



An ETHA Pine Cone Profile

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Dionne Babineaux

Houston, TX



I met Dionne for the first time at the 2023 Fall ETHA conference and was so impressed with her blend of smarts and EQ. She is a PhD student at Rice University, but you will find her path to get there quite interesting. | Gary L. Pinkerton

Q: Where do you live?

A I have lived in northwest Harris County for over twenty years. I joke that I am trying to set a record for most Houston-area schools attended. After graduating from a local middle and high school, I attended several Lone Star College system campuses, the University of Houston, Texas Southern University, and the University of Houston - Downtown. Now, I am attending Rice University. At each institution, I've learned something new about myself and the culture of this part of Texas.

Q: How long have you been part of the East Texas Historical Association?

A: I'm among the newest members of ETHA, but one could hardly tell because of the camaraderie that is a natural part of this organization. My presentation at the 2023 annual conference was the first I have given publicly as a historian. Not knowing what to expect made me anxious, but my panel members assured me that ETHA supports history and historians no matter where we are in our careers. At some point during our presentation, my fear went away, and I felt I could share my work without reservation or restraint - the experience was exhilarating. That was when I knew I would continue to be a member.

Q: What convinced you to join?

A: I was encouraged to join by my fellow classmate, Serena Barbieri-Willhite.

Q: What is there within ETHA that has kept (will keep) you a member?

A: The ETHA community of scholars represents a wide range of historical knowledge that is a resource for new and seasoned Texas historians.

Q: What is there about history that attracts you?

A: Texas history has many stories to tell from many perspectives. Using technology to help with research, interpretation, and the telling of these stories makes this an exciting time to be a historian.

Q: How do you usually pursue history: reading books/articles? Has there been anything in your personal life that led to this? What was it?

A: I didn't always love history, and, for a time, I resented it. In middle school, we dressed as members of the Continental Congress, and I played Benjamin Franklin, who was neither Black nor a woman. Due to moments like this, my interaction with history was mainly limited, transactional, and performative. Instead, I studied finance and urban planning, owned a small retail store, and pursued other professional interests while starting a family.

Years later, we decided to homeschool our seventh grader, the year students study Texas history. I purchased a second-hand intermediate-level textbook and immediately knew it would not deliver all the information I wanted my student to learn. The stories of African Americans were hardly mentioned on its pages. During that year, we moved through whatever histories we could find online and at our local bookstore to tell us more about Black Texans. Then, we took our lessons on the road, visiting local historical sites, libraries, and museums.

My daughter returned to school when our social studies class ended, but I continued reading. I found old Texas history classics, bought more second-hand textbooks, and dragged my family to sites on the weekends and during the summer.

I started talking about what I was learning with our family and friends, which led to the idea of creating a place to talk about Black Texans. I took my notes to a spreadsheet and began listing everything I was learning: the eras, the people, the places, and the sources.

In 2019, I registered a domain for the Museum of Undertold Texas History ([MOUTH](#)) and built and launched the website. I completed online nonprofit leadership and arts management courses. When I needed more support with my writing and research skills, I looked back to the university for training. I enrolled in a graduate history certificate program to help guide my efforts.

After completing the program, I began planning an event to celebrate the history of Black Texans. I boldly emailed a historian whose book I had read a few months earlier. Dr. Bernadette Pruitt responded with a complete list of archives, books, collections, and bibliographies and a reminder that "this will be painstaking work but rewarding."

A few months later, with much encouragement and a leap of faith, I applied to Rice University's Ph.D. program in history. Now, I am in my second semester of coursework, continuing my research for the museum and working on the WPA Slave Narratives and the related histories of African Americans in Texas.

Q: What is your favorite historical period or historical movement? Why?

A: I have been reading through the Works Progress Administration (WPA) *Federal Writers' Project Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives, 1936-1938*. I became focused on the WPA Narratives because I wanted to know more about the first generation of African Americans who built their lives after the abolition of slavery.

They may not have contemplated W. E. B. DuBois or had the theories of modern psychology that we frequently rely on to understand trauma and stress to work through our feelings. But they contemplated their freedom and status in complex ways, sometimes with deflection and humor or by leaning into their pain. Their stories impress, sadden, surprise, and entertain me in the most unexpected ways.