

# Gone but not Forgotten: Female Pioneers in Black Entrepreneurship



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## Abstract

This paper examines the following research questions: 1) Who were historical black female entrepreneurs – develop identifiers/ characteristics for a profile 2) What types of businesses did they own, and what factors may have led to their entrepreneurship; and 3) What impact might age, region, educational status, marital status, and family size have had in their business pursuits? The paper employs storytelling (narrative) content analysis on the lives of four historical black female entrepreneurs: Clara Brown; Christina Bannister; Sara E. Goode and Maggie Lena Walker. Analysis reveals common challenges, aptitude and agency for forging independence and opportunities in 19<sup>th</sup> century American society.

**Keywords:** African American Female Entrepreneurs; Black Female Pioneers; Black Entrepreneurs

## Introduction

What can we tell today's black female entrepreneurs about the struggles and hard work of black female entrepreneurs who predate them? Many, often untold stories of success. Black female entrepreneurs are one of the most resourceful groups to emerge during 19<sup>th</sup> century America. For the purposes of this study, I focused on four historical black female entrepreneurs. I sought to explore three things:

- Who were historical black female entrepreneurs and how to develop identifiers/characteristics for a profile,
- What types of businesses did they own, and what were the factors that may have led to their entrepreneurship, and
- What impact might age, region, educational status, marital status, and family size have had on their business pursuits?

## From Enslavement, through Jim Crow, to Agency

For this study, I performed a narrative/content analysis on Clara Brown, Christina Bannister, Sara E. Goode, and Maggie Lena Walker, primarily based on recorded biographic data/narratives about their lives, work, and families. These four were chosen because they remain relatively unknown for their contributions to American society and because their lives reflect the earliest known characteristic of entrepreneurship exhibited by African American women [1-3]. A specific focus on this study was to identify critical or common themes between their lives and entrepreneurship. The descriptors for categorizing items

into these themes were actions, reactions, and interactions reflected in their histories or, rather, herstories—a major source of information and data about the lives of American black female entrepreneurs. Social scientists note that storytelling is a valid research method [4-6] to perform data analysis that provides engaging, coherent and memorable insights and information. It also allows the research the opportunity to clean data, categorize data and sometimes to perform bivariate or even multivariate analysis. Additionally, narrative/content analysis is a flexible design research method with a broad range of applications, associated processes and variations. While there are no universal standards for implementation, there are a variety of documented procedures for using storytelling for different purposes within a design research project [7].

## Findings

To the first research question:

- Who were historical black female entrepreneurs and what identifiers and characteristics describe her? Narratives/storytelling reflect that Brown, Bannister, Goode, and Walker, all born before the end of the Civil War, can be profiled using a historical time frame of activities in the nineteenth and early twentieth century; industries of entrepreneurship, which include: owners of laundering businesses, beauty salons, furniture stores, banks, stores, and newspapers; geographic location/region—from Boston down to Virginia, and over to Chicago and Colorado; and a

moniker unique to each entrepreneur, including the Gold Rush, patents earned, financier success, and success during the Great Depression. To the second research question:

b. What types of businesses they owned, as well as factors that may have led to their entrepreneurship narratives/storytelling reflect the following common factors regarding enslavement, family loss, and economic survival? To the third research question:

c. What impact might age, region, educational status, marital status and family size played in their business pursuits? The narratives/storytelling reveal a range of ages-late teenage to early 50s-regarding study and practice in industry, a regional reach from the east, to the northeast, and Midwest, without formal education as a prerequisite for these married (at least once) women with three of the four experiencing motherhood. Additionally, this examination was supported by the ways that the black female entrepreneurs

- i. Handled challenges, rejection and/or loss;
- ii. Demonstrated wit, attitude and will to push or pull forward and
- iii. Their creativity and/or uniqueness as a forerunner in a particular market.

### Conclusion

Clara Brown, Christina Bannister, Sara E. Goode, and Maggie Lena Walker were entrepreneurs who persevered not despite of

but rather because of racism and sexism; they can serve as torch bearers and standard markers for successful entrepreneurship. This paper provides a sociohistorical analysis of their lives and specifically their abilities to

- 1) handle hostility, rejection and/or loss;
- 2) demonstrate wit, attitude and will to push or pull forward
- 3) creativity and/or uniqueness as pioneers in industry and role models for today's black female entrepreneurs.

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