberville Street in the French Quarter, and he conferred with clients in his home. Understating the case, the authors note that "trying to establish himself as a practicing Negro lawyer in the segregated South during the Depression wasn't easy," but Tureaud was "convinced that the law was the best means of fighting injustices and providing opportunities for a better life." For many years, he was the only actively-practicing black lawyer in the state.

Admitted to the Louisiana Bar in 1927, only a year later A.P. Tureaud was designated by the national NAACP office as its lead attorney in Louisiana. Given the times, this took courage. As Tureaud began to file one civil rights suit after another, Thurgood Marshall said, "You know, he's putting his life on the line. We're getting the next plane out of here. But he has to stay here and face whatever reprisals there might be for our activity." Tureaud persevered. Despite taunts and threats, he always remained calm and professional. He liked to quote Thurgood Marshall: "Lose your cool, lose your case." In 1950, after years of devoted service to the organization,

he became president of the New Orleans branch of the NAACP.

So what did A.P. Tureaud do?

In 1941, he filed a lawsuit on behalf of Joseph P. McKelvin and other teachers against the Orleans Parish School Board, seeking equal pay for black teachers being paid less than their white counterparts. Because of Tureaud's advocacy, federal judge Wayne Borah ruled that teachers with the same credentials, regardless of color, must receive the same salary beginning in the 1943 school year. Over the years, Tureaud filed 16 suits in parishes across the state to equalize teachers' salaries, winning victory after victory.

In 1944, Tureaud and Thurgood Marshall filed suit on behalf of Edward Hall, president of the NAACP branch in St. John the Baptist Parish, challenging the state's unreasonable (in many cases ridiculous) restrictions on voter registration for Negroes. Until then, most of these suits had been dismissed on grounds of lack of federal jurisdiction. But in 1946, the 5th Circuit affirmed plaintiffs' right to sue in federal court. As the authors note, only 400 black men were registered to vote in Louisiana in 1940; by 1952, the number was in the thousands.

In 1946, Tureaud and his colleague Louis Berry, on behalf of a New Orleans postman named Charles Hatfield, sued Louisiana State University School of Law, contending it could not legally bar admission to black students. The school's defense was that Southern University in Baton Rouge, opened in 1881, could and should have a "separate but equal" law school. According to the authors, the lawsuit "was the impetus to the opening of a law school at Southern University in 1947." Years later, Tureaud remembered, "They didn't have any Negro lawyers [in Louisiana] until I opened up a school at Southern University."

Nothing if not persistent, Tureaud continued to hammer away at racial exclusion in higher education. In the 1950s, he filed and won four lawsuits tearing down the walls of discrimination at LSU medical, law, graduate and undergraduate schools. In 1952, two Seventh Ward residents, Ernest Morial and Robert Collins, who had grown up near Tureaud's home, entered LSU Law School. In the undergraduate

litigation, one of the lead plaintiffs was his son, Alexander Pierre Tureaud, Jr.

A.P. Tureaud, Jr.'s ordeal at LSU is one of the most heartrending sections of a book which obviously deals with a history of inhumane treatment by one group against another. The case was won in federal court, despite offensive rhetoric from LSU's lead defense counsel Leander Perez, with Judge Skelly Wright ruling that LSU's undergraduate school had to be desegregated. But the story of A.P. Tureaud, Jr.'s treatment by students and faculty in the fall of 1953, as the only black student at the university, underscores the cruel difference between victory in the courtroom and changing the hearts and minds of people. After eight weeks of what can only be termed hell, Tureaud's son was granted a "reprieve" of sorts when the temporary injunction under which he had been admitted was set aside due to a legal technicality. During a gathering on the LSU campus in April 2011, celebrating the publication of this book, A.P. Tureaud, Jr. recalled those days with great poignancy and courage.

In 1948, Tureaud filed *Rosanna Aubert v. Orleans Parish School Board*, contending the 14th Amendment guaranteed black students the right to receive "instruction in course of study including the use of modern and sanitary schools and school facilities, such as are provided by defendants for white children." A few years later, as part of a frontal assault on the *Plessy* doctrine, he filed *Bush v. Board of Education*. In 1956, Judge Wright enjoined the Orleans Parish School Board from continuing a policy of segregation in its public schools. There followed, as we know, a lengthy series of appeals, legislative maneuvers and political machinations, all designed to circumvent the court's rulings. In 1960, Gov. Jimmy Davis signed an executive order under which he took control of the New Orleans public schools, ordering them re-opened on a segregated basis. Judge Wright wasted no time striking down the order, despite overheated pleas from Attorney General Jack Gremillion.

Finally, on the morning of Nov. 14, 1960, four black girls — Gail Etienne, Leona Tate, Tessie Prevost and Ruby Bridges — each only 6 years old, accompanied by federal marshals, went to two public schools in the Ninth Ward. The authors

describe in detail the angry reaction of the white parents and the horrible treatment these brave children endured from their white classmates. They also describe the resulting history of white flight from the city and its public schools.

Space constraints won't permit me to do more than make passing reference to other aspects of this interesting book — such as Tureaud's run for U.S. Congress in 1958, his lawsuits to integrate the city's parks and buses, his work with Archbishop Joseph F. Rummel to integrate New Orleans Catholic schools, his representation of a white woman who sought to enroll at Grambling State University, and his mentoring of future leaders like Ernest Morial and Revius Ortique. The authors also paint several deft portraits of Louisiana judges like E. Gordon West (who doesn't fare too well) and Herbert Christenberry (who does) and politicians like Earl Long, Hale Boggs, DeLesseps S. (Chep) Morrison and F. Edward Hebert. For those interested in our state's turbulent and colorful history, there is much here to savor.

A.P. Tureaud died of cancer in 1972 at his home on Pauger Street. At his funeral, Thurgood Marshall said: "He was a great man. In this age of civil rights, we got where we are today by the efforts and dedication of men like A.P. Tureaud, who made himself a leader." He is buried at St. Louis Cemetery No. 3 on Esplanade Avenue. Looking back, it would not have been inappropriate for someone to observe, as Secretary of War Edwin Stanton did in Washington, D.C. on the morning of April 15, 1865, "Now he belongs to the ages."

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