

Economy Hall: The Hidden History of a Free Black Brotherhood

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Review

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Shaik, Fatima. *Economy Hall: The Hidden History of a Free Black Brotherhood*. Historic New Orleans Collection, 2021. HARDCOVER. \$34.95 ISBN 0917860802 pp. 540

“One evening in the 1950s, my father rescued a small library of rare books from the back of a pickup truck. Among them were twenty-four handwritten ledgers” (11). On this personal note, Fatima Shaik begins her engaging and beautifully crafted account of the Société d’Economie et d’Assistance Mutuelle (Economy and Mutual Aid Association) in New Orleans. The Economie was a benevolent society, a common form of organization in many communities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, providing financial support to members in times of illness as well as spaces for socializing and camaraderie. Shaik grew up in New Orleans, surrounded by the descendants of the members of the Economie. Her previous books are novels and collections of short stories; this is her first nonfiction book. Drawing primarily on over 3,000 pages in the ledgers from 1836-1858 and 1864-1935, she recounts the history of the Economie. Shaik centers her narrative on its secretary, Ludger Boguille, an educator who wrote most of the records in the ledgers. Yet the book is ultimately not a history of Boguille or even of the Economie, per se. Scholars of benevolent societies, fraternal orders, and other mutual aid organizations may note a lack of focus on the hallmarks of such organizations, despite scattered references to rituals, benefits, funeral processions, etc. Rather, Shaik uses the ledgers to tell the history of the elite, free Black community of New Orleans. In describing her decision to focus on Boguille, she notes, “his moral and intellectual growth mirrored his community’s evolution” (25-26). From the antebellum period through Reconstruction and the rise of Jim Crow, readers experience the transformations in thought of Boguille and other members of the Economie. Drawing on the rich evidence from the ledgers, Shaik’s narrative wrestles with the “legacies and complicated truths” at the intersection of class and race (440).

Shaik draws on her skills as a fiction writer to craft a captivating historical narrative, and she does so in ways that partly stray from the conventions of most academic historians. While

the ledgers are her main source, she fills in gaps by drawing on other primary materials, including archival collections, newspapers, census records, and a variety of government documents. She uses this information to provide context about the world that members of the *Economie* inhabited. As a result, in many instances she is able to provide descriptive and even sensory details that transport readers into her story. She is, however, careful to distinguish the places she is speculating, prefacing many descriptions with qualifiers such as “perhaps,” “maybe,” and “probably.” She also frequently suggests what Boguille “may have” or “could have”—or even more strongly “would have” or “must have”—thought, felt, or experienced. In one example, she recounts an episode when Boguille agreed to teach an enslaved child in his school, and the parents of other students withdrew their children in protest. She concludes, “Boguille must have keenly felt the difference between his values and those of the families who paid for their children’s lessons. Their biases were not only a matter of color. They cared about class distinctions” (123).

In this instance and many others, *Economy Hall* explores the ways that members navigated the complex challenges of living as free Blacks in the antebellum period. The members of the *Economie* prized their elite status. They were very concerned with maintaining their reputations. New members were only admitted if they had sound finances and good character. Shaik details their love of fine clothes, formal banquets, etc. The *Economy Hall* itself was a beautiful and impressive building. One member described it as a source of “glory and honor” not only “to the brother-Economistes but to our class in general” (141). As hostility to free Blacks rose in the years before the Civil War, Shaik concludes, “Now more than ever, the Economistes felt the pressure to rise above the vulgar hordes” (148). And yet as part of this elite status, some members, including Boguille, owned slaves themselves.

A central theme of the book is the transformation of the organization and its members. In part, it was generational: the sons of the original members rejected slavery more fully than their fathers. Yet Shaik also suggests that individuals changed their thinking, and here she deftly uses Boguille’s story. At the start of the Civil War, Boguille joined the Louisiana Native Guards to defend the city against Union troops. (Shaik suggests that the choice may not have been entirely voluntary—free Black residents were likely to have been forced into service had they not joined.) After New Orleans fell, many free Blacks, including members of the *Economie*, and former slaves joined the Union’s Native Guards. After the Civil War, Boguille expanded his teaching,

working with the Freedmen's Bureau and other groups to expand educational opportunities for former slaves, particularly orphaned children. He also became vice president of the Louisiana State Colored Convention and later other civil rights organizations, demanding equal rights and integration. Shaik therefore concludes, "He was no longer focused only on the concerns of his family or social class. If helping the poor and giving them justice was a radical act, he was well on his way to becoming a revolutionary" (264-65).

Yet in the end it is not only Boguille and the *Economie* but the ledgers themselves that are the main characters in Shaik's story. While *Economy Hall* in many ways is not an academic book focused on historiographical or methodological matters, Shaik expresses a deep understanding of the power of her sources to recover a lost history. Like Michel-Rolph Trouillot, she reflects on the power relationships involved in the silences of many historical records. She characterizes some silences as "deliberate," suggesting that the "life stories" of most Black residents of New Orleans were left out of "mainstream books or newspapers" and early histories of nineteenth-century New Orleans (412, 415-416). Her book is filled with details and dramas of such "life stories" drawn directly from the ledgers. She writes about members whose lives have been lost, poignantly noting when leaders of the *Economie* did not even receive obituaries in local papers. After detailing one such leader, she concludes, "He was forgotten, as were his triumphant forebears and patriotic contemporaries. The truth about Negroes like him practically disappeared, except in the records of the *Economie*" (385). In the end, perhaps the greatest contribution of *Economy Hall* is the recovery of much of this once hidden history.

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