

THE ARGONAUT

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*This issue is dedicated to:*

# BLACK AMERICANS IN SAN FRANCISCO

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## *Introduction: A Paradigm for Civil Rights in California*

by Professor James L. Taylor

*The San Francisco Historical Society expresses deep gratitude to Guest Editor Professor James L. Taylor for his many contributions to this special themed issue of The Argonaut. Professor Taylor helped shape the content of the articles, determine their sequence, and establish the broader historical context for the many events and perspectives presented in this issue.*

### ABOUT THIS ISSUE

This special issue of *The Argonaut* is devoted to the contributions, struggles, and divergent experiences of Black Americans in San Francisco. Since the mid-nineteenth century Black Americans have been a dynamic part of the cultural, political, religious, and artistic fabric of San Francisco. Yet the city's early Black settlers faced crippling prejudice from both unfair legislation and inhospitable public sentiment that often resulted in violence, spurring early activism in the struggle for civil rights. Despite the challenges faced by African American immigrants, Black-owned newspapers, churches, schools, businesses, libraries, and centers of learning emerged in San Francisco to support the intellectual and economic advancement of Black citizens—and to spearhead a bold campaign for civil liberties.

Indeed, some Blacks who settled in San Francisco in the mid-nineteenth century became wealthy and influential despite the challenges they faced. Dichotomies such as this reveal a complex narrative about the African American experience in San Francisco that is not easily explained or understood.

The articles in this issue do not attempt to give a comprehensive history of African Americans in San Francisco and California. Rather, they powerfully recover and document the intrinsic relationship of Black Americans not only to the city of San Francisco, but also to the ultimate formation of California as a free state.

The articles also illuminate the deep roots of Black Americans in San Francisco. Historical scholarship

has only recently provided full-length studies of West Coast and California Black communities; few have focused on the social and political development of Black San Francisco.<sup>1</sup> Of those who have developed research studies, one leading writer notes, “For five decades, San Franciscans dominated the Black world from British Columbia to southern California and east as far as Utah. Their influence, which belied their numbers, went unchallenged until the rise of Black Los Angeles shortly before World War I.”<sup>2</sup>

Collectively, these articles suggest the need to reorient our tendency to misread the westward movements of California's Blacks. The prevailing narrative maintains that Black Americans moved west largely as a result of the need for labor during World War II. A similar misconception exists in relation to African American civil rights activism. In this case, the modern San Francisco Civil Rights and student movements and Oakland's Black Panther Party are understood in relationship to the southern movement led by Martin Luther King Jr., rather than the September 1966 Hunters Point unrest that spawned the Black Panthers into existence three weeks later in Oakland. In fact, the struggle for African Americans' civil rights in San Francisco began much earlier, in the mid-nineteenth century. It was led by a relatively small, educated, articulate community of Black settlers who resolutely pursued equality through every means available—a movement that is largely unknown to current residents of the city. The articles in this issue of *The Argonaut* address misunderstandings such as this one.

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## HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

The following background information will help readers understand the historical and cultural context of Black Americans' migration westward.

The Black experience in California significantly predated the legal formation of the state and of the city of San Francisco in 1850<sup>3</sup> and is traceable to the Spanish and Mexican periods. Under Spanish colonialism, the 1790 census reported just under 20 percent Black population in Mexico. In the Spanish Pacific, before the late turn to Negro labor in the Americas, Spanish slavery ruled indigenous and native American people for more than two centuries, until it was abolished across the Spanish dominion in 1820; still persistent nevertheless, it was abolished in the territories of Mexico a decade later, and laws were passed to discourage slave importation by U.S. citizens. Many Black individuals sought refuge in California because of its still extant Mexican legal culture and traditions. Under Mexican California, "the first English-speaking African Americans entered between 1821 and 1848, having correctly concluded that Mexico imposed fewer racial restrictions than the United States."<sup>4</sup>

The Black presence was integral to the establishment of American California, including the founding of Spanish Los Angeles in 1781.<sup>5</sup> Black presence was also inseparable from the issue of California statehood, which suggests that the roots of Black San Francisco run as deep as the roots of the formation of the state itself. In 1852, anti-slavery leaders—who were not committed abolitionists—placed the issue of slavery at the forefront of statehood.<sup>6</sup> The anti-slavery leaders were informed by several factors that made California statehood an urgent issue to be taken up with Congress in the nation's Capital. Among them were war and annexation in Texas, which occurred in the 1830s and 1840s; also the popularity of Manifest Destiny sentiment in the United States, which influenced war with Mexico and made it an American possession; the attempts by pro-slavery interests to form "a slave colony" advertised in Mississippi papers as "*California, the Southern Slave Colony*";<sup>7</sup> and Utah's entry to the Union as a slave state in February 1852, bringing slavery to the West. The question of Negro slavery emerged with the influx of slaveholding and pro-slavery

southerners, especially in southern California in the 1840s and 1850s. The southern pro-slavery element in California was "determined either to have slavery in California or make a desperate effort before seeing the territory given up as a free state."<sup>8</sup> When the question forced a constitutional convention, California's anti-slavery leaders traveled to Washington, D.C. and forecast a progressive "states' rights" position before Congress, insisting that, "... when any such territory applies for admission into the union as a state, the people thereof alone have the right, and should be free and unrestrained, to decide such [*sic*] question for themselves."<sup>9</sup> The right of the future state to enter the Union free of the U.S. slavery system was non-negotiable; California's Black population must be free, as it continued to manage its own domestic institutions, targeting the largest non-White minorities in the state, California Indians, Chinese, and newly absorbed Mexicans.

The essays in this issue weave together a deeply insightful narrative and record of the many complexities, dimensions, duplicities, and contradictions of African American life in California and San Francisco. There are always at least two Californias and two San Franciscos functioning in relationship to the Black population. They roughly reflect the anti- and pro-slavery positions in the convention debates, which revealed a desire among pro-slavery interests to have a southern California with slavery and a northern California without it; California, like the nation it thought had been left behind in the old East Coast, would be half slave, half free.

As certain as state leaders were about the prohibition of slavery in American California in 1850, before Washington leaders, two years later, the state legislature passed a notorious Fugitive Slave Law, which on its face was supposed to prevent further importation of exploited black labor from the South. However, with the law, the state, in effect, strengthened the hold of the puny slaveholding class and did not protect people brought into the state or who came as fugitives<sup>10</sup> seeking refuge from Southern slavery, by allowing for its retroactive application to those who entered California before the 1852 law. In a single note, author Lee Bruno captures the difficult realities that launched the state of California's first coherent movement for civil rights and Black liberation, noting, "Throughout

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the decade from 1850 to 1860, fugitive slave cases continued to occupy the energies of Blacks.” With the largest Black population in the West and in California, Black San Francisco operated with a unity of purpose from a community base rivaled only by older colonial Black communities, such as those in Philadelphia, Boston, and New York.

The conflicting signals, where slavery was illegal but permitted and supported in California, is the paradigm for race in the state; where Negroes could thrive despite discrimination, prejudice, or even in a condition of slavery; where ex-slaves, fugitives, and free Blacks could excel, even above some late-arrival ethnic immigrant Whites, to wield wealth, intermarry, hold political power, form organizations and institutions, publish newspapers, organize conventions for political agitation, operate businesses, and advocate for children and native Americans—all while leading Black America’s support for the Underground Railroad. The Black ’49ers proved to be an exceptional class of individuals, where some, with full knowledge of discrimination in the state and city, sought land, work, and business opportunities, rather than following the difficult scramble for gold. They were represented by the likes of William A. Leidesdorff, a person of mixed West Indian and African heritage who achieved notoriety, wealth and property, and political office on the city council in Yerba Buena village, before it was San Francisco.

The legislative act passed in 1852 effectively focused the civil rights movement among pioneer Black Californians and San Franciscans. Mimicking the old East, the state legislature passed measures forbidding the court testimony of Blacks in the city against Whites, or at all; and giving Black men the right to vote in city, state, and national elections. California was a new world, where former slave women like Mary Ellen Pleasant and her Los Angeles counterpart Bidley Mason could become millionaires and leading women of political and social influence. But the social capital enjoyed among Blacks did not translate well into the right to bear witness, vote, or have children educated, without segregation policies. Not satisfied with their own achievements, mutual aid, community solidarity, entrepreneurship, and racial group uplift embodied their commitments to other Blacks in the state. William L. Katz concurs, noting,

“the black community of gold rush California became one of the most culturally advanced and probably the richest black community in the country. Its wealth was placed at more than two millions of [sic] dollars in assets, with more than half of this located in San Francisco. This wealth acted as a precipitant of black demands for equal justice and was repeatedly used as a further argument in its favor.”<sup>11</sup>

## THE ARTICLES IN THIS ISSUE

### “Mary Ellen Pleasant’s Quest for Equality for All” by Paul Gutierrez

Paul Gutierrez’s article highlights the signal influence of Mary Ellen Pleasant, who rose from a talented, literate, and insightful slave girl to eventually become the most socially and politically powerful Black woman in California, and perhaps the United States. Gutierrez’s Mary Ellen “Mammy” Pleasant is in nineteenth-century San Francisco what her contemporary Harriet Tubman represented in Maryland, despite stark differences in their experiences in slavery; the former effectively passed as White when necessary and convenient, and the latter was known as legendary “Moses” to Black America. Regarded as the “Mother of Civil Rights in California,” Mary Ellen Pleasant likely assisted in the freedom of hundreds of fugitives from slavery between 1852 and the Civil War.

### “We Are Brethren: San Francisco’s Nineteenth Century African American Newspapers’ Relentless Pursuit of Liberty and Justice” by Lee Bruno

Lee Bruno’s article reinforces understanding of the signal role pioneer Black San Francisco leadership played in planting the kernels of local Black civil society institutions in order to strengthen the propaganda and advocacy positions of Blacks in the city and new state by establishing the first newspaper that catered to Blacks. Bruno suggests, “racism was on display every day in San Francisco,”<sup>14</sup> as leading men and women organized against it and its effects.

Bruno describes the founding of the all-Black Atheneum Institute, the cultural center that would serve as the heart of the Black culture in San Francisco; the successes of Black entrepreneurs during

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the Gold Rush; and attempts to increase literacy and job skills of Black laborers and pave the way for them or their offspring to advance “from the mechanic to the merchant to the professional.” He explains the birth of San Francisco’s first Black-owned newspaper, *Mirror of the Times*, in 1857 and its role in addressing issues of importance to the Black community; as well as the subsequent Black-owned newspaper *Pacific Appeal*, which carried forth this mission, eventually leading to seven Bay Area newspapers that helped build solidarity in the Black community.

### **“Exodus: San Francisco’s Black Community in the 1850s” by Hudson Bell**

Hudson Bell’s article drives home the activities of the broader San Francisco Black community of free Blacks, slaves, and fugitives and their response to incidents of violence, swindles, and attacks by Whites; betrayal of the understanding of “free state”; and attempts of Governor Peter H. Burnett to prohibit the immigration of Blacks to California. Bell’s study especially gives one pause to question the popular notion that Black San Francisco was a “Harlem of the West.”

Bell describes the effective organizing of early Black churches, the Athenaeum Institute, the Franchise League, and other new organizations formed by leading men of the city, including Rev. John J. Moore, Mifflin W. Gibbs, William Newby, Jonas H. Townsend, and Peter Lester (of the earliest Black San Francisco school discrimination protest and notorious caning incident).<sup>12</sup> Bell also chronicles the three Negro Conventions held in 1855, 1856, and 1857, which marked an important cornerstone of Black social, economic, and political organizing in California.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, Bell describes the exodus in April 1858 of some 800 Blacks from San Francisco to Victoria, Vancouver Island, where gold had recently been discovered. Discouraged by California’s increasing prejudice, their lack of progress in securing civil rights, and the promise of a better life in Canada, some of the Black community’s brightest minds gave up and left. Following an advance group of thirty-five Blacks, Rev. Moore, Mifflin Gibbs and 400 to 800 of the population of 1800 Black San Franciscans, quit the test of racial justice in the distant world of California.

### **“San Francisco Black Churches in the Early 1860s: Political Pressure Group” by Philip Monsanto** *(Courtesy of University of California Press and the California Historical Society)*

Philip Monsanto’s previously published essay adds an important reading of pioneering institutional and organizational fulcrums among San Francisco’s Black community in the 1860s. Monsanto focuses on the “big three” early churches: Third Baptist, Bethel African Methodist Episcopal, and African Methodist Episcopal—each continuing to serve San Francisco today. Monsanto provides a summary of the early churches’ ready willingness to engage in the civil rights militancy that was established over the previous decade.

Readers are reminded that “in the struggle to change these discriminatory laws, Black churches played a significant role. . . . Black churches in San Francisco were institutions created ‘for survival’ and ‘a creative means of calling forth pride in achievement to disprove the White assumption of Negro inferiority.’” These churches were more than religious institutions; in the world of Black people, prior to Black Power in 1966, they served the total life needs of Black people.<sup>15</sup> Monsanto points to a collaboration between the pioneer Black elite and the new ministerial class of leaders.

The Black church of San Francisco served as a veritable clearinghouse and think tank, as well as a center of social life, recognition, and status. The churches served the multidimensional social, cultural, political, and meeting needs of the Black community.

### **“Emancipation Proclamation: San Francisco and African American Concert Singers – *In Paradisium*” by Bill Doggett**

Bill Doggett’s study focuses on a rare period of San Francisco’s history when Blacks were welcomed as new and vibrant members of the city’s performing arts community. Doggett’s article highlights renowned artists, performers, and entertainers like Paul Robeson, Marion Anderson, Leontyne Price, Matilda Joyner, and the various circuits of less popular concert singers and entertainers who found their way to San Francisco between World War I and the Depression-era years. Doggett, writing

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on the “cultural front” of the Black community of San Francisco, highlights the emergent class of divas and opera singers, Negro Spirituals, and the expanded opportunities for young artists to respond to scholar W.E.B. Du Bois’ call for the “talented tenth” of the Negro class of artisans to demonstrate Black excellence in all areas of life. The resulting Fillmore Jazz venue rivaled New York city’s cultural revolution known as the *Harlem Renaissance*.

### **“Let Freedom Ring: Buffalo Soldiers and the Liberty Bell” by Lee Bruno**

Lee Bruno’s second article provides an instructive assessment of San Francisco’s contradictory racial policies and sentiments in the early twentieth century, markedly expressed during the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exhibition (PPIE).

During the PPIE, the Liberty Bell, on loan from Philadelphia, was displayed on the exposition grounds for several months. When it was time to return the Liberty Bell, PPIE organizers honored the Buffalo Soldiers of 24th Infantry, an all-Black regiment recently returned from a long assignment in the Philippines, by asking them to escort the Liberty Bell across the city to the Southern Pacific Railroad depot on Third Street. While the Buffalo Soldiers were cheered for their valor all along the route, the PPIE itself contained exhibits degrading to African Americans. The “African Dip” exhibit reinforced stereotypes of “savage Africans.” At the Sperry Flour exhibit, Black women dressed in stereotypic “Mammy” outfits made pancakes for hungry crowds. And fairgoers were confronted with signs advertising the “new science of eugenics” and touting the dangers of “mixed-race breeding.”

The double-handed treatment of Blacks at the turn of the century amid the optimism and rapid recovery from the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, the celebration of Abraham Lincoln in Chicago, and the display of the Liberty Bell at the PPIE were extraordinary. The pride of Black California was blunted by humiliating public displays that degraded Black humanity. Such has been a recurrent theme in the experiences of Black Americans in San Francisco; welcoming and unwelcoming, belonging but not belonging.

### **“The Wester Addition District: Documentary Project” by Rodger C. Birt and Charles Wong**

This photo essay by young photography student Charles Wong weaves together an imagined narrative based on images of San Francisco’s post-war Fillmore District. Wong photographed the Fillmore in 1949, capturing a rare glimpse of a social and cultural landscape that had recently undergone a massive upheaval and was in the midst of ongoing transformation. The Japanese-American community that once populated the Western Addition had vanished in a matter of weeks during the spring of 1941 due to the internment of Japanese Americans. In its place an emerging African American population gradually appeared. Lured to the Bay Area by the promise of war-related industries, these Black Americans were now attracted by the promise of ample housing and affordable rents in the Western Addition.

Wong’s photographs chronicle the new flavor of the Fillmore District as well as the challenge of urban life in a changing San Francisco. Birt and Wong illustrate the haunting, beautiful, tragic, resigned, unkempt, but deeply spiritual realities of Black life in the Fillmore—the spiritual home of Black San Francisco.

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The authors of this issue of *The Argonaut* have accomplished the important and timely task of documenting the facts of the Black population’s origins in San Francisco since the nineteenth century: race policy, culture and life, community development, activism, hope and hopelessness, and (for some) the disappointment of leaving. The authors have outlined the case for the need to rethink how we read U.S. Black social, cultural, and political history from East to West; from Harriet Tubman and John Brown to Mary Ellen Pleasant; Garveyism and the New Negro in Harlem to the Fillmore District. Together, the articles present strong evidence to support the claim that San Francisco’s was a Black movement paradigm for future urban-based Black communities.

Remote from the East, the size of its population and the lapse of more than 150 years have faded knowledge of this vital foundational urban Black

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community. We are given here a compilation to better understand the formation, challenges, development, resources, and maintenance of Black life in the city of San Francisco, The quintessential story of the history of Black San Francisco may, in the final analysis, be this foundation, rather than the World War II migrations that transformed Black life in the city a second major time; on the shoulders of Mary Ellen Pleasant, Newby and Townsend, Peter Lester, Mifflin Gibbs, Moore, Third Baptist, AME Zion, Bethel (AME), and Archy Lee.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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James Lance Taylor is Professor of Politics at the University of San Francisco and past Chair of the Department of Politics. He also teaches in the Masters of Urban and Public Affairs program and is past Coordinator of the African American Studies program. He is author of the forthcoming book, *Peoples Temple, Jim Jones, and California Black Politics* (Pennsylvania University Press), and the award winning book, *Black Nationalism in the United States: From Malcolm X to Barack Obama* (2014) and co-editor of *Some things in the Air: Race, Crime and the Legalization of Marijuana* (2013). His undergraduate studies were conducted at Pepperdine University and graduate degrees at the University of Southern California. Professor Taylor is also a noted political commentator throughout the state of California. He is the proud father of Zion, Tsion, and Massai.

#### NOTES

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1. See for example, Albert S. Broussard, *Black San Francisco: The Struggle for Racial Equality in the West, 1900-1954* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1993); Douglass Henry Daniels, *Pioneer Urbanites: A Social and Cultural History of Black San Francisco* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1990); Jan Batiste Adkins, *Images of America: African Americans in San Francisco* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing 2012); Lawrence B. De Graaf, Kevin Mulroy, and Quintard Taylor, eds., *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California* (Los Angeles: Autry Museum of Western Heritage in association with University of Washington Press, 2001); Daniel Crowe, *Prophets of Rage: The Black Freedom Struggle in San Francisco, 1945-1969* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000).
2. Daniels, *Pioneer Urbanites*, 107.
3. De Graff et al., *Seeking El Dorado*, 6.
4. *Ibid.*, 7.
5. William Loren Katz, *The Black West*, 3rd ed., (Seattle: Open Hand Publishing, 1987), 117.
6. Delilah L. Beasley, "Slavery in California," *Journal of Negro History*, 3:1, Jan. 1918, 33-44.
7. *Ibid.*, 40.
8. *Ibid.*, 37.
9. *Ibid.*, 39.
10. Much like the language of protest, where observers debate the use of "riot" or "rebellion," the use of the term "fugitive" is preferred to the common, non-political, implicitly infantilizing category, "runaways."
11. Katz, *The Black West*, 132.
12. Daniels, *Pioneer Urbanites*, 49.
13. This suggests further, a redirection and reorientation in our thinking of the total Black movement between the 1820s and 1970s. This suggests that well before the 1965 Watts riots and the Black Panther Party asserted the West Coast Black community to the center of social and political discourse, and before the contemporary #Blacklivesmatter slogan launched from Oakland and the Kaepernick NFL protests launched from San Francisco in subsequent centuries, Black San Francisco's nineteenth-century civil rights movement and freedom struggle informed eastward, well before the Great Black migration and twentieth-century Harlem cultural renaissance and New Negro movements, from San Francisco's Black leadership, which funded and inspired a lot of the emergent agitation amid the series of events that led to civil war.
14. Lee Bruno, "We Are Brethren: San Francisco's Nineteenth Century African American Newspapers' Relentless Pursuit of Liberty and Justice," in this issue.
15. Black Power and Black Panther veterans of the 1960s movement might be surprised by the militant five-point plan of leaders like Rev. Moore, who in the end, left San Francisco for Canada in 1858. The Black Panther Party promoted a Ten Point Plan.

# MARY ELLEN PLEASANT'S QUEST FOR EQUALITY FOR ALL

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by Paul Gutierrez

**F**rom her most humble beginning as a slave girl, Mary Ellen Pleasant became self-focused and maneuvered her way through San Francisco in the nineteenth century with a grand strategy – to become a powerful and wealthy woman. She spared no artifice, no use of passion or persuasion, and no hesitancy to achieve that goal. Her methods were as creative as they were purposeful. She was the champion of equality for Blacks, the “Mother of Civil Rights in California.” Her true character has been a matter of debate for well over 150 years. She worked tirelessly to free Blacks from slavery, she became rich and powerful, and she was a Black woman in a world of White men. Her name was Mary Ellen Pleasant, although it changed through the years. Some called her Mammy Pleasant.

Mary Ellen Pleasant is an enigma. She has puzzled California historians for generations. Not all the pieces of her life fit neatly together; not everything can be explained. Her appearance was itself the subject of controversy. She became “a figment of imagination as much as a figure of history.”<sup>1</sup> Her birthplace, the color of her skin, her body, and her social status are described in many ways by her biographers and even by herself. Her complexion at some point in her life was fair to the point of enabling her to pass as a White woman, which she apparently did at times. Other descriptions are more consistent with her Black heritage.

The color of Mary Ellen Pleasant’s skin was, like every aspect of her life, contradictory and embellished by myth. Descriptions of her range from Caucasian to coffee-colored to ebony to dark black to “black as

the inside of a coal-pit, but with no Negroid features whatever.”<sup>2</sup> In some San Francisco census reports, she identified herself as “White.” In later reports as “colored.” These differences may have been related to the darkening of her complexion as she aged.<sup>3</sup>

A photo portrait of an apparent woman of color with a light complexion was purportedly a photograph of Mary Ellen Pleasant. Indeed, that portrait appears on the covers of Helen Holdredge’s two biographies written in the 1950s. That picture, however, is claimed by Hawaiian archivists to actually be an 1865 portrait of Queen Emma of Hawaii, the widow of King Kamehameha IV.<sup>4</sup> History does not show Pleasant’s true appearance at the various times in her life. The only known actual photograph of Mary Ellen Pleasant was taken when she was 87.

Pleasant’s role as “the Mother of Civil Rights in California” has surrounded her with an aura of nobility. Yet her life also included undignified events that raised eyebrows and suspicion. Her history as a liberator of slaves and protector of their freedom is consistent with the actions she took to address her own status as a Black woman. However, history may have a difficult time reconciling the disparate aspects of her life.<sup>5</sup>

Efforts to resolve the contradictions of Pleasant’s life are daunting. However, from the existing sources of information, including extensive interviews with people who knew and interacted with her, the following is the general story that emerges.

She was born into slavery and began her life in Georgia as the daughter of a voodoo queen.<sup>6</sup> In later life, she also dabbled in voodoo when she believed it



MARY ELLEN ("MAMMY") PLEASANT AT 87 YEARS OF AGE

*The only authenticated photograph of Mary Ellen Pleasant at the age of 87, c. 1901.  
Courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.*



*This photo has long been represented as a picture of Mary Ellen Pleasant, and it appears on the covers of Helen Holdredge's books, Mammy Pleasant and Mammy Pleasant's Partner. Hawaiian archivists, however, assert that it is actually a photograph of Hawaiian Queen Emma, widow of King Kamehameha IV. Helen Holdredge collection; courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.*

would serve her purposes.<sup>7</sup> All of the facts may never be known. In her own autobiographical description of herself, for instance, Pleasant rejected the idea that she was a former slave, insisting she was born a free Black in Philadelphia. The truth of this assertion has never been substantiated.

An effort to reconstruct the life story of a person who has been dead for many decades requires a certain amount of surmise. One must glean the best description of things that happened long after the players are gone. Moreover, when events are described in newspapers and books, they are given greater credibility, regardless of whether they are partly or wholly inaccurate. San Francisco's history in relation to newspaper reporting is jaded.<sup>8</sup> Newspaper

reporting was problematic in the nineteenth century. Source materials were frequently fabricated. Published accounts based on hearsay were often so embellished with hyperbole and poetic license that the accounts had little to do with the truth.<sup>9</sup>

A classic illustration of published contradictions can be seen by looking at the various assertions made about the origin of Mary Ellen's description as Mammy Pleasant. "Mammy" was a designation that was applied to her publicly and privately; however, she detested the word. While she might have tolerated the term with her closest associates, she refused to accept mail addressed to Mammy Pleasant.<sup>10</sup> Because the Mary Ellen Pleasant story is rife with mystery, even her biographers cannot agree how she came to be given the name "Mammy."

One historian claims that Mary Ellen was given the name by a vibrant young girl who, later as an adult, would stand side by side with Mary Ellen in a lawsuit against one of the richest and most powerful men in California.<sup>11</sup> Another suggests the name came merely from the fact that Mary Ellen worked and had businesses, such as laundries and restaurants, in the domestic arena.<sup>12</sup> Another analyst argues that the nickname was a term directed at Mary Ellen to demean her.<sup>13</sup> Still another source offers the explanation that it was employed to put Mary Ellen in her place as a Black woman in an "inferior, subordinate and servile position" and an "attempt to categorize Mary Ellen Pleasant into that narrow box."<sup>14</sup> Curiously, one account even suggests, despite most reports to the contrary, that Mary Ellen preferred to be addressed as "Mammy" and her wishes were dutifully complied with.<sup>15</sup> Whatever its origin, the name has stuck to the present day.

The mystery shrouding many things regarding Mary Ellen Pleasant's life is in great part a product of her own obfuscation. Her entire life was shrouded with secrecy by her own design and for her own purposes. Indeed, her effort to write an autobiography of her life, on first face, is itself replete with contradictions and fabrications. As stated earlier, her autobiography claimed that she was born in Philadelphia as a free Black, while this characterization of her origin is unsupported by facts and very likely untrue.

In the beginning, Mary Ellen, then called only Mary, was the daughter of a light-skinned "quadroon"

—an outdated term indicating that a person was one quarter Black and three quarters Caucasian. Her mother apparently told her that she was the product of a White Virginia planter and a mother who had come from a succession of voodoo queens from Santo Domingo.<sup>16</sup>

Although being born into slavery was ordinarily a life sentence to misery,<sup>17</sup> when Mary was about nine or ten, she was purchased for \$600 by Americus Price, a distinguished-looking gentleman who lived in Missouri.<sup>18</sup> Mary, a vibrant and outgoing young girl, may have sold herself by telling Mr. Price that if he purchased her she would be “quick at everything.” The precocious young girl intrigued him. As a hotly contested state between the North and South, Missouri was a border state with an ambivalence to slavery. It was a slave state when it entered the Union in 1821 as part of the Missouri Compromise of 1820. In 1854, the Kansas-Nebraska Act nullified the policy set by the Missouri Compromise and permitted Kansas and Nebraska to vote on whether they would join the Union as free or slave states. The violence that then ensued along the Kansas–Missouri border foreshadowed the national violence to come. Indeed,

such intense conflict continued throughout the Civil War. Mr. Price clearly did not wish to place Mary in the middle of this hot and contentious environment, which could clearly inhibit her talents and bring hostility upon himself. Rather, Mr. Price believed that a girl as clever as Mary should be educated notwithstanding the great risk to him of being labeled an abolitionist for educating a young Black girl. While his peers could shun him if they knew, Price was nevertheless intent on giving Mary an education.

Price had earlier made a generous gift to the Convent of St. Ursula in New Orleans, and he took Mary there for private tutoring. If she did well in her studies, she would receive further instruction and ultimately be granted her freedom. After a year, Price returned to the convent and saw Mary as a tall, soft-spoken, well-mannered young girl of eleven who was able to read and write the basics. Missouri was still ripe with racial division, so Price placed her on the steamboat *Belle Creole*, bound for Cincinnati. He was sending Mary to stay with his friends, Mr. and Mrs. Louis Williams. In Cincinnati, she was to continue her education and perform household chores. Mary’s light complexion concealed her African ancestry, and she could easily pass for Creole. Mr. Price did not tell the Williamses of Mary’s true heritage.

Louis Williams was a silk importer. His wife, Ellen, was pale and gentle. The couple was childless. Ellen treated Mary with affection and grew close to the girl. Mary ran errands, mended Ellen’s clothes, and generally became a companion and confidante. Mary also grew very close to Ellen Williams, who treated Mary much as a daughter. However, at one point when Louis Williams returned home after a trip away, Mary’s life changed abruptly. He ordered her to associate only with the servants, saying that was where she belonged. She was to receive no further education. This turn of events tore at the heartstrings of Mrs. Williams and she tried to comfort Mary. Mary later learned that these changes occurred because Americus Price had died, and Williams felt free to disregard whatever ethical obligations he owed to Price concerning Mary. Although Price had paid Williams in advance for Mary’s education, with Price’s death, Williams felt no longer bound by his promise.<sup>19</sup>

With no alternative, Mary accepted her position as a servant. Then Louis Williams underwent



Sunday newspaper The Call cover. Courtesy of Foundsf.com.

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a further transition in his perception of Mary. He wanted to get rid of her, seeing her now as a nuisance. He decided that he would bond Mary as a servant to one of his clients who resided on Nantucket Island, an island whaling community near Massachusetts' Cape Cod. Mrs. Williams and Mary were both heartbroken when Mary was sent to the island. Mrs. Williams and Mary both shed tears over their loss.

Nantucket was free but segregated; Blacks were crowded in a corner of town called the New Guinea District. The person to whom Mary became bound was a Quaker, Mrs. Mary Hussey, known to everybody as "Grandma." She ran a merchandise store on the island. When they first met, Mrs. Hussey asked Mary's name, and she replied, "Mary Ellen Williams," having chosen the name to honor the woman who was so close to her in Cincinnati. Although Mary Ellen could not have realized it at the time, becoming part of a non-slave-holding part of the country was the most positive thing to happen in her young life. Moreover, moving to Nantucket placed her life on a path that focused and enabled her.

Mary Ellen's drive for education was passionate, and her experience working in Grandma's store taught her valuable lessons that would work to her advantage later in life. One of the most important was learning the concept of supply and demand, a practical aspect of the education Mary Ellen was determined to obtain. To Mary Ellen, knowledge was power, and power was exactly what a Black woman was not supposed to have. And it made no difference how that power was obtained; the end would justify the means.

Later, when the store burned to the ground and Grandma died, Mary Ellen was left alone and uncertain of what to do. While bonded to Grandma, she had learned to cook and make wine, skills that would prove invaluable throughout her life. But now with Grandma gone, she was adrift without direction or focus. There was, however, an accumulation of wine that Mary Ellen had help make. Grandma had often sold the wine to supplement income from the store. One of Mary Ellen's first entrepreneurial strategies was to decide that the wine belonged to her, and if she could sell it, she would have the resources to move to Boston, where she might obtain a position as a housekeeper. She found a buyer willing to purchase

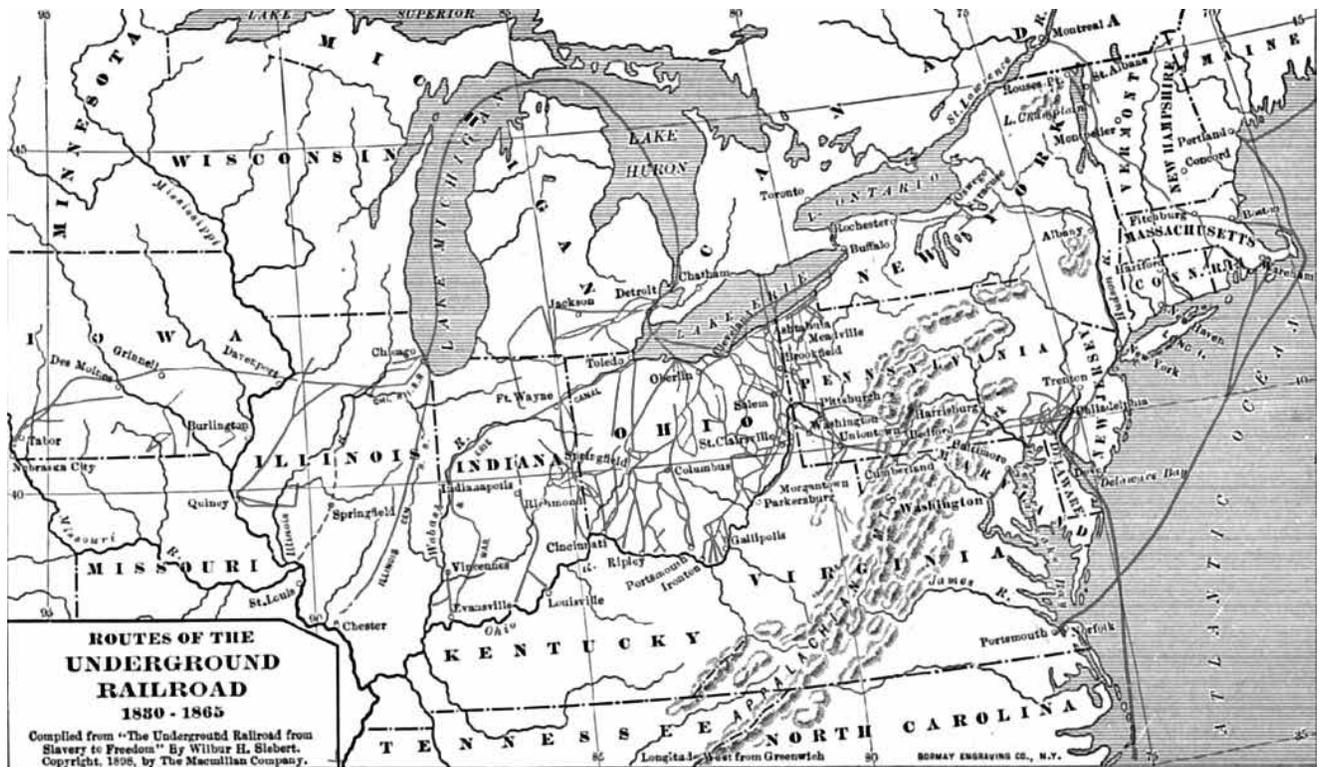
the entire lot. (The buyer had the demand, and Mary Ellen realized she had the supply.) She sold the wine and moved to the mainland. Once in Boston, Mary Ellen landed a job working for Jackson's Tailor Shop on Merrimac Street. Then her life took a most fortuitous turn.

Fascinated by people of wealth, Mary Ellen carefully scrutinized the gentlemen who came into the shop and purchased suits. One man who intrigued her was a large person with heavy features, a tan complexion, and large dark eyes. Mary Ellen learned that his mother was Cuban.<sup>20</sup> James W. Smith was a Catholic widower with a young daughter. He owned a plantation in what was then Virginia (now West Virginia), where he raised tobacco. He was also a successful contractor and merchant in Boston. When visiting Jackson's Tailor shop, he never seemed to notice the comely young employee of the shop. Mary Ellen resolved to change this and take Smith for herself.

Importantly, Smith was a member of a group of dedicated abolitionists, a movement to which Mary Ellen would also become devoted. She looked at Smith as the solution to her humble status and made up her mind to marry him, not because she loved him, but because of the opportunity he presented. In her pursuit of James Smith, she learned which church he attended and began showing up there for services.

Mary Ellen contrived a way to meet Smith by submitting herself tantalizingly to him from the Catholic Church choir. Her Black ancestry presented no impediment; to explain her complexion, she lied, telling Smith that she had some Spanish blood. When he realized that Mary Ellen was the same girl who worked in Jackson's Tailor Shop, he was amazed that he had never realized that this beautiful creature was under his very nose had he only taken the time to look. After a lightning three-week courtship, they were married.<sup>21</sup>

After the marriage, Smith took Mary Ellen from Boston to his tobacco plantation in Virginia. All of the plantation workers for Smith were Blacks whom Smith had purchased and then freed to work at the plantation, if they wished, for pay. She learned that her husband reviled slavery. He worked closely with abolitionist groups to free former slaves and help them escape to Canada (referred to as British North



Routes of the Underground Railroad, 1830-1865. The Underground Railroad was a network of secret routes and safe houses used by nineteenth century Black slaves in the United States to escape to free states and Canada. Courtesy of Wikipedia.

America until 1867). Smith encouraged Mary Ellen to become active in the abolitionist movement. Mary Ellen and her husband sought out Blacks and encouraged them to seek freedom by way of a trip that they would arrange using the “Underground Railroad” to Canada. The Underground Railroad was not an actual railroad with railroad tracks. Rather, it was a system of transportation created by abolitionists, primarily in Philadelphia, in the early nineteenth century. It was a well-organized and efficient system and had a covert network of people and safe houses that worked to transport slaves to freedom in Canada. The Underground Railroad employed train terminology, referring to escaping slaves as “passengers” or “freight” and the people helping their escape as “conductors.” Mary Ellen and her husband helped Harriet Tubman, Jermain Loguen, William Still, and others escape slavery.

Mary Ellen also detested slavery for reasons obviously much closer to home. She abhorred the oppression of Black slaves. She had seen slave

owners treat people like farm animals or worse, while sitting back and enjoying the fruits of slave labor. She believed from personal experience that slavery was wrong from any perspective and that one human being should not be able to purchase another. She was sickened by the fact that people could be bought and sold like cattle and separated from a parent, children, or a spouse; or that someone could purchase a young girl and then generate income by selling her out for prostitution.

To Mary Ellen, slave owners had no compassion for their human property. They could not be motivated by argument or persuasion. If slavery were to be abolished as an institution, she concluded, it would have to be by force. Slaves should someday rise up and physically destroy their oppressors or they would never be free. Until that happened, Mary Ellen and her husband devoted themselves to bringing as many slaves to freedom by whatever devices they could employ. Mary Ellen admired the strength of John Brown in his struggle to free slaves. She considered



*Mary Ellen Pleasant admired abolitionist John Brown for his aggressive approach to freeing slaves. Mary Ellen wanted to give Brown financial and moral support before his armory attack at Harper's Ferry. After that attack, he was captured and hanged.  
Courtesy of Wikipedia.*

him a true warrior, as he was willing to take up arms against oppressors and kill them if necessary. Mary Ellen maintained her belief in “equality for all” and planned to use her new status as a married woman of some wealth and her husband’s devotion to the cause to further the abolitionist effort.

It was not long before Mr. Smith became ill and began experiencing coldness in his feet and hands. He complained of uncontrollable thirst. He shivered constantly and was unable to move about on his own. He believed it was merely a reaction to the stress of their abolitionist efforts, but his condition continued to deteriorate as he struggled to keep his body working. This was a sudden and devastating illness, and rumors circulated that Mary Ellen may have played a role in his condition. In 1828, he died.

Before he died, however, Smith made Mary Ellen promise that if he passed away, she would use part of his fortune to keep the abolitionists’ work ongoing. She kept her promise to work with increasing dedication and commitment to that purpose.

After her husband’s death, Mary Ellen developed a relationship with a man four years her junior with golden dark brown skin, beautiful long angled features, and hazel eyes. His name was John James Plaisance, and he had been employed by Mary Ellen’s husband to oversee his tobacco plantation. His family history traced back to a New Orleans planter named Jules Plaisance, who got into a nasty dispute with his family. To spite his heirs, he left his fortune to Emperor Christophe of Haiti on the condition that the emperor take the Plaisance name. The emperor took the fortune but gave the name to the son of one of his quadroon mistresses. The son and his mother were sent to a plantation in Virginia, where the son grew up and married a quadroon girl. The offspring of that marriage was John James Plaisance.<sup>22</sup>

After her husband died, Mary Ellen placed John Plaisance in charge of all of the properties Smith had bequeathed her. She held great reverence for the Plaisance name because it was of a noble origin, having a connection to an emperor. She planned to marry John, in part to make that name her own. Mary Ellen intended that Plaisance join her in her efforts to help slaves escape. However, during one of her visits with Plaisance, Mary Ellen learned that the authorities knew of her abolitionist activities and were preparing to arrest her. At this point, it made no sense continuing to run the plantation, so she sold it. She and Plaisance moved to New Bedford to continue their abolitionist work.

When Mary Ellen learned that she and Plaisance were both being sought by the authorities for their abolitionist activities, they moved to New Orleans to keep ahead of their pursuers. In New Orleans, Mary Ellen’s interest in voodoo intensified. Believing that voodoo empowered her, she undertook the tutelage of Marie LaVeaux, the then reigning Queen of Voodoo in New Orleans and a distant relative of John Plaisance. Mary Ellen soon learned that LaVeaux’s techniques in hypnotism and conjuring had far greater influence over people and events than she had believed before. Mary Ellen’s voodoo



Portrait of Marie LaVeaux by Frank Schneider, based on a (now lost?) painting by George Catlin. Louisiana State Museum, New Orleans, Public Domain.

activities throughout her life were confirmed by actual witnesses.<sup>23</sup>

While in New Orleans, Mary Ellen also continued her abolitionist activities. Using the Underground Railroad, she continued to funnel slaves to her connections and ultimately to freedom. Mary Ellen and James Plaisance were now married and living under the name *Pleasants* rather than *Plaisance*.<sup>24</sup> Their activities, however, would not go unnoticed for very long. She told her husband

that she wanted him to go to California, recently alive with the discovery of gold, to seek out the possibilities for a new location to send escaping slaves. He signed on as a cook on a ship and left for California. She remained in New Orleans.

With LaVeaux's help, Mary Ellen became a plantation cook. She excelled in preparing New Orleans dishes, and her culinary skills became well known. She was highly sought after as a cook, but she soon learned that many Louisiana slaveholders were also searching intensely for her as an abolitionist. Word had spread that the plantation cook was suspected of being the infamous abolitionist Mary Ellen Pleasants, who, disguised as a jockey, urged slaves to escape their masters. In fact, a visitor approached the owner of the plantation where she worked and suggested that the cook bore an uncanny resemblance to a jockey who had recently visited his plantation and incited his slaves to escape.

Mary Ellen employed various disguises when she visited plantations and encouraged Black slaves to make the escape to freedom – sometimes a jockey, sometimes an old man. When she could talk to slaves privately, she actively persuaded them to escape the shackles of slavery by undertaking the journey to freedom. When they responded favorably, Mary Ellen would conduct them to the Underground Railroad and launch them on their flight.

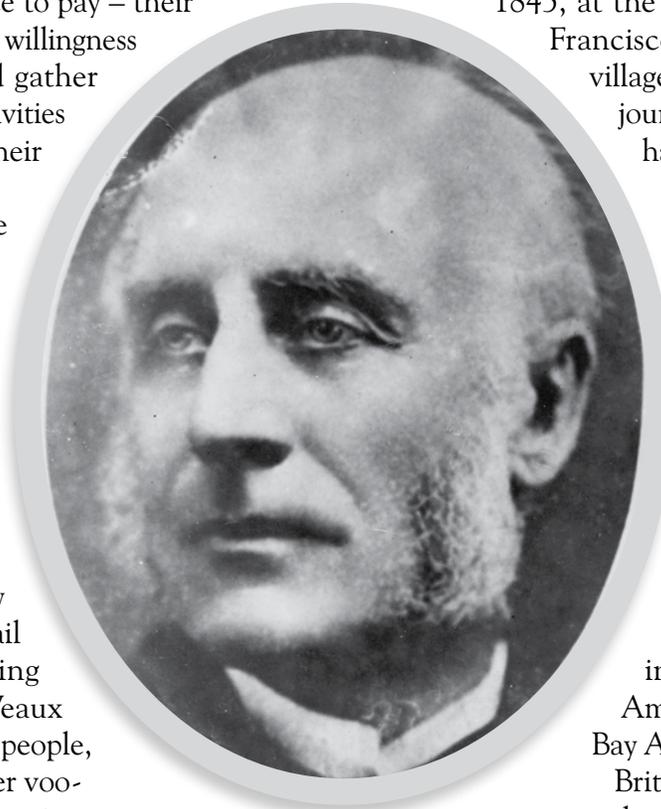
Her abolitionist activities placed Mary Ellen in serious jeopardy. As her true identity was about to be revealed, she had no choice but to escape yet again. One night she secretly left the plantation and slipped onto the ship *Bolivia*, which lay in port. Her passage had been secured by Marie LaVeaux under the name *Madam C. Christophe*, an homage to Emperor Christophe. That night, the ship left port on the four-month voyage to Panama by way of Cape Horn and then on to California.

As Mary Ellen sailed through the Gulf of Mexico, she reflected on what she had learned from Marie LaVeaux about using voodoo to gain power and influence. LaVeaux's system had utilized the Blacks that she had encountered by bringing them under her control. Then she had placed many of them into the service of influential people, endearing them to LaVeaux not only for their rescue, but also for providing them with shelter and an opportunity to earn income or other support. What she expected

in return was a small price to pay – their complete loyalty and their willingness to tell her all they could gather about their employers’ activities and, more importantly, their employers’ secrets.

LaVeaux used the knowledge she gathered from well-placed staff to extract concessions from people of influence desperate to avoid the risk of public disclosure of sensitive secrets. She also arranged marriages for certain young women suddenly and unexpectedly pregnant. Using blackmail and the power of holding devastating secrets, LaVeaux maintained control over people, also holding the fear of her voodoo powers over them. Likewise, all the slaves Mary Ellen had rescued remained indebted to her.<sup>25</sup> These tactics had worked well for LaVeaux, and Mary Ellen was confident that she could use her abolitionist activities and LaVeaux’s strategies for controlling people to conquer San Francisco.

On Mary Ellen’s journey to San Francisco, the *Bolivia* stopped in Acapulco, where a passenger named Thomas Bell boarded the ship. He was a native of Scotland who had left his homeland in



*Thomas Bell was a Scot who met Mary Ellen Pleasant on the ship carrying her to San Francisco in 1851. He fell under her spell and complied with her plans, regardless of how inexplicable or bizarre. Courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.*

1845, at the age of twenty-five, for San Francisco, then known as the tiny village of Yerba Buena. During his journey, he heard that America had declared war on Mexico. He believed that Britain would likely take over possession of San Francisco Bay, a remote and distant land holding of Mexico.<sup>26</sup> Although this conclusion proved incorrect, Bell had feared that in such an event the bay would be closed by the British, so he settled in Mexico and set up business interests there. While he was living in Mazatlán, the Mexican-American War ended, with the Bay Area becoming American, not British, territory. So, in 1851, he decided to return to California. Bell would be arriving in San Francisco during a year of intense social turmoil. Crime, corruption, and violence were rampant. Vigilantes had taken over the city in a desperate attempt to regain control.<sup>27</sup>

Also on the ship was Mary Ellen Pleasant, traveling under the name Madame C. Christophe. She and Bell encountered each other when the ship was in Valparaíso, Chile, bound for Panama. He gave her his red shawl as she shivered in the night. Bell immediately became enthralled and fascinated with Mary Ellen. She seemed capable of reading his actions and delving into his hidden thoughts. (Recognizing the characteristics and mannerisms of people is the stock and trade of many voodoo practitioners.) Mary Ellen appeared to have an unspoken power over Bell, and he resigned himself to not even attempt to deceive her. He admired Mary Ellen’s chiseled facial features, her exotic look, and large hypnotic eyes, which always seemed probing and decisive. Her thin waist and



*The Bolivia was one of five identical sister ships built in 1873-1878. Courtesy of NorwayHeritage.com.*

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slim figure also attracted Bell physically. In Panama, Bell and Mary Ellen transferred to the ship *Oregon* on its way to San Francisco.

Mary Ellen was also attracted to Thomas Bell. He was slightly shorter than she, but still average in height. He had sandy hair, a healthy-looking complexion, and clear blue eyes. The attraction may have been mutual, but Bell and Mary Ellen lost track of each other in the crowd when the passengers disembarked in San Francisco. Bell stayed only briefly in San Francisco and then returned to Mexico, but the thought of Madam C. Christophe returned to his mind frequently.<sup>28</sup>

When the ship docked in San Francisco, Mary Ellen learned that her reputation as an excellent cook from her days in the plantation kitchen had preceded her arrival—most likely from travelers to the city taking the faster, albeit more arduous and dangerous route across the isthmus of Panama. The city was overwhelmingly populated with men because of the gold fever that permeated everything, so anybody—especially a woman—who could provide the comfort of fine food was in huge demand. According to a newspaper article that appeared in 1899,<sup>29</sup> when Mary Ellen arrived in San Francisco she was swamped with offers for her services by men crowding the dock, all of whom wanted her Southern culinary expertise. Mary Ellen began to see yet again the opportunities of supply and demand available to her. The demand was extremely high, and she was the only supply. She announced that she would work for the highest bidder, and an auction was conducted for her services.

Mary Ellen sat on deck as the bidding moved into the hundreds of dollars. Ultimately, the bidding reached \$500 per month for the position of housekeeper. The winning bid was from commercial merchants, Charles Case and his partner Charles Heiser. Mary Ellen was attracted to the word *housekeeper*, as that would mean she only had to assure that the work was done, not that she had to be the person actually doing it. She had a few conditions: she would do no cleaning or dishwashing of any kind whatsoever. Her demand was promptly met, and she undertook managing the boarding house on Sansome Street for Case and Heiser's bachelor employees. While it has been said that this story is a myth, witnesses have recounted it,<sup>30</sup> and it

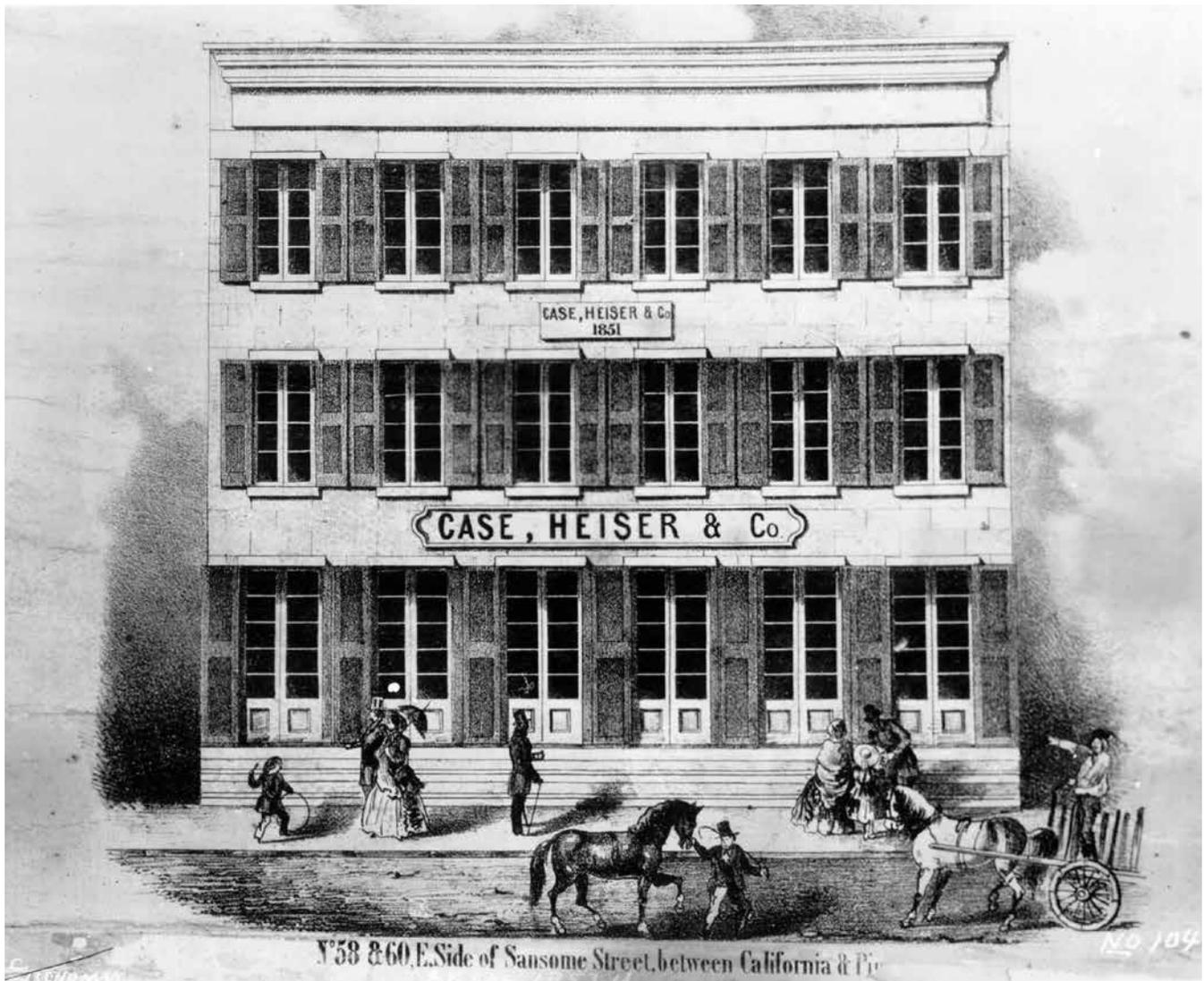
underscores Mary Ellen's intent to use all of her wiles to conquer San Francisco.

Mary Ellen soon realized that her position was with one of the leading commission houses in San Francisco crowding two huge warehouses overflowing with merchandise. She guided her help as they worked efficiently and smoothly, and her table soon served the most mouthwatering cuisine in the city. The reputation of her cooking skills was well founded. Later in life, Mary Ellen would write a cookbook of all of her recipes.

On April 15, 1852, shortly after Mary Ellen arrived in San Francisco, the California legislature passed the Fugitive Slave Act.<sup>31</sup> The act authorized the arrest of former slaves who had escaped their masters and come to California. This led Mary Ellen to decide that she must pass herself off as a White woman. Taking full advantage of her fair complexion, Mary Ellen wanted to hide in plain sight—hiding both as an abolitionist and as a woman of color. Under the act, every Black person had to prove his or her right to freedom. A Black person was presumed to be a slave unless proven otherwise.

A claim by a White person to be the owner of a particular Black person was difficult to dispute because, under a law enacted in 1850, Blacks could not testify at all: "no black or mulatto person, or Indian, shall be permitted to give evidence in any action to which a white person is a party, in any Court of this State."<sup>32</sup> Thus, a White person who asserted ownership of a Black as a slave by sworn affidavit could not be challenged by conflicting testimony from the alleged escaped slave. In 1852, Mary Ellen and other like-thinking Blacks in San Francisco challenged the ban on Blacks testifying, but it was not until 1863, during the Civil War, that this law was changed.<sup>33</sup>

If, however, a slave owner rented out his slave's labor or compensation, the slave earned his freedom. When Mary Ellen heard of efforts to return a slave to slave territory, she would confront the slave owner with papers showing that by renting out his slave, the slave owner lost any ownership right to the slave as property by breaking the law against slave labor in California.<sup>34</sup> The slave, now rescued, was then placed by Mary Ellen in whatever position she could find. She started with her own employers and encouraged them to hire a former slave as a janitor.



Case, Heiser & Company headquarters, on the east side of Sansome Street between California and Pine, where Mary Ellen took her first position upon her arrival in San Francisco. Courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

Soon she added a number of Black girls to assist in maintaining the boarding house. As San Francisco grew, the cadre of Blacks owing their freedom to Mary Ellen likewise grew.

After a few years, Mary Ellen had accumulated enough money to purchase a piece of property at the corner of Jessie and Ecker Streets,<sup>35</sup> where she opened a profitable laundry staffed with inexpensive Black labor. She went on to build a second and third laundry. When the Case, Heiser & Company operation shut down, Mary Ellen was much sought after as a housekeeper. Still, her determination as an abolitionist was unwavering, and she committed more and more of her personal resources to transporting

escaped slaves to San Francisco. When Mary Ellen had arrived in San Francisco, it was home to 444 Black residents. By 1870 the population had risen to 1,330, and Mary Ellen Pleasant accounted for some of that increase. Many former slaves owed a debt of thanks to Mary Ellen for both their freedom and their livelihood. "Equality for All" was still her mantra.

Mary Ellen became the housekeeper for Selim Woodworth, a prominent mine owner who frequently entertained his business associates. She studied the social activities with a keen ear and an eye for detail. During these interactions, Mary Ellen learned which mining stocks were rigged and how transactions could be manipulated. She

began using that knowledge to invest in stocks and other speculations. She would purchase silver, deposit it in the bank and then draw down on it and purchase gold as the value of the investment grew.<sup>36</sup> She began lending some of the money left to her by her husband at 10 percent interest per month, adding to her coffers.<sup>37</sup> She began setting up businesses—such as livery stables and saloons—for other enterprising Blacks, bringing in more profits. Mary Ellen, however, had even more devices for generating profits than such investments.

During these years, Mary Ellen had lost contact with Thomas Bell, the gentleman to whom she had become attracted on her voyage to San Francisco. While she often looked vainly for him on the street, it was not until four years later that they encountered each other in San Francisco's Financial District. They renewed their acquaintance, and she told him of her activities investing in laundries, saloons, and livery stables. Bell was quite impressed with Mary Ellen's entrepreneurial accomplishments and told her that he was employed by the banking firm of Barron-Bolton & Company, which had connections with London's Rothschild banking firm. He suggested that she conduct her business through his firm. Ultimately, Mary Ellen approached Bell from an investment perspective, but it was not for his advice. She gave him orders on what to buy and what to sell. She deflected his advice and he acquiesced to her instructions.<sup>38</sup> The business relationship between the two, however, evolved to the point that Bell, from his connections in the financial world of San Francisco, brought investment opportunities to her attention. From this symbiotic relationship, both Bell and Mary Ellen began to accumulate substantial returns for both of them.

While still committed to and active in her abolitionist objectives, Mary Ellen applied much of her capital to finance the Underground Railroad, thereby bringing many former slaves to freedom. Because Mary Ellen revered the abolitionist John Brown and wanted to support his efforts, she sent Brown money gathered from her Black supporters in San Francisco to assist him in the raid on the armory at Harper's Ferry. Mary Ellen believed that the only



Mary Ellen Pleasant's gravesite today. It commemorates her as the "Mother of Civil Rights" and as "a friend of John Brown." Courtesy of the author.

way to obtain total freedom for her race was by force; this was consistent with Brown's strategy. According to the *San Francisco Call* of January 4, 1904, she delivered cash to John Brown and he agreed to hold off the raid on Harper's Ferry until she could arouse feelings of rebellion among Southern Blacks.<sup>39</sup> However, before Mary Ellen could complete her part, Brown launched his failed attack and was captured. The tragic story of Harper's Ferry was over, and John Brown was hanged.

While she was always critical of Brown for jumping the gun, her commitment to the abolitionist movement in general and John Brown in particular led her to have her epitaph declare, "She was a friend of John Brown."<sup>40</sup> Notwithstanding reports of her activity in support of Brown, some historians question whether she ever really provided him with financial assistance.<sup>41</sup> It has been said that a note was found on John Brown's body with the initials "M.E.P.," but that suspicion of Mary Ellen's involvement didn't arise because the "M" looked too much like a "W." Mary Ellen's bad penmanship may have saved her life.<sup>42</sup>

Mary Ellen's strongly held belief in equality regardless of race reached a pinnacle in 1866. While there may have been an issue as to Mary Ellen's race, whether White, Black or somewhere in between, she made it clear by bringing a lawsuit against the Omnibus Railroad Company, a streetcar company



*Located at 1661 Octavia at Bush Street and designed by Mary Ellen Pleasant, this massive home has concealed passages and listening spots, revealing the secrets that Pleasant relied on to maintain her control over its residents. The furtive activities that occurred at the house led the people of San Francisco to call it the House of Mystery. Courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.*

in San Francisco. Although it was well known that Mary Ellen's financial resources enabled her to travel about the city in her favorite carriage with her own driver from a livery stable she owned, she nevertheless sued the company for \$5,000 because it had put her off the car and refused to transport her because she was Black. At this point, there was no question as to Mary Ellen's ethnicity. She withdrew her suit when the company agreed to allow Blacks to ride the conveyance.

Later, she filed suit against the North Beach and Mission Railroad Company in both her name and that of her husband, John Pleasant. The suit alleged that as she waited on Folsom Street for the No. 21 and hailed the streetcar, the driver refused to stop even though there was sufficient room and Mary Ellen had her paid ticket. They asserted that the railroad company had a policy that required their employees "to refuse to stop the cars . . . to allow

'colored people' or people of African descent, to get on board." Important to her case this time, Mary Ellen called to testify on her behalf a White woman, Lisette Woodworth, a woman whom Mary Ellen had introduced to Selim Woodworth, Mary Ellen's former employer. (Lisette and Selim had ultimately married.)<sup>43</sup>

The case revolved around whether damages for emotional distress or other general injuries could be awarded in the circumstances. The jury awarded damages of \$500. The rail company appealed, arguing that no special damages could be proven; the \$500 was therefore excessive and a result of the jury acting "under the influence of passion or prejudice."<sup>44</sup> The Supreme Court reversed the award, holding that "There was no proof of special damage, nor of any malice, or ill will, or wanton or violent conduct on the part of the defendant." The court ruled that "if the plaintiff was wrongfully

excluded from the car, this violation of her rights entitles her to nominal damages.”<sup>45</sup>

The California Supreme Court thus rejected the argument of the Pleasants’ attorney, George W. Tyler, who argued passionately:

“The damages are not excessive. . . . It will cost plaintiff more than the amount to enforce her legal right to ride in the cars. Let this Court once hold that all a negro can recover is nominal damages for being refused permission to ride in the cars, on account of his color, and that class of persons can never enjoy the privilege in San Francisco. The party can prove no special damage, and he is told by a Court of justice that, although it is conceded he has a right to ride on the cars, and that he has willfully and purposely been deprived of the exercise of his legal right, yet he has practically no remedy. The company, with its paid attorney, could and would litigate until doomsday, if such were declared to be the law.”<sup>46</sup>

The Supreme Court’s ruling upheld the rights of Blacks to use public transportation, even though Mary Ellen’s award of \$500 for emotional distress damages was ultimately set aside. This gave her increased respectability among the Black citizens of San Francisco. Mary Ellen’s husband, John James Pleasant, died of diabetes in 1877.

In 1876, Mary Ellen commenced a major construction project on a large half-block property she had purchased, bounded by Bush, Octavia, Sutter, and Fern Streets, a small alley running through through the property. Although the Fern Street portion was absorbed by the construction project itself, the street’s extension still exists in San Francisco today. Mary Ellen designed and had builders construct a 30-room mansion on the property to be occupied by Mary Ellen’s business partner Thomas Bell and a former prostitute Teresa Percy, both of whom Mary Ellen had incorporated into her life. It was essential to Mary Ellen that she oversee the entire construction effort, as her design included plans for secret passages and hidden rooms so that she could hear and observe the activities and conversations of staff and others in the house. The size and intricacy of the elaborate design were

overwhelming. The art, furniture, mirrors, and chandeliers were stunning. Mary Ellen designed her exquisite bedroom on the second floor, as well as sleeping quarters for Thomas Bell and also sleeping quarters for Teresa. To the outside world, Mary Ellen presented the household as Thomas and Teresa Bell, as husband and wife, and Mary Ellen as merely the housekeeper. At the time, however, Thomas and Teresa were not really married nor even intimate. The reasons for the charade rested with Mary Ellen.

With so many idiosyncrasies, questions, and secrets about the goings on in the enormous mansion—who was who, what was what—San Franciscans and the press began to refer to it as the “House of Mystery.”<sup>47</sup> The house was indeed a mystery, as visitors were not normally allowed and nobody really knew what went on inside. Rumors of strange noises and voodoo chants emanating from the structure were frequent. Mary Ellen was commonly seen leaving the residence in fashionable clothes and in a driven carriage, which appeared inconsistent with the position of housekeeper.

Mary Ellen’s life as a successful Black woman in San Francisco was focused in large part on bringing equality to all. Her efforts and her fortune were committed to that objective, earning her the title “Mother of Civil Rights” in California. California was never the same again.

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*This plaque is on Octavia Street at the former location of the “House of Mystery.” It commemorates Mary Ellen Pleasant as the “Mother of Civil Rights in California.” Courtesy of the author.*



Mary Ellen Pleasant is depicted in a mural painted in the Monadnock Building at 685 Market Street in San Francisco. She is memorialized as the woman who was a mysterious and powerful figure during the Civil War years and championed the cause of Blacks. (She appears at the far right in black). Courtesy of Brookfield Property Partners.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Gutierrez is fascinated with the Barbary Coast, having been a docent for the San Francisco Historical Society. As a passionate historian, he has written numerous articles for *The Argonaut*, highlighting historical events and people during the Barbary Coast era from 1846 to 1876. Paul is a retired trial attorney who practiced in San Francisco.

## NOTES

1. Lynn M. Hudson, *The Making of Mammy Pleasant: A Black Entrepreneur in Nineteenth Century San Francisco* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 119.
2. Herbert Asbury, *The Barbary Coast* (Basic Books, 1933), 14.
3. Helen Holdredge, *Mammy Pleasant* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1953), 61.
4. *The Making of Mammy Pleasant*, 62.
5. See: "Mary Ellen Pleasant: Mammy or Master?" *The Argonaut*, 28:1 (Summer 2017), 6. Mary Ellen Pleasant's primary biographer Helen Holdredge has been criticized for emphasizing the lurid aspects of Mary Ellen's life or even creating them. Holdredge's research has been called flawed and biased. See: <http://maryellenpleasant.wordpress.com>
6. Susheel Bibbs, writer, producer, and director, *Meet Mary Pleasant (Mother of Civil Rights)*, (Video Production, M.E. P. Productions, 2010).
7. Helen Holdredge, *Mammy Pleasant* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1953), 8.
8. See *War of Words: A True Tale of Newsprint and Murder* by Simon Read (New York: Union Square Press, 2009); "Luck is a Fickle Mistress; The Love Story of Charles and Belle Cora" by Paul Gutierrez, *The Argonaut*, 24:1 Summer 2013.
9. William M. Stewart, *In the Circuit Court of the United States. . . ninth circuit . . . William Sharon, complainant, vs. Sarah Althea Hill, respondent. Oral argument for complainant by Wm. M. Stewart – Primary Source Edition* (Nabu Public Domain Reprints, before 1923, 16).
10. Susheel Bibbs, *Heritage of Power: Marie LaVeaux to Mary Ellen Pleasant*, M.E.P. Publications, 1998, 151.
11. *Mammy Pleasant, Marie LaVeaux to Mary Ellen Pleasant*, 55: "The willful Sarah Althea, full of duplicity and unchecked by her indulgent grandfather, found a kindred

- soul in the woman who held sway in the enormous kitchen. Mary Ellen, known to her employers as Mrs. Pleasants, was fascinated by the beautiful child, with her curly red-gold hair, her brilliant blue eyes, and vivacious ways. Soon the two shared a secret, for Sarah Althea endowed her friend with a name invented by herself, ‘Mammy Pleasant.’”
12. *The Making of “Mammy Pleasant*, 4: “Pleasant became known as ‘Mammy Pleasant’ partly because she was a Black woman who performed domestic work; in nineteenth-century America, it is hardly surprising that she would be thus named.” See also at p. 119: “The need to cast Pleasant as mammy reflects this need to radicalize the political and cultural landscape as class relations shifted and the West industrialized.”
  13. Susheel Bibbs, 21, 149. “Pleasant hated this derogatory nickname, popularized in the press by her enemies” and noting “(t)hat ‘mammy’ appellation puts one in one’s place. It consigns one to servitude.”
  14. *Meet Mary Pleasant (Mother of Civil Rights)*, 51 minutes; 55 seconds. Produced/Written/Directed by Susheel Bibbs 2010.
  15. Charles Adams, *The Magnificent Rogues of San Francisco* (The Write Thought, 1998), 162: “She (Teresa Perry) also obediently responded to Mrs. Pleasant as ‘Mammy,’ a name quickly picked up by Mary Ellen’s intimates.”
  16. *Mammy Pleasant*, 8.
  17. To this day, the accuracy of this seminal story is challenged, offering as an alternative that she was born on the Island of Nantucket, notwithstanding the absence of any evidence to support that conclusion.
  18. “*The True Story of Mammy Pleasant*” (*San Francisco News Letter and California Advisor*, September 2, 1916), 4.
  19. *Ibid.*, 13.
  20. Some authors suggest that he was mulatto, part Black and part White, but his color probably was a result of his Cuban ancestry. See Sue Bailey Thurman, *Pioneers of Negro Origin in California* (Acme Publishing Company, 1949), 47.
  21. *Mammy Pleasant*, 18.
  22. Helen Holdredge Collection, San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library, Box 4, Folder 24.
  23. Helen Holdredge Collection, San Francisco History Library Center, San Francisco Public Library.
  24. Later they would drop the final “s” transforming the name to “Pleasant.”
  25. *Heritage of Power: Marie LaVeaux to Mary Ellen Pleasant*, 16; Helen Holdredge, *Mammy Pleasant’s Partner* (G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1954), 103.
  26. *Mammy Pleasant’s Partner*, 5.
  27. Roger W. Lotchin, *San Francisco 1846–1856: From Hamlet to City* (Oxford University Press, 1974), 193; “Luck is a Fickle Mistress; the Love Story of Charles and Belle Cora.”
  28. *Mammy Pleasant’s Partner*, 96.
  29. *The San Francisco Call*, May 7, 1899, p. 1, c.1.
  30. Helen Holdredge Collection, San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library, Box 4, Folder 24.
  31. Stacey L. Smith, *Freedom’s Frontier: California and the Struggle Over Unfree Labor, Emancipation, and Reconstruction* (University of North Carolina Press, 2013).
  32. Jo Ann Levy, *They Saw the Elephant: Women in the California Gold Rush* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1941), 211; *Meet Mary Pleasant (Mother of Civil Rights)*, 42 minutes, 50 seconds.
  33. *Pioneers of Negro Origin in California*, 48.
  34. Rudolph M. Lapp, *Archy Lee: A Fugitive Slave Case* (Baytree Books, 1969).
  35. *Mammy Pleasant*, 40.
  36. *Meet Mary Pleasant (Mother of Civil Rights)*, 24 minutes; 50 seconds.
  37. “The True Story of Mammy Pleasant,” 4.
  38. *Heritage of Power*, 154–55.
  39. Delilah L. Beasley, *The Negro Trail Blazers of California* (Los Angeles: Times Mirror Printing and Binding House, 1919), 96.
  40. *Heritage of Power*, 146.
  41. *Meet Mary Pleasant (Mother of Civil Rights)*, 34 minutes; 51 seconds.
  42. *The Making of “Mammy Pleasant*,” 41.
  43. *Ibid.*, 52. Lisette Woodworth was by this time a matron of San Francisco society and she vouched for Mary Ellen’s veracity and respectability. It was a common strategy for abolitionists to be introduced by prominent White people in times of controversy. When Mary Ellen’s attorney asked how long Lisette knew Mary Ellen, she said about ten years and that she usually referred to her as “Mamma.”
  44. *Pleasants v. N. B. & M. R. R. Co.*, 34 Cal. 586 (Jan. 1868).
  45. *Ibid.*, 590.
  46. *Ibid.*, 588.
  47. *The Making of “Mammy Pleasant*,” 79; *Mammy Pleasant*, 149.

# WE ARE BRETHERN:

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## *San Francisco's 19th-century African American Newspapers' Relentless Pursuit of Liberty and Justice*

by Lee Bruno

In the summer of 1853, three African American San Francisco businessmen – Mifflin Gibbs, Jonas Townsend, and W. H. Newby – gathered on the second floor of the newly-founded all-Black Atheneum Institute to discuss the pressing issue of racial equality. The institute, which had just been founded that year, was destined to become a refuge and a watering hole for Black working-class men, who would assemble on the first floor to socialize, play cards, drink, and occasionally dance. It also served as the cultural center where members of San Francisco's Black community could engage in intellectual discussion and political strategy.

The three businessmen who met that day were resolute in pursuing the basic rights afforded White citizens. They also believed that a Black-owned newspaper could become a potent vehicle for rallying and advocating for their causes. They were constantly reminded of the importance of civic protections because without them Blacks were subjected to violent encounters with Whites who knowingly exploited Blacks' lack of legal rights.

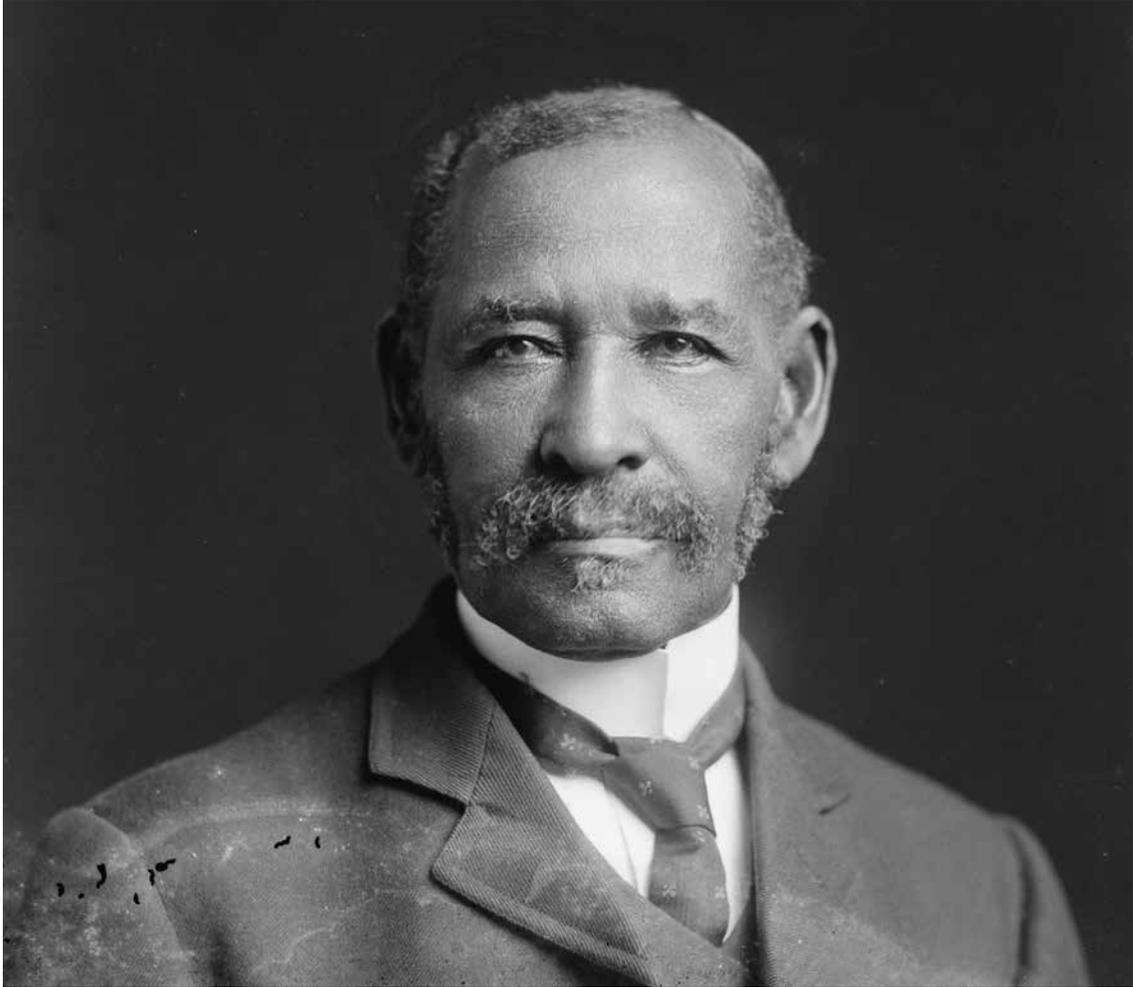
The Atheneum Institute was located in the heart of San Francisco's African American community, on Washington Street between Stockton and Powell. The community was nestled in one of the oldest parts of San Francisco, where churches had become the central rallying spots to socialize and gain solidarity.

At the time, San Francisco was a fledgling city fueled by the gold fever that had swept the world and brought thousands of people to its shores. San Francisco's population in 1849 was roughly 1,000;

over the next three years, it grew to an estimated 35,000. In 1852, there were 464 African American citizens living in San Francisco, according to Douglas Henry Daniels' *Pioneer Urbanites: A Social and Cultural History of Black San Francisco*. By the end of the decade, San Francisco's Black population had grown to an estimated 1,176, out of a total population of 56,776.

Census data and research gathered by Penelope Bullock, author of *The Afro-American Periodical Press 1838–1909*, shows that at that time, San Francisco had the largest Black population of any city in California. Even though California was a free state before the Civil War, many White slave owners brought enslaved men, women, and children to California to work on farms and in factories; however, most African Americans who resettled in California were not enslaved. During the Gold Rush years, many Blacks left New England and headed to California. The passing of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 put them and their family members in great jeopardy. But given the climate of racial injustice in their homelands, many Blacks continued migrating to the state throughout the 1860s (the Emancipation Proclamation was passed in 1863).

By the mid-1800s, African Americans in San Francisco and California had experienced material advancements that exceeded those of most Blacks in the eastern states. Blacks had already made some headway in the Gold Rush era of San Francisco and across California. The Atheneum Institute reported those advances, namely Black ownership of two



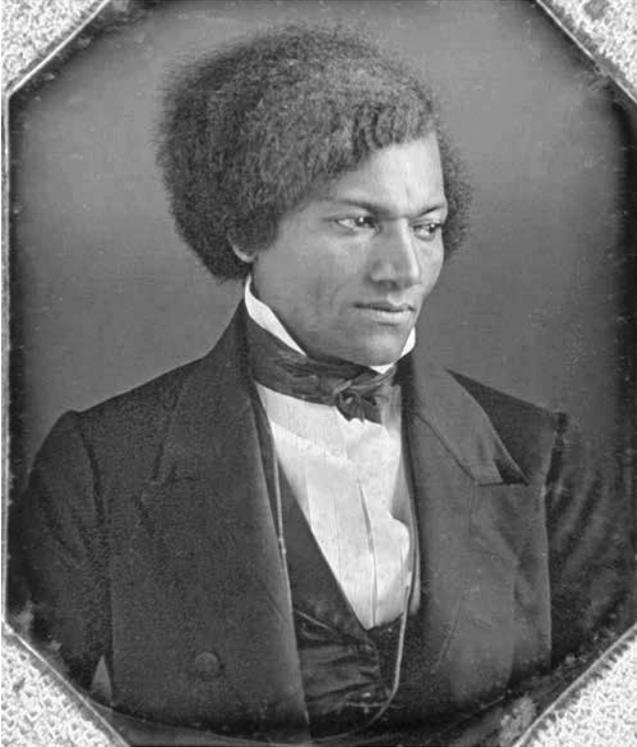
*Mifflin Wistar Gibbs (1823-1915) and his colleagues thought a Black-owned newspaper would be a powerful instrument to help rally the community and give it a unified voice. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

stock issuing companies with combined capital of \$16,000, four boot and shoe stores, four clothing stores, eight express and job wagons, two furniture stores, twelve public houses, two restaurants, two billiard saloons, sixteen barber shops, two bath-houses, one reading room and a library with 800 volumes, one Masonic lodge, and one brass band. It also reported 100 mechanics, 20 draymen, 100 porters in banking and commission houses, 150 stewards, 300 waiters, and 200 cooks, according to Rudolph Lapp's *Blacks in Gold Rush California*.

The three businessmen who gathered at the Atheneum Institute were a testament to this success, as these three men had made advances in their business and personal standings. They also brought diverse life experiences to the table, Mifflin Gibbs having lived in New England, Townsend in

New York, and W. H. Newby in Philadelphia. Jonas Townsend, an ex-slave, had arrived in San Francisco in May 1850 aboard the ship *Hampden* from New York City. He had attended college in Maine and also had nearly noble distinction as one of the Negro Forty Niners. All were deeply committed to the struggles of African Americans, whether slave or free.

"The crying want for us is a middle class," wrote Gibbs in his autobiography, *Shadows and Light*. "The chief component of our race today is laborers unskilled. We will not and cannot compete with other races who have a large and influential class of artisans and mechanics, and having received higher remuneration for labor, have paved the way for themselves or offsprings from the mechanic to the merchant or the professional."



Frederick Douglass, c.1840s, in his 20s.  
Courtesy of Wikipedia.

Gibbs and Townsend believed a Black-owned newspaper in San Francisco could strengthen their voices in calls for equality and illuminate the injustice playing out in the streets of San Francisco. In fact, Townsend had edited a Black newspaper in New York. All three men were familiar with Frederick Douglass's newspaper and his dedication to advocating for abolitionist causes with such words as, "Once you learn to read, you will be forever free." They would advocate for Blacks being afforded the same rights as White citizens in the legal system, so they could serve as witnesses and also jury members and have their children attend public schools.

### CALIFORNIA STATEHOOD AND TESTIMONY LAWS

These three African American leaders were determined to confront the numerous instances of discrimination against their race. California was admitted as a state on September 9, 1850, but despite its status as a free state, a climate of racism

and discrimination existed. In April of that year, the state legislature passed a law that denied non-White testimony in any cases where Whites were involved. The testimony law stated: "No black or mulatto person or Indian shall be permitted to give evidence in favor of or against any White person. Every person who shall have one eighth part or more of Negro blood shall be deemed a mulatto, and every person who shall have one half Indian blood shall be deemed an Indian."

There was wide interpretation and paradoxes when it came to the testimony law for Blacks in California. One case involved a Black man in San Francisco who faced a charge of grand larceny for having enticed away the Black wife of another Black man. The court judged the law did not allow for this kind of criminal action and reduced the charge to one of the men stealing the woman's clothes, wrote Lapp in *Blacks in Gold Rush California*.

In San Jose, another case involving a Black woman accused of grand larceny was brought before Judge Redman. But the judge found the case awkward because he had an interest in the woman. She confessed, but contradictory to this situation the racist testimony law came to her rescue when the judge ruled that her confession could not be accepted because she was technically a slave. She was acquitted.

Two years before the Atheneum leaders gathered, in 1851, these three men had penned a letter to the *Alta California* newspaper. The letter outlined a preamble and resolutions protesting that Blacks "being disenfranchised and denied the right of oath, and their determination to use all moral means to secure legal claim to all the rights and privileges of American citizens." So began a long campaign by abolitionists, activists, church leaders, and others working together to repeal the California state law that prohibited African Americans from testifying or acting as witnesses in court cases involving White persons.

Ultimately, Gibbs, Townsend, and Newby thought a Black-owned newspaper would be a powerful instrument to help rally the Black community and give it a unified voice pushing for the same rights as Whites, including the ability to testify in court and participate as jurors.



*The view north on Battery Street from California Street c. 1855. The dome of the Merchants' Exchange (Battery & Washington) is visible in the distance. Courtesy of OpenSFHistory/wnp26.620.*

## SAN FRANCISCO'S RACISM AND FUGITIVE SLAVE INCIDENTS

Racism was on display every day in San Francisco at the time, and the three African American leaders were not exempt. One of the three, Mifflin Gibbs, and his business partner, Peter Lester, opened the successful Pioneer Boot and Shoe Company store in San Francisco. In 1850, when Lester moved to San Francisco from Philadelphia with his wife and five children, he was appalled to find that slavery was still a fact of life in the free state of California. In an attempt to do something about this, he invited Black slaves and domestic workers into his home where he lectured about their rights and taught them anti-slavery songs.

In 1851, Gibbs and Lester's boot and shoe store became embroiled in its own personal struggle with

discriminatory laws of San Francisco. The incident centered around two White men entering the store. One of the men tried on a pair of boots and decided he liked them. He asked Lester to hold the pair for him. Lester agreed and both men left the store.

A bit later, the friend of the customer returned alone and said he would like to try on the boots being held for his friend. The man then walked out of the store, laughing and saying that his taking the boots was all right with his friend. A short time later, both men returned, and the original customer asked for the boots that were being held for him, knowing full well that his friend was wearing them. When Lester told the customer that the boots were not in the store, the customer responded by caning Lester, who dared not return blows. Gibbs stood by helplessly watching, knowing the two hoodlums were armed and that there were no other witnesses to the event.

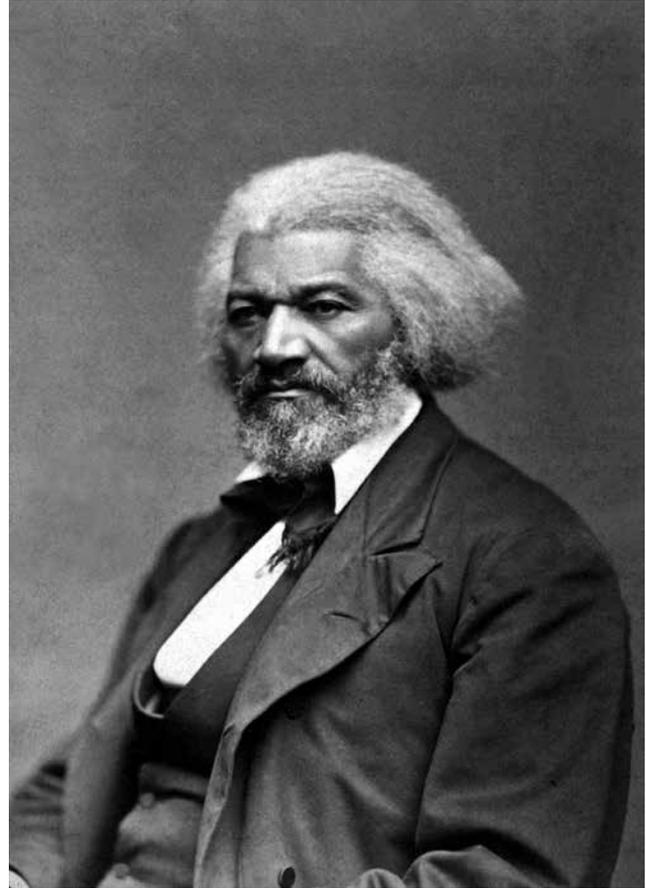
The customer departed in pretended anger. “Here was a case that affected property as well as person, and the injured parties were two of the most articulate and organization-wise members of San Francisco’s Negro community,” wrote Lapp in *Blacks in Gold Rush California*. Lapp also wrote that while many Blacks were adversely affected by the testimony laws, Chinese and Indians were even more victimized than Blacks.

Fugitive slaves was another issue that galvanized the Black leadership. In 1852 three Black men, Carter Perkins, Robert Perkins, and Sandy Jones, were asleep in a cabin when a group of armed Whites broke into their cabin, loaded the three men into a wagon, and hauled them before a justice of the peace. The captives were declared fugitive slaves and ordered back to their former masters. The Black community rallied to fight for fugitive slaves. The Perkins fugitive case was legally contested because in 1849 California had banned slavery. But the California Supreme Court would eventually rule that despite the state being free, those Blacks who were enslaved could not be set free because they were in California. Throughout the decade from 1850 to 1860, fugitive slave cases continued to occupy the energies of Blacks.

In 1857 the case of Archy Lee became California’s most celebrated fugitive slave case. Lee was a fugitive slave who was brought to trial and later freed when it was revealed that his master had illegally hired him out to others in California for more than a year. State law prohibited extended stays in California by slaves and their masters. Lee’s case had elements similar to those found in the Dred Scott case, which was heard by the U.S. Supreme Court at that same time.

### FREDERICK DOUGLASS’S NEWSPAPER ARRIVES

African American abolitionist Frederick Douglass’s first issue of his newspaper *The North Star* appeared on December 3, 1847, in Rochester, New York, a city known for its opposition to slavery. The weekly publication was sold by subscription at the cost of \$2 per year to more than 4,000 readers in the United States, Europe, and the West Indies.



Frederick Douglass’s *North Star* newspaper was an inspiration to Black-owned newspapers in San Francisco. Photo, c. 1879. Courtesy of Wikipedia.

In the first issue of *The North Star*, Douglass explained his reasons for establishing an African American-owned newspaper. He emphasized that he did not want to seem ungrateful to people such as William Lloyd Garrison, a White abolitionist who published the antislavery paper *The Liberator*. However, he claimed that it was common sense that those who suffer injustice are those who must demand redress and, thus, African American authors, editors, and orators must have their own paper with which to share their voices.

*The North Star* was a four-page newspaper. The first page focused on current events having to do with abolitionist issues. An occasional feature, “The Den of Villany [sic],” was a forum for Douglass to comment on discrimination in American society. Pages two and three included editorials, letters from readers, articles, poetry, and book reviews; and the



fourth page was devoted to advertisements. Douglass wrote with great feeling about what he saw as the huge gap between what Americans claimed to be their Christian beliefs and the prejudice and discrimination he witnessed. Douglass was also a staunch supporter of education for African Americans and equal rights for all, including women.

In the winter of 1854, the first San Francisco-bound copy of *The North Star* was on its way west from New York. James P. Dyer, a New Bedford Black, an early San Francisco soap manufacturer and a future Colored Convention leader, subscribed to the Douglass paper as soon as it arrived in California.

Douglass had used funds earned during a speaking tour in Great Britain and Ireland to finance the newspaper. The name of the newspaper paid homage to the fact that escaping slaves used the North Star in the night sky to guide them to freedom. The motto of the newspaper was, "Right is of no sex—Truth is of no color—God is the Father of us all, and we are brethren." The newspaper soon developed into one of the most influential African American antislavery publications of the pre-Civil War era, and would become an inspiration for California's first Black-owned newspaper.

In 1851 Douglass broke off his friendship with William Lloyd Garrison, who had originally

convinced him to join the abolitionist movement. They disagreed about whether it was necessary to have a separate "Black-oriented" press and, more importantly, whether violence should be used to end slavery. Douglass strongly believed in a political resolution, while Garrison, though a pacifist, came to believe that violence might be necessary if emancipation were not achieved quickly.

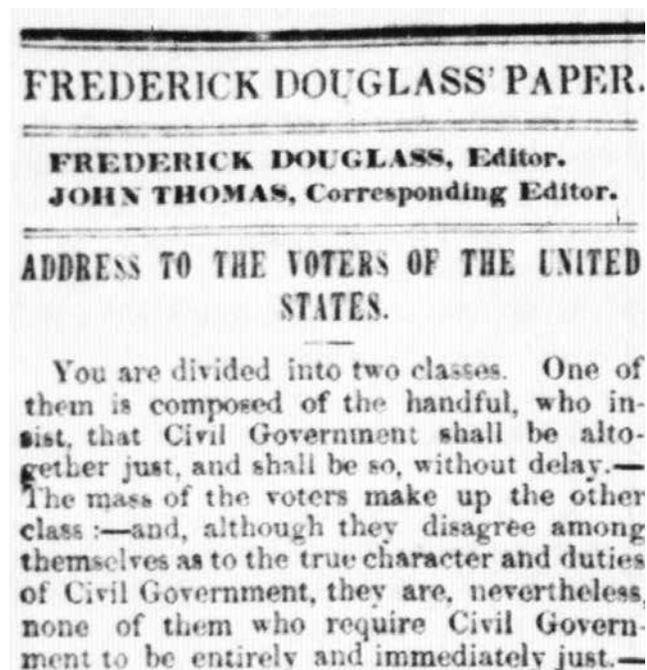
Despite Douglass's efforts, *The North Star* was not a financial success. He earned extra money lecturing and even mortgaged his home in 1848 to keep the newspaper going. By 1851, financial difficulties caused him to merge *The North Star* with the *Liberty Party Paper*, a newspaper published by the abolitionist Gerrit Smith.

The resulting publication, known as *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, remained relatively consistent in appearance and content as *The North Star*. Contributors to the paper included Douglass's co-editor Martin Delany, White abolitionist Julia Griffiths, escaped slave Harriet Jacobs, and even British author Charles Dickens; excerpts from Dickens's novel *Bleak House* appeared in the paper in 1853.

Several members of the Atheneum would also end up writing articles for *The North Star*, including James Rylander Starkey, W. H. Newby, Abner H. Francis, and Edward P. Duplex, according to Rudolph Lapp in *Blacks in Gold Rush California*. Peter Lester, who subscribed to Douglass's paper, also wrote at least one letter to the *Pennsylvania Freeman*, an anti-slavery paper out of Philadelphia. Jonas Townsend was also a subscriber. What's more, three prominent White San Franciscans, Mark Hopkins and two Crocker brothers, subscribed to Douglass's paper.

When Starkey, only two years earlier a slave, arrived in San Francisco in 1852, one of the first things he did was to subscribe to the now-renamed *Douglass' Independent*. Over the next two years, it became evident that Frederick Douglass's Paper was the favorite paper of California's Black leadership.

In November 1859, Douglass's paper permanently ceased publication after Douglass left the United States for a lecture tour in England. The tour likely saved him from arrest in association with the assault on the federal armory at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, led by radical abolitionist John Brown in October 1859. When Brown was arrested, letters from Douglass were found among his possessions.



Douglass focused his editorial on abolitionist issues of the day.



Artist Jacob Lawrence's conception of Brown trying to persuade abolitionist Frederick Douglass to join him in the raid on Harpers Ferry. Douglass refused, as he believed Brown would fail. Courtesy of Wikipedia.

Although Douglass did not support Brown's plans, he left the United States for six months, knowing that Brown would not receive a fair trial.

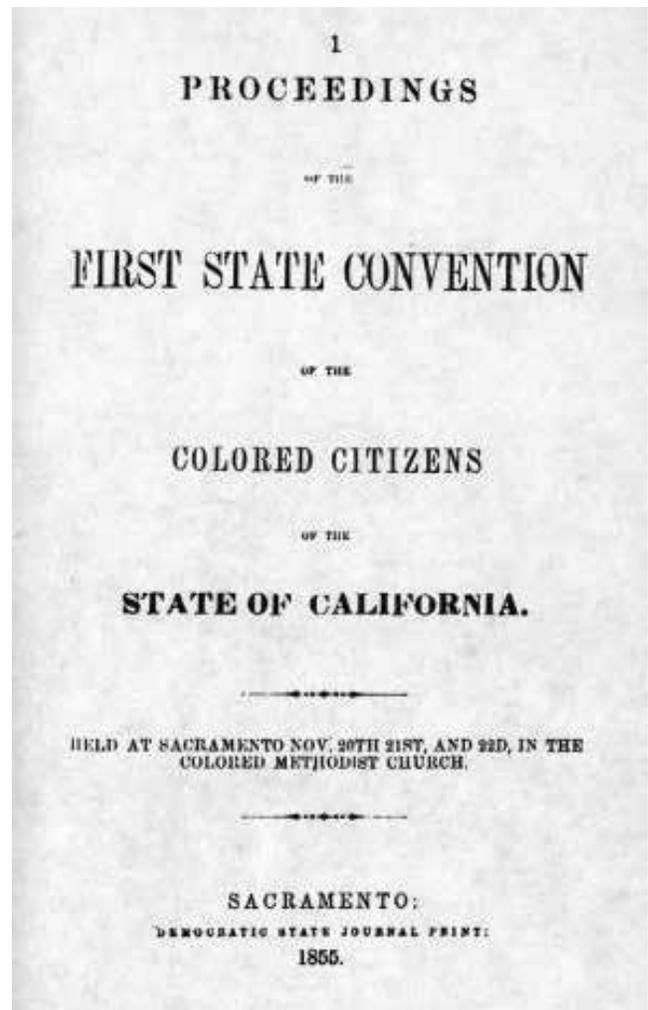
## THE CALIFORNIA COLORED CONVENTION

While the idea of a Black-owned newspaper had been brewing in the minds of Black businessmen for some time, the idea took on a new reality during the first California Colored Convention. In 1854 a meeting of Blacks was held at the St. Cyprian Church in San Francisco. Those gathered endorsed the resolutions of the Colored National Convention that had been held the previous year in Rochester, New York. The San Francisco Black community and its leaders were buoyed by the Rochester program, which fed their determination to continue fighting for their rights in the country of their birth.

A year later, in January 1855, a meeting took place at the San Francisco Black Atheneum Institute that helped spur the idea of holding a convention in California for Blacks. Frederick Douglass had called for a convention in California to take up and discuss the urgent issue of testimony laws and other issues. Leaders at the Atheneum had received letters from their Sacramento counterparts, who expressed interest in having a statewide convention held in Sacramento. The San Francisco leaders set up committees of correspondence to gauge the prevailing sentiment; the results indicated that Blacks were in favor of the idea.

Townsend, who was from the East and had attended college at Waterville, Maine, was one of the leaders of the First California Colored Convention, which convened in Sacramento in November 1855 at the Colored Methodist Church of Sacramento City at 715 Seventh Street. Four other Black leaders would lead discussions over the course of the few days of the convention – Daniel Seals, Frederick Barbadoes, C. M. Wilson, and Fielding Smithed.

In October 1854, Jonas Townsend read a resolution from the Black community at St. Cyprian. The resolution was most likely written at the Atheneum Institute and published in the *Daily Alta*. It would become the first salvo of the Black community as a unified voice using its weekly newspapers to demand equality. (See page 41 for the text of the resolutions).



In 1855, the First State Convention of the Colored Citizens of California convened in Sacramento to take up and discuss the urgent issue of testimony laws.

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The goal of ending racist testimony laws was one of the clear objectives stated at three conventions held by the Colored Citizens of the State of California in 1855, 1856, and 1857. The first convention, held in Sacramento over three days in November 1855, was attended by forty-nine delegates representing ten counties. By 1856, the testimony movement looked promising for changing the laws. According to Lapp in *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, the convention movement had managed to reach out to a large number of White men; 700 of them in San Francisco signed the petition to reform the testimony laws.

Gibbs and Townsend spoke to the gathering about the importance of advocating for Blacks in voting, as witnesses in legal matters, and for all other rights afforded those with citizenship but denied to Blacks because of the color of their skin.

“Gentlemen, the occasion which has brought us together is one of great importance,” Gibbs spoke in the Black Methodist Church in Sacramento on November 20, 1855. “The object we seek, equal testimony in the courts of this state, is deserving of our most earnest effort. . . . We are not without many enemies who would rejoice confusion and division in our midst, but let us enter upon our deliberations in a spirit of kindness and conciliation. . . . If there ever was a people among whom union was necessary; union of purpose, of spirit, and action for the sake of success, then it is necessary to us.”

Gibbs talked about the importance of petitioning the California Legislature for a change in the law relating to the testimony of colored people, as well as adopting plans for the general improvement of Blacks’ conditions throughout the state.

### A NEWSPAPER IS BORN

Buoyed by the convention, the Atheneum leadership started a subscription campaign to fund the first Black-owned newspaper in San Francisco. By 1855, they had acquired enough subscriptions and capital to put the newspaper in motion, focusing on advocating for the rights of slaves, non-slaves, and the abolitionist movement. These men planned and worked together to launch *Mirror of the Times*, San Francisco’s first Black-owned weekly newspaper, in 1857.

For the next three years, *Mirror of the Times* and its enterprising reporting covered issues relevant to their community, but evidence suggests that the *Mirror* published fifty to sixty issues and died a few years later, in 1858 or 1862. *Pacific Appeal* started after the *Mirror* ceased publication.

Gibbs and other Blacks struggled with the injustices in San Francisco, and when gold was discovered in British Columbia in 1858, many decided it was time to leave for better opportunities in Canada. Blacks were frustrated with their failed attempts to overturn California’s unjust testimony and suffrage laws, along with legislative proposals to limit African American and Chinese immigration into the state. Governor James Douglas’s invitation to Black migrants to settle in British Columbia served as an additional incentive to leave California.

The discovery of gold in British Columbia drew an immense number of gold seekers, traders, and speculators from all parts of the world. In June 1858, Gibbs took passage on the steamship *Republic* for Victoria with a large supply of miners’ outfits — consisting of flour, bacon, blankets, picks, and shovels — to sell there. He was one of 400–600 free African Americans who left California and its racial discrimination in 1858 for the gold rush in western Canada. Gibbs set up businesses selling provisions to gold prospectors there.

Lester also left California for Canada at the same time as his business partner Gibbs, after experiencing a racist incident involving his fifteen-year-old daughter, Sarah. According to Lapp in *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, the San Francisco school system had admitted Sarah to the only public high school in San Francisco, but decided to rescind her admission after pressure from White parents and newspapers who claimed her admission was unacceptable “race-mixing.” Sarah had scored second highest in her examinations and had already attended three years of primary school in an all White public school in her neighborhood. (The school had assumed that because of her light skinned appearance her mother was White.)

One of the final episodes that probably convinced Gibbs it was time to leave San Francisco had to do with the State of California taking Gibbs’ businesses to auction in order to obtain payment of a poll tax that the State said Gibbs owed but had refused to pay.

# THE PACIFIC APPEAL.

*A Weekly Journal, devoted to the Interests of the People of Color.*

PETER ANDERSON, Proprietor.

PHILIP A. BELL, Editor.

VOL. I.

SAN FRANCISCO, CAL., SATURDAY, APRIL 5, 1862.

[NO. 1.]

**THE PACIFIC APPEAL**  
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**PETER ANDERSON, Proprietor,**  
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**SALUTATORY.**

'Tis now more than a quarter of a century since we first assumed editorial duties. During that period nearly a generation of mankind have been born, lived and passed away, and we are spared, by the mercies of God, to renew again our labors in a land then only known in geography, or in the tales of travelers and distapt voyagers.

We were then the humble assistant of that father of Colored Editors, the late Rev. Samuel E. Cornish, whose vigorous mind and friendly council guided our otherwise inefficient labors. We were afterwards joined by that ripe scholar and finished gentleman, Dr. James McCune Smith, who still continues to enlighten the world with his earning and experience, wit and judgment, through the columns of the *Anglo-African* and *Frederick Douglass' Paper*. On the retirement of our senior Editor, Rev. Charles B. Ray joined us in conducting the *Colored American*, who was not far behind Messrs. Cornish and Smith, and whose ability as a writer, and efficiency as an editor many who are now in California well remember.

We say not these things boastingly, but to show that we commence the task anew

to conduct a paper to the satisfaction of those we represent, or even of our most sanguine friends; others we neither expect nor seek to please. It is then the urgency of the case which impels us, and having commenced we will continue, God willing, as long as our health, strength and means last—or until we find one more capable from education and ability than we are, but until such time arrives we will neither hesitate nor falter.

•PHILIP A. BELL.  
**Our Proprietor.**

We have said above so much about ourself, the Editor, that we cannot refrain from introducing our Proprietor to our readers. Stand forth, Mr. Proprietor. Reader, we will introduce Mr. Peter Anderson, an old and well-known Californian. He is likewise acquainted with journalism, having been, for some years, Correspondent and Agent for our Eastern papers, and was one of the founders and a contributor to that pride of Colored Californians, "*The Mirror of the Times*."

He is known in the Eastern States, under the *nom-de-plume* of "*The Tall Son of Pennsylvania*."

With such a team we must go ahead.

of our State, are relics of barbarism and slavery, retard the wheels of justice, degrade our manhood, and inflict irroparable injury on our rights and liberties.

We shall Appeal to the hearts and consciences of our rulers, not to their passions and prejudices; we shall Appeal to their sense of right and justice; not to their feelings of pity and commiseration.

We issue our first number a week in advance of our date, to give us time to organize our carrier's list. We shall thoroughly canvass the city, and deliver this number ourselves, to receive subscriptions and advertisements.

We start on our voyage without a single subscriber, but we must have, at least, one thousand subscribers, in less than six months. We will want to enlarge our paper soon, but we must have five hundred subscribers, before we can do that.

There are said to be six thousand Colored people in California, sufficient, if only one tenth subscribe, to support our paper; that proportion, say six hundred, we must have within six months, for the remaining four hundred, we must depend on our neighbors on the northern coast.

Our price, fifteen cents, we know is high but we can not afford it for less, without a

This early edition of The Pacific Appeal (1862-1879) had the subtitle: "A Weekly Journal, devoted to the Interests of the People of Color."

Gibbs wrote in *Shadows and Light*, "I wrote with a fervor as cool as the circumstances would permit, and published a card from a disfranchised oath-denied standpoint, closing with the avowal that the great State of California might annually confiscate our goods, but we would never pay the voters tax."

Although *Mirror of the Times* had shuttered, it still inspired more Black publications. In 1860, Philip Bell, an African American who had co-edited *The Colored American* in New York, arrived in San Francisco and quickly won acclaim for his community fundraising efforts. In 1862, Black tailor shop owner and delegate at the California Colored Citizens Convention, Peter Anderson founded *The*

*Pacific Appeal* and selected Bell as its editor. Bell hired J. Stella Martin, the first Black woman reporter in the San Francisco Bay Area.

*The Pacific Appeal* published poetry and short stories alongside journalistic pieces. It also published several letters by Emperor Norton, self-proclaimed emperor of the United States, including his proposals for what would later become the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge and the Transbay BART Tube. *The Pacific Appeal* published for seventeen years (until 1879) under the slogan, "He who would be free, himself must strike the blow."

*The Pacific Appeal* proclaimed its mission in its first issue of April 5, 1862, stating, "We shall not confine ourselves particularly to California,



In 1862, Philip Bell was selected to be editor of a new newspaper, *The Pacific Appeal*. Courtesy of Wikimedia.

nor to the States and Territories of the American government, but we include within the sphere of our duties the British Possessions. Wherever there is a Colored man, there we claim to have a brother.”

Bell and Anderson eventually fell out, quarreling over issues of political strategy and partisan loyalty. On April 7, 1865, Bell founded *The Elevator* in San Francisco, with the motto “Equality Before the Law.” Bell developed a hypothesis of “Color and Condition” in regard to racial prejudice in America. According to *Philosophy of a Black Editor: Philip A. Bell* by William Snorgrass, Bell said in an editorial, “Condition not color is the cause of our anomalous positioning in this country. Prejudice against color is unnatural, not instinctive.”

Snorgrass also wrote, “Bell believed that through education and economic development this hypothesis would prove true and prejudice would be erased from the American scene.” Bell saw education as a major weapon against prejudice. In an editorial on June 21, 1867, he wrote, “There is no question among mankind as to the importance of mental cultivation as a lever of elevation.”

In 1862, *The Pacific Appeal* and *The Elevator* drew on a number of Black writers and abolitionists, both local and living abroad, including drawing materials from the publishing houses in Europe.

Among the celebrated writers was the French writer of mixed heritage, Alexander Dumas. According to Jan Adkins in “Literary Prose and Poetry in San Francisco’s Black Newspapers, 1862–1885,” both *The Pacific Appeal* and *The Elevator* had ambitious goals with sights set on publishing newspapers that would reach international readers.

Bell advocated self-help and all-Black cooperative ventures to overcome poor economic conditions. He argued that “since Negroes lacked the sufficient capital individually, they should pool their funds in an effort to get a community business going.”

Bell saw a connection among education, economics, and politics and believed that any advancements made by Blacks would have to be fought for and gained in these arenas.

Bell took great interest in labor developments in the San Francisco area. He consistently expressed anti-Chinese and anti-Irish sentiments in *The Elevator*. He believed the Chinese were a threat to Black labor and reasoned that their low standard of living would enable them to work for cheaper wages. This, in turn, would bring about displacement of Black workers in their traditional jobs. At one point, Bell opposed further Chinese immigration to the United States.



Among the celebrated writers featured in *The Elevator* was Alexander Dumas, the French writer of mixed heritage.

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## FROM NEWSPAPERMAN TO JUDGE

Throughout the American Civil War, Gibbs remained in Canada, running business operations in real estate, retail goods, and mining, all of which made him a wealthy man. In 1869, when he returned to the United States, Gibbs pursued and earned a law degree at Oberlin College in Ohio and then moved to Arkansas with his family. He became actively involved in the national Negro Convention movement as well as the state Republican Party.

In 1873, Gibbs was elected police judge of the city of Little Rock, becoming the first elected Black municipal judge in the United States. Sixteen years later, in 1897, he was appointed by President McKinley as the U.S. consul to the African island nation of Madagascar. In 1901 he returned to Arkansas, where he became president of one of the earliest Black-owned banks in the state. In 1915, at age 92, Mifflin Gibbs died in Little Rock.

When Gibbs, Townsend, and Newby first gathered at the Atheneum in San Francisco in 1853 to discuss the idea of a Black-owned newspaper, they did not know it would help transform California. Their pioneering efforts would lead to seven Bay Area newspapers that published articles, opinions, and literature that helped build solidarity in the Black community well into the next century.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Author and journalist Lee Bruno's most recent book is *Misfits, Merchants, and Mayhem: Tales from San Francisco's Historic Waterfront, 1849-1934*, winner of the 2019 Independent Book Publisher Benjamin Franklin Gold Medal for History. His reporting on business, technology, and science has appeared in such publications as *Red Herring* magazine, *The Economist*, *The Guardian*, *MIT Technology Review*, and other publications. He has lived in San Francisco for more than forty years, raising a family of four boys with his wife and enjoying long open-water swimming with the eccentrics at the South End Rowing Club.

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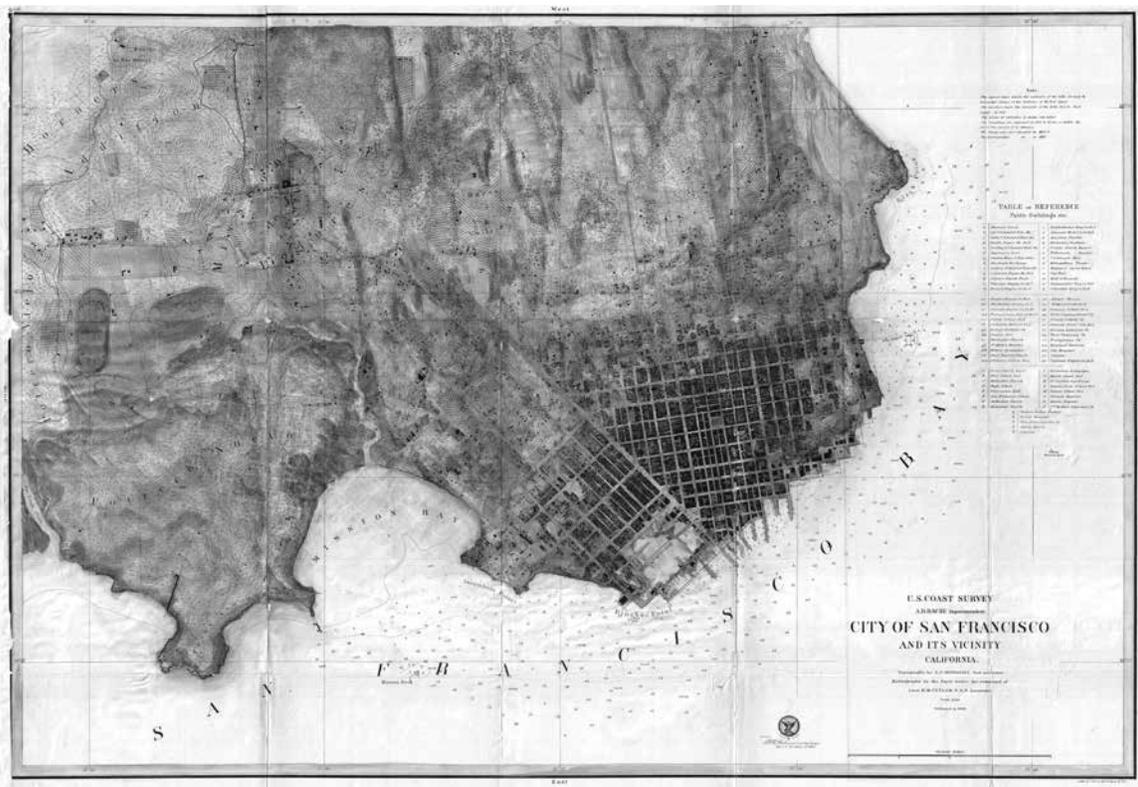
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This 1858 U.S. Coast Survey chart of San Francisco replaced the 1853 chart and reflected the rapid urbanization of the San Francisco vicinity. Courtesy of Schein & Schein.

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## RESOLUTIONS FROM THE BLACK COMMUNITY AT ST. CYPRIAN, 1854

Whereas the state and condition of the colored citizens of California has been one continued series of outrages and unmitigated wrongs, which call loudly upon us to exert all our energies in behalf of reform, we deem it to be perfectly proper and befitting to assemble ourselves together for the purpose of expressing our opinion to the people of this community, showing our inveterate hostility and determined opposition to their tyrannical and unjust laws.

Resolved, therefore,

1. That the surest indication of a prospering and happy people in a community is always to be found in the wise and wholesome provisions of their laws, which protect them in the enjoyment of their inalienable rights, inculcates in the people a sincere and devout patriotism, and an eternal hatred to cruel and oppressive laws.
2. That the Statute Laws of California, which invalidates our testimony in her Courts of Justice, is an old relic of the dark ages, which compels us to labor and toil without any security that we shall obtain our just earnings, suffer crime, unpunished, to stalk abroad in the land, sapping the very foundations of society, is unbecoming a free people in the middle of the 19th century.
3. That such laws are degrading in the extreme, there can be no question; they shut up the avenues to industry, the only sure road that leads to distinction and success in this life; impede the progress of art and refinement among us; destroy that high and ennobling sentiment that teaches us to persevere, labor, sacrifice, suffer and forgive.
4. That we will subserve the best interests of our common country by a fearless, faithful discharge of the duties that we owe to ourselves and to posterity; and that is to be found in the determined opposition that we show to an overshadowing despotism.
5. That we regard industry, honesty, intelligence, as three of the great fundamental elements that are calculated to render people prosperous and happy; yet they never can be attained to a high state of perfection in a country where the common law affords no protection to the weak against the encroachments of the strong.
6. That the gross impositions that have been imposed upon us by the corrupt Legislation of this State, which sold the rights and dearest interests of the native born citizens for the base purposes of making political capital, shall in no ways intimidate us from speaking our sentiments, or boldly asserting our inalienable rights.
7. That the land which gave us birth, and the soil which contains the ashes of our fathers, is our common country, and here by our humble firesides and sacred altars we intend to remain side by side with our brethren, and to contend boldly and manfully in the struggle for our rights, until the Black Laws of California are erased from her Statute Books.
8. That in character, integrity and moral worth, we will compare favorably with any other class of citizens in California, and we challenge our enemies openly that we are not the superiors of three fourths of the foreign population in the country.
9. That we recommend our brethren throughout the State to unite with us, and make one powerful and determined effort at the next session of the Legislature, to procure the repeal of those odious relics of barbarity, which determines the rights and characters of the citizens by the complexion of their skin.
10. That in order to consummate an object so much to be desired, we recommend the formation of a State Central Committee, to act in concert with a committee of citizens in this place, to carry forward this great object.
11. That these proceedings be published in the Alta California.

J. J. Moore, chairman

J. R. Starkey, secretary

Jonas Townsend (Committee of Resolutions)

Daily Alta California, October 22, 1854

# EXODUS:

## *San Francisco's Black Community in the 1850s*

by Hudson Bell

During the California Gold Rush of 1849,\* as the village of San Francisco exploded from a thousand or so people to twenty thousand, the President of the United States was James K. Polk—former governor of Tennessee—who was a slave owner. While slavery did not exist in the Northern states of the Union, it was a legal institution in the Southern states, and therefore both free Blacks from the North, and Blacks from the South who were still bound by slavery, immigrated into California at the time.

While California officially became a “free” state of the Union on September 9, 1850, its exclusion of slavery was not for reasons of liberty or respect for inalienable rights with regard to the Black community. In fact, one of the men who had helped write the state’s constitution was Mississippian William Gwin, who, like Polk, was a slave owner. Furthermore, though Gwin’s leniency on the slavery issue for California brought furor from his U.S. Congressional Southern colleagues, he explained that allowing this secured him a Senate seat, and therefore in the greater scheme, California’s ratification as a free state became part of Kentucky Senator Henry Clay’s Compromise of 1850, which in essence staved off the U.S. Civil War for another decade.<sup>1</sup>

However, as free Black immigrants settled into California, they soon learned that there was a series of “Black Laws” embedded into California’s laws that severely limited Blacks’ rights: as in other free states, Blacks in California could not vote, could not hold governmental positions, and could not serve

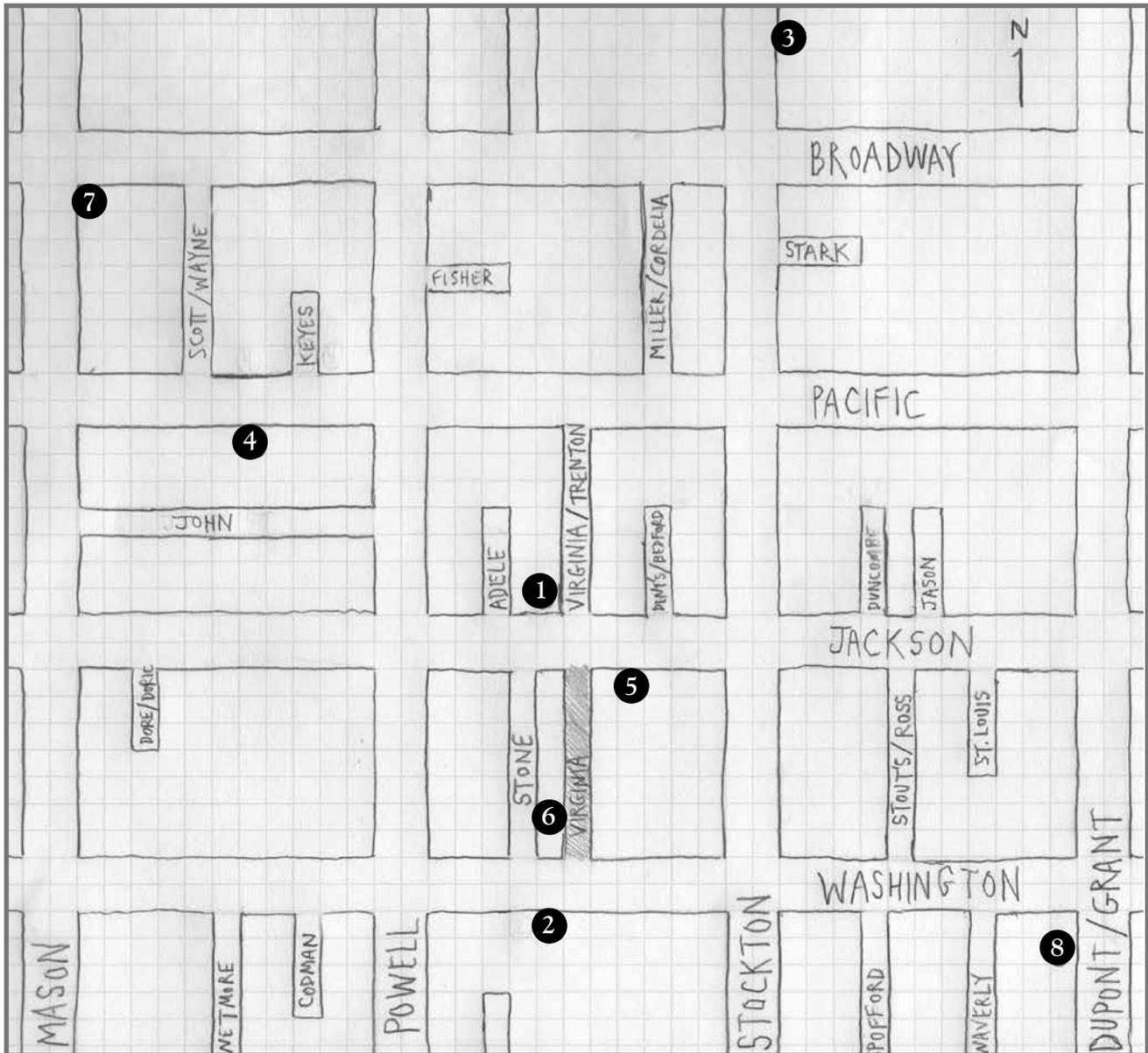
on juries. In addition, a Black person in California could not testify against a White person. These restrictions left the Black community open to abuse and bigotry with no civil protections.

Quite clearly, the Blacks who came to California at this time did not realize that such limitations of their freedoms existed until they experienced them firsthand. For instance, in 1851 a group of Black men entered a “dancing house” on Vallejo Street when a White man approached them and proceeded to attack and beat them with a slung shot (a rope with weights on it, used by maritime workers). The Black men went to the police station and reported the incident, and eventually the White man was arrested. However, after bringing him to the station (and going through the bureaucratic motions), he was let go on the grounds that by the laws of California, evidence by a Black man was “inadmissible” against a White man.<sup>2</sup>

In January 1851 Peter H. Burnett, California’s first governor,† suggested that due to their limited rights, free Blacks should simply be excluded from the state entirely (note that Burnett had been trying to outlaw the immigration of free Blacks into California since 1849)<sup>3</sup>: “Although it is assumed in the Declaration of Independence as a self-evident truth, that all men are born free and equal, it is equally true, that there must be *acquired* as well as *natural* abilities to fit men for self government. Without considering whether there be any reason for the opinion entertained by many learned persons, that the colored races are by nature inferior to the

\* At the time, California was still a U.S. Territory loosely operating under Mexican law, therefore attracting argonauts from all over the world with the idea of “getting gold and getting out.”

† Preceding Burnett—given California was still a U.S. Territory following the Mexican-American War—were seven military-appointed governors.



Map of section of San Francisco neighborhood in the 1800s. Some of these locations are not precise but give general blocks and cross streets. Where there are two street names, the map notes the old name (when known), followed by the name today. 1. St. Cyprian Church/Black School; 2. Athenaeum Institute and Saloon; 3. Zion Church (1852–55); 4. Zion Church (1856); 5. William Gwin brick house; 6. James Riker and Monroe Taylor residence; 7. Jacob Francis residence; 8. Mifflin Gibbs residence. Map by the author.

white, and without attaching any importance to such opinion—still it may be safely assumed that no race of men, under the precise circumstances of this class in our State, could ever hope to advance a single step in knowledge or virtue.”<sup>4</sup>

For Burnett, the idea of free Blacks and whites living and working and existing in the same environment was just not feasible, as he saw it conducive to the support of Abolitionism—the anti-slavery movement in the Northeastern states—which in his view had “already produced so much bitterness, between different portions of the Union.”<sup>5</sup> Burnett

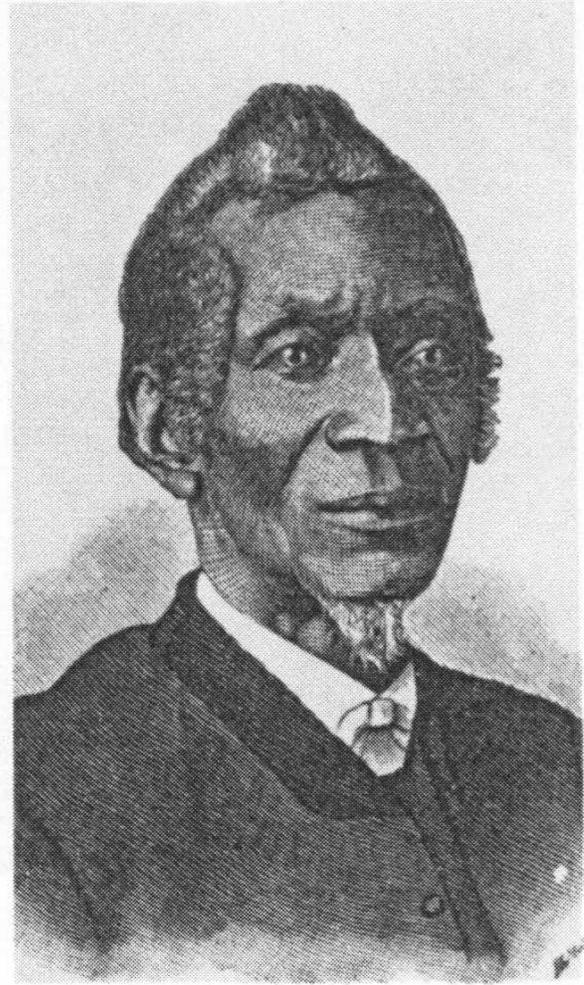
actually predicted war in California if free Blacks continued on as-is in California society: “When those who come after us shall witness a war in California between the two races, and all the disgrace and disasters following in its train, they will have as much cause to reproach us for not taking timely steps, when they were practicable, to prevent this state of things, as we now have for reproaching our ancestors for the evils entailed upon us by the original introduction of slavery into the Colonies. We have the warning voice, of experience—they had not.”<sup>6</sup>

In San Francisco, though the *Daily Alta* newspaper “utterly” disagreed with Burnett’s comments regarding California’s Black communities, the newspaper also revealed an ongoing reality: that there were those in California who still hoped to see the state eventually split in two, with its southern half becoming a slave state:<sup>7</sup> “[We do] not acknowledge the soundness of [Burnett’s] arguments on this point or admit the question of slavery will ever be agitated within our borders. We do not believe it can.”<sup>8</sup>

### THE POST-GOLD RUSH BLACK COMMUNITY IN SAN FRANCISCO

While we have no way of knowing exactly how many Blacks—free or slave—arrived in San Francisco during 1849, due to a report in an abolitionist newspaper in Boston in December of that year, we do know that thirty-seven free Black men in San Francisco had mobilized and created a support system for the Black community called the Mutual Benefit and Relief Society.<sup>9</sup>

In the wake of the Gold Rush, San Francisco’s Black population was in the low hundreds, and in 1852, a census counted 464.<sup>10</sup> This community mostly resided near Powell and Jackson Streets, where its main cultural and faith-based organizations were established. Today this area is the nexus of where the Nob Hill, Chinatown, North Beach, and Russian Hill neighborhoods meet; in the 1850s it was just up from the city’s first tony neighborhood during the Gold Rush: Stockton Street north of Clay. With the post-Gold Rush expansion of the city, this neighborhood quickly transformed from a suburb into a more urban environment, and the Black population was scattered within and at its fringes. In fact, Senator William Gwin’s two-story brick home—on the south side of Jackson between Virginia<sup>11</sup> and Stockton<sup>12</sup>—was just down the block from the Black school and one of the Black community’s main meeting centers. Also, along Stockton in this area were the Gold Rush homes of the Larkins, Macondrays, and McAllisters, just to name a few. This general area remained the heart of San Francisco’s Black community until the turn of the century and the 1906 earthquake and fires. As the century went on, the community’s highest concentration ultimately became John Street,<sup>13</sup> where Nob Hill meets Chinatown today.



*John J. Moore, founder of Zion Church in 1852 and teacher of the first Black school in the basement of St. Cyprian.  
Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.*

In 1852, forty-year-old John Jamison Moore—born a slave in West Virginia who escaped to Philadelphia with his mother as a teenager—founded Zion Church, an African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church, on Stockton Street, between Broadway and Vallejo. Moore may have first lived at a boarding house on Dupont Street<sup>14</sup> (Grant Avenue today) and later lived on a rear lot on Mason Street near Green<sup>15</sup> where Russian Hill meets North Beach. Following Moore’s establishment of Zion Church, the church became the main meeting place for San Francisco’s Black community.

In 1853, the Athenaeum Institute and Saloon was founded at 273 Washington Street between Stockton and Powell.<sup>16</sup> In his book *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, Rudolph M. Lapp explains that

the Athenaeum “became the means by which the Black working class and the Black middle class and its ideological leaders came together to plan for the needs of Black people. . . . The Institute on the second floor was a center for the intellectual life of the Black community of San Francisco. Its leadership was a blend of New England, New York, and Philadelphia Blacks, all very able men who were devoted to the struggles of [Blacks], whether slave or free.”<sup>17</sup> The proprietors of the saloon operation on the ground floor were Monroe Taylor and James Riker. The two of them lived just across Jackson from the Athenaeum at 5 Virginia (today Trenton).<sup>18</sup>

One of the founders of the “Institute” on the second floor, and its first president, was Jacob Francis, who had come to San Francisco in 1851 with his brother Abner, who had been a friend of Frederick Douglass’s in New York and a leader in the abolitionist movement. Abner since had moved on to Portland, Oregon, however.<sup>19</sup> Jacob lived at Mason and Broadway.<sup>20</sup>

Another founder—who served as the Institute’s secretary—was William H. Newby. Newby was born in Virginia in 1828 to a free woman; his father was a slave. Following his father’s death, Newby and his mother moved to Philadelphia, where he made connections with the Philadelphia abolitionist movement. Newby came to California in 1851, and as he learned of California’s Black Laws, he “deeply felt the degradation which such laws heaped upon [him and his community].”<sup>21</sup> Newby was “an ardent worker; he was enthusiastically devoted to his people, and in whatever way he could benefit them he would willingly cooperate with others. He was a fluent speaker, an agreeable conversationalist, a facile and ready writer. . . . he improved himself greatly in California, as he was a constant student. . . . He was a close reasoner and a shrewd debater; more of a controversialist than a logician,”<sup>22</sup> reflected the *Pacific Appeal* in 1863.

Along with Francis and Newby, other founders of the Institute had directly experienced the abolitionist organizations from the Northeastern states. Some of these other men were Jonas H. Townsend, Mifflin W. Gibbs, and James R. Starkey. In essence, the establishment of the Athenaeum Institute was in the blueprint of organizations back East: for example, the Library Company of Philadelphia.<sup>23</sup>

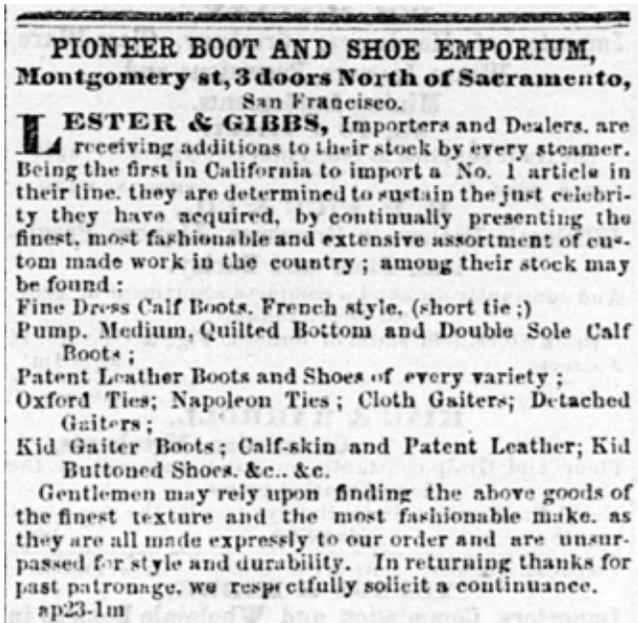
On the occasion of the Athenaeum’s one-year anniversary, a celebration was held at Zion Church, and Starkey reported, “eighty-five persons have been elected members during the past year. Eight hundred volumes have been collected into the library. Eighteen hundred dollars have been received into the treasury during the past year. The expenditures have been about equal to the receipts, showing a small balance in favor of the Institution.”<sup>24</sup>

James Rylander Starkey had been born into slavery in Newburn, North Carolina, but eventually outsmarted his slave owner when he secured funds from Northern abolitionists to purchase his freedom. The slave owner had offered to let him buy his freedom but didn’t expect him to ever amass the required money. One day Starkey blind-sided him with the cash. Though irate, the slave owner honored the deal, and Starkey took off for New York City.

Following the passage of the National Fugitive Slave Act in 1850—which said that any slaves found in free states had to be returned to their



Mifflin W. Gibbs, a successful businessman, was one of the founders of the San Francisco Athenaeum Institute.



Sacramento Union newspaper advertisement for Lester & Gibbs' Pioneer Boot and Shoe Emporium, April 23, 1853. Courtesy of California Digital Newspaper Collection, Center for Bibliographic Studies and Research, University of California, Riverside.

owners—and given the undocumented nature of his freedom—Starkey traveled to San Francisco from New York City aboard the bark *Pocahontas* in 1852. Self-educated, Starkey was later lauded by the San Francisco Black community: “Starkey was truly a self made man . . . by his own almost unaided exertions . . . he became a very fair English scholar . . . an original thinker, and a smooth, easy writer . . . remarkably diffident of his own ability, extremely modest, and never desirous of popular approbation.”<sup>25</sup> In 1860, Starkey was living on the west side of Telegraph Hill on the north side of Green at Sonoma.<sup>26</sup>

Philadelphian Mifflin Wistar Gibbs had arrived in San Francisco in 1850 with only ten cents in his pocket. Gibbs had traveled along with his friend Peter Lester’s family. Gibbs initially engaged in work as a carpenter, but due to the racism he experienced, he shifted to bootblacking, and then after a bit he and Lester opened Pioneer Boot and Shoe Emporium at Montgomery Street between Sacramento and Clay.<sup>27</sup> Eventually, Lester & Gibbs Boot and Shoe Emporium moved to 184 Clay Street at Kearny, near

Portsmouth Square, in what was known as the “Court Block” next to the Post Office.<sup>28</sup> Gibbs lived on the west side of Dupont Street near Washington,<sup>29</sup> in the heart of today’s Chinatown, and the Lester family lived on the south side of Green Street near Larkin, on the western slope of Russian Hill. This was the western edge of the city at the time.<sup>30</sup>

Lastly, another founder of the Athenaeum Institute was Jonas Holland Townsend who, traveling from New York City, arrived in San Francisco aboard the ship *Hampden* on May 2, 1850<sup>31</sup> as part of an all-Black mining company.<sup>32</sup> Born in Pennsylvania, Townsend had attended college in Waterville, Maine, and worked as editor of the *New York Hyperion*.<sup>33</sup> It appears that Townsend lived near Starkey in North Beach on the western slope of Telegraph Hill in a boarding house at 12 Lafayette Place (today the south block of Varennes Street).<sup>34</sup>

Another addition to the neighborhood came on February 14, 1854, when Darius Stokes, from Baltimore, who had already established AME churches in Sacramento and Marysville, founded St. Cyprian (AME) Church on the northwest corner of Jackson and Virginia (Trenton today).<sup>35</sup> Soon after, a new pastor arrived—thirty-year-old Thomas Myers Decatur Ward, a native of Pennsylvania, who had come to California from New England to take over the church.<sup>36</sup>

St. Cyprian’s location helps highlight the heart of San Francisco’s Black community at this time, as not only did St. Cyprian soon draw a larger crowd than Rev. Moore’s Zion Church<sup>37</sup> and become the preferred meeting space for the community, but also on May 22, 1854, the first Black school in San Francisco was established in St. Cyprian’s basement, with Rev. Moore acting as teacher.<sup>38</sup> Later that year, 42 pupils were reported; in early 1855, 62 pupils: 36 boys, 26 girls.<sup>39</sup> In 1857, the *Daily Alta* reported that the school “passed a very satisfactory examination. The class in geography was unusually good. The school possesses, by far, more than ordinary quickness of thought and readiness of comprehension. Mr. Moore, himself a beautiful penman, has taught writing thoroughly. The house now occupied by this school is without a yard, and being the only one in the department devoted to colored children, deserves more conveniences than it now possesses.”<sup>40</sup> Lastly, it should be noted that

while Rev. Moore continued to teach at the Black school in the basement of St. Cyprian, by 1856 he had relocated Zion Church to Pacific between Powell and Mason.<sup>41</sup>

In 1854, Townsend and William H. Yates, made an “effort to establish a newspaper [to] advocate [for Black] rights, refute the charge of inferiority so often brought against [Blacks], and urge the repeal of those unjust and oppressive laws which then disgraced the Statute Books of California.”<sup>42</sup>

William Henry Yates was born into slavery in Alexandria, Virginia, in 1816 and managed to purchase the freedom of his family. Living in Washington D. C., he had worked as a porter for the U. S. Supreme Court between 1837 and 1842, though his activities with the Underground Railroad there had forced him to relocate his family to New York City, where he opened a restaurant. In 1851, the Yates family moved to California. William landed a job as a steward on the steamships, thereby becoming a “key [link] between the various Black communities in northern California.”<sup>43</sup> At this time, Yates lived in North Beach on the south side of Green Street near Dupont and was working on the steamship *Golden Era*.<sup>44</sup>

With Townsend’s newspaper experience in New York City and Yates’s distribution channels by way of his work, starting a Black newspaper for California Blacks definitely made sense. They consulted Newby about the prospect, as well.<sup>45</sup> Nothing tangible transpired at this time, however, and the Black community’s efforts turned to the next best option: getting their protests published and distributed in an established White paper.

On October 11, 1854, Black community leaders invited the White press to St. Cyprian and proceeded to deliver a prepared protest over the Black laws leveled against them in California. Rev. Moore presided as chairman of the meeting, and J. R. Starkey acted as secretary. After stating the object of the meeting, Townsend delivered their prepared “Preamble and Resolutions,” which was published in the *Daily Alta* eleven days later. The statement of protest aimed not only at exercising their voice but also hoped to inspire the mobilization of Black communities about the discriminatory laws in California. (See page 41 for the text of the resolutions.)

## THE FIRST COLORED CONVENTION OF 1855 AND THE MIRROR OF THE TIMES

In the wake of the resolutions put forth by San Francisco’s Black community in 1854, over the next year the various Black communities in northern California mobilized, and, in the model of the Northeastern Abolitionist Conventions, a First Colored Convention of California took place in Sacramento, November 20–22, 1855. Of the forty-nine delegates present, San Francisco had the highest representation with eighteen. Sacramento and El Dorado were next in number with ten each.<sup>46</sup> See Appendix for list of San Francisco delegates.

Jacob Francis acted as preliminary chairman of the convention, being well-known due to his brother’s activities in the Northeast. It should be noted, however, that despite Jacob’s pedigree, due to Abolitionism being a touchy political topic throughout the 1850s, the leaders of this convention limited their focus to immediate issues facing free Blacks in California.<sup>47</sup>

A report on the wealth of California Blacks was made during the convention, and eventually circulated in papers in the northeastern states.<sup>48</sup> The report put San Francisco’s Black population in 1855 at 1,500 people with a combined wealth of \$750,000 (roughly \$22,000,000 today).<sup>49</sup>

On the final day of the convention, a resolution was passed for a committee of three to “report on the propriety of establishing a newspaper press, to

	<i>Population.</i>	<i>Wealth.</i>
Alameda.....	50	\$50,000
Amador.....	100	25,000
El Dorado.....	1,000	350,000
Nevada.....	400	250,000
Calaveras.....	250	100,000
Los Angeles.....	60	70,000
Tuolumne.....	200	73,000
Shasta.....	100	150,000
Santa Clara.....	50	40,000
Sacramento.....	500	250,000
San Francisco.....	1,500	750,000
Monterey.....	50	45,000
Yuba.....	500	200,000
Trinity.....	55	20,000
<b>Total.....</b>	<b>4,815</b>	<b>\$2,375,000</b>

*Report on the wealth of California Blacks during the First Colored Convention in 1855. Courtesy of California Digital Newspaper Collection, University of California, Riverside.*

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be the organ of the colored people of the State.”<sup>50</sup> Initiated by Edward R. Phelps of El Dorado County, the others on the committee were Newby and Rev. Stokes. Ultimately, given there was not enough time to analyze this prospect in full, the conclusion was to form a post-convention committee that would pursue this goal.<sup>51</sup>

In San Francisco the following year, with Townsend as its main editor, a Black newspaper was at last published in California from an office at 119 Merchant Street, between Montgomery and Kearny.<sup>52</sup> A weekly paper, the first issue of *Mirror of the Times*, dropped on September 13, 1856.<sup>53</sup> Unfortunately, no copies remain of this first issue, and less than a handful of issues of the newspaper, have survived at all, but in keeping with the spirit of the 1855 convention, *Mirror’s* focus was addressing the problems facing Blacks in California through essays and editorials.<sup>54</sup> *Mirror of the Times* “was a four-page paper with advertisements and news of the organized [Black] community in California as well as news from the East. Black businessmen in San Francisco, Sacramento, and Marysville advertised their clothing stores, dress shops, hotels, and restaurants. . . . Owners of white business firms who felt the Black buying market was worth seeking or who had sympathetic interest in the fortunes of the Black community also advertised.”<sup>55</sup>

### THE DRED SCOTT DECISION AND AN EXODUS TO VICTORIA

Following the mid-1850s rise and fall of the Know Nothing Party, which was generally less fearful of the abolitionist movement than Democrats, local celebrity John C. Fremont ran for President of the United States in 1856 as the first presidential candidate for the new Republican Party—notably as an abolitionist—but lost to Democrat James Buchanan.

In the first week of Buchanan’s presidency, on March 6, 1857, the U. S. Supreme Court announced its decision on the Dred Scott case. This decision stated that Black people—whether enslaved or free—could not be citizens of the United States, and therefore, the U. S. Constitution did not apply to them. A direct ramification of this ruling occurred

in San Francisco when the Blacks employed as messengers at the Custom House on the corner of Battery and Washington Streets were “removed.”<sup>56</sup>

While it is impossible to know the reasons, it is interesting to note that around this time, Chief of Police James Curtis, along with a posse, enacted a raid on the Athenaeum Saloon—labeled by one paper a “notorious institution”—at 10 p.m. on a Saturday night. They found a table of men playing faro and gambling. The dealer, Philip Humphries, was arrested, as were James Riker and Monroe Taylor, the proprietors of the establishment. Eventually, Humphries and Taylor were both convicted. Their penalty was a fine of \$100 (roughly \$3,000 today) or a stint in the county jail. Somehow Riker was able to convince the judge that he was not in fact a proprietor, and therefore he walked.<sup>57</sup>

As racial tensions rose, legislation was introduced into the California State Assembly in 1857 aiming to ban free Blacks from immigrating into the state. This new law was apparently called the Negro Disability Act. *Mirror of the Times* responded: “You may pass your infamous laws to degrade us, and forbid colored persons coming to settle in the state, and to enslave those who are already here, we will trample it under our feet with the scorn and contempt that it so justly merits. We will teach you, if you have not yet learned, that we too have sinewy right arms, we too have cultivated an intellect, that a combined world shall not enslave. Pro-slavery demagogues, and ignorant politicians may rail out against us, but our castle’s strength will laugh a siege to scorn.”<sup>58</sup> Though the act came close to being passed, it was ultimately defeated. Not surprisingly, however, the San Francisco Black community couldn’t help but feel that things were moving in the opposite direction from the social justice they had been fighting to achieve.

By the Third Colored Convention of California, which took place at St. Cyprian Church in San Francisco during October 1857, supporting *Mirror of the Times* was a crucial goal: “The Committee on the Press [was] in favor of sustaining *Mirror of the Times* at all hazards, and suggested that each [Black man] in the State be requested to pay one dollar per year to support the same, and also that each business man be requested to advertise, etc.”<sup>59</sup> Unfortunately, early the following year *Mirror* ceased publication.<sup>60</sup>

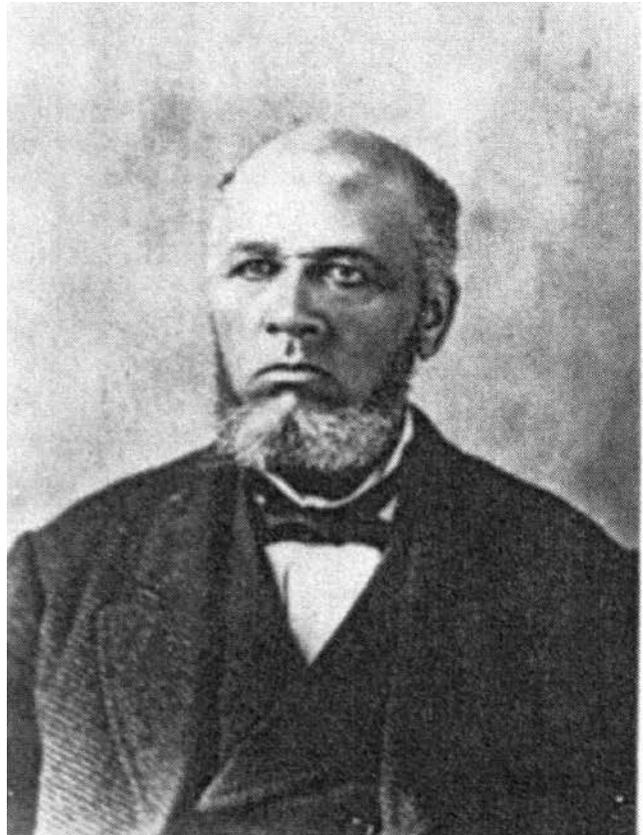


This failure went hand-in-hand with the failure of the California Black community's ongoing petition campaign in hopes of repealing the law that prohibited Black testimony against Whites. The petition from San Francisco had 1,800 names,<sup>61</sup> signed by "the most respectable white men."<sup>62</sup> The petitions died in the Assembly.

Then came a racist incident surrounding Peter Lester's daughter Sarah. Extremely light-complexioned, Sarah had enrolled in the new White high school in San Francisco. Previously, Sarah had attended the Spring Valley Grammar School located down hill from the family's home—in the area known today as Cow Hollow—with no issue whatsoever. But after her recent enrollment at the new San Francisco High School on Powell Street between Clay and Sacramento, an anonymous letter arrived at a newspaper office divulging that she was in fact Black.<sup>63</sup>

"Measures are to be taken immediately, in San Francisco, to separate the colored children from the white. The Board of Education have moved in the matter," reported the *Sacramento Union* in February 1858.<sup>64</sup> It became a difficult debate for the board, however: not only was Sarah a top student, she was also adored by her classmates.<sup>65</sup> Lapp explains: "The board discussion suggests that some members detested the whole racist business but feared the climate of opinion in the state. . . . [the pro-slavery] *San Francisco Herald* continued to badger the board unmercifully [while] the rest of the city press gave lip service to the principle of exclusion, while some papers said an exception should be made for Sarah Lester."<sup>66</sup> Before a final decision was made, the Lesters pulled Sarah from the school.<sup>67</sup>

Parallel to all of this was the Archy Lee case. Archy was an eighteen-year-old slave who had been brought from Mississippi by a man named Charles Stovall. Stovall had been living in the state for a while and would hire Archy out for various jobs. Eventually however, Archy fled. Stovall later located Archy at a boarding house in Sacramento and had him arrested. A series of court battles ensued, and while the proceedings would eventually end in Archy's freedom, the road getting there was quite bizarre. For instance, at one point the California Supreme Court ruled in favor of the slave owner, and Justice Peter Burnett's (first governor of California



*Peter Lester, who pulled his daughter from San Francisco High School after an anonymous letter started a debate on racism with the San Francisco Board of Education.*

mentioned earlier) reasoning was that since Stovall was young and inexperienced, and in ill health, he should basically be given a break, and Archy should return to slavery. "It was a decision that was to live on for many years as a judicial absurdity."<sup>68</sup>

Following this ruling, learning that Archy was being held on a steamship off Angel Island, the San Francisco Black community came to his rescue. James Riker was in the middle of it. They managed to stop Archy from leaving the state, raise money, and get another trial set in San Francisco. Eventually, Archy was pronounced a free man, and a celebration was held at Zion Church.<sup>69</sup>

While bittersweet in the wake of the Dred Scott decision, the sweetness of this victory for the Black community faded fast as a new Black anti-immigration act—similar to the one introduced the previous year—arose in the California State Assembly. For many of San Francisco's Blacks this was the last straw.<sup>70</sup> Hopes for their life in San Francisco were

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dashed, and they began meeting in earnest at Zion Church to discuss emigration. “The colored population of San Francisco held a meeting . . . to consider what course to pursue in case the [Black] act became a law. A portion of them is for emigrating to Sonora; another to Vancouver Island.”<sup>71</sup>

Their decision came fast, as the steamship *Commodore* sat in the bay about to leave for Victoria, British Columbia, near where gold had recently been found along the Fraser River. The steamer’s captain, Jeremiah Naglee, came to Zion Church on the evening of April 18, 1858, and told them of the area and what he’d seen surrounding the current gold rush there.<sup>72</sup> Just two days later, on April 20, a group of San Francisco’s Black community boarded the *Commodore*.<sup>73</sup> Over the next weeks, and perhaps months, it is estimated that anywhere from 400 to 800 of San Francisco’s Black community joined in this exodus to Victoria.<sup>74</sup> As for those mentioned in this article, it is known that Rev. Moore, Jacob Francis, Mifflin Gibbs, Peter Lester, and Archy Lee were all a part of this exodus.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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A native of Louisiana, who also grew up in Kentucky, Hudson Bell graduated from the University of Mississippi and moved to California in 1998. He lives on Nob Hill, where he serves on the board of directors and Huntington Park Committee of the Nob Hill Association. He was the author of the following articles in *The Argonaut*: “Charles D. Cushman: Nob Hill Pioneer” (Vol. 6, No. 2, Winter 2016) and “The Last Bastion of San Francisco’s Californios: The Mission Dolores Settlement, 1834–1848” (Vol. 30, No. 2, Winter 2020). Acting as the Nob Hill Association’s historian, Bell is researching and writing the book *Fern Hill: The Lost History of San Francisco’s Nob Hill*.

#### NOTES

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1. For a detailed examination of this process, see Leonard L. Richards, *The California Gold Rush and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York: Aldred A. Knopf, 2007), 97–111.
2. *Daily Alta*, May 18, 1851.
3. Rudolph M. Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1977), 130.
4. Sacramento Transcript, Jan. 11, 1851.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. Richards, *The California Gold Rush and the Coming of the Civil War*, 215–16.
8. *Daily Alta*, Jan. 11, 1851.
9. *The Liberator*, Feb. 15, 1850; Lapp, 95.
10. Douglas Henry Daniels, *Pioneer Urbanites* (Univ. of Calif., 1990), 13.
11. After years of development, this section of Virginia Street no longer exists. The block of Virginia Street between Jackson and Pacific does remain, however, though it is today known as Trenton Street. See San Francisco Directory of 1852–53, Appendix 8.
12. *Daily Alta*, Feb. 1, 1857. Up for sale, the advertisement reads: “Well known as one of the most elegant residences in the State.”
13. *San Francisco Call*, Dec. 8, 1901; Furthermore, the population of this community remained 1,000–1,800 people between 1860 and 1900. See Daniels, 13.
14. San Francisco Directory of 1852–53, 78.
15. Colville’s City Directory of 1856, 154.
16. *Ibid.*, 5.
17. Lapp, 99–100.
18. Colville’s City Directory of 1856, 5, 185, 217.
19. Lapp, 213.
20. Colville’s City Directory of 1856, 74.
21. *Pacific Appeal*, June 20, 1863.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Lapp, 100.
24. *Daily Alta*, July 22, 1854.
25. *Elevator*, June 17, 1870.
26. Langley’s City Directory of 1860, 291, 336.
27. *Sacramento Union*, April 23, 1853.
28. Colville’s City Directory of 1856, 81, 129; LeCount & Strong’s City Directory of 1854, 185.

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29. Langley's City Directory of 1858, 137.
  30. *Ibid.*, 183.
  31. *Sacramento Transcript*, May 7, 1850.
  32. Lapp, 13.
  33. *The Liberator*, Nov. 30, 1849. Today the college in Waterville, Maine, is known as Colby College.
  34. Langley's City Directory of 1858, 271, 298. Note that there is an entry for a J. H. Townsend at the *Mirror* office and also an entry for a colored James H. Townsend. Seems likely this is also Jonas. As for Lafayette Place, see Langley's City Directory of 1859, page 271, showing that Varennes at the time was just the one block between Union and Filbert.
  35. Colville's 1856 City Directory, 148; *Daily Alta*, June 18, 1854.
  36. *Pacific Appeal*, June 6, 1863.
  37. Lapp, 160.
  38. *Daily Alta*, May 7, 1854; May 22, 1854
  39. *Sacramento Union*, Aug. 9, 1854; *Daily Alta*, Feb. 15, 1855.
  40. *Daily Alta*, Dec. 14, 1857.
  41. Harris, Bogardus & Labatt's City Directory of 1856, 125.
  42. *Pacific Appeal*, June 20, 1863.
  43. Lapp, 99, 213, 214; Daniels, 111.
  44. Langley's City Directory of 1858, 290.
  45. *Pacific Appeal*, June 20, 1863.
  46. *Proceedings of the First State Convention* (Sacramento, Calif., 1855), 3-4.
  47. Lapp, 214-15.
  48. *Ibid.*, 216-17.
  49. *Proceedings of the First State Convention*, 18.
  50. *Sacramento Union*, Nov. 23, 1855.
  51. *Proceedings of the First State Convention*, 22.
  52. Langley's City Directory of 1858, 386.
  53. *Weekly Butte Record*, Sept. 13, 1856; *Sacramento Union*, Sept. 15, 1856. The copy of *Mirror of Our Times* I have seen says "Published every Saturday Morning." Therefore, unless an anomaly for the first issue, Sept. 13 should be the day, as Lapp has.
  54. J. William Snorgrass, "The Black Press in the San Francisco Bay Area: 1856-1900" (*California History*, Vol LX, Number 4), 307.
  55. Lapp, 231.
  56. *Sacramento Union*, May 7, 1857.
  57. *Daily Alta*, Feb. 8, 1857; Feb. 12, 1857; Feb. 14, 1857; *Sacramento Union*, Feb. 12, 1857; Feb. 16, 1857.
  58. *San Joaquin Republican*, April 26, 1857.
  59. *Sacramento Union*, Oct. 20, 1857.
  60. *Sacramento Union*, Dec. 25, 1858.
  61. Lapp, 235.
  62. *Sacramento Union*, Feb. 3, 1858.
  63. Lapp, 169-70; Langley's City Directory of 1858, 37; Langley's City Directory of 1859, 30.
  64. *Sacramento Union*, Feb. 6, 1858.
  65. Lapp, 170.
  66. *Ibid.*
  67. *Ibid.*, 171.
  68. *Ibid.*, 149.
  69. *Daily Alta*, April 20, 1858.
  70. *Daily Alta*, April 5, 1858.
  71. *Nevada Journal*, April 23, 1858.
  72. *Daily Alta*, April 17, 1858.
  73. *Sacramento Union*, April 21, 1858.
  74. Lapp, 252.

## APPENDIX

*Below is the list of San Francisco delegates present at the First and Second Colored Conventions held in Sacramento on November 20–22, 1855 and December 9–11, 1856. In October 1857, there was a Third Colored Convention that took place in San Francisco; but, unlike the two previous conventions, they did not publish the proceedings, so no precise information remains.*

### SAN FRANCISCO DELEGATES AT THE FIRST AND SECOND COLORED CONVENTIONS

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Peter Anderson (both)  
Frederick G. Barbadoes (both; at 2nd delegate for Sacramento Co.)  
Chester B. Bass (2nd)  
James E. Brown (2nd)  
Francis R. Carter<sup>1</sup> (2nd)  
Henry M. Collins (both)  
Henry Cornish (1st)  
William F. Courts (2nd)  
Alexander G. Dennison (2nd)  
James P. Dyer (1st)  
Jacob Francis (both; at 2nd delegate for Yuba Co.)  
Mifflin W. Gibbs (both)  
Jacob D. Gilliard (1st)  
George W. Gordon (2nd)  
William H. Harper (both; at 2nd delegate for Alameda Co.)  
Edward J. Johnson (both)  
Charles H. McDougall (both; at 1st delegate for El Dorado Co.)  
John J. Moore (both)  
William H. Newby (both)  
Edward W. Parker<sup>2</sup> (2nd)  
Nathan Pointer (2nd)  
David W. Ruggles (1st)  
Charles Satchel (2nd)  
Daniel Seals (2nd)  
Darius P. Stokes (both)  
Henry F. Thompson (1st)  
Jonas H. Townsend (both)  
Thomas M. D. Ward (1st)  
William H. Yates (1st)

1. *Daily Alta*, Sept. 29, 1858; Langley's City Directory of 1859, 82; *Pacific Appeal*, Aug. 16, 1862.

2. Colville's City Directory of 1856, 170; Langley's City Directory of 1858, 220; Langley's City Directory of 1860, 248; Elevator, June 30, 1865. I think E. "H." Parker was a misprint. There was an E. H. Parker in San Francisco at this time, but he was White.

# SAN FRANCISCO BLACK CHURCHES IN THE EARLY 1860s:

## *Political Pressure Group*

by Philip M. Montesano

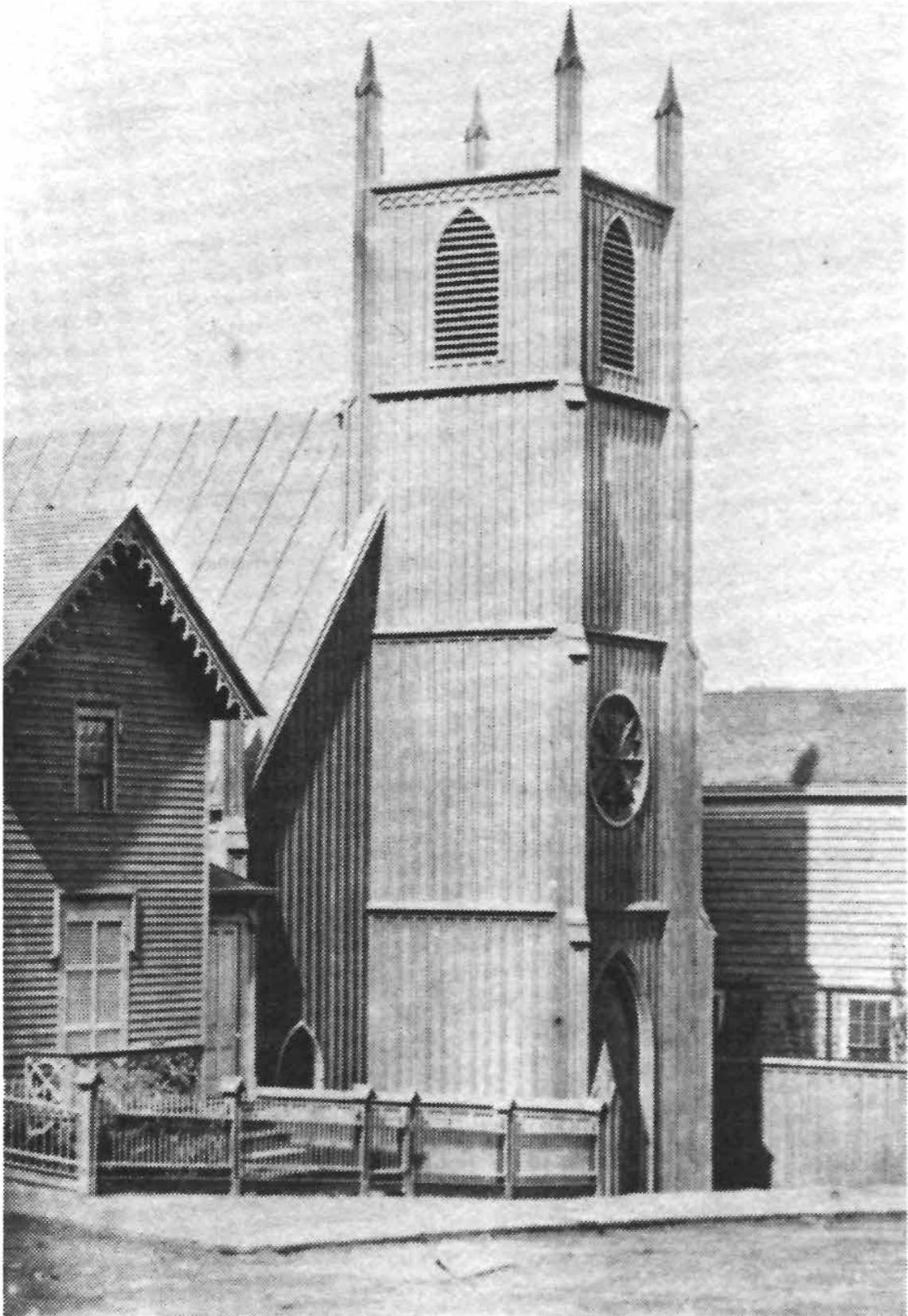
*This article was first published in California Historical Quarterly, Vol. 52, No. 2 (Summer 1973) by University of California Press in association with the California Historical Society. Used by permission.*

**R**everberating with the click of dancing shoes, Assembly Hall, at the corner of Post and Kearny Streets, hummed with activity. Singing violins bowed out waltzes, polkas, mazurkas, and lancers and informed passers-by that a party was merrily progressing behind the bricked walls. Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church was holding a supper-dance: supper with the clergy, dancing after they left. From such happy occasions it might appear that the San Francisco Black community of the early 1860s was content and that few racial problems existed. In reality, however, this period witnessed substantial efforts by the Black community to repeal laws denying Black people suffrage and prohibiting them from testifying and acting as witnesses in court cases involving White people.

In the struggle to change these discriminatory laws, Black churches played a significant role. As in other Black communities throughout the United States, Black churches in San Francisco were institutions created “for survival” and “a creative means of calling forth pride in achievement to disprove the White assumption of Negro inferiority.”<sup>1</sup> Beginning in the 1850s and continuing throughout the 1860s, San Francisco Black churches became involved in

the civil rights problems of the Black community. They provided meeting places to launch political protests. They also provided leadership, a leadership that worked very closely with lay leaders to improve the civil rights of Black people in San Francisco and in California. The three Black churches of San Francisco—Third Baptist, Bethel African Methodist Episcopal, and African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion—began their religious and social-cultural activities in the same year, 1852. Commencing with a gathering of nine Black Christians, the Third Baptist Church on Dupont (now Grant Avenue) between Greenwich and Filbert employed its first pastor, Rev. Charles Satchell, a Black minister from Cincinnati, in 1854 and in 1860, Rev. Thomas Howell, a White clergyman.<sup>2</sup> Bethel AME Church engaged Rev. Joseph Thompson, a White clergyman, to serve as its first pastor and by 1854 had selected Rev. Thomas M. D. Ward, a Black clergyman, to take over. Ward moved his congregation from Jackson, and Virginia to a carpenter shop refitted for religious services on Scott Street, until he could purchase a larger building on Powell Street between Jackson and Pacific.<sup>3</sup>

AME Zion Church first held its services in a building on Stockton Street near Vallejo and, four years later, the congregation moved to Pacific Street near Powell under the leadership of its vigorous Black pastor, Rev. John J. Moore.<sup>4</sup> By the beginning of the 1860s, the churches had established themselves and had begun to expand their social and religious activities.<sup>5</sup>



*By the early 1860s San Francisco's Black churches expanded to include social and political activities. In 1862, Bethel AME purchased a frame building on Powell between Jackson and Pacific Streets for \$5,500. The congregation met on the site until the 1940s. Courtesy of the California Historical Society.*

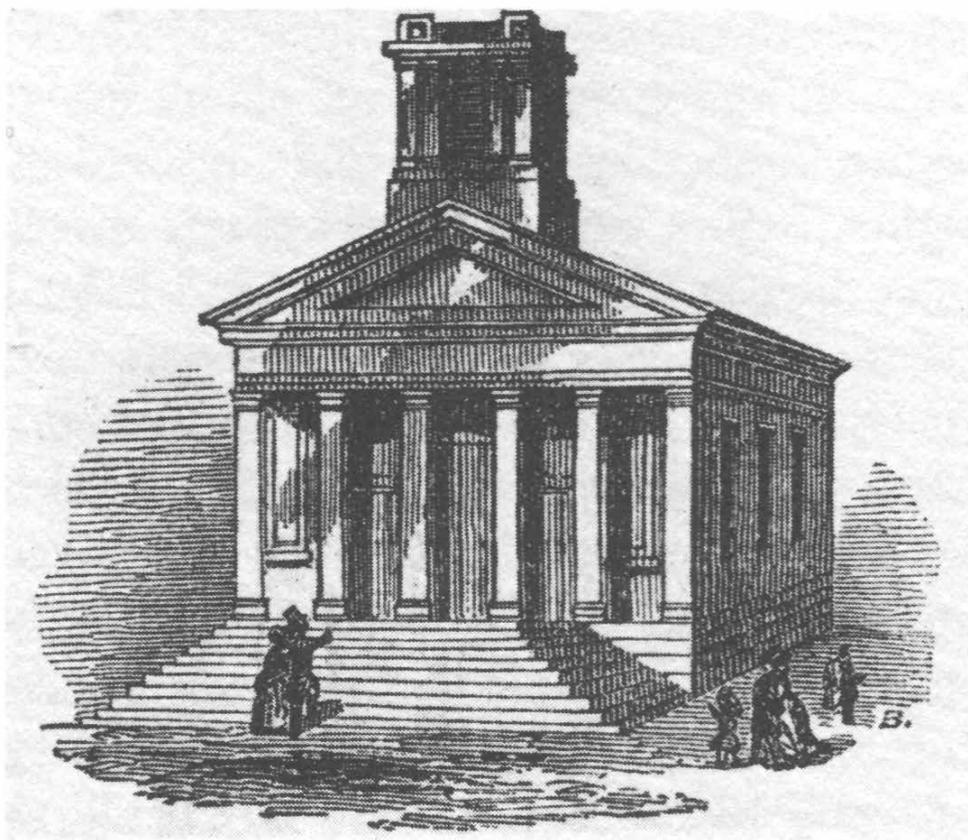
In the 1860s the Black community and its three churches were located in an area bounded by Washington Street, Larkin Street, and the San Francisco Bay.<sup>6</sup> There, the Black community carried on its daily activities, which largely centered around the churches that provided educational and recreational programs and economic assistance to the needy. Throughout the 1850s and 1860s, the churches sponsored a large number of festivals, fairs, musical concerts, recitals by Sabbath School children, and evening lectures. These activities—activities common to both White and Black churches—had dual purposes of money raising and community education.<sup>7</sup> Third Baptist Church, for example, sponsored a musical evening featuring the works of Mozart, Rossini, Schubert, and Haydn;<sup>8</sup> Zion and Bethel churches featured lectures by the popular Unitarian minister, Rev. Thomas Starr King and by a Black physician, Dr. Ezra R. Johnson. Rev. King lectured on such subjects as patriotism and the Hosea Bigelow poetry of James Russell Lowell.<sup>9</sup>

Dr. Johnson's scientific lectures examined, then demonstrated, laughing gas and even offered the audience a chance to get "high."<sup>10</sup>

In addition, the Black churches provided economic assistance to needy Black brothers in times of want, disaster, or war. As did most White churches, Black congregations supported orphans and widows with food and money. They aided the victims of natural disasters such as the 1861–1862 Sacramento flood,<sup>11</sup> raised money to help the sick and wounded of the Black 54th Massachusetts Regiment during the Civil War,<sup>12</sup> and sent money to aid Freedmen.<sup>13</sup> They also collected money to help their Native American brothers in California.<sup>14</sup>

In their churches, Black people could find refuge from the hostile White community,<sup>15</sup> as well as "cultural" enrichment, recreational outlets, and economic assistance. In the arms of the church, Black people of the San Francisco community could also find outspoken champions for civil rights: Black clergy and lay leaders.

When Black people first arrived here in California—before the establishment of the Black churches—they immediately encountered racial prejudice and discriminatory legislation directed against them. The constitutional convention that met in Monterey in September 1849 passed legislation that prohibited Black people from voting.<sup>16</sup> When the state legislature convened in 1850, it added another disability, the exclusion of the testimony of Black people in court cases involving White people.<sup>17</sup> A year later, the legislature enacted a measure that prohibited Black people



*Third Baptist met for a short time at a sanctuary on the corner of Jane and Natoma Streets.  
Courtesy of the California Historical Society.*

from acting as witnesses in court cases involving White people.<sup>18</sup> Not content with these measures, the legislature considered bills in 1852, 1857, and 1858 which would have forbade the immigration of Black people into the state.<sup>19</sup>

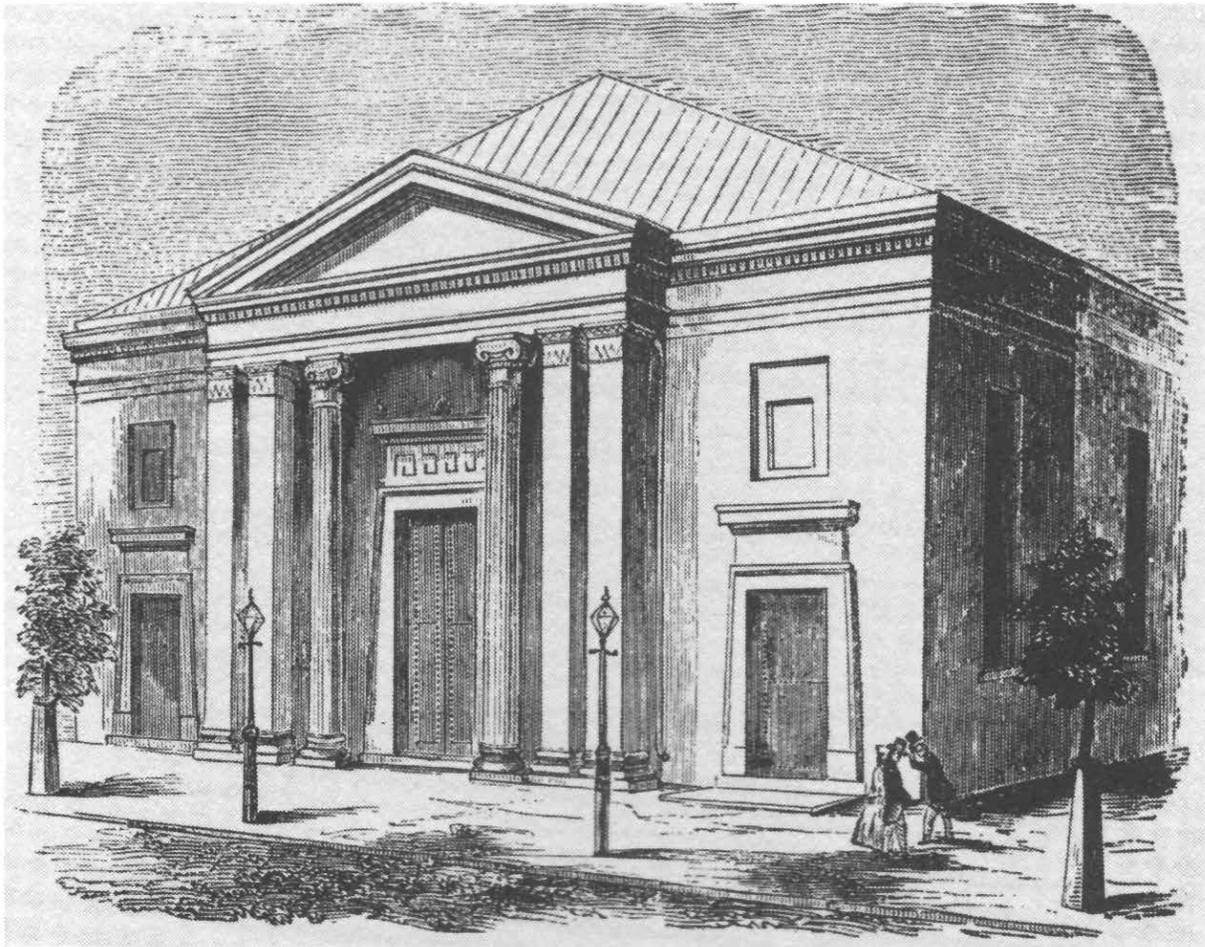
San Francisco Black people resisted attempts to deny them their civil rights. Before the churches became involved in the civil rights movement, men such as Mifflin W. Gibbs and Peter Lester had urged Black people to refuse to pay taxes until Black people received voting rights. The efforts of the two men received support from the recently established churches and from the first Colored Convention, which met in 1855 in the Sacramento Bethel AME Church. Rev. Moore of Zion Church and Reverends Ward and Sanderson, both of San Francisco Bethel AME Church, worked to overturn the anti-Black laws with Gibbs, Lester, and Jonas H. Townsend, the future editor of the first Black-owned newspaper in San Francisco, *Mirror of the Times*.<sup>20</sup> The convention agreed to petition the legislature to repeal the testimony and witness laws. Two conventions, both using Bethel Church facilities, followed the first. These conventions mapped strategy for a renewed attack on the laws, but, again, the strategy failed, and the legislature refused to act. Greatly discouraged at the failures and at the Supreme Court's Dred Scott decision, some of the delegates decided to leave California for British Columbia, a new land of gold and hoped-for freedom.<sup>21</sup>

When the new decade arrived, the Black community received the help of the Unitarian Rev. Thomas Starr King and of a future Black newspaper owner and editor, Philip A. Bell. Under their leadership, the community renewed its efforts to pressure the legislature into repealing the adverse laws. Once again, the pastors Moore and Ward resumed their activities that urged the legislature to rescind the testimony and witness laws.

In 1862, the Black community petitioned the state legislature to repeal the two laws, but, again, the legislature failed to act. Rev. Moore encouraged the community not to give up or relax pressure on the San Francisco legislators. The San Francisco *Lunar Visitor*, Rev. Moores' own newspaper, subsequently published a statement of Black people's goals for all the citizens of San Francisco to read and consider:

The Honorable Senate and Assembly of the State of California.  
 The undersigned, citizens of the United States, and residents of the State of California, respectfully represent unto your honorable bodies that the Statutes of the State of California, prohibiting persons of one-half a race of negro blood from being witnesses in an action a tendency to which a white person is a party, and prohibiting persons who have one-eighth part or more of negro blood from giving evidence in favor of, or against, any white person, in a criminal action, ought, in the opinion of your petitioners, to be repealed.  
 That said Statutes are unjust and oppressive both to the white and the black; that since you are unpunished for the reason that the only witnesses to its commission are persons debarred by these Statutes from testifying.  
 That the honest white man is also excluded from the use of its existing evidence of persons guilty to legitimate transactions.  
 That perjured and fraudulent claims and evidences of indebtedness are often placed in the hands of white men, perjury upon the face to have prison in due course of business, against colored persons, for the purpose of excluding colored evidence of persons not a satisfaction; and these claims are often secured upon and the amounts recovered.  
 Your petitioners are of opinion that judges and jurors ought to be allowed to judge of the weight which should be given to the evidence of colored persons; and that they should be as capable of determining whether a black man is speaking the truth, as a white man.  
 We believe that the exclusion of the testimony of a race of men, is unnecessary, unless of a race held as slaves, or of one having an illegitimate religion.  
 That the exclusion of the testimony of the descendants of Africans, in the United States, is an instrument of an incident to slavery, and should be discontinued with it.  
 In presenting this petition, we respectfully suggest that justice and an impartial administration of the laws, both in civil and criminal cases, demands that the 5<sup>th</sup> clause of section 594 of the Penal Code, Act and the 14<sup>th</sup> section of an Act entitled An Act concerning crimes and punishments, should be repealed.  
 Your petitioners, with ever faithful

The Petition of 1862 calling for the repeal of state laws that prohibited Black citizens from testifying or acting as witnesses in court cases involving White citizens. Courtesy of the California Historical Society.



AME Zion moved into a classic structure on Stockton between Clay and Sacramento, purchased from a Unitarian congregation in 1863–64. Courtesy of the California Historical Society.

1. We want *unity of sympathy* . . .
2. We want *unity of purpose* . . .
3. We want *unity of particular interest* in our own race . . .
4. We want *unity of confidence* in ourselves . . .
5. We want the *unity of self-respect*.<sup>22</sup>

Rev. Moore's efforts received support two months later when editor Bell of the newly established San Francisco *Pacific Appeal* ran a number of editorials urging the Black community to renew the repeal effort. One of his editorials stated:

We have a year before us in which to work for the obtainment of our rights at the hands of the next Legislature. We failed this year from want of time, and from the lack of unity of action among ourselves. We should not

have so many different plans of action, but we should work in harmony together, each one, if necessary, yielding somewhat of his own opinion for the sake of uniting on some general measure.<sup>23</sup>

While the *Pacific Appeal* editorialized, ministers preached, and community meetings continued, several outside factors began influencing the legislature's attitude toward repeal. The Chinese, whose number in California was growing, began causing the White community and its legislators more worry than the Black people. (Blacks in California numbered around 4,086 in 1860 and 4,272 in 1870; Chinese numbered around 34,933 in 1860 and 49,277 in 1870.) In addition, the emancipation of slaves in the District of Columbia and the Emancipation Proclamation, issued January 1, 1863, indicated to the legislature that it must seriously consider repeal of the laws.<sup>24</sup>

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In January 1863, the senate passed and sent to the assembly two bills that would repeal the testimony and witness laws. After debate and delays, the assembly passed the bills in March, and Governor Leland Stanford then signed the measures into law. The combined efforts of the church and community leaders, fear of the increasing number of Chinese, and the Emancipation Proclamation had finally brought success. On March 21, *Pacific Appeal* enthusiastically praised the legislature for its action, but realistically warned the Black community:

As the Testimony Bills have now passed both branches of the Legislature, and as we will hereafter be under the protection of the law, in all our dealings and actions in the respective localities in which our people reside, we should be more guarded than ever against committing any acts that might be construed, by the enemies of our advancement, as a consequence of the repeal of those unjust laws.<sup>25</sup>

The Black community had registered a triumph, yet two other serious disabilities remained: non-eligibility to vote and segregation in the school system. With the end of the Civil War and postwar readjustments, the Black community had relaxed. Bell, Ward, and Moore, however, resumed their warnings that the Black community must continue to fight against racial prejudice. A public meeting held in Bethel AME Church in San Francisco in May 1865 discussed the calling of a convention to plan strategy for an attack on suffrage disqualification and school segregation. The convention met later that year in the Sacramento Bethel AME Church to examine the questions, and the delegates at the convention resumed sending petitions and pressuring state legislators.<sup>26</sup>

The fight for voting rights continued for five discouraging years—years that saw the militant Rev. Moore transferred to the South to become bishop of the South Episcopal District of the Zion Church. Voting rights were finally obtained with the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment, but schools in California remained legally segregated until 1880.<sup>27</sup> By then, Bishop Ward had also left San Francisco to assume new duties in Atlanta, Georgia.<sup>28</sup>

The San Francisco Black community and, in particular, Zion and Bethel churches had lost two dynamic leaders who were not easily replaced. Yet, the political struggles continued under the leadership of laymen, such as Bell, motivated by the Black community's own desire to resist White prejudice.<sup>29</sup> Throughout the 1850s and especially the early 1860s the Black churches in San Francisco firmly established themselves as religious institutions that continue to serve the Black community today.<sup>30</sup> But, of even greater importance, the churches and their pastors had established a tradition of social and political involvement in community affairs. They provided the Black community with education and recreational programs, economic assistance to the needy, meeting facilities, and active political leadership. They were instrumental in pressuring the California State Legislature to repeal the anti-Black testimony and witness laws. As E. Franklin Frazier said of the Black churches during the Civil War period, they played an "important role in the organization" of the Black community and provided an "important arena for political life" among Black people.<sup>31</sup> The political activities of the Black churches and their religious leaders in San Francisco clearly indicate the truth of his statement.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Philip M. Montesano, Sr. received BA and MA degrees from the University of San Francisco. He held California State Credentials for teaching, administration, and as a librarian. He also earned a Master of Library Science from San Jose State University and a Ph.D. in U.S. history from UC Santa Barbara.

After teaching classes at the San Francisco Unified School District, the University of Santa Clara, the Presidio, and San Francisco State, Phil settled in as a teacher and librarian at Westmoor High School in Daly City and as a longtime faculty member at City College of San Francisco. He published articles on San Francisco history, Italian-American history in California, and African American history in California. Dr. Montesano died in San Francisco on June 4, 2019.

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## NOTES

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1. Joseph R. Washington, Jr., *Black Religion: The Negro and Christianity in the United States* (Boston, 1964), 296.
2. *San Francisco Evening Bulletin*, January 14, 1865, 5; Third Baptist Church, *Our Souvenir Book* (San Francisco 1967), n.p. In 1852–1853, there were approximately twenty churches of all denominations in San Francisco. See *San Francisco Directory*, 1852, p. 69 and 1852–53, 20–21.
3. *San Francisco Directory*, 1851–65; Bethel AME Church, *Centennial Celebration, Bethel AME Church* (San Francisco, 1951), 3–4; *San Francisco Evening Bulletin*, January 14, 1865, 5.
4. *San Francisco Directory*, 1851–1865; *San Francisco Pacific Appeal*, January 17, 1874, 1; AME Zion Church, *The Centennial Year* (San Francisco, 1951), 4; Delilah L. Beasley, *The Negro Trail Blazers of California* (Los Angeles, 1919), 158–159.
5. In San Francisco, both Black and White churches were establishing themselves in the 1850s. By the 1860s, these churches had accumulated some wealth and were expanding the sizes of their buildings. See *San Francisco Directory*, 1851–1871.
6. Rudolph M. Lapp, “The Negro in Gold Rush California,” *The Journal of Negro History* (JNH), XLIX (April 1964), 84–85; William P. Humphreys, compiler, *Atlas of the City and County of San Francisco* (Philadelphia, 1876), 7, 10–11, 18–19.
7. The files of the *Bulletin* give numerous examples of church activities. See especially, December 21, 1861, 3; February 13, 1862, 3; March 7, 1862, 3; January 2, 1865, 3; and January 9, 1865, 3.
8. *Pacific Appeal*, September 26, 1863, 2.
9. *San Francisco Evening Bulletin*, September 23, 1862, 3; *Pacific Appeal*, October 25, 1862; November 1, 1862, 2; December 13, 1862, 2; July 11, 1863, 3; July 25, 1863, 2; and August 1, 1863, 2. For a brief biographical sketch of Rev. King, see Horace Davis, *Fifty Years of the First Unitarian Church* (San Francisco, 1901), 57–63.
10. *Pacific Appeal*, August 15, 1863, 2. For a brief biographical sketch of Dr. Johnson, see Philip M. Montesano, “The Amazing Dr. Ezra Johnson,” *Urban West*, 1 (January–February 1968), 21–22.
11. *San Francisco Evening Bulletin*, December 18, 1861, 3; *San Francisco Alta California*, December 19, 1861, 1.
12. *Pacific Appeal*, October 25, 1863, 2; October 31, 1863, 4; and November 7, 1863, 3.
13. *San Francisco Evening Bulletin*, June 1, 1864, 3; September 19, 1864, 3; and September 20, 1864, 3.
14. *San Francisco Evening Bulletin*, December 10, 1864, 3.
15. E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York, 1963), 46, 83–86; Carter G. Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church* (Second edition, Washington, 1945), 164–179.
16. J. Ross Browne, *Report of the Debates in the Constitution of California* (Washington, 1850), 43, 61–75, 137–152, 330–341; Woodrow J. Hansen, *The Search for Authority in California* (Oakland, 1960), 166–174.
17. *Statutes of California*, 1850, 230; *Assembly Journal*, First Session, 1850, 1001; *Senate Journal*, First Session, 1850, 289.
18. *Assembly Bill No. 57*, 1851, California State Archives.
19. Lapp, “Negro Rights in Gold Rush California,” *California Historical Society Quarterly* (CHSQ), 45 (March 1966), 12–13; Eugene H. Berwanger, *The Frontier Against Slavery* (Chicago, 1967), 76. Leon F. Litwack, *North of Slavery* (Phoenix ed., Chicago, 1965), 93–94, indicates the patterns of anti-Black laws passed in Illinois, Ohio, Indiana, and Iowa and the relationship to the California situation. California followed the leadership of these states in its legal discriminatory practices.
20. *Proceedings of the First State Convention of Colored Citizens of the State of California* (Sacramento, 1855), 14–17; Mifflin W. Gibbs, *Shadow and Light* (Washington, 1902), 44–45, 47, 63; Lapp, “Negro in Gold Rush California,” JNH, XLIX (April 1964), 93, 95–96, “Negro Rights Activities in Gold Rush California,” CHSQ 45 (March 1966), 7–9, and “Jeremiah Sanderson: Early California Negro,” JNH, 53 (October 1968), 325. See also, Beasley, *The Negro Trail Blazers*, 54–56. The *San Francisco Mirror of the Times* commenced in 1856. It appears that the paper lasted for about two years. There appear to be only two existing issues, one in August and one in December 1857.
21. Lapp, “Negro Rights Activities in Gold Rush California,” CHSQ, 45 (March 1966), 8–17 and “The Negro in Gold Rush California,” JNH, XLIX (April 1964), 94–98; Litwack, *North of Slavery*, 31, 49–51; Beasley, *Negro Trail Blazers*, 54–60; *Proceedings*, 1856, 12–13, 30, 34–35; *Pacific Appeal*, May 3, 1862, 2. For the movement to British Columbia, see F. W. Howay, “The Negro Immigration into Vancouver Island in 1858,” *British Columbia Historical Quarterly*, 3 (April 1939), 101–113, and Gibbs, *Shadow and Light*, 63.

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22. San Francisco *Lunar Visitor*, February 1862, 2; Petition to *Allow Negroes to Act as Witnesses in Legal Actions*, Manuscript, California Historical Society Library, San Francisco.
23. *Pacific Appeal*, April 19, 1862, 2. See also the files of *Pacific Appeal*, 1862–63, for other editorials and for community discussions of the problem.
24. Berwanger, *Frontier Against Slavery*, 73–77; Mary R. Coolidge, *Chinese Immigration* (New York, 1909), 62–64; S. W. Kung, *Chinese in American Life* (Seattle, 1962), 71–72; Gunther Barth, *Bitter Strength: A History of the Chinese in the United States 1850–1870* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), 136, 144–145. The figures in the text were compiled from Francis A. Walker, *A Compendium of the Ninth Census, June 1, 1870*, (Washington, 1872), 12 and Thomas W. Chinn, ed., *A History of the Chinese in California: A Syllabus* (San Francisco 1969), 21.
- In his book, Berwanger points out that up to the early 1860s the Chinese in California. were denied their civil rights because legislators feared that granting them rights would create a precedent for extending them to the more-despised Black people. This view contrasts with that of Chinn. On pages 23–26, Chinn indicates how the attitudes toward the Chinese changed in the early 1850s from welcome to strong dislike. This is clearly illustrated in the series of anti-Chinese laws passed from 1850–1879. From Chino’s analysis, it would appear that as the number of Chinese increased so did racial antagonism. For the Blacks, this meant that the White community would view them as a lesser threat (because of their small numbers) than the Chinese.
25. *Senate Journal*, Fourteenth Session, 1863, pp. 67, 119, 131–132, 316; *Assembly Journal*, Fourteenth Session, 1863, 312–313, 316, 336; *Statutes of California*, 1863, 60, 69; *Pacific Appeal*, March 21, 1863, 2.
26. San Francisco *Elevator*, May 19, 1865, 3; Proceedings, 1865, 15–19, 22, 26–28.
27. *Statutes of California*, 1880, 47–48; *Elevator*, June 26, 1868, 2.
28. *Elevator*, November 16, 1872, 3. Rev. Ward became the Bethel AME Bishop of California in 1868.
29. A good example of the community’s actions occurred during the school crisis of 1868–69. With the lay leadership somewhat divided, community parents decided to boycott the move of the Black school to an old rundown building. They simply refused to send their children to that school. For more information, see the files of the *Bulletin*, 1868–69. Philip A. Bell, one of the main lay leaders of the San Francisco community, remained active in the community almost up to the time of his death in 1889. The *Bulletin*, April 26, 1889, page 3, contains a notice of his death.
30. The three churches are presently located at 1399 McAllister St. (Third Baptist Church), 970 Laguna St. (Bethel AME Church), and 2159 Golden Gate Ave. (AME Zion). For more information about recent church activities, see the Third Baptist Church: *Our Souvenir Book*; Bethel AME Church, *Centennial Celebration: Bethel AME Church*; and AME Zion Church, *The Centennial Year*.
31. Frazier, *The Negro Church*, 83.

# EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION:

## *San Francisco and African American Concert Singers – In Paradisum 1880–2000*

by Bill Doggett

This article was previously published in *The Argonaut* (Vol. 26, No. 1, Summer 2015).

The years 2013–15 are critical years of commemoration and reflection on the 150th anniversary of the American Civil War; the Emancipation Proclamation, which ended slavery; and the Civil War’s final casualty, the death of President Lincoln.

2013–2015 are also poignant for the City of San Francisco, as the city commemorates the critical period of post-1906 earthquake rebirth with the centennial of the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition (PPIE).

Legendary for its showcase and celebration of the fine arts and classical performing arts, the PPIE proudly announced to the world that San Francisco had emerged from the ashes of the 1906 earthquake and fire.

San Francisco, the urbane and sophisticated 1890s “Paris of The West,” for which theatrical legend Sarah Bernhardt famously shared a great passion, had become a great mecca for the cultural performing arts.

Between 1903 and 1906, the city hosted numerous small classical performing arts ensembles composed of its own gifted musicians, multiple theatrical venues with full-season offerings, as well as spring tours of The Metropolitan Opera Company (1905–1906).

The cultural life of San Francisco from the 1890s to 1906 was comparable in quality and style to the best of the eastern metropolises: Boston, Manhattan, and Philadelphia. San Francisco was graced with many fine venues for live theater and opera, and rich with musical societies that offered public and private

musicales showcasing touring guest artists as well as native Bay Area talent. Similarly, the diverse racial and ethnic population of San Francisco in the 1890s through 1906 mirrored that of eastern cities. San Francisco and its growing urban neighbors, Oakland, Richmond, and San Jose, had small yet important populations of African Americans, as well as the larger Irish, Italian, and Jewish populations that also existed in the major cities of the East Coast.

During the post Civil War Reconstruction years (1870 through the 1880s), many entrepreneurial and pioneering African Americans migrated to California and settled in the San Francisco Bay Area. San Francisco represented a dramatic new opportunity for African Americans, free of the increasingly restrictive limitations of southern race prejudice, which had become formalized as the Jim Crow laws of the South.

For African Americans migrating to the Bay Area in the late 1870s and early 1880s, this critical attitude toward a comparatively race-neutral entrepreneurialism informed a culture of opportunity that many aspiring, classically trained African American musicians both responded to and thrived in.

During the 1870s, San Francisco had been home to the important operatic singer Marie Selika Williams, known as Madame Selika. Madame Selika was the first African American artist to sing at the White House. She sang in the Green Room for President Rutherford B. Hayes and assembled guests in a recital of Verdi and popular songs, a performance she later replicated on European tours in the 1880s and 1890s.

NEXT SUNDAY AFT. 2:30



THE SENSATION OF  
THE CENTURY

*Marian*

*Anderson*

AMERICAN NEGRO  
CONTRALTO

“No one can see and listen to Miss Anderson for two minutes without realizing that one is in the presence of an artist of extraordinary devotion, intensity and self-effacement.”

*N. Y. Herald Tribune*

P R O G R A M

Te Deum.....	HANDEL	Some Time.....	ROSSOTTO
Tutta raccolta.....	HANDEL	Eros.....	COHEN
Der Floete weich gefuehl.....	HANDEL	Idle Wishes.....	SIBELIUS
A bruno vestiti.....	CARISSIMI	Finnish Sailor's Song.....	VEHANEN
Die Vogel.....	SCHUBERT	Done foun' my los' sheep.....	Arr. by Johnson
Ave Maria.....	SCHUBERT	Honor, honor.....	Arr. by Johnson
Der Nussbaum.....	SCHUMANN	Were you there.....	Arr. by Burleigh
Gesang Weyla's.....	HUGO WOLF	Dere's no hidin' place down dere.....	Arr. by Brown
Casta Diva, from <i>Norma</i> .....	BELLINI		

KOSTI VEHANEN at the Piano

Tickets at Sherman, Clay Co. — MANAGEMENT: PETER CONLEY

*Announcement for 1938 San Francisco Opera House Recital of the young Marian Anderson. This was one of Anderson's earliest recitals in San Francisco following her debut at the San Francisco Symphony with Pierre Monteux. From the author's collection.*



*The Hyers Sisters, Anna (left) and Emma were noted 1870s Sacramento-based concert singers who studied with a famous impresario in San Francisco. The Hyers Sisters achieved an outstanding reputation as the first African American concert singers to develop a vision for programming that had positive African and African American images and celebrated African pride-sourced musical presentations at a time when degrading Jim Crow Blackface Minstrelsy was becoming the national pastime for popular entertainment.*

*Photos from Wikipedia.*

The musically gifted Sacramento-based Hyers Sisters, Anna and Emma, studied opera and voice in San Francisco with celebrated teachers, including Hugo Sank and Italian opera star Josephine D'Ormy. The Hyers Sisters were the first classically trained black singers to write and perform operetta and theatrical works that celebrated pride in African-rooted culture. This distinguished their art from the prevailing national pastime, which was steeped in minstrel shows as the dominant vehicle to celebrate "Negro culture."

In 1905 and in 1909, the celebrated African American concert and opera singer Sissieretta Joyner Jones, known as "The Black Patti" for her vocal excellence similar to the renown Italian opera singer Adelina Patti, performed in San Francisco with her

Troubadours Ensemble. Jones had mastered the art of operatic arias and songs with a blossoming career in Germany from the 1870s to the mid-1880s. Returning to the United States, she found that because of her skin color, she could not sustain a career solely as an opera singer and created a musical ensemble called the Black Patti Troubadours. To stay afloat, the Black Patti Troubadours had to specialize in the popular entertainment of the day: Minstrelsy and Coon Songs. Within those musical shows, Jones carved out a sequence in which she would sing operatic arias dressed in gowns, furs, and jewelry to rival any leading white opera soprano on the opera stage.

Appearing April 4–10, 1909 at the American Theatre, Sissieretta Jones and her troubadours



Matilda Sissieretta Joyner Jones has been viewed as the historical mother of African American concert singers. She was named “the Black Patti” after her vocal resemblance to the famous Metropolitan and Convent Garden opera singer Adelina Patti.  
Photo from [www.hamptonroads.com](http://www.hamptonroads.com)

presented a popular variety show. Within the structure of the variety, Jones would be featured in a special section dedicated to her as an operatic showcase. The showcase featured renown and popular opera arias associated with Metropolitan Opera singer Adelina Patti, with elaborate gowns and furs and jewels to match.

As the twentieth century dawned, Jones had triumphed in the press and popular opinion; she was viewed as the premiere operatic African American singer and the cultural ambassador of the Negro race.

As San Francisco rebuilt both physically and culturally after the great 1906 earthquake, the city’s embrace of the classical performing arts found a new venue in the cultural showcases provided during the great 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition.

THE SAN FRANCISCO CALL  
February 3, 1898

AMUSEMENTS.

*California Theatre*  
FRIEDLANDER, GOTTLICH & CO. LESSEES & MANAGERS

Beginning Sunday, Feb. 6,  
First Appearance in San Francisco of the  
World-Famous and Unrivalled

**Black Patti  
Troubadours!**

The Greatest Colored Show on Earth, and the biggest theatrical hit of the Century. Greeted everywhere by applauding multitudes. Fifty ecstasies in Ebony who have set the entire world singing their fascinating and melodious coon ballads. A joyous blending of song, story and dance, by the merriest people under the sun.

**A Veritable Revelation!**

COON COMEDY  
COON SONGS  
JUBILEE SHOUTS  
CAKE WALKS  
BUCK DANCES  
VAUDEVILLE  
OPERATIC REVIEWS.

**Black Patti**  
And Her Fifty Promoters  
Of Mirth and Melody

Are the features of this universally popular company. The stage performance is the quintessence of refined fun and sweet melody, and is intended for the ENJOYMENT OF ALL, especially ladies and children. Bring the little ones to the matinee, they will enjoy it better than the circus. Everybody should bring their shouting voice, for it will be required during the

**CAKE WALK!**  
Seats Ready To-morrow (Friday).

This ad is for the Black Patti Troubadours’ 1909 tour performance at the California Theater in San Francisco.  
From the author’s collection.

Songs and chamber music written about California history and its indigenous American Indian peoples by an emergent corps of California composers were showcased. These included solo piano, vocal, and chamber music written by Charles Wakefield Cadman, Arthur Farwell, and Loomis, as well as lesser-known San Francisco composers.



Rare early edition sheet of iconic Negro spirituals adapted by H. T. Burleigh, an African American composer/pianist/baritone and mentor to composer Antonin Dvorak. This edition lists the names of the many famous White opera singers who featured "Deep River" in their recitals. From the author's collection.

Additionally, new transcriptions of Negro folk melodies embraced by the renown Czech composer Antonin Dvorak were becoming part of the broadening landscape of a folk-melody-inspired American musical culture.

Central to Dvorak's showcase of Negro melodies in his symphonic and chamber music was his association with African American baritone, pianist, and colleague Harry Thackery Burleigh.

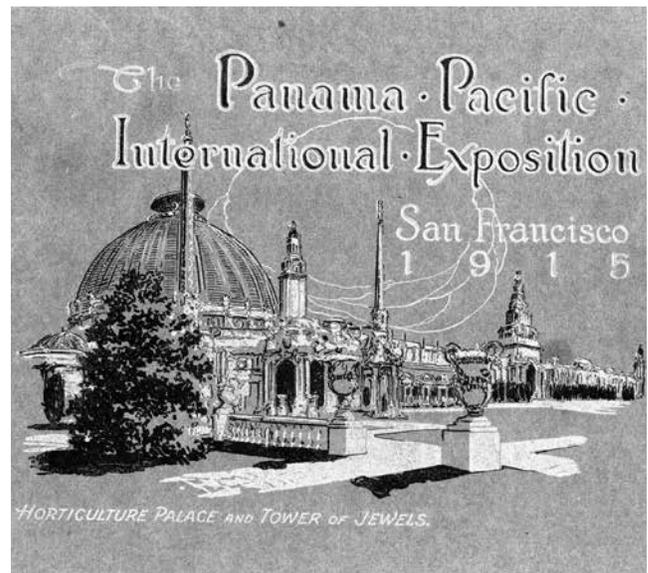
Burleigh's love of the melodies of his slave ancestors and his intention to both preserve and showcase them as arrangements for concert singers and pianists came to life in several series of arrangements published by the famous Italian publisher Riccordi. Burleigh's transcriptions were quickly folded into the repertoire of classically trained

white opera singers, including an impressive array of Caruso's Metropolitan Opera peers: Frances Alda, Alma Gluck, Louise Homer, Marcella Sembrich, and Paul Althouse.

The great civic and cultural successes of the 1915 PPIE ensured that San Francisco had announced to the world its re emergence as a great Metropolis of comparable, if not superior caliber to, its pre-1906 earthquake fame.

A musical highlight of the PPIE was the guest appearance of celebrated French composer Camille Saint-Saëns and the guest residency of the Boston Symphony.

Further, the Exposition affirmed that San Francisco continued its reputation as the West Coast centerpiece for the classical performing arts by spotlighting two signature cultural events that preceded it: the heralded appearance of Metropolitan Opera Star Luisa Tetrazzini at Lotta's Fountain in 1910 and the founding of the San Francisco Symphony in 1911.



Cover of brochure from the San Francisco Panama-Pacific International Exposition in 1915. From the author's collection.

The convergence of these distinctive civic cultural developments in San Francisco between 1910 and 1915, the emergence of the Negro spiritual as a recital concert song of leading singers, and a burgeoning African American population in San Francisco, Oakland, Richmond, and San Jose all

Season 1924-1925

# Auditorium Artist Series

George-Lealie Smith, Manager, in conjunction with Elwyn Concert Bureau

TWELVE SUPREME EVENTS—\$5, \$8, \$10, \$12, \$15

## MARIO CHAMLEE ROLAND HAYES

GREAT METROPOLITAN TENOR  
TO OPEN SERIES IN OCTOBER

A Phenomenal Success—5 Capacity Houses in Boston—3 in  
New York—15 Concerts in London This Summer

Largest Recital Audience of  
the Season Greeted Negro  
Tenor at the Academy

Mario Chamlee, native son of Los Angeles, and now internationally famous as one of the world's greatest operatic and concert tenors returns as the opening attraction of the Auditorium Artist Series. Chamlee's phenomenal success on concert tour this spring well warrants the return home to open this great series of concerts. The tremendous ovation he received at the Philharmonic Auditorium in March was duplicated in every city visited this spring. These great successes following as they do his triumphs for the past three seasons at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York, as well as his highly successful "best artist" appearances in the leading opera houses of Europe, stamp this native Angeleno as one of the outstanding artists of this generation and second to none as an operatic tenor.



MARIO CHAMLEE



ROLAND HAYES

(From Philadelphia Public Ledger,  
Jan. 30, 1924.)

"It was really two audiences that heard Roland Hayes, the negro tenor, at the Academy of Music last night. He had three thousand persons before him and six hundred crowded upon the stage at his back. Roland Hayes is a Georgian, and a former Fisk Jubilee singer. He has had extraordinary success in Europe, with sixteen recitals in London, where he appeared, by command, before the King and Queen. Last November, the first negro thus honored, he was soloist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

**Wide Choice of Songs**  
The reason for the popular royal acclaim was clear to the tentative throng that heard the remarkable young man last night. choice of songs he ranged in arias of Purcell, Handel and B. to the pleading wistfulness of Negro Spirituals. But through them all same artist steadfastly appeared

*In this 1924–25 Bay Area Ellwyn Concert Series announcement, Roland Hayes, the legendary “Negro tenor” of the 1920s, was given equal billing with the renowned Metropolitan Opera Italian tenor Mario Chamlee. This document is both provocative and an important statement about the high regard in which young Hayes was held. It is also a statement about the culturally progressive tastes of Bay Area presenters at this time. From the author’s collection.*

helped to provide both a critical and a captive audience to receive with welcome arms the heralded “colored tenor” Roland Hayes, a pioneering operatic concert singer sponsored and championed by the Boston Symphony Concert Company.

Roland Hayes was first associated with the touring Fisk Jubilee Singers of 1910–11 and first appeared in San Francisco in the 1924–25 Elwyn Concert Series.

According to the advertising and promotion provided by the Boston Symphony Concert Company in the 1924 Elwyn Concert Series brochure, Hayes arrived in San Francisco with great fanfare. The brochure described his recent accomplishments as “A Phenomenal Success: 5 capacity houses in Boston, 3 in New York, 15 concerts in London this summer... largest recital audience of the season greets Negro tenor at the Academy of Music, Philadelphia.”

Hayes was the first African American male to be celebrated as an operatic concert singer in San Francisco, followed by the popular and supremely gifted singer and actor Paul Robeson.

Robeson first appeared in San Francisco in 1930 at the Dreamland Auditorium as part of his landmark Spirituals Recital Tour with pianist Lawrence Brown.

In many ways, the San Francisco recital appearances of both Hayes and Robeson as young emerging singers heralded an interest and disposition toward nurturing the careers of young singers, something that would become a signature feature for San Francisco’s new opera company, which was founded in 1923 by the Italian maestro and first artistic director Gaetano Merola. As the San Francisco Opera matured in its first two decades, an inclusive and expansive vision of showcasing the music of the diverse ethnic communities of



The young Paul Robeson in 1926. Robeson toured with his pianist, Lawrence Brown, in 1930 to San Francisco's Dreamland Auditorium, bringing to the Bay Area his legendary spirituals and Black Art Song recital. Photo from [www.explorepahistory.com](http://www.explorepahistory.com).

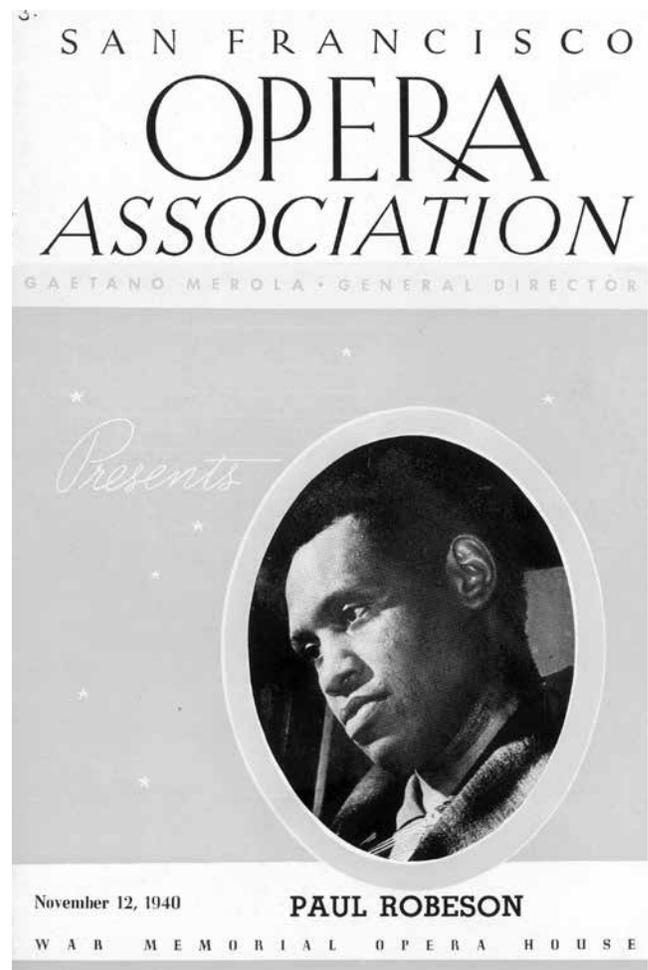
San Francisco was established by Alfred Hertz, conductor of the San Francisco Symphony during the late 1920s and early 1930s. This vision paved the way for the arrival of the Parisian conductor Pierre Monteux in 1935 and the seminal series of musical events that ushered in an era of a progressive and comparatively “color blind” San Francisco classical performing arts landscape that resulted during his tenure as conductor of the San Francisco Symphony.

In Europe, Monteux became famous for conducting the premiere of Stravinsky’s landmark, *Le Sacre du Printemps*, at the Theatre Champs Elysees in 1913. Additionally, Monteux championed the music of French contemporary classical composers in the salons of Paris. A number of these musical salons and recitals showcased young aspiring musicians

from America, including the well received African American singer Marian Anderson.

As music director and conductor of the San Francisco Symphony until 1952, Monteux was the first conductor of a major West Coast orchestra to feature the great contralto Marian Anderson. In her 1937 San Francisco Symphony debut with Monteux, Anderson sang arias of Mozart and Verdi and concluded with two Negro spirituals: “Deep River” and “Motherless Child.”

Of Anderson’s 1937 San Francisco Symphony debut, the noted *San Francisco Chronicle* critic Alfred Frankenstein said that her performance of the spirituals was “the culmination of the concert”... that “they transcended singing and the art of the stage to strike home to the heart with majesty and mystery and breadth of feeling as no artist in my experience has brought to the Negro Spiritual.”



The program describing Paul Robeson in recital at San Francisco Opera House in 1940. From the author’s collection.



SECRETARY ICKES AND MISS ANDERSON

## WASHINGTON TRIBUTE

On Easter Sunday in 1939, occurred one of the most dramatic events in the history of music. A Negro girl, of humble origin, stood before the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, and with the greatest voice of this generation, sang before an assemblage of 75,000 people.

Born of controversy, the concert was attended by Cabinet members, Senators, Congressmen, leaders in business and society, with Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes as host. Sponsors of the event included the First Lady, members of the Supreme Court and high government officers.

Millions throughout the land listened by radio as this awe-inspiring affirmation of militant American principles was given expression.



MARIAN ANDERSON SINGS "AMERICA" AT THE LINCOLN MEMORIAL

"Genius draws no color line," said Secretary Ickes. "She has endowed Marian Anderson with such a voice as lifts any individual above his fellows . . ."



*Easter Sunday Lincoln Memorial program centerfold. Marian Anderson sang to 75,000 people at the Lincoln Memorial and was heard by millions on radio in this historic concert that was set in motion by Eleanor Roosevelt after Anderson was barred by the Daughters of the American Revolution from singing at Constitution Hall because of her race. From the author's collection.*

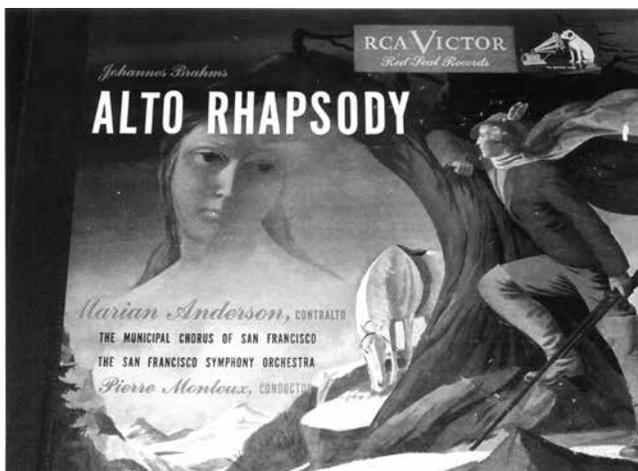
In giving Marian Anderson critical agency as a gifted singer to be celebrated despite her race, Monteux sent a symbolic and critical message to other emerging and prominent African American concert singers that San Francisco was a destination of choice – a place where race prejudice and Jim Crow segregation of the South was absent from the world of the classical performing arts.

Marian Anderson appeared in San Francisco and Oakland again in recitals sponsored by the San Francisco Opera Concerts Series under Peter Conley on February 21 and 22 of 1939, two months before her legendary Easter Sunday 1939 Lincoln Memorial concert. It was significant that Anderson was celebrated in San Francisco before her signature Lincoln Memorial concert, which would usher in an emerging national movement for greater Civil Rights for African Americans.

Marian Anderson and the Elmer Keeton Negro Choir of Oakland, formed in 1937 as a project of the Depression-era Federal Music Project, underscored the legacy of the 1915 PPIE's embrace of the rich and diverse fabric of the showcasing performing arts in California. Their respective heralded presence and their repeat appearances signaled that quality talent, not race, played in the larger expression of the classical performing arts in the Bay Area.

That history was first evidenced in 1909 by Sisseretta Jones ("the Black Patti"), by the young Roland Hayes in 1925, and by Paul Robeson in 1930.

After Marian Anderson's legendary Easter Sunday 1939 Lincoln Memorial concert, which was attended by 75,000 and broadcast nationwide to millions more, Anderson would return repeatedly in recitals and as a featured artist with the San Francisco Symphony under Monteux and in recitals



RCA Victor recording of Brahms' Alto Rhapsody by Marian Anderson with Pierre Monteux and the San Francisco Symphony. This famous recording is the first collaboration of the San Francisco Symphony in a commercial recording with an African American artist. From the author's collection.

under the tutelage of Paul Posz, concert manager of the San Francisco Opera Concert Series.

In Spring 1945, Anderson recorded with the San Francisco Symphony under Monteux one of her great signature works, *Brahms Alto Rhapsody*. The collaboration of that recording was one of the San Francisco Symphony's great early achievements celebrating the added value of cultural consciousness of a socially and musically progressive Bay Area of the 1940s.

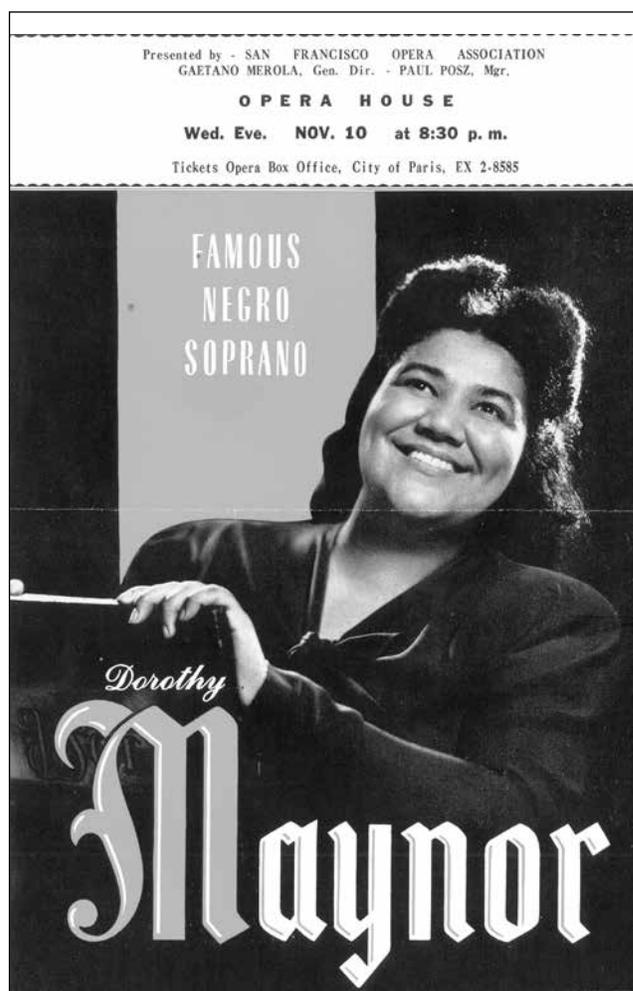
The critical career success that Anderson found in the San Francisco Bay Area was expanded and shared by other African American contemporaries in the concert world. Dorothy Maynor, a soprano renown for 125 opera roles, appeared in recitals in the early 1940s sponsored by the San Francisco Opera Concert Series, managed by Paul Posz.

Maynor would be featured in 1950 with the San Francisco Symphony under Monteux on the Standard Hour broadcasts. Additionally, Posz booked Paul Robeson in recital at the War Memorial Opera House and provided San Franciscans with the first experience of the Katherine Dunham Dance Company, a Black modern dance company.

By 1946–1947, Monteux gave agency to yet another important singer of consequence, the young Carol Brice. Brice's vocal tessitura was often compared to that of Marian Anderson. Both artists

shared similar repertoires, and Brice was invariably referred to as the junior Marian Anderson.

The years 1947–1954 were of critical importance for African American concert singers performing not only in the San Francisco Bay Area but also in New York. Although the color bar that prohibited African American singers from performing at both New York's Metropolitan Opera and San Francisco Opera remained active, the color bar against casting black concert and opera singers had been shattered in 1946 by the newly formed "people's opera": The New York City Opera.



Dorothy Maynor was a popular soprano active in San Francisco in the early 1940s through early 1950s. In the shadow of Marian Anderson, Maynor was famous for knowing and being able to perform 125 different leading opera soprano roles, for which she could never sing on stage because of the color of her skin and the color bar against Blacks on American opera stages. Her most famous recording is the still-luminous 1940 Victor 78-rpm recording of the classic aria "Depuis Le Jour" from *Louise* by Charpentier. From the author's collection.

# CAROL BRICE

*"Her voice is like a cello."*

— DR. SERGE KOUSSEVITZKY (FEB. 27, 1946)



"The voice was like a gorgeous colored band against the tapestry of the orchestral and choral sonorities."  
—Olin Downes, N. Y. Times, October 4, 1946

"Promises to become one of the most distinguished singers yet produced by her race."  
—Irving Kolodin, N. Y. Sun, August 30, 1946

"She will become one of the outstanding singers of our generation."  
—Dr. Fritz Reiner, Director Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, January 26, 1946

"One of those rarely rich voices that seems to be sheathed in radiance."  
—Claudia Cassidy, Chicago Daily Tribune, October 9, 1946

"Displays amazing virtuosity. What seemed most arresting was the bravura rare nowadays in a contralto."  
—Felix Borowski, Chicago Sun, October 9, 1946

"If there were a musical spectroscope, it would disclose a voice of an amazing variety of color, ranging from a clear bright-toned upper register to a full-bodied low register."  
—Charles Buckley, Chicago Herald American, October 9, 1946

"Her voice seems to have a soprano quality as well as one of the most velvety of deep contralto timbres."  
—San Francisco News, August 26, 1946

"May well be the greatest negro voice."  
—Ernest T. Canby, Saturday Review of Literature, August 31, 1946

"I would unhesitatingly put Carol Brice in the category of genius."  
—Rudolph Dunbar (Eminent English Conductor) October 19, 1946

Exclusive Management: W. COLSTON LEIGH, INC., 521 Fifth Avenue, New York 17, N. Y.

Exclusive Public Relations: NEIL SCOTT and ASSOCIATES, 400 Manhattan Avenue, New York 26, N. Y.

Season 1947-48 Now Booking

Columbia Masterworks Records

Promotional ad for the young contralto, Carol Brice, who made great strides in the mid-1940s and was invited by Pierre Monteux to sing with the San Francisco Symphony in 1948. Brice was the second African American concert singer of note to sing with the San Francisco Symphony, and her repertoire paralleled that of Marian Anderson's. From the author's collection.



Maestro Laszlo Hallasz conducting the New York City Opera in the 1980s.  
Courtesy of soundfountain.org

Under the leadership of its artistic director, Hungarian exile/emigré Laszlo Hallasz, Black opera singers were not only given agency but repeatedly cast in important roles as early as 1946.

Hallasz hired and embraced African American singers because he understood issues of race and religious prejudice as a victim of the firestorm of Hitler's Europe. Hallasz escaped Hitler's Europe in 1936 only by invitation from Arturo Toscanini to become his assistant conductor of the NBC Symphony.

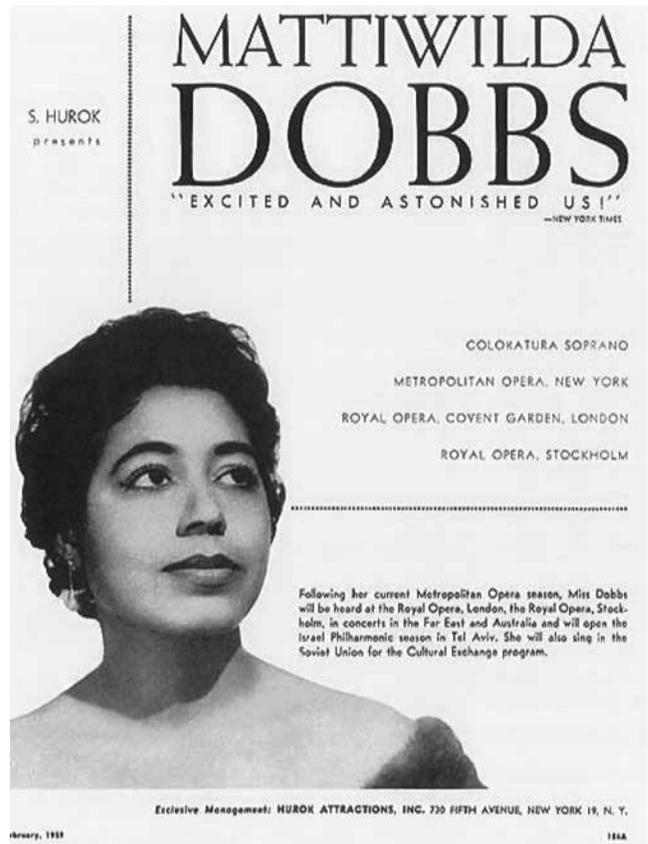
Like Monteux, Laszlo Hallasz had been exposed to the reputations of Marian Anderson and Paul Robeson, celebrated recitalists in Europe during the 1930s. Hallasz, like Monteux, was more interested in the voice and the quality of the artistry than the color of the skin.

As early as 1946, Hallasz hired and cast Todd Duncan (of *Porgy and Bess* fame) as Tonio in *Pagliacci* and Escamillo in *Carmen*; Camilla Williams, the first Black female to have a recurring contract in *Madame Butterfly* in 1947; Lawrence Winters as a showcase artist in the American and world premieres of Carl Orff's *Die Kluge* and William Grant Still's *Troubled Island* in 1949–1950; and the young Robert McFerrin, also in 1949, six years before he would officially integrate the Metropolitan Opera along with Marian Anderson in 1955.

These events would have an impact on the thinking and disposition of the august Gaetano Merola and San Francisco Opera of 1953–54. Before Merola's untimely death while conducting at Stern Grove in the summer of 1954, a decision had already been made to break the color bar at San Francisco Opera.

Before the heralded integration of the Metropolitan Opera by Marian Anderson in January 1955, the young coloratura soprano Mattiwilda Dobbs would be the first African American singer to integrate what was universally perceived as one of the leading American opera companies: San Francisco Opera.

Dobbs appeared in a single opera, Rimsky Korsakov's *Le Coq d'Or*, in 1955. Dobbs' retention was part of a larger disposition of Gaetano Merola to embrace,



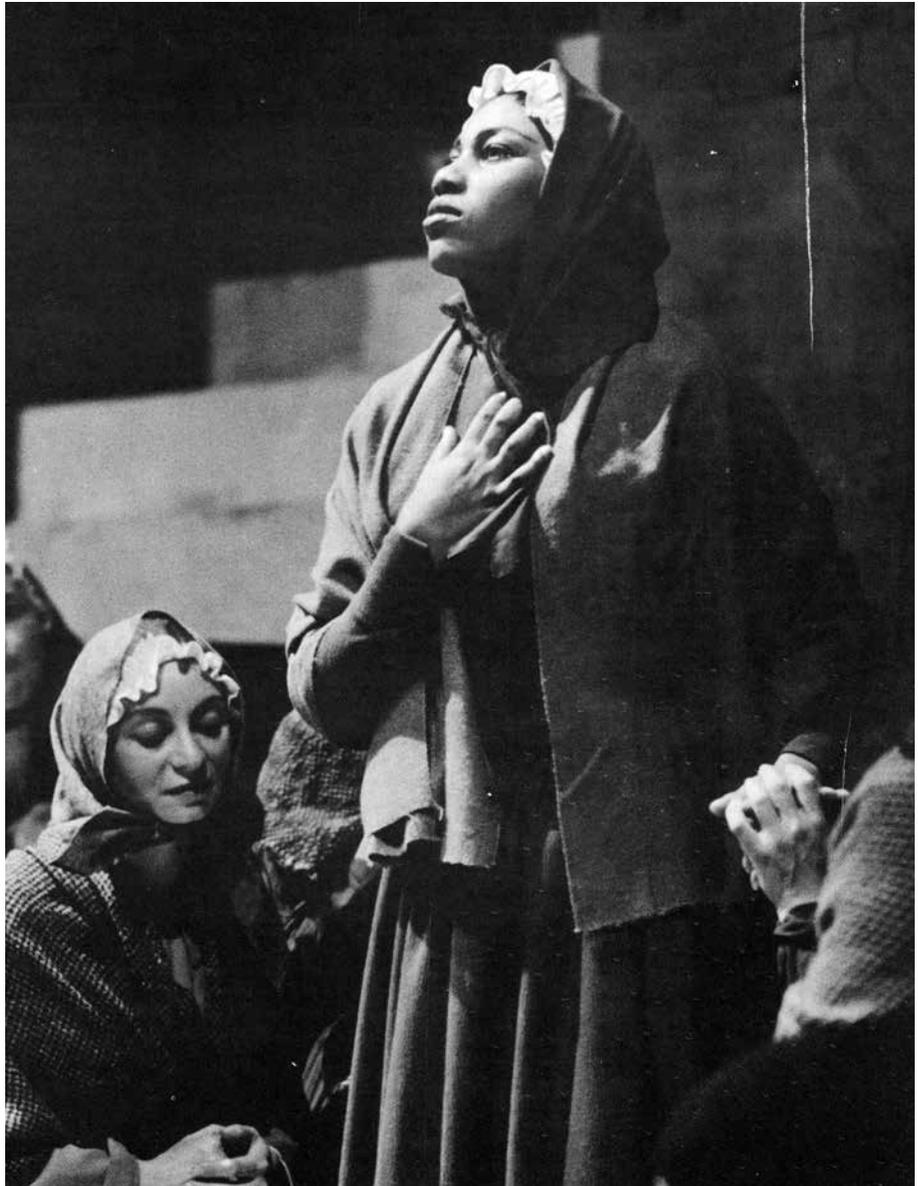
Mattiwilda Dobbs, coloratura soprano, was the first African American opera singer to be hired by San Francisco Opera. She was hired for Season 1954–55 and performed in only one opera, Rimsky Korsakov's *Le Coq d'Or*. From the author's collection.

nurture, and artistically develop young American opera singers. This tradition would be further embraced and developed by his successor, the Austrian exile/emigré Kurt Herbert Adler.

The presence of Mattiwilda Dobbs, combined with the company's disposition toward professional development of young singers, gave rise to what would become San Francisco Opera's most legendary association: the invitation to the young singer Leontyne Price to come to San Francisco Opera.

Leontyne Price has famously remarked about the invaluable mentor-mentee relationship of Adler and Price in numerous interviews. On September 20, 1957, Price made her American opera debut at San Francisco Opera in the United States premiere of Francis Poulenc's *Dialogues of the Carmelites*. In this much-heralded American premiere, Price sang the role of Madame Lidoine. The evening was important for reasons that went beyond the successful premiere of an important new opera and by the opera debut of the second African American to perform on San Francisco Opera's storied stage: in addition, Price had, eight months earlier, sang the role at La Scala in the world premiere of the work.

Price's debut would also coincide with the burgeoning movement for civil rights by African Americans in the deep South. On September 9, 1957, President Eisenhower and Congress had enacted the Civil Rights Act of 1957, the first Civil Rights legislation to pass Congress since the post Civil War Reconstruction Civil Rights Acts of 1866 and 1875. 1957 was also the year of the



Leontyne Price in her American opera debut in 1957 as Madame Lidoine in San Francisco Opera's North American premiere of Francis Poulenc's *Dialogues of the Carmelites*. Earlier that year, Price performed this role at Italy's La Scala in the opera's world premiere. Photo courtesy of San Francisco Opera Archives.

Little Rock School (Arkansas) integration resistance drama, which forced President Eisenhower to send in federal troops to protect the lives of nine young people against the expression of racial hatred and the threat of violence.

In many important ways, the emergence of Leontyne Price at the dawn of the Civil Rights Movement became an important mirror for both the arts and the moral compass of Americans of all races.

After graduating in 1951 from Julliard School of Music, Price began performing with NBC Opera Theater. In 1955, NBC Opera Theater made an historic and controversial decision to cast Price in *Tosca* as Flora Tosca, creating unprecedented de facto interracial casting for television — which was quite daring for its time. In the deep South,

during that same year, both the violent death of Emmett Till and the Montgomery Bus Boycott had occurred. Interracial casting created a firestorm. NBC affiliate stations banned the broadcast of NBC Opera Theater’s performance.

The deep controversy of race at the dawn of the Civil Rights Movement did not diminish the great gift to the opera world, which was Leontyne Price. During the Christmas Season of 1955, San Francisco Symphony invited Ms. Price to make her San Francisco Symphony debut as one of the quartet of soloists in Bach’s Christmas Oratorio.

Price’s debut in Poulenc’s *Dialogues of the Carmelites* in 1957 was followed by debuts at San Francisco Opera in roles she would later signature, including Aida in *Aida* (1957), Leonora in *Il Trovatore* (1958), Donna Elvira in *Don Giovanni* (1959), and Leonora di Vargas in *Forza Del Destino* (1963).

At the San Francisco Opera, Price would expand her brand on tour with the company in its important residency in Los Angeles at the Shrine Auditorium. While in Los Angeles, she would be a featured guest artist during the fabled Hollywood Bowl summer seasons.



See image credit below.



Leontyne Price in *Tosca* was televised in 1955 on NBC in the “Opera Made for TV” series. The casting of Price as Tosca created an interracial love relationship in an iconic grand opera that had never been done before on television or on American opera stages. The broadcast created a national firestorm, especially in the Deep South where many NBC Affiliates banned the broadcast from their local stations. Images from NBC Opera Theater—Legato Classics and London/Decca Records—created an interracial love relationship in an iconic grand opera that had never been done before on television or on American opera stages. The broadcast created a national firestorm. Images from NBC Opera Theater—Legato Classics and London/Decca Records.

# Musical America

OCTOBER

1959



**Strauss Opera Has  
Successful Premiere  
In San Francisco**

**Stokowski Conducts  
New York City Opera**

**Eugene List Celebrates  
25th Year As  
Concert Pianist**

**World Music Bank  
Aids Distribution  
Of New Works**

**Musical America's  
Annual Listings of  
Music Publishers**

**LEONTYNE  
PRICE**

*The young Leontyne Price on the cover of the October 1959 issue of Musical America. At this time, Price was a symbol of great operatic achievement and promise. In January 1961, she made her Metropolitan Opera debut as Leonore in Il Trovatore, three years after she had premiered in the role at San Francisco Opera. From the author's collection.*



Album cover featuring the young soprano, Leona Mitchell. Mitchell debuted at San Francisco Opera in the role of Micaela in *Carmen* in 1973. She would go on to reprise the role of Micaela in her Metropolitan Opera debut in 1975. At the Metropolitan Opera, she sang for eighteen seasons as one of the leading roster sopranos. Photo of 33rpm Stereo LP from [www.cdandlp.com](http://www.cdandlp.com).

The emergence and celebrity of the young Leontyne Price in San Francisco further announced to other young aspiring singers of color, and to the world, that San Francisco and the Bay Area was indeed a paradise of opportunity. In the role of Leonora in *Il Trovatore*, which she first signed at San Francisco Opera in 1958, Price made her Metropolitan Opera debut to thunderous acclaim on January 27, 1961.

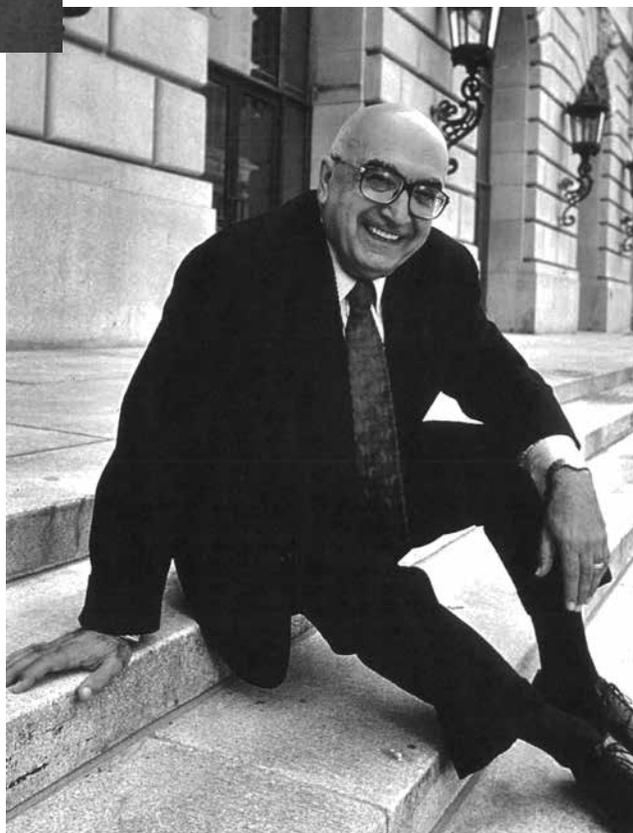
Price would return to San Francisco Opera in her signature roles of *Aida*, *Tosca*, *Leonora*, and *Leonora di Vargas* throughout the 1960s. In 1965, Kurt Herbert Adler would provide her with yet another role debut which she would later signature: *Amelia* in Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera*.

The legacy and critical success of the artistic development of Leontyne Price at San Francisco Opera inspired general director Kurt Herbert Adler to take under his nurturing wing other aspiring young African American singers. Notable among these were Reri Grist, Lawrence Winters, Ella Lee, Simon

Estes, Gary Burgess, Carmen Balthrop, and Leona Mitchell.

This tradition of nurturing young African American singers would be an important signature of San Francisco Opera's Merola Program in the years that followed Kurt Herbert Adler's tenure. During the tenure of the late Lotfi Mansouri, the Merola Program and its related Adler residency would soar to new heights of symbolic opportunity.

The San Francisco Bay Area became a showcase home for many African American singers at both San Francisco Opera and San Francisco Symphony during the 1970s through the mid-2000s. San Francisco Symphony in 1987 was particularly notable not just for the appearance of the fabled bass



The late Lotfi Mansouri, general director of San Francisco Opera 1988–2001, continued the tradition of Kurt Herbert Adler in nurturing and developing the careers of many important young singers of color. For many contemporary African American opera singers, Lotfi Mansouri's era is warmly remembered as "The Golden Years" for Black singers at San Francisco Opera. Photo from [www.musicaltoronto.org](http://www.musicaltoronto.org).



For more than fifty years, Reverend Dr. Hazaiiah Williams (1930–1999) and his East Bay concert organization, *Four Seasons Concerts*, presented innumerable young and legendary Black concert and opera singers in recitals, including Marian Anderson, Dorothy Maynor, Grace Bumbry, and Benjamin Matthews. Photo from *Four Seasons Concerts*, [fsarts.org](http://fsarts.org).

baritone William Warfield as narrator in Copland’s *Lincoln Portrait*, but also for the return featured guest artist appearances by the celebrated Met Opera singers Florence Quivar and Jessye Norman.

In the East Bay, Today’s Artists Concerts, currently known as *Four Seasons Concerts*, has provided critical exposure of both young and historic singers of color for more than fifty years. Under the leadership of the late Dr. Hazaiiah Williams, *Four Seasons Concerts* has presented a fantastic showcase, including Dorothy Maynor, Marian Anderson, Benjamin Matthews, William Warfield, Hannibal Means, Grace Bumbry, Dulcina Stevenson, Lorice Stevens, Betty Allen, Hilda Harris, and outstanding younger-generation talent including Alison Buchanan and Robert Sims.

Indeed, the Latin words *In Paradisum*, famously associated with Faure’s *Requiem*, applies to the storied experiences of African American singers in the San Francisco Bay Area. With the exception of the legendary years of the 1960s–1980s for African American singers in New York City at both the Metropolitan Opera and New York City Opera, the legacy of the Bay Area for inviting and sustaining a critical agency of opportunity for “the young, gifted and black” singer is one of the great historical landmarks in the Classical Performing Arts.

As Leontyne Price shared with Lotfi Mansouri about her potential appearance at the 75th anniversary gala for San Francisco Opera in 1997, “San Francisco Opera is my opera home.”

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Bill Doggett is an award-winning Bay-Area–based exhibitions curator, archivist, and lecturer. He was the first Black guest curator at San Francisco Opera for the company’s 2009 production of the Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*. In 2012, he received the Heritage Keepers Award from the Bay Area Friends of Negro Spirituals for exhibition curation. Since 2014, Doggett has been active with the Association for Recorded Sound Collections, for whom he provides board advocacy on issues in diversity.

Mr. Doggett has curated an exhibition of the content of this article and welcomes inquiries regarding rental loans of that exhibition. For more information about his work and his archive visit: [www.billdoggettproductions.com](http://www.billdoggettproductions.com).

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# LET FREEDOM RING:

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## *Buffalo Soldiers and the Liberty Bell*

by Lee Bruno

This article was previously published in *The Argonaut* (Vol. 26, No. 2, Winter 2016).

In early November of 1915, the Liberty Bell, which had been displayed at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition (PPIE) grounds for several months, was given its final goodbye celebration before starting its long journey home to Philadelphia. John Phillips Sousa played his patriotic marching songs as adults and children – 20,000 of whom had petitioned to bring the bell to San Francisco – lined the route to wave goodbye to the American icon that would never again leave Philadelphia.

The Buffalo Soldiers of the 24th Infantry escorted the horse and wagon that pulled the bell across some two miles of exposition grounds, through the streets of San Francisco to the Southern Pacific depot on Third Street, and loaded the bell onto a flatbed car destined for Philadelphia. The stars and stripes were festooned across the backdrop on an occasion where all Americans felt they had a stake in their country. The presence of the Buffalo Soldiers, celebrated for their distinguished history, was a triumph for Black Americans, yet served to heighten the mixed treatment they'd experienced at the PPIE. The spirit of racial inclusion did not prevail throughout the fair, where messages promoting the achievements of Blacks were intermingled with exhibits that were demeaning to California's recently enfranchised Black citizens.

When the 24th Infantry had arrived weeks earlier on the Army transport *Thomas*, tired and looking forward to a well-deserved rest after a long assignment in the Philippines, San Francisco welcomed them as patriots. "It is a splendid regiment

and army men believe that San Francisco will find it just as desirable a command from the standpoint of orderly conduct as any regiment in the service," wrote the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

Many Blacks had visited the Panama-Pacific International Exposition just to see the Liberty Bell. For them, the bell had special significance. *The Oakland Sunshine* encouraged its readers to go and view the patriotic icon because of its link to the fugitive slave Crispus Attucks, who was a casualty of the Boston Massacre and "the first martyr of the American Revolution." On July 17, the paper wrote, "Let this Western world know that the blood of a Negro patriot has been largely instrumental in preserving the precious jewel of American independence."

Indeed, the Liberty Bell was an iconic symbol of American independence. It had been cast in 1752 with the lettering "Proclaim LIBERTY Throughout the LAND Unto all the Inhabitants thereof," which was a biblical reference from the Book of Leviticus (25:10). In its early years, the bell was used to summon lawmakers to legislative sessions and to alert citizens to public meetings and proclamations. In the 1830s, the bell was adopted as a symbol by abolitionist societies who gave it the name "Liberty Bell."

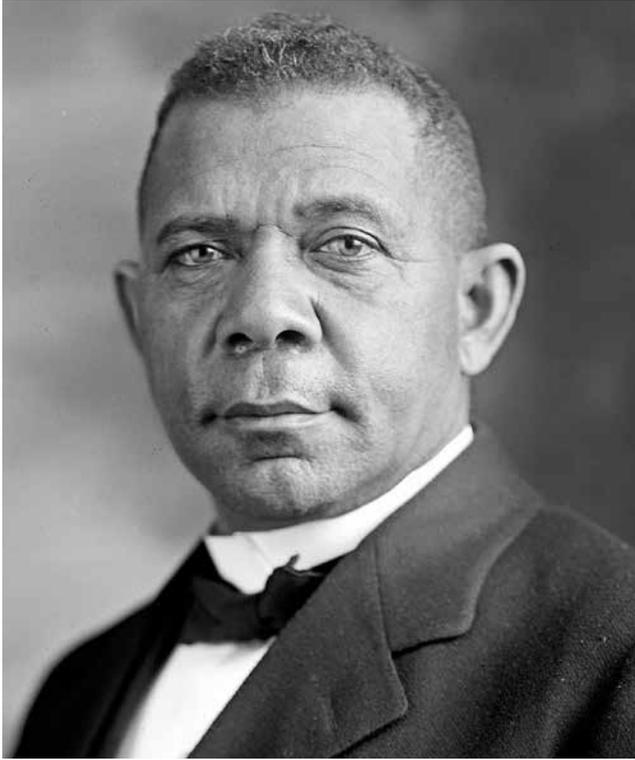
Few Blacks attended San Francisco's 1915 world's fair because many with the means to travel had decided to make the trip to another important celebration instead: the Lincoln Jubilee in Chicago, which celebrated the 50th anniversary of the African Americans' Emancipation. The jubilee ran for nearly a month, from August 22 to September 16, 1915.



*The Liberty Bell traveled from Philadelphia for the first and only time to be displayed at the PPIE. Courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.*

The Lincoln Jubilee was designed to focus and embrace African American achievements across many different endeavors, including science, agriculture, industry, art, engineering, education, literature, and other cultural areas. It was small fair in comparison to the PPIE, but it really belonged to the African Americans who planned, organized, and staged it. The Lincoln Jubilee took 10 years of planning, and the Illinois legislature appropriated \$15,000 for the exposition (19 other states also contributed). Pastors from several hundred Black churches attended.

The Chicago jubilee had displays of art, needlework, wireless technology, foundry production, and machine shop. There were exhibits of slave plows, Lovejoy's printing press, and much more. Well-known inventors attended, including Black Canadian-American Elijah McCoy, who had a small booth displaying his various types of lubricating oil cups for steam engines. His lubricating inventions have also been credited with revolutionizing the railroad and machine industries. This Black inventor held 57 patents by the time of his death and was recognized by Booker T. Washington for



*Booker T. Washington was an African American educator, author, orator, and advisor to presidents of the United States between 1890 and 1915. Courtesy of Wikipedia.*

his prodigious output of inventions.

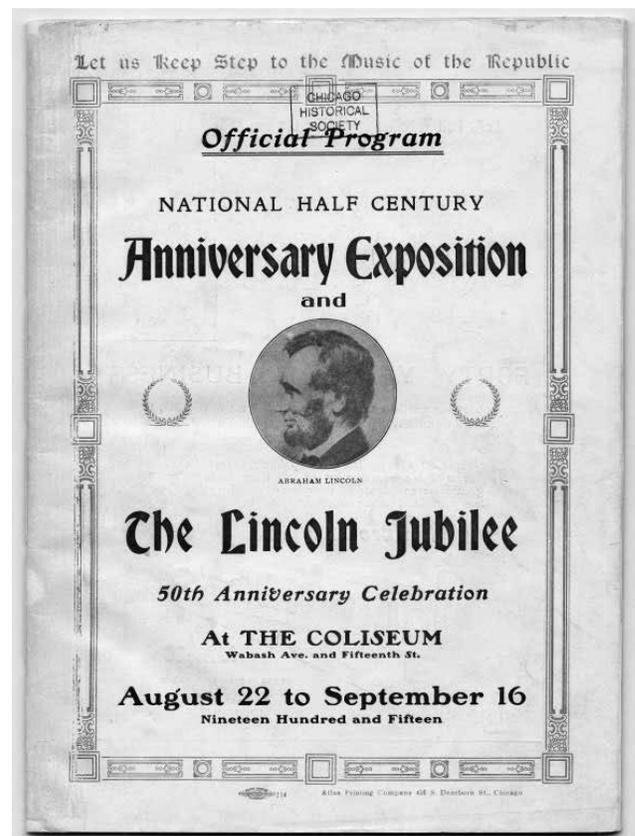
A centerpiece of the Lincoln Jubilee was a statue of Abraham Lincoln. Several exhibits displayed the haunting memory of Lincoln from the chairs at Ford's Theatre, where he was shot, to the bed he died in. All the exhibits seemed to evoke the raw emotions of Lincoln as a great friend and ally of Black Americans.

Sylvester Russell wrote in the *Freeman* newspaper, a Black paper, on August 28, 1915:

The formal opening of the Lincoln Jubilee National Half Century Anniversary Exposition, of fifty years since slavery, opened at the great Coliseum last Sunday afternoon. ... [It was] a gathering that not only filled the auditorium but caused the doors to be closed to fully one thousand people who failed to gain admission. The famous Hallelujah Chorus of six hundred voices under the general direction of J. Gray Lucas served as an introduction to the occasion.

The main Jubilee exhibit was displayed in the Coliseum Building. One great feature of the exposition was a series of great congresses: religious, educational, sociological, industrial, agricultural, and miscellaneous. The International Inter-Racial Congress was an impressive contribution toward the establishment of a permanent peace between the Black and White races.

In contrast, at the PPIE, the Blacks who did walk the fairgrounds found what historians contend was demeaning and at best conveyed mixed messages about race and the African American's place in America. California had gained a reputation for its embrace of African Americans. African American author, sociologist, and historian William Edward Burghardt (W. E. B.) Du Bois visited California in 1913, two years before the PPIE. On that trip, he found much to celebrate, including the availability of single-family homes and jobs for Blacks. San Francisco was more racially integrated than many parts of the nation. National Black newspapers, such



*Official Program: National Half Century Anniversary Exposition, Atlas Printing Co., 1915. Courtesy of the Newberry Library and Chicago History Museum.*



The "African Dip" was an enormous booth in the Joy Zone, and the space recalled popular images of savage Africans. Courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

as the *Colored American*, also sang the praises of the Golden State and encouraged readers to migrate there. Just four years before the fair opened, one editor of a Black newspaper in Los Angeles, Jefferson Edmonds, claimed that California was "the greatest state for the Negro."

But San Francisco's World's Fair, the PPIE, hosted several attractions that would jar and insult any Black visitor. One of those, called the "African Dip," was an enormous booth in the Joy Zone, and the space recalled popular images of savage Africans. Fairgoers entered the African Dip through the entrance of an enormous body of a pierced African of indeterminate gender. They could toss a ball at a

target, which, if successfully hit, would dunk or dip the Black who sat in the booth into a pool of water.

Fairgoers at the very same exhibit could read charts warning against interracial marriage, or "mixed-race breeding." These eugenics messages were even more strident in a Department of Labor display booth. It conveyed information about the weakening of America's racial purity due to recent immigration trends, according to Lynn Hudson's essay, "This is Our Fair and Our State: African Americans and the Panama-Pacific International Exposition." As one historian explained, "The nucleus of California's eugenics movement converged at the PPIE."



Boldly on display at the PPIE was the new “science” of eugenics, which warned of the dangers of interracial contact, especially interracial sex. Fairgoers could read strident eugenics messages, especially in one display booth of the Department of Labor, which conveyed information about the weakening of America’s racial purity due to recent immigration trends.  
 Courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

The fair had other demeaning caricatures of African Americans, including one at the Sperry Flour booth, where women dressed in stereotypic mammy outfits made pancakes for hungry crowds. From the Joy Zone to the ethnological exhibits and even the Palace of Food Products, visitors witnessed a range of disrespectful racial stereotypes, including caricatures of African Americans. For many who crafted the vision of the PPIE, the key to national progress was something called “racial progress” or “race betterment,” but the reality of the exhibits was quite different.

During the PPIE, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) organized a massive outcry against the degrading portrayals of African Americans in Thomas Dixon’s play, *The Clansman*, and D. W. Griffith’s newly released film, *The Birth of a Nation*.

There were, however, exceptions to the negative portrayals of African Americans at the PPIE. The Educational Palace hosted an exhibit put together by the U.S. Department of Education. With the backdrop of classic Greek sculptures, it displayed a set of charts and pictures of historical value

“displaying the progress of the Negro race from the cotton fields of antebellum days to the holding of a post mortem and clinics in a colored hospital, surrounded by Negro doctors and nurses,” wrote Frank Morton Todd, the fair’s official chronicler.

Another set of charts portrayed the Negro in industry and science. The Race Betterment booth was labeled with the following description: “Race Betterment: A Popular Non-Sectarian Movement to Advance Life Saving Knowledge.” Todd described it as “one of the exhibits that caught the eye of every visitor.” The Race Betterment Foundation had been established by the cereal magnate John H. Kellogg.

Several outstanding African Americans were celebrated. One of those was the award-winning painter Henry O. Tanner, whose painting “Christ in the House of Lazarus” was featured in the Palace of Fine Arts and was awarded the gold medal award.

Tanner was the first internationally acclaimed African American painter. He had studied in Europe and was widely recognized as one the world’s celebrated spiritual painters. This pioneering African American artist was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1869. He was the oldest of nine children whose



*Henry Ossawa Tanner.  
Courtesy of Wikipedia.*



*Some Black Americans visited the Panama-Pacific International Exposition to see the Liberty Bell on loan from Philadelphia.  
Courtesy of Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.*

father was an Episcopal minister and schoolteacher. Despite his father's initial objections, Tanner fell in love with the arts. He was 13 when he decided to become a painter, and throughout his teens he painted and drew as much as he could. As a young man, he studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts under Thomas Eakins, an influential teacher who had a profound impact on Tanner's life and work.

At the age of 22, Tanner moved to Paris, where he discovered a culture that was ahead of America in terms of race relations. Free from the prejudicial confines that defined his life in his native country, Tanner made Paris his home, where he gained international acclaim. "Nicodemus Visiting Jesus" is one of his most famous works, according to *Henry Ossawa Tanner: American Artist* by Marcia Mathews.

The PPIE award would be the first in a distinguished career, though most of his recognition came from outside the United States. In 1923, Tanner was named honorary Chevalier of the Order of the Legion Honor, France's most distinguished award. Four years later, Tanner was made a full academician of the National Academy of Design – becoming the first African American ever to receive the distinction. He died in 1937 in Paris, at the age of 54.

In the emerging world of new technology, the Palace of Machinery did not host or spotlight any of the great African American inventors as found at the Lincoln Jubilee in Chicago. One of the noteworthy inventors of that period was Garrett Morgan. A year earlier (in 1914), his brilliant invention of a breathing device for firefighters earned him the first prize at the Second International Exposition of Safety and Sanitation in New York City. When World War I broke out, Morgan's breathing device became the prototype for the gas mask. It protected and saved countless soldiers from mustard gas attacks across the battlefields of Europe during World War I.

The PPIE elicited mixed reactions from Black men and women throughout the state. "The discussion in the Black press reveals that not everyone embraced the possibilities of the fair, and, in fact, some worried it could reinforce messages of racial inferiority," wrote Hudson in her essay.

The world's fairs were designed to help make sense of the upheaval and social disorder of industrializing societies by providing a "community of



Garrett Augustus Morgan, Sr. (March 4, 1877 – July 27, 1963) was an African American inventor and community leader. Courtesy of Wikipedia.

shared experience." In his book, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876–1916*, Robert Rydell wrote: "The sheer popularity of the eleven international expositions that occurred in the United States between 1876 and 1916 demonstrated that Americans were, at the very least, attracted to this shared experience and its unique combination of education and entertainment." But that "shared experience" had been demeaning to many African American citizens.

A few days after the Liberty Bell parade, exposition officials designated Abraham Lincoln Day as a special day to honor the Illinois-born president's legacy. Lincoln Day was a late addition to the exposition's calendar. Its express purpose was to honor the achievements of Blacks. Again, that day, the mixed treatment of African Americans was on display.



*The Buffalo Soldiers from the 24th Infantry were stationed in San Francisco during the last months of the PPiE. They had arrived at the PPiE tired and looking forward to a well-deserved rest after duties in the Philippines. Courtesy of U.S. Military History Institute.*

The fair paid special tribute to the brave military service of the Buffalo Soldiers, the all-Black regiments established by Congress after the Civil War in 1866 as the first peacetime regiments in the regular U.S. Army. Delilah Beasley, the pioneering African American reporter for the *Oakland Tribune*, wrote:

The exercises were opened by a Military Parade, which was led by the entire Twenty-fourth Infantry ... headed by a Negro band and bandmaster. ...The Negroes led the day. ... Some 1,000 Black soldiers of the legendary Buffalo Soldiers led the parade and were followed by White military men comprised of U.S. Marines, sailors, hospital corps and cavalry.

Some of the Buffalo Soldiers rode horses, but most marched on foot in their distinguished blue and gold full-dress uniforms. Each carried on his belt a magazine pocket, rifle belt ring, holster, and pistol, just as he'd worn in many famous battles where many soldiers earned distinguished records for fighting in posts from the southwestern United States and Great Plains all the way to the Spanish Civil War, Mexico, and the Philippines.

But Lincoln Day was not without controversy. Some Blacks found the very notion of a single day devoted to Black achievements patronizing and offensive. The event was not widely covered by newspapers, yet its raw and emotional truth echoed the words of Abraham Lincoln's definition of

democracy displayed in the Illinois state building on the fairgrounds, which read: “As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of democracy – whatever differs from this to the extent of the difference is no democracy.”

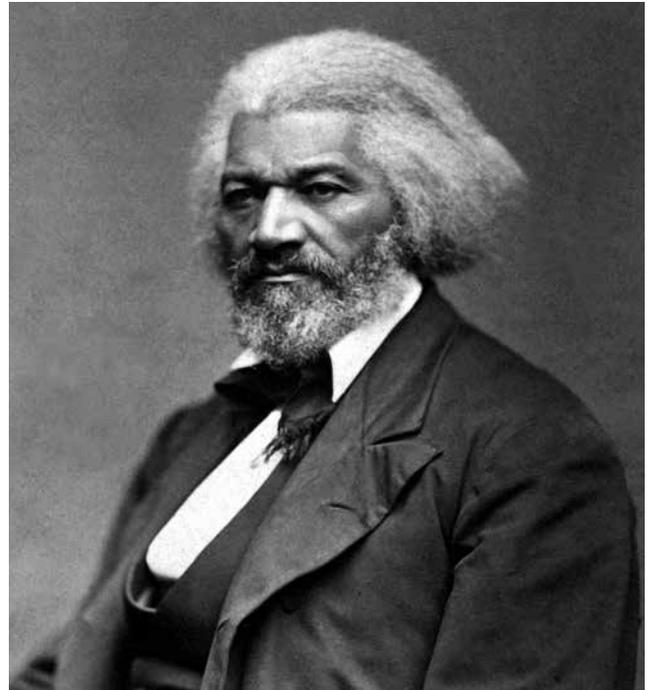
As a result of the controversy over the portrayal and inclusion of African Americans at the PPIE, by May 1915 plans for what was called “Negro Day” were abandoned and a new avenue for Black participation emerged. This time, it was not a race-specific day, but a matter of civic pride. The proposed Alameda County Day and its centerpiece “industrial parade” were considered a more appropriate venue for Black Californians to demonstrate their contributions to the county and state. Black women such as Myra V. Simmons (president of the Civic Center, a Black women’s club in Oakland) took the lead, immediately organizing a forum to discuss the new event, which was planned for June 10.

Ironically, the name “Jewel City,” the moniker given to the Panama Pacific International Exposition, was credited to a young African American girl named Virginia Stephens, who was the daughter of a chauffeur in the wealthy Crocker household. Stephens was 12 years old when she suggested “The Jewel City” as the fair’s official nickname. That name won her the official naming contest sponsored by the *San Francisco Call*. Oakland’s Bournemouth



Annie Virginia Stephens Coker (1903–1986).  
Courtesy of BlackPast.org.

Circle club held the Jewel City Ball, where Virginia was presented with a gold cross necklace and a bouquet of roses. Ms. Stephens went on to attend University of California at Berkeley, and graduated from Boalt Law School. In 1929 she became the first African American woman admitted to the bar in California.



Frederick Douglass (c. February 1818 – February 20, 1895) was an African American social reformer, abolitionist, orator, writer, and statesman. Courtesy of Wikipedia.

There were other World’s Fairs where Black participation was evident. Chicago’s World’s Columbian Exposition in 1893 had been designed to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus’ “discovery” of America. At the fair, the journalist Ida B. Wells and senior statesman Frederick Douglass debated publicly about the role of Black Americans in the fair.

“The debates revealed significant differences in what Black people thought fairs could be and do,” Hudson wrote. “Members of the elite class of Black Chicagoans, including Annie Barrier Williams, the only African American to hold an administrative position in the fair, believed that the exposition could showcase the achievements of the nation’s Black population and was a tremendous opportunity that should not be missed.”

For as much as the PPIE celebrated the Buffalo Soldiers and some of the achievements of Black citizens, the fair’s inclusion of racist and demeaning exhibits undermined any opportunity the PPIE had to do the same for African Americans in San Francisco.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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See page 46 for biographical information about Lee Bruno.

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# THE WESTERN ADDITION DISTRICT

## *Documentary Project*

by Rodger C. Birt and Charles Wong

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**A**t the midcentury point in 1949, certain aspects about San Francisco would have been virtually unrecognizable to anyone who had been away from the city during the previous decade. It was not that the physical contours had changed that dramatically; it was the features of the city's social composition that the absent sojourner would have considered most remarkable. The war had disrupted the carefully calibrated pattern of relationships between San Francisco's White majority and its several nonwhite minority communities. The entire Japanese-American population in the district known as the Western Addition had vanished in a matter of weeks during the spring of 1941, and in its place an emerging African American presence, which was slight in 1941 (9,319), gave an entirely different character to neighborhood streets and shops by war's end. In 1949 the pre-census estimation of black Americans living in the Western Addition was 55,000.\* Induced to come to the Bay Area by the promise of jobs in war-related industries, and lured into the Western Addition by the promise of affordable rents and attractive mortgages, African Americans built a community where, only recently, Japanese-American dreams had crumbled. Fillmore Street, Japantown's main artery of commerce and social intercourse after the 1906 earthquake, was heralded as the "125th Street of the West Coast" in the 1940s, and the neighborhood was labeled "little Harlem." It is a history of the city in a single capsule: one San Francisco goes, and a new one arrives to take its place.

Such was the Fillmore when young photography

student Charles Wong began to wander through it with his camera in the autumn of 1949. Wong was not exactly a stranger in an alien land. He was a native-born San Franciscan, but only recently could he claim the city as his own. Opportunities long denied Chinese Americans were now available in post-war San Francisco. A recently returned Army Air Corps veteran, Wong took advantage of the G.I. bill and enrolled in classes at the California School of Fine Arts (CSFA). When he matriculated at CSFA, the school was the epicenter of San Francisco's vibrant photography community. Throughout the 1940s Edward Weston, Imogen Cunningham, Dorothea Lange, and Ansel Adams all either taught regularly or guest lectured at the school. In 1946 Ansel Adams, then director of photography, hired Minor White, a young, newly arrived photographer from New York. In 1949 Wong enrolled in White's small-format photography class.

White had been experimenting with shaping narratives from a body of photographic work. The ultimate goal was to forge a sequence – a story with a beginning, a middle, and a conclusion – after editing the assembled negatives. Cumbersome large format cameras were not feasible for this kind of work. Street photography called for a smaller, handheld camera that yielded 2.25-x-2.25-inch negatives. Once he had settled into San Francisco, White moved through the city's variegated neighborhoods and up and down its many hills, all the while exposing hundreds of rolls of film. By the time he began teaching at CSFA he was as knowledgeable as a native when it came to understanding San Francisco's patchwork quilt of districts

\* Population data from the Forward to *The Western Addition District Documentary Project* by Charles Wong.



and neighborhoods. Now, he would challenge the students to undertake a project similar to his: they were to create a photographic and literary narrative centered on their observation of a selected portion of the city.<sup>+</sup>

“He walked into the classroom one morning,” Wong says, “and told us to work the Fillmore district into your own unique photo essay.” White gave the class “no guidelines, no formats,” Wong continued. Always fiercely independent, Wong liked the freedom that White’s assignment allowed. The shape of his essay emerged slowly, after weeks of exposing film, developing it, and then making contact sheets. The story Wong wanted to tell became apparent. He realized the walks he was taking, photographing as he went, mirrored a walk an uninitiated pilgrim might make. The Bay Area was a mecca for Americans of every class, race, and ethnicity. San Francisco was a shining city on many hills. Its brightest nugget was the Fillmore.

The prints he made for class presentation display Wong’s voracious eye. Wong says everything he encountered in the Fillmore was not different from what he saw in Chinatown streets and interiors:

“a guy with his girl, kids playing after school, some harsh truths not yet resolved in a changing America, and not a few beautiful dreams.” Nearing the end of his shooting, with only days left before the students’ portfolios were due, he had to find the man in whose footsteps he had been walking. He needed what would be the first image in the sequence, and he knew he could find it at the Ferry Building. He watched men leaving the boats, and then he saw him, “a tall, handsome fellow with battered luggage.” Wong told the man what he needed and why. “The traveler agreed, and I made only a few exposures because I saw he had to get on his way.” As they parted company, Wong knew he had the shot.

In Charles Wong’s photographs the text is quotidian – familiar, but with a high art aesthetic on display in the prints. A mastery of the “grey scale” (White’s name for the visual range between black and white) and the rich play of form and light inform the prints. Wong’s finished prints exhibit formal visual ideals of the f.64 tradition initiated by Adams and Weston in the 1930s and inherited by White in the 1940s. Wong’s project is a singular example of the vital work in American photography that came out

of the Bay Area in these years. But, as with much good student work, the photographs were all but forgotten. Eventually, these photographs might have found their way to an appreciative audience; however, their publication in the pages of *The Argonaut* is the first time the photographs have been seen in almost sixty years.

—RODGER C. BIRT.



<sup>+</sup> One of Charles Wong’s classmates was David Johnson, the only African American student. Johnson recently published his Fillmore work. See David Johnson, *A Dream Begun So Long Ago*, 2014.



*The last whistle from the ferry sounded as I stood on deck watching the steam evaporate into the winter air. Before I could sigh, I was in a crowd. I pretended to be a veteran commuter, but I guess they didn't care anyway; with one glance at my battered suitcase, they would have known that I'd been traveling from afar.*

*My father had told me the story of San Francisco being like a fairy tale. He is gone now, but I remember him saying, "You must go West before you die; and when you do, you'll die a free man." I can still hear him as I stand here waiting.*



*from the dates on the bills,  
I was way late*



*I found the answer*



*went by rows and rows - - -  
of badly kept up houses*

*He used to tell me about the great Fire in 1906, how it burned for days and nights and how he prayed the Lord for rain. With the exception of approximately 20 blocks west of Van Ness Avenue, from Market Street to Golden Gate Avenue, the district escaped disaster. When families from burned-out neighborhoods began crowding into the district in search of temporary shelter, hundreds of dwellings were converted into rooming houses and boarding houses in an attempt to meet the great emergency.*

*The great Fillmore Street became the center of gaieties. Millions of gas lanterns lined the streets, high-stepping horses trotted on cobblestone streets, the sidewalks were crowded with people, and gentlemen tipped their tall silk hats to the ladies.*

*My father added that few years later, reconstruction of the downtown area was well underway and leading business shifted from the Fillmore streets. Its theatres and nightclubs degenerated into cheap vaudeville houses and dance halls.*





I stopped to rest my tired arms, and I couldn't help noticing the busy traffic in the secondhand stores and the junk shops. Through the dusty confusion of cast-offs and odd bits of household utensils, the patrons sorted and resorted, and at times were quite particular. As in the case of an elderly woman who took a faded red dress into the sunlight to inspect its color. I could see some of them admiring their purchases as they unwrapped the newspaper to inspect their precious contents every few steps or so. Others "jay walked" across the street and entered with packages probably bought from previous sales.



Through the gingerbread aberration of the 1890s, the pseudo-Spanish of the 1920s, and the Victorian false fronts with bay windows, the paint on most of the surfaces of the houses was cracked or completely changed into a chalky gray. Areas that were low enough to suffer the wear and tear of society were evident: knives cut aimlessly on battered columns and front steps, and broken windows with drawn-down shades.

A young man with an oversized jacket came jumping down the squeaking steps and behind him the front door slammed.

Voices from above cried, "Tonight at ten," as down the street he raced his sedan, while his arm waved back madly.

*I'm rather an old-fashioned and a religious man. Back where I came from there is only one way of doing anything, and usually that road is set for us. Maybe I haven't been free long enough to think for myself, but some of the things I saw made me want to hide. I love the freedom that's shown in the buses, on the sidewalks, and in the cafes. I just want to pray the Lord that some of the younger generation isn't taking too much advantage of that freedom.*





*From the frustrated sight of the district, with its acute lack of recreational and institutional facilities, most of the younger generation are being brought up on the front steps, the sidewalks, and the back alleys. This younger group is touring the streets in hope of some excitement or, at best, to get into adventure. I went by the Booker T. Washington Center, the Y.M.C.A., the Y.W.C.A., and many churches; and I could understand their burden in such a district. It will not be easy to absorb the tremendous pressure that is building up within its people.*

*I could feel some youths looking me over as I entered the drugstore. In order to observe them, I took a stool by the fountain. They're like any other youth you'll find in any large city. The only thing different about them that was so noticeable was the fact that they were colored, a very poor trademark to have on. Just then a police car cruised by, and the youths slowly turned their backs toward the street and lost their smiles. A man seated next to me spoke out. "These are the kids that's causing a lot of troubles — you're new here?" he asked.*

*I nodded my head.*

*"Do you know?" he added, "You might not believe this but a police department record in two census tracts in the Geary-Fillmore area shows that there were 3,470 arrests per 10,000 persons last year, compared with 838 arrests per 10,000 in the city as a whole."*

*"By arresting them would that solve the problem?" I asked.*

*He shrugged his shoulders.*





I went on down the street, and couldn't help but notice the bold black-and-red signs. It concerns me, for it may mean my returning to where I came from. I stopped one of the strikers, but she didn't have much to say; then a man came and offered to help.

"With Christmas only three weeks away," he said, "we're trying to put as many hands to work as possible. That shop advertised for a store-room clerk but refused to hire a colored man. We know it won't be a long job, but it's the principle. See those people across the street?" he pointed. "Of the three colored men, two are unemployed in San Francisco. Sixteen thousand idle men is an awful problem." He shook his head.

"What kinds of occupations does the Negro hold in San Francisco?" I asked.

He hesitated for a moment and answered. "The majority of the labor class are either longshoremen or warehousemen. Next, the merchant seamen, railroad workers. Some are in the building trade, and a few lucky ones are holding down federal jobs, post office and the like. We also have a small handful of professional men, not over eighteen in number, composed of doctors, dentists, and lawyers."

I thanked him for his splendid work. As I walked away, I couldn't help wondering if he was being used as a pawn.



I stood for a while, watching the idle people sunning themselves beside the entrance of a nightclub. The interior was dark. Once in a while, the mirror behind the bar would catch the reflection from a passing car. The proprietor came out to say hello to the men, and then waving and joking he returned to the bar and without much time lost, his jukebox began slowly and sweet. The men leaning against the sides of the entrance would tip their hats to the proprietor, while a few with high marching elbows began shuffling into the bar. The majority at the entrance remained jived but calm, keeping time with their toes.

I was more or less taken away by the sight when from behind I heard a tap-tap on a window. Turning and looking downward, I saw a shoe shine man pointing at my feet. I in turn looked down to see if my cuffs were in place – then it dawned on me that he wanted to shine my shoes. I stepped down a couple of steps and entered what was no doubt once a little lot in front of this building. It was a tiny little shop with four chairs and as many bottles containing dyes. He left the door open so I could hear the music from across the street. One couldn't help noticing the vast amount of photographs of show people, some showing the shoe shine man in uniform and calendars of poor taste. The ceiling was very low and at certain places I had to duck girdles. He smiled and I saw some of the largest white teeth.

“New in town?” he asked.

I nodded.

“Got any friends in town?”

I shook my head.

“You must be looking for a room,” he said.

“You’re not kidding,” I answered.

He replied, “I got one, but first let me give you a shine – business before pleasure, you know.”





I relaxed and sat back, and his brush kept time with the music. I got off the chair, and he added with a smile, “This room I spoke to you about, well it isn’t exactly a room, well – what I wanted to say was – you’ll have to share it with someone else.”

“Who?” I asked.

He pointed to himself.

“Where’s that room?”

He pointed to a door in back of the shop.

“Want to see it?” he asked.

I didn’t say much, but followed. He showed me a room, twice as small as the shop, with two army cots. By the head of his cot an orange crate stood as a nightstand and a footlocker at the end with army blankets and bags. It wasn’t too bad, but the odor of shoe dyes was overwhelming. I told him the address I got from the bookstand and said that I would like to look at it before making up my mind. He looked at the address and half closed his eyes. I asked him if I could leave my bags with him. He nodded, saying, “You don’t have anything valuable in them have you?” while putting them on the cot in such a way as if to say, you’ll be staying. Then he put his hands on my shoulders and said, “You’re new here, don’t get mixed up with the wrong crowd. If you’re seen with the wrong people more than once, the police will be questioning you.”

I winked and left.



I went by lunch counters, barber shops, soft drink stands, grocery stores, bars, liquor stores, drug stores, "so-called churches," numerous smoke shops, and magazine stands. The pattern seemed to repeat block after block, and I wondered if I had not been walking around in a circle. Competition for some of the one-man outfits must have been keen. Of course I could well imagine that some of these establishments were only disguised fronts for gambling joints, bookie outfits, and "hotels" that accommodate the members of the world's oldest profession.

Just for curiosity I entered a Japanese-operated pool hall. The day was slow for them, being a weekday, and the patrons were just fooling their time away at ten cents a game. I didn't look interested in their games, and some of them acted as if it were their first day in the pool hall. These poor helpless people! I went out and had a smoke. At times I glanced through the windows; the control with the cues those helpless men had was remarkable. I took a deep drag and started across the street.



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I found the address and rechecked the address that was written on the white margin of a newspaper. The front steps were weather beaten, the nose of the landings was thin from wear and tear, and long cracks followed the grain of the board. There wasn't a speck of the original paint left to show how it did look once. I went up those old deteriorated steps until I reached three huge doors, which would have given Ivan Albright\* a pleasant weekend.

I knocked, but no reply. I tried the knob and it turned; inside, I could make out a long corridor that turned into a slight angle and then straightened out again. The light bulb was taken out of its socket, the hall runner was thin, and I could feel the floor give way as I made my way along. The corridor was once wall-papered, and I could see tones of the tan-colored plaster that was spotty here and there. The ceiling was watermarked, and old paint was hanging. The air began to get heavy. I noticed on every door there was provided huge screw eyes. I knocked on one without the padlock and a voice answered, so I stated my reason. "Three doors down to your right," he replied. I went to the appointed door and after stating my purpose, a woman opened the door and asked me to come in. I did, but I left the door open.

She was very pleasant, explaining that she wasn't the owner but more or less kept an eye on the building. "If you want to," she added, "I will show you the room." After a slight pause, she handed me the key and said, "Would you see it alone? I don't think I could climb three flights today."

Following her directions I made my way, the air getting heavier with each step up. The runners had worn through; it would have been safer to have them removed.

I opened the door and struck a match. The switch was nowhere, but with a little eye strain I saw the string dangling from the socket. Wading through a mass of obstacles and rubbish, I pulled on the light. What a nightmare of trash; the party must have left in a hurry. A few makeshift articles, odds and ends from secondhand stores, and a few wire hangers tingling from behind the door were the only pleasant things. I retreated and upon hearing the rent I returned the key. I told the woman I was very sorry because I couldn't meet the rent but would appreciate it very much if she could recommend me to another place. She waited a little while and gave me directions to find another place.

\* Ivan Le Lorraine Albright (1897 – 1983) was an American painter and artist, most known, according to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, for his "meticulously detailed, exaggeratedly realistic depictions of decay and corruption." He is perhaps best known for painting "The Picture of Dorian Gray" that appeared in the 1945 movie by the same name.



I knocked on the door, then turned the knob, and it turned out to be a tradesman's entrance under the overhang of the first floor. I walked, and on the opposite end, with the sun pouring down, a few frustrated trees stood. One could see the torture they bore in order to survive.

This was once a house with a rather long backyard. The owner no doubt had put up a two-story house of some sort in part of the backyard to increase his income. Beside the fence were piles of junk, old lumber, and rubbish of all kinds. Then five or six children appeared as I neared their door. Overhead, I could now hear tiny voices saying, "There is a man here," like birds giving a warning. I kept my distance from the door until a rather young woman appeared at the screen door. I told her my reason for being there and was asked to come in and see it. I glanced over my shoulder and could see faces from many of the windows. It was a large room, dark with shades drawn and awfully hot. By this time the mother had herded her children indoors and had them seated on the sofa. It was a room filled with beds and a bassinet on the floor. I was shown into the kitchen, and the heat began to get unbearable. I could see why, for the oven was the only means of warming the two rooms. She showed me the bed in the kitchen and didn't say very much after that. I asked her about the rent, which was indeed small, for it wouldn't even be enough to pay the milk bill.

Upon my leaving, she added, "I wouldn't have done this if my husband wasn't on strike."

I slipped the kids a couple of dollars and left.



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*I closed the tradesman's door behind me and stood for many minutes, which seemed like years, with all the happenings of the day flashing through my mind. My head began to spin and my throat dried. Is this San Francisco, California, U.S.A.? Shaking my head — this must be a sort of a dream. Then I heard running footsteps and young voices behind me. They rushed past me, and that brought me back to reality. Looking back to see where they came from, I realized that school was out. Yes — maybe dreams will not come true in my time, but I hope that they'll find it.*

*I will go back now and tell the shoe shine man, it's a deal.*



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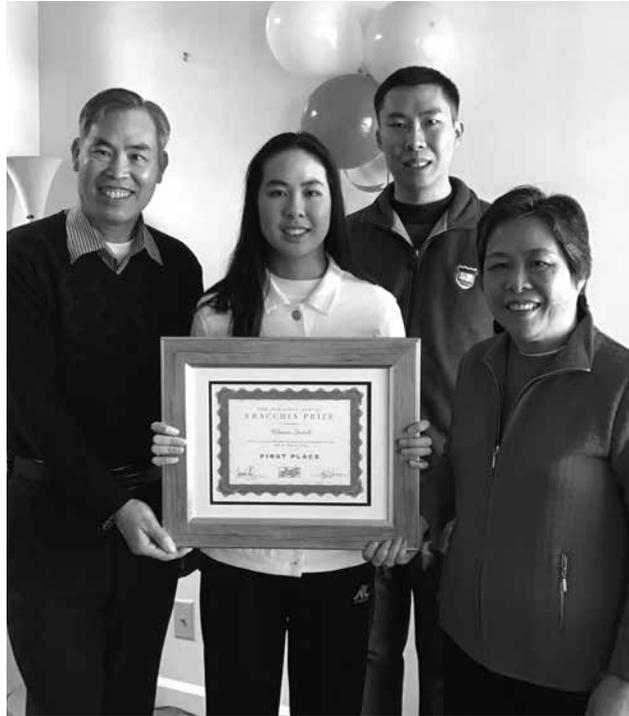
## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Rodger C. Birt Ph.D., is professor emeritus of American Studies and Humanities at San Francisco State University. His most recent publication is *History's Anteroom: Photography in San Francisco, 1906–1909*. He currently is writing a memoir (with photographs), *Waking Up in Naptown*. He currently teaches classes in the Fromm Institute at the University of San Francisco.

Charles Wong (b. 1922) is once again working in photography after a forty-year hiatus. In 1956, with a growing family to support, he went to work at Bethlehem Steel as an industrial designer. After he retired, he resumed walking through San Francisco and taking photographs. A new book of photographs, with new photographs by Irene Poon, is currently in production.

★ MEET THE 2020 FRACCHIA PRIZE WINNERS ★



*The 2020 Fracchia Prize winner Winnie Quock (first prize).*



*The 2020 Fracchia Prize winner Indigo Mudbhary (second prize).*



*The 2020 Fracchia Prize winner Luke Zepponi (third prize).*

## ★★★★★ FRACCHIA PRIZE WINNERS ★★★★★

In fall 2018, San Francisco Historical Society announced a new educational opportunity for San Francisco’s high school students, the Fracchia Prize. Named for SFHS founder and President Emeritus Charles Fracchia, the Fracchia Prize is an annual event that invites students to research some aspect of the city’s history and share what they learn with us. The 2019–2020 Fracchia Prize asked students to write an essay describing the history of Golden Gate Park and develop a walking tour on an area of the park. As in the previous year, SFHS offered cash prizes to the top three essayists, as well as publication of their work.

This year’s Fracchia Prize was co-sponsored by San Francisco City Guides and San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department. SFHS expresses gratitude to longtime supporter Ray Lent and his associates at Placer Partners for funding the 2020 cash prizes.

Students from all parts of the city submitted essays, and the winners of this year’s competition are:

- ★ FIRST PLACE: “Botany and Horticulture: Symbols of Flourishing Against the Odds” by Winnie Quock (George Washington High School)
- ★ SECOND PLACE: “Horticultural History: Learning About San Francisco’s Past through the Garden Gems of the City’s Favorite Park” by Indigo Mudbhary (Lick-Wilmerding High School)
- ★ THIRD PLACE: “It’s a Ringer! One Perfect Day in Golden Gate Park” by Luke Zepponi (Abraham Lincoln High School)

On Tuesday, December 15, the three students, their history teachers, and their families joined SFHS board members virtually in a Zoom meeting for an awards ceremony hosted by the Office of the Mayor and SFHS. Mayor London Breed attended the entire ceremony, graciously addressing the student winners and acknowledging SFHS for its continued work in education. Guests included the three winners and their families. (See pictures on the facing page.) Board Vice President Tom Owens was the emcee. Indigo Mudbhary’s essay was published in the fourth quarter 2020 issue of *Panorama*. Luke Zepponi’s essay was published in the first quarter 2021 issue of *Panorama*. Winnie Quock’s essay begins on the next page.

# BOTANY AND HORTICULTURE:

## *Symbols of Flourishing Against the Odds*

by Winnie Quock

**B**ack in the early 1800s, San Francisco did not have a designated area for a recreational park. The idea of a “public pleasure ground” for everyone regardless of social status to enjoy, proposed by Frederick Law Olmstead in 1866, was new for the people of San Francisco in a time when different classes did not often interact. The area known as Golden Gate Park today was once part of vast sand dunes known as the “Outside Lands.” Olmstead declared the city’s choice to build a park over sand dunes impossible, but his humanist philosophy of the park greatly inspired William Hammond Hall.

After the state legislature passed an act establishing Golden Gate Park on April 4, 1870, Hall won the contract to survey park land and was appointed engineer of Golden Gate Park in 1871. Construction started the same year, and the park opened for recreational use in 1880. In 1890, John McLaren became the Superintendent of the park, and during his 56 years in this position, he and his team of gardeners planted over two million trees. The earthquake of 1906 damaged the park, and in the aftershocks of the earthquake, those who lost their homes used the park as refuge. During the Great Depression, work on the park nearly came to a standstill if not for the New Deal. Work on the park continues today for minor issues like roads.

Today, Golden Gate Park is not only known for its diversity of flora and horticulture, but also for being flourishing and unbeaten. Each of the stops below represent a struggle and a success, whether for

the people honored in the memorials or the difficulty in constructing these places.

On the east end of the park, popular destinations include the California Academy of Sciences, the de Young Museum, and the Conservatory of Flowers. Though San Francisco’s temperate climate encourages visitors at any time of the year, the flowers bloom around spring, from March to May.

### Stops on the Tour

1. Rhododendron Dell
2. The de Young Museum
3. Japanese Tea Garden

Lunch Stop: *Cafes in the museums or food trucks*

4. California Academy of Sciences
5. Shakespeare Garden
6. Botanical Garden

### 1. RHODODENDRON DELL

The Rhododendron Dell’s formal name is the John McLaren Memorial Rhododendron Dell, after the former superintendent. McLaren learned horticulture at the Edinburgh Botanical Gardens and immigrated to the United States in 1872. Many credit McLaren for the high diversity of plant life in Golden Gate Park.

For his extensive work, city officials wanted to place a statue of McLaren in the park. However,



*The Rhododendron Dell's formal name is the John McLaren Memorial Rhododendron Dell, after the former superintendent.  
Photo by Mark Scheuer.*

he adamantly refused, hiding the monument in a box. The statue was taken out of storage after his death and displayed at the entrance of the dell on Eighth Avenue.

Maintenance of the dell was nearly impossible. Without cover from trees, the wind blew nutrients away and the flowers burned to death in the direct sunlight. These conditions toppled the trees surrounding the dell; gardeners had no choice but to scrape the dell bare to start again.

Fortunately for the gardeners passionate about their work for these flowers, as well as the visitors to the dell, the rhododendrons bloomed again in 2010. Today, you can stroll among the flowers and take pictures. The optimal time to view the rhododendrons is in March and April.

## 2. THE DE YOUNG MUSEUM

Golden Gate Park was the site of the California Midwinter International Exposition in 1894. Originally the Fine Arts Building for the exposition, the museum was renamed after the chair of the exposition organizing committee, Michael H. de Young. The original building had an Egyptian Revival style, with images of the Egyptian cow goddess Hathor.

The original building grew into a museum housing art from the Americas, Oceania, Africa, and even a large Asian Art Collection that moved out in 2003. However, the museum building took significant damage in the 1906 earthquake, forcing closure for over a year for repairs. In 1929, the original Egyptian-style building was demolished because it was declared unsafe. The de Young Museum had to close again following the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, which damaged the structure of the building.

The new de Young Museum, which opened in 2005, is now the most visited museum west of the Mississippi. This new museum retains a few of the features from the original, such as the sphinxes, the original palm trees, and the Pool of Enchantment.

Visitors to the museum can observe contemporary and traditional art from across the world, as well as special exhibits. One of the towers, the Hamon Observation Tower, is also open to visitors with free admission and has a 360-degree view of the city.

For more about the de Young hours, ticket prices, and upcoming events, go to <https://deyoung.famsf.org/visit-us>



*The author in front of today's de Young Museum.  
Photo by Mark Scheuer.*

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### 3. JAPANESE TEA GARDEN

The Japanese Tea Garden is another remnant of the 1894 Midwinter Exposition. The tea house in the garden, or *ochaya* in Japanese, became permanent in the park and is now the oldest *ochaya* in the United States.

After the exposition closed, Makoto Hagiwara wanted to maintain the Japanese-style garden for future generations to appreciate. He became caretaker of the garden, pouring in resources and passion into the garden. He and his family were forced out of the park in 1901 because of anti-Asian sentiments in San Francisco. He opened another Japanese garden just outside the park, across Lincoln Way. He was invited back to Golden Gate Park several years later and lived there with his family until his death in 1925. During WWII, Hagiwara's family were forcibly moved to internment camps due to anti-Japanese sentiment, and the Hagiwara family had to leave their home in the garden behind. Their house and their Shinto shrine were demolished.

Today, Hagiwara's original goal of preserving an authentic Japanese garden for people to experience is still retained. Visitors can see wisteria, the Monterey pines, and dwarf trees planted by the Hagiwara family, as well as the water and rocks integral to a traditional Japanese Zen garden. The optimal time to view the cherry blossoms is in March and April. Enjoy the tea from the *ochaya*, and be sure to sample the fortune cookies, invented by Hagiwara himself!

For more about the hours and ticket prices, go to <https://www.japaneseteagardensf.com/vist>

### LUNCH STOP

Sit down in the Academy of Sciences cafe or the de Young Museum cafe and get a taste of cuisine from around the world. Or order some food from the food trucks between the two museums and enjoy your meal outside.

### 4. CALIFORNIA ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

A group of "seven San Francisco gentlemen" met in 1853 with the intention to form an institution of natural sciences, recounted from historian Theodore Henry Hittell's book, *The California Academy of*

*Sciences: 1853–1906*. As fieldwork produced natural specimens, the men made a museum on Market Street to store and display them.

In 1906, the fire that had started after the Great Earthquake consumed the Academy of Sciences building. Luckily, "all the records" were "saved"; but unluckily, most of the specimens were gone. The Academy of Sciences moved to Golden Gate Park, and opened its doors again in 1916 with a dedication to science education: to "explore, explain, and sustain life on Earth."

Disaster struck again after the Loma Prieta earthquake, badly damaging the structure of the academy. For the new building, Italian architect Renzo Piano made a design for environmental sustainability, with a wavy green dome mirroring the hills of San Francisco.

The new California Academy of Sciences today has four main sections: the Steinhart Aquarium, the Osher Rainforest, the Morrison Planetarium, and the Kimball Natural History Museum. Interact with the plant and animal life, as well as the exhibits in the Academy, and get tickets to the planetarium showings.

For more about hours and ticket prices, go to <https://www.calacademy.org/hours-admission>

### 5. SHAKESPEARE GARDEN

Officially the Garden of Shakespeare's Flowers, the idea for this garden came from Alice Eastwood, Director of Botany in the Academy of Sciences, in 1928. The Shakespeare Garden contains plants used as symbols in Shakespeare's work, including poppies, mandrakes, lilies, and violets.

Shakespeare wrote his most influential works containing the plant specimens in the garden around the time his acting career struggled. In London in 1593, acting work became scarce because of the Black Plague, which killed one-tenth of the population. All of the theaters in London closed due to this "sickness."

Visitors to the garden can see the blooms Shakespeare used in his works and learn more about the Bard through his quotations written on plaques in the garden.



The author with the statue of John McLaren in the Rhododendron Dell. Photo by Mark Scheuer.

## 6. BOTANICAL GARDEN

McLaren planned a botanical garden to take shape in the 1890s, but the project received no funding due to lack of interest. Then, in 1926, Helene Strybing donated seed money for the arboretum in memory of her husband. Coupled with help from the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s, the garden began construction, opening May 1940.

Today, the San Francisco Botanical Garden Society oversees the arboretum, as well as the Helen Crocker Russell Library of Horticulture at the entrance. The garden itself is divided into sections, such as the Montane Tropic and the Mediterranean. When visiting the garden, be sure to check out the library and take a walk in the garden.

For more about hours and ticket prices, go to <https://www.sfbg.org>

The walking tour ends here. This is only one side of the Golden Gate Park, so feel free to explore the rest of “Everybody’s Park”!

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Winnie Quock is a senior at George Washington High School.

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THE SAN FRANCISCO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The San Francisco Historical Society (SFHS) is a non-profit California corporation, dedicated to preserving, interpreting, and presenting to its members the history of the City and County of San Francisco through regular monthly meetings, excursions and tours, sponsorship of exhibits and films, and publications. Membership in SFHS is open to anyone wishing to join.

For more information call us at 415.537.1105.



SAN FRANCISCO  
*African American  
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## Black History Month 2021 Celebration

### The Black Family: Representation, Identity, and Diversity

City Hall Kickoff Program	Family Histories Program	Public Affairs Forum	Genealogy Workshop
<p><b>Friday, February 5, 2021</b> 12:00 – 1:00 PM (PST)</p> <p><u>Via SFGovTV (CLICK LINK):</u> <a href="https://sfgovtv.org/sfgovtv-live-events">https://sfgovtv.org/sfgovtv-live-events</a></p>	<p><b>Friday, February 12, 2021</b> 6:00 – 7:30 PM (PST)</p> <p><u>Via Zoom (CLICK LINK):</u> <b>Meeting ID:</b> 867 1198 8171 <b>Passcode:</b> 979960</p>	<p><b>Friday, February 26, 2021</b> 6:00 – 7:00 PM (PST)</p> <p><u>Via Zoom (CLICK LINK):</u> <b>Meeting ID:</b> 832 5172 7377 <b>Passcode:</b> 002621</p>	<p><b>Saturday, February 20, 2021</b> 11:00 AM – 1:00 PM (PST)</p> <p><b>Call (415) 292-6172 to register</b></p>



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# SFHS SALUTES SALESFORCE

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Salesforce has not only helped San Francisco become a world capital of technology. It has fostered a culture of civic involvement and philanthropy that serves as an example for all successful corporations, proving that doing well and doing good can go hand in hand.

The San Francisco Historical Society salutes Salesforce for its many contributions to our city, with special recognition of Marc Benioff, fourth-generation San Franciscan who has supported his hometown in more ways than can be measured. Here are just a few.

## Creating Culture of Giving Back

- **Volunteering** Salesforce employees spend their first afternoon on the job volunteering in the community—and get 56 paid hours per year for continued volunteer work.
- **Riding the Wave** This program celebrates employee milestones (3, 5, 10, and 20 years of employment) by giving employees increasing amounts of money to donate to a non-profit of their choice.
- **Matching Gifts** Salesforce matches any donation an employee makes to an eligible non-profit, up to \$2,500, with another matching gift available after the employee has logged 56 hours of volunteer time.

## Supporting the City

- **Building Our Reputation as a Premier Destination** In 2019, Salesforce's annual Dreamforce convention drew more than 171,000 people from 120 countries around the world to San Francisco, generating millions of dollars in revenue for the city. This was the seventeenth Dreamforce convention in San Francisco.
- **COVID-19 Support** In March of 2020, Marc Benioff donated \$1 million to UCSF's COVID-19 Response Fund. 180 small businesses in San Francisco received grants from Salesforce to help them stay afloat.
- **Funding Solutions to Homelessness** In 2019 Marc Benioff donated \$30 million to research the root causes of homelessness and find ways to end it.
- **Supporting Our Schools** Salesforce has partnered with SFUSD to strengthen STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) offerings and help all our students build skills for the 21st Century.

*Thank You!*