

# “MASTER OF CEREMONIES”: THE WORLD OF PETER BIGGS IN CIVIL WAR–ERA LOS ANGELES

KENDRA FIELD AND DANIEL LYNCH

*This article reconstructs the life and times of Peter Biggs, a free African American man in 1850s and 1860s Los Angeles, revealing the social and economic niche that he fashioned between the U.S.-Mexican War and the Civil War. Biggs’s little-known biography illuminates a forgotten moment in the temporal and spatial history of American racial construction.*

In April 1865, a group of pro-Confederate Angelenos was arrested for celebrating Abraham Lincoln’s assassination and transported to the local Union headquarters at Drum Barracks. One man stood out from the group. Identified in newspaper accounts as “Peter Biggs, a negro,” the free African American barber was, according to one memoir, placed in the charge of six Union cavalrymen and “made to foot it” some twenty miles south to Drum Barracks, with “an iron chain and ball attached to his ankle.” The ball and chain highlighted this former slave’s “uncertain position” in Civil War Los Angeles, and yet, Biggs appeared “un-fazed” to passers-by. Having already proclaimed his “ardent attachment to the cause of Secession,” Biggs gave “three cheers for Jeff Davis” when meeting acquaintances along the road.<sup>1</sup> How might historians understand the actions of this former slave and free black barber in Civil War Los Angeles?

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<sup>1</sup>“Strange Proceedings,” *Wilmington (CA) Journal*, 29 April 1865 and Harris Newmark, *Sixty Years in Southern California: 1853–1913* (1916; repr., Los Angeles, 1970), 330.

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This article reconstructs the life and times of Biggs, a man who experienced a remarkable transition from slavery to freedom a decade before the outbreak of the Civil War. Born enslaved in Virginia around 1820, Biggs lived and labored in Los Angeles between the late 1840s and his murder in 1869. As one of only twelve people in Los Angeles marked “Black” on the 1850 U.S. Census, he was also the only one listed with a surname and living in a home of his own. Over the course of two decades in California, Biggs held numerous positions and identities—from enslaved soldier of the U.S.-Mexican War to free African American barber, from “Don Pedro,” the “Master of Ceremonies,” to “the Black Democrat.” Like most other ex-slaves throughout the antebellum United States, Biggs’s precarious experience of freedom was highly contingent upon kinship connections and social and economic networks. But Biggs’s experience was also shaped by geography—the collision of South and West that characterized Civil War-era Los Angeles.<sup>2</sup>

This article suggests that Biggs’s economic and political capacity in slavery and freedom in the West depended upon his ability to mobilize his longstanding connection to and understanding of proslavery Southerners and the U.S. South. By referring to himself as “the Black Democrat” in newspaper ads, for instance, Biggs flaunted Southern loyalties and drew white Southerners into his shop. Notwithstanding public expressions and actions such as these, it is impossible to narrate the interiority of Biggs’s life and worldview. Indeed, as Darlene Clark Hine has written of the post-emancipation era, a “culture of dissemblance” had emerged among many African Americans that “created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors.” Biggs fashioned a unique social and economic niche for himself in Los Angeles between the U.S.-Mexican War and the Civil War, and he confronted telling racial and political conundrums in the aftermath of general emancipation. Biggs’s little-known biography illuminates a forgotten moment in the temporal and spatial history of American racial construction; his spectacular transition from slavery to freedom reveals an ephemeral racial cartography marked by the antebellum paradox of the “free slave” and by what Tiya Miles has called “the long arm of the South.” Miles has noted, “Considering

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<sup>2</sup>Horace Bell, *Reminiscences of a Ranger, Or Early Times in Southern California* (Los Angeles, 1927), 36–9. “Like identities,” historian Robin Kelley has noted, “identifications are always contingent, transitory, and perhaps more than anything, strategic.” Kelley, “How the West Was One: The African Diaspora and the Re-Mapping of U.S. History,” in Thomas Bender, *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 136. In the face of pervasive violence, numerous African Americans made strategic use of the relative malleability of racial categories in the western borderlands and Spanish-speaking world. See, for instance, Billy Higgins, *A Stranger and a Sojourner: Peter Caulder, Free Black Frontiersman in Antebellum Arkansas* (Fayetteville, AR, 2004) and Tiya Miles, “‘His Kingdom for a Kiss’: Indians and Intimacy in the Narrative of John Marrant,” in Ann Laura Stoler, ed., *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History* (Durham, 2006), 163–88. For Mexico and Latin America, see Karl Jacoby, *The Strange Career of William Ellis: The Texas Slave Who Became a Millionaire* (New York, 2016) and Zephyr L. Frank, *Dutra’s World: Wealth and Family in Nineteenth-Century Rio de Janeiro* (Albuquerque, 2004).

tropes of southern history while studying blacks in western history helps us to hold firmly in mind the abiding power of racialized social formations. As a place distinct but not fully apart from the regions that touch it, the West calls us to imagine layered possibilities for people of the past." Peter Biggs's experiences in nineteenth-century Los Angeles reflect such "layered possibilities."<sup>3</sup>

Biggs was the subject of writings by William Tecumseh Sherman as well as three prominent diarists and memoirists of early Southern California. Newspapers verify his arrest for celebrating Lincoln's assassination; these same papers contain the advertisements for his business. Biggs was also party to a court martial, two civil cases, and one murder trial. Yet, while scholars of nineteenth-century California and the black West have made regular note of Biggs's presence, none have mined the wealth of articles, court records, and other archival sources available on his life.<sup>4</sup> We draw upon previously untapped sources as well as better-known published works, such as the memoirs of lawyer, lawman, and journalist Horace Bell. Lanier Bartlett, a Hollywood screenwriter who edited Bell's second memoir, published in 1930, described him as an "iconoclast" and "skilled caricaturist," and Bell's stories about Biggs were likely sensationalized for the sake of satire. The memoirs are nevertheless invaluable sources. Kevin Starr has argued that they stand alongside the writings of Benjamin Hayes, who also wrote about Biggs, "like cactus plants in the desert of early expression in the Southland." And John Mack Faragher has recently suggested that scholars undertake a "serious reading" of Bell, whom he considers an important early "debunker" of boosterish narratives of Los Angeles history.<sup>5</sup>

How might one explain Peter Biggs's relative absence from the twentieth-century historiography of the black West? In 1957 Walter Prescott Webb argued that the West was defined by its scarcity of "water, timber, cities, industry and Negroes." In the subsequent two decades, pioneering scholars such as Kenneth Wiggins Porter and W. Sherman Savage took great strides to prove this statement incorrect, creating what Lawrence B. de Graaf and others later termed a "recognition school" that

<sup>3</sup>"Barber Shop and Bath House," *Los Angeles Weekly Republican*, 14 December 1867; Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," *Signs* 14, no. 4 (1989): 912; and Tiya Miles, "The Long Arm of the South?," *Western Historical Quarterly* 43 (Autumn 2012): 274–81.

<sup>4</sup>For the most significant treatments of Biggs, see Rudolph M. Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California* (1977; repr., New Haven, 1995), 36, 118–21 and W. Sherman Savage, "Know Your History: Peter Biggs," box 2, W. Sherman Savage Collection, Huntington Library, San Marino, CA. See also Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528–1990* (New York, 1998), 90.

<sup>5</sup>Lanier Bartlett, introduction to *On the Old West Coast: Being Further Reminiscences of a Ranger*, by Horace Bell, ed. Lanier Bartlett (New York, 1930), 14; John Mack Faragher, "Is There a Los Angeles School of Western History? Landscape, Demography, and Institutional Collaborations: A Roundtable Discussion" (roundtable discussion at the Western History Association Conference, Newport Beach, CA, 15–18 October 2014); Kevin Starr, *Inventing the Dream: California through the Progressive Era* (New York, 1985), 31–3; and Faragher, "Los Angeles School."

acknowledged an African American presence and eliminated, in the words of Quintard Taylor, “African American invisibility in the region.” Porter wrote about his book *The Negro on the American Frontier* (1981), “Its thesis is simply: ‘They were there.’” In fact, Savage took significant interest in Biggs and, in the 1970s, wrote a short, unpublished piece titled “Know Your History: Peter Biggs.” Since the rise of the new social history, in keeping with scholars of slavery and freedom in other regions, scholars of the black West have gone far beyond “recognition” to reveal a rich history of African American migration, freedom claims, and community formation, with attention to racial formation in the West. As a result, far more ink has been spilled on Biggs’s black Angeleno peers who courageously sued slave owners for their freedom in the antebellum era or participated in the meaningful wave of black institution building that characterized the post-emancipation era. In other words, the “African American quest for community in the West” has dominated more recent historiography, largely bypassing individuals who failed to fit twentieth-century historical categories and narratives of racial peoplehood and uplift. Jim Downs has noted, “making ‘agency’ a happy ending” to an “often inconclusive set of circumstances” has produced “woefully under-representative histories of black people during the Civil War and Reconstruction.” Biggs’s life—like many African American lives—fits neither the Jim Crow era’s racist mythology of the South’s “loyal slaves” nor the post-civil rights era’s historiography of unwavering resistance. Instead, Biggs’s story creates space for a more nuanced analysis of African American experiences in the American West. That this evocative story has received no sustained scholarly treatment raises new questions about the historiography of African Americans in the West and the historical inconvenience of a subject such as Peter Biggs.<sup>6</sup>

In his memoirs, Horace Bell recalled that when Biggs arrived at Drum Barracks he was put to work alongside white secessionists in a chain gang. While his fellow prisoners were likely not accustomed to bound labor, Biggs was, having been enslaved for the first three decades of his life. He likely remained in Virginia long enough to secure an attachment to the state that persisted, at least in name, through the end of his life.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Walter Prescott Webb, “The American West: Perpetual Mirage,” *Harper’s Magazine* (May 1957): 30; Kenneth Wiggins Porter, *The Negro on the American Frontier* (New York, 1971), 4; W. Sherman Savage, *Blacks in the West* (Westport, CT, 1977); Lawrence B. de Graaf, “Recognition, Racism, and Reflections on the Writings of Western Black History,” *Pacific Historical Review* 44 (February 1975): 22–51; Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 19; Savage, “Know Your History”; and Jim Downs, “The Future of Civil War Era Studies: Race,” *Journal of the Civil War Era*, accessed January 2015, <http://journalofthecivilwarera.org/forum-the-future-of-civil-war-era-studies/the-future-of-civil-war-era-studies-race/>. On the popular mythology of black Confederates, see Kevin Levin, “Black Confederates Out of the Attic and Into the Mainstream,” *Journal of the Civil War Era* 4 (December 2014): 627–35.

<sup>7</sup>Bell, *Reminiscences*, 75 and Savage, “Know Your History.” In 1850 the census taker recorded Biggs as thirty-five years old, “B” (for “black”), and from Virginia. He was recorded as living in his own dwelling, with his occupation as barber. In 1860 the census taker recorded Biggs as thirty-nine years old (a six-year discrepancy from the 1850 census), with \$650 in real estate and \$100 in his

By the time Biggs entered his twenties, in the mid-1830s, the domestic slave trade was a powerful economic engine of the Southern states. Not surprisingly for an enslaved Virginian of his age, Biggs was soon caught in the machine. He was either sold to a trader—who forced him down a series of unknown roads and paths, south and then west—or traveled westward with an old or new slave owner who intended to settle the western interior. Biggs's experience of forced westward migration in the late 1830s or early 1840s comprises a lesser-known branch of what Ira Berlin has called the "Second Middle Passage." Over the first half of the nineteenth century, approximately 1 million enslaved men, women, and children were displaced by the domestic slave trade. As in the first Middle Passage, the experienced was marked by forced migration, familial separation, widespread violence, and mortality. In the Upper South, where Biggs was born, approximately one in three enslaved children experienced family separation such as this amidst the tumult of the Second Middle Passage. The vast majority was "sold South" to the present-day states of Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana, while a smaller set, including Biggs, was forced by owners and traders to the Middle and Far West.<sup>8</sup>

At some point along this westward journey, Biggs appears to have been sold to a long-established frontiersman, Reuben Washburn Middleton. Born in South Carolina, Middleton had migrated with two brothers to Illinois Territory. Following their militia service in the War of 1812, the Middleton brothers were considered by their settler peers "fairly successful" in the "Illinois wilderness," taking active roles in the surveying and development of southern Illinois. Over the next two decades, Middleton achieved economic success as a planter and merchant, doing business in Illinois, Missouri, and Kansas. At the age of fifty-four, while farming in Washington County, Illinois, he and his extended family were converted to Mormonism and followed others to Far West, Missouri. Middleton may have purchased Peter Biggs while living in the slave state of Missouri or he may have owned him illegally for some time in Illinois; in either case, the line between the free state of Illinois and the slave state of Missouri featured prominently in the lives of Biggs and Middleton (as it did in the life of Dred Scott during the same decade). Diane Mutti Burke has examined the relatively small slaveholdings in border states such as Missouri and the impact of such demographics upon men and

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personal estate. "Peter Biggs," U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Seventh Census of the United States—1850, California*, Population Schedules for Los Angeles County, Los Angeles, microfilm, reel 35, M432, Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29, National Archives and Records Administration (Washington, DC) (NARA) (hereafter 1850 census) and "Peter Biggs," U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Eighth Census of the United States—1860, California*, Population Schedules for Los Angeles County, Los Angeles, microfilm, reel 59, M653, NARA (hereafter 1860 census).

<sup>8</sup>Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge, MA, 2003), 159–244. On Virginia, see David Hackett Fischer and James Kelly, *Bound Away: Virginia and the Westward Movement* (Charlottesville, VA, 2000), 229–52. On the Middle West, see Diane Mutti Burke, *On Slavery's Border: Missouri's Small Slaveholding Households, 1815–1865* (Athens, GA, 2010) and Hine, "Inner Lives of Black Women," 912–20.

women's experiences of enslavement. Partially the result of such small slaveholdings, Burke suggests that "the personal and work interactions of Missouri slavery were intimate, exposing both slaves and owners to a vast array of human exchanges ranging from empathy and cooperation to hatred and brutal violence." Meanwhile, black Missourians struggled "to maintain family and communities in the absence of resident nuclear families and slave-quarter communities."<sup>9</sup> Here, Burke lends important context for the stark isolation—about which historians know so little—that Biggs may have experienced during his years as an enslaved man.

By the early 1840s, Joseph Smith, founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, was urging Mormon slaveholders to move across the border to Illinois and free their slaves. Joining this exodus, Reuben Middleton moved to Nauvoo, Illinois, where he was later remembered as "closely associated" with Smith and Brigham Young. Between 1842 and 1845, he, or perhaps his son, sold Biggs to Andrew Jackson Smith, a West Point graduate of 1838 and army officer stationed in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Whatever the circumstances of this transaction, it appears the Middleton family did not "free" their slaves per se but were compensated before leaving the business of slavery behind.<sup>10</sup>

In the mid-1840s, Biggs was forced to migrate once again, this time to Alta California, as the servant and human property of a U.S. officer in the U.S.-Mexican War. Historian Robert E. May uses the term *invisible men* to refer to hidden service of free and enslaved African Americans such as Biggs in the U.S.-Mexican War. Smith had taken temporary command of the Mormon Battalion—drawn from the Nauvoo Mormons in exchange for much-needed resources and subsidizing their migration west—after the death of its initial commander, James Allen, and he led a portion of the unit's march to California. Over the next several weeks, the soldiers expressed growing resentment of Smith and his assistant surgeon, Dr. George Sanderson, for

<sup>9</sup>It is possible that Peter Biggs crossed paths with another African American "Peter" known as "Black Pete," who played a significant role within the development of Mormonism in both Ohio and Missouri. While Peter Biggs was roughly three decades younger than the better-known "Pete," both men were born enslaved in Virginia and were enmeshed in Mormon continental migrations. See Mark Lyman Staker, *Hearken, O Ye People: The Historical Setting of Joseph Smith's Ohio Revelations* (Greg Kofford Books, 2010), Ch. 1, 3, and 8; and Angela Pulley-Hudson, *Native Genius* (University of North Carolina Press, 2015). "Charles F. Middleton," in *Portrait, Genealogical and Biographical Record of the State of Utah: Containing Biographies of Many Well Known Citizens of the Past and Present* (Chicago, 1902), 178–9; Marjorie Tisdale Wolcott, ed., *Pioneer Notes from the Diaries of Judge Benjamin Hayes, 1849–1875* (Los Angeles, 1929), 70–2, 88; and Burke, *Slavery's Border*, 6.

<sup>10</sup>"Charles F. Middleton"; "History, 1838–1856," in *Joseph Smith Papers*, comp. Willard Richards and Thomas Bullock, vol. C-1, 2 November 1838–31 July 1842, 880–1; and Viola Lockhardt Warren, *Dragoons on Trial, Los Angeles, 1847* (Los Angeles, 1965), 49. On African Americans and Mormonism in the antebellum period, see Randall M. Miller and John David Smith, eds., *Dictionary of Afro-American Slavery* (Westport, CT, 1997), 506–7; Newell G. Bringhurst, *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks: The Changing Place of Black People within Mormonism* (Westport, CT, 1981); and Armand L. Mauss, *All Abraham's Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage* (Champaign, IL, 2003).

their treatment. Sgt. Daniel Tyler complained that the medicine he received from the battalion's doctor did not include any of "the brandy the Government furnished for mixing medicines." Tyler and the other men "understood" that this liquor was consumed by "the Doctor and Smith and their immediate associates, including their negro servants, who sometimes got rather tipsy." To explain the missing brandy, the doctor and Smith would plead the enslaved men who served them "had stolen it; and to pass it off, [the black men] got a little 'cussing.'"<sup>11</sup>

This use, or misuse, of the battalion's brandy suggests that Biggs was perceived to have enjoyed some privileges as the unit marched to California. At the very least, his presence helped shape relations between the officers and enlisted men. Although technically volunteers, the Mormon soldiers did not generally embrace the volunteer spirit that swept many white Americans at the onset of the U.S.-Mexican War. They had instead been motivated by a sense of obligation to sacrifice for the sake of the Mormon community, and this sacrifice did not come easily. Although a few men appeared eager to join the unit, most needed persuading. Many of the men, who varied widely in age, were war-weary veterans of earlier conflicts for survival; more than a few enlisted in extremely poor health.<sup>12</sup>

A year later, the presence of enslaved labor amidst U.S. military forces continued to shape relations between officers and enlisted men when Biggs was implicated in an 1847 trial against white U.S. Army soldiers. Pte. John Smith had been charged with the theft of \$650 in gold and silver from a trunk in the quarters of an officer, but Smith swore that Biggs had "induced him . . . to do this wrongful act." Biggs testified that it was Smith's idea. According to Biggs, Smith said "he was flat broke, and that he would rob his brother," and "he knew [Biggs] was that very *laverett* that could give him a sight [on the trunk's location]."<sup>13</sup> As Biggs explained, Smith "said that I was always among the officers, and could tell whether they had any money or not, and where they kept it." While he admitted to providing the trunk's location, leaving an entrance unlocked, and receiving about \$30 for his part in the crime, Biggs provided an alibi for the time of the theft: he "went to the grocery, and did not leave till 2 o'clock or later in the night—before and after the robbery was committed." He also claimed that another soldier involved, John Stokely, threatened to kill him if he talked to the authorities. Stokely was then allowed to come forward and challenge Biggs on this accusation, but Biggs held

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<sup>11</sup>Robert E. May, "Invisible Men: Blacks and the U.S. Army in the Mexican War," *Historian* 49 (August 1987) and Daniel Tyler, *A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion in the Mexican War, 1846–1847* (Chicago, 1964), 150. May writes of "the desire of most American army officers to have servants attend to their needs and comforts." "Invisible Men," 465.

<sup>12</sup>David L. Bigler, ed. *The Gold Discovery Journal of Azariah Smith* (Salt Lake City, 1990), 11–5.

<sup>13</sup>This could be a misspelling of *leveret*, which means "a young hare," "a pet, a mistress," or "a spiritless person." *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed., s.v. "leveret."

firm. A third soldier later testified that Stokely had turned himself in because Biggs, having not yet received his share, was about to inform the authorities. The testimony of these white soldiers suggests that they resented the privileges Biggs may have acquired by nature of his proximity to the officers, a proximity that was founded upon his Southern and western enslavement.<sup>14</sup>

After the trial, Smith and Stokely received prison sentences, but Biggs did not. This intriguing epilogue reveals federal officials' active grappling with the question of differential punishment and leads to a growing controversy of the Civil War era: the possibility of black citizenship. In this sense, Biggs's differential treatment at the tail end of racial slavery echoes a similarly ambiguous moment in the construction of race, crime, and citizenship at its early colonial outset—in which black indentured servants such as John Punch, in the seventeenth century, had begun to be singled out for lifelong servitude, in contrast to the punishment of their white counterparts. In this case, because Biggs was enslaved, officials suggested that his owner, Capt. Andrew Jackson Smith, determine his punishment. Smith himself had served on the commission of the court martial and was informed of the details of the case. More obviously, leaving the matter to Biggs's owner allowed Smith the right to continue benefiting from his labor. In short, this trial raised the burning question of slave owners' "property rights." Then Lt. William Tecumseh Sherman weighed in, suggesting that Biggs should receive equal treatment (punishment). From Monterey, California, Sherman wrote, "The Negro Boy Pete Biggs is certainly amenable to martial law, and should be tried, unless some pledge has been made him . . . or unless Captain Smith prefers to punish the boy himself—to the satisfaction of the gentleman robbed. Otherwise you will please prefer the proper charges against him."<sup>15</sup> Sherman's pontification encapsulates the legal conundrum and American paradox of the antebellum era: the circumstance of being both person and property. This quandary would haunt Biggs's life trajectory; in the decade that followed, he would continue to walk the line between slavery and freedom.

According to an 1876 history of Los Angeles, "at the close of the war, left on California territory, [Biggs's] freedom was necessarily recognized." Although many Anglo-Americans, including military officers, took slaves to the California goldfields in 1848 and 1849, it appears that Andrew Jackson Smith did not. John Mack Faragher has suggested that Smith may have granted Biggs his freedom in order to avoid the expense of transporting him back east. Regardless, Smith was back in St. Louis by 1850 and Biggs was living on his own in Los Angeles. As a result, Biggs was one of twelve African Americans recorded as living in Los Angeles County, and the only one living

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<sup>14</sup>Warren, *Dragoons on Trial*, 30, 39, 55, 58–9.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 49.

in his own domicile. As Rudolph Lapp noted, “they hardly constituted a community” in the early 1850s, and “the best known of them was Peter Biggs.”<sup>16</sup>

Had he lived on the same land six decades prior, Biggs’s African ancestry may have been less conspicuous. Of the eleven founding families of Los Angeles in 1789, six were of African descent, at least in part. Although African heritage had social meaning in the Spanish Empire at this time, it did not represent the barrier to social advancement that it did in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century United States. One of the first mayors of the Spanish pueblo of Los Angeles was categorized as “mulatto” in local records, as was the grandmother of Pío Pico, an Angeleno who served as the last governor of Mexican Alta California. Pico was one of the most respected citizens of Los Angeles on the eve of the U.S.-Mexican War, and he maintained considerable influence there for decades following the conflict. In addition to holding enormous ranch properties in the countryside, Pico also had a home in Los Angeles close to the central plaza, which served as the center of California government during his time as governor. (See figure 1.) The city, the largest in Alta California, was a vibrant center to the regional cattle economy. There, Pico walked alongside many people of mixed African, European, and Native American ancestry, including blacksmiths, tanners, tavern keepers, and other elite landholding ranchers, as well as local Native Americans, who occupied a precarious existence as unpaid or underpaid servants and ranch hands. In 1850 U.S. census takers would record Pico and the vast majority of the mixed-ancestry, Spanish-surnamed population—approximately three-fourths of the 1,610 people reported living in the city—as “white.” American expansion carried new cultural norms and “racial” knowledge into the region along with a new political and economic infrastructure. Biggs and the other eleven African American residents labeled “black” by census takers that year would have been familiar with the varieties of American racial ideology that pervaded the United States.<sup>17</sup>

As he bid Captain Smith farewell and walked his first days in freedom, Biggs must have noted the precariousness of his position amidst the personal and political violence of antebellum Los Angeles. According to one memoir, “cutthroats (all from the

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<sup>16</sup>J. J. Warner, Benjamin Ignatius Hayes, and J. P. Widney, *An Historical Sketch of Los Angeles County, California* (Los Angeles, 1876), 44; John Mack Faragher, *Eternity Street: Violence and Justice in Frontier Los Angeles* (New York, 2016), 202; and Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 118. See also Savage, “Know Your History.” The first Los Angeles County census, taken in 1850, reported twelve African Americans and 3,518 white residents (this total included Spanish-surnamed individuals, some of whom may have been of partial African descent). In 1860 the black population had risen to 87, with 9,221 white persons. The 1870 census lists 134 blacks and 14,720 whites. See Marne L. Campbell, “Heaven’s Ghetto? African Americans and Race in Los Angeles, 1850–1917” (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2006), 54–7.

<sup>17</sup>Carlos Manuel Salomon, *Pío Pico: The Last Governor of Mexican California* (Norman, 2010), 69–70. For historical context on African Americans in nineteenth-century Los Angeles, see Campbell, “Heaven’s Ghetto;,” 24–40; Warner, Hayes, and Widney, *Historical Sketch*, 44; David Torres-Rouff, *Before L.A.: Race, Space, and Municipal Power in Los Angeles, 1781–1894* (New Haven, 2013), 309; and Delilah L. Beasley, *The Negro Trail Blazers of California* (Los Angeles, 1919), 102.

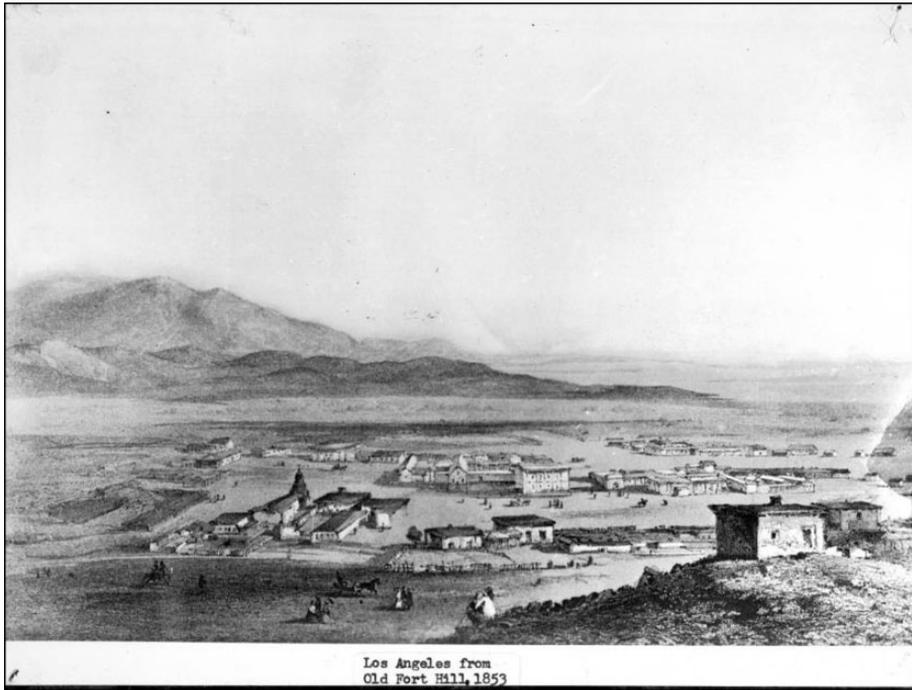


Figure 1. "Drawing (or painting?) of the Los Angeles Plaza done in 1853 by Charles Koppel, looking east from Fort Moore Hill to the west, 1853," CHS-6087, Title Insurance and Trust and C. C. Pierce Photography Collection, 1860–1960, USC Libraries Special Collections. Courtesy of the California Historical Society.

Southern states) . . . held high carnival in Los Angeles, painting the town in all the varied shades of red," with the worst violence reserved for African Americans. The "desperados" put three black "waiters . . . into a corral, with tight adobe walls six to eight feet high." While dancing on the wall and shouting "with glee," the Southern men "began emptying their revolvers at the negroes, who crazed with fear, finally escaped by climbing over the walls." "No one dared to interfere or enter protest," since these Southerners "held the town and ran it to suit themselves." Such episodes may have reminded Biggs that emancipation meant little absent economic autonomy or the protection of kinship networks. "In the Native view, as in many African societies," historian Christina Snyder writes, "the opposite of slavery was not freedom; the opposite of slavery was kinship." At the same time, however, Biggs's experiences of California during and after the war revealed to him the possible opportunities available within this volatile borderland environment.

Biggs's first venture as a free man came in the form of cats. According to Horace Bell, Biggs noticed that gold rush-era San Francisco was "over-supplied" with rats but

lacked “a corresponding supply of cats.” Bell claimed<sup>18</sup> that it was “left to the fertile brain of this distinguished Virginian . . . to equalize this great seeming inequality in the nature of things.” Biggs gathered “all of the cats he could get, either by hook or crook,” and shipped them north. Remarkably, Biggs had “the only cats in [the] market” for a time and emerged “supreme dictator as to prices.” His “handsome fortune,” however, soon filled the “coffers of the gambler princes of the Bay City” since “poor Pete” was “addicted to gambling.” This was the first in a series of entrepreneurial ventures that came to define Biggs’s life. Bell recalled that Biggs “made a great deal of money in various speculations”; his most significant venture was a barbershop that quickly became a central node of Los Angeles society. Soon after arriving in California, Biggs also married a “Spanish lady,” in Bell’s words. Sixteen years old at the time of the marriage, Refugio R. de Biggs soon delivered Juana Biggs, perhaps in 1848, the year the U.S.-Mexican War ended. Through the “gentlemen” he served, and through local connections presumably offered by his wife, Biggs cultivated kinship networks that provided much-needed protection to free people of color in the antebellum era. As he remade himself in this way, he knitted together Southern “hospitality” with new social threads in a fast-changing community.<sup>19</sup>

Not surprisingly, Biggs found himself mired in racial violence nonetheless. At a “ball,” described by Horace Bell, a white Southern-born man named Aleck Bell (unrelated) asked the belle of the ball, “Doña Ramona,” for “the honor of her hand” in the opening waltz. “The Señorita,” however, intended to dance with Biggs first:

the music commenced, and what was Aleck’s disgust at beholding the rascally Pete, in all the glory of a swallow-tailed coat, brass buttons, white vest and gloves, redolent with all the perfume of Araby the blest, shuffle up to the much coveted belle of the ball-room, and with one arm encircling her spider-like waist, sail off in the whirling, giddy waltz. This was more than Southern blood could stand, and out came Aleck’s Colt. The music was stopped and Aleck stepped up to Doña Ramona, and inquired of her if she “preferred dancing with a nigger to a white man.” She replied that “in this particular instance she did; that Don Pedro was El Bastonero, master of ceremonies.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup>Jessie Goodman, ed., *Overland in 1849: From Missouri to California by the Platte River and the Salt Lake Trail, an Account from the Letters of G. C. Pearson* (Los Angeles, 1961), 53–4. John Wells Brier provides a similar account of this incident in “The Death Valley Party of 1849,” *Out West* 17 (1903): 463–4. Christina Snyder, *Slavery in Indian Country: The Changing Face of Captivity in Early America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 5.

<sup>19</sup>Bell, *Reminiscences*, 36–8; “Refugio Rodondo de Biggs,” *Los Angeles Star*, 14 June 1856; and “Cats-Cats-Cats,” *Daily Alta California* (San Francisco), 22 March 1851. The census taker recorded Juana Biggs as twelve years old in 1860; she was described as California-born and “M” (for “mulatto”). “Juana Biggs,” 1860 census.

<sup>20</sup>Bell, *Reminiscences*, 38–9. *Bastonero* literally refers to a baton-wielding leader of a parade, but the term also refers to a master of ceremonies at a reception. *Oxford Dictionaries*, s.v. “bastonero,”

As “Aleck’s chivalry would not permit him to lay violent hands on the lady,” he instead “blazed away at Pete, who bolted for the door.” Everyone assumed Biggs had died until “Peter sent a courier to the city, to the great relief of everybody, and to Captain Bell in particular.” Biggs “promised that, if permitted to return, to ever after keep his place—a promise religiously kept by him so far as the Americans were concerned.”<sup>21</sup> According to city justice records, a saloon keeper reported in 1849 that Americans shot up his place and that among them was a “Captain Bell” who proclaimed that “he didn’t want dancing between whites and the black man, who was there dancing.” Horace Bell’s account is questionable, not only because of his characteristic literary flair but also because he did not arrive in Los Angeles until 1852. Still, there is a good chance that the unnamed black man was Biggs, one of only a few African American men listed in the city in the 1850 census. Moving through the dance floor, the barbershop, the bathhouse, and the courtroom, Biggs occupied a social space that was powerfully shaped—both constrained and enhanced—by the town’s Southern character.<sup>22</sup>

That same year, “descending through lofty hills” into the Los Angeles basin in 1850, Maryland-born lawyer Benjamin Hayes entered town and tied his mule out front of a hotel. And then “an old acquaintance introduced himself to me, in the shape of Peter Biggs, formerly the slave of my friend, Mr. Reuben Middleton, of Liberty.” Like many migrants who came to Southern California in the antebellum period, Hayes had arrived overland from Missouri; he recorded in his journal that the migrants in his party knew the words of “Old Virginny,” a song title suggestive of their Southern roots. Biggs, “delighted” to see Hayes, “communicated many useful items” and rendered services that Hayes “esteemed valuable.” When Benjamin Hayes’s wife, Emily Hayes, arrived in 1852, she wrote to her sister in Missouri, “you cannot guess who was our driver—Pete Middleton, of Liberty.” He had “a Spanish wife,” she explained, and was “a bootblacker and barber for the town.”<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps Biggs began barbering in Virginia, where enslaved and free African Americans often vied for this respected—and often profitable—position. In the 1830s, as Biggs entered adulthood, he would have witnessed the anti-black violence that exploded throughout the state in the wake of Nat Turner’s rebellion. The terror of those years may have led some to cling more tightly to his trade. Perhaps Biggs honed

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accessed March 2016, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/translate/spanish-english/bastonero>. The term was used throughout the U.S. Southwest well into the twentieth century to refer to men who directed dancers. See Rafaela Castro, *Chicano Folklore: A Guide to the Folktales, Traditions, Rituals and Religious Practices of Mexican Americans* (New York, 2001), 100.

<sup>21</sup>Bell, *Reminiscences*, 24–6, 36.

<sup>22</sup>Case 18, Alcalde/Los Angeles County Court Records, 1830–1863 (GC 1164), ser. 2, vol. 7, 528–35, Seaver Center for Western History Research, Los Angeles, CA. G. C. Pearson relates a similar incident, when a southern “cutthroat . . . shot another for dancing with his girl.” Quoted in Goodman, *Overland in 1849*, 53.

<sup>23</sup>Wolcott, *Pioneer Notes*, 70–2, 88, 166–7.

his skills and business acumen in Richmond, a city that had grown tenfold in the two decades before his birth, where many black barbers sought work. According to Douglas Bristol, many slave owners allowed enslaved skilled men, such as barbers, to relocate to Richmond to work as long as they sent back a portion of their profits. In the 1790s, a sixteen-year-old slave barber named Lewis moved from a rural plantation to Richmond. A half-century later, roughly half of the skilled black workers in the city were barbers. Indeed, enslaved barbers “came to dominate the trade,” allowing many the chance to purchase their freedom. By 1860, one in eight free African Americans with property of at least \$2,000 owned a barbershop.<sup>24</sup>

During his time in Missouri, Perhaps Biggs accompanied Andrew Jackson Smith or Reuben Middleton to Louis Clamorgan and Jeffrey Iredell’s first-rate barbershop in St. Louis. In 1845 they advertised that their “Splendid Hair Cutting and Shaving Saloon,” featured a bathhouse and tubs of “the finest Italian marble, the rooms large, airy, and elegantly furnished.” Bristol has suggested that many “black barbers remained aloof from most of the African American community, preferring instead to cultivate relationships with members of the white elite.” Some free black barbers even engaged in slave ownership. “By emulating planters,” Bristol writes, “free African Americans demonstrated that they posed no threat to the social order, which in turn shielded them from white oppression.” In Virginia, and again in Missouri, “the circumstance of living as free African Americans in a region where African Americans were still kept as slaves made occupation central to black identity.” Perhaps Biggs noted such dynamics as he planted seeds for his survival as the only free African American man not attached to a white household in 1850 Los Angeles.<sup>25</sup>

At the very least, Biggs had several years of experience grooming Smith and other military officers. So, after his cat venture and in the wake of his gambling losses, Biggs rebounded with the opening of his shaving saloon in Los Angeles in 1850 or 1851. Soon, amidst the hundreds of white men of Los Angeles County—most newly arrived and Southern born—Biggs had cornered a market once again. Bell recalled that, for a time, Biggs was “the only barber in town who catered to Americans.” The Prussian-born businessman Harris Newmark recalled that Biggs’s niche was “men and boys” since “ladies dressed their own hair.” The most memorable item in Biggs’s shop, wrote Newmark, was “an old-fashioned, high-backed chair.” While customers waited, Newmark noted, “Biggs called ‘Next!’ he sprinkled the last victim with Florida water, applying to the hair at the same time his Bear Oil (sure to leave its mark on walls and

<sup>24</sup>Douglas Bristol, *Knights of the Razor: Black Barbers in Slavery and Freedom* (Baltimore, 2009), 32, 33, 79 and Savage, “Know Your History.” For more on the history of black barbers, see Quincy T. Mills, *Cutting Along the Color Line: Black Barber Shops in America* (Philadelphia, 2013); Sean Trainor, “The Racially Fraught History of the American Beard,” *Atlantic*, 20 January 2014; and Arthur Jones, *Pierre Toussaint: A Biography* (New York, 2003).

<sup>25</sup>Cyprian Clamorgan, *The Colored Aristocracy of St. Louis*, ed. Julie Winch (Columbia, MO, 1999); Juliet E. K. Walker, *The History of Black Business in America: Capitalism, Race, Entrepreneurship* (New York, 1998), 107; Bristol, *Knights of the Razor*, 79, 83, 88–9; and “Peter Biggs,” 1850 census.

pillows), after which, with a soiled towel he put on the finishing touch for one towel in those days served many customers.” Although the Los Angeles barbershop was a simple operation, the “high-backed chair” would have been a critical investment for Biggs, as was his addition of baths in 1852, which he repeatedly advertised.<sup>26</sup> (See figure 2.)

Indeed, the baths and the high-backed chair were symbols of American culture in this borderland town. In 1850s America, according to Bristol, the “sophistication of the barbershop” increasingly determined the success or failure of barbers, especially African-American barbers. Those fortunate to work in “first-class” shops prospered,

Don't forget the name—**Rich, Newmark & Co., COMMERCIAL STREET.** jun21

**Los Angeles Shaving Saloon,  
Main Street,  
Opposite the head of Commercial.**

**PETER BIGGS**, sole proprietor of this establishment, having at great expense fitted up, renovated and improved it in the most elegant and comfortable manner, is now prepared to

**SHAVE, SHAMPOO AND CUT HAIR,**  
in the most fashionable Southern and New Orleans style,  
and at REDUCED PRICES,  
Hair Cutting.....25 cents.  
Shampooing.....25 cents.  
The proprietor has recently connected with the Saloon a

**BATHING ROOM,**  
where HOT, COLD and SHOWER BATHS can be had at all hours of the day at the following prices:  
Cold Baths.....25 cents.  
Hot Baths.....25 cents.  
Shower Baths.....25 cents.  
Clothes renovated and repaired on the shortest notice and at reasonable prices.  
BOOTS will be blacked as usual; and WASHING done to order with neatness and dispatch.

For the convenience of the public, a **City Express and Intelligens Office** is also opened, where all orders will be attended to promptly. My friends and fellow-creatures, who have heretofore had confidence in me, are respectfully invited to continue their patronage. The patronage of all persons thankfully received and gratefully acknowledged.

Doors open from sunrise till 9 o'clock P. M.  
Los Angeles, April 26, 1856. tf

Figure 2. “Los Angeles Shaving Saloon,” *Los Angeles Star*, 28 June 1856. Courtesy of the Huntington Library.

<sup>26</sup>Bell, *Reminiscences*, 137; Newmark, *Sixty Years in Southern California*, 137–8; Savage, “Know Your History”; and “Hair Cutting and Shaving Saloon,” *Los Angeles Star*, 3 April 1852.

while most black barbers “eked out livings on the margin” and faced an “increasing tendency for whites to lash out at free African Americans.” Black barbers also began to face “the first serious competition from immigrants,” compared to whom they possessed little wealth. According to Newmark, the arrival in 1853 of Felix Signoret, a French barber with greater “tonorial capacity,” caused Biggs to cut his prices in half.<sup>27</sup>

In 1853 Biggs also began to target his clientele by advertising his shaving saloon as “Southern” or “Louisiana-style.” As Sean Trainor has illustrated, “barbers’ most difficult work was cultural in nature.” Drawing on a lifetime of knowledge, Biggs read the vulnerabilities of transplanted white Southerners. Uprooted by war and gold, and dispossessed of slave labor, these men were willing to pay for the familiar comforts of home. Such comforts extended well beyond a haircut and a shave. Indeed, most black barbers rarely had the luxury of exclusive barbering and “viewed barbering as part of a repertoire of jobs they could use to survive.” In addition to providing bath service, Biggs met more intimate needs. Bell recalled that the first time he submitted to Biggs’s “barbarous manipulations,” he was asked if he would like to be introduced to local “ladies.” Bell replied he had friends who would introduce him to “such female society as would be proper.” But Biggs explained that he did not mean ladies of “high-up class” but those “always anxious” to make the “quaintance” of “strangers” with plenty of “spondulix” (cash). Biggs, married to a Spanish-surnamed woman, may have had particular access to such women. U.S. officers in California mentioned the allure of Spanish-speaking “yellow girls of the country”; perhaps their appeal to incoming white Southerners resonated within the history of sexual slavery and, especially in the 1850s, the “fancy trade” of the Southern states. The Maryland-born attorney and politician Joseph Lancaster Brent wrote of the charms of the “California girls.” When he traveled east in 1861 to fight for the Confederacy, he left behind a child and a local woman.<sup>28</sup>

Navigating this transplanted Southern society as a black barber required skill in what Trainor has called “the gentlemanly arts.” “They were also expert conversationalists,” he writes, “engaging and entertaining their customers while they worked.” In his 1858 *The Colored Aristocracy of St. Louis*, Cyprian Clamorgan suggested that many black barbers exploited the conversational power their position provided as “gossiping knights of the razor.” But like most black barbers in the 1850s, Biggs walked a fine line, such that “customers might accuse them of overstepping racial boundaries—with

<sup>27</sup>Bristol, *Knights of the Razor*, 109–10; Newmark, *Sixty Years in Southern California*, 137; and “Fifty per cent. Lower,” *Los Angeles Star*, 18 June 1853.

<sup>28</sup>“Los Angeles Shaving Saloon,” *Los Angeles Star*, 1 December 1855; Trainor, “Racially Fraught History”; Bristol, *Knights of the Razor*, 110; Bell, *Reminiscences*, 36–7; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York, 2007), 296–7; Charles Murray to John Griffin, 6 January 1847, Guide to the Documentos para la historia de California, 1846–1847, and especially concerning the Battle of San Pascual: 1846–1876, MSS C-B 79, Bancroft Library, Berkeley, CA; Joseph Lancaster Brent, *Memoirs of the War Between the States* (New Orleans, 1940), 9; “Pioneer Family Member is Dead,” *Los Angeles Times*, 1 February 1925; and Paul Bryan Gray, *Forster vs. Pico: The Struggle for the Rancho Santa Margarita* (Spokane, 1998), 96–7.

potentially disastrous consequences.” Biggs’s strategy amidst a heavily Southern-born clientele may have been to identify as a loyal Southerner. As Bell recalled, “During the great civil war, like many other great men, Pete declared his allegiance to be due to his native Virginia, and accordingly gave the weight of his influence to the ‘Lost Cause;’ hence the cognomen of ‘Black Democrat.’” With his Southern-styled saloon, Biggs reassured white customers of the presumed disposition and loyalty of African Americans, actively countering growing anxieties over the future of slavery and racial hierarchy. “By affirming the racial and class privileges of their white customers,” Bristol writes, “black barbers gained an economic independence that would allow them to withstand growing competition from immigrant barbers.”<sup>29</sup> Indeed, “affirming the racial and class privileges” of customers was precisely Biggs’s business—and a particularly adept strategy in the face of foreign competition.

Notwithstanding his freedom and autonomy as a black barber, Biggs could not vote. Highlighting this paradox, in an 1853 article titled “Make your Sons Mechanics and Farmers—not Waiters, Porters, and Barbers,” Frederick Douglass urged parents to discourage their children from barbering: “All this may be easy . . . But is it noble, is it manly, and does it improve and elevate us?” Yet Biggs may have played an important role in the electoral process in the new state. Voting at the time was “a lucrative business,” according to Bell, in which voters were “considered valuable according to the facility offered for disguising one’s self.” Biggs may have influenced the outcome of one election in 1853. Bell claimed, “Peter Biggs was in his glory on that election day.” After getting “their hair cropped,” voters would be given “another name . . . another drink and another dollar, and another vote would be polled for some enterprising candidate.”<sup>30</sup>

By the mid-1850s, a few African Americans had begun to trickle into Los Angeles. In the scholarship of the black West, the larger and more affluent communities that formed in Northern California cities like San Francisco have overshadowed the small community that took shape in Los Angeles in the ensuing years. These communities gave rise to the first black churches and newspapers, but their relative success had more to do with the disproportionate effects of the gold rush on the northern and southern parts of the state than on the aspirations of the black settlers themselves. In 1853 Robert and Winnie Owens and their two daughters purchased their freedom and

<sup>29</sup>Trainor, “Racially Fraught History,” 79–80; Clamorgan, *Colored Aristocracy*, 52; Bell, *Reminiscences*, 40; Bristol, *Knights of the Razor*, 69; and “Barber Shop and Bath House.” About the few free pro-Confederacy black Virginians, Joseph Thomas Wilson wrote in 1887, “Those publicly loyal to the Confederacy were pragmatically acknowledging who and where they were. Their determination to stand with the South was akin to free men consciously performing a civic duty.” *The Black Phalanx: African American Soldiers in the War of Independence, the War of 1812, and the Civil War* (1890; repr., New York, 1994), 164.

<sup>30</sup>“Make your Sons Mechanics and Farmers—not Waiters, Porters, and Barbers,” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 18 March 1853; Bell, *Reminiscences*, 101–2; and D. Michael Bottoms, *An Aristocracy of Color: Race and Reconstruction in California and the West, 1850–1890* (Norman, 2013), 92–3.

migrated to Los Angeles. Later known by some neighbors as “Uncle Bob” and “Aunt Minnie,” they took on washing and odd jobs and after several years won a military contract to cut wood. By 1860, they were also in the cattle and livery stable businesses, with \$6,500 in assets. Historians of the black West have frequently characterized the Owens family as the vanguard of black community building in Los Angeles. Rudolph Lapp notes, “The embryo of black community life began in 1854 in the Owens home, when they invited other blacks in Los Angeles to come to their residence for religious services.” Years later, their descendants benefited from strategic property investments, and by the end of the century, two of the grandsons owned a block on Broadway and Third Street, known as the Owens block. By 1856, nurse and midwife Biddie Mason and her extended family had settled in Los Angeles after winning their freedom in the court of Judge Benjamin Hayes, Biggs’s “old acquaintance” from Missouri. The *New York Daily Times* cited the Mason case as one that “should attract much attention.” According to the *Daily Times*, the “effect” of Hayes’s “decision is that Slavery can have no legal existence in a State where it is prohibited by law—a proposition apparently so self-evident that its enunciation seems merely puerile and superfluous. Strangely enough, however, the doctrine needs ever judicial sanction to strengthen it against the later dogmas of the South.” A year later, in 1857, these Southern dogmas would triumph in the Supreme Court’s ruling on the case of Dred Scott. Had the ruling occurred one year earlier, the small, free African American community of Los Angeles might have been deprived of Mason’s long legacy. As it happened, “By the end of the 1850s,” “Robert Owens has replaced Peter Biggs as a model for Los Angeles Negroes, and in the next decade Biddy Mason joined him in that role.”<sup>31</sup>

Indeed, by the time of the Civil War, the constellation of African Americans in Los Angeles would increasingly center around Owens and Mason, both of whom lived directly west of the plaza, in the area where Spring Street intersects with First and Second. Like Owens and Mason, Biggs registered a personal and real estate value in 1860 and at one time owned property at Spring and Third. This neighborhood, located several blocks southwest of the plaza, varied greatly in terms of cultural background and social status, but a small cluster of African American residents looked out for each other. Biggs appears to have been friendly enough with his neighbor to draw upon Owens’s resources in a time of need. Biggs eventually sold off his equipment to Owens

<sup>31</sup>“Robert Owens,” 1860 census; Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 119; “Anti-Slavery in California,” *New York Daily Times*, 27 March 1856; and Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 121. On African Americans in nineteenth-century Los Angeles and California, see Patty R. Coleman, “John Ballard and the African American Community in Los Angeles, 1850–1905,” *Southern California Quarterly* 94 (Summer 2012): 193–229; Kenneth Goode, *California’s Black Pioneers: A Brief Historical Survey* (Santa Barbara, 1974); Lawrence B. de Graaf, Kevin Mulroy, and Quintard Taylor, eds. *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California* (Los Angeles, 2001); W.E.B. Du Bois, “Colored California,” *Crisis* 6 (August 1913): 192–3; Stacey Smith, *Freedom’s Frontier: California and the Struggle over Unfree Labor, Emancipation, and Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill, 2014); Savage, *Blacks in the West*; and Lynn M. Hudson, *The Making of “Mammy Pleasant”: A Black Entrepreneur in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco* (Champaign, IL, 2008).

and kept the receipt, perhaps hoping to repurchase the items later. But while Biggs may have benefited from Owens's patronage, the early growth of a black community in Los Angeles likely hurt him in other ways. Barbering was the most popular profession for African Americans of either gender, and by 1870, five black barbers operated in Los Angeles County. Biggs had no competition in the early 1850s, a fact that was much changed by the time of his death in 1869.<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps reflecting growing anxieties about Biggs's position, he and Refugio Rodondo Biggs opened a store in her name in 1856. He made a point of getting the business license filed with the county, marking his name with an "X." The license, published in the *Star*, said the store would sell "fruits," "vegetables," and "poultry" while also operating as a "coffee" or "eating" house. (See figure 3.) Refugio's store was likely located near her husband's Los Angeles Shaving Saloon in the Salazar block, which was badly damaged in a fire later that year. According to newspaper coverage, Peter Biggs was "also a sufferer."<sup>33</sup>

Possibly in an attempt to recoup losses after this fire, Biggs signed a contract to lease the Bella Union's shaving saloon. (See figure 4.) In November 1858, Biggs retained attorney Columbus Simms of South Carolina and brought a \$1,200 lawsuit against Alejo Rendon, a Mexican-born barber whom Biggs claimed prevented him from taking occupancy. Perhaps Biggs felt he had a sympathetic audience in Judge Hayes, his old acquaintance, who freed Biddy Mason and seven other slaves two years earlier.<sup>34</sup>

Biggs could not testify as a black man in 1850s California, but that did not mean that Hayes ignored his point of view. In addition to subpoenaing Biggs's French competitor, Felix Signoret, and eight others, Hayes may have used a strategy he employed during the Mason case of informally interviewing black witnesses in his chambers. Regardless, Biggs seems to have lost. The case file includes an order requiring Biggs to pay \$15 in legal fees. Had Biggs's conflict with Rendon occurred the year following,

<sup>32</sup>Biggs's lot near Spring and Third is referenced in the court case of Guadalupe Perez, Dognacia Perez de M. Perez v. Peter Biggs, No. 09116, Los Angeles Superior, Los Angeles Area Court Records 1850–1910, Huntington Library, San Marino, CA (hereafter case, LAACR) and Coleman, "John Ballard," 206. For a careful accounting of African American occupations in Los Angeles in the period, see Campbell, "Heaven's Ghetto?" 85–8. Competing barbers in Los Angeles in 1860 included two sole practitioners—the French-born Felix Signoret, South Carolina-born African American Louis Green—and two partnerships: Prussia-born George Peffer and Jamaica-born Louis D. Green (listed as "B") and Mexican-born Alejo Rendon and Maryland-born William Leonard (listed as "M"). See "Felix Signoret," "Louis Green," "George Peffer," "Louis D. Green," "Alejo Rendon," and "William Leonard," 1860 census.

<sup>33</sup>Refugio Rodondo Biggs, "Statement of intent to become a 'sole trader,'" MSS C-Y 296, Bancroft Library; "Refugio Rodondo de Biggs," *Los Angeles Star*, 14 June 1856; and "Fire," *Los Angeles Star*, 22 November 1856.

<sup>34</sup>Peter Biggs v. John Doe, No. 00576, Los Angeles District, LAACR (hereafter Biggs v. Doe); "Alejo Rendon," 1860 census; Biggs v. Doe; "Anti-Slavery in California"; and Wolcott, *Pioneer Notes*, 70–2, 75.



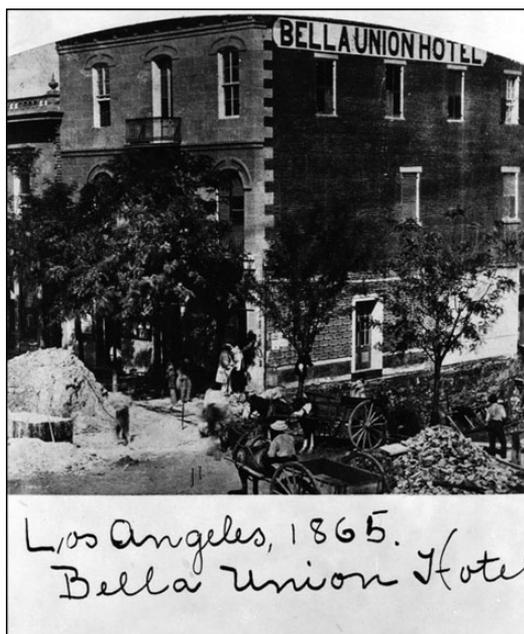


Figure 4. "View of the Bella Union Hotel in Los Angeles, showing workers around mounded dirt and rubble," ca. 1865, CHS-12704, Title Insurance and Trust and C. C. Pierce Photography Collection, 1860–1960, USC Libraries Special Collections. Courtesy of the California Historical Society.

barbering skills but himself: a former slave familiar with the ways of the South. In an era of heightened sectional crisis and civil war, the likely move for Biggs was to maintain visibly close connections with white Southerners.<sup>36</sup>

Two years later, in May 1864, J. F. Bilderback was arrested for publicly celebrating the Confederate victory at Fort Pillow, a battle that culminated in the massacre of nearly four hundred African American federal troops who had already surrendered. Bilderback expressed his hatred of black soldiering and his wish that "the Confederates would annihilate every negro taken with arms, and every white man, as well, who might be found in command of colored troops." While he was arrested by Union authorities, Bilderback's audience was likely sympathetic to his views, as the majority of the U.S.-born population of Civil War-era Los Angeles County were white Southerners, many of whom uttered frequent "indiscreet" expressions of "Hatred of the National Government."<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup>Peter Biggs," *Los Angeles Star*, 6 December 1862.

<sup>37</sup>"Another Military Arrest," *Los Angeles Star*, 14 May 1864.

Thousands of Southern-born whites arrived in Southern California in the wake of the U.S.-Mexican War, many traveling overland from frontier slave states along paths blazed by the invading U.S. military. In the words of Stacey Smith, this influx, which included “a small but persistent population of slaveholders, made Los Angeles one of the strongest centers of proslavery sentiment on the Pacific Coast.” Southern-born whites comprised a slim majority of the U.S.-born population in town, and they expanded their political influence by forming a powerful alliance with propertied, native-born Californios. Underpinning the cooperation of these two groups in both politics and vigilante activity were common seigneurial values regarding social hierarchy and masculine honor. In the 1860 presidential election, strong support from both Southern-born Anglos and Californios helped Southern Democratic candidate John C. Breckinridge receive more votes for president in Los Angeles than any other candidate, including Republican Abraham Lincoln (who won in California) and Northern Democrat Stephen A. Douglas, who came in second statewide. Following the Confederacy’s collapse and Lincoln’s assassination, local Unionists feared Southern sympathizers might take drastic action. Two days after the assassination, on 17 April, Col. James Curtis requested that more troops be sent to Southern California, claiming that “an organization of rebels exists in [Los Angeles] and San Bernardino counties” and that “the Union people of the latter have demanded protection.”<sup>38</sup>

In this climate of Unionist panic and anguish, Biggs and those white celebrants of Lincoln’s assassination were arrested. Under General Orders, No. 27 of the Department of the Pacific, Gen. Richard C. Drum stated that such celebrants would be considered “virtually accessory after the fact” and that any expression of “sympathy” with “the Act” was to be “suppressed.” Three were arrested in Los Angeles on 18 April, and three more were arrested on 22 April, including “Peter Biggs, a negro.” A correspondent of the San Francisco-based *Daily Alta California* tried to explain the anomaly of this “descendant of Ham”: “So impressible was the nature of this Ethiopian that he has continually been the vanguard of the secessionists and traitors of this place.” Perhaps only an African American man who had straddled the boundaries of free and enslaved, eastern and western, and pre- and post-bellum worlds could have embodied all of these contradictions at once. By 13 May, following additional arrests, eight prisoners, including Biggs, were being held as “government guests” at Drum Barracks. Writing decades later, Bell recalled that, following the assassination, “Southern ‘patriots’ . . . hurrahed until they fell in the streets, dead drunk.” Union

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<sup>38</sup>Smith, *Freedom’s Frontier*, 126; Leonard L. Richards, *The California Gold Rush and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York, 2008), 215–6; and James F. Curtis to Richard C. Drum, 17 April 1865, quoted in *The War of the Rebellion*, ser. 1, vol. 50, pt. 2 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1897), 1200. On the alliance, see Daniel Lynch, “Southern California Chivalry: The Convergence of Southerners and Californios in the Far Southwest, 1846–1866” (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2015), 13, 132–9. According to the 1860 census, 51.9 percent of all Los Angeles County residents born in U.S. states had been born in Southern states (922 out of 1,778). Lynch, “Southern California Chivalry,” 12–4.

soldiers then “loaded the “patriots” into an army ambulance,” and, after “escaping successfully from the town,” they put the prisoners, including “Niger Peter the barber,” into “camp chain gangs.”<sup>39</sup>

To the chagrin of the Unionist *Wilmington Journal*, three of the prisoners were released without explanation. Following a “public examination” of the remaining prisoners in Los Angeles on 22 May, Biggs and two others remained in custody, but another man was released. Chat Helms, a white man, was let go on the explanation that he was “an ignorant person, occupying no social position.” Once again, Biggs stood out—first, to Mormon soldiers (who conflated Biggs with his white superiors); then later, to William Tecumseh Sherman (who wanted to punish Biggs as a citizen instead of as a slave); and finally, to Union officers—as being as worthy of punishment as those white citizens of “social position” whose beards he trimmed.<sup>40</sup>

On 24 June, the *Wilmington Journal* reported the release of the last political prisoners at Fort Alcatraz as well as the continued incarceration of three “guests” at Drum Barracks. Biggs and the other men were finally released on 17 July, but only after taking an oath to “abide by and faithfully support all laws and proclamations which have been made during the existing rebellion in reference to the emancipation of slaves.”<sup>41</sup> Ironically, Biggs was only granted his freedom after agreeing to accept the freedom of all other former slaves.

Perhaps he relished this political theater of a public examination and oath taking. It may have been part of his strategy as a Southern-style barber. Bell recalled, “Pete won the cognomen during Secession of the Black Democrat on account of his political adherence to the local majority.” The only evidence, however, of Biggs describing himself in this way comes from 1867 advertisements in the *Los Angeles Weekly Republican*, which, as its name would suggest, expressed opinions favorable to the Republican Party. (See figure 5.) How then might historians reconcile Biggs’s public celebration of Lincoln’s death and his self-identification as “the Black Democrat” in a publication supporting the Party of Lincoln? His choice of ad—and the seemingly conflicting choice of outlet—may have been part of a strategy to appeal to Anglo-American men across the political spectrum. Republicans might laugh at the irony of

<sup>39</sup>Richard C. Drum, “General Orders, No. 27,” *War of the Rebellion*, 1198; “Degraded Beings,” *Wilmington Journal*, 22 April 1865; “Government Guests,” *Wilmington Journal*, 22 April 1865; “Our Letter From Los Angeles,” *Daily Alta California* (San Francisco), 4 May 1865; “Strange Proceedings,” *Wilmington Journal*, 29 April 1865; “Government Guests,” *Wilmington Journal*, 13 May 1865; and Bell, *Old West Coast*, 75–6. Court records show Biggs was also charged with grand larceny (10 May 1864), disturbing the peace (24 or 25 October 1864), and “cheating” (11 June 1868). John Shore et al., *Los Angeles County Justice Court Minutes*, vol. “18 May 1863–29 October 1869,” 207, 282, 565, LAACR. On American responses to Lincoln’s assassination, see Martha Hodes, *Mourning Lincoln* (New Haven, 2015), 87.

<sup>40</sup>“Government Guests,” *Wilmington Journal*, 27 May 1865.

<sup>41</sup>“Government Guests,” 24 June 1865 and “Government Guests,” 22 July 1865, both *Wilmington Journal*.

**Barber Shop and Bath  
House.**

**T**HE undersigned begs leave to inform the citizens of Los Angeles, that he is now located at the old stand opposite Banning & Co's. office. Where he is prepared to execute Shaving, Hair Cutting and Shampooing in an artistic manner, and at San Francisco prices.

*Warm, Cold, and Shower Baths at all hours  
of the day*

He also keeps at the same place, an Intelligence office and City Express. Furnishes all kinds of help at short notice, and attends to the cleaning of Rooms with neatness and dispatch.

PETE BIGGS.  
The Black Democrat.

oct26tf

Figure 5. "Barber Shop and Bath House," *Los Angeles Weekly Republican*, 14 December 1867. Courtesy of the California State Library, Sacramento.

the "Black Democrat" while at the same time supporting an enterprising freedman, and many Southerners would have valued a formerly enslaved man who publically embraced the "Lost Cause."<sup>42</sup>

By contrast, African Americans who embraced the political equality championed by the Republican Party met stiff resistance in Los Angeles. In 1870 a black man named Luis G. Green cited the newly ratified Fifteenth Amendment when he sued the county clerk for refusing to let him vote. Green was then denied his voting rights by Judge Ygnacio Sepulveda, a lifelong Democrat who, like many native-born Californios, had a history of siding with Southern-born politicians in the proslavery "Chivalry" wing of the state Democratic Party. Less than two months later, in the wake of a new congressional enforcement act, the county clerk registered Green and several other African American men without incident.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>42</sup>Bell, *Old West Coast*, 40, 75–6 and "Barber Shop and Bath House."

<sup>43</sup>Coleman, "John Ballard," 214–7; "An Important Decision on the Fifteenth Amendment," *Los Angeles Weekly Star*, 7 May 1879; and Lynch, "Southern California Chivalry," 206.

Despite Green's ultimate success in registering, the resistance he faced from Judge Sepulveda fits a broader pattern of intensifying conflict between various minority populations in California—African Americans, Native Americans, Chinese immigrants, and Latinos. The end of the Civil War saw the Democratic Party roar back to power, as members of the white majority confronted the possibility that their privileged position might erode significantly as a result of Reconstruction. For instance, many white Angelenos feared that Reconstruction legislation designed with African Americans in mind might expand the rights of Chinese immigrants and Native Americans. In the face of this racial backlash, Michael Bottoms has shown, many Californians of color engaged in “destructive competition,” ultimately strengthening the position of white Angelenos and making life especially difficult for those, such as Biggs, who had served as intermediaries between groups. The multinational world that Biggs first encountered in Mexican-era Los Angeles had been replaced by a self-consciously multiracial world. By this time, in this place, racial categories and access to whiteness mattered more than the national and regional knowledge upon which Biggs had initially made his name.<sup>44</sup>

Against this backdrop, El Bastonero, the Master of Ceremonies, lost his life. On 5 May 1869, Peter Biggs appears to have been murdered in a Main Street restaurant by a nineteen-year-old California-born man who worked as a cook. His death occurred amidst an upswing in violence, a side effect of the city's rapid economic development and population increase during the late 1860s and early 1870s. According to the *Los Angeles Daily News*, Biggs, “more familiarly known as ‘nigger Pete,’ was stabbed and killed by one Victor, alias Sport.” The incident took place at Baker's Restaurant, where Victor worked. According to the coroner's inquest, published a few days after the murder, the cause of death was a butcher's knife through the heart at approximately 1:30 a.m. Bell recalled that Biggs “died with his boots on” in a brawl with a “Mexican waiter.” The dispute began when Biggs deemed the waiter “guilty of some breach of conventional good manners, and as none knew better how to wait on a gentleman, none were more exacting in demanding the utmost punctilio on the part of those who waited on him.” Biggs hurled “epithets” followed by “cups, saucers and plates,” as the argument escalated into a fight.<sup>45</sup>

The accused, Victor Lamorie, was found “not guilty” by the jury, which was drawn from a pool that included many Spanish-surnamed men who may have resented Biggs's position in Los Angeles. Perhaps Biggs had, for the final time, bumped up against the limits of his ability to stake out a semi-privileged status. Asserting primacy over another man of color, he was murdered. As Bell recollected in 1877, “his

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<sup>44</sup>Bottoms, *Aristocracy of Color*, 8.

<sup>45</sup>Faragher, *Eternity Street*, 445–6; “A Negro Named Peter Biggs,” *Los Angeles Daily News*, 6 May 1869; “A Homicide,” *Los Angeles Star*, 8 May 1869; “Coroners Inquests,” *Los Angeles Republican*, 6 May 1869; and Bell, *Reminiscences*, 40.

slayer walks our streets today, of course proudly conscious of having killed a distinguished character.”<sup>46</sup>

Six decades later, a character likely based upon Biggs was featured in the 1930 Hollywood Western *The Lash*. The screenwriter, Lanier Bartlett, also edited and published Horace Bell’s second memoir that year. Although the film is no longer extant, the book upon which it was based survives. Chapter 14 of Lanier and Virginia Stivers Bartlett’s *The Lash: Photoplay Title of Adios!* opens with a tremendously racist caricature of the barbershop of “Peter Moses,” who, Bartlett wrote, “advertised in the Los Angeles *Star* that he ‘shampooed and erranded for the gentleman of the city.’” While “gesticulating with his razor,” the “newsy barber” told Judge Travels a story he had already recited “many times that morning” about the robbery of a group of white women. A “native ranchero” had led the women to refuge in a Catholic Church, but, being Presbyterian, they demanded to be moved. When “Peter Moses” shared their location at the Bella Union Hotel, the judge replied, “The Bell Union! That rat-infested, dirt-floored old mud-pie! Outrageous! . . . What are you grinning at, you black devil? Attend to your business!” The barber replied, “Yassah, yassah, beg pa’don, Jedge, you all’ll be shaved up slick and pretty in jes one secon’ now, Jedge.” Moses then hastened “to concentrate on his work,” but, as the racist dialogue nevertheless reveals, “work” ultimately involved far more than shaving. This was the case for Peter Biggs, who served as an intermediary—amidst the Spanish- and English-speaking populations, between Catholics and Presbyterians, and many more—and thereby carved a niche for himself. In the far corner of the American empire, at the intersection of the South and West, Biggs had become, in Horace Bell’s words, an “illustrious and necessary appendage to Los Angeles society.”<sup>48</sup>

Local newspapers do not corroborate Bell’s claim that “[m]any mourners followed the great man to his last resting-pace.” Whether or not there was a crowd, his twenty-one-year-old daughter, Juana—recently married to freedman Nelson Smiley—may have said good-bye to her father that day. While Biggs would later loom large as a “distinguished character” in nostalgic memoirs, perhaps by 1869 his moment of local prominence had passed. His opportunities as a free black man in a borderland town with many Southern migrants shrank as a result of general emancipation and the politics of Southern Reconstruction.<sup>49</sup> Los Angeles’s gradual transition from a Spanish-Mexican pueblo to an American city also diminished opportunities for Biggs.

A photographic panorama created a week after Biggs’s murder shows the extent of this transition. (See [figure 6](#).) The photographers caused a “slight commotion,” according to the *Daily News*, by positioning themselves in front of an old hilltop fortress built

<sup>46</sup>People of the State of California v. Victor Samonri [sic], No. 00888, Los Angeles Criminal, LAACR and “Victor Lamorie,” *Great Registers, 1866–1898*, collection 4–2A, microfilm, CSL rolls 19 and 20, FHL rolls 976928 and 977994, California State Library, Sacramento.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 120 and Bell, *Reminiscences*, 40.

<sup>49</sup>Bell, *Reminiscences*, 40.



Figure 6. "Panoramic view showing 200 degrees of Los Angeles looking east from hillside above Broadway (formerly Fort Street), May 13, 1869, (1868?)," by Charles C. Pierce, CHS-5833P-5837.5, Title Insurance and Trust and C. C. Pierce Photography Collection, 1860-1960, USC Libraries Special Collections. Courtesy of the California Historical Society.

by the Mormon Battalion, the unit that brought Biggs to Los Angeles during the U.S.-Mexican-American War. "Some people," the paper reported, "became much excited, declaring that an enemy had captured the fort and was bringing its guns to bear on the city." Rather than challenging the American conquest of Los Angeles, however, the photographers were documenting it. The pitched roof of the city's first Protestant church dominates the foreground; the clock tower of the Market House is the sole structure peaking above the horizon. These vertical symbols of Anglo-American development contrast sharply with the low-slung adobes in the city's central business district. A year later, in 1870, this area would be designated as the second of three wards for the city's elections. To the northeast, at the far left of the panorama, were the old plaza and the largely Spanish-speaking neighborhood of Sonoratown, named after the state in northern Mexico where many of its residents were born. Those living in the third ward in the southwestern part of the city were much more likely to be born in the United States. Robert Owens's home is barely visible in the upper right-hand section of the image; Bidy Mason and Peter Biggs also owned property in what became the third ward. Yet, far more Anglo-American settlers lived in this rapidly developing part of the city. The third ward generally voted against Spanish-surnamed candidates during the 1870s, as the Spanish-surnamed population faced increasing political and social marginalization. Meanwhile, in 1871, a diverse mob massacred 10 percent of the city's Chinese population. Thereafter, "the fixing of blame took on a distinctly Mexican vector," according to historian David Torres-Rouff. Anglo anxieties stemmed in part from plans to connect Los Angeles to the transcontinental railroad network. Anglo-American elites led an effort to reform the city ahead of the railroad's arrival in 1876 and Sonoratown was targeted by a larger and increasingly professionalized police force. The nineteenth-century pueblo of Los Angeles had begun its decades-long transformation into twentieth-century LA.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>50</sup>Charles C. Pierce, "Panoramic view showing 200 degrees of Los Angeles looking east from hillside above Broadway (formerly Fort Street), May 13, 1869 (1868?)," CHS-5833P-5837.5, California Historical Society Collection, 1860-1960, University of Southern California Libraries Special Collections; "Don't You Remember," *Los Angeles Daily News*, 10 May 1869; "Photographic," *Los Angeles Daily News*, 11 May 1869; J. M. Guinn, "Old Fort Moore," in *Annual Publication of the*

The end of the Civil War was accompanied by the emergence of a more rigid racial hierarchy throughout the state. Having supported the Union, white Californians were embittered by Reconstruction, believing that its policies would dilute their own political influence within a highly diverse state. Unlike the former Confederate states that had to ratify the Fourteenth or Fifteenth Amendment as a condition of readmittance, California refused to ratify either one. In the face of this particular racist backlash against Reconstruction, as well as the growth of the African American population in Los Angeles, the kinds of privilege previously cultivated by free African Americans such as Biggs faded quickly.<sup>51</sup> In the Reconstruction era, just as formerly enslaved and free African Americans actively embraced the upbuilding of black Los Angeles, public space for “the Black Democrat” was narrowing by the day.

Within a year of Peter Biggs’s 1869 murder, it appears that his only known child had died. Thus, while the children and grandchildren of Biddy Mason and Robert Owens passed down and memorialized the stories of these black pioneers, Biggs had no known descendants. By 1870, his remaining son-in-law, Nelson Smiley, had left Los Angeles for Tulare County, where he died in 1880, reportedly in a “Suicide by Shooting.” In the absence of descendants, surviving kinship networks, or institutional attachments, Biggs’s story was left to occasional mention in the writings of well-known white Angelenos.<sup>52</sup>

By the time Delilah Beasley sat down in 1918 to write the first substantive history of African Americans in California, Biggs received barely a few lines’ attention beyond “first barber.” Significantly, while he may have been the only free African American living independently in Los Angeles in 1850, he was not included under the chapter heading “Slaves Emancipated in California Through the Courts and Friends of the Negro Race Before the Issuing of President Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation.” In a book titled *The Negro Trail Blazers of California* (1919), at the height of racial uplift, perhaps the story of Biggs had nowhere to land. As Nell Irvin Painter noted in 1977, the earliest generations of black historians, of which Beasley was one, “emphasized respectable individuals” and “‘credits to the race’ who have made ‘contributions’ to American life.” Painter acknowledged that such a focus on “heroes” in African American history, both understandable and tragic, has left a series of powerful erasures that historians have only recently begun to excavate. After Biggs’s death in 1869, the *Star* reported, “Pete was quite a character in his way, was always on hand to do any errand, but sometimes became noisy and troublesome.”<sup>53</sup> He proved troublesome in both history and historiography, in his own time as well as ours.

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*Historical Society of Southern California and Pioneer Register, Los Angeles*, vol. 4 (Los Angeles, 1898), 141–7; and Torres-Rouff, *Before L.A.*, 179–203.

<sup>51</sup>Bottoms, *Aristocracy of Color*, 55–94.

<sup>52</sup>“Juana Biggs,” 1860 census and “Nelson Smiley,” U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Tenth Census of the United States—1880, California*, Population Schedules for Tulare County, Tulare, microfilm, roll 85, T9, NARA.