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Sarah Louise Delany
1889 – 1999

Annie Elizabeth Delany
1891 – 1995

Founders of the
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Somerset Maugham once said that “longevity is the writer’s greatest tool.” Maugham—who lived to be 92—would have marveled at Sadie and Bessie Delany, who co-authored their first book in 1993, when they were 103 and 101, respectively. *Having Our Say* (Kodansha America 1993), written with Amy Hill Hearth, projected the story of the Delany sisters upon the screen of national awareness. What a story it is!—containing three average lifetimes of experience, wisdom, humor, and history. But the Delany sisters were not “average.” They were two extraordinary people, living extraordinary lives.

Friends and Sisters, Molasses and Vinegar

We were best friends since Day One! Why Sadie is in my earliest memory. . . . My first memory is Papa calling us all inside because a storm was coming. We all sat on the floor and Papa said, “Just be quiet. Let God do his work.” . . . When the storm was over, there was a beautiful rainbow. . . . Sadie took my hand and we ran outside to get a better look. . . . We were certain God had hung it in the sky just for us.
— Bessie Delany

The story of the Delany sisters is the story of one of the oldest living relationships on earth. Sadie Delany was born on September 19, 1889;



*Sarah Louise (Sadie) Delany,
around two years old, 1891.*



*Annie Elizabeth (Bessie)
Delany, around
one year old, 1892.*

Bessie, on September 3, 1891. They were born second and third of ten children. Their father, Henry Beard Delany, who was to become the first black Episcopal bishop in the United States, was born into slavery on a plantation in Georgia, while Nanny Logan Delany, their mother, was born as an “issue-free Negro,” in Virginia. (An issue-free Negro was a person who had some African ancestry but whose mother was a free person, not a slave.)

The leitmotif of the Delany family story is achievement, instilled by Henry and Nan, and attained through pluck, luck, and more than a fair share of intelligence. (All ten of their children received a college education during a time when most people—black or white—were lucky to graduate from high school.) The parents met while attending Saint Augustine’s School, a black seminary and teachers college in Raleigh, North Carolina, started by the Episcopal Church. At “St. Aug’s,” Henry Delany was “a shining star among shining stars.” But what shined in his eyes was even brighter. Nanny James Logan was “smarter than all the boys,” and went on to become class valedictorian.

From the beginning, the two sisters were, as many symbiotic relationships are, the felicitous melding of opposites. As Sadie described, "Bessie was what we used to call a 'feeling' child; she was sensitive and emotional. She was quick to anger, and very outspoken. Now I was a 'mama's child,' and followed my Mama around like a shadow. I always did what I was told. I was calm and agreeable. The way I see it, there's room in the world for both me and Bessie. We kind of balance each other out." And Bessie: "Sadie is molasses without even trying! She can sweet-talk the world,

The Delany family, about 1906, in front of the Delany cottage at Saint Augustine's School. Sadie is in back next to her father, Bessie in front holding her sister Laura.



or play dumb, or whatever it takes to get by without a fuss. But even as a tiny little child, I wasn't afraid of anything. I'd meet the Devil before day and look him in the eye, no matter what the price. If Sadie is molasses, then I am vinegar!"

Living on the campus of St. Aug's, the Delany sisters grew up in relatively idyllic circumstances, steeped in an atmosphere of learning and somewhat sheltered from the harsh racial realities of the surrounding country. Each morning Papa Delany would line up all ten children for inspection before they ventured out bearing the Delany name and reputation. After morning inspection came morning prayer service, and then school, taught by the teachers-in-training at St. Aug's. In free moments, Sadie and Bessie would pick cotton on the campus farm to earn extra money. Bessie was a champion cotton-picker, gathering more than most men—two hundred pounds of cotton at a time to Sadie's one hundred. In the evenings the Delany clan assembled to make music: Papa Delany on the Mason & Hamlin organ, and the ten children playing assorted instruments, including violin, flute, trombone, and clarinet.

Ultimately, everything in the Delany family revolved around religion. As Bessie said, "All of the values that made us strong came from the church. It was religious faith that formed the backbone of the Delany family. We were good Christians and God never let us down. I'll tell you something else, honey. We were good citizens, good Americans! We loved our country, even though it didn't love us back."

Growing Up With Jim Crow

We encountered Jim Crow laws for the first time on a summer Sunday afternoon. We were about five and seven at the time. When we got to Pullen Park

... the spring where you got water now had a big wooden sign across the middle. On one side, the word "white" was painted, and on the other, the word "colored." Why, what in the world was that all about? We may have been little children, but, honey, we got the message loud and clear. But when nobody was looking, Bessie took the dipper from the white side and drank from it. — Sadie Delany

The Delany sisters became living national treasures of American history and black consciousness. Their experience spanned the inception of Jim Crow laws in 1896, to the civil rights movement of the Sixties, to the present day. At the beginning of Jim Crow, St. Aug's was an oasis; elsewhere, blacks were subjected to the complete range of trauma from the humiliation of separate facilities to the murderous activities of lynching parties. Even in relatively liberal North Carolina, the Delanys experienced "back of the bus" seating and "back of the store" service. For young Sadie and Bessie, this treatment was particularly hard to stomach. Their maternal grandfather, James

Sadie studying Greek at Saint Augustine's School, 1908.



Bessie in her classroom in Brunswick, Georgia, in 1914.

Milam, after all, had been a white man. They had been brought up with a heightened sense of self-worth and achievement. The two sisters developed distinctly different approaches to making their way in a hostile world. Sadie, while insisting upon her chosen path, made frequent use of sweetness and conciliation. Bessie did not.

Papa Delany expected his sons and daughters to leave the haven of St. Aug's, to further their educational careers, and to spread the gospel of education, good works, and good will. After graduating in 1910, Sadie took a job as a circuit-riding teacher introducing domestic science to black schools so that she could save enough money to continue on to a four-year college. It was an eye-opener. As Sadie said, "Now I saw for the first time what life was really like for my people. I realized that I was a child of privilege, and that I must share my good fortune. I kept remembering what my Papa always said: 'Your mission is to help somebody. Your job is to help people.'"

Bessie also left St. Aug's and took up a temporary teaching job to save money. Her first

post was in the small rural town of Boardman, North Carolina. "It turned out I was the most exciting thing that happened to Boardman . . . in about a hundred years. Those poor colored folks thought that I was *something* . . ."

In 1913, Bessie moved on to another teaching post in Brunswick, Georgia. "Now, Georgia was a mean place—meaner than North Carolina. . . . In Georgia, they never missed a chance to keep you down. If you were colored and you tried on a hat or a pair of shoes, you owned them."

It was traveling to Brunswick that Bessie came close to being lynched. She was in a colored waiting room, waiting to change trains at the station, when a drunken white man stuck his head in and started leering at her. Bessie said, "Oh, why don't you shut up and go wait with your own kind in the white waiting room?" The man started yelling and a crowd began to gather. Soon there were dozens of white people milling about, with the drunk bellowing at the top of his lungs.

"Two things saved me," Bessie remembered. "That glorious, blessed train rounded the bend, breaking up the crowd and giving me my way to get on out of there. And it helped that the white man was drunk as a skunk, and that turned off some of the white people."

Harlem Renaissance

As far as we were concerned, Harlem was as close to Heaven as we were going to find on this Earth.
— Sadie & Bessie Delany

Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, "Jelly Roll" Morton, Louis Armstrong, and Duke Ellington were some of the people who made the Harlem of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s the center of the world for black culture. As Amy Hill



Sadie's graduation photograph, Columbia University, 1920.



Bessie's yearbook photograph, Columbia University, 1923.

Hearth wrote in *Having Our Say*, "Harlem was a magnet for an entire generation of young black Americans with dreams of a better life. By the early 1930s, there were more than 200,000 black people living in Harlem. Among those who made the pilgrimage were nine of the Delany children."

Sadie moved first in 1916, followed by Bessie, a year and a half later. Their brother Harry was already there, working as a porter and saving money to attend New York University. Brother Lucius had rented an apartment at 2505 Seventh Avenue at the corner of 145th Street. Sadie, Bessie, Julia, Hubert, all moved in with him. The landlady was a Marcus Garvey disciple. The rent was \$45 per month, \$9 each.

Sadie attended Pratt Institute and then Columbia Teachers College, graduating in 1920. Her first teaching job in New York was at P.S. 119 in Harlem, a mostly black elementary school. As

Sadie described it, “This was a typical assignment for a colored teacher. They most certainly did not want us in schools where the children were white.” Since one of the ways that white schools discriminated was to object to Southern accents as somehow damaging to child development, Sadie took lessons from a speech coach in Manhattan, using the freight elevator to enter the building. “You had to decide: Am I going to change the world, or am I going to change me? Or maybe change the world a little bit, just by changing me? If I can get ahead, doesn’t that help people?”

Since discrimination was the given, advancement sometimes required something other than the right qualifications. Sadie wanted to teach at the high school level, an opportunity denied black teachers. So Sadie employed a ruse. She applied for a high school position and waited three years to rise to the top of the seniority list. To avoid the personal interview (which would have revealed her race), she skipped the meeting and sent a letter pretending some mixup. Then, she just showed up on the first day of classes. “Child, when I showed up that day—at Theodore Roosevelt High School,

a white high school—they just about died when they saw me. A colored woman! But my name was on the list to teach there, and it was too late for them to send me someplace else.” Sadie had become the “first colored teacher in the New York City system to teach domestic science on the high school level.”

Bessie enrolled at Columbia University in 1919 to study dentistry. Out of a class of 170 students, there were eleven women, six black men, and one black woman. In addition to the normal rigors of a professional education, Bessie also had to work to pay her tuition, as well as endure the scrutiny and discrimination that being the only black woman in the class brought her. She had to be better than everyone else, just in order to survive. “You see, when you are colored, everyone is always looking for your faults. If you are going to make it, you have to be entirely honest, clean, brilliant, and so on. Because if you slip up once, the white folks say to each other, ‘See, what’d I tell you.’”

It was here that Bessie made the decision to place career over marriage and family. Bessie

Sadie at age 102.



Brian Douglas



Bessie at age 100.

Brian Douglas

related, “Before I enrolled in dental school I had a long talk with my Mama. She said, ‘You must decide whether you want to get married someday, or have a career. Don’t go putting all that time and effort into your education and career if you think you want to get married.’” In 1923, Bessie graduated as a Doctor of Dental Surgery, only the second black woman licensed to practice dentistry in New York State.

The Delanys continued their family tradition of sticking together even in their professional lives. Bessie opened an office in the center of Harlem with her brother Hap, and later they moved to another set of offices which they shared with brother Lucius, an attorney. Bessie charged “two dollars for a cleaning, two dollars for an extraction, five dollars for a silver filling, and ten dollars for a gold filling.” She never raised her rates throughout a nearly 30-year career, because “I was getting by OK. I was always proud of my work, and that was enough for me.”

The Delany family also participated in the center of Harlem political and cultural life. They knew or met entertainers such as Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, Alberta Hunter, Cab Calloway, Lena Horne, and Duke Ellington. They knew the early leaders of the NAACP, such as Walter White, Dr. Louis T. Wright, and James Weldon Johnson. They were friendly with William Kelly, founder of the *Amsterdam News*, the famous and influential black newspaper.

Bessie became actively involved in the burgeoning civil rights movement. “All you had to say was the word ‘protest’ and I was there! I marched in more protests in New York City than I care to remember. It’s a wonder I didn’t wear out my feet.” Bessie was a follower of W. E. B. Du Bois, the militant black rights activist and editor of *The Crisis*. Activism brought out the difference in styles

between the two sisters, and in the Delany family. Bessie was a firebrand and sided with Dubois and his followers. Sadie was conciliatory, as was Papa Delany, siding with Booker T. Washington, the black rights moderate (whom she used to chauffeur around on his visits to the Delany home in North Carolina).

One thing they both agreed on was women’s rights. As Bessie wrote: “I was torn between two issues—colored, and women’s rights. But it seemed that no matter how much I had to put up with as a woman, the bigger problem was being colored. . . . But one of the happiest moments of my life was back in 1920 when women got the right to vote. Sadie and I registered to vote immediately and we have never missed a chance to vote since.”

Traveling Through the Century

When Mama and I were in Russia . . . we thought it was a most interesting place, but poor. I remember maids admiring our clothes at a hotel. And I remember that we were served cabbage soup at a hotel, and Mama and I laughed because in the South that is known as “pot liquor.” I wanted to go out and buy us some fruit, but it was so expensive—a ruble for a single pear. — Sadie Delany

After Papa Delany’s death in 1928, Mama Delany moved to New York to be with her children. This delighted Sadie and Bessie, and they indulged her, including her new-found wanderlust. “While Papa was still alive, Mama had never seen much of the world at all,” related Sadie. “She had the whole world on her shoulders as the bishop’s wife. . . . So, after she moved up to New York, she was ready to go places.” In the summer of 1930 they took Mama Delany on a tour of Europe. In London they attended a performance of

Othello starring Paul Robeson, an old family friend. Bessie had known Robeson at Columbia. After the show, they went backstage to visit, and Robeson exclaimed that it was “so good to see some Delanys from Harlem!”

With Sadie maintaining her teaching job, and Bessie running a clinic for the city to supplement her income, the Delany family weathered the Great Depression together, trying to help the less fortunate along the way. “. . . I *fed* people during the Depression,” remembered Bessie. “My patients would show up and say, ‘Dr. Bessie, I’m *hungry*.’ And I’d always give them something, a piece of bread or whatever I had for myself.”

During the war years, various Delanys went off to serve. Brother Manross made a career in the army and ended up in Burma, helping build the Ledo Road. The sisters and Mama moved to a more fashionable Harlem neighborhood, Edgecombe Avenue, during the war. After the war, they moved to a little cottage in the North Bronx, next to their Victory garden. In 1950, Bessie retired to take care of Mama, while Sadie continued working to support them.

At home in Mount Vernon, New York.

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“I was a dentist, working independently, and I had no pension plan,” reasoned Bessie. “I remember being at a dinner party just before I retired. There was a woman there, a very flashy, important Negro at that time. And she said to me, in front of all of these people, ‘You’re going to give up your *career* to take care of your mama!?’ And I said, ‘Honey, let me tell you something. If you had my Mama you wouldn’t think *twice*.’” With Bessie taking the lead, the Delanys, daughters and sons, cared for Mama Delany until she died in her sleep in 1956.

The “Burbs”

Today, all of Mount Vernon, it seems, is mostly Negro, but in 1957, it was mostly white. I don’t think either Sadie or I had ever lived among so many white folks before, and it was a bit of a shock to us. Of course, we were a bit of a shock to them.

— Bessie Delany

One thing I notice since I got this old is that I have started to dream in color. — Sadie Delany

In 1957, Sadie and Bessie moved to Mount Vernon, a Westchester suburb of New York, to be near their brother Hap. There they performed their daily rituals: Yoga exercises, a whole clove of garlic, a teaspoon of cod liver oil, boiled tap water.

They outlived all of the members of their immediate family. Sadie and Bessie, however, still had each other. “Neither one of us ever married, and we’ve lived together most all of our lives, and probably know each other better than any two human beings on this earth,” said Sadie. “After so long, we are in some ways like one person.”

Their lifetime of collaboration was particularly fruitful, especially *after* they passed the one hundred year mark. In addition to *Having Our Say*, they published *The Delany Sisters Book of Everyday Wisdom* with Amy Hill Hearth (Kodansha America 1994). In 1995, the theater version of *Having Our Say* opened on Broadway.

Annie Elizabeth (Bessie) Delany died on September 25, 1995, at the age of 104. Sarah Louise (Sadie) Delany died on January 25, 1999, at the age of 109.

In 1994, Sadie and Bessie opened a fund at The New York Community Trust, and through the coming years, grants from this fund will help “hang a rainbow in the sky” for individuals, families, and communities striving to improve their lives.



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