

REMEMBERING BIDDY MASON PART II
BUILDING BLACK L.A.

S02 E03 EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

INTRO: SAVING THE UCSF MURAL

DEQAH: I don't think I'll ever forget the summer of 2020. Despite a pandemic raging from coast to coast, After the murder of George Floyd, Americans of all races and backgrounds were protesting, side by side.

CLIP: What do we want? Justice! When do we want it? Now! What do we want? Justice! When do we want itt? Now!

VANESSA: For what felt like the first time, Americans were also engaging with our racist history - and seeking out stories of Black resilience and triumph.

ENTER LO-FI MUSIC

DEQAH: As a historic preservationist and Somali-American focused on preserving Black history, it was incredible to see the stories of Black Americans — finally getting their due. It was during this time that I discovered a blogpost about a 19th century Black woman named Biddy Mason. Biddy's story blew me away.

VANESSA: The blogpost was written by architectural historian Laura Voisin George.

LAURA: I am an architectural historian, a native of Southern California, and I am also in the PhD program in history at university of California, Santa Barbara.

VANESSA: As Laura was researching a 1930s, WPA mural at the University of California San Francisco's medical school, she discovered that it featured Bidy — working right alongside a well known doctor.

LAURA: There's this woman of color, and she's become a nurse, and she's working next to the leading doctor and surgeon in Los Angeles.

DEQAH: Laura is part of the Long Road to Freedom project, the group of Bidy super-historians we introduced you to last episode, who include professors Sally Gordon and Kevin Waite. When Laura joined in early 2020, she told them about the mural right away.

LAURA: I had mentioned to them, Hey, do you know, there's this mural at UC in San Francisco? And they said, yeah, can you write us a blog about it?

****MUSIC FADES****

VANESSA: in June 2020, Laura called UCSF to ask some questions about these paintings

DEQAH: She found out that the medical hall was slated to be demolished - and with it, the murals.

LAURA: UCSF wanted to demolish UC hall as part of the plan to redevelop their Parnassus campus. And part of that was a new hospital. Um, also realize this is during 2020, and we did have a pandemic on, so arguments about, we need a new hospital were very strong in those days. And I told Sally and Kevin and said, you know, he said, well, Laura, go do something. It's like, okay

****ENTER MUSIC *****

VANESSA: So Laura hooked up with a group of people in San Francisco, and got to work.

LAURA: So we began to put a lot of pressure on the university. We began to do it through letters, to, to newspapers, to editors, to doing radio appearances, to posting handbills around San Francisco, right. Just really raising public awareness

Deqah: They started gaining traction Thanks largely to Bidy.

LAURA: the title of the New York times article in August, was, a black nurse saved lives. Now she may save art. So I think Bidy's being a woman of color at this point, perhaps raised the importance of the issue than it just being art. As each new article, each op-ed came out, it sort of snowballed. San Francisco is coming forward and saying, don't do it. The community is coming up and saying, hell no. And so by about August the University saw the writing on the wall.

****MUSIC ENDS****

VANESSA: While UCSF has publicly committed to preserving the murals. The fight is still not over. Right now. The murals are sitting in storage, waiting for a more permanent home.

DEQAH: Laura has an idea of where the murals should go.

LAURA: This new hospital they're so excited about building, it's going to have a huge atrium waiting room, big enough for, oh, I don't know, 10 panels. So we think that they should be installed in the new building.

VANESSA: And what do you think that would mean for biddies legacy--? If it were reinstated, publicly accessible.

LAURA: I think it would be an amazing message. Right. Especially if we could tell the whole story about how these murals are even here today because of Bidy, and hopefully, um, hyperlinks or QR that we'll send them to where they get lot more information

VANESSA: QR code to our podcast episode.

LAURA: Absolutely, right! Click here!

****MUSIC ENTERS****

VANESSA: The mural tells the story of Bidy the healer, but that's only one part of her legacy in California.

VANESSA: There's Bidy the real estate mogul. Bidy the philanthropist. Bidy, The godmother of Black L.A.

DEQAH: Despite her importance to Californian history, the courthouse where Bidy's freedom trial was held is gone. Her first home, too. Her real estate properties, if still standing, have no markers.

****MUSIC FADES / ENTER CREDITS MUSIC****

In some ways, the fight to preserve Bidy's presence in California has already been lost.

VANESSA: But there are traces of her legacy left — if you know where to look.

CREDITS

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

VANESSA: and I'm Vanessa Quirk, a cities journalist. In our previous episode, we told you about Bidley Mason's remarkable beginnings: how she was born into slavery in Mississippi, earned her freedom in one of the largest freedom suits in American history, and then went on to become one of the most well-respected healers in Los Angeles.

DEQAH: Today, in the second of our two-part series on Bidley, we're telling the final half of her story — how she went from owning nothing at all, to becoming a wealthy entrepreneur who built the foundations of Black Los Angeles.

VANESSA: And we'll tell you how the group of organizers and historians, who we started to introduce you to last episode, are keeping Bidley's memory alive.

BIDDY THE REAL ESTATE MOGUL

VANESSA: When we left Bidley last, she was recently emancipated, working for the famous Dr. Griffin as a nurse and midwife and living with the Owens family in Los Angeles.

*****ENTER MUSIC*****

KEVIN: It wasn't entirely clear to her. I think what freedom would mean in Los Angeles. L.A. In 1856, it was basically a cowtown. There is no downtown, there's just the central Plaza and the homes and the businesses that Abutted it.

DEQAH: That's Kevin Waite, the historian from Durham University who you may remember from our previous episode. Kevin told us that even with the offer of a home and a job, Bidy was pretty brave to stay in L.A. with her daughters.

KEVIN: There were just a couple of black families. The city was overrun by young white men from the slave states. So it was, it was not a hospitable place for a freed woman and her three African American daughters to settle.

VANESSA: But Bidy had good friends, the Owens, for support.

DEQAH: As you might recall from our last episode, Bidy's daughter, Ellen had met and fallen in love with Charles Owens in San Bernardino. Once they were married, the Mason-Owens families were officially joined.

VANESSA: While Ellen found love with the Owens, Bidy found friendship, as well as some business savvy. You see, Robert Owens was a well-respected businessman. And by living with him and talking with him over dinner and whatnot, Bidy learned quite a bit about investing in property.

DEQAH: Her employer, Dr. Griffin was also an investor in real estate and a good friend of Benjamin Wilson, an early mogul of LA real estate.

VANESSA: Who knows how many conversations between these men that Bidy overheard or that she even took part in herself? I mean, it might seem unlikely that an African-American woman in the 1860s would have been having these

kinds of conversations with white landowners, but then again, Bidy was no ordinary woman.

*****MUSIC ENDS*****

KEVIN: She had this uncanny ability to befriend almost everybody she came in contact with. She crossed the color line with remarkable ease. It was unusual, I would say, for an African American formerly enslaved woman to have the allies and the friends that she did. Pio Pico, one of the wealthiest landholders in LA. And in fact, the last Mexican governor of California was one of her sort of allies and patrons. I've studied slavery for quite a while. And I can't think of too many other figures, who were part of such a large, diverse, and unusual collection of people.

DEQAH: And who knows how much Intel Bidy picked up traveling across the city for her medical work?

*****MUSIC STARTS*****

VANESSA: After 10 years of working as a healer, saving up her money, friends paying attention to the real estate around her, Bidy was ready.

KEVIN: She bought her first property in 1866, land was still relatively cheap, and she came to own some properties in what's really now the heart of downtown Los Angeles.

DEQAH: Once she had bought her first property, she leveraged it to make money so she could buy more.

KEVIN: She was very entrepreneurial. She built store rooms and residential properties on her real estate, and then she used the rents from those properties to sort of seed other investments. She was bringing in money from her work as a nurse, she was bringing in money from the rents that she charged her tenants, and she may have even been making some money from commercial enterprises. For a woman who, who was never taught to read and write, I think remarkable doesn't begin to sort of capture it

VANESSA: Upenn Law professor Sally Barringer Gordon agrees.

****FADE OUT MUSIC****

SALLY: In the 19th century, Women had limited legal rights, especially married women. In many jurisdictions, married women could not own property separately from their husbands. And Bidy, who never married after she was emancipated, became a significant property owner and property holder.

DEQAH: Jackie Broxton of the Bidy Mason charitable foundation thinks that Bidy's desire to acquire property may be part of the reason she never married as a free woman.

JACKIE: You know, a lot of white women have asked me, well, did Bidy ever get married? Did she find true love? I said, I don't think she was looking for it. You know, she found comfort in being able to take care of herself and her children and provide a foundation for her family

BIDDY THE FOUNDER OF FAME CHURCH

VANESSA: Biddy didn't believe in keeping her wealth just within her family.

One of the first things she did when she purchased— her own home was to open it up to LA's black community for prayer meetings.

****ENTER MUSIC****

JACKIE: And then that graduated into a religious service, and from there, they actually later got a physical structure.

DEQAH: Out of Biddy's living room. The first African-American Methodist Episcopal congregation or FAME church was born. It's the oldest African American house of worship still operating in Los Angeles.

Vanessa: FAME now lives in the historic west Adams Heights, sugar hill neighborhood, in an impressive mid-century building designed by the famous African American Architect, Paul Revere Williams.

Deqah: Just a short walk away from the church is a small, unassuming bungalow that houses The Biddy Mason charitable foundation, which spun out of the church in 2013. I asked two friends of mine who live in LA, Jane and Adrian, to meet Jackie Broxton It's executive director, there.

****MUSIC FADES****

JANE: Wow, this place is beautiful

ADRIAN: Oh wow

Jackie: Thank you. Hi, how are you?

DEQAH: For years, Jackie and her foundation colleagues worked out of their garages. This is the first time they've had a headquarters of their own.

VANESSA: Jackie and her team are decorating the space now with unique pieces of furniture, art by people of color, as well as artifacts that speak to Bidy's story.

JACKIE: We want to educate the community to Bidy Mason's legacy, because a lot of people who've lived here all their life, they know nothing about her.

DEQAH: Jackie showed JANE and ADRIAN some treasured photographs over the living room fireplace.

JACKIE: And this is Bidy and these are her daughters, her three daughters .

VANESSA: There's an old photograph of the route that Bidy walked from salt lake city to San Bernardino.

DEQAH: A photograph of Judge Benjamin Hayes,.

JACKIE: Who granted her her freedom along with the document itself.

VANESSA: A copy of the deed to the first piece of property Bidy purchased.

Deqah: they even have a reproduction of the UCSF mural hanging on a wall

JACKIE: This is Bidy Mason. This is Dr. Griffin and they're treating a malaria patient.

VANESSA: But the Foundation doesn't just keep Bidy's legacy alive with artifacts; it also does it through its initiatives supporting foster youth.

JACKIE: This building will be a place where foster youth can come and get services and support.

DEQAH: It will also soon provide transitional housing for people aging out of foster care.

JACKIE: Most slaves were orphans, so she would relate to what we call foster kids, what we used to call orphans.

VANESSA: The roots of the foundation's philanthropic work can be directly traced to FAME, to those first meetings in Biddy Mason's living room. So we asked Jackie to tell us more about FAME's start.

JACKIE: Now there were eight other men who were the original trustees along with her. They were all former slaves. Most of them were barbers or laborers, or teamsters.

DEQAH: Louis Green was one of those great men.

JACKIE: Louis Green sued the city to be able to vote. And once he got the right to vote, then the other seven men registered to vote.

VANESSA: All of them had to navigate systems that tried to deny them power, wealth, and even basic security and safety.

JACKIE: There was so much racial prejudice in, in the early Los Angeles community. I think they probably felt like they needed to band together, to protect themselves.

ENTER SAD MUSIC

Deqah: This feeling likely heightened in the wake of the Chinese Massacre of 1871.

VANESSA: By some accounts this massacre was one of the largest mass lynchings in American history.

DEQAH: It all started because of a false rumor that Chinese immigrants were killing whites. Hundreds of white and hispanic men attacked the city's Chinatown.

VANESSA: 19 people were killed. The dead represented more than 10 percent of the Chinese people in Los Angeles.

DEQAH: Jackie thinks events like these made Bidy and her compatriots realize that they needed a safe place to meet.

Jackie: There weren't a lot of places for black people to go. They needed the shelter of the church, emotionally.

DEQAH: Bidy and these other men start first AME at just the right time — just before LA's black population explodes.

****END MUSIC****

VANESSA: Here's Kevin Waite again.

KEVIN: Nobody predicted that LA would become the second biggest city in the country, in the mid 19th century, it just it wasn't on that trajectory. Really, it was in the 1880s that that began to all change.

****RAILROAD FX START****

That's when, LA had two major railroad lines. And because of the, sort of the rapid travel and the cheap fares that those railroads offered, um, you got an influx of immigrants in 1880 itself, there were just about a hundred black residents in

the city. Um, but by 1890 that had jumped to about 1200. And this is when black LA itself begins to take shape. And it's really built around First African Methodist church. This church was, in a lot of ways, the nexus of black spiritual and political and social life. I mean the black church was so important to freed communities all over the country. And that wasn't any exception in LA. So again, it's, it's Bidley's fingerprints that are all over the most important developments in the city's early history.

VANESSA: By the late 19th century, African Americans owned more real estate in LA than anywhere else in the country. Thanks in huge part to Bidley's precedent.

BIDDY THE PHILANTHROPIST

****ENTER MUSIC****

DEQAH: As Bidley's chosen home was transforming from frontier backwater to bustling city, Bidley's wealth was growing.

VANESSA: According to professor Sally Gordon, throughout her life as Betty earned wealth, she put it back into her community.

SALLY: Bidley built orphanages, she built schools. She opened food kitchens. She welcomed new people of color arriving in Los Angeles. She provided them with a place to stay. She gave them jobs. She built success for others in addition to her own success.

KEVIN: And she tended to the sick and to the poor. She fed the victims of the flood of 1884, which left about a third of L.A. homeless. She was a tireless philanthropist.

SALLY: Biddy Mason left a sizable estate. It's been estimated at \$300,000 in 1891, which translates into more than eight and a half million dollars today. All that despite having given away so much.

DEQAH: When Biddy died at the age of 73, her family couldn't hold her funeral at FAME church — it just wasn't big enough to hold all the people who wanted to pay their respects.

KEVIN: She died a very wealthy woman. A revered figure, a notable philanthropist, and one of the real founders of the African American community in Los Angeles.

****MUSIC BEAT****

VANESSA: After Biddy's death, her grandson, the son of Ellen Mason and Charles Owens, took over the family business.

KEVIN: She gifted him a large portion of her fortune in her will when she died in 1891, and he built upon that wealth by erecting commercial properties on the parcels of land that Biddy herself gave to him.

****ENTER MUSIC****

KEVIN: Probably the most prominent example was the Owens block, which was one of the more fashionable commercial blocks in the city. And, it made Robert

Owens, probably the richest African American west of Chicago. And this is, this is really the sort of beginning of the Owens Mason dynasty,

*****MUSIC ENDS*****

KEVIN: Which was for the next, 60, 70 years far and away the most influential and wealthy African American family in Southern California.

DEQAH: Today, however, none of Bidy's descendants own the land she or her grandson developed.

VANESSA: Kevin, Sally, Jackie and others in the Long Road to Freedom project are trying to piece together where all her properties are located.

JACKIE: Our hope is that we'll be able to put a commemorative plaque on each place that she actually owned, even if it's a parking lot now.

DEQAH: However, the location of Bidy Mason's first property on Spring Street IS known. Jackie told us that, back in 1988, FAME members and city officials decided to build a park there in her honor.

VANESSA: When Jane & Adrian went to visit Jackie Broxton, She told them they HAD to check it out. So, they got back in their car and drove downtown.

GOOGLE MAPS: You've arrived.

ADRIAN: Okaaaayy...

JANE: I really don't see. It's just buildings.

ADRIAN: And it's on this side of the street?

JANE: It says we're here

DEQAH: Turns out the Bidy Mason Memorial park is hidden, sandwiched between two high rises.

ADRIAN: OK, this is not it.

JANE: Are you sure?

ADRIAN: Yeah.

JANE: I just, I'm not seeing any way to get—oh, maybe it's down here. It's gotta be down here. Okay.

VANESSA: Once you discern the entrance, you leave the city behind and enter into this calm, open concrete Plaza with leafy camphor and jacaranda trees.

JANE: Is this really cool, (laughs) You would have known this was here.

VANESSA: In the back of the Plaza, there's a long dark concrete wall. Etched into it are pictures and words that tell the story of Bidy's life.

DEQAH: But as Jane and Adrian found out, even though the park is in one of the most popular blocks in L.A., it's easy to walk right past.

JANE: It's not something that people walking through downtown exploring are gonna see. I mean, we never saw this, and we've eaten at the restaurant that's right next door. We probably walked past it hundreds of times and never seen it. It's literally hidden. So yeah, clearly she was prominent and important, but like so many other black Americans, her accomplishments and her memorial's hidden.

VANESSA: Bidy Mason's descendants would like to rename Spring Street to Bidy Mason Street. Because right now, You can walk around all of downtown Los Angeles and not see a trace of Bidy at all.

DEQAH:When we asked Kevin Waite and Laura Voisin George where they most see the legacy of Biddy today, they both suggested we don't look to the physical realm at all. BUT TO the organizations - like FAME Church.

KEVIN : FAME church remains really a pillar of the LA Black community, um, just as it has been since- 1872 when Biddy co-founded it. The members of FAME church are very consciously living Biddy's legacy.

****ENTER MUSIC****

LAURA: I feel Biddy's presence most, in the people that work in her legacy, like Jackie Broxton. And I see you know, people they have worked with and the difference Jackie's made in their lives. I'm like, yeah, I could feel Biddy's legacy in that.

VANESSA: They see Biddy's legacy in People like Jackie, who every day try to make life better for foster youth.

DEQAH: And People like Sky Lea Ross

KEEPING BIDDY'S LEGACY ALIVE

VANESSA: Jackie connected us with Sky because she exemplifies what Biddy Mason's legacy is all about.

****MUSIC PLAYS OUT****

SKY: My name is Sky Lea Ross. I am a doctoral candidate, marriage and family therapist, and trauma therapist. Um, I'm a former foster youth, which is what got

me connected with the Bidy Mason foundation. I received one of their scholarships, and so I've been involved with the organization ever since.

DEQAH: Bidy was separated from her parents as a child. Sky similarly had to make her way in life without caring parents to guide her.

SKY: I wasn't allowed to go anywhere. I didn't know what college was.

VANESSA: After enduring an abusive childhood, Sky entered the foster care system. As a teen, school was her refuge. Because of her academic excellence, she was chosen for a special program that sends high school students to UCLA for a summer of intense learning.

SKY: but that introduced me to what higher learning was. And that gave me access to that. I was like, oh wow, this is something people do.

DEQAH: So as a senior she applied, and got into, UCLA. Sky started seeking scholarships - including one from the Bidy Mason Charitable Foundation for foster youth. That was the first time she had heard the name Bidy Mason.

SKY: I did not learn about her when I was in high school or when I was taking classes that talk about black history, she was never mentioned. And to know that she was right in my backyard to know that she was in Los Angeles that would have been so inspiring to know that there was a public figure here, on this soil, on this ground who did so many breakthroughs.

VANESSA: Once at UCLA, Skye became a Gender Studies major.

SKY: And I loved that so much because it gives you the tools to articulate the struggles that you live on a daily basis. The things that we all go through, but we

don't necessarily know how to talk about them. The less that we know, the less power we have. And so I think education is really a solution to that.

DEQAH: Biddy never learned to write, but believed so strongly in the power of education that she created schools for African-American children. Skye is now pursuing her doctorate.

SKY: I am doing research specifically on former foster youth and BIPOC and LGBTQ community looking at how interpersonal trauma child maltreatment translates into health conditions over time, looking at the outcomes as well as resilience and coping skills.

DEQAH: Sky works as a therapist for an organization called Peace Over Violence that aids survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault. Sky helps these people work through the kinds of traumas that Biddy and her enslaved friends had to suffer constantly

VANESSA: Sky, like Biddy, has chosen a career that allows her to give back to her community and support others.

****MUSIC STARTS****

SKY: To see how resilient Biddy Mason really was and to see how much she accomplished and how much she gave to her community. When I take my photos, my professional photos, with my cap and gown and everything I'm going to post, I am my ancestor's wildest dreams and my oppressors' worst nightmare. Yeah, I do think a lot about our ancestors and I think about all of the barriers that they had, I think about how much they had to overcome, and that is very inspiring

and that does push me to do even better and to hope that I can pave the way for the future generations. I hope that if my ancestors inspired me and I have heroes that came before me, I hope to be a hero for others.

VANESSA: Over 130 years after Bidy's death, she is still a hero, showing Sky, Jackie, and everyone touched by her story how to move forward.

****MUSIC ENDS CREDIT MUSIC STARTS****

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 Barringer Gordon

DEQAH: Thanks also to my friends, Jane Slater and Adrian Stucker. Connor Lynch edited, and Andrew Callaway mixed this episode.

VANESSA: Our music is by Adaam James Levin. You can check out Dom's band last Amsterdam at Amsterdam lost dot com.

DEQAH: If you like this episode, make sure to subscribe to us wherever you get your podcasts. To support urban roots and help us tell more little known stories of urban history. PLEASE give us a good rating on apple podcasts OR donate to us via Patreon at Urban Roots podcast.

VANESSA: Till next time.

DEQAH: Till the next time.

Bye y'all.