

Black Pioneer Families of Coloma
Presentation by Mike Okey at SRS on 2/21/2020

SLIDE 1: The Black Pioneers Of Coloma

The African Americans that came to California represent a cross section of America and the world during the mid-nineteenth century. They came from many countries, cultures and a variety of social structures, ranging from slavery to free blacks of means.

SLIDE 2: Slavery in California Prior to the Gold Rush

1579 Drake lands the Golden Hinde on the coast of Northern California. Four African slaves from Spanish colonies become the first in California.

1776 Anza establishes future site of San Francisco, with 240 colonists and soldiers includes people of mixed African, Indian and Spanish heritage.

1781 Spanish establish pueblo of Los Angeles. Over half of the original 46 settlers have African ancestry.

1826 Black mountain man Peter Raney enters Southern California with Jedediah Smith's Rocky Mountain Fur Company party of exploration.

1835 Black sailor Allen Light deserts brig Pilgrim in Santa Barbara. He later becomes a influential Mexican official of San Diego.

1841 Black ship captain William Leidesdorff arrives in Yerba Buena, becomes an entrepreneur and civic leader before his death in 1848. By 1841 Johann August Suter was granted 50,000 acres which he named "Nueva Helvetia" New Switzerland. In order to develop his holdings, he maintained 600 to 800 Native Americans as slaves.

1846 Slave "Mary" comes from Missouri with master and settles in San Jose, where she gains her freedom.

- The Bear Flag Revolt against Mexico includes African Americans Charles Gains, John Grider, Joe McAfee and Billy Gaston.

1848 James Marshall discovers gold at the site of the newly constructed sawmill, on the south fork of the American River.

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SLIDE 3: James P. Beckworth Frontiersman

Few, if any African Americans participated in the exploration of the American Continent. The true-life adventures of frontiersman James P. Beckwourth, and the political prominence of California's last Mexican Governor, Pio Pico, stand in contradiction to these popular misconceptions.

Serving in various capacities, these free men of African ancestry helped to establish the California missions and pueblos. They constituted 25 percent of Juan Bautista de Anza's 1775 expedition to San Francisco, and more than fifty percent of the colony established in Los Angeles in 1781. Among the descendants of these colonists was Pio Pico, who would become the last Governor of Mexican California. Major population centers during the nineteenth century were located in the state's northern region, as the gold rush mining camps drew miners, then entrepreneurs, tradesmen and their families. More than 60 percent of the population of African descent in California, counted in the United States Census of 1850, lived in Mother Lode mining towns. Men like Pearly Monroe came seeking opportunity, developed homesteads and settled their families in foothill communities like Coloma.

Until recently, little factual information had been collected concerning California's African American population in the decades following statehood. There are few references to the experiences of African American people either in nineteenth century-local histories or in later and more scholarly interpretive histories. The Multicultural Exhibit Program of the California Park Service is one way to acknowledge the significant contributions of people of African descent to the development and growth of the state.

Slide 4: Blacks Came to California for a Variety of Reasons

California for some was like the immigration to the north American Colonies. People came for new opportunities, seeking fortunes in the gold fields. Others came as the result of oppression in their own country, such as the Chinese.

Many blacks came as slaves, while others came to California from other countries, simply to take advantage of the opportunities California offered, some blacks came to escape prosecution or oppression that existed in other states.

Mary Ellen Pleasant, a New England Underground Railroad agent, fled to California to avoid prosecution under the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. During the Gold Rush she gave financial aid to escaped slaves and fought injustice through the courts.

Image on slide courtesy of the San Francisco Public Library, Holdridge Collection

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Slide 5: Slavery in California After Gold Discovery

1850 Black mountain man James P. Beckwourth discovers the lowest pass to cross the Sierra. He leads a party of settlers to Marysville.

- Census shows 962 blacks among 92,597 residents.

1850 California enters US as an undivided free state (part of Compromise of 1850), on September 9. Coloma does not hear the news until Oct. 13, 1850.

1852 Two dozen slaves help Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints members establish San Bernardino.

- Passage of state Fugitive Slave Law protects rights of owners until 1855.

1854 First school for black children in California opens at St. Cyprian AME Church in San Francisco.

- Biddy Mason and her family gain freedom through court decision against their former slaveowner.

1860 California blacks total 4,086, with 118 residing in Marysville, 88 in Stockton and only 12 in Los Angeles.

1865 Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution abolishes slavery.

1866 Fourteenth Amendment gives African Americans equal protection under the laws of the country.

1869 Fifteenth Amendment guarantees male citizens equal voting rights.

As you can see the subject of slavery in California is far more complex and nuanced than we have imagined. Now it is time to turn our attention to those pioneer families that built Coloma and made the community that we see today.

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Slide 6: Black Pioneers of El Dorado County, in and around Coloma

Here are the Pioneer Families of El Dorado County, in and around Coloma. Although some of those listed may have come later than 1852, they arrived from every state and territory of the United States.

- Aviery, Dennis (Deislis)@ Coloma
- Burgess, Rufus M. @ Coloma, 1850-52, NPS
- Celancey, Joshua @ Coloma, 1852, Barber
- Francis, Joseph Smallwood @ Coloma, Listed as Joseph Frances, is 8 months old in 1860 Census, b. Coloma 1859

Francis, Robert Coleman @ Coloma, Listed as R C Frances, is 36 years old, barber from the West Indies in the 1860 Census

“Negro Bob” @ Cold Springs

Barker (Baker), Elijah @ El Dorado County, is 3 years old in 1860 Census

- Gooch, Nancy @ El Dorado County, 1849, from Maryland via Missouri
- Gooch, Peter @ El Dorado County, 1849,

Long, Aleck @ El Dorado County

“Cupid” @ Georgetown

- Smallwood, James @ Georgetown, Listed as Joseph Smallwood C, is 20 years old, barber in 1860 Census
- Smith, William @ Coloma, 1850, Cook
- Moore, James @ Gold Hill, 1850, Barkeeper

We know little or nothing of these families, so we will focus upon two of the prominent families that came to Coloma at the beginning of the Gold Rush. Specifically, we will be looking at the contributions of the Burgess and the Gooch/Monroe families.

Slide 7: Seeking your fortune in California was not as straight forward as many thought that it would be!

It is important to note, particularly in California, that your survival depended upon help from everyone around you and your own wit, particularly between 1848 and 1852. I have come to call this period one of the most dynamic in American history. This was a time when the available resources were completely overwhelmed. If the same thing were to happen today it would be as if four hundred fifty million people arrived during 2020. All resources would be completely overwhelmed, and you would have to rely upon your own wits just to survive.

Racism and bigotry took on many forms. In small communities

Many of the immigrants arriving at Sutter Fort were shocked to find that no accommodations were to be had, food was much more expensive, and tools and equipment were difficult to come by.

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Slide 8: Peter and Nancy Gooch

Just how they obtained freedom is not completely known, and it is assumed that William Gooch simply gave them their freedom.

Nancy and Peter Gooch arrived in California in 1849 as slaves from Missouri. It is likely that their owners were the William Gooch family of Placerville who became owners of the Crescent City Hotel.

Peter and Nancy Gooch were freed shortly after California's admission into the Union as a free state in 1850. After her emancipation, Nancy with the assistance of her husband Peter, worked as a laundress and cook for local miners to make sufficient money to provide payment for the freedom of their son Andrew Monroe and his wife Sarah Ellen Collins Monroe. Nancy's money may have been needed to pay off Andrew's indebtedness. Also, the surname Monroe was likely adopted from Andrew's last owner in Missouri. Nancy continued to work toward this end after Peter's death in 1861. It is believed that part of the \$750 that Nancy later raised was used to pay for the transportation of Andrew, Sarah Ellen and their young sons Pearly and Grant to Coloma from Missouri. Nancy owned about 80 acres of land after Peter's death.

Peter Gooch b. 1824 d. 1861 and Nancy Anne Ross/Gooch b. 1811 d. 1901.

Image on Slide is believed to be a wedding photo of Nancy and Peter Gooch, which may have been taken in 1858 the year they were married. Photo courtesy of Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park

Slide 9: The Monroe Family

The Monroe family arrive in Coloma around 1868-70 after Andrews mother had raised enough money, around \$750 (\$53,000 in today's gold value) and the Civil War was concluded.

Shown in Photo on slide: are Andrew Monroe b. 1847 d. 1921, Sarah Ellen Ball b. ?d. ?, Pearly b. 1868 d. 1963, U. S. Grant b. 1869 d. 1943, Andrew b. 1873 d. 1892, Cordilla b. 1877 d. 1945, William b. 1876 d. 1928, Garfield b. 1880 d. 1920, James b. 1886 d. 1988

Once in Coloma, the Gooch/Monroe family homesteaded adjoining properties in the northwestern section of town. Andrew Monroe soon acquired 80 acres on the western side of the Old Coloma Road (State Route 49) and built a house on the property. This house was destroyed by a fire in 1889 and was rebuilt within a year. The Monroe family cultivated various orchard crops and vegetables on their property, most particularly apples and other fruit. The harvest and sale of their produce, as well as other agricultural enterprises, enabled the family to supplement their incomes to levels that allowed them to prosper in El Dorado County.

Photo on slide courtesy of Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park

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Slide 10: Pearly A. Monroe

One of Pearly and Grant Monroes' earliest educational influences was Edwin Markham, a schoolteacher who later became one of California's most famous poets. Nancy Gooch was to enjoy the company of her growing family in Coloma until her death in 1901. Her experience with her family would not be without a loss however as her grandson Andrew Monroe Jr. would succumb to a heart attack at the age of 20 in 1892.

The family home was destroyed by a fire in 1889 and was rebuilt within a year. The Monroe family cultivated various orchard crops and vegetables on their property, most particularly apples and other fruit. The harvest and sale of their produce, as well as other agricultural enterprises, enabled the family to supplement their incomes to levels that allowed them to prosper in El Dorado County.

In 1885, Pearly and Grant assisted their father Andrew in the burial of their friend and neighbor James Marshall, the man whose discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill in Coloma in 1848 led to the California Gold Rush. Pearly Monroe built a house (circa 1925) that was intended to be used as a rental property, adjacent to the blacksmith shop (circa 1928-29) on Coloma Road near the gold discovery site. In fact, the site on which James Marshall made his famous gold discovery became what was eventually Monroe property. Pearly Monroe would later move to Sacramento where he worked as a janitor for the California State Library. He was once married and divorced, and like the rest of his siblings left behind no children. Pearly Monroe died in 1963 at the age of 94 in Sacramento. In his will he left \$125,000 (most of it in property) to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Half of the amount was bequeathed to the national chapter and the other half to the Sacramento chapter. An additional \$2,500 was to be deposited in accounts set up for 36 young people in Coloma and Sacramento, in care of the Sacramento NAACP Credit Union.

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Slide 11: Joseph Smallwood, Barber

Joseph Smallwood is listed as being born in Indiana, twenty years old in the 1860 census and listed as Barber.

His business was located in a small building adjacent to the Virginia Saloon known as the "Coloma Shaving Saloon", run by Joseph Smallwood in May 1854. Mr. Smallwood was one of the few Negroes residing in Coloma, a fact the Argus curiously never mentions. However, in the Placerville Mountain Democrat of August 4, 1855, we find: "Celebration. The anniversary of the emancipation of the negroes of the West India Islands, was celebrated with considerable pomp and ceremony. The Hon. Mr. Smallwood, of Coloma, a negro a shade darker than the 'blackness of darkness,' presided with matching dignity."

At the end of the year Smallwood was operating the "El Dorado Bath House", possibly at the same location for a while, before he moved up the street to a shop owned by Luther Davis. Smallwood was still in Coloma in 1860; the census shows the 46-year-old barber was born in

Maryland and living with his 20-year-old son. Before June 1855, this became the new location of Kline's Cigar Emporium when he moved from his location next to the Brick Store. It is likely also to have been the location of the Fashion Restaurant the following October, when Kline went into partnership with T. Elkus.

"El Dorado Bath House and Shaving Saloon" were advertised by Smallwood as "opposite Baker's Hotel" (Argus, May 12, 1855) continuing the legend in November 1856. Prices were interesting. No excuse for a man not to be neat and clean with these accommodations and prices:

Hot baths 75¢

Cold " 50¢

Hair cut 50¢

Shampoo 50¢

Shaving 25¢

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Slide 12: Rufus M. Burgess

Rufus M. Burgess Sr. arrived in California in 1850 with an overland wagon train from Kentucky with his owner General Price. Since California was a free state, Price freed Burgess shortly after their arrival. Once free, Burgess settled in Coloma, took up gold mining, purchased land near the site of James Marshall's gold discovery, and eventually operated a blacksmith shop in a structure located where the Grange Hall building is currently located. Rufus Burgess married Anna Butler in 1864. The marriage produced no children. Anna Butler/Burgess died in 1886. Rufus Burgess Sr. later married Josephine Burris, a laundress in Coloma. This marriage produced three sons, Marion, Rufus Jr., and Edgar. Rufus Burgess terraced his hillside property in Coloma for the cultivation of fruits trees. The family made a living by packaging the fruit from these trees on their property and hauling it by horse and wagon to Placerville for sale in local markets. Over time, the Burgesses buy farmland for their orchards and home.

After the death of Rufus M. Burgess Sr., Josephine married William Henry Monroe in 1913. No children were produced from this union, but William Monroe's stepchildren would enjoy the familial bonds that developed between the Burgess and Monroe families during this marriage. Marion, Edgar, and Rufus Jr. would all eventually, like James and Pearly Monroe, become part of the Sacramento community with their residency, occupations, church affiliations, and social life.

Photo of Rufus M. Burgess on slide courtesy of Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park

Slide 13: The Second Generation of the Burgess Family

The second generation made a living by packaging the fruit from these trees on their property and hauling it by horse and wagon to Placerville for sale in local markets. In his later recollections, Marion Burgess stated that his father's blacksmith shop was one of Coloma's best places to have tools of all kinds sharpened, horses shod, and wooden wagon wheels repaired. Marion himself drove cars for the Pierce-Arrow Stage Coach line that made pleasure trips from Placerville to Camp Richardson at Lake Tahoe. Marion Burgess is also credited with re-discovering objects associated with the original Sutter Mill site in Coloma. These and other artifacts, long covered by the waters of the American River until their re-discovery, were put on display in the County Historical Museum in Placerville. All three Burgess brothers were involved with the construction of American River bridges in Coloma that would periodically wash out during floods. Marion Burgess was also one of seven young men from Coloma who enlisted for service in the U.S. Army during World War I.

Photo on slide: Rufus Jr and Marion Burgess, Photo courtesy of El Dorado County Historical Museum

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Slide 14: The Burgess & Monroe Families Were Active Participants in the Community

The Monroe Family is getting ready to take part in the Marshall Monument Dedication. This was the biggest event in Coloma since the fiftieth anniversary of James Marshall discovery of gold.

Photo on slide courtesy of Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park

Old-timers reenact placer mining near gold discovery site, 1890, as part of Marshall Monument dedication.

Photo on slide courtesy of Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park

Left to Right are: C. J. Johnson, 1852; Dan Teuscher, 1849 worked on mill; Rufus Burgess (Freed) 1850-52, Miner, Blacksmith, farmer; Perry Young 1849 First Alcalde of Coloma; Philip Teuscher.

Slide 15: The Burgess Brothers

The Burgess twins, Jonathan and Matthew, continue the tradition of California's manifest destiny. Rufus Burgess Sr. arrived in Coloma to carve out not just a living but was able to thrive and raise a family.

The Burgess brothers have built a business that began by polishing used golf balls and reselling them. From that they built Burgess Brothers BBQ & Burgers. Today, they are going beyond that to additional food products.

The brothers are now working with Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park to provide additional details on the Burgess family pioneer and community spirit. When this work is completed it will be available for research and adding to the story of African Americans in California.

Images on slide courtesy of The Burgess Brothers