

Bridget “Biddy” Mason

1818–1891



WHY SHE MADE HISTORY Biddy Mason was a slave until the age of 38, when she and her children were freed in California. Later, Mason became one of the first African American women to own land in Los Angeles.



As you read the biography below, think about the courage Biddy Mason had in order to overcome her life as a slave and succeed as a businesswoman.



The Granger Collection, New York

Bridget “Biddy” Mason was born a slave in 1818 on a Mississippi plantation owned by Robert and Rebecca Smith. The couple became **Mormon** converts in 1847 and moved to Utah. The Smiths took their slaves with them on the 2,000-mile journey. Along the way, Mason was responsible for preparing meals, herding cattle, serving as a midwife, and taking care of her three daughters.

The Smiths moved again in 1851, this time to San Bernardino, California, to join a Mormon community being founded by Brigham Young. Biddy Mason was said to have walked behind the wagon train the entire trip.

California was a free state, and slavery was forbidden. Mason petitioned for freedom for herself and her three children. In 1856 the California court freed Mason and her children, and 10 other slaves owned by Robert Smith. Mason then moved to Los Angeles and found a job as a midwife and nurse.

Mason saved her money and, after 10 years of freedom, was able to purchase a plot of land for \$250. This made her one of the first African American women to own land in Los Angeles.

VOCABULARY

Mormon member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

A few years later, Mason sold part of her land for \$1,500. She used the money she made on the deal to build rental properties on other land she owned. Mason used her money wisely and continued to buy and sell real estate. Eventually, she amassed a fortune of almost \$300,000.

Mason was also generous, and she gave much of her earnings to charity. She provided food and shelter for the poor of all races, and she would often visit and bring gifts to prisoners being held in local jails. In 1872 she and her son-in-law founded the first African American church in Los Angeles. For her kindness, she became known as Grandma Mason.

Biddy Mason died in 1891 and was buried in an unmarked grave. Almost 100 years later, Los Angeles mayor Tom Bradley dedicated a tombstone to mark her grave. More than 3,000 members of the church that she founded attended the ceremony.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. How was Biddy Mason able to petition for freedom?

2. **Contrast** How did the lives of slaves differ from those of the free in the United States?

ACTIVITY

3. In celebration of Biddy Mason's life and the dedication of her tombstone, write an epitaph for her that talks about a few of her accomplishments.