

# Black Women Who Braved the Old West

By KARYN FOLLIS CHEATHAM  
FOR THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

"Go West, young man, go West." Horace Greeley popularized this John B. L. Soule phrase in 1851, and Greeley also insisted that the Western lands should be "reserved for the benefit of the white Cau-

casian race." But at the time he was calling for white men to go west, the West contained a sizable population of men who were black, and a growing population of black women.

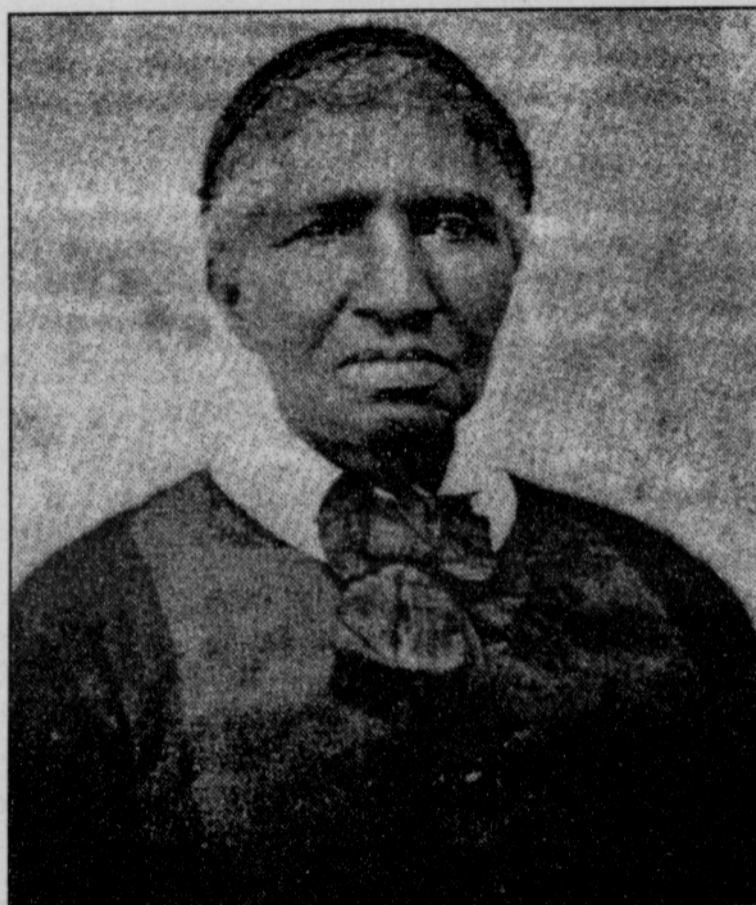
History information, however, followed the sentiments expressed by Greeley and for

over a century, the mystique of carving out a niche in the massive western landscapes was restricted to white males. It has only been in the last 30 years that blacks have begun to appear in western history.

Black women have been credited for their part in the settling of the West. At first only white waifs, wives and bawdy girls were mentioned, but recent presentations have begun exploring the broader aspects of women's role in the westward expansion. The information about women now includes women of color.

Where did this black community come from? Over 2,000 black freemen had hurried to Old California to take part in the Gold Rush, and some sent for their families. California, like Texas, had a small population of former Spanish slaves and mixed-blood blacks from before the arrival of Americans. And whites who came west brought their slaves. Many of those servants took advantage of territorial laws and sought their freedom.

One such person was Biddy Mason who, as a slave, had



Clara Brown purchased her freedom to become a cook to prospectors in Colorado. She started a laundry business that made her wealthy. With the money, she bought 34 relatives out of slavery. She also paid for the cost of a covered wagon train to bring them and other blacks West on a steamboat.

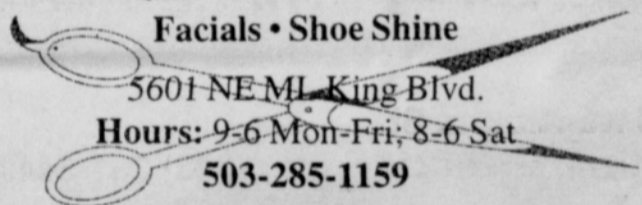
herded her master's cattle owner wanted to return to Virginia in 1856 (presumably to sell his slaves), Mason and her three daughters were with her, and when their

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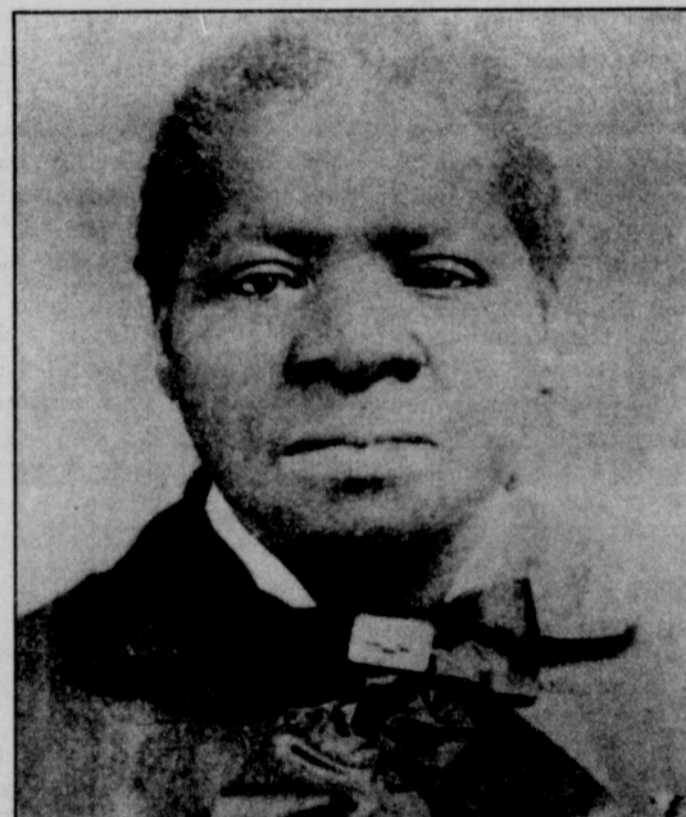
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Bridget "Biddy" Mason was a nurse-midwife and philanthropist. In 1989, a memorial depicting Mason's achievements was erected in Los Angeles. The city also celebrates Biddy Mason Day.