

Los Angeles, CA



Origins of Juneteenth

On June 19, 1865, the enslaved people of Galveston were declared free from the system of bondage known as chattel slavery in America. This brought about feelings of liberation, joy, and endless possibilities that spread throughout the nation, including the newly emerging western territories and states. In the earliest years following the Civil War, Black Americans in California celebrated Emancipation Day on January 1, in conjunction with New Year's Day. Due to a small African American population prior to the 20th century, public celebrations of Juneteenth took longer to emerge in Los Angeles. Eventually, the mass migration of Black Americans in the 20th century, who sought better living conditions, more economic opportunities, and an escape from the racial terror of the South, established LA as a new frontier for Black progress in America.

Celebrations of Freedom in Los Angeles

First Official Emancipation Celebration (April 12, 1870)

The initial official emancipation celebration in Los Angeles was held at the First African Methodist Episcopal Church, which was the city's first Black house of worship. Over 50 individuals gathered to commemorate the ratification of the 15th Amendment, which granted African American citizens the right to vote. The event was a festive affair that included a church service, potluck, dance, and fireworks display.

Wesley Chapel Methodist Episcopal (Jan. 1, 1900)

This house of worship was a common location for annual Emancipation Day celebrations in Los Angeles. Parishioners shared personal stories of their experience with slavery and their journey towards freedom and equality in post-emancipation America.

First Official Juneteenth Celebration (1895)

The earliest known "official" Juneteenth celebration in Los Angeles took place in 1895. The event was marked by a large picnic at the North Beach in Santa Monica and was attended by more than 200 people.

"Black Palm Springs" Juneteenth Celebration (1938)

In commemoration of Juneteenth, Santa Clarita, also known as the "Black Palm Springs," decided to launch a project for a public bathhouse and swimming pool on June 19. This was a significant moment as it offered a safe and peaceful place for African Americans to swim and relax, away from the racial violence and discrimination they often faced.

California Officially Recognizes Juneteenth

In 2003, California's legislature passed a resolution recognizing Juneteenth. In 2022, the City of Los Angeles dedicated Juneteenth as an official city holiday.

Trailblazers of Freedom

Mifflin Wistar Gibbs (1832-1915)

In the early days of California, William Alexander Leidesdorff Gibbs was a black entrepreneur and civic activist. He was among many black men who migrated to California from New York and Massachusetts during the antebellum period to seek economic opportunities. In 1856, Gibbs played a vital role in co-founding the Mirror of the Times, which was California's first black-owned newspaper.



Bridget "Biddy" Mason

Biddy Mason, who was born as a slave in Mississippi, embarked on a journey to San Bernardino, CA on foot and by caravan in 1851. After filing a petition and undergoing a lengthy court proceeding, she finally succeeded in gaining her freedom in L.A.'s district court in 1856. Mason went on to become one of the first prominent landowners and philanthropists of the City of Los Angeles, where she contributed significantly to the community. She played a key role in founding the First African American Methodist Episcopal Church in Los Angeles in 1872, and also helped to establish a traveler's aid center and an elementary school for African American children.

Paul Revere Williams

Paul Revere Williams was a renowned designer and architect. He co-designed the Theme Building at LAX and created notable buildings and celebrity homes in Southern California. Williams was the first African American member of the American Institute of Architects and served on the first Los Angeles City Planning Commission in 1920.



The Path to Absolute Equality

(1849) Enslaved African Americans Arrive in California During Gold Rush

Hundreds of enslaved people migrated to the northern region of California with their enslavers, seeking to find gold during the California Gold Rush. Once in California, enslaved people commonly fled into the foothills of San Francisco. In some cases, they earned wages too and were able to pay for their manumission.

Compromise of 1850: Unfree in a "Free State"

In 1850, due to the growing population, the territory of California was admitted into the Union as a "free state" under the Compromise of 1850. This policy hardly ended the system of slavery in California.

(1910-1940) The Great Migration

During the first wave of the Great Migration, thousands of African Americans moved west to California, particularly folks from Texas and Louisiana. Texans commonly moved to cities along the West Coast including Los Angeles, Bakersfield, Oakland, and Sacramento. The Texas tradition of Juneteenth became more popular in California during this period.



(1940's) - The Second Great Migration

Amid WWII, LA became a hub for defense production, providing employment opportunities in the rubber, steel, and auto industries. Black Americans migrated West in mass, resulting in a huge population surge in LA. In 30 years, the black population in LA rose from about 64,000 in 1940 to over 763,000 in 1970. This time marked a peak of the black middle class and thriving black communities in LA. This period also marked a time of great racial discrimination in housing practices in LA, that prohibited Black Americans from settling in more desirable areas of the city.

Tom Bradley

Bradley was born in Texas as the grandson of a slave, and eventually moved to Los Angeles with his family in 1924. He attended Polytechnic High School in Sun Valley and received his undergraduate degree from UCLA. Before getting his law degree from Southwestern Law School, Bradley served as a police officer for the LAPD.



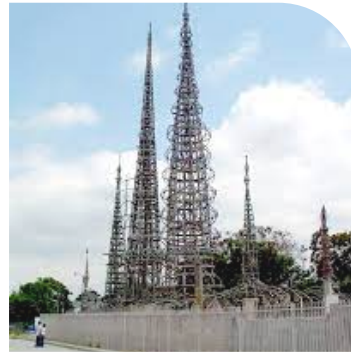
Angela Davis



Maya Angelou



John Singleton



WATTS TOWER ARTS CENTER



HATTIE MCDANIEL RESIDENCE



AFRICAN AMERICAN FIREFIGHTER MUSEUM



SECOND BAPTIST CHURCH (L.A.) 1885

Historical Resources and References

Black History is L.A. History

<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/c9c7c9db4d3f4c2aa5bb967a51c7d768>

The Great Migration: Creating a New Black Identity in Los Angeles

<https://www.pbssocal.org/history-society/the-great-migration-creating-a-new-black-identity-in-los-angeles>

Migration to Los Angeles, UCLA Library, Center for Oral History Research

<https://sites.google.com/view/ucla-library-blackbusinesses/migration-to-los-angeles>

