History in the Making

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The Biddy Mason Memorial Park is a boon to Spring Street. Visually interesting and centrally located, it offers a nice reprieve in the crowded Downtown Los Angeles area. Unfortunately, it is so hard to find that it may as well not exist at all. Sandwiched in the middle of a city block by an assortment of buildings such as the famous Bradbury Building, two parking structures, and a derelict shopping alley, it is genuinely impossible to see the park from the street. Even someone who knows the location of the park would be hard-pressed to find it, as there are only two small plaques to mark the two “suggested” entrances, both of which have plaques so heavily scratched that they are illegible. The entrances themselves, besides not revealing the location of the park, are not welcoming to women walking in off the street.

Figure 1: The Broadway Street Entrance.[1]

As for the actual memorial of the Biddy Mason Memorial Park, it looks like a brutalist art fixture from a distance and up close it looks like someone put a timeline on a black concrete wall. There is nothing explicitly wrong with the memorial itself, everything on it is factually correct and portrays the biggest facts of Mason's life: she was a slave, she won an important court case, she was a midwife, and she once owned the area where the memorial stands. The memorial also gives information on the area: that the majority of the first Los Angeles settlers, Los Pobladores (original settlers), had African ancestry, that Spring Street was named Calle Primavera at its founding, and that Los Angeles had a Black population of 1,258 in 1890. The memorial does not say much else and leaves visitors with those facts and little to contextualize them. There is no mention of the anti-slavery

[1] All pictures provided by the author. To reach the memorial, you enter through here and then down the covered alley that holds (apparently) shuttered shops on each side. The memorial itself is in an open courtyard.

agitation in Los Angeles and no mention of the importance of midwives to enslaved people or to the community at large.

Figure 2: Portrait of Biddy Mason.[2]

Biddy Mason (1818-1891) was one of the first women to own her own property, a fact that goes unmentioned, although there is a picture of the deed containing her name, and they do not explain why they called Biddy Mason "Grandmother" despite the memorial having it carved very largely on the timeline. To be fair to the memorial, it celebrates the diversity of the city and the narratives that exist outside what is commonly taught at school and is significant in terms of acknowledging her memory in the area where she once lived while adding to the community around Spring Street. However, it still withholds on contextualizing the importance of her life within Los Angeles and what she represents to the history of the city. Biddy Mason's life is significant to

[2] Photo courtesy of the Miriam Matthews Collection at Los Angeles Public Library, entitled *Headshot of Biddy Mason*.

African American women in California and is especially important as an inspiring story of how she was able to gain control over her life and improve life for her family.

The memorial is effective in informing the public on the bullet points of Mason's life but fails in informing visitors on the deeper aspects of being an African American woman in Los Angeles, instead focusing on the bare bones progression of the area as equally as it celebrates Mason as an individual. It also fails equally in fully acknowledging Mason's dedication to her community and in explaining the progression of the area. The memorial is a welcoming space that celebrates Biddy Mason and the development of Los Angeles, but it lacks background for the casual viewer and fails to fully encapsulate why Biddy Mason was remarkable.

Figure 2: The memorial which consists of the wall pictured here.[3]

[3] The farthest point of the picture with the metal structure is the Broadway Street entrance as well as the elevator to the parking structure that has the assemblage mentioned later in this article.

Biddy Mason came to Los Angeles during an often-ignored time for the area, with the transition from Spanish rule (1776-1821) to American underway and an influx of people coming into California looking to profit from the Gold Rush (1848-1855). There were a number of African Americans migrating to California at this time, with their numbers more than tripling during the period from 1850 to 1860 and the majority of those migrants were settling in cities. African American women were still very much in the minority in the area, with only 31% of the African American population being female in 1860. Most of these women came to California with family, but it wasn't uncommon for them to come alone and then send for the rest, often raising money to buy their freedom. There were a number of enslaved people in California at this time, despite California nominally being a free state, having been transported to the state by their owners who were also looking to join the economic rush.[4]

Mason was one of those who was brought along with her family by her master, Robert Smith. Mason was already a knowledgeable midwife with three children of her own, while her owner Robert Smith was a Mormon who came west from Mississippi to help build Mormon territory. She and another enslaved woman named Hannah were taken with their children first to Salt Lake City in Utah territory between 1848 and 1851, living there for three years before continuing on to San Bernardino for the newest Mormon output. These women would have had the most difficult duties during the journey and would have been forced to walk behind the wagons, tend to the pregnant travelers, look after livestock, and care for their own children.[5] In California, Mason and Hannah would have found a more welcoming community with free African Americans, who were often and

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[4] Willi Coleman, "African American Women and Community Development in California, 1848-1900," in *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California*, ed. Lawrence B. de Graaf, Kevin Mulroy, and Quintard Taylor (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2001), 101-103.

[5] Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1995), 141-144.

actively defending their civil liberties both in court and out on the street.

California was technically a free state but during this period was operating under three types of law administration: Mexican, military, and American as they transitioned into the union. The Fugitive Slave Act (1850) further complicated matters and by 1855 there was so much agitation against slavery that Smith began to prepare to take his family to Texas along with Mason, Hannah, and their eight or so children. As they prepared to move, the entire family was taken to a canyon in the Santa Monica Mountains where Charles Owens, a man in love with one of Mason's daughters, and Manuel Pepper, a man in love with one of Hannah's daughters, became involved. Both men were free African Americans who lived in Los Angeles and had close ties to the community there.

Bob Owen, the father of Charles and a business owner, would get the law in the Los Angeles and San Bernardino counties involved. Mason and her family would be put under the charge of the Los Angeles' sheriff, challenging Smith's right to move them out of the state against their will. They would petition the court for their freedom and to remain in California as free citizens, but they were not able to speak in court under California law. Despite this, Mason was acknowledged as the head of both families and was often deferred to as such.[6] This summary does not do justice to the complications and the terror that all those enslaved must have felt, nor does it encapsulate the hope or the joy when the case was won in their favor. This was a singular case in that not only did the African Americans win their case against a well-to-do White man, but also in that the courts did their utmost to maintain their integrity and make a compassionate ruling.

After the case was won, Mason would accept an offer by the Owens to stay with them in Los Angeles, where she would gain a job under Dr. John Strother Griffin (1816-1898) as a midwife; earning a reputation for herself while simultaneously becoming a

[6] Hayden, *The Power of Place,* 144-149.

celebrated member of the community for risking her life as a nurse during a smallpox epidemic. Mason would have earned the title "Grandma" or "Aunt" as a symbol of her importance to the community. Mason did not live in Los Angeles until after the trial for her freedom, and it would be another ten years before she was able to save enough money to buy the property on Spring Street. She was one of the first African American women to own their own property in Los Angeles, which would become an economic base for her and her family. Mason developed the land into a commercial building with space for her family to live, allowing her grandsons to establish businesses on the land. Her home was also the first meeting place of the Los Angeles branch of the First African Methodist Episcopal Church.[7] Telling the story of Biddy Mason makes it clear that she was a product of her times and was active in her community. She was able to gain her freedom, employment, respect, and a future for her grandchildren through her connections and the help of those around her. Biddy Mason also represents a moment of social upheaval and community building in the Los Angeles area, and her story relays the ideas of new starts and opportunity as well as hope for the future that would be attractive to the area at large. Unfortunately, none of this is relayed through the Biddy Mason Memorial.

[7] Hayden, *The Power of Place,* 151-157; Hayden, *The Power of Place,* 158-161

Figure 3: A section of the memorial, with a picture of Biddy Mason.[8]

To be fair to the Power Of Place, the project that erected the monument, the Biddy Mason Memorial Park was conceived as one of four works of art along with a public history workshop and an article on Biddy Mason. There was a poster that was given away to school trips, a letterpress artist book which was donated to the Los Angeles Public Library and Archive, and the "assemblage" located in an elevator lobby nearby that contains artifacts from the site. This memorial was possible due to the happy accident of the owners of the site reaching out to the Power Of Place to find what properties they owned were historic and their ability to get a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. The entire project was done in conjunction with a group of artists, graphic designers, researchers, and the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).[9]

[8] The memorial continues like this along the timeline with an image or two, a representative carving (with unclear meaning), and a small paragraph, which here says "Spring Street between Fourth and Seventh is the financial center of Los Angeles, a city of over 50,000, including 1,258 blacks. 1890."
[9] Hayden, *The Power of Place,*176-181; 170; 172-173.

A great deal of effort was put into this project, with an eye to represent Black history in Los Angeles through public history while utilizing the foot traffic of downtown. The effort is wonderful, but the issue is that they did not anticipate the longevity of the park versus the rest of the project. This monument was erected in the 1980s and forty years later it must stand alone without the other half of the art projects done to supplant it as well as without the lectures or urban tours that included it at the time. The Biddy Mason Memorial Park now must speak alone, and it fails.

There is a lack of historical sites in Los Angeles, most probably because of the premium on land but also because of a lack of care about the history of the area. The Biddy Mason Memorial is remarkable in how neatly it fits into Spring Street and conserves space while teaching passersby about the street and a remarkable citizen who once lived there, but it is also remarkable in how it fumbles in all these aspects. In James Loewen's book *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong*, one of the functions of public history is that monuments can provide a shared community heritage and play the role that stories have for communities. Loewen mentions from the first page that these sites usually arise from local initiatives and are often meant to tell a favorable story about the community in which they are situated.[10] The overarching theme of *Lies Across America* is to explore how that often means a misrepresenting of historical facts and using language that ignores unpleasant politics.

The Biddy Mason Memorial seems to take that to heart and attempt to be as unbiased as possible, stating bland facts without interpretation that are so apolitical that they are almost a political statement in itself. The memorial is so underwhelming that it even fails on the counts of providing stories for the community. Which is a shame as through the Biddy Mason Memorial the story of Los Angeles finally includes that of African Americans and women

[10] James Loewen, *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong* (New York: The New Press, 1999), 25-26; 2.

who succeed rather than just being victims or playing passive roles in the world around them. It should be said that while the memorial is not perfect, it opens up the idea of who has history in Los Angeles, and it is in many ways a wonderful start but one that has no follow through. The key point is that the memorial needs more and could have been more with the inclusion of more dates and facts about what Los Angeles would have been like during Mason's time and the cultural significance of her life.

Biddy Mason lived an interesting life during an interesting time. She was a slave in the south who was transported through Utah to California and had lived among the Mormon settlers, she gained extensive medical knowledge, and was a single parent who famously won freedom for herself and her family in court. It would be very hard to convey all the nuances of these facts in a memorial in a crowded area, but it seems that for the Biddy Mason Memorial they decided to do the bare minimum and it shows. There is nothing truly wrong with the memorial and in fact it is a step forward for a more inclusive history of Los Angeles, but it is a place of unrealized possibilities that makes one wonder why they could not fit in a few more sentences.

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Author Bio

Ahlys Gandara is currently finishing her first year in the master of arts in history program at California State University, San Bernardino. She has earned her bachelor of arts in history from California State University, Northridge and is specializing in the history of the American West with a focus in California and food history. Previously, they had majored in English and sociology before realizing their passion for American history. He is an ardent fan of local tourism and volunteers with the astronomy group the Sidewalk Astronomers. She plans to work in the public sector following graduation and would like to reaffirm, once again, that they are not cut out for teaching.