

A Cultural Diversity Initiative: The California African American Heritage Trail

In my capacities as Chief Curator at the African American Museum and Library at Oakland, Commissioner for Cultural History on the State Historical Resources Commission, and co-chair of the Commission's Cultural Diversity Committee, I have given a lot of thought to an initiative for the creation of a statewide California African American Heritage Trail. My determination to do so was buoyed by the recent success of a similar endeavor in San Francisco, spearheaded by historian John Templeton. The documented evidence presented by Templeton, the soundness of his argument, and his perseverance, helped to convince the San Francisco Board of Supervisors to recognize and endorse the San Francisco African American Freedom Trail. Also influencing the Board's decision may have been the release of San Francisco Heritage's policy paper, *Sustaining San Francisco's Living History: Strategies for Conserving Heritage Assets* which drew from case studies of conservation and preservation initiatives around the country, and presented local, incentive-based solutions to protect cultural heritage assets.

The San Francisco African American Freedom Trail extends from Fort Mason to Visitation Valley and includes 400 points of interest that highlight the historic and cultural contributions of African Americans to San Francisco. The trail is the first of its kind in the west, and has garnered positive attention from residents and visitors alike.

Anything that happens in San Francisco always attracts a lot of attention, but the history of the African American community in Oakland is no less compelling. To that end I am proposing to begin work on the establishment of a California African American Heritage Trail in my own backyard and throughout the State. The 400 points of interest identified by Templeton in San Francisco sets an impressive example, but it is important to realize that there are a significant number of properties and locations that were either owned by African Americans or were associated with the development of the African American community in the east Bay Area and other regions, as well.

Recent years have seen the African American populations of San Francisco and Oakland rapidly shrinking, which makes identification and preservation of sites related to those populations' history even more imperative. Even when African American citizenry was at its peak, the record of their longevity and activities in these cities and other California towns was obscured. A recent article in the San Francisco Chronicle told the story of the town of Coloma: birthplace of the Gold Rush, and by 1849, home to 10,000 people. The article's author writes about the James Marshall Monument that stands on a hilltop overlooking the town, and the Monroe Ridge Trail, noting that the trail "ends at the Monroe Orchard which allowed the Monroe family to eventually own most of Coloma by selling their abundance of fruit and produce to hungry miners in the region."¹ However, what the writer failed to mention is that the Monroe family—descendants of Peter and Nancy Gooch—were African Americans.



Monroe family, 1870. Nancy Gooch seated at right. (Courtesy of the California State Library)

¹ See *the Birthplace of the Gold Rush*, Jill K. Robinson, San Francisco Chronicle, March 16, 2016.

The contributions of these pioneers and others like them are too significant to be ignored or forgotten. It is difficult to appreciate a group of people, or what they have accomplished when you know nothing about them, or what you do know is culturally biased. How much richer would be our understanding of a town such as Coloma if we knew that by 1853 there were at least two thriving Black-owned barbershops, and by the late 1850s, 20% of the town's African American residents were involved in similar commercial activities.²

Sustainable Preservation: California's Statewide Historic Preservation Plan 2013-2017 specifically addresses the issue of cultural diversity, stating that "when everyone has the opportunity to be heard, and recognized for their contributions to the American experience, there is a greater potential for a true consensus for preservation." Furthermore, Goal Four of the plan states that to foster a preservation ethic it is necessary to "cultivate a sense of stewardship for historical and cultural resources, and the belief that these resources, and the stories they can tell, enrich our lives and communities." Among the objectives listed to help achieve the goal is Objective C: "Develop and promote heritage tourism as a vehicle for economic development."³ The National Trust for Historic Preservation defines heritage tourism as, "traveling to experience the place and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past."⁴ Establishing a California African American Heritage Trail clearly answers the intent of such goals and objectives by expanding and enriching the narrative of California for all who seek to better understand our state's history.

Here is where you can help. Knowing that a shared public understanding of the value of California's historic and cultural resources helps to better protect those resources, I am reaching out to local, regional and statewide residents and organizations to join me in this heritage trail initiative. I invite any who are interested to help form committees to set goals for the California African American Heritage Trail, adapt a model, develop themes, and identify the most compelling stories about their region or county. I welcome your thoughts, comments, and participation! Please feel free to contact me at (510) 637-0197, or rmoss@oaklandlibrary.org. I look forward to hearing from you.

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² Rudolph M. Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, Yale University Press, 1977, pp.111-114.

³ All quotes drawn from *Sustainable Preservation: California's Statewide Historic Preservation Plan 2013-2017*, California Office of Historic Preservation, California State Parks, 2013, 19-20, 28.

⁴ Trust for National Historic Preservation, www.preservationnation.org.