

Leaders of Afro-American Nashville



PATTI JULIA MALONE 1859-1897

*Photograph courtesy of the Nashville Room,
Public Library of Nashville and Davidson County*

Patti Julia Malone was born a slave to Mahalia Malone at The Cedars Plantation in Athens, Limestone County, Alabama, in 1859. After the Civil War, Mahalia bargained with her former master, Dr. Thomas Stith Malone, for her work and that of her daughter Patti. They made arrangements for Patti to attend Trinity School, a school for African Americans operated by the American Missionary Association. It was here that Patti Malone first came to know Mary Frances Wells, the principal from Michigan and a graduate of Mt. Holyoke Seminary for Women. Miss Wells befriended Patti, employed her and sent her to Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee.

Patti first entered high school at Fisk in 1873-74 as a boarding student. In 1877, Dr. George White asked Patti to join the Jubilee Singers, already an internationally-acclaimed chorale group. Ella Sheppard, one of the nine original Jubilee Singers, kept a daily diary of her travels. At Christmas in 1877 she wrote about Dr. White's announcement that Georgia Gordon and Patti Malone would soon join the group. Patti made her debut with the group in Hamburg, Germany, on January 14, 1878.

After Dr. White disbanded the Jubilee Singers in 1882, Frederic Loudin, a former member, organized the Loudin Jubilee Singers. The group performed in Europe and Australia. In Paris, Patti purchased opera glasses which today are housed in the Houston Library in Athens, Alabama. The Jubilee Singers spent thirteen months on tour in Australia and were very well received there. When Patti left the tour for a two-month rest at home in Athens, the group's patrons presented her with a purse of 63 sovereigns. It was even rumored that she was to wed a wealthy white Australian.

On January 26, 1884, Patti Malone purchased from her mentor and benefactor, Mary Frances Wells, a

lot, seven-eighths of an acre for \$300 on Brown's Ferry Road on Coleman Hill in the Village View section of Athens. For \$1400 she erected a spacious two-story residence which she named "The Oaks." The home later became the Oaks Funeral Home but is now no longer standing.

In 1897, while the Jubilee Singers were touring the United States, Patti became ill. The local physician in Omaha, Nebraska, advised surgery and Patti prayed over her condition all evening. Shortly after the group left for their next engagement, Patti entered the hospital. She died on January 20, 1897, the first Jubilee Singer to die while in active service. Her companions returned with her body to Athens, Alabama, where she was buried in the black cemetery in a lot with an iron fence around it. Her fellow Jubilee Singers sang at the funeral. The local press gave considerable notice to the occasion and praised her for "her genuine worth and true womanliness."

Almost a century passed before someone rediscovered Patti's grave and the local historical society raised money for a grave marker. The occasion was truly celebratory with services at her graveside. Following the dedication, the public was invited to see local actors and singers portray various historical scenes from Patti Malone's life.

Patti Malone spent almost twenty years of her young life as a Jubilee Singer. Her legacy is one of good deeds, an unsurpassed soprano voice, and a touring agenda that included visits to seventeen countries and appearances before six crown heads of Europe. Two different photographs of her with the Jubilee Singers remain, though she is not in the 1873 mural at Fisk University's Jubilee Hall. Her legend continues to live and flourish in her church and her community.

-Mary Glenn Hearne

This publication is a project of the 2000 Nashville Conference on Afro-American Culture and History. The authors compiled the information. Tennessee State University's College of Arts and Sciences edited the materials. The Metropolitan Historical Commission assisted with editing and design.