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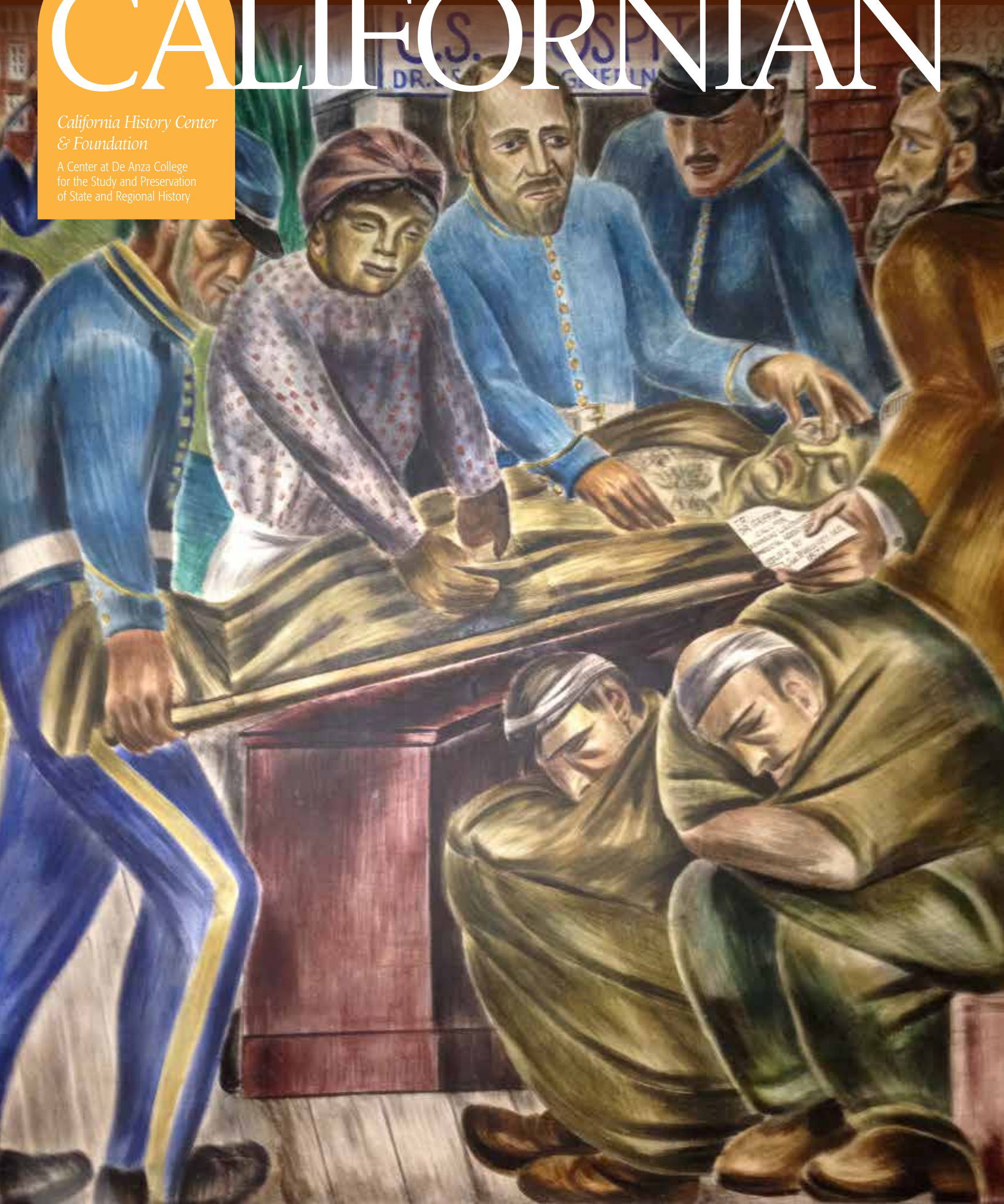
CALIFORNIAN

California History Center & Foundation

A Center at De Anza College for the Study and Preservation of State and Regional History



Movements Without Borders by Chengmao Li

We come to California carrying more than luggage,
a second language in the mouth, a first name misheard,
a map that says here and a heart that says maybe.
We learn the new rules of belonging by small signs:
a form that asks for boxes,
a classroom that asks for voice,
a flag that asks for faith,
a street that asks for speed,
a border that asks for proof,
a mirror that asks,
who counts,
today.
Then someone saves a seat.
Someone says your name right, slowly, without laughing.
Someone shares notes, food, a ride from the foothills,
and the line on the map stops feeling like a verdict.
The campus lawn becomes a commons,
the library a shelter of quiet citizenship,
and democracy turns out to be this ordinary thing:
people making room,
again,
again,
again.
My hope for democracy is not perfection.
It is the widening.
Not one story, but many speaking at once.
Not “go back,” but “come in.”
Not a wall, but a door you can hold open
until your arm shakes,
until your neighbor is through,
until you realize
the border was never the edge of the world,
only the edge of someone’s imagination.

Calendar

Spring Quarter

APRIL

6 **First Day of Spring Quarter**

MAY

23-25 **Memorial Day Weekend — no classes, offices closed**

JUNE

19 **Juneteenth Holiday — no classes, offices closed**

21 Summer Solstice

26 **End of Spring Quarter**

27 Graduation

JULY / AUGUST

California History Center (CHC)
Closed for Summer Quarter

SEPTEMBER

7 **Labor Day holiday – no classes, offices closed**

9 California Admission Day

18 College Opening Day; CHC Opens for Academic Year

21 **Fall classes begin**

California History Center & Foundation

A Center for the Study of State and Regional History
De Anza College

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Trianon Building Hours: Tuesday through Thursday 10:00am–4:00pm

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Cover photo: Mason/Griffin detail from the Bernard Zakheim Murals, "The History of Medicine in California," c. 1935, UCSF

Director's Report

Lori Clinchard

The Work of Belonging

This is my eleventh director's report. I've been writing them since February of 2023, three times a year, and over that time I've reflected on oral history and the stories my grandfather told me, on the paradox of digitizing physical archives, on what it means to stay human in the age of AI, on Polish jazz under Nazi occupation and the evolution of eyes under existential stress. I've quoted Niels Bohr and Mary Oliver and T.S. Eliot. I've tried, each time, to make sense of the moment we're living in — to find the thread that connects what we do at the California History Center to what's happening in the wider world.

Today, as I sit down to write, I am feeling the weight of the world. The oceans are warming. The political landscape is hostile and disorienting. AI is reshaping how we think about creativity, intelligence, and what's real. I've spent years developing my thinking on these questions—in these reports, in my essay "Being Human(e) in the AI Era," in conversations with students and colleagues. So I turn to the voices of the students, the art and poetry of our De Anza students, created in response to a prompt about belonging, freedom, and democracy:

> *Freedom feels like open doors, like walking forward without leaving myself behind.*

That's Tracy Le. And here is Charlie Englund, writing about what it feels like to be American:

> *It is generous with opportunity and careless with people. I am grateful, but not blind.*

And Ariana Perez, whose poem ends with this:

> *When I think of America I imagine a place not yet broken, still at work.*

The students' work is full of hope, honesty, and presence. In the exhibit hall, Ashley Sanchez built a Liberty Van — you can lean into the driver's side window and listen. There's a telephone on the far wall where visitors can leave their own voice. The biographical posters ask questions rather than settling answers. And in our feature article, you'll find the second part of the life of Biddy Mason, a woman who walked 1,700 miles to an uncertain freedom, who spent a week's wages to sit for a portrait — choosing to be seen — and who lived by a principle that has stayed with me since I first read it: "If you hold your hand closed, nothing good can come in. The open hand is blessed, for it gives in abundance, even as it receives."

I invite you to come see the exhibit, "Expanding the Story of Belonging," to find these threads that connect what we do at the California History Center to what's happening in your own life and in the wider world. Read the poems. Leave a message on the telephone. We're open Tuesday through Thursday, 10 to 4.

"If you hold your hand closed, nothing good can come in. The open hand is blessed, for it gives in abundance, even as it receives."

Ashley Sanchez's interactive Liberty Van installation.

Audrey Edna Butcher Civil Liberties Education Initiative

Our news feed and social media posts, viewed in the comfort of our private screens, seem to bring nothing but bad news: extrajudicial imprisonments and deportations, families being separated, and worse. Why bother thinking about civil liberties when individual due process rights and the rule of law that protects them seem like distant concepts traveling far from our present reality?

But in our self-imposed, electronic isolation we can forget that civil liberties are realized for us as individuals only through collective power and group action. This political dynamic, fostered by our desire to protect ourselves as individuals, is what can also bring us together as a society, allowing us to cherish our individuality while also cherishing our connections to each other.

The exhibit, Expanding the Story of Belonging, currently showing at the CHC, is a wonderful example of how the pursuit of individual belonging becomes a collective act — and how that act is bound up with the struggle for equality. It uses art, storytelling, and personal histories to reveal the connections between us, even as we build new identities. It gives a sense of hope and a glimmer of what equality in the pursuit of democracy feels like when we are actually seen and heard together.

Read below for more about the exhibit as explained by CHC Director Lori Clinchard, who created it with her team of interns, volunteers, faculty supporters, and their students. Please come to see it! *— Tom Izu*

Tom Izu

About the Exhibit

by Lori Clinchard

California has long served as a testing ground for the meaning of democracy — for who gets to belong, and who gets to decide. The California History Center's current exhibit, *Expanding the Story of Belonging*, takes that question as its organizing principle and opens it up through poetry, portraiture, multimedia installation, and an extraordinary model Liberty Van built by Humanities Scholars Work Experience (HSWE) student intern Ashley Sanchez and her family.

The exhibit does not offer a single answer. It offers many — drawn from the voices of De Anza College students who were asked to respond, in their own ways, to themes of immigration, democracy, freedom, and what it means to arrive, to stay, and to carry more than one identity at once.

Walking Through the Exhibit

Visitors enter through staggered display panels featuring original poetry by students of De Anza instructor Jill Quigley and portraits by students of instructor Julie Hughes. The poets were given a wide scope — belonging, democracy, freedom, immigration, boundaries, America — and what they produced ranges from sharp to tender to darkly funny. One poet reimagines the Pledge of Allegiance so precisely that it reads like a new founding document. Another writes about strawberry fields with a quiet intensity that lingers long after the words end. Several explore the experience of carrying two languages, two countries, two selves, and the exhausting, beautiful refusal to choose between them. The portraits, meanwhile, reflect what it means to belong — in America, in community, in oneself — rendered through each artist's distinct visual vocabulary.

Above the exhibit space, a clouded question floats: *What does it mean to be an American?* The surrounding artworks, models, and interactive displays all circle back to it, each offering a partial, provisional, deeply felt answer.

The Liberty Van

At the center of the exhibit stands a model Liberty Van, the work of Ashley Sanchez. It is modeled on the actual Liberty Vans deployed by the Save America Movement beginning in September 2025, when crews of attorneys, faith leaders, and documentarians drove through neighborhoods in Los Angeles, Chicago, Charlotte, Minneapolis, and other cities to monitor and respond to Immigration and Customs Enforcement operations. The real vans were acts of civic witness — mobile stations for safeguarding constitutional rights in moments of fear. The model van carries that history into the gallery and transforms it into something visitors can approach, examine, and feel.

The van itself is not simply a replica to admire from a distance. Its open trunk houses *Caught Between Currents*, an installation inspired by Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* and the history of the U.S.–Mexico borderlands. Bandanas float on air currents generated by fans, illuminated by colored lights — fabric that moves and never settles, evoking identity as something shaped by tension, movement, and memory rather than fixed by geography or decree.

On the van's open doors, *Chingonas Chicanas: We Were Never Meant to Dim* honors Chicana writers, activists, and thinkers through an arrangement of candles set against layered textures and vivid color. The candles represent living

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"Equal rights, fair play, justice, are all like the air: we all have it, or none of us has it. That is the truth of it."

– Maya Angelou

The Life and Times of Biddy Mason

PART TWO

by Jerry Grayson

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jerry Grayson has enjoyed a wide-ranging set of careers. Educated in newspaper journalism, he worked in broadcast news for 16 years, then became an education video producer, followed by a stint in non-profit education technology provision and, for the past 23 years, has devoted his energy to healthcare software systems. His article for our magazine this quarter, in some respects, takes him back to that early print training and his deep interest in history.

Biddy Mason's refusal to take things lightly must have begun with her earliest recallable days as a child slave in Georgia.[3] When elders took time to show, she took time to listen and learn. Separated from her mother early on, the bondswomen and men around her became family. They would come and go, too, and so would she. Eventually she wound up in Mississippi, a little place called Logtown. Robert Smith, whose South Carolina homeland bordered Biddy's in Georgia, had settled in Logtown, too, but it's not clear he was her master at that point.[4] A 20-year-old Biddy bore Ellen in Logtown, 1838.[5] A few years later found her, and Smith, now her owner, a couple hundred miles north in west-central Mississippi.[6] Biddy gave birth to second daughter Ann in 1842.[7]

Ann was still toddling when Smith and wife Rebecca made known they'd found a new religion, the Mormons,

The following scene, Biddy Mason preparing for her portrait in the late 1860s, is historical fiction. No evidence exists that this scene with Biddy and her daughters occurred.

Biddy sensed the day's significance for her family. She was ready, her mind set, her clothes store-bought. The bodice fit wasn't fully apt but it wasn't homespun, and not cheap. Biddy stayed heedful of her money since starting with Dr. Griffin, back before the War and the other slaves freed. Griffin made no bones about it, a Southern man, backing the rebels. Yet, he paid her and she tended that money, the family's future. But her photograph mattered, too—had to look nice. That little strip of cloth for her collar cost what would fetch four laying hens, easy, but the soft material felt special. "Finest satin, that bow," said Mrs. Roe, her fancy goods store just removed to the new brick building on Commercial Street where Los Angeles kept growing up.[1] Between that bow, the shiny pin, the blouse and bodice, and sitting for the picture, Biddy spent nearly a week's pay.[2] Wasn't easy, but important for her kin.

Everything had changed. The world came ever new, with Biddy's steps solid (when the earth wasn't shaking) and measured, her outer calm masking inner excitement. One chilly January Saturday in a smaller Los Angeles more than a decade back, Judge Hayes declared her "free forever." She and Ellen, Harriett and the blessed Ann, all free. Hannah and her brood, too. Free of unpaid chores, never-ending chores. Free of whipsaw control, day and night. Free of other folks' leavings—scraps. Free of threat without defense, no fair recourse. Free of slavery and of that man, Robert Smith. It all left Biddy free to be.

"I am somebody"—her thought now as Ellen and Harriett readied her for picture-taking. Ellen tugged and flattened the bow a bit more as Harriett, firmly, lovingly, smoothed Biddy's sleeves. Biddy's image in that old, dingy little wall mirror was smudgy, but the essence was clear—a woman rising as if on Jacob's Ladder. Maybe she'd started climbing long ago, as far back as learning to midwife and tend the sick, knowing the right herbs. As far back as finding the knack to herd big animals. Biddy never took any of it lightly, always full in. Serious business, and her filled with resolve now more than ever as she kept rising. Her picture—her portrait—had to show that.

—End of scene

Biddy Mason, c. 1868. Credit: USC Digital Library and California Historical Society Collection

Latter-day Saints (LDS).[8] After another few years Rebecca's childhood slave Hannah (now an adult) and Hannah's four children came to the Smiths in Rebecca's father's estate settlement back in South Carolina.[9] That same year, 1847, Biddy had a third girl, Harriett.[10] Within months, Smith had the household pulling up stakes for "Deseret," the Utah Territory. Brigham Young, head of Smith's new church, urged his flock to leave behind the scorn and turmoil they'd endured in Ohio, Missouri, Illinois, and other pockets of hostility.[11] Utah was their promised land.

The long move tested Biddy: herding livestock, tending the sick, cooking and helping set up and break down camp, and midwifing at least two births.[12] Biddy and her ten- and four-year-old girls made the 1700-mile journey on foot with Biddy carrying the nursing infant, sometimes slogging along muddy trails in pelting rain or pushing through heat and high winds. They forded streams, tramped through forests, plains and mountains. The company arrived in the Salt Lake Valley ahead of a hard, bitter winter with spare provisions and the threat of starvation. The next spring and summer proved little better, but the emigrants endured.[13]

Two years later Young wanted a California Mormon colony. California's constitution declared it a non-slave state but the reality was murky. In 1851 Smith put Biddy and the others on the move again, to San Bernardino.[14] Settling this new land with other Mormons (they purchased an immense rancho but only half what they thought) Smith set himself up away from the main group and started gaining a level of success eluding him since he and Rebecca left South Carolina decades earlier.[15] His advancement soon hit a ceiling; Smith dissented

Lithograph of a generic circus layout,1874. Credit: Library of Congress

when his fellow Saints, also entitled to land he worked, altered his ranching arrangement to fit their needs.[16] That and other factors prompted Smith to uproot his household yet again and go to Texas, a place that forbade even Blacks with freedom papers to stay free. His move began in late December, 1855.[17]

What happened next, before Smith could take everyone out of California, remains partly unclear. It's clear the Los Angeles and San Bernardino sheriffs presented Judge Benjamin Hayes a habeas corpus petition for the 13 people (and Hannah about to give birth) under Smith's control.[18] The judge approved the writ. Did the San Bernardino Mormons trigger the legal action against their independent brother now on the outs with the church? Did free Blacks in San Bernardino like Elizabeth Flake Rowan start it? Rowan emancipated when her Mormon master returned to Utah. Or was the writ the handiwork of Robert Owens, another former slave, now a key member of the expanding Los Angeles community? An L.A. paper, looking back 45 years to the writ, the subsequent hearing, and Biddy's freedom, stated flatly the intervention arose "through the continued efforts" of Owens who'd bought his own freedom in Texas five years earlier.[19] As Biddy would experience, ample reason exists to believe Owens made it happen, in full or in large part.

Regardless of the initiator, the writ's hearing in early 1856 prompted Judge Hayes to consider Smith's intentions, his declaration of at least Hannah being "well disposed" to go to Texas, Biddy's in-chambers expression of fearing such a trip, and the threat of children subjected to a harsh, oppressive new bondage compared to seemingly looser servitude under Smith in California. Weighing it all, and leaning on California law and Enlightenment ideals, the judge declared the 14 "free forever."[20] The words, hoped for in Biddy's circle, yet unexpected, swept over those in court. Hadn't the Mormons spoken of "the hand of the Lord," what others called 'divine providence?'[21] Wasn't this new, unlikely, unexpected freedom the work of God?

The judge's decision that nippy January Saturday touched off a week of intrigue and chicanery as Smith's adult sons and hired men tried to lure Biddy's and Hannah's children back to Smith's control, and as the Smiths tried deceptive persuasion on Hannah. The lawyer for Biddy and Hannah tried to leave the case (paid off by parties unknown) and have the judge reverse their liberty. In spite of the subterfuge, the week ended with all still free.[22]

One can imagine Biddy feeling a different sense of self and learning more new things in her first days as her own person.

One can imagine Biddy feeling a different sense of self and learning more new things in her first days as her own person. Her long treks across the country provided new scope but this place would go beyond. The Los Angeles basin offered greater social diversity than the South or Utah. In the 1850s, just after the Mexican-American War, Whites with U.S. roots were a minority, with a distinction drawn between Californians (Mexicans) and Americans.[23] Biddy would learn some Spanish.[24] The indigenous Native Americans boasted greater presence than in the South, and the populace included Asians, mainly Chinese, with a Chinese-run laundry neighboring the Owens property.[25] Biddy's life now unfolded within a menagerie of cultures and mindsets.

This mid-19th century melting pot existed on literally shaky ground. The early Spanish clergy jokingly dubbed their main Los Angeles-area mission "San Gabriel de los Temblores."[26] The earth moved under Biddy's feet soon after arriving in San Bernardino. It must have raised a few hairs on her and her children's skins; this turf was not Biddy's old settled South. A violent 1853 temblor near the Colorado River could be felt hundreds of miles away in San Diego and Los Angeles. Biddy, at Smith's San Bernardino ranch, stood closer to that epicenter. One report noted "the earth heaved and rocked backwards and forwards, four or five feet...the waters of the Colorado flowed upstream."[27] Just before Biddy's emancipation an 1855 quake struck Los Angeles: "the most violent shock of an earthquake ever experienced in this country. The

walls of some of our most substantial buildings were riven from top to bottom. Nearly every house was deserted by the terrified occupants."[28] A year after Biddy's freedom another quake came rumbling. The temblor reflected "the late convulsion of nature" which became "the great topic of conversation during the week, and reference made to the frequency of earthquakes around here, and the great danger we are all subject to."[29]

Between shakes the basin's citizens did find other modes of entertainment. Across from the Catholic sub-mission church (*La Iglesia de Nuestra Senora la Reina de Los Angeles)* a plaza served as civic center and principal marketplace, with fruit and vegetable vendors and the hawking of personal and household goods. "The Plaza" hosted livestock sales, festivals, public dances, and gatherings after *La Iglesia*'s mass.[30] With California just a few years removed from Mexican control and its pastimes, bullfighting still took place, but in Biddy's first years the bullfights moved from The Plaza to a dedicated area nearby.[31] Late in the 1850s the city enjoyed a visit by Lee's National Circus, a touring troupe which became a regular Los Angeles attraction, pitching tents at The Plaza and its environs.[32] The circus would play a part in Biddy's life in a way she may not have imagined.

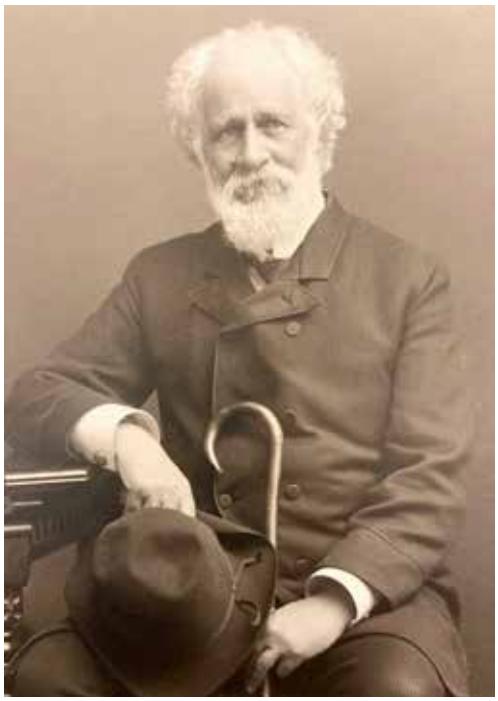
Her domestic routine now her own, Biddy found freedom with what made a meal. Many Southern dinners centered on pork, with cornmeal, beans and various vegetables. Southern California's main meat was beef, not pork, with generally available wheat and corn, and a broader variety of vegetables.[33] Biddy certainly adapted, and in Winnie Owens, Robert's wife, she had an eager and active comrade. Winnie often threw suppers and parties, usually including baked treats, though baking presented a challenge in a mid-19th century kitchen where cooking and baking meant using cast iron appliances lacking thermostats or temperature settings. Whatever her technique, Winnie, and later Biddy, often earned praise as hosts.[34] These soirees perhaps offered Biddy the most sociable aspect of being in L.A. A contrasting mood sometimes menaced the streets.

Los Angeles of the mid-1800s exhibited numerous tropes which continue to inform Western movies and TV shows. Yes, horses regularly bolted unguided down broad, dusty streets, sometimes with a buggy, a stage coach, or even a dismounted rider bouncing and careening behind, and pedestrians scurrying out of the way.[35] Yes, lynch mobs occasionally overpowered the sheriff, overran the jail, and oversaw 'necktie justice.'[36] And yes, gun violence permeated those early days. Officially, 31 shooting murders occurred in this town of about 1600 citizens in 1850, and that, as the county sheriff's department pointed out, did not include gun deaths for Native Americans, Mexicans, African Americans or Asians, who together made up more than 80% of the population.[37] Those murders didn't count.

The earliest Yankee civic leaders, men eager for gain and glory, recognized the lawlessness problem and worked hard to rein it in, even taking official law enforcement upon themselves in some cases. David W. Alexander, the sheriff whose posse rescued Biddy from Smith in the Santa Monica Mountains, gained status as a business leader before being elected sheriff in 1855. Just months after freeing Biddy, Alexander put down his badge and returned to business.[38] In his post-sheriff career Alexander regularly exchanged correspondence with mayor and, later, state senator Benjamin Davis Wilson, and sometimes with John G. Downey, who became lieutenant governor and then governor of the state. Don Pio Pico, the last governor of Mexican California, enjoyed membership in the circle, as did others whose names live on in L.A.: Warner, Sepulveda, Banning, et al.[39]

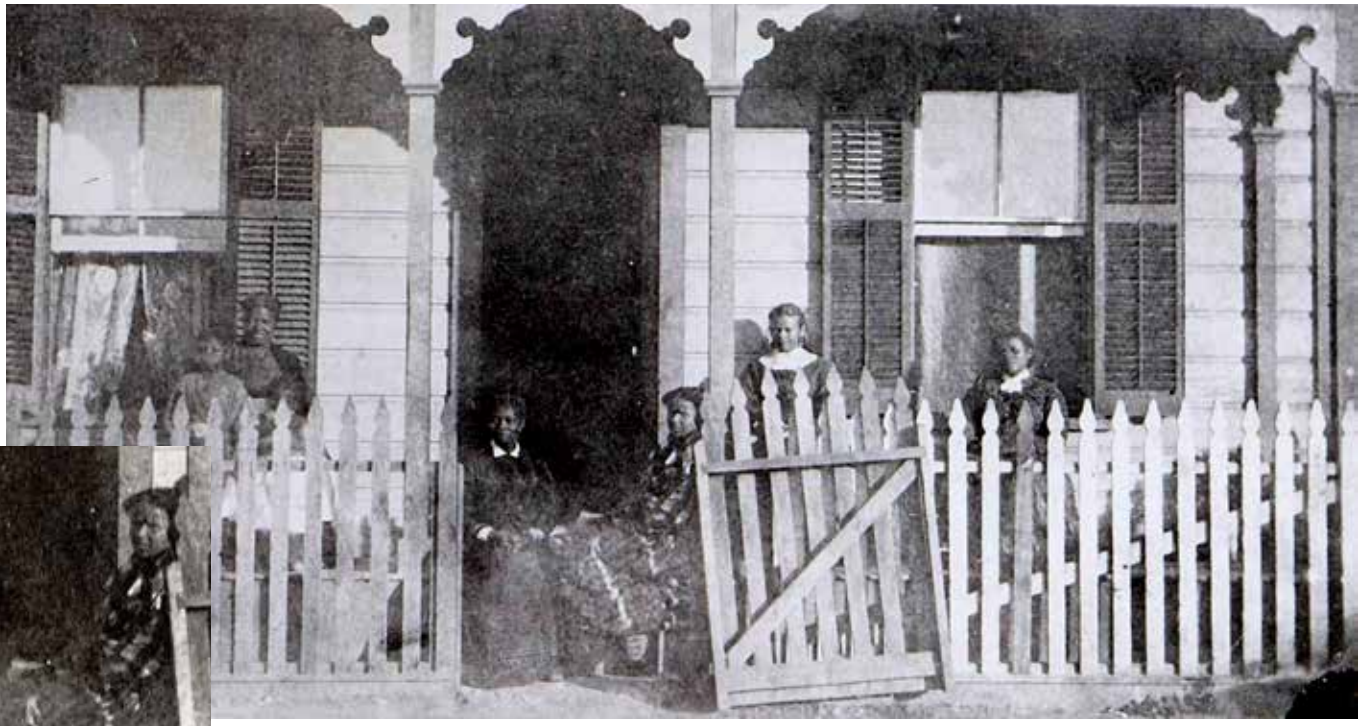
Los Angeles of the mid-1800s exhibited numerous tropes which continue to inform Western movies and TV shows.

This clique included Biddy's future employer, John Strother Griffin. The letters among these men often centered on commerce and politics. They wrote regarding water rights, land acquisition, building new railroads, extending and creating stage coach lines, and bringing in the telegraph.[40] The near tripling of L.A.'s population through the 1850s made this small, entrenched circle more powerful, with Biddy operating at its periphery and continuing to learn.



Portrait of John Strother Griffin, undated. Credit: Los Angeles Public Library

Another correspondent in the men's 19th century chat group, Judge Hayes, noted in a written summary of Biddy's court proceedings—a summary he successfully urged Wilson to have published in a Sacramento newspaper—that Biddy and her girls secured lodging with the Owens family.[41] This placement comes weighted with significance. Robert Owens, the former Texas slave, freed himself through an arrangement with his owner where Owens



Mason/Owens family at the Owens home, Los Angeles, c. 1870. The two figures in the doorway are believed to be Biddy Mason (l), Ellen. Credit: UCLA Library Digital Collections.

contracted out his work, shared the income with his master, bought his freedom, left Texas for California, and soon earned enough to buy the freedom of Winnie and their children. Owens quickly developed a level of influence in a growing L.A.[42] He operated a corral domesticating wild horses and mules brought up from San Diego. The U.S. Army became a main customer.[43] Winnie helped foster sway through suppers attended by the town's leading Whites, a practice which ultimately came under some sneering attention as far away as Sacramento.[44] Individually and as a couple, Robert and Winnie embodied savv— they worked the system. While not themselves at the top of the power brokers pyramid, the Owens curried favor with those better positioned.

The Owens also ran a boarding house, with one remembrance of the boarding unit offering a window into the complex, slavery-adjacent reality of ante-bellum California in which Biddy lived in the 1850s. A Los Angeles Herald article by a reporter who knew the Owens noted that before the Civil War, "many slave owners have claimed that their property was kept in hiding at this place [the Owens boarding house] but I have known of but one instance. The master of this woman was a drunken brute that resided at Cucamonga."[45] In other words, the Owens house could be thought of as a western station of the Underground Railroad, a sort of beacon in the fog of California's cloudy free-state status.

In Biddy's hearing, California law prohibited her, a Black woman, testifying in open court against Robert Smith, a White man, so Judge Hayes questioned Biddy in chambers. Hayes' public summary of that interview notes Biddy's unease with a move to Texas.[46] It's highly unlikely this was the only topic. If the judge followed the usual deposition course, even unofficial ones, he would have laid groundwork and asked establishment questions: Where was Biddy born?[47] When did Smith acquire her? What were her usual tasks? Could she describe walking 1700 miles from Mississippi to Utah, tending to her girls, including a nursing infant, while herding livestock, setting up and breaking down camp, cooking, nursing the sick? Who taught her herbal remedies? When did she first midwife a birth? She may even have mentioned midwifing at least two deliveries on the trail. Judge Hayes' sister would soon marry Griffin, a university-trained doctor, one of the first in L. A.[48] Biddy had health care skills and clearly performed under difficult conditions.

It's not certain if Hayes introduced Biddy Mason to Griffin. It's also unclear when Biddy began working with and for Griffin. Trained at the University of Pennsylvania, Griffin established himself in L.A. in the mid-1850s after serving as U.S. Army surgeon in the Mexican-American War.[49] He became the upper echelon's go-to doctor. A San Diego judge traveled north for Griffin to operate in what was described as "a severe attack of dropsy."[50] Griffin's successful treatment of Benjamin Wilson's wife Margaret, who seemed constantly plagued with illness, prompted her writing to her husband in Sacramento of "being happy to have it in my power to relieve the anxiety which I know you must feel…glad to tell you that we are unusually well."[51] Griffin even traveled to San Francisco for cases.[52] Back home in 1850s L.A., the doctor also saw his share of sufferers of violence, including a captured robber to whom authorities had delivered "several balls," and a shootout victim who hid out for "some considerable time" before seeking medical attention. The latter refused to divulge the nature of his incident; the treatment delay forced

an amputation, which itself fell short of being life-saving.[53]

Biddy's part in these or other cases before or after 1859 can't be established with current evidence, but it's reasonable Judge Hayes would have alerted the doctor, his future brother-in-law, to Biddy's skills soon after learning of them in January, 1856. Griffin could certainly use the help. The doctor's practice expanded in '59 with his receipt of the county contract for hospital and jail medical services, with Biddy, now taking the name Biddy Mason, employed by Griffin as nurse and midwife at $2.50/day.[54] Biddy's prior earnings from midwifing—in grand mansions as well as rickety hovels—may often have been in cash, but just as likely in barter. The Griffin contract meant steady income. Biddy Mason, more than 37 years a slave, would put that money to good use.

There's also a strong chance over the years Biddy found herself tending Dr. Griffin, a man who seemed himself in regular peril. Griffin sustained noteworthy injury in 1858 when his carriage reins broke, causing the horses to bolt.[55] And in 1860, horses pulling his carriage over bales of wool and hides toppled the buggy, causing his ejection and serious injuries.[56]

As long as he stayed upright the doctor rose in rank. By the early 1860s Griffin became county coroner, and later "County Physician."[57] His note to the board of supervisors in November, 1862 alerted them to several cases of smallpox in the city, confined to the Native American population. "A suitable house" four miles outside the city became the isolation and treatment center, with a second doctor assigned to direct treatment. An article notes of the patients that, in addition to the second doctor, "a person was also appointed to take care of them."[58] Prior accounts of Biddy's health care activity include her duties as a "confinement nurse," which would include this episode as well as work at the jail and hospital.[59]

Once freed, Biddy likely held more than a passing interest in the affairs of the Mormons in San Bernardino, with acquaintances and maybe a few friends still there. The LDS community's population grew to twice that of Los Angeles by 1855 and they boasted better organization and far less violence.[60] But Robert Smith's ranching dust-up with his religious brethren hinted all was not well; the community's internal difficulties would grow. The crushing debt load of their ranch purchase became a main irritant, coupled with several inadequate growing seasons. As the L.A. Star noted, "the failure of the wheat crop has placed our Mormon friends under great pecuniary embarrassments, which has forced them to ask relief…"[61]

Mortgage payments and poor food yields stood alongside rising external scrutiny of the colony by some California citizens, the kind of negative vibes Mormons experienced in Missouri, Illinois and elsewhere in the East. At least one newspaper referred to printed Mormon defenses of polygamy as "obnoxious and vile prints—a miserable conglomerate religious cant, marked licentiousness and black hypocrisy."[62] The press also noted, in August, 1857, "a large sale of cattle" by the Mormons to liquidate their ranch debt.[63] By late fall 1857 the LDS community in San Bernardino was visibly eroding. Brigham Young, aware of the colony's difficulties and fearful of open warfare in Utah between Mormons and the U.S. Army, issued a recall of LDS members to Salt Lake Valley. In less than a year the San Bernardino LDS settlement ceased to exist.[64] From Biddy's perspective it likely seemed the colony fulfilled its purpose.

Biddy Mason's new life unfolded with family events occurring in a fullness she'd previously been denied. Multiple narratives suggest Charles Owens, Robert's son, became smitten with Biddy's daughter Ellen when Biddy and her children still lived under Robert Smith's control.[65] With Ellen now free, and in close proximity to Charles, their attraction deepened. Ellen turned 18 on October 15, 1856. She and Charles

Once freed, Biddy likely held more than a passing interest in the affairs of the Mormons in San Bernardino, with acquaintances and maybe a few friends still there.

Ellen Mason Owens Huddleston, c. 1890. Credit: UCLA Library Digital Collections

Robert Curry Owens, Biddy's grandson, c. 1864. Credit: UCLA Library Digital Collections

married the next day.[66] Two years later Ellen gave birth to Biddy's first grandchild, Robert Curry Owens.[67]

The family suffered deep misfortune the year after the wedding. Smallpox, a source of recurrent epidemics in the city, may have caused Biddy's daughter Ann's illness in 1857, though period accounts do not cite an outbreak.[68] Whatever Ann's ailment, she did not recover, and died that August.

As Biddy grieved Ann's death she received yet another shock within weeks. Emily Hayes, the judge's wife, died September 12. Mrs. Hayes was "for some time in delicate health" but thought not in danger of imminent death.[69] The news spread rapidly through the relatively small community and doubtless triggered Biddy's deepest sympathy for the man who'd finalized her freedom.

Biddy's public part in Judge Hayes' life seemingly ended in 1856, despite narratives contending his decision in her case cost him popular support for his judgeship and his political career. Judge Hayes acknowledged some of the acrimony directed at him at the time: "I was denounced as an *abolitionist*! For declaring a simple proposition of law."[70] The judge's finding did run contrary to vocal and seemingly widespread sentiment. The electoral facts suggest otherwise.

Judge Hayes ran for reelection in 1858, a bit more than two years after Biddy's hearing at which he declared her "free forever." Hayes used the term "free forever" again in his '58 campaign—an allusion in this instance to a judge's independence. The 1856 decision still carried some currency in Los Angeles—if the judge were to be punished by voters, this would be the time, not later. As Will Rogers observed, the American electorate has long operated with fairly short-term memories.[71] Contrary to the payback narrative, Hayes won reelection in that Fall of '58 by significant margins in his jurisdiction: San Diego, San Bernardino and Los Angeles counties. His L.A. County margin was 1229 to 209.[72] Hayes served as First District judge another five years until the state redrew districts in 1863. The new lines meant he ran largely unknown in Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo counties. Perhaps the redistricting constituted a power broker's political ploy, but Hayes again won Los Angeles County. He lost the new counties, however, and the election by 60 votes.[73] This likely left Biddy a bit wistful; the man who'd declared her free and perhaps also endorsed her and her skills, would no longer sit on the bench.

Clearly Biddy Mason landed well-connected when freedom came, but she had done the work, under oppressive circumstances, to optimize her abilities. The cohort of civic leaders around her demanded competence, consistency, and a certain acuity; Biddy needed to function among them at a high level. The Owens family also had elevated expectations—neither Robert nor Winnie sat back waiting for the world to come to them.

July of 1860 provides a window into the recurring theme of the Owens household as community host, often to White Angelenos, with Biddy now a part of the family. This time, for Fourth of July festivities, Robert Owens sponsored a company of friends solely from the Black community, about 70 people. With many of them former slaves from South Carolina, Virginia, Tennessee, and the West Indies, their Independence Day conversations had to include observations on liberty and their former lives, what they endured, how freedom arose. That buzz didn't make the public narrative. Owens told a reporter he'd "laid in a heap o' grub, and had it as nicely cooked as I could." Doubtless Biddy, Winnie and Ellen played roles in preparing the get-together. The affair included brandy and wine for what Owens termed "a square dinner," from which "every one went home with a full belly and good humor." The reporter felt compelled, it seems, to add a certain context for Owens' host role, noting "that Bob was once a slave, and while so, was in possession of those who taught him the highest traits of a "colored gentleman."."[74] "Uncle Bob," as he was sometimes called, a bondage beneficiary!

The 1860s proved a break-out period for Biddy Mason. She enjoyed employment with Dr. Griffin. She became an in-demand midwife across the diverse Los Angeles community.[75] Her family life, living with Ellen and Charles early in the decade, blossomed with the maturation of her teen-aged Harriett and the growth of grandsons Robert Curry and Henry.[76] Outside the family the Civil War dominated the early '60s, with passions running high among many in spite of the dis-

tance from battles half a continent and more away. A segment of the city's hierarchy displayed unreconstructed Southern loyalties. Doctor John Strother Griffin, for instance, openly celebrated Lincoln's assassination in 1865, just days after the South's surrender, and needed restraint so he wouldn't go into the street, boisterously express his glee, and be attacked by Unionists.[77] No doubt Biddy, Owens, and other African Americans in the community watched, hoped and prayed for a Northern victory. Most Black Californians had known bondage, and some the lash. They intensely followed the conflict's progress, lauded the Emancipation Proclamation, thrilled at the Confederate surrender, mourned Lincoln's killing.[78] Of all the events for Blacks of the time, emancipation and the death of Lincoln were the most enduring. W. Sherman Savage, a 20th century Black professor (Lincoln University of Missouri, CSU-LA) steeped in African American history before the rise of Black studies, notes how participants at annual Emancipation Proclamation celebrations often kept Lincoln's death central: "They hailed him much after the fashion of Moses in the case of the Israelites and felt even though Lincoln was dead he yet spoke to them in their move toward liberty and universal emancipation."[79]

We don't know whether Biddy carried such a reverence. Yet, this period of national trauma and sacrifice may have contributed to the emergence of Biddy voicing her animating principle, the need to give. In addition to the many dead in battle, Lincoln had himself given what he termed at Gettysburg "the last full measure of devotion."[80]

Biddy Mason understood sacrifice—she nearly said as much to the judge.[81] She'd learned lessons which may otherwise have been unattainable. As a girl and then a woman with little to give, she'd experienced how giving of her attention, her time, and her self was beneficial. It's possible that in her day-to-day life, healing and guiding births, even when not paid, she saw and felt the value of her giving coming back to her in appreciation and deep, sustained gratitude. In due time Biddy spoke the words to frame the life she now lived more fully than ever, the approach that would guide her and become her creed: "If you hold your hand closed, nothing good can come in. The open hand is blessed, for it gives in abundance, even as it receives."[82]

Biddy likely pondered the value of generosity in the summer of 1865. The end of the War, the end of slavery, carried emotions difficult to fully comprehend. Her own freedom had been aided and abetted by a generous former slave and his wife, among whom Biddy became family. So when Robert

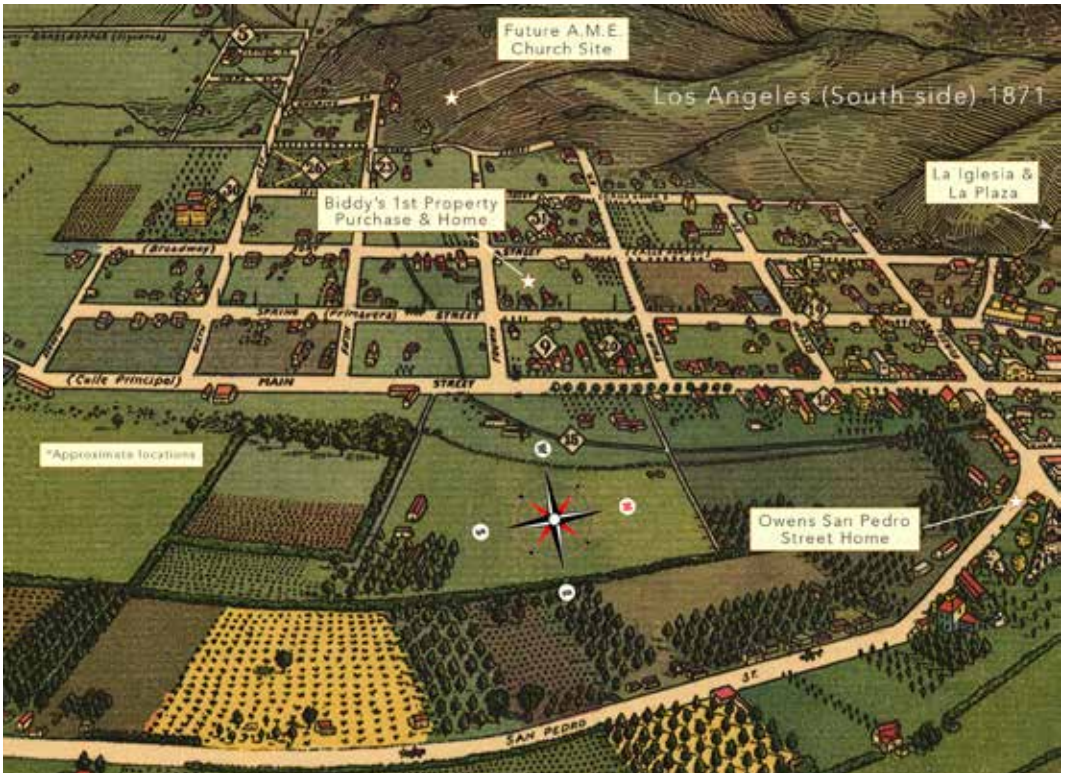
Looking south along Spring Street, c. 1894. Credit: Public Domain

Owens took ill that summer, with typhoid fever contracted on a trip to Stockton, it had to shake Biddy nearly as much as did Ann's illness. Owens died August 18, 1865,[83] and Winnie administered his estate.[84] Once things settled she did what Robert would have done, hosting a large gathering, this time in his honor. Attendees included a state senator, a local judge, a prominent attorney, county clerks from Los Angeles and Kern, and one John Strother Griffin, M.D.[85] The guest list confirmed the words of Bishop T.M.D. Ward of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, who lauded Robert Owens as "a man who wielded a vast amount of influence in this place…[a man] religious, affable, energetic and industrious."[86] For Biddy, Owens' passing must have felt like the loss of a protective and gregarious brother who'd fostered her freedom and her growth. Her future course may have had him as a guiding star.

As the decade progressed Biddy became more prosperous than she may ever have dreamed.

As the decade progressed Biddy became more prosperous than she may ever have dreamed. In 1866, with Ellen and Harriett now both married, Biddy staked her claim for the family's future, buying a $250 plot on Spring Street ("Primavera" in Spanish, season of renewal) just outside the city and a few blocks from gentle hills.[87] In her bold move—an African American woman purchasing property in Los Angeles County—Biddy would make clear her intent, designating this land as her family's for decades, even generations.[88]

Two years later Biddy secured property on Olive Street for $375; the nascent real estate magnate Biddy Mason would soon be riding a wave.[89] The little town of her freedom continued swelling. The post-Civil War years brought more settlers and L.A.'s population grew to about 6,000 by 1870, up from 4,000 a decade earlier. Within four years of her first purchase, Biddy's $625 in investments showed a value of $3,000, and this was just the beginning.[90] Full connection of transcontinental rail service to the basin in 1876 injected a new, primary



Los Ángeles south side, 1871, section of Augustus Koch drawing. Credit: Library of Congress. (Location indicators, compass and titling added.)

growth driver; the 15 years following that would raise the population to 50,000.[91] Biddy's land, initially on the outskirts, soon stood near the center of the emerging metropolis.[92]

It's believed Biddy sat for her definitive photograph in her early real-estate period, the late 1860s or early '70s, as her world expanded beyond midwifing and health care. It's likely her portrait decision represented a legacy to her daughters, her grandchildren, and friends. Simply having her picture taken meant entering a new realm of self-presentation; photography was just a few decades old and the age of the selfie remained at least 130 years away. Biddy's image presents without smile or scowl—a straight-ahead visage lacking furrow or device. She has a quiet authority, a heightened level of self-possession. Having endured and come out stronger, she's not looking back but moving seriously forward.

It's believed Biddy sat for her definitive photograph in her early real-estate period, the late 1860s or early '70s, as her world expanded beyond midwifing and health care.

This same time period saw the vision of an African American church in Los Angeles taking shape. For many years Biddy fulfilled her spiritual yearning attending Fort Street Methodist Episcopal Church, which held its first services in the El Dorado Saloon in 1853, when Biddy was in San Bernardino.[93] When initially freed she may also have attended The Plaza church, *La Iglesia*, established by a Spanish Franciscan in 1814. While *La Iglesia's* Latin mass may have seemed inscrutable, its rituals could have evoked for Biddy an enhanced sense of divinity with chiming bells, incense, elaborate vestments, and night and early morning candlelight vigils in a dark sanctuary.[94] Fort Street likely aligned more with the Protestant approach she may have known before the Smiths. Yet, attendance at either still felt wanting. African American congregants may have been tolerated but not fully welcomed.

By 1869 the push for a new church showed clear momentum, including a "colored church" benefit festival at L.A.'s Stearn Hall, where "a fine band of music was in attendance, and the supper surpassed anything we have ever seen in this city."[95] The efforts of Biddy, Winnie and their families and friends gained more attention as time went on, with a planning meeting at Winnie's house for another festival prompting a newspaper to urge support.[96] That festival also received a colorful boost from unexpected participants. In the fest's lead-up, Biddy and others were aided by the press reporting "tickets have been placed at the very modest sum of $1, and consequently are going off 'like hot cakes.'"[97] The affair itself "attracted a large crowd of people, both white and colored...and was voted a success by all who attended." Coincidentally, the Lee National Circus had come to town on one of its regular visits, and the circus band played at Biddy's festival, giving the fest a rollicking soundtrack. "Dancing was kept up until a late, or rather an early hour in the morning, when the guests departed, highly pleased with the entertainment given by their colored friends."[98] It's not clear whether the "colored friends" included the musicians, but some 19th century circus bands featured African American players. The church-building energy ultimately prompted a visit from that previously-mentioned, high-ranking A.M.E. official.

When the steamship *Orizaba* came down the California coast in late August of '69, on board was Bishop Thomas Marcus Decatur Ward of San Francisco's Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. The Reverend Ward, a Pennsylvania native with parents active in the Underground Railroad, served as tenth Bishop of the A.M.E. Church.[99] His two-week stay in Los Angeles featured a meeting at which contributors gave $1400 toward a new, brick church, prompting Ward to say of the future congregants "in our church enterprise they have covered themselves all over with glory...in point of liberality they excel any people I ever sojourned among." The "Roll of Honor" donor list shows "Biddy Mason" and "Charles Owens" gave $50 each, with 31 other contributions ranging from $10 to $100. The bishop noted "the women commenced this glorious work, and may God prosper them in their temporal affairs."[100]

Bishop Ward's visit carried a significance difficult to anticipate; a direct impact on Biddy's grandsons and their mother, Ellen. The gathering included Alice Coleman, an L.A. resident and one of three $100 donors.[101] Both Coleman and the bishop held deep connections to educator Jeremiah Burke Sanderson, a Massachusetts native, abolitionist, and cohort and friend of Frederick Douglass. Sanderson arrived in the Bay Area in 1854, believing his trip to California nothing more than a visit.[102] His engagement with Northern California's Black community became noteworthy in 1855 when Sanderson gave a stirring anti-slavery oration before the California State Convention of Colored Citizens in Sacramento. They elected Sanderson convention secretary,[103] and he would spend the rest of his life in or near the Bay Area, his wife and children joining him in 1860 just ahead of the Civil War.

Sanderson taught in San Francisco, Sacramento and Oakland, but his Stockton tenure became most significant for Biddy and her offspring. An 1870 Stockton newspaper reporter accompanied school officials to the "colored school," Sanderson's Elk Street School, on a surprise visit. The reporter came away with this observation of Sanderson's methods:

> *"We hazard nothing in saying that he is one of the best teachers in [San Joaquin] county and it is only the prejudice which so extensively prevails against a sable skin that prevents him from occupying one of the highest positions as a teacher in one of the public schools. There are few men, if any, in the county who can excel him in reading, and fewer still equally gifted with the faculty of imparting knowledge to the young."*

The journalist provided this spelling lesson example:

> *"He announces the word to be spelled, which is repeated by a pupil, then the next names the first letter, another the second, and so on until a syllable is completed, when it is named, and on goes the spelling in the same form until the word is finished — the entire class announcing the word. During the exercise the attention of every pupil is closely riveted upon the word to be spelled."*[104]

This was the man under whose tutelage Biddy's grandsons would extend their educations in the early 1870s in Stockton after a stint in Oakland.

In addition to sending the boys north, Charles Owens urged Ellen to go and gain the literacy she'd been denied growing up under Robert Smith's control. Ellen agreed, and she and the boys boarded at the Sanderson home in Stockton.[105] The educator also served as a minister, and in August, 1872, he officiated a wedding at his home, the marriage of Laura Allison and Granville Huddleston.[106] An event years later suggests Ellen, Robert Curry and Henry were in Stockton that summer. There's also an inference that Biddy spent a bit of that summer, and more, up north. The Stockton post office noted an unclaimed letter for "Biddy Mason" in late July.[107] A "Bridget Mason," of Irish descent, did live in Stockton at the time but does not appear to have gone by the name "Biddy," and Ellen's Biddy, now deeply engaged in real estate, likely let it be known where she could be reached. Further, the Stockton city directory of 1873 includes a "Mrs. Biddy Mason" residing on Market St., just two blocks from Sanderson's one-room schoolhouse. Huddleston lived one block east on Washington, and Sanderson two blocks further on Sonora St.

Biddy would also have had significant church business in the north that summer of '72. With Bishop Ward promoted to broader leadership, Bishop Alexander W. Wayman became new head of the A.M.E.'s Western Diocese (California, Illinois, Indiana and Missouri), and he made the rounds in Sacramento, Stockton and San Francisco in June and July, preaching and getting acquainted at A.M.E. churches on successive Sundays.[108] It's not clear whether Biddy's formal A.M.E. organizing session in her L.A. home that year, with 11 others present, came before or after the new bishop's northern visit.[109] Biddy's 1872 gathering in her house may well have been the

Sells Bros. circus band, 1884. Credit: Public domain

Drawing of Jeremiah Burke Sanderson, 1870. Credit: Public Domain

first recognized service, coming after at least three years of church-building activity. Whatever we term it, that foundational gathering in Biddy's home in '72 contrasts with the larger cohort (at least 33 people) at Bishop Ward's visit three years earlier. It's reasonable to surmise Biddy's prior status in that larger group had evolved now into leadership, and that the dozen attendees in '72 bears witness to flagging enthusiasm among others three years on. There also seemed headwinds from church leadership at this point, with low potential membership and inadequate funds. In 1869 Bishop Ward noted the small church base, and according to professor Savage, "the condition became so difficult one of the bishops of the A.M.E. Church thought it would be best to give up the effort to establish that denomination in Los Angeles."[110]

If Biddy indeed made the trip to Northern California in '72 to bend the ear of the diocese's new bishop, and to take in his preaching, she stepped into a throng where "all the church-going people seemed to be on the tip-toe of excitement, desirous to hear his evening's initial discourse." Bishop Wayman opened by telling the congregation, "I have a message from God to thee." Getting their attention, it's reported he provided "many Biblical truths, beautifully portrayed with much pathos and eloquence." Bishop Wayman was a hit. After the message, the church's pastor "called upon the congregation to give the Bishop a financial greeting. The table was placed in front of the altar, and the ladies seemed to go up en masse, all styles of Dolly Vardens were represented at times around the table."[111] ("Dolly Varden," a Charles Dickens character, became 19th-century shorthand for colorful, flamboyant women's fashion — a pop culture reference of the times.)

Bishop Wayman's first foray into California left him more amenable to the state than he'd been initially.[112] Biddy, too, must have made a positive impression on the bishop; an 1873 A.M.E. notice includes Fielden Smithea as Los Angeles church pastor, a new position.[113] Smithea, apparently still seeking ordination, gave way in 1875 to Rev. J. Fletcher Jordan.[114] Both led what a 1971 church history called Stephens (or St. Stephens) African Methodist Episcopal, not yet First A.M.E.[115]

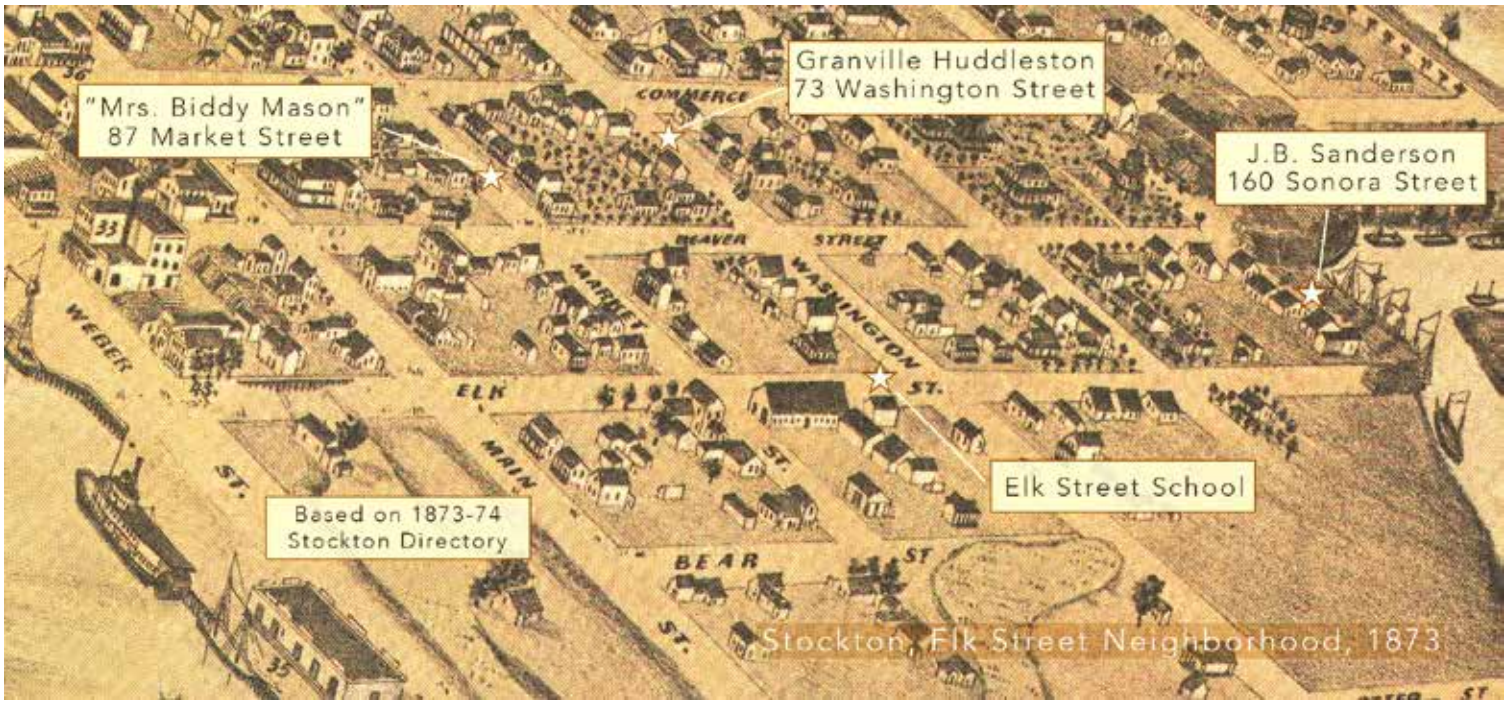
The young church struggled, with a small membership and financial base. For a while Biddy's real estate served as lifeline, both for the income she donated to the church and the land given for a proper building. The church building went up at Fourth and Charity Streets, but the financial problems would continue. During one period Biddy paid the building's taxes and insurance, but after several years she temporarily closed the church's doors (tough love?) to get the membership to share the burden.[116]

By the early 1870s Biddy Mason's life stood at a distinct and dramatic remove from the servile bondage of her first 37 years. Many of the people who'd fostered her rise remained nearby, but one, Judge Hayes, moved south to San Diego (part of his original district) after his 1863 defeat. He married again in 1866.[117] We have no evidence of communication between Hayes and Biddy — the judge may have deemed it improper, and Biddy, who never learned to read or write, left no journals or letters. It's also not clear that Biddy had either business or personal connections in San Diego in the late '60s or beyond, except the judge. It's possible she did make a trip to San Diego over Christmas, 1871; the *Orizaba's* list of passengers returning to Los Angeles on December 26th includes a "B. Mason."[118] After the death of his second wife, and in answer to calls in L.A. to write a county history, Hayes returned to Los Angeles in 1876, passing away a year later.[119] Publicly, Biddy's time with Hayes totaled a matter of days in 1856. Her association with Hayes' brother-in-law left open a channel to a man for whom she must have felt a steady fondness.

By the early 1870s Biddy Mason's life stood at a distinct and dramatic remove from the servile bondage of her first 37 years.

The pastimes and entertainments in which Angelenos shared in the '70s grew with the city, and in one instance the expanding variety brought in performers likely to touch Biddy's deepest memories of the South she'd left nearly 30 years earlier. Doubtless, the news of upcoming concerts at Turn-Verein Hall by the "Tennessee Jubilee Singers," a traveling troupe from "back home," rippled through the African American community.[120] Today, this chorus of heralds is known as the Fisk Jubilee Singers.

The end of the Civil War prompted a golden age for creating what we now refer to as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Prior to the War there were four HB-



Elk Street School neighborhood, Stockton, 1873. Section of 1871 Augustus Koch drawing. Credit: University of Pacific (Location indicators and titling added.)

CUs in the country, all north of the Mason-Dixon Line. Just one developed during the conflict. From 1865 to 1870 more than 20 HBCUs were founded. Fisk University (initially Fisk Freed Colored School) in Nashville began in 1866 with classes in former Union Army barracks. First-year enrollment included at least one 70-year-old former-slave "freshman."[121] By 1871 Fisk featured a troupe of singers who toured and raised funds for the school. In their first decade the *a cappella* ensemble, most of them former slaves, performed throughout the U.S. and Europe before audiences which included U.S. Grant, Queen Victoria and Mark Twain.[122]

We can't say Biddy Mason sat in the crowd for any of the group's 1876 L.A. performances. We can say for the still relatively-small African American community whose core had Southern and slavery roots, the event represented something cathartic, judging from accounts. The group's songs of faith, struggle, sorrow and liberation drew "tears from the eyes of many, mingled with smiles, and no doubt recalled the days of their childhood more vividly than anything else could have done." The reporter noted that a particular African American woman "who sat near us, with the smiles and tears blended on her face, would now and then in a low voice join the choruses."[123] Even if she'd now grown accustomed to her own liberty, Biddy (if in attendance) must have marveled at the young African Americans on stage, and what they represented: giving voice and expression to emerging freedom. Freedom nowhere near full, and not perfect, but advancing.

Biddy Mason's advancement continued with more commercial properties. One three-year lease of rooms in the "Mason Block" along Spring Street produced $100 a month.[124] And as the city modernized its infrastructure, she made sure to get in on the improvements, petitioning for sewer connection in 1877.[125] Biddy remained active, engaged, and ready to agitate for her rights and her family's.

Drawing of women displaying "Dolly Varden" styles, indicative of fashion described in church collection scene, c. 1870. Credit: Wikipedia

"Tennessee (Fisk) Jubilee Singers", c. 1875. Credit: Fisk University Archives

The value of her properties by 1891 was $300,000.

Biddy's son-in-law, Charles Owens, also moved forward during this period. Charles' attraction to Ellen in 1855 may have been key in securing the habeas corpus writ, and freedom. After Robert's passing in '65 Charles took the reins in his father's lines of work.[126] He stood as the Owens principal in their '69 church contribution. He shows up handling family property business that same year.[127] By 1879 Charles becomes an A.M.E.-designated church trustee.[128] It certainly seemed Ellen's husband was next to wield Owens influence in Los Angeles, so his sudden death at age 50, in 1882, jolted the family.[129] It's likely that Ellen, now widowed and with both sons grown to adulthood, spent more time with her mother than she had in years. Their conversations would have ranged over past, present and future, and in addition to their shared cross-country trek, they would have noted the raising of the boys, the success of their lives, the ups and downs of church-building, maybe that 1872 summer in Stockton. By 1885, that Stockton summer would loom larger. Granville Huddleston and Laura Allison divorced by 1879.[130] Voter rolls in 1884 show Huddleston a resident of Los Angeles. Ellen, perhaps a witness to Huddleston's marriage to Laura Allison in Stockton 13 years earlier, would marry him in '85.[131]

There's nothing signifying when Biddy's health care work with Dr. Griffin waned, but it appears he left active practice in 1878.[132] A colleague remarked of the old Confederate-sympathizing doctor "he carried a brusque and somewhat forbidding mask to cover a tender, generous heart."[133] His frequent social visits with Biddy and Winnie seem confirming. And, in an expanding Los Angeles, Biddy's real estate dealings became more involved over time, and Griffin too pursued land deals (becoming known as the "Father of East L.A.") as well as water rights, local railroad development, and politics.[134] Their linkage, and Biddy's largely unheralded part in Griffin's work, would not go fully unnoticed. After his death in 1898, Griffin's pioneer role in state medicine earned him a memorialization: his likeness in a California medical history mural at UCSF. Standing with the doctor as they tend to a malaria patient—very much central to the scene—is an image of Biddy Mason.[135]

While Biddy may have no longer treated patients once she passed 60 years, her heart remained in a place where she had to take care of others.

While Biddy may have no longer treated patients once she passed 60 years, her heart remained in a place where she had to take care of others. Extensive flooding in Los Angeles (1884 and '86) triggered devastation, disruption, homelessness, and an emblematic Biddy Mason reaction.[136] Moved by the resulting suffering, Biddy told a small grocer on Spring Street near her home, "give groceries to the homeless. Let no one that is in need go hungry. I'll pay for it."[137]

When Biddy Mason's life began anew in 1856 she gained a big sister, workmate, confidant, and friend. Winnie Owens approached life much like Robert. The Owens home on San Pedro Street functioned as a mini civic center for Angelenos of all castes. It hosted early organizational sessions for church fund-raising, accommodated holiday parties for neighbors and friends, became a venue for Winnie's tea parties, and served as a place to send-off souls recently departed.[138] Then there are those power-broker suppers that made news up north. The Owens had their own range of businesses. And of course, Biddy became family by marriage; Biddy and Winnie shared grandsons.

On a date not specified, a photographer captured an image of the Owens home, mainly with the females and a young Robert Curry or perhaps Henry, sitting on the front porch. Judging from the age of the boy (eight or nine years) the photograph came just a few years after Robert Owens' passing in '65. Whether the boy is sitting on Winnie's lap, or Biddy's, is also not clear, but likely Winnie's as the woman appears to be wearing an apron. It's a family scene: the women and their girls, sharing stories and observations, enjoying being together. If this is the mid or late 1860s they would have many more years together, but surely Biddy would not feel those years had been enough. Winnie died April 17, 1883 at age 75.[139]

It's possible that in a lifetime of long journeys, Biddy Mason's last included her Ellen. Fitting. A ten-year-old Ellen likely served as travel helpmate on that long, arduous trek from Mississippi to Utah in 1848, and again from Utah to San Bernardino in 1851. Their last excursion certainly didn't present such a grueling challenge; more a scenic cruise along the California coast. On June 18, 1889, the steamer *Pomona* left L.A. for San Francisco. The passenger list shows more than 50; side by side in the listings, "Mrs. B. A. Mason, Mrs. E. Huddleston."[140]

The grinding existence Biddy faced the first half of her life would have been taxing, and her later freedom and prosperity could never recover what was lost. When she completed that apparent San Francisco journey she would have been about 71. Uncommonly (with no one in actual pursuit) she'd walked away from slavery. She soon saw her value increase immensely as a free woman, providing for her family, caring for others, tending to business, being midwife both for countless new Angelenos and for a new place of worship. "A consistent Christian," noted her obituary when Biddy died at her home at 331 South Spring Street, January 15, 1891.[141] A contemporary mayor remembered "the kindly, cheerful greeting of this good soul."[142]

Bridget "Biddy" Mason's place in the A.M.E. firmament received a confirmation just a few months after her death. Meeting in Stockton in August, 1891, and after settling questions on temperance ("yes") tobacco ("no") and the proper way to pray ("kneel!") the California A.M.E. Conference concluded by paying tribute to leadership that had passed on. The list was limited: a bishop, a reverend, clergy children and, down in Los Angeles, one Biddy Mason. En masse, the conference attendees sang two hymns in memory of the dearly departed, including, "Servant of God, Well Done."[143]

For reasons of space, the references appear on our website: deanza.edu/califhistory.

Bridge and rail lines damaged by mid-1880s Los Angeles flooding. Credit: Water and Power Associates, Los Angeles

Audrey Edna Butcher Civil Liberties Education Initiative

continued from page 5

In the center of the room, a word cloud installation features falling raindrops that, when approached, play recordings of student poets reading their own work aloud.

legacies — ongoing presences that guide, challenge, and illuminate. The flames persist.

Through the driver's side window, visitors can lean in and encounter *This is for You*, an installation that narrows into a tunnel of light, sound, and text. Phrases like "survive" and "live sin fronteras" line the passage, while the words "smile more" emerge — a reference to the everyday microaggressions and expectations placed on Black, Indigenous, and immigrant communities. Layered voices of educators offer affirmation against the constriction, creating a felt tension between survival and selfhood. The piece draws from histories of indigenous boarding schools and the racialized demands for cultural erasure that have shaped the experiences of Chicanx and immigrant communities across generations.

The van's headlights project historical footage — protests, murals, walkouts, documentary interviews — grounding the exhibit's contemporary student work in the longer arc of movement history and cultural resistance.

Participation and Voice

The exhibit is designed to be participatory. Near the entrance, visitors are invited to write their own thoughts on belonging, American identity, and democracy on stickers affixed to posters and a lamppost. In the center of the room, a word cloud installation features falling raindrops that, when approached, play recordings of student poets reading their own work aloud.

Near the far wall, a telephone holds a voicemail from Ashley Sanchez. After listening, visitors can leave their own messages — adding their voices to an accumulating record of response. It is a fitting final gesture for an exhibit built on the premise that democracy deepens when more voices enter the room.

A Living Exhibit

Expanding the Story of Belonging does not argue a thesis so much as it creates conditions for questioning. It asks visitors to consider how belonging has been defined and by whom, to recognize the people who expanded freedoms now taken for granted, and to see immigrants not as outsiders requesting acceptance but as architects of a more inclusive democracy. The student work at its core — unscripted, and trusted to find its own form — is the strongest evidence for that argument. These poets and artists were given a set of themes and the freedom to respond. What they made is extraordinary.

The full exhibit remains on view at the California History Center through the end of Spring Quarter 2026. Ashley Sanchez's Liberty Van installation will continue on display through November 2026.

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At the Center

RECENT EVENTS

A Taste of History

FHDA Chancellor Lee Lambert welcomed guests.

On March 21, 2026, the California History Center hosted the 16th annual A Taste of History, this year themed *Movements Without Borders: Expanding the Story of Belonging*. Guests gathered in the Trianon to experience the new exhibit, featuring student poetry, portraiture, Ashley Sanchez's original and interactive art installations, and original poetry performances by Claudia Melendez and Joseph Jason Santiago LaCour. The evening included music by Foothill Beats, food from Bun Me Up, and wine tastings in the salon, generously provided by local wineries.

Above left, CHCF Board member Carolyn Wilkins-Santos with Marvin Santos, and at right FHDA Trustee Laura Casas and De Anza faculty Veronica Acevedo-Avila.

Social Sciences and Humanities Division Dean Elvin Ramos, De Anza student Cris Li, CHC Assistant Archivist Saroj Bangaru, CHC Faculty Director Lori Clinchard, and CHC student archives volunteer Rama Fikru.

Student portraits, poetry, and biographical panels on display in the Trianon exhibit hall.

At the Center

RECENT EVENTS

CHCF Board Member Cecilie Vaughters-Johnson and CHCF supporter Risë Jones Pichon.

Emeritus Professor and former De Anza administrator John Swensson and CHCF Board Member Ulysses Pichon.

America by Junhyeok Park

Democracy is a mosaic of broken glass
where every shard reflects a different name.
Belonging is the 280 freeway at dusk—
it looks different depending on where you're driving.
I am a letter that crossed an ocean in a suitcase
to tell you the border is just a line of ink.
I stopped knocking because I'm already inside.
My voice is the compass and the seed.
Welcome to the garden.
Welcome to the now.

Civil liberties advocate Susan Hayase and CHC Executive Director Emeritus Tom Izu

We give thanks to our partner Foothill-De Anza Foundation, and to all the generous donors and supporters of California History Center. We are grateful to winery coordinator Laura Ness and to local wineries Cooper-Garrod Vineyards, Farm Day Family Winery, House Family Winery, Kings Mountain Vineyards, and Silver Mountain Vineyards. Proceeds support De Anza student multimedia, oral history and archival projects that preserve and share our local history.

FOOTHILL-DE ANZA
Community College District

Siphoning the Sounds:
Bearing the Weight of America

Envisioned by: Ashley Rose Sanchez

Co-Constructed by: Ashley R. Sanchez, Alanna Zhang, Karl Rogers, Felicia Rogers, & Edwin El-Kareh.

Audio Contributions: Red Wheelbarrow (Spring 2025 Student Edition) Published Poets: Catalina Ramirez, Ranhee Choe, Kylie Arenas, Santa Clara County Poet Laureate Emeritus: Tshaka Campbell, proud Chicano activist, and published poet: Roberto Tinoco Duran.

Description:
The *soundcloud* is a physical representation of the question, “What does it mean to be American?” Made with batten, styrofoam, muslin cloth, acrylic paint, wire, fishing line, chain link, LEDs, NeeDoh products, speakers, and heated adhesive, it was meant as an offering of corporeality to a sense of belonging or isolation for marginalized people often forced into constant reformation simply to survive.

We have curated voices of writers: some burgeoning poets, fresh against the system that has entangled their lives in “otherness”—most pondering if America is a country that defines belonging as a forced sterilization of our culture, our history, our language. Other, more established writers unearth immutable howls of rebellion in their delivery as they question whether the United States can ever truly carry the weight of the generational physical, legal, and spiritual violence that has been levied against us.

This piece encourages its participants to be brave, like Atlas, and hold up the complexity of our lives, our personal worlds. So come in, squeeze the drops dangling just below the cloud. See how long you can withstand the words as they rain down on you.

CHCF

Membership donations can be made at:
https://www.deanza.edu/califhistory/

Thank you for considering initiating or renewing your annual membership with De Anza College's California History Center Foundation. The Center offers public exhibits, special events, lectures and workshops. The Center's Stocklmeir Library & Archives features a collection of materials on California history and Santa Clara Valley's development. The CHC Foundation is a 501 (c) (3) registered non-profit agency.

Thank you to our new and renewing Members & Donors:

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