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Invisible Activists:

Foundational Political Work of Black Women in Gold Rush California,

1850 – 1861

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in African American Studies

by

Margaret Williams Verrone

2024

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Invisible Activists:

Foundational Political Work of Black Women in Gold Rush California,

1850 – 1861

by

Margaret Williams Verrone

Master of Arts in African American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Brenda Stevenson, Chair

This thesis focuses on the political activism of Black women in California from the onset of the California Gold Rush through the beginning of the Civil War. Black people migrating to California during the Gold Rush encountered an anti-Black environment and responded by engaging in abolition work and organizing; seeking voting rights, the right to testify against white people in court, and the desegregation of schools and public transportation. Though activism performed by Black men in the nineteenth century is documented, the political work of Black women during this period has often been overlooked, minimized, or uncredited. This thesis reveals the creative tactics and strategies Black women in the nineteenth century utilized in the struggle for civil rights, identifying Black women as equal partners with Black men in the political achievements of that era.

This thesis of Margaret Williams Verrone is approved.

Benjamin L. Madley

Richard A. Yarborough

Brenda Stevenson, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2024

DEDICATION

Dedicated to the memory of my father, Dr. Carroll B. Williams, Jr.

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INTRODUCTION

In January of 1848 James Marshall discovered gold in Coloma, California at John Sutter's sawmill, triggering a massive migration.¹ Hundreds of thousands of people from around the world descended upon California, from Asia, Latin America, Europe, the Pacific Islands, Australia, New Zealand, and states across North America, mixing among California Indians, Californios, and Mexicans already living in the area, creating, in a short period of time, one of the most racially and culturally diverse regions on the planet.² Among the treasure seekers were Black migrants from eastern free states, whose movements were not solely motivated by riches. While many gold seekers planned to extract wealth and return home, most of these free Black migrants planned to relocate permanently. Having suffered the indignities of second-class citizenship in the East, California appealed to Black newcomers, men and women seeking the social freedoms and political equality previously withheld in their states of origin.³ Encouraged by the territory's absence of chattel slavery, its multi-racial heritage, and reports in Black newspapers of social fluidity, Black migrants traveled to California, optimistic that they would find opportunities for economic advancement.⁴

¹ H. W. Brands, *The Age of Gold: The California Gold Rush and the New American Dream* (New York: Random House, 2002), 24.

² D. Michael Bottoms, *An Aristocracy of Color: Race and Reconstruction in California and the West, 1850 – 1890* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), 4.

³ Lawrence P. Crouchett, Lonnie G. Bunch III, and Martha Kendall Winnacker, *Visions Toward Tomorrow: The History of the East Bay Afro-American Community 1852-1977* (Oakland, California: Dharma Enterprises, 1989), 3.

⁴ Jack D. Forbes, "The Early African Heritage of California," in *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California*, edited by Lawrence B. de Graaf, Kevin Mulroy, and Quintard Taylor (Los Angeles: Autry Museum of Western Heritage in Association with Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 89.

The promise that California represented for Black people did not immediately materialize as Black pioneers often encountered a racially hostile environment. When the California Constitutional Convention assembled in the Autumn of 1849, several delegates proposed a constitutional provision barring Black people from the state.⁵ Though it did not pass, the state's first Democrat-dominated legislature under Governor Peter Burnett later introduced a "Bill for an Act Prohibiting the Immigration of Free Negroes and Persons of Colour to this State." This failed as well, but other legislation adopted by the state denied Black people social and political parity.⁶ The inability to vote, serve on juries, testify in court, or legally protect their property exposed Black people to all sorts of mischief, including theft, assault, and, most crucially, enslavement.

Despite California entering the union as a free state in September of 1850, unfree labor saturated the landscape. Illegal California Indian chattel slavery already existed in the region, as Spanish, Russian, and Mexican authorities institutionalized bonded labor in California when they ruled the territory, which United States officials increased.⁷ Indeed, John Sutter employed hundreds of Northern California Indians, who, though nominally paid, were often unfree.⁸ Unfree immigrants from Northern Mexico, Chile, and China worked under coercive contracts that kept them toiling for years, paid only in non-monetary compensation.⁹ Unsurprisingly, Black slavery was also tolerated in antebellum California. Southern slaveholders brought enslaved men and women to California to mine or to hire out. Free Black people who had moved westward in hopes of evading the reach of the federal Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 and the kidnappings and

⁵ Browne, John Ross, *Report of the Debates in the Convention of California on the Formation of the State Constitution in September and October 1849* (Washington: John T. Towers, 1850), 339.

⁶ Stacey L. Smith, *Freedom's Frontier: California and the Struggle over Unfree Labor, Emancipation, and Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 62; W. Sherman Savage, *Blacks in the West* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1976), 10.

⁷ Benjamin Madley and Edward D. Melillo, "California Unbound: Rethinking the 'End' of Unfree Labor in the Pacific World and Beyond," *California History* 100, no. 3 (Fall 2023), 27.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁹ Smith, *Freedom's Frontier*, 10.

false accusations that it perpetrated found themselves imperiled by the passage of the California Fugitive Slave Act in 1852.¹⁰ In response, some Black people left California, moving north to British Columbia.¹¹ Others chose to stay and fight, utilizing the same strategies they had developed in the Eastern United States. Members of the Black community worked as abolitionists, organized conventions to spearhead political campaigns, and raised money to fund landmark civil rights court cases and other causes.

Black men have often been credited as the leaders of Black political activism, eliding the participation of Black women. Indeed, historians have written much about the activities of Black men in nineteenth-century California with minimal reference to Black women, creating the impression that Black women made only minor contributions to the Black political work of the time. This thesis contends that Black women in California, exposed to the same injustices and dangers as Black men, engaged fully in the fight for equal rights.¹²

There are many reasons why the political actions of Black women in Gold Rush California have remained under-studied. Primary source materials detailing the activities of the Black community are, in general, scant. Neglect, fire, and flood destroyed many records.¹³ Because the Black population was small, especially compared to the much larger Chinese population, the Black community did not attract the attention of many nineteenth-century California journalists and writers.¹⁴ Records revealing Black women's activities remain particularly elusive. In the rare case that a Black woman appeared in a California newspaper of

¹⁰ California Legislature, *The Statutes of California passed at the Third Session of the Legislature* (San Francisco: G.K. Fitch & Co. and V.E. Geiger & Co. State Printers, 1852), 67.

¹¹ Rudolph Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 240.

¹² Willi Coleman, "African American Women and Community Development in California, 1848-1900," in *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California*, eds. Lawrence B. de Graaf and Quintard Taylor (Los Angeles: Autry Museum of Western Heritage in Association with Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 111.

¹³ Daniels, *Pioneer Urbanites: A social and Cultural History of Black San Francisco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), xix.

¹⁴ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, ix.

the day, the common Victorian practice of referring to married women with the honorific “Mrs.” followed by the husband’s name effectively erased their individual identities. Modern historians have either obscured or overlooked Black women’s activities by using gender neutral terms, such as “the Black community” when describing Black activity, concealing those areas where Black women may have had a role, or crediting only the husband for an endeavor in which the wife also participated. Following Victorian norms that conditioned the shape of Black protest toward political goals that primarily affected men also tended to silence Black female voices.¹⁵

Existing records tend to focus on the Black middle-class - those who were able to accumulate wealth - stressing racial uplift and opportunity while paying scant attention to the Black working class, but the historical erasure of Black women’s accomplishments is not limited to the poor.¹⁶ Unable to escape the stigma of inferiority, nineteenth-century Black women’s achievements have often been ignored by white society.¹⁷ Historian Deborah Gray White attributed their invisibility to the Black woman’s condition of double oppression: what is important to Blacks is invisible to whites, what is important to women is invisible to men.¹⁸

That said, there are three notable Black women commonly identified in history books for their important political work in Gold Rush California: entrepreneur and financier, real estate magnate, and abolitionist Mary Ellen Pleasant; former slave, real estate magnate and philanthropist Biddy Mason; and educator Elizabeth Thorn Scott Flood. By focusing almost exclusively on this trio, historians have created the misimpression that they were the only Black

¹⁵ Patrick Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 6.

¹⁶ Marne Campbell, *Making Black Los Angeles: Class, Gender, and Community, 1850 – 1917* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016) 5.

¹⁷ Lawrence B. de Graaf, “Race, Sex, and Region: Black Women in the American West, 1850 -1920,” *Pacific Historical Review* 49, no. 2 (May 1980): 285-313.

¹⁸ Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1985), 23.

women in Gold Rush California whose achievements merit mention. This thesis seeks to show that, though exceptional, these three women represent work being done by the entire Black female community during the Gold Rush.

Black women's activities have also been overlooked because scholars do not recognize their efforts as political. With Victorian social norms discouraging women from public political displays, Black women's actions largely supported the more public political work of Black men. Black women's political work in Gold Rush California took the less visible forms of fundraising, community building, social work, hospitality, and education. Yet these undertakings proved crucially important. They provided the ground upon which political campaigns and social movements blossomed. This paper seeks to redefine "activism" to include this less conspicuous political work, for without it the civil rights advances achieved by the Black community in Gold Rush California would have been impossible. Yet finding the relevant data has not been easy.

The primary challenge in researching this thesis was to locate places where Black women's political activism was suggested, alluded to, or could be inferred. It required reviewing available primary sources but reading between the lines, re-examining Black women's work with the presumption that they were keenly aware of, and impacted by, the anti-Black politics that dominated Gold Rush California. It required holding the belief that Black women were not spectators but actors, with the courage and resolve to do whatever necessary to protect their families and improve their living conditions. By viewing Black women's actions in Gold Rush California through a lens of presumed agency, this thesis teases out clues that provide evidence of Black women's political activism.

The search for signs of political activism begins pre-migration. Black women activists traveling to California in the nineteenth century likely displayed political behavior in their state

of origin. When they moved to California they brought with them their propensity toward activism, as well as personal, family, and community histories of strategic responses to racism. Facing similar challenges in California, it can be assumed that they repeated these same, often well-honed strategies. This thesis presents the scholarship of historians who have identified social and cultural precepts that governed the free Black community in the East, as well as conventions of enslaved Black people, to explain the various forms Black women's activism took post-migration.

Historiography

Nineteenth-century northern Black women held the same political convictions as the northern Black community at large, and several monographs consulted for this thesis illuminated their activism. *The Fugitive's Gibraltar: Escaping Slaves and Abolitionism in New Bedford, Massachusetts* (2009) by historian Kathryn Grover provided comprehensive background for how New Bedford, Massachusetts, the port city of origin for many Black California migrants in the nineteenth century, became a magnet for fugitive slaves and other people of African descent, and developed into a hotbed of anti-slavery activism.¹⁹ *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626 – 1863* (2003) by historian Leslie M. Harris examined the history of Black activism in New York City, tracing four periods of political work and class consciousness, from 1626 through the United States Civil War.²⁰ Historian Patrick Rael's *Black Identity and*

¹⁹ Kathryn Grover, *The Fugitive's Gibraltar: Escaping Slaves and Abolitionism in New Bedford, Massachusetts* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 11.

²⁰ Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 8.

Black Protest in the Antebellum North (2002) traced the emergence of Black protest thought in the North and how it developed into two idea sets - racial uplift and Black nationalism.²¹

Religion and the Black church loomed large in Black communities during this period, and several scholars have examined how the relationship of Black people to the church expressed itself through activism. *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (2000) by historian Eddie S. Glaude described how the Old Testament Bible story of Exodus resonated with many Black people in the United States and translated into notions of racial solidarity, profoundly shaping Black American politics in the nineteenth century.²² *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African American Women and Religion* (2010) by Bettye Collier-Thomas presented political initiatives that developed in the Black church, but also revealed the breadth of the oppression and suppression of Black church women in the United States.²³

Three monographs and one journal article consulted for this thesis focused on beliefs that informed the sensibilities of nineteenth-century free Black women specifically. In *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (2017) historian Brittney C. Cooper presented the intellectual genealogy of “race women,” the female counterpart to “race men,” highlighting women throughout United States history who argued for a Black-woman centered theory of racial discourse, as existing ideas did not demarcate the unique experience of Black womanhood.²⁴ Though Cooper’s history began in the late nineteenth century, nascent strains of this movement are evident as early as the 1850’s, that is, during the California Gold Rush. In *All Bound Up Together: The Woman Question in African American Public Culture 1830 -1900*

²¹ Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest*, 5.

²² Eddie S. Glaude, *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early nineteenth century Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 16.

²³ Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African American Women and Religion* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), xvi.

²⁴ Brittney C. Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 14.

(2007), historian Martha S. Jones located Black women's work in the United States in churches, antislavery societies, literary circles, mutual aid organizations, schools, and war relief agencies, arguing that these areas served as training grounds for political activity and expanded Black women's public capacities.²⁵ *Beauty Shop Politics: African American Women's Activism in the Beauty Industry* (2010) by historian Tiffany M. Gill explained the strategic importance of the beauty industry as it served to form Black women's identities. She also traced how these entrepreneurial shops propelled some beauticians into political civil rights work during the nineteenth century that continued into the twentieth century.²⁶ In her article "Black Ideals of Womanhood in the Late Victorian Era" historian Shirley J. Carlson explained how the "ideal Black woman" of the nineteenth century lived a dual existence, embodying the genteel behaviors that satisfied the "culture of womanhood" as required by white Victorian society, but also displaying attributes of womanhood valued by her own community.²⁷

Meanwhile, enslaved Black women who traveled to California during the Gold Rush brought with them practices, beliefs, and objectives that often differed from the ideologies of free Black women and several scholars have provided important insights into their pre-migration lived experiences. *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (1996) by historian Brenda E. Stevenson focused on the activities of slaveholders and slaves in Loudon County, Virginia; but the domestic conditions, gender responsibilities, and extended family and kinship structures that she explored were universal to slaves throughout the South.²⁸ *Labor of*

²⁵ Martha S. Jones, *All Bound Up Together: The Woman Question in African American Public Culture, 1830-1900* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 9.

²⁶ Tiffany M. Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics: African American Women's Activism in the Beauty Industry* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 9.

²⁷ Shirley J. Carlson, "Black Ideals of Womanhood in the Late Victorian Era," in *The Journal of Negro History* 77, no. 2 (Spring 1992), 61.

²⁸ Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), x.

Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present (1985) by historian Jacqueline Jones chronicled the changes in Black women's work before and after the U.S. Civil War, with chapters describing the skillset enslaved Black women would later utilize in entrepreneurial endeavors once in California.²⁹ *Ar'n't I A Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (1985) by historian Deborah Gray White pointed out the triple constraints endured by Black female slaves – being Black in a white-dominated society, enslaved in an otherwise free society, and female in a society ruled by men. White explained how this unique condition created conflicting conceptualizations of Black womanhood – the “jezebel” and the “mammy” - which affected Black women's movements in community life.³⁰ Historian Juliet E. K. Walker's article, “Racism, Slavery, and Free Enterprise: Black Entrepreneurship Before the Civil War,” revealed the scope, diversity, and multidimensional character of Black business activities among both free and enslaved Black men and women. These four works provided a baseline for comprehending the general character, capabilities, and objectives of enslaved and recently free Black women pioneers before their migration. This thesis will show how these elements shaped their civil rights activism once in Gold Rush California.

This thesis also engaged scholarly works detailing the experiences of specific Black women. The first place many scholars start when researching the history of Black Californians is the earliest monograph published on the subject, *The Negro Trailblazers of California*, written by journalist and historian Delilah Beasley in 1918. Beasley scoured the archives at the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, as well as newspapers of the day for incidents and anecdotes illuminating Black history in California. She also gathered oral histories from

²⁹ Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, Inc. 1985), 9.

³⁰ White, *Ar'n't I A Woman?* 15.

Black California pioneers and their children. Beasley's book included the educational, social, and occupational accomplishments of specific Black residents of Northern California, which sometimes read like a "Who's Who" of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Black society.³¹ Her research approach unearthed a wealth of information about Black women's work in a variety of California institutions and was an invaluable resource for this project.

Despite the obvious value of Beasley's path-breaking book, later historians writing about the history of Black people in the western United States often dismissed her work. In his 1987 introduction to *The Black West*, historian William Katz called her an "amateur historian," with an "untrained approach [that] was often inadequate."³² Katz' book, as well as historian Rudolph Lapp's *Blacks in Gold Rush California* (1977), historian William Savage's *Blacks in the West* (1976), and historian Quintard Taylor's *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528 – 1990* (1998), all cover the same ground as Beasley, but do not devote nearly as much attention to the activities of Black women in California. In these subsequent books chapters covering Black civil rights work Katz, Lapp, Savage, and Taylor focused primarily on the four California State Conventions of Colored Citizens, held between 1855 and 1865, whose delegates were exclusively men. Other than acknowledging contributions by the usual suspects – Pleasant, Mason, and Flood -- Katz, Lapp and Savage largely ignored Black women's presence in Gold Rush California.³³ Thus Beasley's work remains important as foundational scholarship in the study of Black women in the California Gold Rush.

³¹ Delilah L. Beasley, *The Negro Trail-Blazers of California* (Fairfield, CA: James Stevenson Publisher, 1918), 98.

³² William Loren Katz, *The Black West: A Pictorial History*, 3rd ed. (Seattle: Open Hand Publishing, Inc. 1987), xiii.

³³ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 120, 210; W. Sherman Savage, *Blacks in the West* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1976), 133, 135, 140; Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West 1528 – 1990* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), 79, 86, 91.

Admittedly, Bidley Mason and Mary Ellen Pleasant loomed large among Black pioneer women in California during their lifetimes; therefore, this historiography would be incomplete without them. *The Force of a Feather: The Search for a Lost Story of Slavery and Freedom* (2002) by historian DeEtta Demaratus detailed Bidley Mason's nineteenth-century efforts to sue for freedom. Demaratus also described the travails of Hannah Embers, the other Black woman involved in the lawsuit, whose ambivalence over exercising her freedom revealed the complications of personal entanglements between slave master and the enslaved.³⁴ Historian Dolores Hayden's important article, "Bidley Mason's Los Angeles, 1856 – 1891," revealed how Mason incorporated other Black women in her prodigious charitable work and community building in Los Angeles.³⁵ This thesis argues that Mason's work required the support of a body of unnamed Black women and argues that their efforts are worth mentioning.

Mary Ellen Pleasant remains one of the few Black women whose political work as an abolitionist and litigant for equal rights in Gold Rush California is well documented. Her reputation as a financier, real estate magnate, millionaire vodou queen, and sorceress are also well documented, so it is surprising that only two monographs narrate her fascinating life. Researchers often criticize *Mammy Pleasant* by Historian Helen Holdredge (1953), for its lack of historical rigor and for the author's fondness for racial stereotypes.³⁶ *The Making of "Mammy Pleasant: A Black Entrepreneur in nineteenth century San Francisco* (2003) by historian Lynn Hudson, provided more fact-based biographical information: however, there are many aspects of Pleasant's life that remain a mystery.³⁷ Historian Tricia Martineau Wagner's compendium of

³⁴ DeEtta Demaratus, *The Force of a Feather: The Search for a Lost Story of Slavery and Freedom* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2002), 117.

³⁵ Dolores Hayden, "Bidley Mason's Los Angeles 1856 – 1891," in *California History* 68, no. 3 (Fall 1989), 99.

³⁶ Helen Holdredge, *Mammy Pleasant* (New York, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1953), 3; Lynn M. Hudson, *The Making of "Mammy Pleasant"* (Chicago: The University of Illinois Press, 2003), 6.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 9.

biographical sketches, *African American Women of the Old West* (1998) also included chapters on Bidley Mason and Mary Ellen Pleasant, as well as educator Elizabeth Thorn Scott Flood.³⁸

Journal articles and essays provided a richer vein for research about Black women's activism in California than books. Historian Barbara Y. Welke's 2003 essay, "Rights of Passage: Gendered-Rights Consciousness and the Quest for Freedom, San Francisco, California, 1850 – 1870," in *African American Women Confront the West: 1600-2000* edited by Historians Quintard Taylor and Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, argued that late nineteenth-century California civil rights were gendered, elucidating the social context within which Black female activism took place in San Francisco.³⁹ "Race, Sex, and Region: Black Women in the American West, 1850 – 1920" (1980) by Historian Lawrence de Graaf provided a statistical analysis of the Black female population in the western United States, addressing their occupations and their social activities while detailing the group's unique traits and challenges.⁴⁰ He also credited free Black women with cultivating the intellectual and moral culture of the Black community in nineteenth-century California.⁴¹ Historian Willi Coleman's essay, "African American Women and Community Development, 1848-1900," pointed to sites of Black women's activism in the United States, such as abolition, litigation, the church, education, fundraising, and racial uplift efforts, while also describing their lived experience in this racially hostile and patriarchal environment, areas upon which this paper aims to expand.⁴²

³⁸ Tricia Martineau Wagner, *African American Women of the Old West* (Guilford, CT: Twodot of Morris Book Publishing, 2007), 1, 91, 103.

³⁹ Barbara Y. Welke, "Rights of Passage: Gendered-Rights Consciousness and the Quest for Freedom, San Francisco, California, 1850-1870," in *African American Women Confront the West: 1600 – 2000*, eds. Quintard Taylor and Shirley Ann Wilson Moore (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), 74.

⁴⁰ Graaf, "Race, Sex and Region," 289, 291.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 306.

⁴² Coleman, "African American Women and Community Development in California," 103.

Several books about Black history in the West explored how the racially and culturally diverse California population of the nineteenth century impacted the Black community. Historian Arnaldo De León, in *Racial Frontiers: Africans, Chinese, and Mexicans in Western America, 1848 – 1890* (2002) emphasized what these three minority groups had in common as each struggled to adapt to the Anglo-American society, hoping assimilation would bring acceptance and citizenship.⁴³ In *Making San Francisco American: Cultural Frontiers in the Urban West 1846 – 1906*, historian Barbara Berglund focused on San Francisco’s exceptional racial and ethnic diversity, the imbalanced sex ratios, and social fluidity; recognizing restaurants, hotels, boardinghouses and spaces for entertainment as cultural frontiers.⁴⁴ Historian Marne Campbell’s *Making Black Los Angeles: Class, Gender, and Community, 1850 – 1917* expanded upon her 2012 article about Black female entrepreneurs, “African American Women, Wealth Accumulation, and Social Welfare Activism in nineteenth century Los Angeles.” Both works drew from an extensive database to show that the Black working-class, largely through the efforts of Black women, employed cross-racial community building for economic security.⁴⁵ *Aristocracy of Color: Race and Reconstruction in California and the West 1850 -1890* by historian Timothy Bottoms, however, painted a much more contentious picture, describing how people of color resisted Anglo-American’s efforts to create a binary regime of “white and non-white” and competed against one other for status within the developing racial hierarchy.⁴⁶

Journal articles also provided a variety of perspectives on racial and cultural diversity in Gold Rush California. Historian Sucheng Chan’s “A People of Exceptional Character: Ethnic

⁴³ Arnaldo De León, *Racial Frontiers: Africans, Chinese, and Mexicans in Western America, 1848-1890* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002), 3.

⁴⁴ Barbara Berglund, *Making San Francisco American: Cultural Frontiers in the Urban West 1846-1906* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 10.

⁴⁵ Campbell, *Making Black Los Angeles*, 4.

⁴⁶ Bottoms, *Aristocracy of Color*, 7, 93.

Diversity, Nativism, and Racism in the California Gold Rush” examined the complex interplay among the many categories of immigrants in California, illuminating how Anglo-American nativism, ideologies of Manifest Destiny, and class antagonism mixed to generate the 1851 Foreign Miners Tax, expulsion campaigns, and violence against a variety of unwanted ethnic groups.⁴⁷ In “We Feel the Want of Protection: The Politics of Law and Race in California,” historian Shirley Ann Moore also examined California’s multiracial political dynamics and how nativism and racism affected all people of color in California to varying degrees, contending that different ethnic groups often vied for inclusion in the citizenry at the expense of other minority groups.⁴⁸ Agreeing with Chan’s assessment, Moore maintained that though many newcomers to California experienced oppression and hostility, the unique cultural history of Black migrants differed substantially from that of Native Americans, Chinese, Mexicans, and others from around the globe. Subsequently, the obstacles faced by Black people, and their response to those obstacles, differed as well.⁴⁹

Books that focused on specific regions of California, when considered together, revealed differences between Black communities in large urban settings, such as San Francisco and Sacramento, and those in smaller, rural mining towns. *Pioneer Urbanites: A Social and Cultural History of Black San Francisco* by historian Douglas Henry Daniels described the highly literate, optimistic, and motivated Black population arriving from free states who established the large and vibrant community in the City by the Bay.⁵⁰ *Pioneers of Negro Origin* by historian Sue Bailey Thurman provided biographical sketches of notable Black individuals in San Francisco.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Sucheng Chan, “A People of Exceptional Character: Ethnic Diversity, Nativism, and Racism in the California gold Rush.” *California History* 79, no. 2 (Summer 2000), 72.

⁴⁸ Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, “We Feel the Want of Protection: The Politics of Law and ace in California, 1848-1878,” in *California History* 81, no. ¾ (Summer 2003), 114.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 116.

⁵⁰ Daniels, *Pioneer Urbanites*, 12.

⁵¹ Sue Bailey Thurman, *Pioneers of Negro Origin* (San Francisco: Acme Publishing Company, 1952), 5-62.

A Walking Tour of the Black Presence in San Francisco During the Nineteenth Century: A Black History Week Event, by authors Elizabeth L. Parker and James Abajian, provided maps of the downtown locations of Black businesses and homes owned by Black people, and anecdotes about those community members.⁵² Regional booklets offered details about the small Black populations in those respective communities. *Visions Toward Tomorrow: The History of the East Bay Afro-American Community, 1852 – 1977* by historians Lawrence P. Crouchett, Lonnie G. Bunch, III, and Martha Kendall Winnacker described the growth of the Black community in Oakland just after the peak of the Gold Rush and its development as the East Bay’s first substantial town.⁵³ *John Grider’s Century: African Americans in Solano, Napa, and Sonoma Counties from 1845 – 1925* by author Sharon McGriff-Payne; *To Know My Name: A Chronological History of African Americans in Santa Cruz County* by historian Phil Reeder; *Black Life in Sacramento Valley, 1850 – 1934* by political scientist Michele Shover and journalist Thomas C. Fleming; and *Black Pioneers in Yuba County* by historian Carol Withington offered similar details about Black mining communities.⁵⁴ Often issued for town anniversaries and written by local historians, these booklets provided details about specific local practices of the area’s Black communities.

The California legislature’s tolerance of slavery and unfree labor in the state supported the racially hostile environment that bedeviled Black residents, and several books have explored the paradox of slavery persisting in a nominally free state. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 along

⁵² Elizabeth L. Parker and James Abajian, *A Walking Tour of the Black Presence in San Francisco during the Nineteenth Century: A Black History Week Event* (San Francisco: San Francisco African American Historical and Cultural Society, 1974), 1.

⁵³ Crouchett, Bunch, and Winnacker, *Visions Toward Tomorrow*, 3.

⁵⁴ Sharon McGriff-Payne, *John Grider’s Century: African Americans in Solano, Napa, and Sonoma Counties from 1845 to 1925* (New York: iUniverse Inc., 2009), 5; Phil Reeder, *To Know My Name: A Chronological History of African Americans in Santa Cruz County* (Santa Cruz: Cliffside Publishing, 1995), 4-11; Michele Shover and Thomas C. Fleming, *Black Life in the Sacramento Valley, 1850-1934* (San Francisco: Max Millard, 1998), 3-24; Carol Withington, *Black Pioneers in Yuba County* (Yuba City: Carol Withington, 1987), 11.

with the California Fugitive Slave Act of 1852 rendered the freedom of all Black Californians precarious. Not only did those acts imperil actual fugitives, but free Black people wrongfully accused of being fugitives could not defend themselves in court to protect themselves against removal to the South. The ability to testify therefore became a focal point for Black activism. Several books explored the responses to this political environment. *California A Slave State* (2023) by historian Jean Pfaelzer and *Freedom's Frontier: California and the Struggle Over Unfree Labor, Emancipation, and Reconstruction* (2013) by historian Stacey L. Smith both described extensive forms of unfree labor in California, from the presence of Black slaves mining for Southern owners to Native American enslavement and guardianships, Latin American peonage, and Chinese coolieism and prostitution.⁵⁵

Two articles consulted for this thesis also covered the topic of slavery in antebellum California. Stacey L. Smith's 2011 essay "Remaking Slavery in a Free State: Masters and Slaves in Gold Rush California" focused exclusively on Black chattel slavery, contending that though Black enslaved people took advantage of the chaotic nature of slavery in California, by running away or negotiating for better working conditions, flexibility in the institution waned as pro-slavery lawmakers passed legislation promoting the interests of slaveholders.⁵⁶ "California Unbound: Rethinking the 'End' of Unfree Labor in the Pacific World and Beyond" (2023) by historians Benjamin Madley and Edward D. Melillo expanded the time frame and geography for these systems of bondage, framing California as "only one node in a vast network of unfree labor circuits," offering a counterbalance to the Atlantic World slave trade narrative.⁵⁷ These works

⁵⁵ Jean Pfaelzer, *California A Slave State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023), 17; Smith, *Freedom's Frontier*, 9.

⁵⁶ Stacey L. Smith, "Remaking Slavery in a Free State: Masters and Slaves in Gold Rush California," *Pacific Historical Review* 80, no. 1 (February 2011): 35.

⁵⁷ Madley and Melillo. "California Unbound," 24–56.

integrated California into the history of the Civil War, and indicated how these various unfree labor systems impacted the politics of the Black community.⁵⁸

Several works attending specifically to Civil Rights activities in nineteenth-century California attempted to fill the gender gap. In *West of Jim Crow: The Fight against California's Color Line* (2021), historian Lynn Hudson identified Black women pioneers in gender and racial justice, beyond the usual Mason-Pleasant-Flood triumvirate.⁵⁹ *The Colored Conventions Movement: Black Organizing in the nineteenth century*, edited by historians Gabrielle Foreman, Jim Casey, and Sarah Lynn Patterson, is a compendium of essays attesting to the political zeal of Black women during the nineteenth century. "A Word Fitly Spoken: Edmonia Highgate, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and the 1864 Syracuse Convention" by historian Eric Gardner addressed the erasure of women's work in connection with the Colored Conventions.⁶⁰ "Black Organizing, Print Advocacy, and Collective Authorship: The Long History of the Colored Conventions Movement" by historian P. Gabrielle Foreman contended that though prohibited from joining political conventions as delegates, Black women participated off the convention floor, impacting political discourse in boardinghouses, literary societies, and other communal spaces.⁶¹ "Where Did They Eat? Where Did They Stay? Interpreting Material Culture of Black Women's Domesticity in the context of the Colored Conventions" by historian Psyche Williams-Forsen argued that Black women used hospitality to "engage the market economy and enact social

⁵⁸ Smith, *Freedom's Frontier*, 4.

⁵⁹ Lynn M. Hudson, *West of Jim Crow: The Fight Against California's Color Line* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2021), 6.

⁶⁰ Eric Gardner, "A Word Fitly Spoken: Edmonia Highgate, Frances Watkins Harper, and the 1864 Syracuse Convention" in *The Colored Conventions Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century*, eds. P. Gabrielle Foreman, Jim Casey, and Sarah Lynn Patterson (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 74.

⁶¹ P. Gabrielle Forman, "Black Organizing, Print Advocacy, and Collective Authorship: The Long History of the Colored Conventions Movement" in *Ibid*, 35.

change.”⁶² “Performing Politics, Creating Community: Antebellum Black Conventions as Political Rituals” by historian Erica L. Ball described how the performance of political rituals within the Colored Conventions included the participation of women and signaled “respectability” to white society, enacting a form of activism.⁶³ Though some of these essays fall outside the geographic and temporal range covered by this thesis, they provide evidence that despite gender discrimination that obscured their activism, Black women in nineteenth-century California conducted political work in a variety of ways.

Despite societal gender expectations, antebellum Californian Black women found creative ways to support civil rights causes. To illuminate their activist history, this thesis will address six key questions. What form did Black women’s activism take in Gold Rush California and how did it differ from the activism of Black men? Did Black women have the same political objectives as Black men? How much were Black women’s actions proscribed or limited by “respectability politics”? How can we re-read Black women’s supportive actions as political and essential for the success of a campaign? Who are some of the Black female activists whose names have been overlooked or minimized? And, finally, how did Black women’s antebellum political work in California inform the direction of their activism after the Civil War?

By identifying nineteenth-century Black women’s political activism pre-migration and revealing how they repeated those actions post-migration in California, this thesis will locate the elusive political work of Black women in Gold Rush California and clarify the role Black women played in the Black community’s multi-pronged strategy to procure civil rights. Part one will describe the migration of pioneer Black women and men to California, why they moved,

⁶² Psyche Williams-Forsen, “Where Did They Eat? Where Did They Stay? Interpreting the Material culture of Black Women’s Domesticity in the context of the Colored Conventions,” in *The Colored Conventions Movement*, 88.

⁶³ Erica L. Ball, “Performing Politics, Creating Community: Antebellum Black Conventions as Political Rituals,” in *Ibid*, 157.

how they traveled, and the political landscape they encountered when they arrived. Part two will provide an overview of the ideologies held by free and enslaved Black people in the nineteenth century, the roots of those beliefs in Black culture, and how those notions informed the ways Black women expressed political agency. Part three will chronicle the political activity of nineteenth-century Black women in California, how they reproduced institutions developed in their states of origin and used those organizations to combat racial inequality in California. Contrary to the misperception that Black women in Gold Rush California were either bystanders or merely helpers in civil rights work, Black women were in fact political creatures. By supporting the Black community and political efforts financially, nurturing the needy, maintaining their households, educating their children, conforming to Victorian social standards, escaping bondage, and assisting others to escape, Black women in Gold Rush California embodied political activism. Indeed, it suffused every aspect of their lives.

PART ONE: CALIFORNIA MIGRATION

Early Migration of Black Women to California

Black women have been connected to California since 1535 when Hernando Cortés and his party of explorers landed on the peninsula. Cortés called it “California” after the mythic island in the romance novel *Las Sergas de Esplandian* (The Deeds of Esplandian), described as “close to the region of earthly paradise,” abounding in precious stones and gold. Cortés adopted the name to this land, believing that he and his men would unearth the treasure depicted in the story.⁶⁴ Written in 1510 by Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo, the novel chronicled the adventures of a Spanish prince who encounters Queen Califia, a ruler of Black Amazons on the island of California. “These women had energetic bodies and courageous ardent hearts, and they were very strong,” wrote Montalvo, an apt characterization of the Black pioneer women who would arrive in the nineteenth century.⁶⁵ Regrettably, Queen Califia suffered an ignominious fate. After falling in love with the prince she challenged him to battle demanding that if victorious, they would marry, however when she lost she was forced to admit that the prince’s European fiancée was more beautiful than herself. According to Historian Taharka Adé this sixteenth century “assimilationist propaganda, enforcing a hierarchal interpretation of Eurocentric norms,” effectively described the predicament faced by Black women Californians in the nineteenth century as they struggled against both racist and sexist mores that limited their options.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Beasley, *Negro Trail-Blazers*, 17; Kenneth Starr, *California: A History* (New York, Modern Library – Random House, 2007, Rev. ed.), 6.

⁶⁵ Garci Rodríguez De Montalvo, *The Labors of the Very Brave Knight Esplandián*, trans. William Thomas Little (Binghamton: New York, 1992), 458.

⁶⁶ Adé Taharka, *W.E.B. Du Bois’ Africa: Scrambling for a New Africa* (New York: Anthem Press, 2023), 97.

Historian Marne Campbell made the same point succinctly: for Black people the real California was no paradise.⁶⁷

Before the Gold Rush, Black people's presence in California was spotty. Historian Rudolph Lapp claimed that Black people first set foot on California soil in 1579 with the arrival of Sir Francis Drake. Drake's ship held three Black men and one Black woman -- probably captured from the Portuguese or Spanish in the Caribbean and South America during his global voyage -- when he landed in San Francisco.⁶⁸ English-speaking Black men and women arrived by sea in the 1820's as part of multi-racial ship crews. Attracted to Mexico's antislavery laws adopted after the nation's independence from Spain, many Black crew members abandoned ship to settle.⁶⁹ Though the identities of these initial Black newcomers remain anonymous, historian Theodore Hittell identified the first Black woman to arrive in California as Juana, an enslaved fourteen-year-old girl brought from Lima Peru to San Francisco in 1825.⁷⁰

One distinct group of Spanish colonists with African ancestry arrived in 1775 with Juan Bautista De Anza's expedition, comprising some of the founders of Los Angeles.⁷¹ These mixed-race migrants identified closely with their Spanish roots, however within the rigid Spanish hierarchal caste system mixed race *castas* were consigned to a lower rung, and subsequently experienced limited rights and benefits. With such restrictions they had little to lose by leaving Mexico to live on the fringes of the Spanish empire in Alta California.⁷² The War for Mexican Independence in 1810-1821 ended Spanish rule and along with it the Spanish caste system. In

⁶⁷ Campbell, *Making Black Los Angeles*, 14.

⁶⁸ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 2.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Theodore H. Hittell, *History of California* (San Francisco: N.J. Stone & Company, 1898), 2:115.

⁷¹ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 2.

⁷² Kelly Lytle Hernández, *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771-1965* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 27.

1834 Mexican governors moved to secularize the missions, intending to distribute mission lands to prominent *castas*, or Californios, and grant a portion to native Gabrielinos who had labored in the missions. Instead, the Californios kept the land for themselves, establishing wealthy rancheros.⁷³ Their elevated status was short lived. The United States went to war with Mexico in 1846, and with the end of the war and the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo on February 2, 1848, Mexico ceded California to the United States. In 1850, when California formally became a state, the mixed-race Californios suddenly found their social status rendered ambiguous as racial logic reclassified them as Negro.⁷⁴ Because the Californios did not self-identify as Black, and they were not legally classified as Black, their political activities are not the subject of this thesis.

The Black population in California grew slowly. With the Mexican American War, some Black men and women arrived in the capacity of servants or service personnel for military units.⁷⁵ In 1846 a Black woman called “Mary” became the first Black enslaved person to obtain freedom in the California courts. After traveling from Missouri with her owner to San Jose, she won her freedom legally through a Justice of the Peace, provided she reimburse her master for his expenses to bring her to California.⁷⁶ There exists evidence that a small party of Black people - eight Black men and one Black woman - arrived in California in 1847 with a group of Mormons. Because these first Black populations in California were small, transient, largely

⁷³ Hunt Janin and Ursula Carlson, *The Californios: A History, 1769-1890* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2017), 23.

⁷⁴ José Luis Benavides, “‘Californios! Whom Do You Support?’ El Clamor Público’s Contradictory Role in the Racial Formation Process in Early California,” *California History* 84, no. 2 (Winter 2006/2007), 54.

⁷⁵ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 7.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

unfree, and mostly male, it is unlikely that any sort of community existed among the earliest Black Californians.⁷⁷

Free Black Women and Gold Rush California

When California entered the Union as a free state in September of 1850, it had already attracted the attention of Black people. Like white treasure-seekers, Black people were eager to profit from the potential financial bonanza of California gold mining. Historian Rudolph Lapp contended that “the Gold Rush served to dramatize the essential Americanism of Black aspirations. Nineteenth-century notions of progress and material wealth were as much the possession of Blacks as of the most upward striving white Americans.”⁷⁸ California’s promise of economic opportunity came at a time when Black workers on the East coast were facing new competition from Irish immigrants escaping the Irish potato famine for unskilled jobs in the United States.⁷⁹ Black people’s optimism that capitalism would improve their status is remarkable given the many ways in which the nation had failed them. Nevertheless, they had faith that the free-market United States system was essentially just and would allow them to enter American society if they made financial gains.⁸⁰

Unlike many white treasure seekers who planned to extract riches from California and then return home, most Black migrants planned to stay. From 1846 to 1849, while California was a territory and not yet fully formed, white California residents had yet to develop and implement the social and economic barriers that restricted free Black people in the East, or in free midwestern states, such as Illinois, Ohio, and Indiana. Black newcomers were hopeful that they

⁷⁷ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 11.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, x.

⁷⁹ Harris, *Shadow of Slavery*, 7.

⁸⁰ Daniels, *Pioneer Urbanites*, 27.

could influence the new state's direction.⁸¹ California's multi-racial heritage and the absence of an extended history of explicitly legalized chattel slavery suggested that California would offer greater social fluidity and equality.⁸² The number of white abolitionists heading to the California gold fields and promoting progressive anti-slavery politics reinforced that optimism.⁸³ Black and white people alike viewed California as a land of opportunity where hard-working, enterprising individuals might remake themselves. George Washington Dennis came to California as a slave in 1849, having been promised his freedom if he helped his owner, who was also his father, establish the El Dorado Hotel in San Francisco. Dennis worked as a porter for \$250 a month and with his savings purchased his own freedom as well as his mother's. Eventually Dennis saved enough to purchase property, and he opened a livery stable in San Francisco.⁸⁴ As the Black population grew, the proliferation of social and cultural institutions provided individuals a chance to achieve status and recognition in ways that might elevate their social standing within the Black community and boost their self-esteem. Daniels pointed out, "it was only natural that being a church leader, newspaper columnist, Masonic officer, or guest at refined social affairs would be meaningful to former slaves and descendants of slaves."⁸⁵

In addition to economic opportunities and hopes for social mobility, many Black men and women fled the East coast after the passage of the federal Fugitive Slave Law in 1850. Numerous Black residents in New England and upper New York had escaped slavery in the South and had been living in the North in relative security. The passage of the 1850 law placed them in peril: it allowed slave hunters to seize any Black person, fugitive or free, accuse them of

⁸¹ Crouchett, Bunch, and Winnacker, *Visions Toward Tomorrow*, 2.

⁸² Forbes, "Early African Heritage," 89.

⁸³ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 17.

⁸⁴ Shover and Fleming, *Black Life in the Sacramento Valley*, 7.

⁸⁵ Daniels, *Pioneer Urbanites*, 109.

being a runaway, and escort them back to southern bondage.⁸⁶ It also facilitated the forced deputization of free citizens in support of such hunts. Encouraged by abolitionist Frederick Douglass, who had previously reported in *The North Star* that the California Constitutional Convention had defeated provisions that would pose financial obstacles for Black migrants, Black people put distance between themselves and slave catchers in the East by migrating to California.⁸⁷

Though not enslaved, free Black southerners nevertheless faced oppressive economic and social practices, motivating some of them to migrate. For white southerners, free Black men and women living in the South posed a threat to their security and welfare, especially those free Black people who interacted with enslaved people.⁸⁸ Fearful of competition, white people limited opportunities available to free Black residents. Historian Brenda E. Stevenson reported that in Loudon County, Virginia, authorities made it a felony for Black people to prepare medicine of any kind, banned Black people from participating in public performances or exhibitions, sell goods, or work as barbers. They also censured preachers and teachers. Few Black people had the financial resources to purchase land or start a business, and white people prohibited them from skilled employment, relegating them to cheap day labor.⁸⁹ All of these proscriptions devastated urban free Black economies, culture, and social life, compelling them to migrate to less hostile locales.⁹⁰

Whether from the north or the south, free Black people migrating to Gold Rush California embodied demographic patterns that differed significantly from urban centers created

⁸⁶ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 18.

⁸⁷ Pfaelzer, *California a Slave State*, 129, 136; Lapp, 16.

⁸⁸ Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*, 290.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 296.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 162, 291.

by Black people during the Great Migration after World War I. According to historian Douglas Henry Daniels, typical nineteenth-century Black men migrating to San Francisco were “robust, mature adults, primarily single men with few dependents, urbanites who were highly literate, cosmopolitan, [with] a fascination with technology and [a] willingness to sacrifice present material comforts for future economic gain or a desired lifestyle.”⁹¹ Lapp claimed that they were “in many ways exceptional and represented a higher degree of initiative, aggressiveness and tenacity than most Americans, Black or white.”⁹² Black men tended to arrive first and start businesses if they had the skills and the capital. If they did not, then they found employment in which they could establish themselves before sending for their families in the East.⁹³ Those without families indicated their intention to start one by ordering Black mail order brides. These intrepid young Black women ventured West to leave poverty and oppressive conditions while searching for love and a fulfilling marriage. Men would choose the youngest women they could find, hoping they would survive childbirth in frontier conditions that were typically unsanitary. Often these brides would find themselves caring not only for their own children but for children from the husband’s previous marriage in which the wife had died.⁹⁴

As the benefits of California beckoned, the small free Black population grew quickly, however throughout the antebellum years Black people remained a distinct minority in California.⁹⁵ Starting in 1848, Black people from the States, West Indies, and South America began to trickle in as gold fever took hold, picking up speed by 1850. The 1850 United States Federal Census counted 962 free Black Californians, amounting to approximately one percent of

⁹¹ Daniels, *Pioneer Urbanites*, 12.

⁹² Graaf, “Race, Sex, and Region,” 289.

⁹³ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 186.

⁹⁴ Katz, *Black West*, 289.

⁹⁵ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 11.

the California population, with free Black women numbering 90, comprising only one-tenth of free Black inhabitants. Three years later, in 1852, the population had doubled, numbering close to 2,000.⁹⁶ By 1860, census takers counted 2,827 free Black men and 1,259 free Black women for a total of 4,086. Though the Black population remained roughly one percent of the overall California population, the number of Black women increased in proportion to Black men to become a third of the overall Black population.

It should be mentioned that census numbers in California's early history have proven to be tricky and unreliable, especially as they relate to race. Because there were no classifications for other persons of color, the number representing the Black population in the 1850's census also includes Chinese, Pacific Islanders, Native Americans, and Mexicans.⁹⁷ By 1860 the "free colored" category had been split into Black and mulatto, and separate categories for "Asiatic" and "Indian" had been created. This change would appear to improve the accuracy of racial classifications; however since the determination of racial identity was left to the judgment of the census enumerator, racial classifications could change from one decade to the next depending on the census taker, their instructions, and the subject under review.⁹⁸ Enumerators easily became confused by subtle skin color distinctions between foreign-born Black people of African descent, a dark-skinned person of central American background, a swarthy Iberian, or a dark-complexioned Hispanicized Indian.⁹⁹ Additionally, the transitory nature of the Gold Rush created a fluidity in populations, making them difficult to count. Lapp has estimated that six to seven hundred Black people living in gold rush counties were of North American origin, but many

⁹⁶ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 22.

⁹⁷ Moore, "We Feel the Want," 105.

⁹⁸ Campbell, *Making Black Los Angeles*, 6.

⁹⁹ Daniels, *Pioneer Urbanites*, 82.

Black people of Latin American ancestry living throughout the state eventually returned to their country of origin, primarily Chile and Mexico.¹⁰⁰

Additional complications arose from California's status as a free state that nevertheless contained enslaved people. At the time census takers were not differentiating between free and enslaved Black people, and the 1849 state constitution had no provision for counting enslaved persons.¹⁰¹ Both free and enslaved people are recorded as "servants" in official records - evidence that some enslaved people were at least partly included in the count - but there were many more enslaved people who were not; their illegal status would have discouraged slaveholders from allowing any recording of their presence.¹⁰² Black people wary of the California State Fugitive Slave Law may have tried to present themselves as Indian, Mexican, or some other nationality. This was particularly likely among the Californios with African ancestry who, within stricter modes of racial classification, were re-categorized as Negro, losing rights, opportunities, and social position.¹⁰³ The California census of 1852 had additional controversies. At the time, debate raged in the United States congress over whether the new state should have one or two representatives in the House based on its population. Enumerators were tempted to inflate the number of people in the state by estimating, double counting individuals, and including crews on ships who were likely to leave.¹⁰⁴

Though the accuracy of census numbers may be in question, the population of Black women in antebellum California was undoubtedly small. Initially few free Black women migrated from the East as Black cultural values emphasizing kinship and family discouraged

¹⁰⁰ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 49.

¹⁰¹ Rudolph M. Lapp, "Negro Rights Activities in Gold Rush California" in *California Historical Society Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (March 1966): 3.

¹⁰² Campbell, *Making Black Los Angeles*, 8.

¹⁰³ Forbes, "Early African Heritage," 88.

¹⁰⁴ Warren C. Wood, "Fraud and the California State Census of 1852: Power and Demographic Distortion in Gold Rush California," *Southern California Quarterly* 100, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 16-20.

them from traveling long distances. Primitive living conditions on the frontier, the negligible number of other Black women in California, and isolation from other Black communities also proved major deterrents.¹⁰⁵ Despite these drawbacks, Black women did make the trip, differing from their white female counterparts in several ways. Generally, Black women migrants to California were older, their ages ranging from twenty to forty, and they tended to be married.¹⁰⁶ It is likely that Black women also weathered the transition from East to West more easily than white women. Because they did not experience domestic lifestyles the same way as Victorian white women, compelled to join the workforce by necessity rather than focusing solely on housekeeping and motherhood, they probably did not experience the same level of distress white women experienced when moving to the frontier.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, Black women tended to be more preoccupied by the hardships presented by their race, not by their status as women.¹⁰⁸

The general character of Black women migrants also differed from their white counterparts. Though both groups aspired to Victorian norms of femininity, white culture cast intelligence as masculine, prompting many white women to hide their intellect and defer to their husband's presumably superior judgment.¹⁰⁹ Conversely, the Black community appreciated the female intellect, and to that end, Black female migrants tended to be more literate than their white counterparts, and the Black population in general. The 1860 census showed that at a time when most Black people were illiterate, 75 percent of Black women in California could read and write.¹¹⁰ Additionally, Black men encouraged Black women to form their own views and express their ideas. Self-confident, outspoken, with a strong sense of racial awareness, "race women"

¹⁰⁵ Graaf, "Race, Sex, and Region," 290.

¹⁰⁶ Katz, *Black West*, 287.

¹⁰⁷ Graaf, "Race, Sex, and Region," 312.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Carlson, "Black Ideals of Womanhood," 62.

¹¹⁰ Coleman, "African American Women and Community Development," 102.

were highly esteemed by the Black community in California.¹¹¹ Because of this inherent political sensibility Black women in California were more likely than white women to become community activists.¹¹²

Though some Black women heading to California may have been unenthusiastic travelers, others exhibited the same adventurous spirit as male migrants. Most Black men and women traveled overland, enduring great hardship.¹¹³ White migrant Margaret Frink, who experienced a disastrous crossing of the Humboldt Sink, described in her journal on August 12, 1850, that within the crowd there had been “a Negro woman...tramping along through the heat and dust, carrying a cast iron bake stove on her head, with her provisions and a blanket piled on top – all she possessed in the world – bravely pushing on for California.”¹¹⁴ In recalling her experiences crossing the country in 1851 at the age of twelve with her mother and sister by wagon train, Black California pioneer Mary Sugg described the frequent sight of “smoldering frames and broken wheels of freight wagons, the bloated bodies of horses, broken gear, and sometimes the signs of freshly dug but smoothed over graves.” Her group faced threats from Mormons who tried to steal their horses, and Native Americans, who at first appeared friendly but whose undue interest in Mary prompted her mother to hide her in an empty sugar barrel hanging from the side of the wagon whenever Native Americans approached.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ Carlson, “Black Ideals of Womanhood,” 61.

¹¹² Katz, *Black West*, 285.

¹¹³ Quintard Taylor and Shirley Anne Wilson Moore, “The West of African American Women, 1600-2000” in *African American Women Confront the West*, 7.

¹¹⁴ Margaret Ann Frink, *Journal of the Adventure of a Party of California Gold-Seekers: Under the Guidance of Mr. Ledyard Frink During a Journey Across the Plains from Martinsville, Indiana to Sacramento California, from March 30, 1850, to September 17, 1850* (ca. 1897), 92.

¹¹⁵ Vernon Sugg McDonald, “The Pioneer Sugg Family: The Saga of An Early Day Family of Tuolumne County and the history of One of Sonora’s Outstanding Gold rush Homes” in *The Quarterly of the Tuolumne County Historical Society* Vol. 4, No. 1, (July – Sept 1964), 97.

Numerous Black men and women traveled to California by ship, unperturbed by the idea of sea travel since many had seafaring men in their families.¹¹⁶ Even so, traveling by ship could be challenging. Historian Carol Withington painted a vivid picture of the experience:

Black people who arrived from voyages by way of Cape Horn traveled about 18,000 miles for over five months, often clinging desperately to slanting bunks as their boats strained against lunging seas. As long months passed the supplies of fresh meat, fruit and vegetables were replaced by tainted meat, wormy bread, and putrid water as a daily fare. Weeks of inactivity, confinement in quarters and lack of proper food gave way to outbreaks of malaria, jaundice, and cholera. Many died on ship, due to lack of any medical care. In addition, there was the constant fear of shipwrecks and fires.¹¹⁷

Those who traveled by sea often paid for the journey by working onboard. For example, Anne Fuller arrived in California in 1852 as a stewardess on an eastern ship that took the route around Cape Horn. Incredibly, she made the trip twice. After marrying Black pioneer John Landeway in San Francisco, she and her husband returned East, traveling across Panama, but then came back to California in 1863 by sailing around Cape Horn a second time.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 12.

¹¹⁷ Carol Withington, *Black Pioneers of Yuba County* (Yuba City: Carol Withington, 1987), 11.

¹¹⁸ Sharon McGriff-Payne, *John Grider's Century: African Americans in Solano, Napa, and Sonoma Counties from 1845 – 1925* (New York: iUniverse, Inc., 2009), 53.



Figure 1. Migration routes taken to Gold Rush California. Image by Barry Evans and Holly Harvey.

Most Black newcomers lived in Northern California. New Englanders and New Yorkers tended to settle in San Francisco, the first stop for migrants arriving by sea. Black newcomers hailing from southern states preferred the more rural Sacramento, Stockton, and Marysville, all of which were close to rivers that made them ideally situated for servicing mining communities.¹¹⁹ Southern California, meanwhile, was relatively unaffected by the Gold Rush, remaining a frontier with racial boundaries that hewed to that of colonial Mexico, where anyone of African descent was governed by the same laws that free Black people enjoyed in the other states.¹²⁰ Once California became a state and migration increased, race relations changed in Southern California as white residents intensified their oppression of Mexicans, Chinese, and Native Americans. Black people also experienced prejudice but because the population was so small white people did not consider them a threat.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 116.

¹²⁰ Campbell, *Making Black Los Angeles*, 17.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

In the early days of the Gold Rush, Black people in mining communities experienced a relaxing of racial etiquette as all parties focused on extracting treasure. Though white people competed with Black people and other people of color for riches, everyone had the same objective - economic advancement - and so a tenuous but working racial democracy arose between white and Black gold miners.¹²² Some mining companies hired workers from a variety of cultural backgrounds: white Americans, Mexicans, Native Americans, free Black people, and enslaved Black people as well.¹²³ In addition, the presence of Black-owned mining companies indicated the opportunities available to enterprising Black miners. Robert Anthony established the first quartz mine in California, and Black men also established the Rare Ripe Gold and Silver Mining Company.¹²⁴ The names of mining towns indicated where Black men controlled certain claims: African Bar, Arroyo de los Negros, Negro Bar, Negro Bluff, Negro Butte, Negro Creek, Negro Flat, Negro Gulch, Negro Hill, Negro Slide, Nigger Bar, Nigger Bill Bend, Nigger Camp, Nigger Diggins, Nigger Hill, Nigger Jack Slough, Nigger Ravine, Nigger Tent, and Niggerville, to name a few.¹²⁵ Despite the attraction of treasure, the Black community in mining towns remained relatively small. Historian Phil Reeder contended that the low number of Black people in Santa Cruz County may have had benefits, for though “racism has always been a basic component in the socio-economic makeup of this community, it has been the more visible minorities – Native Americans, Californios, Chinese – which have borne the brunt of this mindless prejudice.”¹²⁶

¹²² Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 75.

¹²³ Savage, *Blacks in the West*, 78.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, 83.

¹²⁵ Erwin G. Gudde and Elisabeth K. Gudde, "Place Names. Part 1 & 2" in *California Gold Camps: A Geographical and Historical Dictionary of Camps, Towns, and Localities Where Gold Was Found and Mined; Wayside Stations and Trading Centers*, eds. Erwin G. Gudde and Elisabeth K. Gudde (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 13, 235, 236, 243.

¹²⁶ Reeder. *To Know My Name*, i.

With the dearth of Black women in California in the early 1850's, there was no substantial Black community; however the few Black women living in remote, rural environs did experience some benefits.¹²⁷ As racist behavior tended to be more relaxed in mining towns, it provided cover for interracial mixed married couples who sought isolation from white people, often placing themselves near Chinese mining communities where they were less likely to be victimized.¹²⁸ Work available to Black women living in mining towns included running boardinghouses and restaurants, laundering, and performing as entertainers. In Grass Valley one enterprising Black woman gave public piano concerts, charging fifty cents for admission.¹²⁹ Though it was not a common occupation, some Black women became prostitutes. One such mulatto woman named Priscilla, living in Grass Valley, had a Black lover as well as a white one. The white one killed the Black one and went free because there were no white witnesses to the murder.¹³⁰ However, living in mining towns exposed Black women to assault and robbery, which was rampant on the California frontier. One Black woman, Mrs. Tilghman, wife of a Marysville barber, experienced the first attempted stagecoach holdup while traveling between Camptonville and Marysville and died during the altercation.¹³¹

The political, intellectual, and cultural environment of California cities attracted Black female migrants traveling from urban centers in the East.¹³² With the presence of treasure seekers from around the world, the culturally diverse urban center took on a unique cosmopolitan character that impacted the lives of the Black men and women who settled there.¹³³ Since the Black community was too small to command a district of its own, Black people and Black

¹²⁷ Forbes, "Early African Heritage, 88.

¹²⁸ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 88.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, 90.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, 82.

¹³¹ *Ibid*, 84.

¹³² Graaf and Taylor, "Introduction," in *Seeking El Dorado*, 11.

¹³³ Daniels, *Pioneer Urbanites*, 82.

businesses in San Francisco could be found throughout the city. To escape white racism, Black people chose to live among other dark-skinned ethnic minority groups, such as Mexicans, Chinese, and Italians.¹³⁴ The Black community was itself diverse, including foreign-born Blacks from the West Indies, Jamaica, Canada, Central America, Latin America, and the Cape Verde Islands off the coast of Africa, creating a confluence of languages and cultures within a relatively confined geographic boundary.¹³⁵ In the early years of the Gold Rush, Black people resided near the wharves, then later moved to “Chili Hill,” an area populated by Latin-Americans with whom Black residents would socialize, frequenting the same saloons, gambling houses, and even a Christmas masquerade ball.¹³⁶

Historian Douglas Henry Daniels purported that San Francisco was segregated not by color but by class, identifying the various locations of Black people based on social divisions. Wealthy and middle-class Black people lived on Sacramento and Washington streets in the 4th and 6th wards.¹³⁷ Working-class Black families lived on secondary streets or back alleys on Broadway and Powell, or behind the Palace Hotel on Market Street. Meanwhile, people of all hues, including white people, congregated in a square block along Kearney Street to Pacific and Jackson. Washerwoman’s Bay -- located between Franklin, Octavia, Filbert, and Lombard streets -- presented a place for women of all races came to launder the weekly wash.¹³⁸ The Barbary Coast and Tenderloin were the poorest districts, possessing a few dives frequented by drunks and where white and Black women of the lowest class worked.¹³⁹ This cosmopolitan environment also impacted middle-class white men. Far from the law, East coast institutions, and the social

¹³⁴ Daniels, *Pioneer Urbanites*, 81.

¹³⁵ Ibid, 17.

¹³⁶ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 103.

¹³⁷ Daniels, *Pioneer Urbanites*, 97.

¹³⁸ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 103.

¹³⁹ Daniels, *Pioneer Urbanites*, 79.

propriety precipitated by the presence of white women, white men could indulge their curiosity and sense of adventure by patronizing Black and other ethnic restaurants and other non-white businesses for novel and exotic experiences.¹⁴⁰ This constant intermingling of cultures and races allowed for Black people to cultivate white allies, befriending influential white people to obtain the resources and opportunities they had gotten through family or business associations.¹⁴¹

The more equitable ratio of Black women to Black men in California created more opportunities for marriage in the Black community than in the white community, where the civilizing presence of white women had not fully manifested. The presence of Black families created a pressing need and desire for institutional community building more quickly than in the white community, and through these nascent social institutions Black people helped one another. Unmarried Black Californians created surrogate families by lodging together, either as boarders or in family-run hotels that catered to Black people. These communal experiences reinforced relationships and created tightly knit networks of solidarity that became indispensable for resisting and combating white racism.¹⁴² Black organizations helped newcomers settle, while Black newspapers – such as *Mirror of the Times*, established in 1856, followed by *The Pacific Appeal* in 1862 and *The Elevator* in 1865 -- became essential for getting the word out and advertising job opportunities. The Pioneer Seamen’s Boarding and Lodging House was one such institution that found employment for Black people as waiters, cooks, and stewards in the service industry. An information bureau set up by two Black residents helped local people and out-of-towners find housing and lodging, as well as legal services.¹⁴³ According to English literature

¹⁴⁰ Berglund, *Making San Francisco American*, 18; Nancy J. Taniguchi, “Weaving a Different World: Women and the California gold Rush,” *California History* 79, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 144; Pfaelzer, *California a Slave State*, 23.

¹⁴¹ Daniels, *Pioneer Urbanites*, 73.

¹⁴² Susan Bragg, “‘Anxious Foot Soldiers’: Sacramento’s Black Women and Education in nineteenth-century California” in *African American Women Confront the West*, 100.

¹⁴³ Daniels, *Pioneer Urbanites*, 54.

scholar Saidiya Hartman, these networks of affiliation within the Black community were defined not by a sense of racial identity but by “connections forged in the context of disrupted affiliations, sociality amid the constant threat of separation, and shifting sets of relation particular to site, location, belief, and action.” In other words, the Black community, in San Francisco and elsewhere, formed out of the mutual desire for change, and Black identity emerged from a mutual repudiation of white oppression.¹⁴⁴

Enslaved Black Women in Gold Rush California

American southerners already had dreams of spreading slavery westward, into the southwest, Texas, and California, searching for arable land to expand the cotton boom; and with the discovery of gold, their migration to California increased.¹⁴⁵ Most came from the upper South -- Missouri, Kentucky, and Tennessee -- arriving with one or two slaves and working alongside them in placer mining, recreating the small farm conditions in the South. Some of these enslaved men already had experience with placer mining as half a dozen gold rushes had occurred in the American South, such as in Burke County in North Carolina.¹⁴⁶ To get around legal complications slaveholders utilized “sojourner codes,” which allowed visitors to bring slaves into free states temporarily, though they were hardly tourists.¹⁴⁷ Contrary to the myths of “striking it rich,” however, many white miners discovered that not only was placer mining grueling and difficult, but it rarely yielded great wealth. This, and the fact that the enormous influx of male migrants to California generated a demand for domestic skills, compelled southern slaveholders

¹⁴⁴ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2022), 99.

¹⁴⁵ Smith, “Remaking Slavery,” 35.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁴⁷ Pfaelzer, *California a Slave State*, 137.

to subsidize their income by hiring out their bonded men and women, as cooks, waiters, domestic servants or laborers, a practice that was already an integral part of slavery's profitability in the South.¹⁴⁸ Delilah Beasley identified Diana Caruthers and her teenage daughters as enslaved women employed as cooks in a boardinghouse in the gold fields near the Merced River. These women were famous for their buttermilk, eggs, turkey, pies, and doughnuts.¹⁴⁹ Californians also bought and sold Black and Indigenous enslaved women as forced sexual partners, prostitutes, concubines, and wives.¹⁵⁰

Since slavery had been legally banned in California those who brought enslaved people into the state employed covert actions to hide the presence of their human property. For that reason, the number of enslaved people in California during the nineteenth century is difficult to ascertain. However, with the passage of the 1852 California Fugitive Slave Act, some contemporaries determined a need to attempt a count of the state's Black enslaved population.¹⁵¹ Though the constant mobility and fluidity of enslaved people in California makes it difficult to calculate their number, Lapp contended that at any particular time in the early 1850's there were 200 to 300 enslaved Black men and women in mining territory and possibly 500 to 600 involved in the Gold Rush altogether.¹⁵² A letter penned by lawyer James Pratt of San Francisco to fellow lawyer Cornelius Cole suggested a much higher number. "I am told there are at least 1,500 slaves in the state," he wrote.¹⁵³ Historian Jean Pfaelzer contended that over the course of the Gold

¹⁴⁸ Charnan Williams, "The History of Slavery and Race in California from the Gold Rush to the United States Civil War, 1848-1865" Ph.D. Diss (University of Michigan, 2022), 11; Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 132; Smith, "Remaking Slavery," 38.

¹⁴⁹ Beasley, *Negro Trailblazers*, 84.

¹⁵⁰ Smith, *Freedom's Frontier*, 11; Pfaelzer, *California a Slave State*, 24.

¹⁵¹ Williams, "History of Slavery and Race," 45.

¹⁵² Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 65.

¹⁵³ James Pratt to Cornelius Cole, June 30, 1852, box2, folder 217/2, Cole Family papers, Charles E. Young Library, Special Collections, UCLA.

Rush southern treasure-seekers brought as many as two thousand enslaved Black people to California.¹⁵⁴

Slave flight was a constant worry for slave holders in California. Before California became a free state, the vast landscape, the isolation of mining, and the presence of northern abolitionists meant enslaved people could readily run or be rescued.¹⁵⁵ The California terrain made escape easy, through redwood forests or by sea. Many ships bound for Mexico, Panama, British Columbia, or coastal lumber towns employed free Black men and women who were eager to help fugitives.¹⁵⁶ Without the plantation economy, California lacked the legal and social structures of enforcement that existed in the South. Moreover, California's admittance into the Union as a free state came with legal structures that aided slaves desirous of freedom.¹⁵⁷

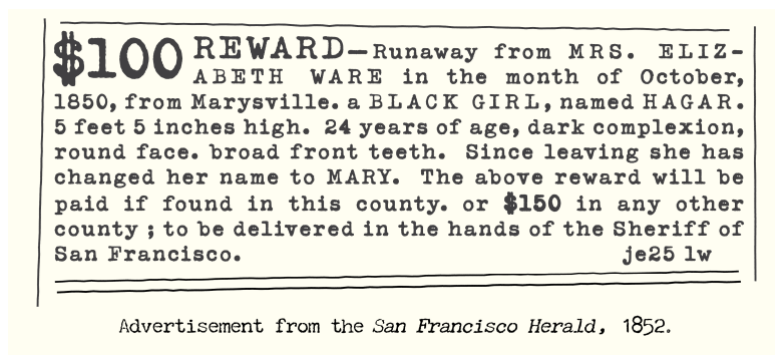


Figure 2. Slave advertisement from the San Francisco Herald, 1852.

To address the challenging landscape that California presented, slaveholders found creative ways to maintain the oppressive system on free soil. They would often form their own kinship ties, living together as a way of maintaining control. In the event of an owner's absence,

¹⁵⁴ Jean Pfaelzer, "None But Colored Testimony," in *The Colored Conventions Movement*, 332.

¹⁵⁵ Smith, *Freedom's Frontier*, 42.

¹⁵⁶ Pfaelzer, "None But Colored Testimony," 334.

¹⁵⁷ Madley and Melillo, "California Unbound," 34.

or if they fell sick or died, friends and neighbors would take charge of their bonded people. These slaveholding communities would also suppress slave rebellions through violence: a posse would shoot or beat runaways, offer rewards for their return, threaten abolitionists, and help slaveholders transport their slaves back to slave states.¹⁵⁸ Slaveholders would also bring married enslaved men to California but keep their wives in the South as hostages in case the husband decided to flee.¹⁵⁹ Conversely, some slaveholders responded to the challenges of preventing slave escapes by offering emancipation contracts requiring those in bondage to work in exchange for their freedom and the freedom of loved ones left behind in the South.¹⁶⁰ So secure were these agreements that enslavers would send Black men in bondage to the gold fields alone, confident that the enslaved person could be trusted to send back funds in order to buy the freedom of their families.¹⁶¹ Though southerners attempted to recreate the conditions that existed in the South, the relationship between slave owner and enslaved transformed as circumstances allowed people in bondage to negotiate their working conditions.¹⁶² This shift in the power dynamic between enslaver and enslaved eroded the slaveholder's authority and destabilized the slave system.¹⁶³

The labor market in nineteenth-century California also included enslaved Black and Indigenous children. The 1850 Act for the Government Protection of Indians legalized existing martial law systems of servitude by allowing Anglo-Americans to adopt captive minors by gaining guardianship status, then forcing them to work without pay, until the age of fifteen for girls, and eighteen for boys.¹⁶⁴ Black enslaved women would sometimes lose their children as

¹⁵⁸ Madley and Melillo, "California Unbound," 33; Smith, "Remaking Slavery," 42.

¹⁵⁹ Pfaelzer, *California A Slave State*, 130.

¹⁶⁰ Madley and Melillo, "California Unbound," 32; Smith, *Freedom's Frontier*, 49

¹⁶¹ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 21.

¹⁶² Smith, "Remaking Slavery," 32.

¹⁶³ Smith, *Freedom's Frontier*, 49.

¹⁶⁴ Madley, "'Unholy Traffic in Human Blood and Souls': Systems of California Indian Servitude Under U.S. Rule," *Pacific Historical Review* 83, no. 4 (November 2014), 643.

their poverty justified charging them as unfit mothers, removing their children from their care, and placing them with white guardians.¹⁶⁵ By transforming enslaved children into wards, the exploitative relationship between slaveholder and enslaved was recast as familial, both obscuring child labor practices and providing a rationale for it. A robust market for child labor grew from the fact that children were just as useful as adults in their ability to do domestic work and could be hired out for profit. Because they had limited mobility, they were less likely to run away. These children also became a tool for slaveholders to control willful or uncooperative parents.¹⁶⁶ In 1860 the age for the release of wards was raised to twenty-five for men and twenty-one for women.¹⁶⁷

The 1850 Act also included two forms of convict leasing, wherein any white person could pay the fines for an incarcerated Indigenous person, who would then be forced to work for that person until he had paid off the fine. A related scheme saw Indigenous people arrested as vagrants, then auctioned to the highest bidder within twenty-four hours of the arrest, granting the buyer their labor for four months without compensation.¹⁶⁸ In the latter part of the decade, as the white population grew and labor became increasingly scarce with the growth of agriculture and ranching, Indigenous people were increasingly given unpaid apprenticeships as field hands and domestic servants. This was a way of “civilizing Indians” and reducing the work of state-supported militias that murdered Indigenous Californians in battles and genocidal massacres to dispossess them of coveted tribal lands.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁵ Smith, *Freedom's Frontier*, 128.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 125.

¹⁶⁷ Madley and Melillo, “California Unbound,” 30.

¹⁶⁸ Madley, “Unholy Traffic,” 643; Campbell, *Making Black Los Angeles*, 27.

¹⁶⁹ Smith, *Freedom's Frontier*, 133.

Foreign treasure-seekers from around the world also brought people in various forms of enslavement. Chinese migrants brought with them women who were under the control of powerful Tong leaders. Chief among these migrants were the Hip Yee Tong, an international crime organization that imported perhaps as many as six thousand female prostitutes to work in San Francisco brothels between 1852 and 1873.¹⁷⁰ Workers in Mexico, Chile, the Pacific Islands, and East Asia who were desperate to join treasure seekers but who could not afford transportation to California signed coercive labor contracts. Though frequently paid, these foreign workers often found themselves forced to toil for years while receiving non-monetary compensation in the form of passage to California, clothes, food, and other goods.¹⁷¹ Ultimately the success of Mexican and Chilean miners provoked Anglo-American Free-Soilers, who attacked these workers, prompting the Chilean Congress to hire ships to rescue and return them home.¹⁷² These various regimes of slave labor contributed significantly to the Gold Rush economy and subsequently shaped the politics surrounding the enslavement .

With the influx of enslaved Black people, racist attitudes among white Northerners from free states hardened. Many embraced a “free labor” ideology that envisioned an egalitarian meritocracy where hard work and dedication determined a man’s economic fortunes. Free-Soilers resented the presence of slaves, believing that they gave an unfair advantage to wealthy slaveholders, and resented slaveholders monopolizing gold claims and pushing out independent freeholders.¹⁷³ Moreover, white people who had wanted Black people barred from the state altogether feared that escaped slaves would settle in the state, thus increasing the population of

¹⁷⁰ Madley and Melillo, “California Unbound,” 43.

¹⁷¹ Smith, *Freedom’s Frontier*, 10.

¹⁷² Madley and Melillo, “California Unbound,” 37.

¹⁷³ Leonard L. Richards, *The California Gold Rush and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 81; Smith, “Remaking Slavery,” 43; Pfaelzer, *California a Free State*, 127.

Black people in California.¹⁷⁴ For these reasons, as California moved toward statehood, Free-Soilers lobbied for a slavery-free constitution, and with the California Convention of 1849 they got their wish.

California's free-state status did not immediately provide a haven for Black people. At the 1849 California Constitutional Convention, pro-slavery Governor Peter Burnett and a legislature dominated by the Democratic party codified racist ideas about social and economic life in California laws to ensure that the racial hierarchy whites created would be reinforced by the machinery of the state. Responding to Free-Soiler concerns, delegates sought to prohibit free Black migration into the state, passing the Bill for an Act Prohibiting the Immigration of Free Negroes and Persons of Color to this State. Though this bill did not pass in the Senate, it was brought up again in 1851, 1857, and 1858.¹⁷⁵ A second bill, An Act Relative to Free Negroes, Mulattoes, Servants, and Slaves required Black Californians to obtain licenses to live in the state and established slave codes for slavers and enslaved people already living there.¹⁷⁶

In addition to drafting legislation to hinder Black migration, Democrat legislators also passed oppressive laws resembling existing Black Codes in the South. Considered unable to discern truth from falsehood, and without the intellect to reason, Black people were deemed not "oath-worthy." Subsequently the legislature passed An Act Concerning Crimes and Punishment barring Black people -- as well as mulattos, Chinese, and Indigenous people -- from participating in the legal system. Black people could not serve as witnesses or jurors in both civil and criminal cases against white people, even if a white person confirmed their testimony.¹⁷⁷ The California

¹⁷⁴ Pfaelzer, *California A Slave State*, 134.

¹⁷⁵ Stacey L. Smith, "Remaking Slavery," 32.

¹⁷⁶ Smith, *Freedom's Frontier*, 62.

¹⁷⁷ Savage, *Blacks in the West*, 148; Pfaelzer, *California a Slave State*, 211; Pfaelzer, "None but Colored Testimony," 333.

Constitution also limited voting rights to white men, barring Black people and other minorities from the ballot box. Nevertheless, Black people were expected to pay city, state, and county taxes on real estate and goods, as well as taxes on business licenses, even though they did not have the legal ability to protect their property.¹⁷⁸

After it became a state, California's ambivalent relationship with unfree labor continued throughout the Gold Rush as it grappled with three of the most divisive issues surrounding slavery: the status of slaves in federal territory, the rights of slaveholders to bring human property into free states, and the capture and return of fugitive slaves.¹⁷⁹ The most concerning law passed was the 1852 California Fugitive Slave Act, which authorized the capture of fugitive slaves who had migrated to California pre-statehood, when it had not yet established its free status. Enslaved people who arrived after California joined the Union and Black people living in California who had been free from birth, were nonetheless vulnerable to kidnapping by unscrupulous slave catchers. Unable to testify in court, Black people had difficulty disputing false charges and were constantly at risk of removal to the South and subsequent enslavement.¹⁸⁰

The 1852 California Fugitive Slave Act also shifted the power dynamic back towards slave owners as it removed the leverage enjoyed by enslaved people to negotiate contracts, making it easier for masters to retract previous agreements.¹⁸¹ Despite California's free-state status, California courts punished abolitionists for helping enslaved people to escape, with fines and sometimes imprisonment.¹⁸² The law was rigorously enforced until 1855 when the legislature let it lapse due to a shift in public sentiment as Black people gained white friends,

¹⁷⁸ Savage, *Blacks in the West*, 139, 141.

¹⁷⁹ Smith, *Freedom's Frontier*, 64.

¹⁸⁰ Smith, "Remaking Slavery," 57.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid*, 58.

¹⁸² Savage, *Blacks in the West*, 38.

particularly in the early Republican party. Of equal importance was the development of Black activist organizations and strengthening of their political resolve.¹⁸³

Meanwhile, white Southerners never fully gave up the idea of creating an enclave for slavery in Southern California. In 1852 the California State Assembly entertained a petition from twenty-three slaveholders from Florida and South Carolina requesting permission to create a slave colony in the state. Los Angeles representatives would yearly mount campaigns to lobby legislators to divide California in two for the purposes of creating a slave state in the southern part.¹⁸⁴ Southern California was dominated by Americans from southern states, with a general disrespect for the law, making it a dangerous place for Black people.

Black pioneers responded to these political and social challenges by initiating the same cultural institutions they had established in the East earlier in the nineteenth century: churches, social clubs, literary societies, fraternal orders, and civil rights organizations, as well as establishing a California “underground railroad,” aiding enslaved people who sought freedom. These institutions duplicated what they had left behind, manifested their values, ethics, and standards of conduct, and reflected their hopes for a destiny of equal rights and citizenship.¹⁸⁵ Moreover, the synergy created by the coalescence of voluntary Black migrants coming from Northern states, Southern states, and foreign countries, with leadership primarily from New England abolitionist circles, produced a robust Black community ingrained with an activist spirit, willing and able to fight for equality. As we shall see, Black women worked within these institutions to support and participate in overt activism, while their quotidian activities embodied resistance to white subjugation.

¹⁸³ Lapp, “Negro Rights Activities,” 7.

¹⁸⁴ Smith, *Freedom's Frontier*, 126.

¹⁸⁵ Graaf and Taylor, “Introduction,” in *Seeking El Dorado*, 3.

PART TWO: BLACK IDEOLOGIES PRE-MIGRATION

Two primary ideologies governing the Black community before migration to California informed how Black people responded to the racial challenges they met upon their arrival. When confronted with anti-Black laws and social structures they resorted to the same playbook they had deployed in the East and Midwest with varying levels of success. Their conception of themselves as a unified group mixed with a deep-seated sense of kinship prompted one response, while their desire to prove their parity to white people -- intellectually, culturally, and morally -- to demonstrate worthiness of citizenship, dictated a second tactic. These two strategies were linked by the most important institution in the Black community: the Christian church. To fully comprehend Black women's political activism in California, it is important to understand how these cultural touchpoints intersected, how they governed Black thought and action in the nineteenth century in general, and how Black women worked within these belief systems.

Black Nationalism

The concept of racial solidarity, or Black nationalism, informed all Black politics in the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁸⁶ The Black identity as a unique nation originated with the Black elite, whose middle-class sensibilities and lifestyle gave them the intellectual capability as well as the financial and cultural resources to articulate Black nationhood. With their resentment of social exclusion and alienation, and a common desire for change, they invented a race consciousness that became the foundation for political work.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ Glaude, *Exodus!* 16.

¹⁸⁷ Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest*, 212.

The concept of Blackness grew out of white racism. Solidarity among Black people arose from experiencing a common maltreatment by white people, not from recognizing a shared cultural connection through African roots.¹⁸⁸ Black intelligentsia generally resisted the arguments for cultural essentialism, as they did not want to support racial science ideas contending that Black people and white people were biologically different; such an admission would invariably harm their political efforts.¹⁸⁹ Black nationalism, therefore, sprang largely from necessity. Black resistance arose from Black leaders making realistic assessments of their oppressed circumstances and trying to craft a solution. As white people excluded them from public facilities, cultural venues, and political life, Black people formed their own institutions, such as churches, schools, fraternal societies, beneficial organizations, and businesses. Black celebrations and parades became visual indicators of Black joy and Black pride. Black newspapers informed the community of its accomplishments and motivated Black people toward political action. These institutions fomented a sense of racial consciousness and Black solidarity as much as the segregation that made them necessary.¹⁹⁰ Black leaders employed nationhood language within Black political discourse as it became synonymous with solidarity and a way of uniting political efforts.¹⁹¹

The phrases “Black community” and “Black nationhood” suggest homogeneity, but the Black population in California included people from different areas of the country and the world, different socioeconomic brackets, and possessing different skills. Uniting such a group was neither automatic, nor trouble-free. This diversity differed from the relatively small population of free Black people in the north, where economic conditions compressed the social structure of the

¹⁸⁸ Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest*, 49.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 53.

¹⁹⁰ Daniels, *Pioneer Urbanites*, 70.

¹⁹¹ Glaude, *Exodus!* 54.

community, causing less social mobility, less diversity of experience, and less socioeconomic difference.¹⁹² Conversely, conditions in the South had produced a Black population closer in character to Black populations in the Caribbean.¹⁹³ The southern plantation economy required a large population of enslaved Black people, and the initial gender imbalance of white men to white women resulted in sexual relations between white planters and enslaved Black women, creating a distinct middle-class of free mulatto elites.¹⁹⁴ Initially such a distinct class did not emerge in the North, so Black leaders were able to align with Black people across a wide spectrum of differences. Free Black people from the South migrating north brought their cultural biases with them, and their doctrines of class-consciousness eventually characterized the Black elite and informed the direction of Black politics.¹⁹⁵

Black political leadership skewed heavily towards elite middle-class Black people. Leaders were more likely to be light-complected, literate, earn their living in a skilled or professional capacity, and own property. Elite men were more likely to marry light-skinned women, which became an indication of status.¹⁹⁶ Denominational differences also existed among Black people, with free Black people from the North and Midwest attending primarily Methodist churches while Baptist congregations consisted of formerly enslaved, poor, and working-class Black people, creating separate world views and concerns between those groups.¹⁹⁷ Despite these differences, Black elites who had been born in the South, whether mulatto or dark-complected, did not think themselves so high that they considered their interests to be radically different from those who were enslaved, and because of their status they could act on their political desires.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹² Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest*, 24.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 25, 39.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁹⁷ Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice*, 57.

¹⁹⁸ Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest*, 27.

Black leaders set about uniting Black people by building a conception of blackness based on a shared oppression inflicted upon them by a hostile white public, arguing that their common subjugation required that they unite in political action under a unified identity.¹⁹⁹ Saidiya Hartman located “Black identity” in the acts of resistance against bondage and white supremacy, asking, “If the condition of bondage is, by definition, a racial and class ascription, then is any effort to address, critique or undermine racial dominance and enslavement necessarily a performance of Blackness?... Can instances where the dominant is manipulated and challenged be read as disruptive or refigured articulations of Blackness?”²⁰⁰ In this conception, Blackness can be defined as active opposition to white supremacy and rejection of inferior status.

Black solidarity arose from inspirational community building. Pointing to ancient civilizations of Africa, such as Egypt and Ethiopia, the Black elite argued that Black people were not only capable of building great civilizations, but these nations were the birthplace of European civilization as well.²⁰¹ They encouraged the Black population to adopt strategies of self-improvement, offering ways that even the poor and working-class could uplift the race and participate in the historical battle against racial oppression. Black leaders relied on public speaking, sermons, reprinted speeches, and published pamphlets to deliver their message, with the Black press linking Black people throughout the country into a national community.²⁰² Denied entrance to white institutions, they formed their own churches, benevolent societies, fraternal orders, military organizations, businesses, and schools. In California these Black organizations served to provide a sense of familiarity, order, and safety in an environment

¹⁹⁹ Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest*, 14.

²⁰⁰ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 97, 58.

²⁰¹ Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest*, 221.

²⁰² *Ibid*, 45, 216.

characterized by rootlessness and danger.²⁰³ Opportunities for inclusion in these organizations, as well as appeals for personal elevation, may have been particularly meaningful to the formerly enslaved and descendants of slaves, whose self-esteem benefitted from the status and recognition brought by participation in such associations.²⁰⁴ Black organizations also offered a sense of kinship and a measure of safety. Douglas Henry Daniels described how Black people employed a practice he coined as “travelcraft,” a hospitality system of Black people looking after their own. Black travelers arriving in San Francisco were offered lodging, places to eat, and entertainment, saving them from suffering insults, embarrassment, inconvenience, and outright hostility in white establishments.²⁰⁵

Racial Uplift

Once Black leadership established Black nationhood as a unified Black identity, they sought to address racial inequities through a two-pronged approach, an inward facing strategy of personal improvement and community building, coupled with an outward facing strategy to change racist laws. This became the same two-pronged strategy utilized by Black leaders in Gold Rush California.

Locating political activity among Black women in the nineteenth century requires reassessing activism to include work that supported, facilitated, or laid the groundwork for strategies and efforts to abolish slavery and further civil rights. Though equally energized to fight for equal rights, Black women were constrained by the ideology of “racial uplift,” which governed free Black people as they sought inclusion in hegemonic white society. In question was

²⁰³ Daniels, *Pioneer Urbanites*, 122.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 109.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 69.

the assertion by white people that Black people were a degraded race, mentally inferior, brutish in nature, and incapable of meeting requirements of citizenship; perceptions reinforced by racist images in popular media. Without formal access to politics or mainstream cultural platforms, Black people's ability to control these racist images was next to impossible. The one thing Black people could control, however, was themselves, and so self-regulation became the primary plan for correcting racial imbalance.²⁰⁶

Black leadership believed that once they proved to white people that their intellectual and cultural capacity equaled theirs, then white people would grant them citizenship. Therefore, Black leaders encouraged the Black masses to adopt the same Victorian norms and middle-class values shared by white society through social and moral work.²⁰⁷ Frederick Douglass stood as an example of the efficacy of uplift. Unequaled among abolitionist lecturers, white audiences were astounded by his command of language and depth of knowledge on a wide range of topics. Indeed, Douglass was responsible for changing the white public's appreciation for the capacity of black slaves.²⁰⁸ Racial uplift, however, should not be regarded as a mere capitulation to judgements of white American racism. For Black people it represented the desire to survive slavery, gain independence, and engage as full participants in the body politic, signaling and embodying liberation and equality.²⁰⁹

Working within the ideology of racial uplift, free Black women experienced the double consciousness W.E.B. DuBois described in his essay "Strivings of a Negro People."²¹⁰ As they attempted to model the attributes of a Victorian lady - managing a well-kept home, being a

²⁰⁶ Lynn M. Hudson, "Entertaining Citizenship: Masculinity and Minstrelsy in Post-Emancipation San Francisco." *The Journal of African American History* 93, no. 2 (Spring 2008), 185.

²⁰⁷ Rosetta E. Ross, *Witnessing and Testifying: Black Women, Religion, and Civil Rights* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 3.

²⁰⁸ Harris, *Shadow of Slavery*, 228.

²⁰⁹ Ross, *Witnessing and Testifying*, 3.

²¹⁰ W.E.B. Du Bois, "Strivings of the Negro People" in *The Atlantic Monthly* (August 1897), 195.

dutiful helpmate to their husbands, nurturing children, spending leisure time at social activities and church, and personifying paragons of virtue and modesty - their thoughts and actions also embodied qualities valued by the Black community.²¹¹ Though acceding to white-middle class norms effectively gendered Black political activism, Black women nevertheless considered the fight for civil rights as a joint venture between both sexes.²¹² Rather than abandon their political aims, familial and kinship associations gave Black women a sense of collective purpose in the Black community and became the spaces in which they expressed their activism.²¹³

Modern historians looking back at this period may have judged Black women's work - as social workers, schoolteachers and church and club members - by the same standards as white women, without considering Black women's perception of what they were accomplishing. Though the work may have appeared similar, such as providing aid to the needy and raising money for causes, Black women considered themselves political activists in a way that white women reformers did not. Black women's community work was subversive in its defiance of a white society that denied them access to public and private social welfare programs.²¹⁴ In many ways, simply surviving and striving within a racist environment can be interpreted as activism. Saidiya Hartman located political activism in the everyday activities of Black women, stating, "I believe that these pedestrian practices illuminate inchoate and utopian expressions of freedom that are not and perhaps cannot be actualized elsewhere."²¹⁵

Projecting an identity of respectability, intelligence, and culture was at the root of racial uplift. As Black people attempted to prove their worth for citizenship, they engaged in a

²¹¹ Carlson, "Black Ideals of Womanhood," 61.

²¹² Bragg, "Anxious Foot Soldiers," 97.

²¹³ Ibid, 111.

²¹⁴ Jones, *Labor of Love*, 8.

²¹⁵ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 17.

simultaneous project to contest and disprove the degraded depictions of Black people prevalent in nineteenth-century white media. During this time theories of racial science proliferated. The American school of ethnology, the development of phrenology, and the ascendancy of statistics all generated new data to support claims that races had separate origins and non-white races were inferior to the white race.²¹⁶ In addition to battling racial science, Black people fought to change how they were presented to the public in white newspapers, the theater, and by white speakers on the lecture circuit. Because black newspapers got as much as half of their material from a syndicate, sometimes racist cartoons that proliferated in the white press would appear in the Black press, creating a paradox of offensive material appearing in publications intended to elevate the race.²¹⁷ Black people especially wanted to counter how they were portrayed in the new popular entertainment craze of the day, blackface minstrelsy.²¹⁸

After the War of 1812, with industrial development northern states saw urban growth and mass migration, as well as a rise in activism for Black rights and women's rights. Beginning in the 1830's, white men threatened by the possibility of competition for political power, employment, or status in society responded to the threat through minstrelsy.²¹⁹ The donning of black cork and black greasepaint by white performers to mock and demean the black community became equally about politics as entertainment.²²⁰ By the 1850's, minstrelsy had become the foundation of American entertainment. Shows that had originally been consigned to dive bars and saloons now played in respectable theaters where women and children were in attendance.²²¹

²¹⁶ Glaude, *Exodus!* 128.

²¹⁷ Daniels, *Pioneer Urbanites*, 126.

²¹⁸ Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest*, 172.

²¹⁹ Katrina Thompson Moore, "The Wench: Black Women in the Antebellum Minstrel Show," *The Journal of American Culture* 44, no. 4 (December 2021), 319; Hudson, *West of Jim Crow*, 50.

²²⁰ Moore, "The Wench," 318.

²²¹ Hudson, *West of Jim Crow*. 50; Moore, "The Wench," 318.

Minstrelsy appeared in California with the onset of the gold rush, following 49'ers to the gold fields. Free Black migrants, perceiving California as a place where they could articulate what citizenship and Black manhood might look like in a free state, posed a threat to the white men who had preceded them. Thus, as men waged political battles in California courtrooms and convention debates, shows portraying Black people as simple, servile, slow, and harmless were enjoyed by white audiences. For example, performances by the San Francisco minstrels, Haverley's United Mastodon Minstrels, and Birch's Ethiopian Opera Troupe ridiculed "Negro dandies" trying to rise above their lower rung in the social hierarchy.²²²

Literature on blackface minstrelsy has centered on the ridicule of Black men by white male performers, however white men also mocked Black women. These racist representations were rendered in drag performance, or referenced in skits, songs, and advertisements, and had damaging social implications.²²³ In minstrel shows white men portrayed Black women as "the wench," a caricature which had two forms. The most familiar in stage performance was the "yaller gal," a colloquial term for a light-skinned Black women. The yaller gal, also known as a "Jezebel" or "fancy" embodied a promiscuous character governed entirely by her libido; the exact opposite of a respectable Victorian lady.²²⁴ Considered the epitome of desirability, the "yaller gal" often personified a concubine or prostitute. Possessing attributes that were valuable in the slave market – light skin and European features - also connected her to a history of sexual submission.²²⁵

This stereotype concerned young Black women; the assumption that they were always sexually eager and available exposed them to unwanted advances. Throughout the nineteenth

²²² Lynn M. Hudson, "Entertaining Citizenship," 176.

²²³ Moore, "The Wench," 318.

²²⁴ White, *Ar 'n 't I a Woman?*, 29.

²²⁵ Moore, "The Wench," 323.

century, black women's bodies would be the subject of racialized and sexist diatribes, and they struggled to counter those beliefs. Though historian Lawrence B. de Graaf claimed that there was little rape or sexual abuse by white males against Black females in Gold Rush California, Black women nevertheless worried about being stereotyped as wanton women or assumed to be prostitutes.²²⁶ Whether or not the danger existed, Black women's perceived vulnerability animated their calls for refinement and respectability. Historian Brittney Cooper concluded that "in this respect, the sexual and gender policing of women's bodies within the practice of racial uplift appears to be a reasonable response to safeguard the sanctity of their bodies."²²⁷

The second form of minstrel caricature of Black women was the "grotesque," a depiction more likely to appear in songs and advertisements. This rendering portrayed the Black female figure with ludicrous physical features distinguished by monstrous exaggeration to emphasize Black women's unattractiveness and lack of femininity. In addition to physical ugliness, she conveyed a vile, vulgar, and animalistic persona.²²⁸ Though the "grotesque" appeared as a comic, satirical figure, this product of white male hatred dehumanized Black women, differing from their treatment of Black men. The rise in popularity of the "grotesque" in minstrel performance correlated with the practice of exhibiting real Black women onstage for audience consumption. The exposition of Saartje Baartman in 1810 presents the most famous example. Billed as "Hottentot Venus," Baartman toured Europe in a circus freak show, her naked body exposed for audiences to observe her large buttocks and genitalia, an image comprehended as both primitive and pornographic.²²⁹

²²⁶ Graaf, "Race, Sex, and Region," 303.

²²⁷ Cooper, *Beyond Respectability*, 15.

²²⁸ Moore, "The Wench," 327.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*

Though not featured on the minstrel stage, the “mammy” posed a third damaging stereotype for Black women. This image, commonly applied to older Black women, portrayed a house servant totally dedicated to her white family, particularly the children. She was given charge of house management and served as friend and advisor.²³⁰ This personification reinforced notions of the perfect slave that denied Black women’s agency and self-interest.

Seeing themselves as refined, worldly, urbane, and with cultured taste, free Black Californians worked to project this image to counter racist white characterizations of Black people.²³¹ Additionally, though many in the Black community toiled in domestic or other low-status jobs, they refused to be defined by their employment. To elevate their image, they had photographs made of themselves and their families dressed in their stylish best.²³² Black elites in California strove toward personal improvement through literary societies to edify the mind, such as the San Francisco Athenaeum and Literary Association, and social clubs and fraternal orders, such as the Hannibal Lodge No. 1 Freemasons on Bush Street. These organizations engaged in public service and community uplift, creating the appearance of cultural and social sophistication.²³³ Non-segregated events, such as roller skating, presented an ideal forum for displaying an uplifted Black image. Black people showed off fancy skating skills in a public arena, exhibiting poise, skill, quality dress, style, and Victorian manners.²³⁴

²³⁰ White, *Ar 'n' t I A Woman?*, 49.

²³¹ Daniels, *Pioneer Urbanites*, 35.

²³² *Ibid*, 126.

²³³ Crouchett, Bunch, and Winnacker. *Visions Toward Tomorrow*, 15.

²³⁴ Daniels, *Pioneer Urbanites*, 127.



Figure 3. Black people in elegant dress, 1860's. Flood Family Papers, African American Museum and Library at Oakland.

As a strategy to bring about citizenship, racial uplift had several drawbacks. First, adopting Victorian norms inherently required accepting the sexism intrinsic to the patriarchal structure of the dominant white society. Black men sought equality to white men in all respects: social, political, and economic, as well as patriarchal manhood status.²³⁵ Linking worthiness to masculinity reinforced the implicit maleness of citizenship, casting men as operatives within the political world and women as passive bystanders.²³⁶ By focusing on manhood rights, such as enfranchisement, and excluding women's interests, Black men effectively shaped Black public protest toward a heavily masculinized style that marginalized Black women, thereby minimizing opportunities for Black women to influence politics and protest.²³⁷ Northern Black women initially accepted the gendered divisions of nineteenth century political culture and were thus complicit in surrendering their power, a decision that would shift by the turn of the century.²³⁸

²³⁵ Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice*, 55.

²³⁶ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 271.

²³⁷ Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest*, 6; Hudson, *West of Jim Crow*, 18.

²³⁸ Welke, "Rights of Passage," 85.

The intentional suppression of free Black women's access to leadership and the elision of their sites of activism exposed tensions between the sexes in the Black community during the nineteenth century. According to historian Bettye Collier-Thomas, "Black men seeking equality sought to reinforce the already established patterns of male dominance that existed among free Blacks in the church, the family, the benevolent societies, and Black society at large."²³⁹ Lynn Hudson added that Black men in leadership positions -- such as ministers, Republican party leaders, and newspaper editors -- became increasingly concerned with men's rights precisely because Black women continued to challenge male prerogatives. They would thus respond to Black women's attempts to move into the political sphere by mocking or ignoring them.²⁴⁰ Black women considered civil rights to be a shared pursuit between men and women, and throughout history have rejected community and church hierarchy based on gender. However, in recognition of the destructive nature of white attacks on Black masculinity, and the limited employment and leadership opportunities available to Black men, most Black women acquiesced to the acceptance of Victorian gender norms.²⁴¹ Nevertheless, many Black women engaged in political work through those avenues available to them: abolitionist work, attending Colored Conventions, joining civic organizations, creating literary and debate societies, writing to the Black press, fundraising, ministering to the poor through Black churches, attending political rallies, organizing festivals and parades, and creating the state's first Black schools.²⁴²

A second problem the ideology of racial uplift created for Black women was the submission of the domestic sphere to surveillance. Freedman texts, distributed to Black households by the Freedman's Bureau starting in 1865, provided advice on how to run a proper

²³⁹ Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice*, 56.

²⁴⁰ Hudson, *West of Jim Crow*, 18.

²⁴¹ Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice*, 56.

²⁴² Hudson, *West of Jim Crow*, 31.

home, with tips on labor, hygiene, and discipline. These texts not only established a measuring stick by which a home would be judged, but revealed that Black homes were judged and perhaps had always been judged, with the insinuation that a lack of cleanliness or sign of disorder would be interpreted as depraved, criminal, or animalistic.²⁴³ Fear of a bad image had the Black press printing household columns about how to prepare nutritious meals and effective methods for housekeeping. A book written by the Black lawyer R.C.O. Benjamin entitled *Don't: A Book for Girls* provided a list of “don'ts” to protect the image of refined womanhood.²⁴⁴ Thus the Black household, an area considered the purview of Black women, became politicized and subject to self-imposed oppression. Hartman professed that placing Black politics at the site of family was consistent with regulatory projects of the state, resulting in:

a paradoxical construction of the freed, both as self-determining and enormously burdened individuals, and as members of a population whose labor, capacity, forms of movement and association, and sexual practices were fiercely regulated and policed in the interests of an expanding capitalist economy and preservation of a racial order on which the white republic was founded.”²⁴⁵

Moreover, though the domestic sphere presumably offered a space for women and children that was under patriarchal protection, their safety was illusory, as women were neither assured protection from violence perpetrated by outsiders or their spouses.²⁴⁶

Conforming to Victorian values also meant accepting racial ideologies of the day, including the ordering of social groups, with whiteness at the top and other groups jockeying for position within the hierarchy. The concept originated with the early modern European idea of the Great Chain of Being, which organized the universe into a rigid stratum placing God at the top followed by angels, men, beasts, plants, and minerals. The hierarchal ranking of mankind

²⁴³ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 281.

²⁴⁴ Coleman, “African American Women and Community Development,” 116.

²⁴⁵ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 203.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 276.

mutated into a more fluid and individualized form as the Romantic Era of the early nineteenth century attended to concerns for self-improvement and self-fulfillment. Black elites gravitated to this concept as it offered the promise of elevation through moral, mental, economic, or political gains.²⁴⁷ Unfortunately, competition among cultural groups saw Black Californians conceding to racist notions, with Black newspapers reprinting stories of exotic Asian foreigners, referring to Chinese as grotesque and having filthy habits, and commending white authorities who supported the potential of Black intellect at the expense of Native Americans. This attitude manifested a surprising level of racial intolerance considering the Black community's own maltreatment.²⁴⁸ Most concerning was their acceptance of the premise that in a virtuous republic, rights were only extended to equals, justifying the exclusion of not only entire cultural groups but any individual who fell short of the metric that determined equality, even other Black people. Since racism was the foundation for capitalism, by supporting this notion Black elites unwittingly abetted continued subordination and oppression of the Black lower class.²⁴⁹

Social pressures resulting from the practice of racial uplift exposed several areas of class conflict in the Black community as protest among Black elites was rooted in liberal capitalism and the concomitant creation and ordering of social divisions.²⁵⁰ Historian Douglas Henry Daniels contended that Black San Franciscans viewed class stratum as “necessary and desirable,” and that “a respectable demeanor, not color, should be the sole basis for admission to public facilities.”²⁵¹ Black leadership, invested in the inherent ability of Black people to rise, pressured the Black masses to engage in a social project of self-improvement so that whites

²⁴⁷ Hudson, “Entertaining Citizenship,” 127.

²⁴⁸ Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest*, 284.

²⁴⁹ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 209.

²⁵⁰ Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest*, 172.

²⁵¹ Daniels, *Pioneer Urbanites*, 132.

would be deprived of evidence to support their racist beliefs.²⁵² This manner of social control affected the development of Black neighborhoods. In Yuba County there were no Black saloons, billiard parlors or gambling dens, and there were also no Black prostitutes, despite the existence of ninety-five houses of prostitution according to the 1860 U.S. Census.²⁵³ With elite Black people offering moral admonitions to control disreputable Black behavior exhibited by the working class, these invasive pressures were not always appreciated.

Such class tensions manifested at the San Francisco Atheneum, a space established in 1853 at 917 Washington Street where the Black working class and the Black middle class could come together to collaborate on plans for the needs of the San Francisco Black community. The first floor of the two-story structure housed the Atheneum Saloon -- a space for social gathering, drinking, card playing, and dancing -- while the second floor housed the Atheneum Institute and library. This a co-ed space for intellectual life, boasting eight hundred books, sought to stimulate reading, encourage literary production, and train future orators and leaders by sponsoring debates.²⁵⁴ It also was where the first Black San Francisco newspaper, the *Mirror of the Times*, was organized. Social tensions soon developed between those men frequenting the saloon and those who preferred the library as the latter group repeatedly admonished the saloon men for their raucous behavior. By the end of 1857 the Institute vacated the second floor and moved to a new location. The space was subsequently fitted for parties and concerts.²⁵⁵ With the exodus of so many prominent Black San Franciscans to Victoria, Canada, in 1858, the Atheneum lost many important members and closed its doors soon after.²⁵⁶

²⁵² Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest*, 198.

²⁵³ Withington, *Black Pioneers of Yuba County*, 23.

²⁵⁴ Parker and Abajian, *A Walking Tour*, 3.

²⁵⁵ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 101.

²⁵⁶ Parker and Abajian, *A Walking Tour*, 4.

Classism also introduced an impossible standard for most Black households to meet. Conventional middle-class households would have men as the sole breadwinner with women using their domestic skills to improve their own family, rather than working in white households. Because few skilled jobs existed in Gold Rush California, these goals were unfeasible for most Black households, including among the Black elite, setting expectations that only caused anxiety and frustration.²⁵⁷ Ultimately racial uplift as a strategy for gaining acceptance failed. As public protest among free Black people in California and elsewhere tended toward elitism, with racial uplift as its guiding principle, historian Patrick Rael pointed out that “it may have done more to reinforce the gender subjugation of Black women and the class subjugation of working-class Blacks than it did to liberate them from their respective yokes.”²⁵⁸

The main problem with the approach of utilizing self-improvement as a tool for gaining social acceptance and therefore citizenship lay within the faulty premise. The efficacy of racial uplift fundamentally relied on the assumption that white people would adhere to the logic of acquisitive capitalism, compelling them to give Black people the rights Black people felt they deserved.²⁵⁹ The presumption that whites would choose liberalism over white supremacy turned out to be a tragic miscalculation. As Rael explained, “Largely shut out of the political and institutional life of the nation, they yet remained steeped in its values. Embracing, sharing, and co-fabricating the values of their milieu, they trusted that their enemies would hold to those values with the same fervor and sincerity... This was not the case. What Black elites grossly underestimated were the overwhelming advantages of white racial privilege.”²⁶⁰

²⁵⁷ Harris, *Shadow of Slavery*, 181.

²⁵⁸ Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest*, 284.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 205.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 285

Kinship and Community

While notions of racial uplift governed much of the behavior and political actions of free Black men and women, formerly enslaved Black people incorporated habits and practices of slave culture into their activities as free people, evident particularly in the actions of Black women in California. The spirit of community grew from the kinship ties in the slave quarters, where family, kin, and community overlapped and merged as enslaved people established supportive practices of mutual obligation.²⁶¹ The primary role of an enslaved woman was her duty to her enslaver and his family, at the expense of her own family. She therefore often had to look to other Black women for help, and childrearing of enslaved children became a shared, communal task.²⁶² Women too old for field work carried out collective work for the benefit of the whole community, such as cooking meals or washing clothes.²⁶³ Brenda Stevenson contended that kinship ties provided intangible benefits to the Black enslaved community, such as nurturing, education, socialization, material support, and recreation, offering a bastion of support to help cope with the social chaos and unpredictability inherent in their enslaved condition.²⁶⁴ Adults taught children the importance of community, stressing the obligation to help their own people over their obligations to slaveholders. They learned not to lie to or steal from each other, and the importance of keeping slave secrets from slaveholders.²⁶⁵ The malleability of enslaved kinship networks created a wide variety of households: matrifocal, polygamous, single parented, spouses abroad, multi-generational, single and mixed gender, co-residential nuclear families, as well as monogamous marriages.²⁶⁶ These entangled relationships gave enslaved Black people a

²⁶¹ Jones, *Labor of Love*, 31.

²⁶² Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*, 161.

²⁶³ Jones, *Labor of Love*, 29.

²⁶⁴ Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*, 325.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 254.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 160.

sense of identity, thus, when free from bondage, they maintained a strong sense of the Black community as a protective institution.²⁶⁷

Enslaved women experienced the necessity of community support more acutely than enslaved men, bearing the burden of providing support for the enslaved community after a long day working in the field. Once enslaved people returned to the slave quarters Black men would retire while Black women's work would continue: washing, weaving, cleaning, spinning, and sewing.²⁶⁸ Black enslaved women often carried out these extra chores with other women, gathering to do laundry or have quilting parties, imbuing the work with a social atmosphere.²⁶⁹ Such bonds among enslaved women revealed themselves through the common practice of treating unrelated women as though they were blood relatives, referring to older women as "Aunt" and "Granny," and calling each other "sister."²⁷⁰ Enslaved women had their own female culture, establishing emotional relationships with other women that they may have perceived as more stable than relationships with enslaved men, whose sustained presence in their lives proved unreliable.²⁷¹

Though Victorian norms kept free Black women constrained from positions of leadership, enslaved women had no such societal hindrances, nor could their husbands compel them to be submissive helpmates. Unable to provide protection, property, food, or clothing, enslaved husbands could not use those things to exercise authority over their wives.²⁷² Moreover, separating Black men from their families forced enslaved women to take on responsibilities as heads of households, which instilled in them a sense of leadership and self-reliance that they

²⁶⁷ Jones, *Labor of Love*, 43.

²⁶⁸ White, *Ar 'n't I a Woman?* 122.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 133.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 132.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 153.

would later display once free from bondage. Within this matrifocal environment enslaved women valued self-reliant, independent women willing to protect themselves and their families, through confrontation if necessary. Though white society considered aggressive behavior masculine, many Black women deployed combative conduct to protect their most basic claim to womanhood: their bodies, and their roles as wives and mothers.²⁷³

In addition to leading households, enslaved Black women held positions of power and leadership within slave culture. The West African tradition of respecting one's elders conferred upon older women an increased influence among the enslaved, often serving as historian and storyteller, passing on folklore that connected the community to their African past.²⁷⁴ Elderly women living in the quarters commanded communal esteem, while mothers received their children's respect and deference.²⁷⁵ Some enslaved women practiced medicine, serving as midwives or treating illnesses with teas, herbs, and broth. Such medical knowledge also provided a form of resistance, denying the slaveholder an increase in property through abortions.²⁷⁶ Other enslaved women were believed to be witches, prophetesses, or vodou conjurers, skilled in concocting potions and charms for good and evil, and such individuals would also be treated with respect within enslaved communities.²⁷⁷

As enslaved Black women found freedom, either in northern states or in California, their political goals matched those of never-enslaved Black women, to live unmolested in freedom, and enjoy civil rights as full citizens in the body politic, however their experiences, skills, and conception of their agency within the Black community differed from their middle-class sisters.

²⁷³ Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*, 236.

²⁷⁴ Jones, *Labor of Love*, 40.

²⁷⁵ Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*, 227.

²⁷⁶ White, *Ar 'n't I a Woman?*, 124.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 136; Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice*, 14.

Historian Deborah Gray White pointed out that formerly enslaved women, who knew their power, aptitude, skills, and strength, may not have desired the status of Victorian womanhood, which presented women as too weak-willed and capricious to make their own decisions, requiring a man to guide their every movement.²⁷⁸ Ultimately, both free Black women and formerly enslaved Black women in nineteenth-century California demonstrated activism that was bolstered by a history of free Black women working in northern cities through church, social organizations and employment, and formerly enslaved women building and leading communities through kinship networks, without the help of men.²⁷⁹

Religion and the Black Church

Religion played an important role in the lives of free and enslaved African Americans in the nineteenth century. Though slave owners introduced Christianity into slave culture as a method of control, emphasizing themes of submissiveness, subordination, patriarchal hierarchy, and punishment for sins, enslaved people found more meaning in other, more subversive themes, such as the biblical story of Exodus. Enslaved Black people related to the story of God delivering the Israelites from slavery to freedom. They adopted for themselves the role of God's chosen people, reenacting the Exodus narrative through songs, praying, and dancing; building a sense of community while building a political movement.²⁸⁰ Black people also connected to the wilderness theme, wherein God guides people "wandering in the wilderness," showing the faithful the way when there seemed to be no way, bolstering Black people's faith in deliverance.²⁸¹ Liberation themes also existed in the context of God's gift of life, which included

²⁷⁸ White, *Ar 'n 't I a Woman?* 16.

²⁷⁹ Graaf, *Seeking El Dorado*, 105.

²⁸⁰ Glaude, *Exodus!* 4.

²⁸¹ Ross, *Witnessing and Testifying*, 8.

the liberty to fully thrive and prosper as human beings.²⁸² As historian Eugene D. Genovese put it, Christianity “fired [enslaved Black people] with a sense of their own worth before God and man,” engendering in them a form of “spiritual emancipation.”²⁸³

Subversive interpretations of the Bible and Christianity necessitated secrecy. Enslaved people resorted to secret meetings, called “hush arbors,” in swamps, woods, or the quarters, away from the master’s prying eyes. Within these secret meetings they celebrated a syncretic form of Christianity, combining it with African religious traditions such as the “ring shout,” a devotional dance where the body became a vessel through which one communicated with God.²⁸⁴ Slaveholders recognized the act of “stealing away” to engage in these religious rites as a form of rebellion. Patrollers finding enslaved people participating in such meetings would punish them. Not only did these clandestine gatherings defy the strict control over slave mobility, but devotion to an all-powerful God implied that the enslaved recognized a divine authority that overrode the slaveholder’s supremacy.²⁸⁵

The Exodus story also helped to build a sense of Black nationalism as Black people perceived the nation quest of the Israelites as analogous to Black ambitions.²⁸⁶ This sense of solidarity also grew out of the need for Black churches among free Black people who were frustrated by their exclusion from leadership in biracial congregations and annoyed by white churches flouting of Christian tenets to justify slavery. Increasingly, Black people recognized that they constituted a distinctive community with its own specific issues and interests that required their own separate space.²⁸⁷ The Black church, then, became the primary space for organizing,

²⁸² Ross, *Witnessing and Testifying*, 2.

²⁸³ Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Random House, 1976), 283.

²⁸⁴ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 112; Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice*, 6.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 111.

²⁸⁶ Glaude, *Exodus!* 53.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 23.

Black agency, and social activity; a place where Black personhood was recognized, and Black aspirations were brought to fruition.²⁸⁸ Historian Eddie Glaude Jr. explained that the Black church “emerged as the symbol and the substance of their rebellion.”²⁸⁹ Ironically, the tenets of Christianity also mitigated the rebellious strains within the Black community. The religion taught that white oppressors were not evil but fellow sinners before God, curbing hatred of white people and directing the hatred toward the institution of slavery.²⁹⁰ Christian teachings also advocated forgiveness, fueling Black imaginings of an ultimate unification with white Americans.²⁹¹

According to Bishop Daniel Payne, a major shaper of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, the first Black church in the United States was formed in 1794 when Black members of the Philadelphia Methodist Episcopal congregation complained of “suffering unkind treatment” from their white brethren who considered them a nuisance, and so determined to “erect a house of worship wherein they could worship God under their own vine and fig-tree.”²⁹² Enslaved and free Black people gravitated to the Methodist Episcopal belief that God and the holy spirit were accessible to anyone, regardless of race, gender, or class. However, accessibility did not extend to church leadership.²⁹³

Black women seeking formal ordination in the Black church during the nineteenth century were disappointed as gender bias against women prevailed among church leaders. An editorial for the *Christian Recorder* revealed sexist sentiments by Payne, who justified the denial of a petition licensing women to preach, stating “In every sphere of labor, physical and moral, Providence seems to have appropriated the proper laborers... the man, strong in body and mind,

²⁸⁸ Glaude, *Exodus!* 7.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁹⁰ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 282.

²⁹¹ Glaude, *Exodus!* 7.

²⁹² Daniel A. Payne, *A History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (Nashville: Publishing House of the A.M.E. Sunday-School Union, 1891), 6.

²⁹³ Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice*, 18.

is fitted by nature to execute what the weaker sex is incapacitated for, both physically and mentally. Must the church, that needs the most manly strength, the most gigantic minds, to execute her labors, confide them to those whom nature has fitted for the easier toils of life?”²⁹⁴ Within Christian teachings the concept of “the least” resonated with Black women as analogous to their social condition. Through various forms of oppression – racial, gender, and economic – Black women often become servants in society and in churches.²⁹⁵

Though barred from official ministry, Black women still played an important and essential role within Christian religious services, as witnesses. Rooted in African religious practices carried into slave culture, “testimonies” within a religious service were verbal affirmations of God’s work and the testifier’s humanity, in defiance of their status as slave.²⁹⁶ According to interviews of enslaved people, women were the one who did most of the shouting and mourning in a hush arbor religious service. Shouting displayed a form of personal testimony and articulated one’s holy spirit. Moreover, the shouter’s participation transformed the service, helped build the collective emotion of the congregation to a fervor, and effectuated the spiritual climax.²⁹⁷ Historian Rossetta E. Ross contended that the act of witnessing and testifying within religious services was “equally as important as canonized texts and inherited rituals and doctrines, and in some cases, they supersede these formal traditions in bearing religious value and meaning and in mediating interaction with the holy.”²⁹⁸

Because Black men did not want Black women to hold supervisory positions over them, Black women found leadership opportunities within the institution of the church in work

²⁹⁴ Payne, *African Methodist Episcopal Church*, 301.

²⁹⁵ Ross, *Witnessing and Testifying*, 9.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 14.

²⁹⁷ Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice*, 13.

²⁹⁸ Ross, *Witnessing and Testifying*, 15.

traditionally relegated to women, such as feeding, cleaning, and education.²⁹⁹ This type of nurturing church work simultaneously manifested political objectives of reform and racial uplift. Black women became the “official fundraisers of the race,” using solicited funds to create a network of religious and secular organizations to care for the indigent, support widows and orphans, and aid victims of natural disasters, as well as establish schools, beneficial societies, libraries, insurance clubs, and organized social events, activities that worked to rectify racial obstructions.³⁰⁰

Church work also allowed Black women to hone activist skills. Religion sociologist Cheryl Townsend Gilkes asserted that in attending to “the least” in the community, Black women utilized a wide variety of tasks to confront and challenge racism, including “arguing, obstructing, teaching, lecturing, demonstrating, suing, writing letters and other activities that often concluded as organized actions.”³⁰¹ As Black women carried out the church’s Christian mission in segregated auxiliaries, they cultivated an independence and leadership that they had not previously experienced. Though their efforts were sometimes credited to male leaders of the church, these “church mothers” wielded considerable influence, sometimes exceeding that of the ministers.³⁰² Black women’s labor and talent undergirded all Church functions, especially Black community building, with Black women as the backbone.³⁰³

These three governing ideas - Black nationalism, racial uplift, and Christianity - determined the contours of Black activism in the nineteenth century. Though Black women’s political efforts in California were not recorded as readily as Black men’s, by examining the

²⁹⁹ Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice*, 49.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 49.

³⁰¹ Ross, *Witnessing and Testifying*, 9.

³⁰² Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice*, 77; Ross, *Witnessing and Testifying*, 11.

³⁰³ Glaude, *Exodus!* 20, 121.

work they conducted within these frameworks and appreciating their impact in furthering the political goals of the Black community, Black women activists in California emerge as previously overlooked partners in the fight for equal rights and citizenship.

PART THREE: BLACK WOMEN'S ACTIVISM IN CALIFORNIA

Black women's activism in nineteenth-century California took many forms, some overt and some subtle. Their wide range of political work reflects the diversity of pioneer Black women: their free-status, married status, socioeconomic bracket, skills, and experiences pre-migration. The following subchapters provide an overview of social issues impacting the Black community in nineteenth-century California, the response of the Black community in general, and the specific role Black women played in those responses.

Black Women and Abolition

Free Black people migrating to California in the 1850's did not expect to encounter slavery. White slaveholders, noting the ambivalence of California's politicians toward slavery, believed the frontier environment insulated them from the calls for abolition and their actions would go unchecked. Alarmed by this brazen disregard for California's free state status, many free Black men and women originating from northern states were already well-trained in anti-slavery work.³⁰⁴ The form of abolitionism embraced by free northern Black migrants to California tended to be radical, favoring Frederick Douglass' call for political action, rather than William Lloyd Garrison's rejection of it and call for non-violence.³⁰⁵ New Bedford, Massachusetts was the origin state for many Black migrants to California, who carried with them a radical sensibility cultivated by the New England training ground for abolition and activism. Largely due to its Quaker origins, New Bedford had been anti-slavery from its inception in 1787

³⁰⁴ Pfaelzer, *California A Slave State*, 120, 144.

³⁰⁵ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 188.

and continued to provide a haven for fugitive slaves.³⁰⁶ New Bedford citizens organized to denounce the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery League for disdaining the political process when it began to express doubts about Garrison's followers. They also criticized the pastors for their lack of courage and allowed women to participate in anti-slavery meetings.³⁰⁷ Any New Bedford Black women migrating to California would have arrived with a sharpened political sensibility, ready to deploy when circumstances called for it.

Free Black people in New York and Massachusetts preferred Douglass' demands for the immediate dissolution of slavery, as opposed to the gradual emancipation that had taken place in the North, and also rejected notions of Black people colonizing Liberia.³⁰⁸ Black leaders in New York saw the disappointing results of gradual manumission, where emancipation laws designed to free enslaved people curtailed their freedoms, resulting in Black New Yorkers being legally, economically and socially designated as separate, dependent, and unequal.³⁰⁹ Strategies for addressing these inequities differed within the Black community along socioeconomic lines. Elite Black people tended to focus on using legal means to aid fugitive slaves, mounting "Colored Conventions" to address injustice as well as other non-resistant strategies, while working class Black people often engaged in grass-roots political efforts, inviting fugitives into their homes, and providing food, shelter, and clothing.³¹⁰ The debates that took place over how to free enslaved people from bondage and how to attain social, economic and political equality persisted after Black people of both classes migrated to California, continuing to contribute to class distinctions within the Black community.³¹¹

³⁰⁶ Grover, *The Fugitive's Gibraltar*, 16.

³⁰⁷ Ibid, 137.

³⁰⁸ Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery*, 170.

³⁰⁹ Ibid, 5.

³¹⁰ Ibid, 209.

³¹¹ Ibid, 5.

Despite class divisions, the small number of Black people in California necessitated solidarity to achieve political projects. The Black community worked in concert to form a west coast Underground Railroad that stretched from San Diego to Vancouver, carrying fugitives to churches, hotels, ranches, and homes.³¹² Black abolitionists across the state spread the news of masters illegally holding a person in bondage, informed enslaved people of their rights in California, encouraged them to escape, and protected them when they did. When slaveholders tried to transfer enslaved people back to the South, free Black people petitioned for writs of *Habeus Corpus*, a court order directing a person detaining others to produce the detained person before the court. Additionally Black abolitionists hired sympathetic white lawyers and paid for the enslaved person's legal defense.³¹³

Within abolition work women were both the rescuers and the ones being rescued, with both parties engaged in activism as they disrupted the slave system. Often the names of these heroic women are unrecorded as their actions were clandestine, however some names have surfaced. Mary Ann Harris, an enslaved woman who worked as a nurse for a Dr. Ross was stationed on Alcatraz Island. Harris had negotiated with her master an agreement whereby she would purchase her freedom at \$4 a month. According to historian Delilah Beasley an "old colored woman by the name of Aunt Lucy Evans stole her off the island," freeing her.³¹⁴ Beasley also identified several other Black female abolitionists, reporting that "a number of enslaved people" were liberated through the efforts of Mrs. Harriett Davis and Mrs. White, among them a Mr. and Mrs. Parker.³¹⁵

³¹² Pfaelzer, *California A Slave State*, 213.

³¹³ Smith, *Freedom's Frontier*, 55.

³¹⁴ Beasley, *Negro Trailblazers*, 91.

³¹⁵ *Ibid*, 92.

Black Californian abolitionists experienced with the Underground Railroad prior to migration wasted no time in returning to activist work. Peter and Nancy Lester arrived in California in 1850 from Philadelphia where they had participated in abolitionist activities and discovered that their work would continue in California. They began inviting enslaved people to their home, where Peter would lecture them about their rights and teach them anti-slavery songs. In a letter to a friend Peter Lester wrote, “When they left, we had them strong in the spirit of freedom. They are leaving [slavery] every day.”³¹⁶ While Peter Lester is often given sole credit for the abolitionist work taking place in his household, his use of “we” strongly suggests that his wife participated as well. One can imagine that she also provided hospitality for the enslaved guests, serving them food and drinks to make them feel comfortable and at ease as she and her husband educated them about their rights, helping to bolster the courage they would need to act upon that “spirit of freedom.”

Mary Ellen Pleasant’s abolitionist work also began before she came to California. Details about this enigmatic woman’s past are murky due to her intentional obfuscation, however some facts are indisputable. In the late 1830’s, when she was fourteen or fifteen, she met James Smith, a Bostonian who made a good living as a foreman, carpenter, and contractor. He was also an ardent abolitionist. They married in 1833 when Mary Ellen was nineteen, and they used Smith’s money to support abolitionist causes, aiding people escaping bondage through the Underground Railroad. When Smith died in 1844, he left his fortune to Mary Ellen with the stipulation that she continue their abolitionist work.³¹⁷ The \$15,000 that she inherited would amount to a little over \$600,000 today.

³¹⁶ Peter Lester, “Letter From California,” *Pennsylvania Freeman*, December 5, 1850; Pfaelzer, *California a Slave State*, 149; Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 137.

³¹⁷ Lynn Hudson, “Mining a Mythic Past: The History of Mary Ellen Pleasant” in *African American Women Confront the West*, 58; Wagner, *African American Women*, 95.

Mary Ellen kept her promise. In 1850 she married an ex-slave named John James Pleasant, Pleasants, or Pleasance of New Bedford, Massachusetts, who was a cook or a seaman or both. In an article for *Ebony* magazine, historian Lerone Bennett asserted that similar to Mary Ellen Pleasant's first husband, "he too occupied a shadowy and indistinct role in the Pleasant play... Black or white, known or unknown, poor or rich, there was only one role for a man in her life and that was a supporting role, behind the scenes."³¹⁸ Mary Ellen Pleasant moved with her husband to California, enticed by gold but likely mindful of the dangers posed by the newly passed Fugitive Slave Act. Once in California Pleasant continued to support fugitive slaves by riding into rural areas and challenging slaveholders who held people in bondage. She paid to bring former slaves to California, and when they arrived provided them with housing and employment.³¹⁹ In a 1950 interview, Charlotte Dennis Downs recalled Pleasant and her father, George Downs, working together to protect fugitives. One case involved George Mitchell, who struggled to extricate himself from an owner who sought to retain ownership of Mitchell under the expired California Fugitive Slave Act. "While the owner and his lawyer were swearing out affidavits, George was put under wraps by my father and Mammy, and they never did get a hold of him."³²⁰

In 1858 Pleasant traveled with her husband to Chatham, in what is now the province of Ontario Canada, which at the time had an active community of free Black people and fugitives. There she joined the Chatham Vigilance Committee, a group which helped with the rescue and payment for the defense of Sylvanus Demerest, a Black man who was almost the victim of a

³¹⁸ Lerone Bennet, Jr. "A Historical Detective Story: Part II: Mystery of Mary Ellen Pleasant" in *Ebony Magazine Archive* Vol 34, Issue 7, (May 1979): 74.

³¹⁹ Wagner, *African American Women*, 95.

³²⁰ Charlotte Dennis Downs Interview, #26, April 16, 1950, MEP Coll. SFPL.

kidnapping by New Yorker W.R. Merwin.³²¹ In Chatham Pleasant began her association with John Brown, aiding him in his plot to raise an insurrection. Brown held secret meetings that, among other things, organized a provisional government of the United States, convening what he termed a “provisional constitutional convention” in May 1858.³²² Pleasant and the rest of the Chatham Vigilance Committee raised funds for his cause, with Pleasant contributing as much as \$30,000, which today would be worth \$1,150,000.³²³

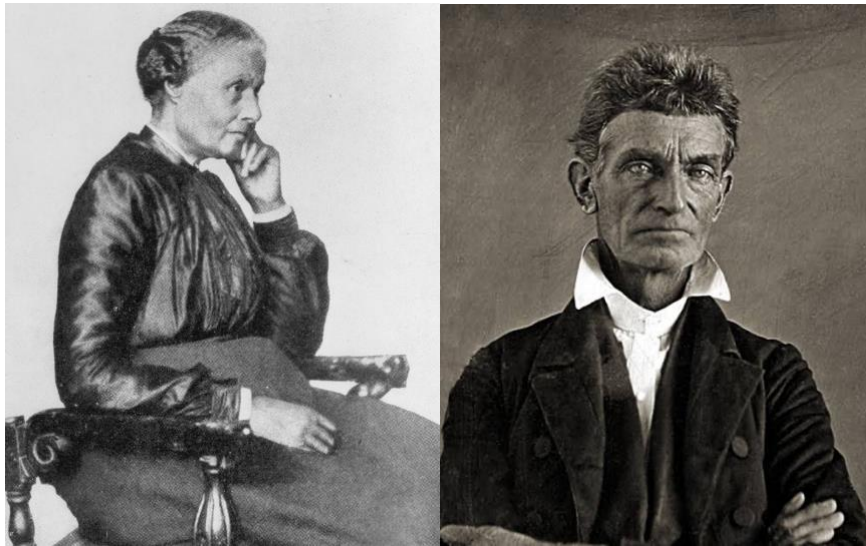


Figure 4. Mary Ellen Pleasant, 87 years old. Public domain image. John Brown c. 1856, Library of Congress.

Pleasant may have been even more integrally involved in the plan. In an interview with her friend Sam Davis, editor of the short-lived *Pandex of the Press*, Pleasant told Davis that she helped raise support for Brown’s cause by riding throughout the countryside in the South disguised as a jockey, warning enslaved people, and staying overnight in slave cabins. “We arranged that when Brown made his stand at Harper’s Ferry, [West Virginia] the Negroes were to rise in every direction, but our plans were all knocked to pieces by Brown himself,” Pleasant

³²¹ Hudson, *Making of Mammy Pleasant*, 39.

³²² *Ibid.*

³²³ Wagner, *African American Women*, 282.

reported. “He started the raid on Harper’s Ferry before the time was ripe. I was astounded when I heard that he had started in and was beaten and captured and that the affair upon which I had staked my money and built so much hope was a fiasco.”³²⁴ Brown’s captors discovered an incriminating letter penned by Pleasant, stating “the ax is laid at the root of the tree. When the first blow is struck, there will be more money to help,” but her “poor handwriting” caused her initials at the bottom of the note to be misread, keeping her role in the adventure concealed.³²⁵ Davis corroborated elements of Pleasant’s story through interviews with John Brown’s children, Jason and Susan.³²⁶

While free Black men and women aiding enslaved people presented one form of Black abolition in nineteenth-century California, the acts of resistance carried out by the enslaved people themselves provided the other side of the activist coin. Hartman contended that very often interventions performed by the subjugated get lost when measured against traditional conceptions of political action.³²⁷ Enslaved people often exerted their power through subtle yet defiant behaviors “conducted under cover of nonsense, indirection and seeming acquiescence,” with an opacity that made them undiscernible to the slaveholder.³²⁸ These behaviors included work slowdowns, destruction of property, theft, self-mutilation, or deception.³²⁹ Overt forms of resistance included physical confrontations with owners and overseers, as well as outright revolts, however enslaved people more commonly resorted to clandestine escapes.³³⁰ Exercising bodily agency by temporarily stealing away to join in collective assembly -- such as hush arbor religious gatherings, or to visit a loved one without permission -- also expressed resistance. Not

³²⁴ Sam Davis, “How a Colored Woman Aided John Brown,” *The Inquirer and Mirror*, December 26, 1901.

³²⁵ *Ibid*; Wagner, *African American Women*, 96.

³²⁶ Davis, “How a Colored Woman Aided John Brown.”

³²⁷ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 103.

³²⁸ *Ibid*, 9.

³²⁹ *Ibid*, 84.

³³⁰ *Ibid*.

only did this behavior implicitly challenge the domination of the slaveholders but it also inculcated a sense of empowerment and possibility in the enslaved.³³¹

Enslaved women's forms of resistance sometimes differed from those employed by enslaved men. Because children often anchored them to the plantation and they often had less familiarity with the surrounding countryside than enslaved men who were hired out, escape presented a less viable option for women in bondage. They did, however, use their child-bearing responsibilities to their advantage, feigning illness more often than men.³³² Since "slave increase" depended upon enslaved women's fertility, and "women's diseases" were shrouded in mystery, few slave owners wanted to gamble on damaging an enslaved woman's reproductive organs.³³³ As caretakers of children, any work a woman did for her own family deprived white slaveholders full control over them as field workers and servants, however such personal family care also contributed to the health of the slave population, increasing the value of the slaveholder's property.³³⁴ Food preparation provided another opportunity for enslaved women to engage in subversion. Sometimes they would feed runaways, keeping them from harm's way as long as possible.³³⁵ They would also resort to poisoning their masters. A notice appearing in the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania Public Ledger on October 23, 1838, reported:

Conspiracy to Poison – Two Negro women, servants of Jas. Charless, St. Louis (Mo), conspired to poison the whole family on Sunday the 7th inst., and had prepared the poison, but were detected and their design frustrated.³³⁶

Enslaved men and women in California had more options for resistance. Though California's anti-slavery status was not being enforced, there was no system to police enslaved

³³¹ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 100.

³³² White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?* 76.

³³³ Ibid, 79.

³³⁴ Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 12.

³³⁵ Ibid, 31.

³³⁶ "Conspiracy to Poison' two enslaved women prepared poison," Newspapers.com. Public Ledger, October 23, 1838.

people either. Once enslaved people realized this, they took advantage of opportunities to escape.³³⁷ Escape, however, was not always desirable. Enslaved men brought to California to mine gold were often located in the wilderness, where they were unfamiliar with the terrain and feared Native Americans.³³⁸ The threat of brutal punishment by slaveholders if caught also provided a major deterrent to escape, and the likelihood of capture increased with substantial reward offers.³³⁹ Despite such concerns, many enslaved people took advantage of the disorder and anonymity of the frontier landscape to flee to remote mining areas or cities.³⁴⁰ Though some escapes were facilitated through carefully planned strategies by free Black abolitionists, in the early years of the Gold Rush they were often executed through the personal courage of the enslaved, a few unknown free Black people, and legal help from sympathetic white lawyers and judges.³⁴¹

Examples of abolitionists aiding slave escapes include an incident in 1859, when a band of Oaklanders forcibly rescued Peter Burns and his daughter, 18-year-old Hannah, who had traveled from Missouri and were being held in bondage in a house in Berkeley by the Burns family.³⁴² An unnamed abolitionist aboard a steamship helped Jane E. Whiting and her three children, who had traveled with her owner Mrs. Thompson under the guise that they were free Black servants traveling willingly to California. The abolitionist befriended Jane, and upon discovering the truth ensured that when the ship docked Jane and her family disembarked first, then escorted them to the Black-owned “Harper and West Boarding House.” The Black community met, changed the family’s name from Whiting to Freeman, and secured day work for

³³⁷ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 134.

³³⁸ Pfaelzer, *California A Slave State*, 124.

³³⁹ Madley and Melillo, “California Unbound,” 33.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 34; Smith, *Freedom’s Frontier*, 51.

³⁴¹ Lapp, “Negro Rights Activities,” 4.

³⁴² Crouchett, Bunch, and Winnacker, *Visions Toward Tomorrow*, 2.

Jane, while her children were instructed to play inside to avoid detection.³⁴³ Even after the Civil War California abolitionists continued to discover enslaved men and women and liberated them from bondage. In 1868 or 1869 a Miss Hester Anderson and Miss Belle Grant were liberated in Red Bluff, and as late as 1871 Annie Randall was discovered by Reverend J.B. Sanderson, who reported in his diary that he freed her from a Stockton ranch.³⁴⁴

While taking flight from bondage presumably met with fewer obstacles in a nominally free state such as California, kinship ties to family members left in the South sometimes kept enslaved people from fleeing. Those who ran risked permanent separation from those loved ones, as the opportunity to reunite with them or purchase their freedom would be highly improbable.³⁴⁵ Mary Williams suffered the consequences of her escape with the loss of her son. Simon Hammersmith brought her to California sometime during the 1850's as his slave or indentured servant. Soon after, Mary gave birth to Charles, a mulatto child who was likely fathered by Hammersmith. After Mary fled to live with a white man named James Frizelle, Hammersmith refused to give her custody of Charles, charging her with being an unsuitable mother. The California courts found in his favor. In November 1857, when Mary and James attempted to kidnap Charles, the police eventually caught them, charged them with assault and abduction, and returned Charles to Hammersmith.³⁴⁶

Enslaved people often recognized the chaotic nature of California and used this instability to their advantage by renegotiating the terms of their bondage, extracting concessions from their owners for better working conditions, greater personal liberty, and payment for their labor.³⁴⁷

³⁴³ Beasley, *Negro Trailblazers*, 92.

³⁴⁴ Ibid.

³⁴⁵ Smith, "Remaking Slavery," 30.

³⁴⁶ Smith, *Freedom's Frontier*, 124.

³⁴⁷ Smith, "Remaking Slavery," 45.

This led to a practice called the “Sunday claim,” a southern custom whereby slaveholders gave enslaved people small plots of land on which they could farm, stake a mining claim, or hire themselves out during time off in the evenings and on Sunday, then keep the money they made for themselves.³⁴⁸ Enslaved people would then use these extra funds to purchase their own freedom and the manumission of family members.³⁴⁹ On occasion a slaveholder might grant an enslaved person decision making power in managing the owner’s business enterprise, and that enslaved person could then begin their own enterprise on the side. The enslaved person would develop skills in advertising, negotiating contracts, extending credit and assuming debt, their competency differing little from their free counterparts.³⁵⁰ Enslaved entrepreneurs who raised enough money to buy their freedom would often continue in those business enterprises as free Black Californians.³⁵¹

Sometimes slaveholders reneged on negotiated contracts for liberation, and in those cases enslaved people would exercise another form of resistance by turning to the courts, finding allies among anti-slavery lawyers and judges.³⁵² Because legally Black people could not testify in California courts, white allyship became essential for a successful decision. “Lucy,” an enslaved woman in Missouri, provides one such example. She had been promised her freedom by her owner if she traveled to the goldfields with her owner’s son. In Auburn the son claimed she was his slave and had her arrested as a fugitive. However, his plans were thwarted. Upon entering California Lucy had given her manumission papers to a local white lawyer and was able to prove she had a legal right to her freedom.³⁵³

³⁴⁸ Smit, “Remaking Slavery,” 47.

³⁴⁹ Madley and Melillo, “California Unbound,” 34.

³⁵⁰ Juliet E.K. Walker, “Racism, Slavery, and Free Enterprise: Black Entrepreneurship in the United States Before the Civil War,” *The Business History Review* 60, no. 3 (Autumn 1986), 364.

³⁵¹ *Ibid*, 369.

³⁵² Smith, *Freedom’s Frontier*, 59; Savage, *Blacks in the West*, 33.

³⁵³ Pfaelzer, *California A Slave State*, 149.

Biddy Mason's story is one of the most well-known examples of a Black person engaging the legal system for her liberty, as her case forced the freedom issue into state politics and helped clarify the rights of Black Californians.³⁵⁴ Less known but equally important is the story of Hannah Embers, the other enslaved woman freed in the judge's decision. Hannah's parallel story illustrates how Black women's activism sometimes took the form of personal courage and emotional fortitude.

The story began in 1851 when Mormon leader Brigham Young sought to establish a settlement in California as a stopping point for Mormon pilgrims traveling by ship around Cape Horn to approach Utah from the West. Robert Mays Smith volunteered and brought with him fourteen enslaved people, including thirty-year-old Biddy Mason and her four children, as well as her sister Hannah and her children and grandchildren.³⁵⁵ Traveling in a caravan of 150 wagons, they followed the California Trail, planning to settle in San Bernadino County. During their journey the two Black women encountered free Black people with "radical ideas," including Charles H. and Elizabeth Flake Rowan, who alerted them that because California was a free state they should contest their slave status once they reached their destination.³⁵⁶

After working in San Bernadino for three years, Biddy met Robert and Minnie Owens, a formerly enslaved couple who ran a successful corral in Los Angeles selling horses to the U.S. government and local ranchers. Their son, Charles Owens, had fallen in love with Biddy's eldest daughter Ellen, and Hannah's daughter Ann had fallen in love with one of the vaqueros working on the corral, Manuel Pepper. In 1855, Smith, concerned about his ability to keep his slaves, decided to move to Texas, a slave state. Smith told Biddy and Hannah that they would be free in

³⁵⁴ Hudson, *West of Jim Crow*, 24.

³⁵⁵ Wagner, *African American Women*, 5

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

Texas because of their free status in California. Bidly, skeptical of Smith's promises, asked the Owens to contact the sheriff as she was ready to sue for her freedom. Conflicting stories exist over who informed San Bernadino Sheriff Robert Clift of Smith's plan. One version named Charles Owens, another had members of the First State Convention of the Colored Citizens of California, which had convened the month before, demanding the sheriff intervene. Elizabeth Rowan was also aware of her friend's perilous predicament and may have had a hand in alerting the sheriff.³⁵⁷ Regardless of who made the request, every account located the impetus for action among Black abolitionists.

In December 1855, Smith was camped in the Cajon Pass, preparing for his move to Texas, when Sheriff Clift and Sheriff David Alexander of Los Angeles County raided Smith's camp and presented him with a writ of Habeus Corpus issued by Judge Benjamin Hayes of the district court. The law officers took Bidly, Hannah, and the twelve children into protective custody pending a preliminary hearing, and placed the fourteen of them in the county jail for their protection while the perpetrator remained free.³⁵⁸ Many historians recounting this case will at this point jump to Judge Hayes' ruling in favor of Bidly and Hannah, freeing them and their children for life, however the chain of events preceding this decision revealed abolitionist work by other Black women in the saga.

Smith maintained that Bidly and Hannah were only bound to his family by affection and dependence, not by force, and that he was acting as guardian to their children, "subjecting them to no greater control than his own children." Moreover, Smith claimed that Hannah and her children "were disposed to" come with him to Texas voluntarily, as a portion of his family.³⁵⁹

³⁵⁷ Demaratus, *Force of a Feather*, 78

³⁵⁸ Ibid, 82; Wagner, *African American Women*, 6; Savage, *Blacks in the West*, 40; Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 120; Smith, *Freedom's Frontier*, 129.

³⁵⁹ Demaratus, *Force of a Feather*, 85.

Judge Hayes doubted this argument. Texas did not allow the entrance of free Black people, so moving to that state would ensure a lifetime of bondage for Hannah and her children. Judge Hayes thus sought to determine the precise nature of the relationship between Smith and Hannah before making a final ruling.³⁶⁰

Smith's exclusion of Bidy among the people "disposed" to follow him suggested that he knew Bidy would not accept that arrangement, whereas Hannah might. Indeed, when Judge Hayes questioned each party, Bidy clearly stated that she did not want to stay with Smith. Moreover, her children confirmed their desire to stay with their mother. Hannah, however, shocked the judge by expressing her intention to stay with Smith. The judge found her testimony to be irrational, and her "hesitancy" and "cold replies" raised suspicions that her decision had been coerced. Hayes sent Sheriff Alexander out to the ranch to speak with Hannah without the Smiths present. When Alexander returned, he confirmed that Hannah had been pressured by Smith's wife. Nevertheless, Hannah was determined to leave with Smith because she had taken an oath in court and was loathe to break her word.³⁶¹

Smith prepared to leave California with Hannah. Meanwhile, Bidy, her daughter Ellen, Hannah's daughter Ann, and the younger children stayed with the Owens, and the rest of the children remained in jail under protective custody. Smith, spurning Hayes' decision, sent two of his teamsters to the Owens' house to pressure Ann and Ellen to accompany them back to Smith's ranch. After the women declined, they returned with Smith's son Will, to pressure them a second time. Once Judge Hayes got wind of these visits he placed the women under court order, along with Bidy, and then also added Hannah, certain that her stated preference to stay with Smith was a lie. Judge Hayes then sent a posse to the ranch to retrieve Hannah. They delivered her to

³⁶⁰ Demaratus, *Force of a Feather*, 86.

³⁶¹ *Ibid*, 140-142.

the county jail where she was reunited with her children. Even after Sheriff Alexander put the women in custody, Smith's teamsters visited the women in jail with the possible motive of kidnapping in mind.³⁶² They were unsuccessful, and soon after Smith left for Texas without his newly freed slaves.

There is much to unpack in Hannah's story, with its many activists. Hannah's possible emotional entanglement with Smith, especially with the strong possibility that he fathered several of her children, complicated her decision. Whether or not Hannah and Smith had feelings of affection for one another, the presence of Smith's wife made it unlikely that Hannah and her children were ever treated like true family, or that they would be had they accompanied Smith to Texas. Hannah's hesitation in embracing freedom revealed an internal struggle from her subjugation by an owner with whom she enjoyed a semi-familial relationship, leading her to accept slavery, as well as the further bondage of her children.³⁶³ One can imagine the courage Hannah must have mustered to finally extricate herself from what she possibly viewed as a genuine relationship, with some level of emotional and social benefits.³⁶⁴

Though technically the law was on her side, one should not discount Bidley Mason's bravery in seeking her and her children's liberation. Judge Hayes found in her favor, but that outcome was not guaranteed. Not every court case brought by enslaved people seeking freedom in California went in their favor. Consider the case of Robert and Carter Perkins. In 1852 C.S. Perkins brought Robert and Carter to California from Mississippi to mine gold. Perkins put them in the charge of Dr. John Hill, and after several months of work Hill freed the two men. The following May the sheriff of Placer County seized Robert and Carter on C.S. Perkins' behalf.

³⁶² Demaratus, *Force of a Feather*, 146.

³⁶³ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 53.

³⁶⁴ Marne L. Campbell, "African American Women, Wealth Accumulation, and Social Welfare Activism in 19th-Century Los Angeles" in *The Journal of African American History* 97, no. 4 (Fall 2012), 388.

They were tried by a pro-slavery judge, and charged with being fugitive slaves.³⁶⁵ As a southern-born former slaveholder, Hayes actions would have displeased the large number of Californians supporting the southern cause, as well as Mormons, who formed a powerful voting bloc. He thus imperiled his own political ambitions.³⁶⁶ Had Hayes decided against alienating these constituencies and ruled against Mason, she would have exposed herself to retribution by Smith when returned to his control.

One also cannot discount the courage demonstrated by Bidley's and Hannah's children, many of whom were female. Their placement in the county jail "for their own protection," must have been uncomfortable, if not frightening. The extra pressure applied to the two older girls, Ellen and Ann, also required fortitude as it may have been the first time in their lives that these two young women had ever openly defied white men.

Winnie Owens and Elizabeth Flake Rowan also played important roles in the freeing of their friends. By first educating Bidley and Hannah of their rights in California, they provided knowledge and the promise of support that would allow Bidley to later request their help when it appeared that her freedom was imperiled by relocation. By providing a safe and comfortable environment for at least some of the women and children involved, and by alerting Judge Hayes of visits by Smith's teamsters that posed a possible threat of kidnapping, these women continued to be vigilant guardians, willing to stand up to white men whose very presence in their home threatened their safety.

The three cases of Archy Lee offer another famous example of the Black community - women and men - joining with white allies to liberate an enslaved person.³⁶⁷ Archy Lee had been

³⁶⁵ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 191.

³⁶⁶ Demaratus, *Force of a Feather*, x.

³⁶⁷ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 157.

brought from Mississippi by slaveholder Charles Stovall in October 1857. At the time, sojourner laws allowed slaveholders to keep their slaves if they were only traveling through California. Stovall remained for more than a year, however, renting out Lee's services before deciding to return to the South. At this point Lee escaped, taking refuge in Hackett House, a hotel on Third street owned by Charles Hackett and Charles Parker, the largest Black business in Sacramento and the center of Black political and social life in that city.³⁶⁸

On January 6, 1858, police arrested Lee. Immediately the Black community rallied to his defense, with support coming from as far as San Francisco, whose larger and more organized Black population numbered close to 400 people.³⁶⁹ Reverend J.J. Moore held a meeting at the San Francisco Zion African Methodist Episcopal Church with the first order of business being the organization of a fundraising campaign to pay for Lee's legal expenses. A committee of seven men and seven women was appointed that included Mary Ellen Pleasant.³⁷⁰ Parker hired Edwin Bryant Crocker, a lawyer with a history of working with fugitive slaves. Crocker won the first trial, arguing that Stovall was not a traveler but a resident. However, before Lee could claim his freedom, Stovall got the California Supreme Court, led by pro-slavery Judge Peter Burnett -- the former California Governor who had attempted to bar Black people from the state -- to intervene. Though Judge Burnett agreed with the major points of the case he ruled that because Stovall was young, inexperienced, and suffering from poor health, the court would show him leniency and allow him to retain Archy in slavery. Lee was arrested and jailed a second time.³⁷¹

³⁶⁸ Brian McGinty, *Archy Lee's Struggle for Freedom: The True Story of California Gold, The Nation's Tragic March Toward Civil War, and a Young black Man's Fight for Liberty* (Guilford, Connecticut: Lyon's Press, 2020), 37.

³⁶⁹ Rudolph Lapp, *Archy Lee: A California Fugitive Slave Case* (San Francisco: Book Club of California, 1969), 13.

³⁷⁰ Hudson, *Making of Mammy Pleasant*, 38; Lapp, *Archy Lee*, 26.

³⁷¹ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 149.

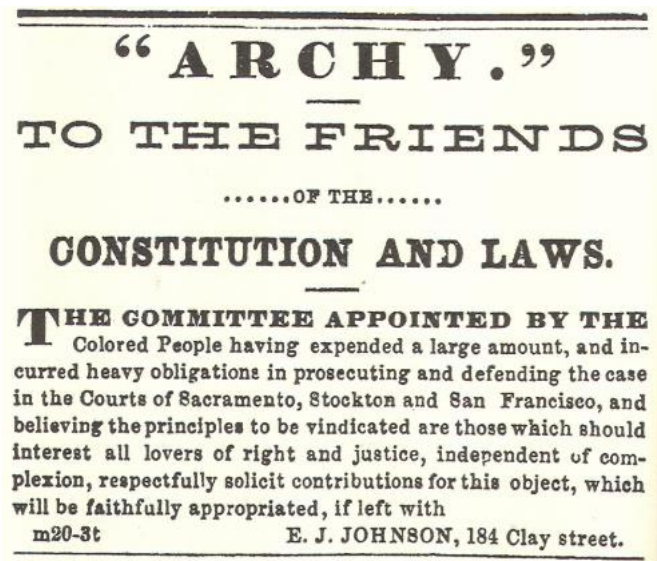


Figure 5. Archy Lee donation solicitation, 1858. Public domain image.

This turn of events further aroused the Black community, and they packed the courtroom. Though no disruptions occurred, the presence of so many justice-seeking Black people attending the numerous trials alarmed white San Franciscans. Elite Black members on the Executive Committee of the Colored Convention, concerned about maintaining the appearance of respectability, posted a statement in the *Daily Evening Bulletin* assuring white citizens that they were not rebellious but a “law loving and law abiding class of persons who have always quietly submitted to the unjust enactments that have been imposed upon us.”³⁷² Meanwhile, Stovall had Lee stashed away in a Stockton jail for safekeeping, leading the Black community to suspect that because Stockton was a major seaport he planned to secretly smuggle Lee out by sea. As they rushed to obtain a writ of *habeus corpus* to retrieve Lee, other plans were made to kidnap him should Stovall attempt to flee, a speculation supported by the presence of Black patrols along the San Francisco wharves that appeared to be scheduled in shifts.³⁷³ Black lookouts staked out the

³⁷² Lapp, *Archy Lee*, 46.

³⁷³ *Ibid*, 19.

wharves, searching for any sign of flight. Black businesspeople closed their offices. Maritime workers - stewards, cooks, waiters, and deckhands - became the eyes and ears of this Black activist crusade.³⁷⁴ According to the historian Rudolph Lapp, the aggression expressed by this community was so militant it unnerved the anti-Black California assembly, blocking a legislative attempt to register all free Black men in California and bar future Black immigration to the state.³⁷⁵

Stovall did try to abscond with Lee, was apprehended by law enforcement, and subsequently arrested for kidnapping. After three successive court cases, U.S. Commissioner George Penn Johnson reversed the California Supreme Court ruling, freeing Archy for good. This was the last fugitive slave case in California, its settlement bringing an end to California's Fugitive Slave Law.³⁷⁶ Concerned that the frenzied atmosphere surrounding the case might pose risks for Lee, Mary Ellen Pleasant hid him in her home, then helped Lee escape to Canada several weeks later.³⁷⁷

The positive outcome of this case only succeeded through the monumental efforts of the entire Black community - men and women - as well as white allies. Black women participated at every step of the way. They supported and carried out plans formed by leadership in the California Colored Conventions. They raised essential funds to engage white lawyers. They provided emotional and spiritual support for Lee throughout the trials, and supplied hospitality and sustenance for Lee while he stayed at Hackett House. They became lookouts along the wharves, intent on preventing Stovall's kidnapping of Lee.

³⁷⁴ Lapp, *Archy Lee*, 21

³⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 11.

³⁷⁶ Madley and Melillo, "California Unbound," 36.

³⁷⁷ Hudson, *Making of Mammy Pleasants*, 38.

Though abolitionism presented a form of activism available to both free and enslaved Black women, Victorian social norms in the nineteenth century often constrained free Black women from engaging in other forms of public activism, a point previously made in this paper. Nevertheless, Black women conducted political work by supporting projects led by Black men. By examining the role Black women played in these efforts the necessity of their participation for the success of these ventures becomes clear.

Black Women and the California Colored Conventions

Initially Black activism in California centered around procuring civil rights, particularly those that defined manhood, such as the right to vote and the right to testify in court against white people in civil and criminal cases, which was comparable to the right of self-defense, of a man to protect his family and business.³⁷⁸ Free Black men in California responded by replicating the forums that provided the primary mode of public political expression among free Black people in the United States: the Colored Conventions. From the beginning these political gatherings were aimed at men. Delegates were all male, speakers addressed the “gentlemen” in the room, and the speeches focused on male rights.³⁷⁹

The first Colored Convention occurred in 1830 in response to Ohio’s exclusionary laws, bringing Black leaders together to contest widespread discrimination, launching a movement. Over the next sixty years, Black activists organized more than two hundred state and national Colored Conventions across the country. Delegates met in homes, churches, and other communal spaces to strategize about how to gain citizenship and equal rights. They wrote resolutions to address educational and labor rights, gain access to the courts, and obtain equal access to

³⁷⁸ Welke, “Rights of Passage,” 75.

³⁷⁹ Ibid.

schools. They also authored proposals that stressed the importance of owning property and one's own business, as well as the support of enslaved people and the newly liberated.³⁸⁰

Within these meetings, Black men spoke for their constituents and honed political skills, conceiving a political agenda for the race.³⁸¹ Two distinctive strategies emerged, which historian Eddie S. Glaude framed as an “outside-inside” approach. The outside approach focused on fighting state laws that established discriminatory racial policies. The inside approach focused on developing group solidarity and self-improvement through education, sobriety, and economic self-sufficiency, to negate pseudo-scientific assaults on Black intelligence and humanity.³⁸²

The Colored Conventions were a collective experience with a performative quality, where public ritual became a means for aggrandizing Black middle-class standards and principles. Historian Erica Ball, explained, “ritual events such as these are best understood as ‘performances’ that achieve symbolic power because they proceed according to a pre-determined set of rules, following a conventional structure.”³⁸³ The performance included acting out gender specific roles dictated by Victorian social norms of the day, consigning women to the domestic sphere and men to the public, thus barring Black women from participating as delegates. Free middle-class Black people conformed to these gender divisions, intent on presenting Black manhood as self-assertive, independent, and capable of leading and protecting their families, believing such representation was crucial for convincing white Americans of Black people's worthiness for social and political inclusion.³⁸⁴ Though disallowed from participating as delegates, Black women still played a significant role in the convention's “public

³⁸⁰ Foreman, “Black Organizing,” 24.

³⁸¹ Ball, “Performing Politics, Creating Community,” 156.

³⁸² Glaude, *Exodus!* 114, 121.

³⁸³ Ball, “Performing Politics, Creating Community,” 158.

³⁸⁴ Glaude, *Exodus!* 121.

performance.”³⁸⁵ Political rituals require an audience to confer legitimacy upon the ceremony, and Black women provided spirited reactions to delegates’ skillful oratory, becoming co-creators in the drama.³⁸⁶

The exclusion of Black women within the political forum was not a foregone conclusion. A resolution in the first National Convention of Colored Freedmen in 1848 brought by Frederick Douglass and Martin Delaney called for equal participation in convention proceedings. The resolution was defeated in committee, but Delany then presented the issue before the full assembly, and after Rebecca Sanford made an appeal for the rights of women the motion passed.³⁸⁷ Evidence suggests that there were occasions where Black women would speak, however recorders of the minutes declined to include these incidents. According to historian Eric Gardner, the Colored Convention minutes should be “studied as a multivocal text loaded with gaps and silences.”³⁸⁸ As highly curated documents, “Committees on Printing” and “Committees on Address” determined what was included and often left out Black women’s voices, reflecting strategic concerns about public perception.³⁸⁹ In eastern Colored Conventions, recorders of the proceedings noted Mary Ann Shadd Cary’s presence, as well as a vote over whether to grant her status as a delegate, however her emigration debate with delate J.J. Bias was left out.³⁹⁰

Similarly, teacher and poet Priscilla Stewart, who in 1848 served on the Business Committee of the Antislavery convention in Philadelphia, offered comments which do not appear in the published minutes. At some point Stewart moved to California, then later departed with the mass exodus to Victoria, British Columbia in April 1858 after the California assembly passed a

³⁸⁵ Ball, “Performing Politics, Creating Community,” 161.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 160, 163.

³⁸⁷ Jones, *All Bound Up Together*, 59.

³⁸⁸ Gardner, “Word Fitly Spoken,” 77.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁰ Foreman, “Black Organizing,” 40.

bill requiring all free Black people to leave the state. Stewart penned “A Voice from the Oppressed to the Friends of Humanity, Composed by One of the Suffering Class,” distributing it to “California Pioneers” to raise money for the trip.³⁹¹ The poem included this stanza: *Far Better breathe Canadian air/ Where all are free and well/ Than live in slavery’s atmosphere/ And wear the chains of hell.*³⁹² Ultimately the bill ejecting Black people from the state did not succeed. The California Senate had made minor adjustments and sent it back to the assembly, which failed to act upon them before adjourning, killing the measure.³⁹³ After the Emancipation Proclamation, Stewart later returned to California to teach with Reverend Jeremiah Sanderson. She remains a Black woman activist whose work has been largely forgotten.³⁹⁴

Throughout the 1850’s fugitive slave cases occupied the attention of the Black community, however of greater concern for free Black people was the fight for the right to testify against white people in California courts.³⁹⁵ The passage of the California Fugitive Slave Law in 1852 made the issue even more acute. If apprehended by slave hunters and charged as fugitives, free Black people would have no recourse for their defense. Testimony laws also rendered Black ownership of land precarious, leaving this primary symbol of masculine independence - a quick route to wealth in the gold rush economy - unprotected from fraud and theft. Black Californians were also vulnerable to assault and even murder, without possibility of legal recourse.³⁹⁶ In response to their precariousness state, and with the growth and maturation of the Black community, Black Californians increased their civil rights work and became more organized.

³⁹¹ Pfaelzer, “None But Colored Testimony,” 339.

³⁹² Beasley, *Negro Trail-Blazers of California*, 263.

³⁹³ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 240.

³⁹⁴ Beasley, *Negro Trail-Blazers of California*, 263.

³⁹⁵ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 143.

³⁹⁶ Bottoms, *Aristocracy of Color*, 27.

The “First State Convention of the Colored Citizens of the State of California” was held in Sacramento on November 21, 22, and 23, 1855, in the Colored Methodist Church. From the outset the question was raised over whether women should be included. By the 1850’s, Black women’s participation in the Underground Railroad had made their political work obvious, and the well-known activities of women such as Mary Ellen Pleasant and Biddy Mason had already established that politics were women’s business.³⁹⁷ Though Reverend Jeremiah Sanderson argued for women’s inclusion, the California Colored Conventions continued the national practice of banning female delegates.³⁹⁸ Nevertheless, women traveled from across the state to attend the organizing meetings that proceeded the conventions, took part in the social events in and around the Convention location, and raised money to support the conventions and its causes.³⁹⁹

The California Convention minutes reflected the respectability performance of earlier conventions, with white society as the intended audience. In the morning of the first day of proceedings, Reverend Jeremiah Sanderson pointed out:

Perhaps no subject is attracting the attention of the public more than the efforts which the colored people are making to elevate themselves; the public eye is upon us.... There are those, too, who think we cannot conduct this convention with intelligence and ability; they expect scenes of disagreement and confusion; I trust we shall disappoint them; let us deliberate and act, each emulous to perform his duty; and when the report of our doings goes out before the people, they shall be compelled to say *well done*.⁴⁰⁰

On the second day, Jonas H. Townsend took issue with a statement in the preamble of a report given by the Business Committee that summarized convention objectives, contending that it was

³⁹⁷ Hudson, *West of Jim Crow*, 27.

³⁹⁸ Ibid.

³⁹⁹ Ibid, 26; Coleman, “African American Women and Community Development,” 105.

⁴⁰⁰ First State Convention of the Colored Citizens of the State of California (1855: Sacramento, CA), “Proceedings of the First State Convention of the Colored Citizens of the State of California. Held at Sacramento Nov. 20th 21st, and 22d, in the Colored Methodist Church [sic].,” *Colored Conventions Project Digital Records*, 5.

“crouching” in tone, and that a more “manly” appeal should be made to the state legislature.⁴⁰¹ Darius P. Stokes remarked, “Let us first correct ourselves, and become worthy of respect, then the world will not withhold its reward.”⁴⁰² Townsend concluded the convention by referencing the wealth of Black Californians, their attachment to United States institutions, and the wars in which Black men fought for the United States, remarks clearly aimed at a white audience.⁴⁰³

During that first meeting the official record mentioned Mrs. Alfred J. White of Tuolumne County when William H. Newby presented a resolution suggested by her thanking the Business Committee for their “faithful, intelligent and successful labors.” Newby responded, “It is all the more grateful to the feelings of the committee as an expression of satisfaction with their efforts to serve you – as coming from a lady; where the ladies are with us, and approve, we are satisfied that we are right; it is an earnest success.”⁴⁰⁴ However, Black women were not always satisfied with the proceedings in the Colored Conventions. With the focus of the male delegates on rights that primarily affected men, Black women felt they could not rely on men to fully represent their political interests.⁴⁰⁵ Nevertheless, Black women carried out the work behind the scenes, launching petition drives, organizing rallies, campaigning for candidates, and raising funds to pay for attorneys, helping to stitch together a community that was scattered throughout the larger cities and smaller towns.⁴⁰⁶

Black women were also crucial for the development of the first Black newspaper in California, *Mirror of the Times*, whose original purpose was to report on convention proceedings. When white subscribers to the *Sacramento State Tribune* protested the inclusion of the Colored

⁴⁰¹ First State Convention, 11.

⁴⁰² Ibid, 12.

⁴⁰³ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 218.

⁴⁰⁴ First State Convention, 24.

⁴⁰⁵ Hudson, *West of Jim Crow*, 28.

⁴⁰⁶ Pfaelzer, *California A Slave State*, 210; Foreman, “Black Organizing,” 29.

Convention affairs in the pages of that newspaper, the need for a Black press became obvious.⁴⁰⁷ Though founded by Mifflin Gibbs, George Washington Dennis, William H. Newby, and Jonas P. Townsend, it was the Mirror Association, a Black women's philanthropic group, that raised funds to establish and support the paper.⁴⁰⁸ From the end of 1856 through March of 1858 *Mirror of the Times* published between fifty to sixty issues. Unable to sustain itself through subscriptions and advertisements it found support through fundraising by other Black women's groups, such as the Placerville Ladies' Club, the Sacramento Banneker Society, and the Siskiyou County Yreka Liberty Club.⁴⁰⁹

The Black press in California became an essential tool, not only for informing the Black public of the convention's activities but for promoting the respectability of the event to the white public as well. Though the newspaper focused on the testimony campaign it also informed white Californians of the Black community's attachment to principles of republican government.⁴¹⁰ Foreman contended, "one could argue that conventions were held in the press as much as they took place in the halls, churches, and buildings in which delegates and attendees gathered."⁴¹¹ After the *Mirror of the Times*' run ended in 1858 there was no Black press in California until 1862 when the *Pacific Appeal* debuted, followed three years later by *The Elevator*.⁴¹²

Black women participated in the conventions in subtle ways as well, through hospitality; preparing and serving food, and hosting the massive number of out-of-towners who needed housing during the convention.⁴¹³ Historian Psyche Williams-Forsen identified food and

⁴⁰⁷ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 218.

⁴⁰⁸ Campbell, "African American Women," 390.

⁴⁰⁹ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 230.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid*, 220.

⁴¹¹ Foreman, "Black Organizing," 45.

⁴¹² Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 265; Eric Gardner ed. *Jennie Carter: A Black Journalist of the Early West* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), vii.

⁴¹³ Gardner, "Word Fitly Spoken," 74.

domestic labor as “radicalized source of female empowerment,” pointing out that providing guests with the accoutrements and rituals of home engendered an air of conviviality that promoted community, reflecting African family patterns of kinship.⁴¹⁴ The Black parlor became a space for social gathering, feeding and sheltering attendees and provided Black women with access to information about convention debates as delegates discussed the day’s events within earshot. Though they could not express their opinions on the convention floor, Black women did so in parlors, kitchens, sewing circles, reading rooms, literary societies, and other female gathering spaces.⁴¹⁵ Foreman challenged historians to conceptualize the Colored Conventions as not only consisting of the formal delegate gatherings in civic spaces but also the community participants who converged in various sites in neighborhoods to “debate, discuss, and advocate for political access, inclusion, and justice.” Foreman explained, “multi-use sites such as boardinghouses buzzed with political energy during conventions, serving as reconfigured extensions of the meetings themselves.”⁴¹⁶ Moreover, Black women would no doubt lobby their husbands, sons, and other male relatives, offering their opinions on important political decisions to influence the men in their lives.⁴¹⁷

Whether or not the 1855, 1856, and 1857 Colored Conventions in California were politically effective is up for debate. During this period anti-Black Democrats dominated the California legislature, led by Senator William Gwin, a former Mississippian.⁴¹⁸ The second and third California Colored Conventions, in 1856 and 1857, were no more successful than the first, as each spate of petitions calling for equal rights for Black people were met with

⁴¹⁴ Williams-Forsen, “Where Did They Stay?” 88, 94.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid, 97.

⁴¹⁶ Foreman, “Black Organizing,” 35.

⁴¹⁷ Williams-Forsen, “Where Did They Eat?” 97.

⁴¹⁸ Moore, “We Want the Feel of Protection,” 117.

intransigence.⁴¹⁹ Morale was so low after the 1857 Dred Scott decision denied the legality of Black citizenship in the nation that a fourth convention seemed pointless; it was only the distraction of the Archy Lee fugitive slave case in 1858 that kept the momentum going.⁴²⁰ As long as Democrats controlled the California legislature, Black people had little chance of acquiring equal rights, however with the outbreak of the U.S. Civil War, the Democratic party's hold on California's legislature and judiciary collapsed and its discriminatory policies fell out of favor.⁴²¹ The alignment of Republicans with Free-Soilers ultimately prevailed over the Democrats, sweeping Republicans into office, resurrecting the promise of California's anti-slavery constitution.⁴²² And, on December 19, 1865, California legislators ratified the Thirteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, banning slavery.⁴²³

Though the more formal convention framework relegated Black women to supportive positions, community work provided them opportunities for leadership. While the "outside" male-led strategy of petitioning the legislature to enact change failed, the "inside" strategy, where free Black women had their greatest influence, bolstering the Black community through social work, celebrations, and education - bore fruit.

Black Women and the Activism of Community Building

Free Black women developed their political networking strategies within the home and churches, and later in women's social clubs, spheres that Victorian's deemed appropriate for feminine activity.⁴²⁴ This paper has already addressed the importance of Black churches from a

⁴¹⁹ Bottoms, *Aristocracy of Color*, 38.

⁴²⁰ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 204.

⁴²¹ Bottoms, *Aristocracy of Color*, 40.

⁴²² Smith, *Freedom's Frontier*, 78.

⁴²³ Madley and Melillo, "California Unbound," 36.

⁴²⁴ Campbell, "African American Women," 390.

religious standpoint and the role of Black women within the Christian service, however Black churches in Gold Rush California also served as the nexus for political organizing, charity work, fundraising, celebrations, and social reform campaigns, which strengthened the Black community by promoting nationhood, community education, and social uplift. These undertakings were often organized and led by Black women.⁴²⁵

Black churches were the first organizations established by the Black migrants, even while the Black population was still quite small. These congregations formed and met without ministers, assembling in private homes until buildings could be built or purchased and ministers could be hired.⁴²⁶ Black women had a role in establishing these churches. Eliza Davis and Milly Denton, along with eight other people, organized the First Colored Baptist Church of San Francisco, the first Black Baptist church west of the Mississippi.⁴²⁷ Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Scott founded the church in Rozenville Junction. Of the five founders of the St. Olivet Church in Marysville, four were women: Mrs. Segue, Mrs. Blue, Mrs. McGowan, and Mrs. Bland, with the fifth founder being the Reverend.⁴²⁸

⁴²⁵ Campbell, "African American Women," 394; Philip M. Montesano, "San Francisco Black Churches in the Early 1860's: Political Pressure Group," in *California Historical Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (Summer 1973), 145, 146; Savage, *Blacks in the West*, 184.

⁴²⁶ Montesano, "San Francisco Black Churches," 145.

⁴²⁷ Shover and Fleming, *Black Life in the Sacramento Valley*, 23.

⁴²⁸ Beasley, *Negro Trail-Blazers*, 158.

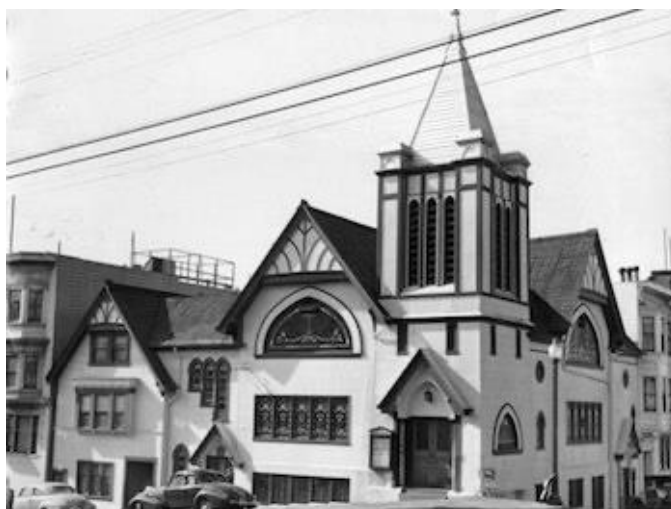


Figure 6. First Colored Baptist Church of San Francisco, founded August 6, 1852, building dedicated March 14, 1869.

Despite its small size the Marysville church “hummed with activity” throughout the summer and Fall of 1857 as the women’s committee raised money through a series of “Ladies festivals” to construct a church building, which was completed in January of 1858.⁴²⁹ By holding teas, picnics, food fairs, and festivals, Black women provided the funds for church buildings as well as the monetary and physical resources to sustain them.⁴³⁰ Sometimes a single individual would have an outsized impact on church development. In Los Angeles, Bidley Mason established the First African Methodist Episcopal Church (FAME) in 1872. The services took place in her home, until she was able to purchase the property for the church building. Once constructed, Mason single handedly supported the church by paying all its taxes and expenses in its first critical years.⁴³¹

In addition to religious sustenance and providing space for overt political ventures such as the Colored Conventions, Black churches supported the objectives of racial uplift through

⁴²⁹ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 163.

⁴³⁰ Coleman, “African American Women and Community Development,” 106.

⁴³¹ *Ibid*, 106; Campbell, “African American Women,” 386.

charitable work. Middle class Black people blamed the state of poverty stricken and illiterate Black people for racial pseudo-science designating Negroes as a degraded and immoral race, and sought to rectify the situation by elevating the unfortunate.⁴³² Elite Black women accepted the challenge of improving the morality of the Black community, creating benevolent societies within which they used domestic skills to feed, shelter, educate, and train widows, orphans and other men and women in need.⁴³³ The earliest known Black benevolent society in California appeared in Placerville in 1859.⁴³⁴ In 1860 Black women in San Francisco created the Ladies' Benevolent society and the Ladies' Pacific Accommodating and Benevolent Society. A year later the Black women of Sacramento organized a female auxiliary to the Eastern Star, a men's masonic fraternal organization. These groups aimed to promote education, respectability, and reform. They also provided medical aid, burial services, and held fundraisers to support other charitable ventures.⁴³⁵ Money raised by these groups also helped fund the Black press in California, which publicized their social uplift achievements.⁴³⁶

Black women in San Francisco also sought to support Black working women, by organizing a mutual aid association in 1860, The Ladies Union Beneficial Society. A predecessor of women's labor unions, this union provided protection of health, welfare, and other services routinely denied to Black women engaged in domestic work, such as cooks, nannies, and maids. This effort established a tradition of organizing among Black western women at a time when white Victorian norms dictated that women should not be in the workplace at all.⁴³⁷

⁴³² Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest*, 148.

⁴³³ Forson, "Where Did They Eat?" 90.

⁴³⁴ Coleman, "African American Women and Community Development," 111.

⁴³⁵ Campbell, "African American Women," 393; Taylor and Moore, "Introduction" in *African American Women Confront the West*, 11.

⁴³⁶ Coleman, "African American Women and Community Development," 111.

⁴³⁷ Hudson, *West of Jim Crow*, 28.

Literary societies became another outlet for racial uplift as Black women sought to raise the intellectual standards of Black women and families. These California organizations had antecedents in northern states, such as the Philadelphia Library Company of Colored People established in the 1833, and the Female Literary Society of Philadelphia established in 1831.⁴³⁸ Members of these organizations would read aloud from books and periodicals, read their own written compositions, perform musical pieces, or recite dramatic selections.⁴³⁹ For politically minded women these associations became a training ground for future leadership, offering opportunities for Black women to acquire basic literacy, hone writing skills by composing essays, and gain confidence in delivering speeches and orations.⁴⁴⁰

Literary groups brought Black women public exposure, though in limited ways.⁴⁴¹ At a time when Victorian norms discouraged Black women from making political speeches, literary societies presented a venue where they could speak their mind publicly, expressing political viewpoints or giving a voice to the social context in which they lived, first among themselves and then in front of audiences composed of men and women.⁴⁴² The Black press advertised these productions, allowing Black women's intellectual work and political perspectives to spread beyond just family and friends.⁴⁴³ At a time when Black people were barred from white schools, literary societies also provided a means by which Black women and men could build community and display their intelligence, proving that intellectually they were equal to whites.⁴⁴⁴

⁴³⁸ Jaqueline Bacon and Glen McClish, "Reinventing the Master's Tools: Nineteenth-Century African-American Literary Societies of Philadelphia and Rhetorical Education," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (Autumn 2000), 22.

⁴³⁹ Harris, *Shadow of Slavery*, 180.

⁴⁴⁰ Jones, *All Bound Up Together*, 31.

⁴⁴¹ Harris, *Shadow of Slavery*, 179.

⁴⁴² Foreman, "Black Organizing," 44.

⁴⁴³ Harris, *Shadow of Slavery*, 180.

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 186.

In addition to literary events, Black churches also provided a venue for cultural education by sponsoring musical concerts and lectures. In San Francisco, the Third Baptist church organized an evening of music featuring the work of classical composers, while the Zion and Bethel Churches held talks by Unitarian Minister Reverend Thomas Starr King and Black physician Dr. Ezra R. Johnson, who delivered a lecture on laughing gas.⁴⁴⁵

Black Churches in California and elsewhere also sponsored festivals, celebrations, and balls, with women planning elaborate programs that fulfilled the “inside-outside” political strategy. These staged affairs had the triple purpose of raising money, allowing image-conscious Black elites to project an elevated image to white society, and indoctrinating non-elite Black people towards activism.⁴⁴⁶ As early as 1853, Black church women in the Marysville Mount Olivet Baptist Church held “ladies festivals,” and similar fund-raising events occurred in Placerville, Grass Valley, and Stockton to support small AME churches.⁴⁴⁷ In 1854, Grass Valley Black women organized a festival that garnered enough money to launch the construction of an African Episcopal church costing \$1400.⁴⁴⁸ At these festivals speakers gave public speeches aimed at educating and fostering racial pride in non-elite Black people, providing descriptions of their historical heritage and a vision for the future of the race.⁴⁴⁹ Speakers also identified slavery and white racism as the culprit for the Black community’s reduced circumstances and stressed the need to organize to counter these negative pressures.⁴⁵⁰ While some working-class Black people may have rejected the paternalistic attitude of elite Black leaders, others were likely

⁴⁴⁵ Montesano, “San Francisco Black Churches,” 146.

⁴⁴⁶ Daniels, *Pioneer Urbanites*, 131.

⁴⁴⁷ Graaf and Taylor, “Introduction” in *Seeking El Dorado*, 12.

⁴⁴⁸ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 91.

⁴⁴⁹ Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest*, 79.

⁴⁵⁰ Daniels, *Pioneer Urbanites*, 119.

encouraged by these gatherings, and took advantage of the opportunities available to them in churches, lodges, and literary societies to uplift their circumstances.⁴⁵¹

Black leaders in free states engineered the performative aspect of festivals to appeal to Black audiences, while signifying Black power and unity to the white community. Public processions, banners with anti-slavery mottoes, martial displays, and music with military themes were designed for mass appeal. Food, dancing and socializing also provided a key ingredient, offering spaces for commingling that simultaneously projected upon white audiences the unified vision of the Black community.⁴⁵² Equally important was the perception of respectability, sometimes at the expense of Black unity. Tiered ticketing systems conferred a sense of exclusivity, with restricted dinners held after the public parties were underway. Additionally, advertisements for the event would use the phrase “large and respectable” to indicate the desired tone for the occasion.⁴⁵³

In addition to recruiting working-class Blacks into politics, nineteenth century anti-slavery celebrations asserted Black people’s right to public spaces, signaling a new era of confrontational politics.⁴⁵⁴ Earlier Black festivals celebrated by enslaved Black people during the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, such as Pinkster Negro Election Day and Militia Training Day, signified upon white society, covertly satirizing their cultural practices without white audiences being the wiser. Held in marginal spaces, white audiences sanctioned these public events, enjoying the opportunity to observe and vicariously participate in Black culture. However, after northern states ceased Black enslavement in the mid to late nineteenth century, anti-slavery themed celebrations, with their more aggressive subversive messages, fomented

⁴⁵¹ Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest*, 81.

⁴⁵² *Ibid*, 64.

⁴⁵³ *Ibid*, 61, 66.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 72.

fears in white audiences of free Black people seeking equal social status. Moreover, these public parades, picnics, dances, and other festivities moved these celebrations from the periphery of cities to major thoroughfares, making the streets a staging ground for public protests and a venue for debating racial issues.⁴⁵⁵ White people responded by parodying Black elites through blackface minstrelsy, but the Black community had scored a significant win by claiming public spaces to air arguments against slavery and racial discrimination.

Anti-slavery celebrations included Black Independence Day, usually held on July 5 as Black people eschewed celebrating on July 4 in protest of slavery in the South. Other festivals commemorated the 1791-1804 Haitian Revolution, the abolition of the international slave trade, and John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry.⁴⁵⁶ In 1859 Black people in Tuolumne County celebrated the twenty-first anniversary of the British West Indies Emancipation Act, drawing close to one hundred participants from such gold rush towns as Columbia, Angel's Camp, and Jamestown. In the following year, the West Indian Benevolent Association organized festivities commemorating the Emancipation Act in San Francisco, Sacramento, and Sutterville, with crowds coming from as far as Placerville, Auburn, Oroville, Napa, and Sonoma.⁴⁵⁷

The issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, became known as "Freedom Day," a momentous occasion that caused some of the largest celebrations to erupt across the nation as Black communities and white allies rejoiced over the end of enslavement. In Northern California hundreds attended the Emancipation Jubilee held at Platts Hall in San Francisco, with Jeremiah Sanderson delivering the keynote address.⁴⁵⁸ Within all these celebrations and festivities women not only participated but provided the planning and labor for

⁴⁵⁵ Hudson, *West of Jim Crow*, 39.

⁴⁵⁶ Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest*, 78.

⁴⁵⁷ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 258.

⁴⁵⁸ McGriff-Payne, *John Grider's Century*, 35.

their success. They raised funds, prepared food, organized Black schoolchildren's songs and presentations, and made banners to convey the speakers' themes in a more easily understood format for those with limited literacy.⁴⁵⁹ Some women even found an opportunity to make speeches. According to the January 2 issue of the *Pacific Appeal*, in San Francisco's 1864 Freedom Day celebration "people were taken with Emma Harding's speech on Abraham Lincoln."⁴⁶⁰

Within these interracial affairs, Black women used commensality as a political tool. Psyche Williams-Forsen quoted Claude Grignon in "Commensality and social Morphology: An Essay of Typology" to define commensality as the act of gathering "to accomplish in a collective way some material tasks and symbolic obligations linked to the satisfaction of a biological individual need."⁴⁶¹ The choice of refreshments carried cultural meaning and community identity, bringing together people in a space where alliances could be formed. According to Williams-Forsen, "the fundraising fair, the convention, and the space of daily meal setting allowed for various kinds of influence to be exercised by Black women even as they served the function of providing sustenance."⁴⁶²

Black Women and Education

Academic education presented another area where Black women expressed political activism in California. The Black community valued education for several reasons. Literacy gave Black people the ability to read the Bible, a key source of inspiration for both free and enslaved

⁴⁵⁹ Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest*, 79.

⁴⁶⁰ Coleman, "African American Women and Community Development," 111.

⁴⁶¹ Williams-Forsen, "Where Did They Eat?" 89.

⁴⁶² *Ibid*, 90.

Black people. It also brought understanding to the workings of white society.⁴⁶³ Additionally, for free Black people, education worked toward the inside-outside goals of racial uplift. Education was crucial for the Black community to improve their social, political, and economic conditions. At the same time, proving to white society that Black people possessed the same intellectual capabilities as white people would indicate their ability to perform the same work and exercise the civic responsibilities of full citizens. In this way education, too, became politicized.⁴⁶⁴

The first public school in California appeared in 1847. Ironically the first Board of Education included a mulatto man, California pioneer and entrepreneur William Leidesdorff, an immigrant from St. Croix with a mixed Danish and African ancestry. Leidesdorff's contemporaries, however, were unaware of his ancestry and considered him white.⁴⁶⁵ Indeed, Leidesdorff's presence on the board had little impact on his fellow white board members, who insisted on keeping schools segregated in response to a variety of social pressures, such as the linking of public education to notions of U.S. citizenship. In school students would be taught their liberties and rights with the purpose of producing loyal, virtuous citizens, a quality which white people had determined Black people incapable of achieving. Admitting Black students into public school would be tantamount to acknowledging their ability to operate as equals in white society.⁴⁶⁶ Moreover, the idea of Black and white children learning side-by-side conjured images of "amalgamation,"-- the threat of racial mixing -- an anathema to segregationists.⁴⁶⁷ Finally, State officials feared that allowing Black children into state funded public schools would open the door to Chinese children, an ethnic population white people regarded as equally undesirable.

⁴⁶³ Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice*, 45.

⁴⁶⁴ Savage, *Blacks in the West*, 168.

⁴⁶⁵ Bottoms, *Aristocracy of Color*, 113; Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 9.

⁴⁶⁶ Bottoms, *Aristocracy of Color*, 97.

⁴⁶⁷ Hudson, *West of Jim Crow*, 31.

The Chinese population was much larger than the Black population; according to the 1860 census Chinese people constituted 9 percent of the population while Black people only amounted to 1 percent.⁴⁶⁸ The idea that public schools would be overwhelmed with Chinese students sealed the white desire for segregation.⁴⁶⁹

Though the California School Law of 1851 apportioned funding among the several cities and towns in proportion to the number of students between the ages of five and eighteen regardless of color, in 1855 Section Eighteen of an act passed the state legislature accounted for the enumerating of white children, suggesting that all other children would no longer be counted and therefore would not receive funding.⁴⁷⁰ Black people were thus left to their own devices to provide education for their children.

As with many social and political endeavors launched by the Black community in the nineteenth century, Black people turned to the church, which provided education through Sabbath schools. Though initially taught by Black men and white women, as the population of free, highly literate Black women increased in California in the 1850's that trend began to shift.⁴⁷¹ Though Victorian norms determined that married women should remain in the domestic sphere and not enter the working world, most Black households could not meet a basic standard of living unless both partners worked.⁴⁷² Based on their maternal and spiritual inclinations Black women were deemed ideal for the moral training of Black youth, and were allowed to expand their labor beyond the domestic arena by becoming teachers.⁴⁷³

⁴⁶⁸ 1860 United States Census

⁴⁶⁹ Hudson, *West of Jim Crow*, 32.

⁴⁷⁰ Savage, *Blacks in the West*, 168.

⁴⁷¹ Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice*, 49.

⁴⁷² *Ibid*, 45.

⁴⁷³ Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest*, 155.

Within the household Black women had a duty to nurture their children. This meant attending to their virtue, molding their intelligence, inculcating the benefits of education, and modeling these behaviors themselves. As schoolteachers these educational objectives could be considered in a larger political context of promoting citizenship, expanding opportunity, and fostering Black pride.⁴⁷⁴ Sharing the belief with white reformers that permanent impressions formed during early developmental years, Black women's work became even more crucial for uplifting the Black community.⁴⁷⁵ Black women also broadened their curriculum for girls, expanding lessons from domestic work and social graces to include knowledge and literacy that would foster economic independence, readying both sons and daughters for the workplace.⁴⁷⁶

One of the earliest and most influential Black female educators in California was Elizabeth Thorn Scott. Originally from Bedford, Massachusetts, Elizabeth and her husband, Joseph Scott, traveled to San Francisco by ship in 1852, crossing through Panama and sailing north on the Pacific before settling in "Hangtown" (later Placerville) in El Dorado County with their California born son.⁴⁷⁷ Soon after they arrived her husband died. Now a widow, Scott moved with her son to Sacramento. Scott's passion for education prompted her to open her home for the private instruction of Black students, and on May 29, 1854, she founded the first Colored school in Sacramento. The student body consisted of four girls and ten boys, with ages ranging from four to twenty-nine.⁴⁷⁸

Three months later, on August 7, 1854, the community organized the first public school for Colored children in Sacramento in the basement of the St. Andrew's Church on 7th Street and

⁴⁷⁴ Bragg, "Anxious Foot Soldiers," 97.

⁴⁷⁵ Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest*, 150.

⁴⁷⁶ Carlson, "Black Ideals of Womanhood," 63.

⁴⁷⁷ Wagner, *African American Women of the West*, 104.

⁴⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 105.

hired Scott as the teacher for fifty dollars a month. This school welcomed Black, Chinese, and Native American children with a tuition of one dollar a week.⁴⁷⁹ Mrs. Persila Yantes served on the committee that raised money for the school by subscription.⁴⁸⁰ Four years later, in 1858 a group of Black Sacramento women used donations to purchase a lot on O Street between 9th and 10th as a permanent school site. The six women - Persila Yantes, Emily Allen, Mary Joseph, Maria Caldwell, Rebecca Gibbs, and Jane Ware – transferred the deed to three male trustees for one dollar, stipulating that the site must be used for a school or revert to the women’s control.⁴⁸¹

Scott’s interest in politics led her to attend the first state Colored Convention in 1855, convening at St. Andrews Church, where it is believed that she met her second husband, Isaac Flood, an ex-slave who arrived in California in 1849.⁴⁸² After marrying Flood, in keeping with Victorian norms, she gave up work, leaving St. Andrews without a teacher until Jeremiah Sanderson took over. Meanwhile, Elizabeth and Isaac moved to Brooklyn, now known as East Oakland, and in 1856 she gave birth to another son, George, the first Black baby born in Alameda County. The East Bay offered a lower cost of living than San Francisco. As Black businesses relocated there, and the transcontinental railroad brought more families to the area, Elizabeth began to solicit support for another school. In 1857 she opened the school in her home, on East 15th Avenue, establishing the first private Black school in Oakland. Like St. Andrews, the school was open to all children of color, with the goal of creating a curriculum competitive with white schools.⁴⁸³ The year after she started her private school Elizabeth and Isaac, along with

⁴⁷⁹ Wagner, *African American Women of the West*, 105.

⁴⁸⁰ Beasley, *Negro Trail-Blazers*, 174.

⁴⁸¹ Bragg, “Anxious Foot Soldiers,” 102.

⁴⁸² Wagner, *African American Women of the West*, 107.

⁴⁸³ *Ibid*, 109.

other community leaders, founded Oakland's first Black church on Washington Street, the AME Methodist Church, in 1858.⁴⁸⁴

During this period Jeremiah Sanderson worked on the "outside" strategy by petitioning the school board for funds, arguing that Black residents paid taxes to support public schools and should therefore have access to public school instruction. By 1860 the Board agreed to provide funding for Black schools in areas that had ten or more children in the school district. In 1862 when Republican John Swett was elected Superintendent of Public Instruction he amended this with a provision stipulating that if there were fewer than ten non-white students they could be admitted into a white school if the district desired it.⁴⁸⁵ Notwithstanding the mandate for segregated learning facilities, the funding of Black schools was a victory for the civil rights of Black families in California.⁴⁸⁶ Despite this recognition, the decision still left Black children in rural districts without access to schools. The Black community determined to pay the expense for educating those unaccounted children through fundraising, festivals, and subscription solicitation, with Black women leading the charge.⁴⁸⁷

Throughout the 1850's and 1860's Black private and public schools continued to open, hiring Black women as teachers. One week before the first Sacramento Colored school opened, San Francisco opened its first Black primary school on May 22, 1854, in the basement rooms of St. Cyprian AME Church, the only venue for formal education for Black primary school students for ten years.⁴⁸⁸ In 1858 the school had as many as forty students, some of them as old as twenty-one, suggesting that there may have been adult formerly-enslaved people whose first opportunity

⁴⁸⁴ Wagner, *African American Women of the West*, 110.

⁴⁸⁵ Bottoms, *Aristocracy of Color*, 111.

⁴⁸⁶ Bragg, "Anxious Foot Soldiers," 103.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 102.

⁴⁸⁸ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 167.

to learn to read came in California.⁴⁸⁹ Downtown Vallejo opened a one room school, attended by a handful of Black children, among them Nancy, James, and George Holman, the children of ex-slaves Isabel and George Holman, who were intent on their children receiving an education.⁴⁹⁰ Also in 1861, after Black students were ejected from the local white primary school in Watsonville after white parents complained, the local community hired Mrs. L.C. Clark to teach the Black children in her home.⁴⁹¹ In 1859 the Black community of Marysville finished the construction of their Baptist Church which included space for a school in its basement. They welcomed its first teacher, Mrs. Sherman, who was assisted by Miss Washington.⁴⁹² In 1863 the First AME Mission of Oakland acquired a building, changed its name to the Shiloh AME Church, and became Oakland's first schoolhouse.⁴⁹³

Though Black schools provided education to Black boys and girls for the purpose of ensuring future opportunities and uplifting the race in general, girls may have been the primary beneficiaries. In the latter years of the gold rush parents may have felt the need to supplement their family income by sending their sons into the workforce. Once Chinese immigrants began to dominate the laundry and domestic services, Black women had fewer employment options and girls tended to stay in school longer.⁴⁹⁴

Initially, Black public schools were not that much different from white schools. Both resorted to conducting classes in rude locations and rented spaces. The curriculum in Black schools matched the white schools as Black parents insisted their children be taught the same values and receive the same academic rigor.⁴⁹⁵ Over time, however, the racial segregation of

⁴⁸⁹ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 169.

⁴⁹⁰ McGriff-Payne, *John Grider's Century*, 21.

⁴⁹¹ Reeder, *To Know My Name*, 8.

⁴⁹² Withington, *Black Pioneers of Yuba County*, 16; Beasley, *Negro Trailblazers*, 175.

⁴⁹³ Crouchett, Bunch, and Winnacker, *Visions Toward Tomorrow*, 5.

⁴⁹⁴ Bragg, "Anxious Foot Soldiers," 103.

⁴⁹⁵ Bottoms, *Aristocracy of Color*, 113, 114.

schools posed a problem for some Black families who felt the Black schools were not as well equipped as the white schools. In a petition to the San Francisco Superintendent of Schools, Black community members described the basement school as too small to accommodate the 300 enrolled children, badly ventilated with foul and unhealthful air, leaky ceilings with plaster falling, and constant loud disturbances from exercises performed by the military company in the space above.⁴⁹⁶ Some Black parents expressed concerns that the level of instruction was not as high as white schools.⁴⁹⁷ Moreover, Black parents feared that exclusion of Black students from white classrooms would foster a belief that Black students were not suited for the full benefits of citizenship.⁴⁹⁸ Simply put, they reported multiple inequalities. School desegregation had been goal since the 1855 California Colored Convention, but had been set aside as delegates attended to more urgent civil rights concerns, such as the right to testify in court and the right to vote.⁴⁹⁹ Though activism surrounding California school desegregation became more acute following the U.S. Civil War, culminating in January 1874 with the case of Mary Frances Ward in *Ward vs. Flood*, the first high profile effort toward desegregation occurred in the late 1850's with the case of Sarah Lester.

Sarah Lester, daughter of Black California pioneers Nancy and Peter Lester, attended a white primary school in San Francisco for three years that serviced the district where they lived. Because she was light-skinned no one challenged her presence; she passed for white. In 1858, Sarah took the exam for placement in the white high school, scoring second highest in general studies and the highest in music and art. After the high school accepted her, an anonymous letter sent to the *San Francisco Herald* revealed her Black ancestry, creating a public outcry over

⁴⁹⁶ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 175.

⁴⁹⁷ Savage, *Blacks in the West*, 172; Reeder, *To Know My Name*, 17.

⁴⁹⁸ Bottoms, *Aristocracy of Color*, 108.

⁴⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 95.

whether she should be allowed to continue in the white school system because of her high intelligence and superior grades, or whether she should be denied entrance to avoid the precedent of race mixing.⁵⁰⁰ During the furor, San Francisco Superintendent of Schools Henry B. Janes began receiving more applications from Black families whose children were as light-skinned as Sarah Lester.⁵⁰¹

While Sarah was probably accustomed to activist work - her father and mother were the same couple that hosted gatherings with enslaved people at their home and lectured them about their rights - it was one thing to observe her parents' work and quite another to be the center of that work. One can imagine the pressure this young woman experienced, understanding that her fight might determine the fate of other, equally deserving, Black students, and knowing she was the subject of conversation around the city and the source of consternation in the white community. Ultimately, the Lesters withdrew Sarah's application and moved the family in the 1858 mass exodus of Black Californians to Victoria, Canada. The next few years saw several Black students age out of the ungraded Black primary schools, with no Black high school available for them to continue their studies.

It was not until the 1870's that Black students in California had access to a high school education.⁵⁰² Local school districts under financial strain from the 1873 depression opted to enroll Black students rather than fund two separate systems. On August 3, 1875, the white-controlled San Francisco school district admitted Black children, and by the end of 1875 Oakland, Sacramento, and Vallejo had also desegregated their schools. The following year most

⁵⁰⁰ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 169.

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid*, 169.

⁵⁰² *Ibid*, 172.

of the rest of the districts quietly opened their doors to Black students. Bottoms aptly concluded, “where law had failed, economy succeeded.”⁵⁰³

Black Women, Business, and Entrepreneurship

Within the American capitalist system, money provided the basis for Black opportunity across the country. Almost every activist venture required funding, whether it was for hiring lawyers, constructing and supporting churches and schools, helping the less fortunate, financing political campaigns, or embodying Victorian norms within elite lifestyles to impress white society. The acquisition of money therefore took on political meaning. As discussed earlier in this paper, women were generally consigned to the domestic domain and discouraged from venturing into the male domain of business, however Black families often needed both partners to work if they were to maintain the desired standard of living. It therefore became acceptable for Black women in nineteenth-century California to work outside the home.

Capitalism and entrepreneurship in the Black community had roots in West Africa, where the culture carried a spirit of equality between men and women as independent producers of goods and commodities. Moreover, as Africans participated in the slave trade, Africans brought to the new world had operated in this same political economy.⁵⁰⁴ By working within this capitalist structure, enslaved people defined their lives - especially conceptions of freedom - through currency.⁵⁰⁵ Though capitalism was at the root of Black oppression, Black people connected the beliefs and character virtues associated with the market economy with Americanism. They therefore sought to adopt those characteristics to improve their condition by

⁵⁰³ Bottoms, *Aristocracy of Color*, 126.

⁵⁰⁴ Walker, “Racism, Slavery, and Free Enterprise,” 373.

⁵⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 375.

profiting from -- rather than being exploited by -- market relations.⁵⁰⁶ Creating economically viable businesses also bolstered Black nationalistic efforts. Black economic independence by which the Black community could sustain itself offered the most effective countermeasure for battling white supremacy and exclusion from American institutions.⁵⁰⁷ Black success in business also proved Black people's worthiness for inclusion in American society, especially as wealth signaled a superiority of character and intelligence.⁵⁰⁸ Motivated by these beliefs, Black entrepreneurs in California developed businesses in a wide variety of occupations, including merchandising, manufacturing, real estate, construction, transportation, and mining.⁵⁰⁹

Black women generally preferred urban to rural work, as they equated working on farms with slavery.⁵¹⁰ Most Black people made money through domestic service positions, and for Black women that meant taking work in white households as maids, cooks, and childcare providers.⁵¹¹ Some took advantage of the growing maritime traffic on waterways connecting San Francisco, Sacramento, Stockton, and Marysville, working as waitresses and stewardesses aboard those vessels.⁵¹²

Within the Black community conceptions surrounding domestic work were mixed. For middle-class reformers domestic occupations were sometimes considered degraded for not being sufficiently independent from white employers, and because of the belief that Black women should not work for white families at the expense of their own.⁵¹³ Domestic work was also tainted by experiences in slavery where "house slaves" were more vulnerable to the will of their

⁵⁰⁶ Daniels, *Pioneer Urbanites*, 62; Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest*, 284; Walker, "Racism, Slavery and Free Enterprise," 374.

⁵⁰⁷ Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*, 11.

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid; Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest*, 193; Walker, "Racism, Slavery, and Free Enterprise," 371.

⁵⁰⁹ Walker, "Racism, Slavery, and Free Enterprise," 345.

⁵¹⁰ Graaf, "Race, Sex, and Region," 297; Katz, *Black West*, 291.

⁵¹¹ Graaf and Taylor, "Introduction" in *Seeking El Dorado*, 17.

⁵¹² Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 98.

⁵¹³ Harris, *Shadow of Slavery*, 181.

masters, and in worst case scenarios, assault, battery, and sexual abuse.⁵¹⁴ Other reformers, however, defended domestic work, claiming dignity in all forms of labor, and considered it a pragmatic way to improve the condition of Black people.⁵¹⁵ An early indication of her financial savvy, Mary Ellen Pleasant intuitively realized the value of her domestic skills. Upon her arrival in San Francisco in 1849, she auctioned herself at the crowded dock as a free woman, stipulating that she would “do no washing, not even dishwashing.” The winning bid was \$500, the highest ever paid for a cook.⁵¹⁶

Despite debates over domestic labor and class distinctions, most Black women didn’t have a choice. In 1900 the Twelfth Census record reported that 86.1 percent of working Black women in California labored in domestic work.⁵¹⁷ For those working-class Black women domestic jobs provided the means for supplementing family income, brought some level of independence, paid better than what could be made in the South, and, through thrift and industriousness, could be parlayed into entrepreneurial ventures.⁵¹⁸

Jeremiah Sanderson’s household presented an example of an elite, middle-class household supporting women’s work outside the home. Sanderson’s wife Catherine took in laundry, reporting in a letter to her husband, “I had a very large wash this week and only had about 46 shirts and I do not know what I would have done if it had not been for Mrs. Gardner, who helped me iron yesterday and today.”⁵¹⁹ Their daughter Mary did sewing, then in 1867 became a teacher at the Brooklyn Colored School.⁵²⁰ The youngest daughter, Florence, expressed

⁵¹⁴ Harris, *Shadow of Slavery*, 6.

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁵¹⁶ Taniguchi, “Weaving a Different World,” 161.

⁵¹⁷ Coleman, “African American Women and Community Development,” 114.

⁵¹⁸ Graaf, “Race, Sex, and Region,” 299.

⁵¹⁹ Sanderson Papers, Letter from Catherine Sanderson to Jeremiah Sanderson, April 25, 1858, Bancroft Library.

⁵²⁰ Crouchett, Bunche, and Winnacker, *Visions Toward Tomorrow*, 6.

an interest in dressmaking but eventually became an active worker in the Fifteenth Street Church, a deaconess, and superintendent of the Sunday school primary department.⁵²¹

Because of limited job options in nineteenth-century California, Black people developed an entrepreneurial mindset, identifying opportunities to make money and developing the skills to capitalize upon those opportunities. Douglas Henry Daniels contended that their ingenuity casts them as actors rather than passive subjects as “they schemed, diversified, hustled, politicked, and passed as white to get secure jobs and extra money; their triumphs were testimony of their worth and enabled them to remain in the city.”⁵²² Most Black entrepreneurs developed enterprises that often earned only enough for self-sufficiency, accumulating property worth less than \$500.⁵²³ Women in particular managed very small businesses. Historian Wendy Gamber claimed that women made money as “hucksters, hawkers, peddlers, saloon keepers, shoe shiners, laundresses, vendors, nurse maids, boardinghouse keepers, dancing teachers, proprietors of private schools, street walkers, gardeners, whitewashers, and jacks-of-all-trades people.”⁵²⁴ Black women who managed to develop businesses in more highly skilled areas, such as catering, hairdressing, tailoring, dressmaking, and merchandising, vaulted into a higher income bracket, accumulating property worth between \$500 to \$5000.⁵²⁵ Historian Juliet E.K. Walker stressed that “limited financial success should not detract interest from the expertise required to transform menial and unskilled occupations into sustaining businesses, especially considering the societal constraints militating against Black business participation.”⁵²⁶

⁵²¹ Sanderson Papers, Letter to his sister Lydia, October 3, 1870, Bancroft Library; Beasley, *Negro Trail-Blazers*, 164.

⁵²² Daniels, *Pioneer Urbanites*, 44.

⁵²³ Walker, “Racism, Slavery, and Free Enterprise,” 357.

⁵²⁴ Gamber, “A Gendered Enterprise: Placing nineteenth century Businesswomen in History.” *The Business History Review* 72, no. 2 (Summer 1998), 191.

⁵²⁵ Walker, “Racism, Slavery, and Free Enterprise,” 357.

⁵²⁶ *Ibid*, 372.

In addition to raising income, some of the jobs Black women performed carried political implications. The importance of education in the Black Community has already been addressed in this paper, however teaching was the purview of elite Black women and comprised only a small percentage of Black women working outside the home.⁵²⁷ While enslaved women had been responsible for the personal needs of white people, including hair care, free Black women, such as Margaret Smith of Suison, California, turned these skills into business enterprises. Like their barbering counterparts they served wealthy white clientele exclusively, allowing them access to white society in a role that was not servile.⁵²⁸ Hair care establishments for Black women worked toward racial uplift efforts as Black women sought to “beautify” themselves with skin lighteners and hair straightening combs, a market that expanded when Madame C.J. Walker began marketing her chemical hair straightening products in the early twentieth century.⁵²⁹

Black women would often capitalize on their food preparation skills. Local townspeople dubbed Nancy Geary “the ice cream lady” of Dixon (known then as Silveyville), and eventually turned her ice cream shop into a restaurant. George Washington Dennis, mentioned earlier in this thesis, rented a gambling table at the El Dorado Hotel from which his mother sold hot meals: eggs, apples, and bread, clearing \$225 a day.⁵³⁰ Some women took on multiple jobs. Dorothy McGowan worked as a laundress for William T. Ellis, a prominent white businessman, but was also one of the best nurses in Marysville.⁵³¹

Entertainment offered business opportunities for talented women inclined toward performance. In some respects, Black women performers had an advantage over white women,

⁵²⁷ Graaf, “Race, Sex, and Region,” 296.

⁵²⁸ Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*, 10.

⁵²⁹ Graaf, “Race, Sex, and Region,” 301.

⁵³⁰ Taniguchi, “Weaving a Different World,” 161.

⁵³¹ Withington, *Black Pioneers of Yuba County*, 14.

who had to observe proprieties. “Exotics” could generally earn more than “respectable” women.⁵³² In the late 1850’s and 1860’s Anna Pindell, known as “the Black Nightingale,” toured the state with a troupe of Black actors, and in 1867 Anna and Emma Hyer made their debut as opera singers in Sacramento.⁵³³ Delilah Beasley contended that prostitution among Black women was scarce in the mid-nineteenth century, stating that “very few of the free women of color went astray during the wild days of the Gold Rush.”⁵³⁴ However, toward the end of the century Black people both staffed and ran brothels, drawing the attention of the city’s Black newspapers as well as women’s benevolent societies.⁵³⁵

Boardinghouses offered the most prestigious type of business run by Black women. Along with hairdressing, boardinghouses were one of the few Black businesses to enjoy white patronage.⁵³⁶ Black women who ran Black boardinghouses and offered other shared dwellings helped meet the need for housing as Black migrants poured into Northern California during the 1860’s, and then Southern California after the Civil War. By 1900 there were seventy-five Black boardinghouses in California, many run by women.⁵³⁷

In the late 1860’s Mary Ellen Pleasant ran a profitable boardinghouse strategically located on 920 Washington Street near City Hall, the Opera, and the largest gambling house, attracting an elite white clientele. Unaware that the Black female “innkeeper” known as “Mammy” was also the owner of the establishment, these wealthy politicians, investors, and well-connected businessmen openly discussed business dealings over meals and in parlors in her presence, and Pleasant surreptitiously took in this insider information. She then made her own

⁵³² Taniguchi, “Weaving a Different World,” 156.

⁵³³ Coleman, “African American Women and Community Development,” 115, 116.

⁵³⁴ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁵³⁵ Graaf, “Race, Sex, and Region,” 304; Coleman, “African American Women and Community Development,” 116.

⁵³⁶ Graaf, “Race, Sex, and Region,” 300.

⁵³⁷ *Ibid.*

investments in real estate, precious metals, mines, and stocks, amassing a fortune that she used to support activist and philanthropic causes.⁵³⁸ Pleasant also used her businesses to provide employment for Black people, hiring an extensive staff of Black workers to serve her guests.⁵³⁹ Though certainly generous, Pleasant was not averse to spending a little money on herself. In 1877 Pleasant built a sprawling thirty-room Victorian Mansion on Octavia and Bush streets in San Francisco that covered two city blocks and cost \$100,000, worth about \$2.5 million today. Dubbed the “House of Mystery,” and then later the Bell Mansion, she lived there with her business partner, Thomas Bell, Vice-President of the Bank of California; traveled in a carriage driven by a coachman dressed in a long black coat, white breeches, and top hat; and maintained an air of secrecy that spurred rumors of her practicing Voodoo.⁵⁴⁰



Figure 7. Bell Mansion c. 1925. Jesse Brown Cook collection, online archive of California.

⁵³⁸ Wagner, *African American Women of the West*, 97; Hudson, “Mining a Mythic Past,” 57.

⁵³⁹ Hudson, *Making of Mammy Pleasants*, 58.

⁵⁴⁰ Hudson, “Mining a Mythic Past,” 60, 62.

Entering the real estate market did not require vast sums. Working class women could own property while employed in domestic occupations, save money by combining households with extended family members or boarders, or reside in rented rooms themselves, then put their savings toward property that would later pay dividends.⁵⁴¹ Historian Marne L. Campbell reported that while property ownership was rare among Black people in other parts of the United States during the nineteenth century, in Los Angeles it was the easiest way for Black workers, men and women, to ascend into the middle class. Indeed, in the late nineteenth century many Black migrants to Los Angeles bought property upon their arrival.⁵⁴² Biddy Mason's job as a nursemaid at \$2.50 a day allowed her to acquire property for her family. She purchased lots in what is now downtown Los Angeles, and she was able to sell the land at a considerable profit. One plot for which she paid \$250 she later sold for \$18,000.⁵⁴³ Mason studied trends in the real estate market and ended up owning choice properties in the city, making her one of the wealthiest landowners and the wealthiest Black person in Los Angeles. In Northern California, Anna DuBois of San Francisco bought prime city lots in Oakland that also rose considerably in value.⁵⁴⁴

In the 1870's, with the completion of the transcontinental railroad and the subsequent influx of migrants, the population in California grew, allowing Black property owners to realize profits on their investments. These financial gains allowed them to reinvest in other money-making speculations or business ventures, all furthering efforts toward strengthening and uplifting the Black community.⁵⁴⁵ Though more Black men owned property than Black women by a four to one margin, Black women had the financial savvy and resources to not only acquire

⁵⁴¹ Campbell, "African American Women," 380.

⁵⁴² Ibid, 381.

⁵⁴³ Ibid, 386.

⁵⁴⁴ Crouchett, Bunche, and Winnacker, *Visions Toward Tomorrow*, 6.

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid, 11.

property for their households but to invest in land, reap the rewards, and enjoy the independence disposable income provided.⁵⁴⁶



Figure 8. Bridget "Biddy" Mason, Security Pacific National Bank Photography Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.

Money earned by Black women not only supplemented the family income but also allowed them to support causes as individual benefactors, not as mere appendages to their husbands. As secretary of the Livingston Institute, Jeremiah Sanderson kept a ledger recording stock investments made by Black investors for the purpose of purchasing a school building. He listed Fifty-two women among the contributors, some by their full name and others by the honorific "Mrs." followed by their husband's name, an indication that, though married, they were investing as individuals. Indeed, some of the husbands are recorded separately, with their own investment amounts. According to Sanderson's records, women comprised 25 percent to 50 percent of the shareholders.⁵⁴⁷ Like Mary Ellen Pleasant, Biddy Mason also used much of her fortune to help the Black community. In addition to funding the First AME church, she ran what

⁵⁴⁶ Campbell, "African American Women," 380.

⁵⁴⁷ Livingston Institute Minutes and Accounts, Jeremiah Sanderson Secretary, Sanderson Papers, Bancroft Library.

amounted to a social service agency, paying grocery bills for families in need, securing work for the unemployed, comforting those who were incarcerated, and housing the homeless.⁵⁴⁸ She also founded a nursery school, initiated welfare work among children in Los Angeles, and opened her home to anyone in need of physical or spiritual sustenance, Black, Mexican, Native American or Caucasian.⁵⁴⁹

⁵⁴⁸ Coleman, African American Women and Community Development,” 107.

⁵⁴⁹ Shover and Fleming, *Black Life in the Sacramento Valley*, 44.

CONCLUSION

This thesis examined the political activities of Black women during the period commonly referred to as “the California Gold Rush,” beginning in 1848 and ending with the onset of the Civil War in 1861. By illuminating Black women’s political work, which has often been obscured by the more visible activism of Black men, this thesis argued that their efforts provided the foundation upon which other political projects could take flight in the early years of California’s statehood. Though this paper utilized the California Gold Rush as a temporal framework, the Black community’s fight for civil rights in California did not correspond with mining industry developments. By 1860 the most easily extractable gold in California had become scarce. While quartz mining expanded, it required heavy machinery and capital resources, making the endeavor out of reach for most Black miners.⁵⁵⁰ As Black people found work in other industries, Black activism continued through the Civil War, with emancipation and constitutional changes codifying Black citizenship in the United States producing major shifts in the status of Black people. This conclusion offers an overview of the developments in Black women’s activism after the Civil War to the end of the century.

When the war began, California’s population included pro-Confederacy supporters.⁵⁵¹ Initially, Unionists in the California legislature had the upper hand, passing legislation pledging loyalty to the United States. Though the cost of transporting recruits from California to the East Coast proved too expensive, Union supporters sent gold by steamer ship to help arm, feed, and clothe Union soldiers, and support the North’s credit. Each steamer carried an average of over \$1 million in gold, with two or three steamers making the journey every month. In 1864 over \$46

⁵⁵⁰ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 92.

⁵⁵¹ Charnan Williams, “The History of Slavery and Race in California from the Gold Rush to the United States Civil War, 1848-1865” History Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Michigan, 2022, 198.

million in gold was sent via Panama.⁵⁵² Historian Charnan Williams contended that at this same time, by contemporary accounts, Southern California was “a hotbed of Confederate activity.”⁵⁵³ 6 percent of white male Californians came from southern states, and another 7 percent from border slave states, accounting for the significant pro-confederacy presence.⁵⁵⁴ Though much of the secessionist activity took place behind closed doors, two southern-leaning secret societies that promoted slaveholding expansion into California operated in California during wartime: the Knights of the Golden Circle and the Knights of the Columbian Star.⁵⁵⁵ Soldiers battled across the country, Black Californians followed the war’s progress closely, getting their information through daily newspapers, letters from relatives, reports from passengers and ship personnel traveling the waterways, and communication relayed through the grapevine of preachers, barbers, businessmen and friends.⁵⁵⁶

Before the war began, the election of Republican President Abraham Lincoln in 1860 and Republican Leland Stanford to the California governorship in 1862 had already allowed Black Californians to make additional political headway. On December 19, 1865, California legislators ratified the Thirteenth Amendment, which outlawed slavery in the United States.⁵⁵⁷ However, California Democrats led the west against Reconstruction. When Congress passed the Fourteenth Amendment, which granted citizenship and protected the civil liberties of those recently freed from slavery, on June 13, 1866, and sent it to the states for ratification it arrived when the California legislature was in recess. When the legislators returned, the Democrats, who ran that

⁵⁵² Richards, *California Gold Rush and the Coming of the Civil War*, 230.

⁵⁵³ Williams, “History of Slavery and Race in California,” 188.

⁵⁵⁴ Richards, *California Gold Rush and the Coming of the Civil War*, 230.

⁵⁵⁵ Kevin Waite, *West of Slavery: The Southern Dream of a Transcontinental Empire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 185.

⁵⁵⁶ McGriff-Payne, *John Grider’s Century*, 35.

⁵⁵⁷ Madley and Melillo, “California Unbound,” 31.

session, never brought it to a full vote, fearful that granting Black citizenship rights would also empower the Chinese and the California “Digger” Indians, groups who had been equally abhorred by white Californians. It was not until May 1959 that California legislators extended a token ratification.⁵⁵⁸ For the same reason, on January 28, 1870, the Democrat led legislature overwhelmingly rejected the Fifteenth Amendment and refused to ratify the terms of Reconstruction, eighty-one to sixteen.⁵⁵⁹ It was not until April 3, 1962, that the Fifteenth Amendment was finally ratified in California.⁵⁶⁰ Despite the legislature aligning itself with anti-Reconstruction forces in the South, optimism colored the mood of the California Colored Convention of 1865 as delegates renewed demands for desegregation, suffrage, and education.⁵⁶¹

In 1867 Democrat Henry Huntly Haight became governor, ending the Republican rule of the state and securing California against Black suffrage, and in the 1870’s the Republican party regained control of state government.⁵⁶² In 1872 the legislature, with support from a ruling by the State Supreme Court, revised the criminal code barring non-whites from testifying in court against white people. This law went into affect in 1873, removing a major structural support of slavery and other forms of unfree labor in California.⁵⁶³ Voting rights remained a concern for the Black community but new issues emerged, focusing on desegregating public spaces.⁵⁶⁴ Where Black men had been most visible in fighting against the testimony ban, Black women were the first to make us of that new right, using the courtroom to fight for equality of access to public transportation.⁵⁶⁵

⁵⁵⁸ Waite, *West of Slavery*, 227.

⁵⁵⁹ Madley and Melillo, “California Unbound,” 36.

⁵⁶⁰ Waite, *West of Slavery*, 227.

⁵⁶¹ Moore, “We Feel the Want of Protection,” 118.

⁵⁶² *Ibid*, 86.

⁵⁶³ Madley and Melillo, “California Unbound,” 31.

⁵⁶⁴ Bottoms, *Aristocracy of Color*, 52.

⁵⁶⁵ Welke, “Rights of Passage,” 86.

During Reconstruction Black women’s activism broadened from supportive, behind-the-scenes work to leading public political projects. Historian Brittney Cooper attributed this development to Black men “being actively and violently pushed out of the public sphere in Post Reconstruction period,” and Black women filling the gap.⁵⁶⁶ Black “race women” no longer limited their activities to conform to ideal Victorian notions of womanhood, discarding restrictions that prevented them from fully engaging in advocacy work.⁵⁶⁷ Perceiving that Jim Crow politics meant keeping Black people “in their place,” Black women shaped their activism around the free movement of emancipated Black bodies by focusing on access to segregated spaces.⁵⁶⁸ They employed the law to assert their status as respectable women in the gendered geography of public space, understanding that claiming these restricted spaces would expose themselves to hostile repercussions from segregation advocates.⁵⁶⁹

During the nineteenth century the right to travel represented a fundamental feature of freedom, and the right to ride public conveyances expressed that freedom. In cities across the country, whether a person had access to public transportation determined where they lived, worked, shopped, and socialized. Limited access to transportation effectively limited opportunities.⁵⁷⁰ Streetcars also represented a gendered space. Because city streets were the domain of men, when middle-class women stepped into those streets, they immediately became vulnerable.⁵⁷¹ Streetcars presented a safe way for women to travel alone quickly, safely, and inconspicuously. Historian Mary P. Ryan explained, “on a streetcar [a woman] was under protection of the male conductor or driver. She avoided not only the exhaustion and filth of

⁵⁶⁶ Cooper, *Beyond Respectability*, 12.

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁸ Hudson, *West of Jim Crow*, 21, 29.

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid, 19.

⁵⁷⁰ Welke, “Rights of Passage,” 73.

⁵⁷¹ Ibid, 76.

dragging her long skirts through muddy city streets but also chance contacts with, and contamination from, unrespectable elements of the urban population.”⁵⁷² For that reason, the right to ride public conveyances was considered of utmost importance to women. For Black women, this right became essential for being recognized as a respectable woman. Failing to observe strict protocols of dress and behavior of proper womanhood risked being construed as, and subsequently treated like, a woman of low status, possibly a prostitute.⁵⁷³ Thus, Black women were uniquely motivated by and suited for this battle. In the late nineteenth century three Black women sued to challenge their exclusion from public transportation in California courts. Their insistence on equal treatment under the law constituted an overtly political act.⁵⁷⁴

In San Francisco, the Omnibus Railroad Company and the North Beach and Mission Railroad Company both adopted policies to bar Black people from riding in their cars. As “common carriers”-- a legal category of conveyance that indicated a public role facilitating the right to travel -- they were required to accept all passengers who could pay, excepting those people with contagious diseases, of bad character, or intent on hurting the carrier’s business. What had not been tested before 1850 was whether they could exclude a passenger based on their race.⁵⁷⁵ On April 17, 1863, Charlotte Brown, daughter of wealthy businessman and civil rights activist James E. Brown, was bodily removed from an Omnibus car. She sued the company, testifying that three times the conductor refused her ticket and instructed her to leave, and each time she had refused. Finally, she described her removal:

After speaking to driver, he (the conductor) came to me and told me I must get out and took hold of me. The car had then stopped to take someone else in, at or near the corner, and I then asked him if he intended to put me out and he said yes, and

⁵⁷² Mary P. Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 71.

⁵⁷³ Welke, “Rights of Passage,” 76.

⁵⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 74, 83.

⁵⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 77.

at the same time let me out and I said I would seek redress, and he answered, "very good."⁵⁷⁶

Charlotte's behavior and her warning to the conductor may suggest that her actions were premeditated, with the intention of providing a test case to challenge the law. Conversely, because the transportation company had never announced its racial policy, Charlotte's actions may have been unplanned. Either way, the Black community in San Francisco was prepared to support her effort.⁵⁷⁷

The Omnibus Company claimed that exclusion was necessary for the comfort of white passengers repulsed by the presence of Black passengers, and painted images of white female passengers threatened by predatory Black men.⁵⁷⁸ Nevertheless, Brown won her case. Though she had sued the Omnibus company for \$200 she received \$25 and costs.⁵⁷⁹ Not long after, in 1864, Judge C.C. Pratt of the Twelfth District Court abolished segregation in street cars. Despite this ruling, streetcar companies continued to discriminate against Black passengers. Mary Ellen Pleasant, who was an associate of Charlotte Brown's father, decided to act.⁵⁸⁰

Mary Ellen Pleasant sued both the Omnibus Railroad Company and the North Beach and Mission Railroad. She may have coordinated with Emma Jane Turner, a laundress, as both sued the North Beach and Mission Company for refusing them passage on the same day, October 3, 1866.⁵⁸¹ On October 17, Pleasant rescinded her Omnibus suit, because agents of the company had informed her that they were reversing their

⁵⁷⁶ Charlotte Brown court transcript, 1863-1866; Legal documents: *Charlotte L. Brown vs. Omnibus Railroad Company* : ADS and TD, 1863-1866, MS 228A, California Historical Society.

⁵⁷⁷ Welke, "Rights of Passage," 78.

⁵⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 79.

⁵⁷⁹ Hudson, *Making of "Mammy Pleasant,"* 50.

⁵⁸⁰ *Ibid*.

⁵⁸¹ *Ibid*, 78.

policy of banning Black people from their cars. Pleasant's second case ran for two years, eventually making it to the California Supreme Court in 1868. Pleasant testified that when she hailed the streetcar the driver refused to stop, though there was room, and she had a ticket. Pleasant also claimed that by being forced to proceed to her destination on foot she "suffered greatly" in her mind and body.⁵⁸² Historian Lynn Hudson contended that Pleasant's focus on bodily suffering carried symbolic weight, conjuring images of lynching and tortured slaves, which at the time were common social and cultural tropes in the United States.⁵⁸³ Employing discourse to elicit sympathy was a strategy employed by nineteenth-century abolitionist women. Pleasant also employed a second abolitionist strategy: she convinced an upper-class white woman, Lisette Woodworth, to testify as a witness on her behalf.⁵⁸⁴

Both Pleasant and Turner won their suits. However, the North Beach and Mission Company appealed the decision in Pleasant's case, contending that the streetcar conductor's failure to stop was not racially motivated; he simply had not heard Pleasant's hailing. The California Supreme Court overturned both cases, agreeing that neither Pleasant nor Turner had sufficiently proven their exclusion had been due to their race.⁵⁸⁵ Legal campaigns by Brown, Pleasant, and Turner continued until 1893, when California legislators finally enacted a law prohibiting racial discrimination on public transportation.⁵⁸⁶

⁵⁸² Hudson, *Making of "Mammy Pleasant,"* 51.

⁵⁸³ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁵⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸⁵ Welke, "Rights of Passage," 84.

⁵⁸⁶ Coleman, "African American Women and Community Development," 108; Moore, "We Feel the Want of Protection," 118.

Throughout Reconstruction and Post-Reconstruction, Black respectability remained a preoccupation for the Black community as Black people sought to reclaim manhood and womanhood status, categories which had been stripped from Black people through the dehumanizing conditions of enslavement and Jim Crow.⁵⁸⁷ However, the Victorian norms of womanhood did not stop Black women from asserting their growing political agency. The California Colored Conventions of the 1850's had infused Black women -- both the attendees and supporters -- with ideas and energy, spurring future activism.⁵⁸⁸ Children of attendees would seed generations of activists throughout the late nineteenth century and beyond, as Black women's beneficial societies continued to proliferate in California, springing up wherever there was a concentration of Black women.⁵⁸⁹ In 1884 the House of Ruth, an auxiliary of the Odd Fellows Lodge, was founded, and in 1897 the Home for Aged and Infirm Colored People opened in East Oakland. Emma Scott led a fundraising campaign to purchase a sixteen-room Victorian Home that would become the final resting place for some of the Bay Area's most prominent Black citizens. In 1899 members of the Beth Eden Baptist Church organized the Fanny Jackson Coppin Club in East Oakland to provide rooms for Black travelers visiting the East Bay.⁵⁹⁰

The turn of the century would find the burgeoning population of Black women in Los Angeles fomenting a new wave of Black women's organizations in Southern California. In 1904 Black women created the Sojourner Truth Industrial Club as a refuge

⁵⁸⁷ Cooper, *Beyond Respectability*, 20.

⁵⁸⁸ Foreman, "Black Organizing," 29.

⁵⁸⁹ Shirley Ann Wilson Moore and Quintard Taylor, "The West of African American Women," in *African American Women Confront the West*, 11.

⁵⁹⁰ Coleman, "African American Women and Community Development," 112.

for the hundreds of young Black women migrating to Southern California from across the country.⁵⁹¹ The Black Angeleno Club, established in 1907, built upon Bidy Mason's efforts to assist poor families. These clubs largely continued the work of racial uplift, providing day care centers, industrial schools, and leading campaigns to close pool halls, gambling parlors and other dens of iniquity. However, in 1896 the creation of the National Association of Colored Women by Mary Church Terrell and Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin in Washington D.C. ushered in a new level of political activism. An interdenominational organization that advanced a Black woman's agenda, the NACW firmly articulated political objectives in its mission, focusing on Black women's religious, racial and gender issues, including those surrounding women's suffrage, lynching, Jim Crow laws, and other civil rights.⁵⁹² Historian Brittney Cooper contended that the NACW became a training ground for the first generation of Black women intellectuals, creating its own school of racial thought.⁵⁹³

The turn of the century saw the blossoming of the Black women's club movement across the country. In California these clubs were a natural outgrowth from seeds planted by Black women's activism in the early days of the California Gold Rush. The political work of Black women in California -- largely unrecorded, minimized, and overlooked -- had always been present, as Black women lived their activism through supporting causes, building the Black community, uplifting the race, and exhibiting the intellect, virtue, and grace that they hoped would provide acceptance into United States citizenry. Their courage and determination were no less than that of their Black male counterparts. These

⁵⁹¹ Moore and Taylor, "West of African American Women," 11.

⁵⁹² Colleen-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice*, 80.

⁵⁹³ Cooper, *Beyond Respectability*, 17.

traits galvanized Black women through future civil rights campaigns, where they would finally claim their place next to Black men on the front lines; their names known, their work legible, and their presence no longer invisible.

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