

The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry

Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County

Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield

(1819 – March 31, 1876)

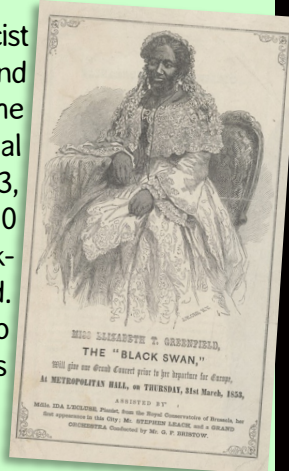
“First Black Woman to Perform in Buckingham Palace”



Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield was born into slavery around 1819, in Natchez, Mississippi to Anna and Taylor. As a child, Elizabeth accompanied the mistress of the plantation, Elizabeth Holiday Greenfield (who Elizabeth was named after) to Philadelphia. The mistress was very fond of young Elizabeth and allowed her to study music while they traveled. Upon her death in 1844, the mistress freed her enslaved people, returning some to Liberia. Since she relocated permanently to Philadelphia, she emancipated Elizabeth and left her a stipend of \$100 a month in her will when she died. Unfortunately, the will was contested, and Elizabeth was left with nothing. However,

Elizabeth was educated and earned her living by teaching music and voice in Philadelphia. By 1851, Elizabeth moved to Buffalo, NY and began working with the Buffalo Music Association, as a soprano, singing to mostly segregated audiences. She became known as the “Black Swan”, contrasting the famous white opera singer, Jenny Lind, known as “the Swedish Nightingale.”

While white critics used racialized terms to celebrate Elizabeth’s talent, black activists focused on her racist manager and criticized Elizabeth for the segregation of her concerts. Frederick Douglas, famous orator and abolitionist, petitioned Elizabeth, demanding she not perform Metropolitan City Hall, because of the segregation policy, but Elizabeth had signed a contract, and could not refuse to perform without financial repercussions. As a result, Frederick Douglas published a scathing opinion piece against Elizabeth. In 1853, Elizabeth made her debut in New York at Metropolitan City Hall to an audience of over 4,000 people. The only black attendees were workers that were required to watch her performance from backstage. When Elizabeth took the stage, she was met with nervous laughter from the uncouth white crowd. But as she began to sing, her voiced silenced the stunned crowd. By performing repertoire thought too complex for black artists, Elizabeth forced her white critics and audiences to reexamine their assumptions about the abilities of black singers.



Shortly after her Metropolitan debut, Elizabeth traveled to Europe for performances in England, Ireland, and Scotland. Her then manager abandoned her leaving without return travel arrangements. Elizabeth contacted Harriet Beecher Stowe, abolitionist and author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, who assisted her with extending her concert tour schedule across Europe. Elizabeth performed for the Dutchess of Norfolk, The Dutchess of Argyle, and The Dutchess of Sutherland. In a historic event, Elizabeth led a command performance for Queen Victoria at Buckingham Palace on May 10, 1854. She was the first black woman to perform in Buckingham Palace for the Queen of England.

Despite her popularity and success in Europe, she was denied entry to advanced musical study programs when she returned to the U.S. Undeterred, she began touring across the United States, limiting the tour no further south than Baltimore, M.D. She opened her own vocal studio, to teach the next generation of black operatic voices.

Elizabeth reunited with Frederick Douglas, and traveled with him throughout the country, speaking and performing at abolitionist events and raising funds for various orphanages.



In the 1860s, Elizabeth developed an operatic troop that purposely excluded the degrading minstrel performers. She taught music and performed in selected shows.

Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield died in Philadelphia on March 31, 1876, of sudden paralysis. In 1921, Harry Pace founded “Black Swan” records, naming the business in honor of Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield.

