

Biddy Mason

She escaped slavery — and became a generous millionaire

1818 - 1891

Entrepreneur

Pioneer

Health care provider

Real estate investor

Philanthropist

American Hero



Early Life: A Challenging Start

Biddy Mason was born into slavery in 1818 and spent her youth in Mississippi, where she became a skilled healer and **midwife** (someone who helps women during childbirth).

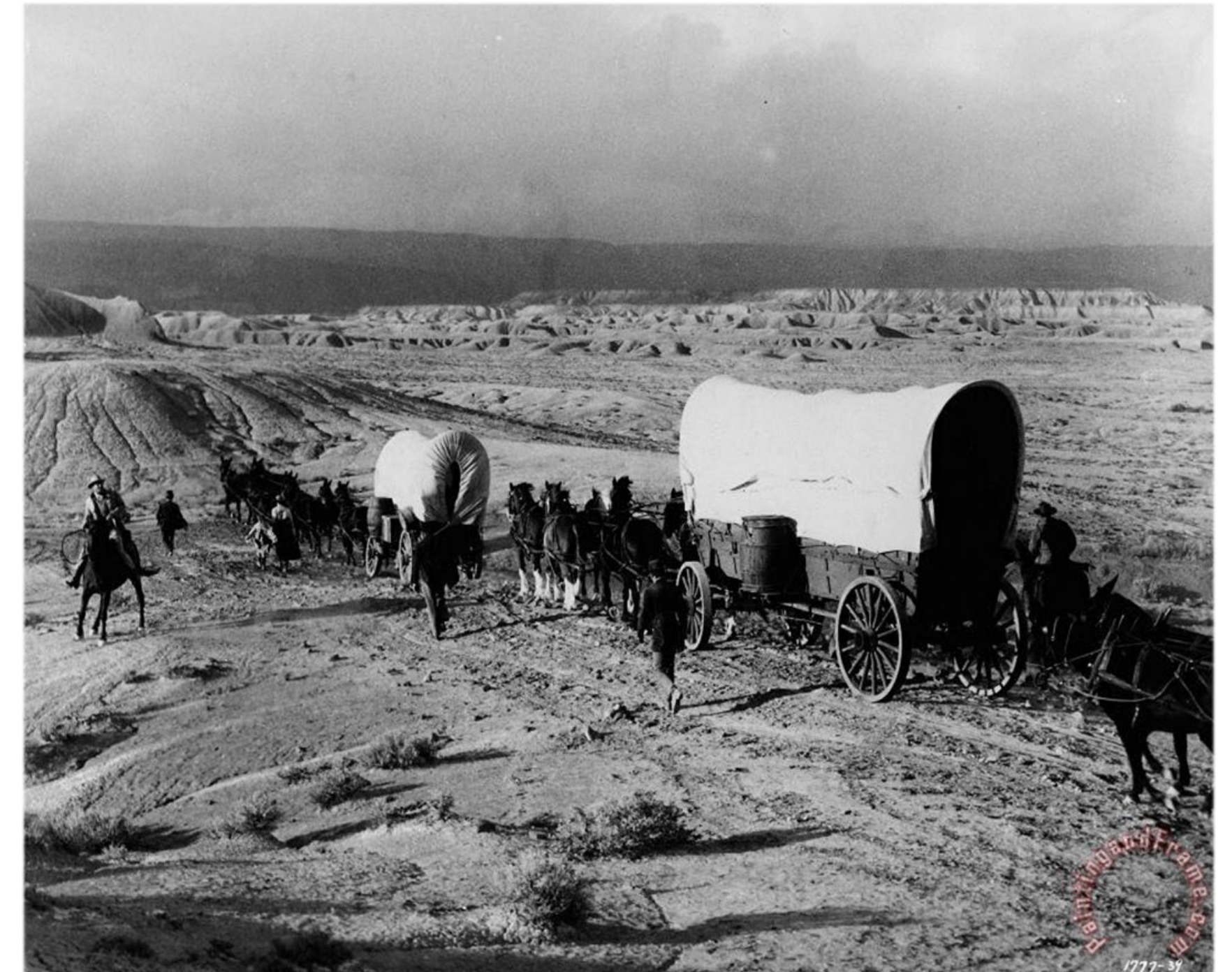
She learned from other enslaved women how to treat illness with traditional African and Caribbean herbal medicine, and how to deliver babies.

Biddy Mason learned her healing skills from her community. What are some things you learned from people around you?

Westward Journey

In the 1840s her enslaver, Robert Smith, took his family and slaves westward to join his fellow Mormons in Utah. She walked the entire way (1,700 miles) behind a **wagon train**, which was how many **pioneers** travelled west.

She also set up and broke down the camp, cared for her own children, cooked meals, and worked as a midwife.



A wagon train trip could take about five months. What is the longest trip you've ever taken? What did you use to travel?

California

Then, Smith moved on to California, even though it had recently entered the Union as a free state.

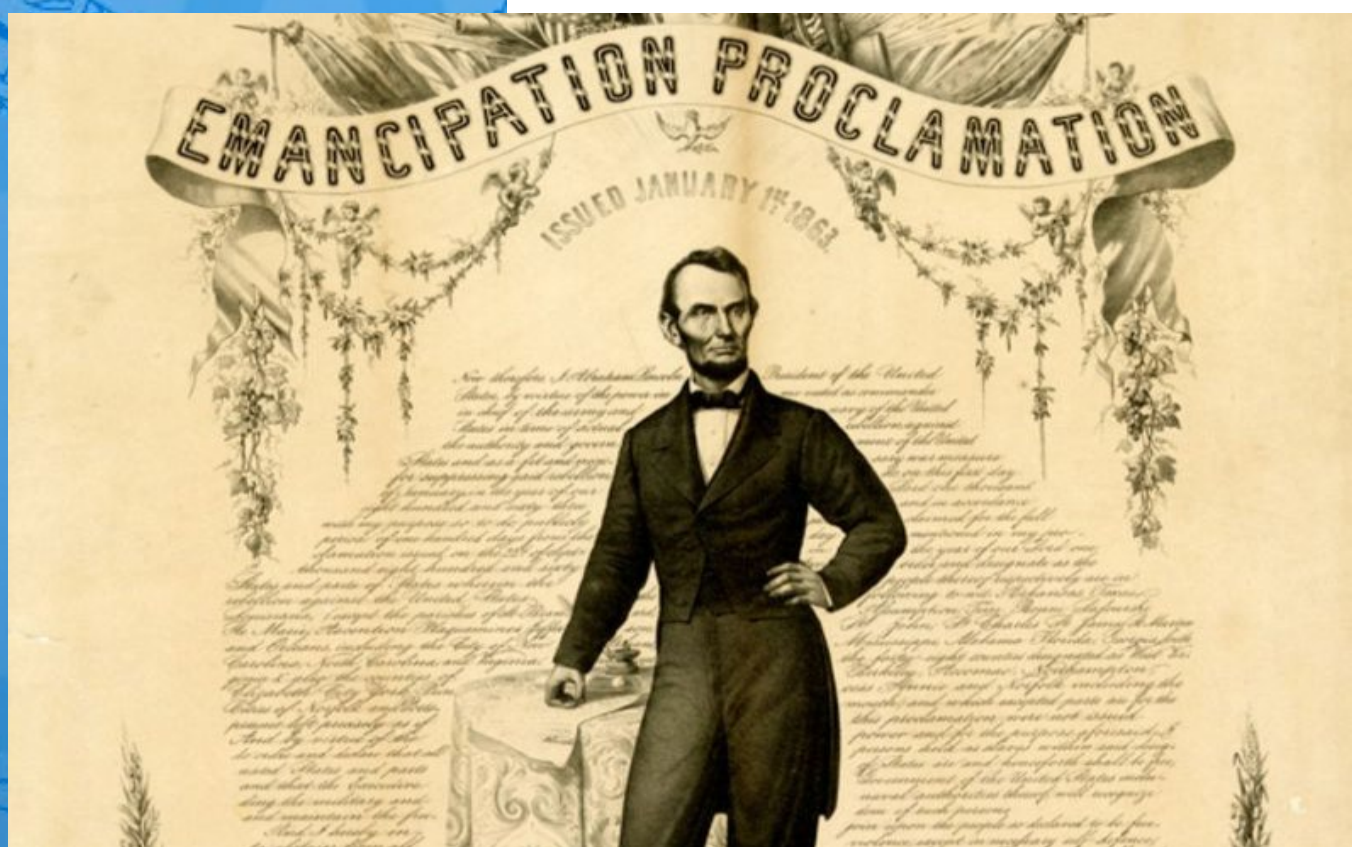
He took Biddy and her children with him. Along the way, she met a free black couple, who urged her to **sue** for freedom once she reached California.



Freedom!

When Smith realized Mason could sue for freedom, he tried to take her to Texas (a slave state), but the sheriff **intervened** in her favor.

In 1856, she won her freedom in court and Robert Smith was ordered to pay her court costs.



In 1863, President Lincoln declared all slaves in regions “in rebellion against the United States,” i.e. the Confederacy, “forever free” in what became known as the **Emancipation Proclamation**. But slavery was only outlawed nationwide with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865.

Working and investing

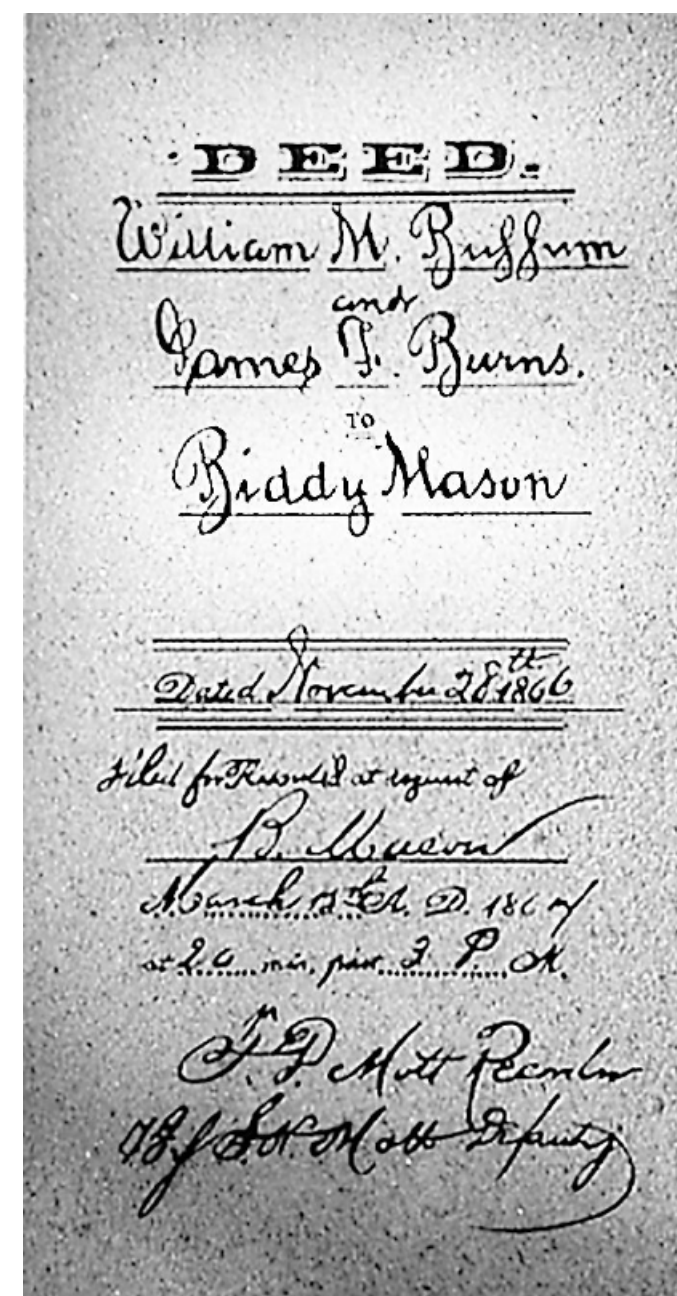
As a free woman, Biddy earned her living as a midwife and nurse. She earned a decent **wage** and carefully saved her money.



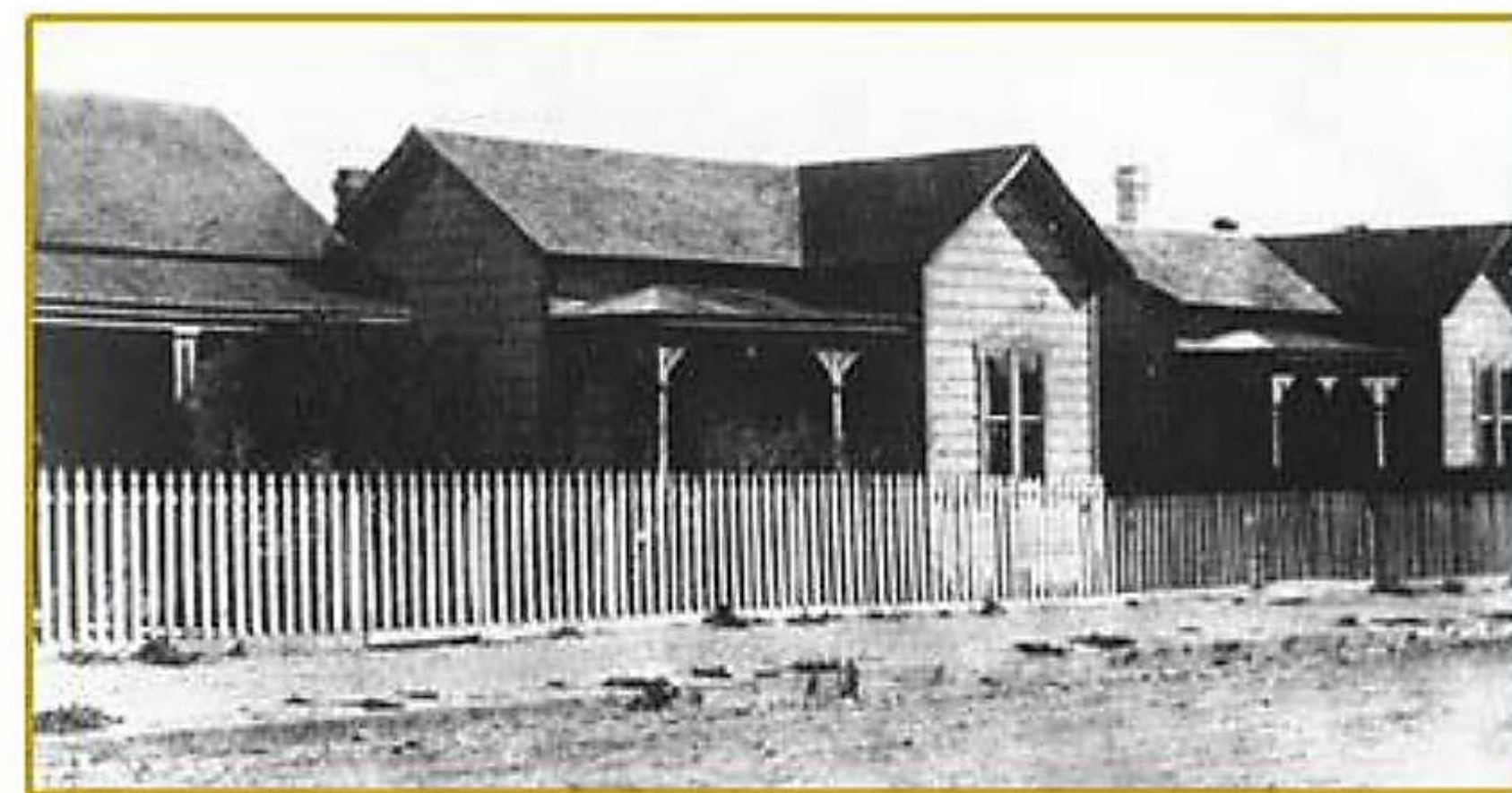
Biddy Mason used her skills to earn money. What are some ways even young people can earn money?

Wise investment choices

Using her savings, Biddy purchased land in Los Angeles, which was a smart move, as California was growing rapidly. She later sold her land at a **profit**. She **reinvested** her profit, and her **real estate** holdings grew.



Biddy Mason's Home



Biddy Mason's residence, shown in this photo from the 1870s, was on First Street not far from the Owens home.

Courtesy of the UCLA Special Collections

A wealthy and generous woman

Biddy used her fortune to benefit her neighbors of all races. She was very **generous** to those in need.

She donated money to many charities, fed and sheltered the poor, and visited prisoners.

She donated to local churches attended by both blacks and whites.

She founded a traveler's aid society. She founded an elementary school for black children.



A generous spirit

“If you hold your hand closed, nothing good can come in.

The open hand is blessed, for it gives in **abundance**, even as it receives.”

— Biddy Mason



How does it feel when you help other people? Do you need to be rich to be generous?

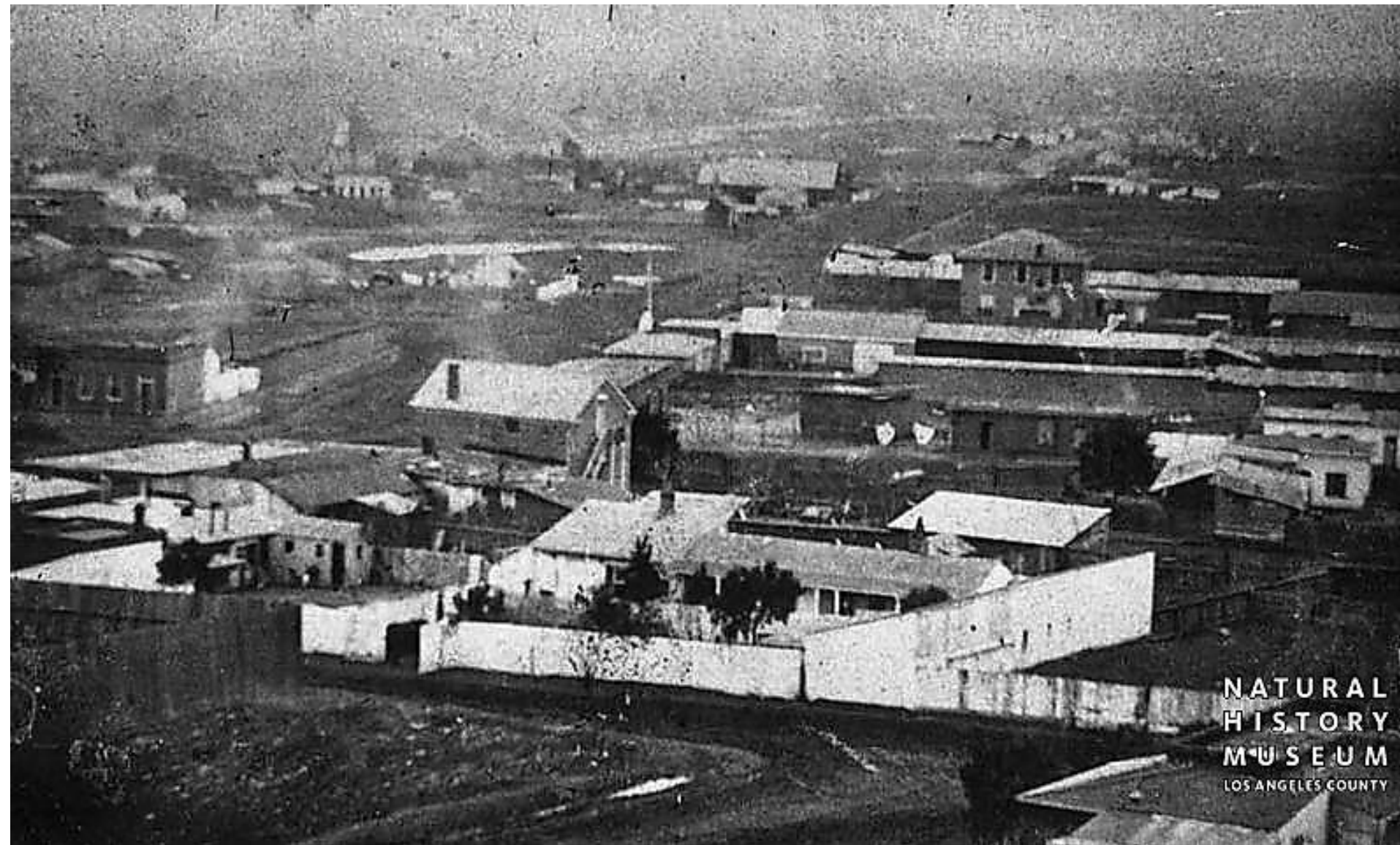
Accomplishments

Despite her humble beginnings, Biddy Mason became one of the most well-known citizens and most important landowners in Los Angeles during the 1850s and 1860s.

A generous **philanthropist**, she founded a school, an orphanage, and the Los Angeles First African Methodist Episcopal (F.A.M.E.) Church.



Accomplishments



Los Angeles in the 1860's

During a Los Angeles **smallpox epidemic**, despite the risk of getting sick, Biddy Mason used her knowledge of herbal remedies to care for the suffering.

When floods hit the region, she told local merchants to provide for the victims' needs (regardless of color or social status), and she covered the costs.

Why do you think these causes were important to her?

An important legacy

By the time of her death in 1891, Biddy had learned to speak **fluent** Spanish, dined with the Los Angeles Mayor, and amassed a fortune of \$300,000—the equivalent of about \$8 million today.

By the 1870s, Biddy was the richest African American woman west of the Mississippi, and one of Los Angeles' major commercial real estate holders.



Memorializing a remarkable life

Today, there is a park on the site of her home with a large monument recounting the story of her life.



What causes would you like to support?

If you had enough money to give some away, where would you like to donate?

What causes are important to you?

What kinds of people would you like to help in your life?

Are there ways you can support important causes, even if you have no money to give?



Vocabulary

midwife

pioneer

wagon train

sue

intervene

Emancipation Proclamation

wage

real estate

reinvest

profit

generous

smallpox

epidemic

fluent

philanthropist

abundance



Elizabeth Colomba, *Biddy Mason*, 2006,
collection of Mattie McFadden-Lawson and
Ambassador Michael A. Lawson (ret.), © 2021
Elizabeth Colomba/Artists Rights Society (ARS),
NY, photo courtesy of the artist to LACMA.



WOODSON
CENTER

BLACK *History* *and* EXCELLENCE