

REMEMBERING BIDDY MASON PART I
LONG ROAD TO FREEDOM

S02 E02 EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

INTRO

LAURA: So I don't remember the exact minute, but it is very likely it was in spring of 2013. And I was probably sitting in the reading room at the Huntington library

DEQAH: That's Laura Voisin George.

LAURA: I am an architectural historian and a native of Southern California.

VANESSA: Back in 2013, Laura was considering a Ph.D., and was researching one of California's first successful surgeons, Dr. John S. Griffin

DEQAH: and on one of those long sessions of library reading, she came across a useful resource.

LAURA: In the 1950s and 1960s, there was a UCLA medical lecturer named Viola Lockhart Warren. And she wrote a series of articles about early Anglo doctors in Southern California.

DEQAH: One of those articles contained a historical detail that struck Laura as pretty odd. Warren wrote about a series of 10 murals that, at the time, adorned the walls of the UC, San Francisco's medical school

VANESSA: The series was painted by a Polish immigrant named Bernard. Zackheim of Diego Rivera was called the *History of Medicine in California*.

LAURA: So there's 10 panels, there's a chronological linearity to them in that you have the Native Americans sharing their herbal medicine Anglo doctors on one side. And you see, the development of more formerly trained surgeons. It was like a graphic representation of the history of medicine in California that the medical students there should know.

DEQAH: Viola Lockhart Warren's article included an image of one of the 10 panels.

LAURA: That portrays Dr. Griffin with a Black nurse working beside him on a patient. They're standing, over a stretcher that has, probably an unconscious soldier wrapped up in a blanket. So it's just intriguing that, you know, there is this woman of color and she has

become a nurse and she's working next to the leading doctor and surgeon in Los Angeles. And it's just like, I kind of want to know more about this.

VANESSA: So Laura started digging and found out this woman's name: Bidy Mason

DEQAH: The fact that Bidy is one of the pioneers of California medicine is only one small part of her large story.

VANESSA: In June, 2020, Laura wrote a blog post that described the remarkable highlights of Bidy Mason's life. Including how she went from being enslaved in the South during the early part of the 19th century to becoming one of the wealthiest women in the American West by the time she died in 1891.

DEQAH: I first came across Bidy's story because of Laura's article and I was instantly blown away. For years. Information about Bidy has been hard to come by, Bidy was barely in the footnotes of historical texts. Even the fact that she was featured in these murals was almost lost to history.

VANESSA: But historians like Laura and some other crusaders who will soon introduce you to keeping Bidy's story alive. And in this episode, so are we.

CREDITS

DEQAH: Welcome to Urban Roots, a podcast by Urbanist Media, that dives deep into little known stories from urban history. We're your hosts; I'm Deqah Hussein-Wetzel, historic preservationist

VANESSA: And I'm Vanessa Quirk, a cities journalist.

DEQAH: Today's episode is the first of a two part series telling the remarkable story of Bidy Mason.

BIDDY'S EARLY YEARS

KEVIN: Bidy really belongs in the Pantheon of great black female leaders. / like Harriet Tubman and Sojourner truth. When you look at where she came from and where she ended up, the story to me is every bit as remarkable.

VANESSA: That's Kevin Waite, he teaches American history at Durham University in England. He's also the author of a new book called "West of Slavery."

DEQAH: along with professor Sarah Beringer, Gordon, who we'll introduce to you later in this episode, Kevin received a grant from the national endowment of the humanities to dive deeper into Bidy.

VANESSA: With that funding, Kevin and Sally have launched a project called the *Long Road to Freedom*. They've assembled researchers from across disciplines to contribute and share their knowledge of Bidy.

DEQAH: the group includes architectural historian, Laura Voisin George, who you heard at the top of the show.

VANESSA: So this collaborative of folks, that's kind of like a justice league of like bitty historian superheroes.

DEQAH: Totally! These folks have come together with a mission to gather as much information about bitty as they possibly can. Unfortunately, there are very few records from bidy's early years that are left.

JACKIE: Now we did find in an 1870 census that she listed her mother as being born in Louisiana.

DEQAH: That's Jackie Broxton, Executive Director of the Bidy Mason Charitable Foundation.

JACKIE: That's the first time I think anybody has discovered that.

VANESSA: Bidy was born into slavery in 1818 in Hancock county, Georgia

JACKIE: She was separated from her parents when she was very young.

DEQAH: And as a teenager, but he was sold to a family in Mississippi.

KEVIN: She arrived in Mississippi in the 1830s. Just as Mississippi was becoming, not just America's cotton Heartland, but the world's cotton Heartland. Tens of thousands of African-Americans were forcibly transported to Mississippi during this period. And in fact, across the antebellum period, roughly 1 million black slaves were caught up in what's called

the second middle passage, which was their forcible removal from the Eastern seaboard slave states to the Southern interior.

DEQAH: Biddy was likely expected to do domestic work in addition to nursing and working in the plantation.

VANESSA: During this time, he probably picked up an invaluable skill.

JACKIE: What we can deduce is that someone taught her how to deliver babies. And then someone encouraged her with this herbal healing. So I have to assume that was another slave, or a group of slaves. Some of that she may have learned from native Americans, I don't know.

DEQAH: However, she learned it, Biddy was good at her craft.

VANESSA: When she was 25, a plantation owner named Robert Smith purchased her, so she could help tend to his sickly wife, Rebecca.

DEQAH: Robert was far from a gentlemen, at least around Black women.

JACKIE: He was probably overly amorous, which is why he was always in the slave cabins

VANESSA: We don't know the details, but we do know that during her years of enslavement Biddy gave birth to three daughters: Ellen, Harriet, and Ann.

KEVIN: There were a couple of theories about the fathers of Biddy's children. One, this is my favorite and I wish it was true, but I think there's very limited evidence to support it is that for a period, she ran off and cohabitated with the Cherokee, and that he may have been the father of some of her children. Most likely, Robert Smith or one of his sons — FORCIBLY fathered one of Biddy's children. And we know that by looking at census data, usually census takers would record the skin color of people that they identified and Biddy was marked as Black. And I forgot exactly which of her daughters was marked as Yellow. Yellow often was a signifier of mixed race heritage. I think it's really revealing. It's really tragic as well. Because the, the skin tone hints at a really violent history

JACKIE: You know, to be a woman in, slavery times and not have any control whatsoever over your body. I don't think people understand the full gravity of that and what it does to you

psychologically and that repeated trauma. I mean to go through childbirth for someone that you're not in love with and who obviously cares nothing about you. That's a lot of trauma

DEQAH: Biddy wasn't the only enslaved woman in the house who Robert Smith endangered. There was also Hannah, a young skin woman.

VANESSA: Rebecca Smith, Robert's wife had brought Hannah with her from her family home when she got married. So, by the time Biddy arrived, Hannah had been surviving Smith for years.

JACKIE: She was very intimidated by Smith. Very intimidated by Smith

DEQAH: Biddy helped Hannah navigate and survive the Smith household.

JACKIE: I think they were confidants. I would love to hear what they said about Smith.

VANESSA: When Hannah also gave birth, likely to Robert Smith's children, Biddy was by her side. The two forged a special lifelong bond.

DEQAH: Their bond, and their strength, would soon be tested.

MUSIC BREAK

Move Out West

VANESSA: Biddy's experiences up to this point in her life, we're pretty typical for an African-American woman at the time. But in 1848, Biddy's life would take an unusual turn.

DEQAH: That year Smith joined the church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. The Mormons. At that time, Mormons throughout the U.S. were migrating into Western territories in what they called an Exodus . Most moved to Utah, where their leader, Brigham Young founded Salt Lake City in 1847.

VANESSA: Robert Smith wanted to be there, too. He packed up his legal family and the enslaved people under his charge, Biddy, Hannah, and their children.

KEVIN: Biddy was one of, probably about 80 or so enslaved African-Americans who was forcibly taken west to Utah during the Mormon Exodus in the late 1840s, she went with a large party of white southerners. They were called the Mississippi Saints.

DEQAH: From her family's stories, we know a bit about what the journey must have been like for Biddy.

KEVIN: Whereas most of the white Mormon travelers would have probably written in their wagons, Biddy walked most of the way. From her home in Mississippi, all the way to Cottonwood Canyon in Utah. That's a journey of about 2000 miles. And there's every reason to think that she made a vast portion of that journey on foot.

VANESSA: Biddy didn't just walk those miles from Mississippi. She worked the entire journey.

KEVIN: Biddy, I think, would have been responsible for nursing white settlers, for taking care of the livestock and for doing all sorts of assorted domestic tasks.

DEQAH: She also helped deliver the children born on the trail.

KEVIN: We think that, uh, it was on this journey that Biddy may have begun to sort of hone her abilities as a midwife.

VANESSA: She and Hannah had young children to carry most of the way as well,

DEQAH: Many who attempted the journey, didn't make it to their destination.

VANESSA: But against the odds Biddy and Hannah survived the journey to Utah.

DEQAH: The dry desert landscape couldn't have been more different than the lush fertile fields of Mississippi. But the white settlement was almost a carbon copy of what Biddy and Hannah had left behind.

KEVIN: You can sort of think of it as these Mississippi Saints, trying to sort of recreate Mississippi in miniature on the Utah Frontier.

VANESSA: But there was no large-scale agriculture, no cotton plant and pick in that territory during the 1840s. So when slaved people did other work, like building houses.

DEQAH: Enslavers also assigned different values to black men and women.

KEVIN: In the American South, and especially the Cotton Belt, male slaves typically sold for more because they were deemed, um, stronger, heartier workers in the fields. In the West, women's labor became comparatively more valuable, partly because women, especially mothers, were less inclined to run away if they were looking after young children like Bidy and like Hannah. One of Robert Smith's own enslaved people escaped a man by the name of Randy, but that just wasn't an option for Bidy or for Hannah. And so I don't think it's really any coincidence that Robert Smith's enslaved people were all either women or children. They were just easier to control on a sparsely policed frontier.

VANESSA: Not long after he declared that Utah was the place for his people to dwell, Brigham Young announced a new Mormon settlement in San Bernardino, California. Five hundred families, including Robert Smith's, signed up.

DEQAH: Bidy Hannah and the other enslaved women and children were forced to pick up their lives once again

KEVIN: All told in this first group of Mormon settlers, there were probably about two dozen African-American slaves with them.

VANESSA: The Union admitted California as a free state in 1850. So Black people technically became free when they stepped onto Californian soil. But, it's hard to know how much Bidy and her fellow African-Americans were aware of that fact.

KEVIN: Authorities there weren't in the practice of policing slaveholders. They effectively turned a blind eye.

DEQAH: Bidy and Hannah remained in California for five years. They tended to livestock, raised children, maintained the household and attended births. There are records of Hannah riding out at all hours to assist births throughout the colony. Bidy was likely doing the same.

MUSIC ENTER

VANESSA: People in the frontier community praised Bidy and Hannah for their midwifing skills.

DEQAH: During this time, Bidy would occasionally go into San Bernardino for supplies there. She met with a few free black people, including an upper middle-class businessman named Robert Owens,

VANESSA: Soon Owens and his family became very invested in the fate of Bidy and her family. Bidy's eldest daughter, Ellen, had caught the fancy of Robert Owen's son, Charles. Here's Jackie Broxton of the Bidy Mason charitable foundation, again.

JACKIE: The pictures I've seen of Ellen as an older woman, she was very handsome. So I can only imagine what she looked like when she was younger. And there weren't a lot of black girls around for this young man to date. So, he would've noticed her, definitely.

VANESSA: In 1855, the ever unsatisfied Smith decided to hit the road again. Hannah was nine months pregnant.

KEVIN: Robert Smith sort of had a falling out with the Mormon authorities in San Bernardino and he attempted to take his white family and his 13 and very soon to be 14 and slaves African-Americans to Texas.

DEQAH: California was a free state. Texas was not. The decision would change American history and Bidy Mason's life.

MUSIC BREAK

The Court Case

VANESSA: New Year's Eve The Smith party has packed up the house and started towards Texas through the Santa Monica Hills.

DEQAH: But somebody had let the authorities know that they were planning to leave the state.

KEVIN: It may have been one of his sort of rivals in the San Bernardino Mormon colony. It may have been one of the African-Americans in Los Angeles at the time, who certainly knew of the slave holding colony in San Bernardino. We just, we don't have the smoking gun, but

what we do know is that when he tried to leave for Texas in late 1855, he was FINALLY apprehended by the sheriffs of Los Angeles and San Bernardino with a writ of Habeas Corpus.

DEQAH: Habeas..what now?

VANESSA: I think that is our cue to finally introduce Sally or Sarah Beringer Gordon, the Law professor at the University of Pennsylvania. Who's the co-director of the Long Road to Freedom project.

SALLY: Habeas Corpus—the phrase—is in what we call Law Latin. Which just means “you have the body or produce the body”. Habeas Corpus literally requires the target of the writ to produce the body. In this case the judge gave the enforcement of the writ to the two sheriffs of Los Angeles and San Bernardino Counties.

DEQAH: The sheriff, possibly with the help of free blacks, separated the women and children from Smith.

VANESSA: He allowed Hannah, who was days away from giving birth to go back to San Bernardino. But he escorted Bidy and her children to the dismal county jail for their protection. There, she and her enslaved compatriots remained for weeks while they waited for the trial against Robert Smith to begin.

DEQAH: The case was a freedom suit in which an enslaved person could assert their claim to freedom — either based on their ancestry — or as in Bidy's case, the time they'd spent in a free state, these lawsuits were pretty common before the civil.

VANESSA: Judges tended to rule in favor of the slave holders and Smith was insisting that his slaves wanted to go with him to Texas.

DEQAH: African-Americans were voiceless in these proceedings. Even the free state of California, didn't consider them full citizens.

SALLY: In 1852, the legislature enacted a statute that prohibited any person of color for being a witness in a case that involved a white litigant.

END SOMBER MUSIC

VANESSA: Sally told us that the judge in this case, Benjamin Hayes, broke the rules.

DEQAH: We don't know why exactly. Maybe us, because Judge Hayes wasn't from California and was fuzzy on the laws there?

VANESSA: Or maybe it was because he wanted to piss off Robert Smith, who hadn't tried to subvert the trial at every step? Smith had even hired someone to threaten the opposing lawyer who quit the case.

DEQAH: Smith even tried to break into the jail.

SALLY: Robert Smith behaved so badly. He lied, he bullied, he threatened. That his credibility was entirely undermined.

VANESSA: Judge Hayes decided he wanted to hear from someone other than Smith.

SALLY: The trial didn't really follow the rules about testimony. Robert Smith called Hannah to the stand.

TENSE MUSIC

DEQAH: Imagine how terrified Hannah must have been at that moment. Robert Smith had ruled over her life.

VANESSA: Now she was walking with her newborn into a courtroom, a space filled with white male bystanders to take the stand and testify.

SALLY: For a woman like Hannah who had spent her entire life hidden behind the enslavement wall of silence, coming to court and taking her place within the witness stand must have been unbelievably frightening and intimidating. Add to that, that she was described as a woman, nearly white. Judge Hayes called one of the daughters all but white. He would not have known that she was a girl of color. So, Hannah had tangled history and a deep, deep fear of settings like this where people like her were often sold, carried away, intimidated, and more.

VANESSA: The lawyers asked questions. Hannah answered so quietly, she was hard to hear.

DEQAH: They asked her repeatedly to speak up. Then they asked her the central question of the case. *Do you want to go to Texas?*

SALLY: Finally and barely audibly Hannah said, yes, I want to go to Texas. The courtroom was shocked, Judge Hayes included! He was shocked but he was not persuaded.

DEQAH: Judge Hayes decided he wanted to hear what Bidy had to say. But instead of summoning her to the witness stand, he invited bitty into his chambers for an interview.

VANESSA: Bidy was 37 years old, she had only ever known slavery. She came from the cotton fields of Georgia and Mississippi. She viscerally understood the potential consequences of turning against your master.

DEQAH: Bidy was also a mother. She deeply feared the consequences of being sent back to a slave state where her children, whom she loved more than anything could be sold abused or worse at a moment's notice. So she wasn't just speaking for herself, but for her children, and for Hannah, and all the other mothers in her predicament.

SALLY: And at some level, Bidy understood that this was their best chance to keep their family together. All of them. Each and everyone that had a chance to speak said they wanted to keep their families together.

VANESSA: When Bidy entered Judge Hayes's chambers and he asked if she wanted to go to Texas, Bidy answered very, very carefully.

SALLY: What she said was, "I've always done what I've been told to do", but at the same time, she was afraid of this trip to Texas. You can just feel the fear of this poor woman struggling to keep her family together. Judge Hayes was clearly moved by Bidy's testimony. And so, the judge recognized that Robert Smith was lying to them and deceiving them. As a result, the defendant, Smith, lost even more credibility in Hayes' eyes.

DEQAH: That's when Robert Smith decided to cut his losses, he skipped town.

SALLY: The case collapsed. It was over. Nobody claimed those 14 people as slaves any longer. So, just per force, they were freed.

CELEBRATORY MUSIC

VANESSA: For the first time, a court of law emancipated 14 people at once.

SALLY: All of a sudden 14 free people of color were in Los Angeles where they had not been before. This was an enormous increase in the free black population.

SALLY: ~~The addition of 14 new people of color was noticed by those pro-slavery Los Angeles residents and not appreciated. Many of them attacked Hayes.~~ The slave colony of San Bernadino by the Latter Day Saints learned immediately that the case had produced in the end (even if inadvertently) freedom for Bidy, Hannah, and their families. And, immediately slaves evaporated from San Bernadino. And a wealthy city built substantially on slave labor collapsed.

VANESSA: If this is where Bidy Mason's story had ended, that would have earned her a place in the history books. By speaking up, by standing up for herself and her children Bidy changed the course of people's lives throughout California.

OUTRO

DEQAH: But Bidy's story is just getting started. Almost as soon as she earned her freedom, Bidy got a job offer.

VANESSA: You see sometime during or soon after the trial, but he met Judge Hayes's brother-in-law. When Dr. John S. Griffin. Remember him?

DEQAH: Yes, the famous LA doctor we discussed at the top of the show. Well, we asked Laura voice and George, the woman who identified Bidy in the UCSF mural, how she imagined that Bidy and Griffin might've met.

LAURA: Here's how it could have worked is that you may know that during the trial, Bidy and the other family Hannah's family were all being kept in jail, to protect them. Right. I'm sure Griffin called the jail if there was a wounded prisoner. Who knows, perhaps Bidy had helped a wounded patient before Griffin got there and he got there and said, well, you don't

need me what happened? It's like, well, that woman over there, she did it. He'd be like, and you are? (laughs)

VANESSA: However they met, Griffin was impressed. Impressed enough to hire Bidy as a nurse. She soon made herself indispensable and became really well known across the city for her skill.

DEQAH: Especially because Bidy treated anyone Black or white, wealthy or poor, incarcerated or free.

LAURA: She was incarcerated in Los Angeles jail, then she went back and treated patients there, she also served individual women in the Los Angeles community as midwives. And I think Bidy was considered one of the best ones in Los Angeles.

DEQAH: While she traveled across the city, offering her medical services to the poor and the rich, Bidy was earning money, and giving back. Here's Professor Sally Gordon again.

SALLY: This is a woman who had been abused, mistreated, bought, sold dragged from one place to another her entire life. And when she was given a choice, she became a giver. She supported people. She educated them. She fed them. And she showed her courage by the way, embraced freedom . and what he built, which was a successful African American community Bidy Mason built Black LA.

DEQAH: that story in part two.

END CREDITS

DEQAH: Thank you for listening to urban roots, brought to you by Urbanist Media. Your hosts are me, Deqah Hussein-Wetzel And Vanessa Quirk

VANESSA: Special, thanks to all those who made this episode possible. Laura Voisin George, Kevin Waite, Jackie Broxton and Sally Beringer Gordon.

DEQAH: Connor Lynch edited, and Andrew Callaway mix this up.

VANESSA: Our music is by Adaam James Levin Aridy. You can check out Adaam's band, Lost Amsterdam at Amsterdamlost.com.

DEQAH: If you like this episode, make sure to subscribe to us on apple, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts.

VANESSA: If you're subscribed, you'll be the first to know when we drop our next episode, which will continue Bidy's story and explain how this bad-ass lady built Black Los Angeles.

DEQAH: to support urban roots and help us tell more little known stories of urban history. You can give us a good rating on apple podcasts or donate to us via Venmo or PayPal at urbanist media

VANESSA: till next time.

DEQAH: till the next time, y'all. Bye.

*****END S02 E01*****