

Women's History Month

Louise “Lulu” Cecelia Fleming (28 Jan. 1862–20 June 1899) pioneer Congo missionary and physician, was born in Hibernia, Florida, to slave parents. Fleming taught in the public schools of Saint Augustine, Florida, where she viewed teaching as a ministry, the fruit of her conversion at age 15. Looking back, she judged that her conversion made her a missionary “like Andrew of old from the very day I found the Lord.” Fleming attended Shaw University in 1884 and 1885, the years when the American Baptist Missionary Union (ABMU) assumed responsibility from the Livingstone Inland Mission for six mission stations in the Congo. Graduating at the head of her class, Fleming returned to teaching in Florida, but not for long. The Woman’s American Baptist Mission Society of the West, stirred by reports of a great revival in the Congo, sought single women missionaries. Their first recruit was Fleming.



Fleming arrived at Palabala, lower Congo, in May 1887 and wrote of her amazement at the grandeur of the mountains and the lushness of the Congo Valley. Fleming worked as matron and teacher at the station’s school. She savored weekend opportunities to visit area villages and assist with evangelism services. On a Sunday tour to a nearby town, Fleming reported that the “king” had been pleased by the singing of the school girls and had engaged the missionaries in conversation. Through a translator, Fleming told the king that she was part of his family, “my grandfather and his being of the same country.” Reacting with disbelief to Fleming’s overture, the king cried. “No, no . . . she is a white black woman.” Fleming spoke Kikongo to her school girls and at preaching services without a translator.

Fleming emphasized the need for women missionaries to visit homes and she rejoiced in 1890 when Nora Gordon, (a new graduate of Spelman College, GA) joined her in Palabala. Gordon’s teaching allowed Fleming to spend half of her day on home visits. Interest in Fleming’s work ran high, with contributions in support of her work

coming from local women’s groups in Raleigh, North Carolina, Plymouth, Massachusetts, and Chatham, New Brunswick, Canada. Illness forced a return home in 1891, where Fleming recovered her strength and pursued medical training, graduating from the Women’s Medical College in Philadelphia in 1893—making her the first black female missionary among Baptists.

For her second term in the Congo, Fleming was assigned to Irebu, an interior station further up the Congo River. There she immediately began her medical work, coping as best she could with a new language, missionary illnesses, and “native wars,” during which several school children were kidnapped. Still she kept her focus on “healing the sick and preaching the word.” In addition to her evangelistic and medical work, she played the organ at daily chapel services and for three Sunday services. Except on Sundays, she provided clinic and dispensary service each morning, and most afternoons she visited a nearby town to provide medical care and an evangelistic service. In her last year of service at Irebu, Fleming treated 5,475 patients in her dispensary and made “out-calls” to 308 individuals, some requiring multiple visits. Of all these patients, she noted proudly, only six died.

In late 1898 she married a British missionary, yet her ties with U.S. churches remained and when she became very ill, she returned to Philadelphia. Though only thirty-seven years old at her death, Fleming had been “successful in winning the hearts of the Congo people, putting herself in close touch and sympathy with them.” Fleming’s contribution was to inspire other young women to mission service. Her legacy also endured in the Congo, where she was remembered and honored into the twenty-first century.

This is derived for the article written by Deborah Van Broekhoven for the Henry Louis Gates & Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham (editors) *The African American National Biography* with the published version providing source notes that have been omitted from this bulletin copy.



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