

# The Clerk's Black History Series

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## Lena Paul Richards



(September 9, 1892 - November 27, 1950)

First Black Woman to Have Her Own TV Cooking Show”

**Lena Paul Richards** was born on September 9, 1892, in New Roads, Louisiana, to Françoise Laurent and Jean-Pierre Paul. When she was a child, her family moved to New Orleans, where her mother and aunt worked as domestic servants to a wealthy couple, Alice and Nugent Varin. After school, Lena helped in the kitchen, where she learned cooking skills and recipes. She also prepared lunches and assisted with larger family gatherings. After graduation, she was hired full-time by the family. Alice recognized Lena's natural talents and in 1918, she paid for Lena to attend the Fannie Farmer School of Cookery in Boston, Massachusetts. She was the only woman of color in the program. Lena reported that there wasn't much she could be taught by the school, but she appreciated the experience. After completing culinary school, Lena returned to New Orleans and launched her own catering business from her home and opened a sweet shop, serving local workers sandwiches, red beans, and fresh fruit. Lena was also in high demand for social events, weddings, and debutante balls. Some of her specialties included turtle soup, potato pancakes, crawfish bisque, stewed eggs, oysters, a 16lb fruitcake, and lamb chops with pineapple. At one point, she worked in the Orleans Club - an elite club for white socialites.

Lena married Percival Richards in the early 1920s, and the couple had one daughter. Lena's success in the racially segregated south compelled her to open her own cooking school in 1937, along with her daughter Marie. She wanted to teach men and women the art of food preparation and serving food for any occasion so they could earn higher wages in the Jim Crow South. Because her personal cooking services were in high demand, Lena began freezing her gourmet meals to sell locally.

Between culinary classes and catering events, Lena compiled her more than 300 recipes and published her own cookbook, titled "Lena Richard's Cookbook" in 1939. This was the first New Orleans Creole cuisine cookbook written by an African American. Although her cooking skills came naturally, Lena wanted to dispel the stereotype of the mammy, with innate cooking skills though some magical lineage of service. She emphasized the skill, labor, time, and training that went into food preparation. She also copyrighted her work, to protect her recipes that had been copied and printed by white cookbook authors. Within one week of the books release, Lena received 200 letters requesting copies of the book. Lena and Marie headed up North to promote her cookbook and give demonstrations to the northerners that were hungry for a taste of Southern cuisine. Uncertain about the availability of the proper ingredients, Lena packed a suitcase of dried shrimp, pure cane sugar, Louisiana pecans, and old-fashioned brown sugar. While in New York, Lena connected with Houghton Mifflin Company representatives who expressed interest in publishing her cookbook nationally. Soon after, the company printed Lena's work under a new title, "New Orleans Cook Book" (1940).

After a successful book tour and head-chef stints in New York and Virginia, Lena returned to New Orleans. In 1941, she opened her first restaurant on La Salle Street in New Orleans called "Lena's Eatery". By 1946, she started her own frozen-food business, where she sold fully cooked packaged dinners that were shipped across the country. Eight years later in 1949, she opened her second restaurant called "Lena Richard's Gumbo House". That same year, she made history again as the first Black woman to host a televised cooking show in the U.S.

The show, titled "Lena Richard's New Orleans Cook Book", became so popular that WDSU-TV began airing the 30 minute show twice a week on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Lena tore down racial barriers with an audience of mostly white, middle- and upper-class women, longing for her culinary expertise for all things Creole. The show aired from October 1949 until her passing in November 1950.

On the morning of November 26, 1950, Lena attended church before going to her restaurant to meet a guest who traveled to try everything on her menu. After cooking all day, she felt ill and went home early. Lena Richard died the next day, November 27, 1950, of a heart attack. She was 58 years old. Lena's family kept the Gumbo House open until 1958. Her recipes are still being prepared today.

