

Volume XVI, No. 2

Late-Summer 2019

The Freedom Seeker

African Americans in Baja California: A Hidden History from the Early 20th Century

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The most well-known stories of African Americans along the U.S.-Mexico border are enslaved peoples self-emancipating by crossing through Texas into Mexico, or possibly Buffalo Soldiers serving their country in the borderlands between two nations consistently at odds. Blacks have a rich history in the border spaces between the U.S. and Mexico, but this history is often obscured or ignored because many people assume African Americans are absent from that space. Some African Americans, including some middle- and upper-class entrepreneurs in the West in the early 1900s, saw the border as an opportunity for social change, economic advancement, and even an avenue for fighting White Supremacy.

A group of Black businesspeople created the Lower California Mexican Land and Development Company, nicknamed Little Liberia, in 1917. Initially, they planned to create an agricultural community just outside of Ensenada in Baja California, Mexico. Their goal was to sell their goods to growing agricultural markets back in the United States; this would prove African Americans capable of substantial economic success when outside the political, economic, and social systems in the United States that consistently stunted Black productivity and community growth. Rather than creating a utopian community that sought freedom and equality through creating distance from White communities, Little Liberia organizers fought for change through constant community interchange between Los Angeles and Baja California. For these African American leaders, connections across and through

the border were vital, not just to maintain Little Liberia's connection with Los Angeles, but to serve its larger purpose of change. The community's creators engaged with the border as a natural aspect of their social movement, and when members spoke about the border in print they referred to crossing the border not as a grand adventure into a desolate or dangerous wasteland, but akin to simply crossing into another city. They saw Mexico as a land of opportunity for African Americans, and Mexicans were brothers in a similar cause for equal rights and fair treatment by the American government.



Hugh MacBeth,
Community Leader of
Little Liberia

Community organizers' belief in the need for connections between African Americans and Mexicans became more transparent after significant organizational changes in 1922. Shortly after the Tulsa Race Riot in 1921, wealthy African Americans from the surrounding counties in Oklahoma joined the Little Liberia community, contributing substantial funds and merging with the existing board of directors. The company began plans for a bank, motel, and sanatorium, and Baja California officials offered financial and public support. The company also created the International Community Welfare League, whose primary goal was fighting White Supremacy in the United States and Mexico. The League had offices in Mexico City, Los Angeles, Baja California, and Oklahoma, and recruited Native Americans, Mexicans, and African Americans into its ranks. League organizers sought to fight White Supremacy on a continental scale because they believed White Supremacy as the root of mistreatment of African Americans and Mexicans on local, national, and international levels. The League, for example, led a drive for signatures on a petition to the United States government asking for the recognition of Mexico's new government under President Álvaro Obregón, which President Warren

Continued on page 4

Inside this issue

<i>In the Months Ahead</i>	P. 2
<i>I Heard It Said . . .</i>	P. 3
<i>Young Abolitionist Teen Scholars' Institute</i>	P. 3



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The Freedom Seeker is a publication of Underground Railroad History Project of the Capital Region, Inc., a non-profit corporation dedicated to promoting knowledge of the 19th century Underground Railroad Movement and its legacy in the Capital Region, in NYS, in the United States, and relating that history with us today. This newsletter is published three times a year. Editorial inquiries can be sent to URHPCR, 194 Livingston Ave., Albany, NY 12210 or info@undergroundrailroadhistory.org.

This newsletter is printed by Modern Press

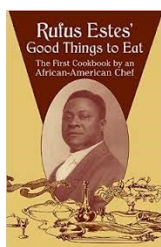
Freedom Seeker Corner

On Nov. 17 of 1856 Catherine Pitts, aka Ann Derickson, of Berlin, Maryland arrived in New York City from Philadelphia with one infant child in arms. She arrived at the office of Sydney Howard Gay, the editor of the National Anti-Slavery Standard Newspaper. The newspaper office was an Underground Railroad refuge. Her enslaver had been John Pitts, a preacher



and doctor, who was about to sell Catherine and her husband. So her brother advised them to flee and they did, first by wagon and then on foot, finally reaching New York City. She was able to move on to freedom farther north. Her story is one of the many that can be uncovered through research on the story of the Underground Railroad.

Looking forward to seeing you in the months ahead!



The Museum Shop at The Stephen and Harriet Myers Residence is open for your business. Reading books, activity books, handmade jewelry, mugs, t-shirts, note cards, Cliff Oliver photographs, Harriet Myers dolls and handmade doll clothing and more for young and older.

The Underground Railroad Bicycle Tour - Underground Railroad History Project of the Capital Region and the Albany Bicycle Coalition are

collaborating on an exciting and informative bicycle tour of historic sites and structures relating to the Underground Railroad Movement in the Capital Region. We begin and end at the Stephen and Harriet Meyers Residence in Albany, an outstanding artifact from the Anti-slavery period and ride north along the Hudson River to Troy, NY where the true story of Charles Nalle and how Harriet Tubman helped him escape the evil bounty hunters hot on his trail will be explored. Paul Stewart, co-founder of the URHP will accompany us on the tour and deliver commentary at selected sites along the way. Our return to Albany will



be on the lovely and scenic Mohawk-Hudson Bike Path where refreshments are available after the ride. Sunday, September 22 beginning at 9:30am at The Stephen and Harriet Myers Residence located at 194 Livingston Avenue, Albany. More details are available by visiting <https://www.hudsonrivervalleyramble.com/ramble/events/ev-detail/the-underground-railroad-bicycle-tour>

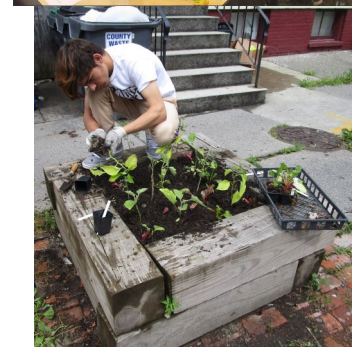
Crossings: Bridging the Authentic Underground Railroad Past to the Present - Freedom seekers, in their

acts of self-liberation, not only traversed the physical landscape to new destinations, they also conquered the mental landscape of their enslaved status to a life in freedom. Today, we are bridging the authentic history of the UGRR past to the present. The work of descendants, community researchers, historians, and others are elevating the story from the mythical, unknown past to a documented history of a grass roots resistance movement. Through this exploration of our collective heritage, we aim to move society from racism to inclusion and tolerance. Details at <https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1205/professional-development.htm>



Over the Past Months - YATSI 2019

The Young Abolitionist Teen Scholars' Institute is a five week, interdisciplinary learning experience that creates a hands-on introduction to careers in history, the arts, museum education, preservation, anthropology, photography, and more. Through research and project based activities, students learn about the inspiring work of local abolitionists as they collaborate in the creation of professional public presentations showcasing what they have learned at The Scholars' Institute. This innovative summer institute is an opportunity for teens to not simply learn about, but to re-create, a 'sense' for the past and its relevance today.



"I know two students who participated in the program, and it was truly transformative. They learned so much, gained confidence, and had fun too! Thank you for your wonderful work!" (Karen)

News and Notes

Mission Statement of URHPCR:

Underground Railroad History Project researches and preserves the local and national history of the Underground Railroad movement, its international connections, and its legacy to later struggles, engaging in public education and dialogue about this movement and its relevance to modern society.

I Heard it Said at The Myers Residence -

"One of the best living history projects in New York State!" (Aaron, March, 2019)

"Very interesting, extremely well-preserved and, wow, what a history. I had only before seen a "stop" on the Underground Railroad but this was the hub. Great history." (David, May 2019)

"This museum is a must see, very eye-opening and important sight. Museum staff tailored our tour to be just what we wanted, educational, meaningful, and hands-on." (NorthStar, May 2019)

Together, through Underground Railroad History Project, we can make a positive difference in our world today that will contribute to a better tomorrow.



Stevie Wants You



Thank you to our donors: AnnMarie Hess, Antony Searle, Carolyn Peterson-Vaccaro, Chris Cummings, Cordell Reaves, Dan Egan, Darby Penney, David Hochfelder, Dorothy Willsey, Eric and Debbie Fagan, Fern Peterson, Geralyn Zink, J. Dylan Habritter, Marey Bailey, Mary Liz Stewart, Matt George, Olivia Brazee, Pat Fahy, Pat Oldham, Paul Stewart, R. Etta Baines, Roger & Carol Green, Sara McDarby, Sharon Carter, Sheila Daley, Susan DuBois, Yvonne Abunaw, R. Etta Baines

Welcome and thank you to new and renewing members: The Blueshift Group, Susan Haswell, Jason Batman, Margaret Walter, Mark Barth, Mary Prokop

Make a donation - Renew your membership - Invite someone you know to become a member - give the gift of membership - SUBSCRIPTION DONATIONS and SUBSCRIPTION MEMBERSHIPS and ONE-TIME PAYMENT options are available at UndergroundRailroadHistory.org

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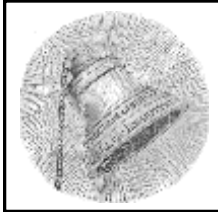
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African Americans in Baja California (Cont'd)

G. Harding and Congress refused to acknowledge. As the community grew, so did its members' ideas for means of creating change.

Little Liberia began to collapse in 1927, and by 1928 the community had fallen apart. The company faced public allegations of mismanagement and some members faced accusations of stealing community funds. Baja California had experienced a substantial drought. Changes in Mexican leadership and policies meant African Americans were less welcome in Baja California. The fact that the farmland was not purchased correctly within Mexican land law was the final blow to the community, and all but one member moved back to Los Angeles. Although Little Liberia only existed for a decade, its reliance on the possibility of social change through transborder connections contributes to the annals of history as another movement for social justice initiated by African Americans.

Photo credit - blackpast.org

Laura Hooten is working on a book on Little Liberia which will be published by Oklahoma University Press in 2022.

Notes of note -

Good by and thank you to Ruth Kassel and Ralph Pennington, Jr. for their contributions over the years to URHPCR as board and committee members.

Welcome to Ron Gardner, recently returned to the board of URHPCR.

Thank you to Vera Michelson for her incredible generosity in bequeathing her home to URHPCR. We are most appreciative of her generous gift. The home has been placed on the market. If you or someone you know is interested, please contact Paul Stewart at 518-432-4432 or at info@UndergroundRailroadHistory.org

Questions? Concerns? Contributions? Interested in volunteering? Contact us at (518) 432-4432 or at [UndergroundRailroadHistory.org](mailto:info@UndergroundRailroadHistory.org)