



ROOTS

Newsletter of the Afro-American History Society

"A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots" – Marcus Garvey

SPRING 2016



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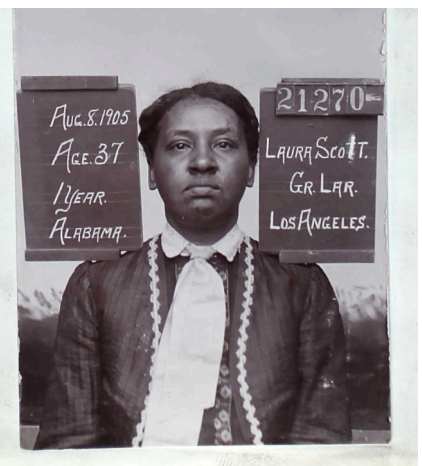
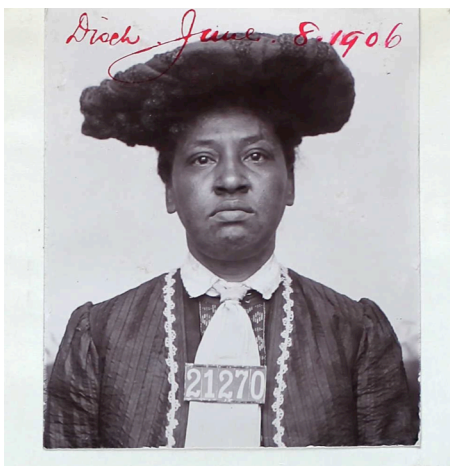


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“Documenting One Woman’s Experiences in the Criminal Justice System: Laura Scott, San Quentin Prisoner #23187”

by

Mariame Kaba



Laura Scott, San Quentin Prisoner 21270, August 8, 1905. California State Archives

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Black Facts



Alexa Irene Canady

Born in 1950 in Lansing, Michigan, Alexa Canady almost dropped out of college, but recovered her self-confidence and went on to qualify as the first African-American woman neurosurgeon in the United States. Dr. Canady earned a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Michigan in 1971 and graduated *cum laude* from the university’s medical school in 1975. Dr. Canady next completed her surgical internship at Yale-New Haven Hospital. From 1981-82 she worked as a neurosurgeon at Children’s Hospital in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Dr. Canady was chief of neurosurgery at the Children’s Hospital of Michigan from 1987 until her retirement in 2001. After several years of retirement in Florida with her husband George Davis, Dr. Canady returned to surgery as a part-time pediatric surgeon in Pensacola. She has received numerous professional recognitions. She is the recipient of two honorary degrees; was honored with the Children’s Hospital of Michigan Teacher of the Year award in 1984, the American Medical Association President’s Award in 1994, and the Wayne State University Distinguished Service Award in 1994. Alexa Canady was inducted into the Michigan’s Woman’s Hall of Fame in 1989; and in 2002 was named “Michigander of the Year” by the *Detroit News*.

Source: National Library of Medicine.
Image: American Medical Association

**Documenting One Woman's Experiences
in the Criminal Justice System:
Laura Scott, San Quentin Prisoner #23187**

by
Mariame Kaba

Height 1M	67.8	Head lgth.	19.1	L. Foot	25.5	Color of Left Eye	Circle	Age	40
Eng. H'ght		Head wth.	14.5	L. Mid. F.	11.		Periph. Z	Apparent Age	
Outs. A. 1M	70.	Check wth.		L. Lit. F.	8.4		Pecul.	Nativity	Alan.
Trunk	89.4	R. Ear	6.3	L. Fore A.	44.9			Occupation	

Remarks incident to measurements } _____



DESCRIPTIVE										
Forehead	Incln.	84	Nose	Profile	Ridge	leave	R. Ear	Teeth	Beard	
	Hght	2.			Base	Hor			Root	Shal
	Width	W		DIMENSIONS			Chin		Complexion	Blk
	Pecul.			Length	Projection	Breadth			Weight	150
			Pecul.				Build	Med		

Measured at _____ Aug 8 1905 by _____

...it is paramount that scholars begin to view the incarcerated black woman's experience as part of the African-American historical experience...By choosing not to do so, historians run the risk of obscuring the humanity of these women while, at the same time, perpetuating their invisibility.¹

—Talitha L. LeFlouria

Introducing Laura Scott

It was the hat that did it for me... I first met Laura Scott on January 1, 2012, on the Internet. One of my hobbies is collecting prison-related artifacts like old postcards and photographs. Over the past few years, I have built up a collection of police mug shots. I was searching for more mug shots in an online store when I came across Laura Scott's face on a Bertillon card (image on preceding page). Bertillon cards were named after the French law enforcement officer, Alphonse Bertillon, who pioneered criminal identification techniques such as anthropometry (measurement) and the mug shot itself. The cards usually include key descriptors about criminal suspects as well as a mug shot photo. In her photograph, Laura, who is wearing an ornate hat, stares impassively ahead. Across her neck, a tag reads "23187."

The following key details were also listed on her Bertillon card:

Criminal Name: Laura Scott

Reg No: 23187

Age: 40

Birthplace: Alabama

Height: 67.8 inches

Weight: 150

Hair: Black

Eyes: Brown

Complexion: Black

Race: Negress

Occupation: Dressmaker

Crime: Pt. Larceny & Prior

Sentence: 5 years

Measurements taken: August 8, 1905

I immediately purchased the mug shot and card for seventy-five dollars. I never look into the backgrounds of the individuals on the mug shots that I collect. This time, however, something about Laura Scott called out to me. This black woman with the beautiful hat fascinated me and she seemed to be looking right at me through the camera lens. I became curious about Laura. Who was she and how did she find herself coming into contact with the law?

Since I am based in Chicago, I relied on the Internet to begin my search for any information about Laura Scott. I initially didn't find very much: only a small mention in the *Los Angeles*

Herald about a “negress” [sic] named Laura Scott who was sentenced to one year in San Quentin for grand larceny in 1905.

I was encouraged by this to think that other newspapers might also have covered the same 1905 incident and perhaps in greater detail. Before continuing with a more comprehensive newspaper search though, I turned to the genealogical website *Ancestry.com* hoping to learn about Laura’s origins. I knew from the Bertillon card that she was born in Alabama and I could estimate her date of birth based on the age that was listed on that card. This led me to a couple of possibilities. Next, I wanted to locate primary source documents, so I turned to the California State Archives to access Laura’s prison records. I requested court records from the archives of the Los Angeles Superior Court and asked for jail documents from the Los Angeles Sheriff’s department. I also sought information from the Bancroft Library at the University of California at Berkeley. Finally, I hired a research assistant in Los Angeles who could scour the microfilm of local newspapers at the Los Angeles Public Library. The resulting life story is primarily based on information found in law enforcement and prison records, court documents, and accounts in newspapers.

A Woman on the Run...

On a hot day in 1905, officers Leon and Randolph rushed to the Arcade depot in Los Angeles. They were in pursuit of a 5-foot 6-inch, 150-pound black woman named Laura Scott who was boarding a train headed to El Paso, Texas. The night before, she had invited a white miner named Charles Carson, newly arrived from Arizona, to what the *Los Angeles Times* described as “her room in a cheap lodging-house.” While he slept, Laura allegedly robbed Carson. When police found her, she had a ticket to Galveston, Texas and \$109 on her person.² The *Los Angeles Times* reported on the incident as follows:

*Laura Scott, a bad colored woman, got away with the belongings of Charles Carson, who arrived in the city from Globe, Ariz., yesterday, and the officers got on her trail in the nick of time. Carson put up at a cheap lodging house on Wednesday night and in the morning reported to the police that he had been robbed. Officers Leon and Randolph were put in charge of the case and quickly learned that a colored woman named Laura Scott had just started for Texas. A rush was made to the Arcade depot and the negress [sic] pulled from the train just as it was about to pull out. Carson lost \$180, a gold watch and other articles, most of which were in the possession of the woman when she was searched.*³

So what led the *Los Angeles Times* to label Laura Scott “a bad colored woman?” She was certainly a woman already known to the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). A few months earlier on a Wednesday night in March 1905, a man named Frank McVeigh had taken an ax to her head and almost cracked her skull open. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that: “The blow from the ax fractured her skull, and caused a ghastly scalp wound.”⁴ It was a miracle that she survived the assault after she “was taken to the receiving hospital where it found that her skull had been laid bare.”⁵

Frank McVeigh, who is described as a “burly negro” in one press report, was apparently a neighbor of Laura’s living in the house adjoining hers on San Pedro Street. Laura Scott offered at least a couple of versions of what happened that evening. In one newspaper account, she reportedly told the police desk sergeant that she went over to McVeigh’s place on the evening of March 22 to collect some money that he owed her. She learned that he was not at home but instead at 131 Central Avenue. She followed him there. He was “drunk” and “quarrelsome” according to Laura and other witnesses. She asked for her money and he began to verbally assault her and threatened to kill her. She stood her ground and McVeigh grabbed an ax and “struck her with a vicious blow to the head.” He was apparently prepared to finish the job but was restrained by other people who held him until the police arrived. McVeigh was taken to police headquarters where he was booked on “a charge of assault with intent to commit murder.”⁶ In her account to police, Laura maintained that Frank McVeigh was “in the habit of borrowing small sums of money from women in the neighborhood.” She went on to tell the police that:

*Tuesday night he had borrowed from her and she gave him more than he asked, he promising to return the change the following morning. He did not do so and so she went to him and asked for the money and the assault followed.*⁷

Unsurprisingly McVeigh had a different story to tell. According to him, Laura Scott “had been persecuting him, threatening to kill him and otherwise making his life miserable.” When he saw her coming on Wednesday, “he thought she was armed and intended to kill him, and in order to defend himself he knocked her down with the ax.” The police did not find any corroborating evidence for McVeigh’s story among the witnesses to the assault and as such he was jailed.

Another contemporaneous article published in the *Los Angeles Examiner* offers the following headline in describing the incident: “Pious Colored Woman Struck with an Ax.” The subtitle is “Laura Scott Wanted Money for Prayer Meeting Contribution.” The piece quotes Laura as follows:

*I was just going to church, says the woman. I wanted some money for the contribution box and called at McVeigh’s house for the dollar which he owed me. Without replying, he grabbed an ax and tried to kill me.*⁸

No other article describes Laura as a church-going woman who was only looking to recover some money that she had lent Frank McVeigh in order to contribute to her local house of worship. So it seems highly unlikely that this was Laura Scott’s motivation for approaching McVeigh. The article cited above is also the only one that directly quotes Laura’s own words and as such it is important for what it illustrates about the way that Laura perhaps wanted to be perceived by others. This incident tells us something about Laura’s personality and also about the self-image that she wanted to project to the public. Regardless of who was telling the truth, it is clear that Laura Scott was a tough woman who would not back down from a fight. In fact, the *Los Angeles Herald* described her demeanor at the police station after the assault in this way: “Although she had been hit a powerful blow and the scalp had been cut open the Scott woman did not lose consciousness for an instant, and after she gave her testimony to the desk

sergeant walked out of the station as though nothing unusual had occurred.”⁹ One wonders what in Laura’s upbringing and background gave her such a strong will and seeming confidence.

A Childhood in Alabama

Laura Scott was born in Alabama in either 1868 or perhaps 1872. Her exact birth date is unknown because there are various ages listed for her on different documents. San Quentin prison records list her age as 37 years old in 1905 and then as 40 years old in 1908. Her Bertillon criminal card lists her age as 40 years old in 1908. However, two years later, the 1910 Federal Census where she appears as a prisoner at San Quentin lists her age as 38.¹⁰ She is identified as being 28 years old in an April 9, 1907 *Los Angeles Herald* newspaper article covering her second trial. In addition, Laura Scott was reportedly divorced and the surname she used could be either her maiden or married name.

It was common for many people in that era not to be certain of their exact date of birth. The question is whether it is more plausible that Laura Scott would inflate her age when she was younger or whether she would decrease her age as she got older. By all appearances, it seems that Ms. Scott paid close attention to her looks. Her outfits in her mug shot photos attest to this. Therefore one could infer that the San Quentin prison documents and the Bertillon card were probably more accurate than the 1910 Federal Census or a newspaper article.

Based on census research, if Laura Scott was her birth name and she was actually born in 1872, it is possible that her parents were Silas and Jane Scott. If so, she would have lived as a child in Perry County, which was part of Alabama’s rural black belt. Laura would have been one of 10 children. Silas and Jane were listed as laborers in the 1870 and 1880¹¹ Censuses and it is likely that they had both been slaves. However, we can’t be sure that this is in fact Laura Scott’s family because of the uncertainty about her actual date of birth and name. I wondered, though, could that Laura Scott have left behind a mostly rural, poor, and deeply racist Alabama for California? For an adventurous black woman like Laura appears to have been, Alabama must have felt deeply oppressive and constraining and would probably have seen Los Angeles as “the land of milk and honey” by contrast.

I found another intriguing possibility for Laura recorded in the 1900 Federal Census.^{11A} I wondered why, when Laura was apprehended in 1905, she had a train ticket to Galveston. Interestingly, the 1900 Census contains an enumeration for a Laura Scott, dressmaker, who was born in 1867 in Alabama and was living in Galveston, Texas. The census was taken in June 1900, three months before a devastating hurricane made landfall in Galveston causing a great loss of life and property. Could that Laura Scott have left the devastation for California?

Because of a paucity of information, Laura’s early life remains a mystery, as well as a when she first arrived in California. For whatever reasons, however, Laura Scott at some point made her way to California and found misfortune.

Laura Scott in Old Los Angeles

The first English-speaking blacks arrived in the Los Angeles area in the early 1800s but their numbers were very small. The 1850 Census found only 12 black people recorded in a city of over 3,500. The English-speaking black community grew from 134 in 1870 to 188 in 1880. By 1900 there were over 6,000 blacks in the city. That was more than tenfold increase from 1880 and took place as Los Angeles was becoming an industrial city. By 1910, the black population in Los Angeles was over 9,000.¹² Even with the increases, black people made up less than two percent of the city's total population until after World War.

The first documented sighting of Laura in California may have been in 1902. According to a newspaper account, a Laura Scott was arrested for shoplifting in San Francisco in December 1902. It hasn't been possible to definitively confirm that this is the same Laura Scott. According to the 1910 Federal census, Laura was literate; she could read and write. Available prison records describe her education as poor or fair (depending on the year), she seems only to have completed grade school at a public school.¹³ Is it possible that she received her grade school education at one of the Freedmen Bureau schools established in Alabama after the Civil War? Regardless, it seems that Laura Scott it did not have the benefit of being highly educated.

What type of work could a poorly educated African-American woman secure in Los Angeles? Employment opportunities for black women in early Los Angeles were even scarcer than they were for men. Historian Lawrence B. de Graaf suggests, "...servant, laundress, dressmaker and midwife were four of the leading occupations of western black women."¹⁴ It wasn't until 1918, for example, that Los Angeles County Hospital opened the doors of its training program to the first black woman. On various official documents, Laura Scott's occupation is listed as "house-girl/dressmaker/ seamstress." How much money was she able to make by cleaning houses or sewing? Was it enough to support herself? If not, one has to wonder about how else Laura supplemented her income. By all accounts, she was a woman living alone in a boarding house. Some Southern black women who migrated after the end of slavery found they were enticed or drawn to prostitution as a way to survive.¹⁵ It's hard to know if Laura Scott was stigmatized as a "loose-woman." Thus far I have not found Scott described as a sporting girl. By all indications she was popular in her community, with many friends. This suggests that she wasn't an outcast but rather a valued member of her community.

Laura Scott does seem to have eschewed some of the conventions of her time. She was divorcée and apparently did not have any children. Prison records and press reports suggest that Laura drank regularly and perhaps even heavily. She was also a smoker. These habits would have put her outside of the boundaries of acceptable behavior for a woman of her time. It isn't far-fetched to consider whether her drinking may have contributed to her numerous encounters with the law.

On the whole, women's gender roles in early 20th century California were prescribed and rigid. Historian Linda Parker provides some insight into life for women in California during this period: "Before 1910 the women of California, like people in other states, lived under state laws that

favored male dominance...Although women paid taxes, they could not vote in California until 1911. Women accused of law violations were arrested by men, imprisoned with men...tried in a court by men lawyers, jurors, and judges according to man-made laws'.¹⁶

Laura Scott: San Quentin Prison 1905-1906

On July 18, 1905, Laura Scott was held for trial in superior court on a \$1,500 bail for the Charles Carson robbery. Standing before Judge Smith on August 4, Scott first claimed to be innocent of the charges against her. By that afternoon, however, she had pled guilty. Judge Smith sentenced her to one year in San Quentin Prison for grand larceny. She was assigned prison identification number 21270 (and later assigned 23187).



View of the women's courtyard, San Quentin Prison, ca. 1915. Marin County (California) Free Library

There were no female reformatories in California and it was not until the 1930's that a separate prison for women, the California Institution for Women in Tehachapi, was opened. Thus, Scott, like other women prisoners, was confined to a prison with men, though in a separate ward. In 1904, the year before Laura Scott was sentenced, there were 1,451 men and 27 women incarcerated in San Quentin.¹⁷ In 1905, there were 1,556 prisoners in San Quentin and only 26 were women.¹⁸ Female prisoners at that time were found guilty of a variety of crimes, however, the San Quentin prison register from 1880-1910 indicates that 46 percent of the female inmates were jailed for grand larceny, as was Scott.¹⁹

One first person account provided by a female informant about the harsh and inhumane conditions at San Quentin spans the years (1906-1909) when Laura Scott was there. It is therefore very likely that the informant was one of Laura's fellow prisoners. As such, when the unnamed former female prisoner mentioned that a "two-time negress" [sic] convict worked as the dressmaker of the prison, I wondered if that person could have in fact been Laura Scott. Remember that her occupation was listed on prison and arrest records as dressmaker/seamstress. If Laura were indeed the woman who had the job of dressmaker in the

female department, this would have been considered one of “the easiest positions, as no scrubbing or other hard work were required.”²⁰

1907 Trial

Upon her release from prison in June 1906, it is unlikely that Laura Scott would have been able to immediately find gainful employment. She was a convicted felon who had spent nearly a year behind bars in the notorious San Quentin Prison. Given what we know today about the high rate of recidivism for people who have been incarcerated, it should be no surprise that Laura found herself in trouble with the law again a few months after she was discharged.

On February 18, 1907, Laura Scott was arrested by detectives Glenn and Stevens (both of whom were also black) and charged with petty larceny. She was accused of stealing an alarm clock from Ms. J.H. Russell. According to the *Los Angeles Times*: “It was the last of a series of petty thefts on her part during the past ninety days.”²¹ She allegedly sold the clock for 25 cents at the local pawnshop. Laura was bound over to the Superior Court and her bail was set at one thousand dollars. She was jailed while awaiting trial and jail records find a “Lena” Scott booked on February 20, 1907.

Laura’s trial took place on April 8, 1907. The scene set by the *Los Angeles Herald* shows Laura surrounded by friends and allies:

*Yesterday department one was crowded when the Scott woman’s case was called. Many of those among the spectators had contributed their mite to help in defending her and all were anxious to testify as to her general good character up to the time when the alleged purloining of the clock occurred.*²²

Mrs. Russell was the chief prosecution witness and she told the court what happened:

*On the afternoon the clock was taken [February 16] I was ironing when Miss Scott came in and sat down and began to talk. We had considerable conversation there, and I kept right on with my ironing. At that time the clock was on a table near where Ms. Scott sat. [...] When she went out I didn’t notice at first that the clock was gone, but a few moments after that I discovered that I had lost the clock.*²³

Throughout the trial, Laura Scott maintained that she was innocent of the charges against her. The *Los Angeles Times* described her as having a “sullen and serious countenance” throughout the proceedings. This was in stark contrast with the demeanor of another key witness against Laura: Lizzie Douglas (her last name appears as Carroll in court records). Lizzie was described as a “mulatto,” whose mouth curved in a wondrously humorous and expansive smile as she cakewalked to the witness stand.” The *Los Angeles Times* published the following testimonies during the trial.²⁴

In her account, on the morning of February 16, she had gone over to her friend Mrs. Russell’s home to help with ironing. Mrs. Russell brought out an alarm clock and set it on the “ice chest.”

As she testified on the witness stand, Lizzie would periodically break out into fits of laughter as she remembered the details of the incident. Laura Scott came into the Russell home on San Julian Street for a “pail of beer.” Lizzie added: “I had whiskey myself.” She continued:

[Laura] began lounging about the room and leaned up against the ice box. She picked up a piece of paper and looked at it, she said Mrs. Russell’s phone bill didn’t read exactly like hers. Then Mrs. Raymond came in, and after a little while she asked what time it was. As soon as she said that, Laura Scott went out. Mrs. Russell told Mrs. Raymond to look at the clock. Mrs. Raymond said she didn’t see any clock. Mrs. Russell asked her if she was blind, and told her to look on the ice box. Mrs. Raymond said she did, but she didn’t see any clock. We all looked then, and the clock wasn’t there. Then Mrs. Russell sent her boy to tell Mrs. Scott to bring the clock home.

Upon cross-examination, Laura Scott’s attorney, David Taylor, asked Lizzie Douglas: “But you didn’t see her take the clock?”

Lizzie: *No.*

Taylor: “As a matter of fact, you don’t know that she did steal it, do you?”

Lizzie: *It couldn’t a jumped down off of there and walked away.*

Taylor: “What time did the defendant leave the house on San Julian Street?”

Lizzie: *How could I know that? The clock was gone, and there wasn’t no way to tell the time.*

The Prosecution called Rosa Goldberg, who owned a pawnshop with her husband on First Street, to the stand. The *Los Angeles Times* reported on her testimony:

“Where is your store,” asked Deputy District Attorney Blair.

At First and Alameda streets.

“In Los Angeles?” pursued the prosecutor.

Of course, returned Mrs. Goldberg, ‘with an air of pitying his ignorance.’

When it was the defense’s turn, attorney Taylor representing Laura Scott, “asked the witness how she could identify that clock.” “Isn’t it just like thousands of others you can buy at jewelry stores for 75 cents?”

Mrs. Goldberg: *I never bought any at a jewelry store. I paid 25 cents for that one.*

“But how do you know that is the one?” persisted attorney Taylor.

That is the clock, Mrs. Goldberg replied decidedly.



Attorney Taylor also tried to impeach the credibility of the detectives who arrested Laura Scott by claiming that they “tricked her into making admissions.” However officer Glenn testified that it was Laura who had told them where they could recover the clock. He added that she offered to pay for it.

It only took two hours for the jury to find Laura guilty of petit larceny. The *Los Angeles Times* report described her disposition during the trial and her reaction to the verdict:

Laura Scott showed little feeling when the verdict was announced, and not much at any other time during the trial except one. That was when her attorney, in his argument, spoke of her as Ada Scott. She whispered sharply to him across the table with every show of anger: ‘Laura Scott’. And to her friend Ada Stanley, she remarked, ‘The fool’.



Because she had a prior conviction of larceny, the offense that she was convicted of became a felony. If probation was not granted she could be sent to the state penitentiary for the crime.²⁵ Court records do not indicate any sentence awarded by the judge in this particular case and there are also no records to indicate that Laura was re-incarcerated at San Quentin. This leads one to speculate that she was perhaps put on probation for her crime. Probation records for this time period are not available.

Laura Scott, San Quentin Prisoner 23187,
November 20, 1908. California State Archives

1908 Conviction (Second Incarceration at San Quentin)

Unfortunately, after seemingly having escaped a prison sentence, Laura Scott found herself once again facing a judge a little more than a year later. On November 11, 1908, a jury once again convicted Laura Scott of petty larceny for stealing another clock. At this point, one has to

ask, “what’s with Laura’s fascination with clocks?” In all three documented cases for which she was arrested, clocks or watches were among the items she allegedly stole.

This time she was accused of stealing a gold watch and a chain from Susie McNeary two months earlier on September 12. The estimated worth of these items was fifteen dollars. A warrant was issued for her arrest on September 17. She was brought to court and bail was set at one thousand dollars. On September 18, she was booked at the Los Angeles jail at 1:30 p.m. On November 16, appearing before Judge Curtis D. Wilbur, who would later become the Secretary of the Navy under President Calvin Coolidge, she was sentenced to five years at San Quentin Prison.²⁶ She was discharged from the Los Angeles County jail on November 18 at 10 p.m. and entered San Quentin Prison on November 20, 1908 to serve her sentence.

Laura was paroled on February 1, 1912 and eventually released from prison on June 20, 1912. After her release, the trail runs cold. I could find no additional documentation about Laura Scott’s life and so her story unfortunately must end here. I wonder if she left Los Angeles or even California upon her release from San Quentin.

Conclusion

Little did I know that the colorful life Laura Scott led would shed light on life for black women in early twentieth century California and would also provide important information about imprisoned women during that period.

In 1905, Laura Scott was exceptional, but in 2016 she would have been just one in a crowd. It was rare for women to find themselves behind bars in the early 20th century. It is all too common in the 21st century for some women (particularly those who are black or poor). The number of women in prison has increased exponentially since Laura Scott’s incarceration in 1905 when there were just over 13,000 women behind bars across the country. In 2014, there were 112,961 women in state and federal prisons in the United States—an increase from the previous year and the largest number since 2009. For the past decade women have comprised about seven percent of the prisoner population. While men vastly outnumber them, the percentage of women incarcerated is growing faster than that of men. In addition, women are increasingly imprisoned for serious offenses. For example, in 2014, 59 percent of women were sentenced for drug crimes.²⁷

I hope that this necessarily incomplete portrait of Laura Scott’s life adds to our understanding of the history of black women’s involvement with the criminal legal system. If nothing else, I hope that it underscores that some of the same social forces (joblessness and poverty; mental illness; substance abuse and sexual abuse; racism and and sexism; and/or other forms of victimization) that led to Laura’s incarceration still have purchase in the lives of thousands of black and brown women today.

There are likely hundreds of other Laura Scotts in the annals of our history. I hope that others will unearth those stories. After all, for me, it all started because of a hat...

Mariame Kaba is an organizer, educator, and writer who lives in Chicago. She is committed to ending violence, dismantling the prison industrial complex, and supporting youth leadership development. Mariame is the founder and director of Project NIA, a grassroots organization with a mission to end youth incarceration. Mariame has also co-founded several other organizations, including the Chicago Freedom School. She is a published author, a teacher, and has served on numerous nonprofit boards. Mariame notes that she is and has always been a rabble-rouser!

Editor's Note: In light of growing interest in and concern about inequality in the U.S. criminal justice system and soaring rates of incarceration of African Americans, AAHS appreciates the opportunity to publish a historical account about one person's experiences with crime and imprisonment. The article also provides insight into researching prison records and their potential for genealogical research. The society extends its sincere gratitude to Mariame Kaba for permitting us to publish an edited version of her article about Laura Scott. The full article contains additional information about life for black Americans in California in the early 1900s and appalling conditions women faced in San Quentin Prison during that period. Her article was part of the October 2012 exhibition *Black/Inside: A History of Black Incarceration in the U.S.* at the African American Cultural Center (University of Illinois at Chicago).

Access at <https://prisoner23187.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/laura-scottfinalallowres.pdf>

FOOTNOTES

¹ Talitha L. LeFlouria, "Under the Sting of the Lash: Gendered Violence, Terror, and Resistance in the South's Convict Camps," *Journal of African American History*, Volume 100, Number 3, (Summer 2015): 382

² "Admits She Robbed an Arizona Miner." *Los Angeles Express* (July 14, 1905). Retrieved for microfilm on May 22, 2012.

³ "Robbed by Negress." *Los Angeles Times* (July 14, 1905). Retrieved from ProQuest February 2012.

⁴ "Negro Splits Woman's Head." *Los Angeles Times*. (March 23, 1905). Retrieved from ProQuest February 2012.

⁵ "Struck Woman on Head with an Ax." *Los Angeles Times*. (March 23, 1905). Retrieved from microfilm on May 22, 2012.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "Negro Splits Woman's Head." *Los Angeles Times*.

⁸ "Pious Colored Woman struck with an Ax." *Los Angeles Examiner*. (March 23, 1905). Retrieved from microfilm on May 22, 2012.

⁹ "Negress' Head Too Hard Even for Ax." *Los Angeles Herald* ((March 23, 1905). p. 4. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>

¹⁰ Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910 (NARA microfilm publication T624). Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29. National Archives, Washington, D.C.

- ¹¹ Ancestry.com. *1870 United States Federal Census*. Tenth Census of the United States, 1880. (NARA microfilm publication T9, 1,454 rolls). Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29. National Archives, Washington, D.C.
- ^{11A} Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900 (NARA microfilm publication T623). Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29. National Archives, Washington, D.C.
- ¹² "Historical Census Records of Ethnic Groups in Los Angeles County 1850 to 1960." *Los Angeles Almanac*. <http://www.laalmanac.com/population/po20.htm>
- ¹³ *Descriptive Register of Prisoners 1851-1940* (housed at the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley) – <http://oskicat.berkeley.edu/record=b11254305-SI> - retrieved by David Kessler, librarian at Bancroft on January 12, 2012.
- ¹⁴ Lawrence B. de Graaf. "Race, Sex, and Region: Black Women in the American West, 1850-1920." *Pacific Historical Review* 49 (1980): 298.
- ¹⁵ de Graaf, 303
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- ²² "Jury Finds Girl of Theft," *Los Angeles Herald*. April 9, 1907, p.8
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- ²⁴ *Los Angeles Times*, April 9, 1907
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MEMBERSHIP MONTH

BY TRICHITA CHESTNUT

As of the end of January 2016, the society had 57 members. Please continue your support of AAHS by renewing your membership for May 2016 through April 2017. For your convenience, a membership form is included at the end of this newsletter. Please submit dues payments to AAHS Treasurer Rutha Beamon. If you have any membership questions, please let me know. I may be reached at 301-837-0520.

OUR COLLEAGUES

BY BARBARA BURGER

The National Genealogical Society honored our retired colleague, **Reginald Washington**, with the 2015 Award of Merit. The Award of Merit is presented to an individual or non-profit genealogical or historical organization in recognition of exceptional contributions to the field of genealogy that have significantly aided research or increased interest in genealogy over a period of five or more years. Reggie was recognized for his contributions to the study and preservation of African-American records. For three decades, he has introduced researchers to many little-known, but incredibly rich, record collections that are now staples for genealogical research. His labors have given researchers online access to a half-million documents from the files of the Southern Claims Commission and more than a million from the Freedmen's Bureau and the Freedman's Savings & Trust Company.

KWANZAA 2015

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PATRICE BROWN

Our 2015 celebration of Kwanzaa featured a performance by DC area vocalist Kat Rollins, who is a lead and background vocalist for the DC area group, *J'Adore*. Her performance included smooth jazz, R&B, and neo-soul renditions that showed her versatility and range as a second soprano/alto. Her charming performance was followed by the presentations of door prizes. And as is our tradition, a delectable and bountiful feast concluded the festivities.



Women's History Month 2016

AFRO-AMERICAN HISTORY SOCIETY PROGRAMS

TUESDAY, MARCH 8 – FILM – ARCHIVES 2. “Daisy Bates: First Lady of Little Rock” tells the story of a seven-year journey by filmmaker Sharon La Cruise to try to unravel the life of Daisy Bates, a forgotten civil rights activist. In 1957, Bates became a household name when she fought for the right of nine black students to attend the all-white Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. Bates’ public support culminated in a constitutional crisis—pitting a president against a governor and a community against itself. As head of the Arkansas NAACP, Daisy Bates would achieve instant fame as the drama played out on national television and in newspapers around the world. Unconventional, revolutionary, and egotistical, Daisy Bates reaped the rewards of instant fame, but paid dearly for it. **Lecture Room C, 10:45 am.**

THURSDAY, MARCH 17 – LECTURE – ARCHIVES 2. CO-SPONSORED WITH THE SAY IT LOUD! EMPLOYEE AFFINITY GROUP. “African Americans in Diplomatic Service: A Conversation with Retired Ambassador Sylvia Stanfield.” Retired Amb. Sylvia Stanfield will provide an overview of the history of African Americans in diplomatic service, will talk about her foreign service career and her experiences and challenges as a U.S. ambassador, and will discuss her interest in increasing the involvement of African Americans, especially, women in careers in international affairs. **Lecture Room C, 10:45 am.**

TUESDAY, MARCH 22 – FILM – ARCHIVES 2. In “Free Angela Davis and All Political Prisoners” chronicles the life of University of California professor Angela Davis and how her social activism implicated her in a politically motivated kidnapping and murder. Ms. Davis fled California, convinced she would not be given a fair trial and was placed on the FBI's 10 Most Wanted list. After a national manhunt she was captured two months later. Charged with murder, kidnapping and conspiracy, Angela Davis was put on trial in one of the most sensational court cases of its time. Nearly forty years later, and for the first time, Angela Davis speaks frankly in the film about the actions that branded her as a terrorist and simultaneously spurred a worldwide political movement for her freedom. **Lecture Room C, 10:45.**

IN THE NEWS

CIVIL RIGHTS: The residents of **Flint, Michigan** continued to reel from the disclosures that the city's water supply is contaminated and that thousands of residents have been exposed to lead-laced water. A state of emergency has been declared in the city of almost 100,000, of whom 56 percent are African American and 41 percent live below the poverty level. (Source: *Detroit Free Press, Time, and USA Today*). On January 26, 2016, Random House published *The Life and Adventures of a Haunted Convict*. The account is considered to be the earliest memoir by a black inmate —**Austin Reed**. The memoir that was edited by Yale University professor Caleb Smith was published on January 26, 2016, 150 years after Reed's release from prison. (*Smithsonian Magazine*)

MILESTONES: **Maurice White**, the founder and leader of Earth, Wind and Fire, a band known for the dynamic sound of their horn section and their energetic and elaborate stage shows. Mr. White died February 3, 2016, at the age of 74. (Source: *New York Times*). Self-taught artist **Thornton Dial** died January 25, 2016, at the age of 87. Mr. Dial used scavenged objects, fabric, and paint to make astounding, intricate wall reliefs and sculptures that portrayed the story of the black struggle in the South. (Source: ARTnews). **Natalie Cole**, an award-winning vocalist died December 31, 2015. She was 65. Ms. Cole's hits included "Unforgettable," a virtual duet that she sang with her late father Nat "King" Cole. Natalie Cole won a total of nine Grammys during her career, the last coming for traditional pop vocal album for her 2008 standards collection "Still Unforgettable." (Source: *Variety*). **George "Meadowlark" Lemon**, known to many as the "Clown Prince of Basketball," died December 27, 2015. He was 83. Mr. Lemon joined the *Harlem Globetrotters* in 1954 at age 22 and stayed with the traveling show until 1978, appearing in more than 16,000 games in more than 100 countries. He received the John W. Bunn Award in 2003 for his outstanding lifetime contributions to basketball and was inducted into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in 2003. Meadowlark Lemon's death followed that of fellow teammate **Marques Haynes** who died on May 22, 2015, at the age of 89. Mr. Haynes was considered by many to be the greatest basketball dribbler of all-time. Marques Haynes was also the first player ever to be inducted into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame as a Globetrotter. He was enshrined into a total of six Halls of Fames. (Source: Harlem Globetrotters). **Mattiwilda Dobbs**, an internationally known opera star, died December 8, 2015. Ms. Dobbs was the first African American to sing at La Scala in Milan, Italy, and the first black woman to be offered a long-term contract by the Metropolitan Opera Company in New York. Ms. Dobbs was 90. (Source: *New Georgia Encyclopedia*).

HONORS: On January 7, 2016, Secretary of the Treasury Jacob J. Lew renamed the Treasury Annex the **Freedman's Bank Building** in honor of the Freedman's Savings and Trust Company (commonly known as the Freedman's Bank). The U.S. Congress incorporated the bank on March 3, 1865 to assist African Americans integrate into the economy following the Civil War. (U.S. Department of the Treasury). On December 6, 2015, actress, advocate and humanitarian **Cicely Tyson**, who is 90 years old, was presented with the 2015 Kennedy Center Honors for lifetime artistic achievements. (Source: The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts).

WITHOUT
Black History,
YOU ONLY KNOW PART OF
AMERICAN HISTORY



Lt. Col. Merryl Tengesdal became the first female African American to pilot the U-2 — an ultra-high altitude reconnaissance aircraft used for intelligence gathering. (U.S. Air Force photo/Senior Airman Bobby Cummings)

**FIND OUT ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTIONS THAT
AFRICAN AMERICANS HAVE MADE TO U.S. HISTORY**

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