

Sabbatical Proposal
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Introduction

In 2004, my eyes scanned over a 100 year-old census record. After poring over pages of monotonous information, my eyes suddenly stopped and stared. There on the page was one mark, a letter, actually, that stunned me. The letter “N” was recorded by a census enumerator to describe the race of a family living in the Conejo Valley in 1900 (see attachment 1). John Ballard and his family were the first African Americans to settle in the western Santa Monica Mountains. That one seemingly innocuous letter was a catalyst that corrected a 100 year-old historical injustice, and if this proposal is accepted, will rewrite the narrative of the African American experience in California history. I am applying for a semester sabbatical to complete a research project on John Ballard, a 19th century African American pioneer. During my sabbatical, I will complete necessary research, join the Los Angeles History Research Group, and write an article for publication in a scholarly journal.

Background

The first record of John Ballard in California is a marriage certificate that states “I, Jesse Hamilton a Methodist minister hereby certify that the ceremony of marriage was performed by me on the 6th day of November 1859 between John Ballard, a colored man aged 30 years born in Kentucky and Amanda, a colored woman aged 19 years born in Texas...” In 1859, California had been a state for less than a decade and slavery was banned according to the state constitution. With just over 4,000 residents, the city of Los Angeles was home to only about 60 African Americans. While blacks were not considered citizens and constitutionally barred from voting or testifying against whites in court, John Ballard managed to find unique freedom and opportunity in Los Angeles. During the 19th century he worked, owned property, and helped found a vibrant black community. Historians have ignored this community, believing that it was too small to have made any significant contributions to history, but I believe that his accomplishments deserve to be celebrated and studied.

According to a deed filed with the county in 1869, Ballard and six other men founded the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in Los Angeles, a historically black church that provided more than just spiritual guidance. Usually excluded from other churches because of color, blacks found a safe place to celebrate births and marriages, forming essential social and familial bonds. The deed refers to Ballard and the other men as “the trustees of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.” The First AME church of Los Angeles became one of the most important institutions for the black community, as it continues to be today. During a service on October 25, 2009 the First AME Church of Los Angeles honored me for my research (see attachment 2).

By 1870 John Ballard owned several properties in Los Angeles and was the father of seven children. It was also in 1870 that he became a political activist, challenging racist federal and state laws. On January 28, 1870, the California legislature voted *against* ratification of the 15th Amendment, which states, “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” But enough states did vote to ratify, and so the 15th Amendment became law in February, 1870. Immediately, a small group of black men tried to register to vote in Los Angeles, but the California Secretary of State prohibited county registrars from doing so (in violation of the

United States Constitution). After several months of contentious legal battles, letter writing campaigns and rallies, the Secretary of State finally gave in. And so, on July 5, 1870, John Ballard became one of the first African Americans registered to vote in Los Angeles County, by virtue of the 15th Amendment.

The next decade brought many changes for the Ballard family. In 1871 Amanda died in childbirth and a few years later John married a woman named Francis. By 1880 the family had moved out of the city and settled in the western Santa Monica Mountains, the first African Americans to do so. One can only speculate why they chose to do this, but given the changing racial climate of Los Angeles in the 1880s, it may have been an escape. Between 1870 and 1890 the population of Los Angeles jumped from just over 5,000 to over 50,000 and then doubled again in 10 years. This influx was largely due to immigrants from the East and Midwest. Primarily white, many of these Americans brought racist views and policies with them. Known as Jim Crow laws, institutionalized segregation became entrenched in Los Angeles at this time. For many African Americans who had lived in the city for decades, this sudden change must have been shocking and frightening.

At the end of the 19th century John, Francis, and at least some of their children, lived in the Santa Monica Mountains near Seminole Hot Springs. John stayed in the mountains even after the death of his second wife in 1896. In 1900 he acquired a homestead patent (see attachment 3). The Homestead Act allowed adult American citizens to receive 160 acres of land for a small fee, as long as they built a home and made "improvements" to the land. For many years, blacks had been prohibited from homesteading in California both by law and custom; even after the 14th Amendment conferred citizenship on African American men, tradition and custom still worked against them. Now an elderly widower, John Ballard lived in a small lumber house and made a few trips per year into the city to sell firewood and charcoal. But if in fact he came to the mountains to escape racism, John Ballard may have been disappointed to learn that even in such a remote location, bigotry could find him. According to several Ventura and Conejo Valley newspaper articles, fires in 1889 and 1891 burned his cabin and barn. In both, locals suspected arson.

Around 1900 a local ranching family took an interest in John Ballard. Amazingly, during one visit, a member of the family took a picture of him, labeling the photo "Nigger Ballard". But even as an elderly man he stands tall and proud (see attachment 4). Shortly after this photograph was taken, in 1905, John Ballard died. He was buried at Rosedale Cemetery in Los Angeles. Although it is an unmarked grave, it is situated on a small hill, overlooking the city he helped to build.

The Mountain

In 2007 I gave a talk about the Ballards at the National Park Service headquarters in Thousand Oaks. At the end of the talk, a gentleman approached me to ask if I knew anything about the name of the mountain near his home. He explained that it was called Negrohead Mountain, and wondered if there was any connection to Ballard, since his homestead was nearby. Intrigued, I researched the mountain and its peculiar name. I found several references to the mountain in newspapers after 1910. In all, the mountain was referred to as "Nigger Ballard Hill," but as time progressed, it was shortened to just "Nigger Hill" and then evolved into "Niggerhead" (see attachment 5). During the 1960s the Johnson administration ordered all derogatory place names to be changed to "Negro." Thus, United States maps identified the peak as "Negrohead Mountain" up until the present day

After I discovered the origin of the name and connection to Ballard, I petitioned the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors to make a formal request to the United States Geological Survey (USGS) to rename the mountain *Ballard Mountain*. The Board was very enthusiastic and after my testimony, immediately sent a letter asking the USGS to rename the mountain, “as a lasting tribute to the pioneering spirit and civic contributions of this courageous African-American man and his family to the political and cultural vibrancy of his community in the formative years of our city’s growth and development.”

According to Dr. Marcia McNutt, the director of the USGS, the Board on Geographic Names receives over 100 name change requests per year. In most cases, these requests take years to process. However, this case was different. In less than a year (record time) the Board approved the request and on September 9, 2009, the mountain officially became Ballard Mountain. On February 20, 2010 over 90 people, including Ballard descendants, gathered to officially celebrate the name change and christen a bronze plaque that was placed at the base of the mountain. The renaming of Ballard Mountain brought pride to a family and a community and righted an injustice. Multiple news outlets featured the story, including international media (attachments 6-11).

While the renaming is certainly an accomplishment, my research on Ballard is not complete. There is still necessary research that needs to be done, but most importantly, John Ballard’s story must be added to the historiography through formal publication. It is wonderful that the public learned about the mountain through the media, but until an academic article is written and published, Los Angeles history, California history, African American history, and United States history will remain incomplete.

Literature Review

While there are numerous articles and books that explore the African American experience in California, very few focus on the individuals who comprised the 19th century black community in Los Angeles, and even fewer focus on their activism. John Ballard has never even been mentioned in any article or book. Scholars are well acquainted with a handful of individuals from this era and rely on these few to tell the story: Biddy Mason, Robert Owens and Charles Owens. While they are extremely significant, they were not the only ones who contributed to the growth of the community. An article about John Ballard’s experience will give historians a more complete picture of life in 19th century Los Angeles. It will also shed light on the early activism that is unknown to scholars.

Douglas Flamming, *Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (2006)
Ballard’s contributions occur before Jim Crow became fully entrenched in Los Angeles. His experience *before* 1880 is evidence of early activism rarely seen elsewhere in the United States.

Lawrence B. De Graaf, Kevin Mulroy, Quintard Taylor, and Autry Museum of Western Heritage, *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California* (2001)

The people discussed in this anthology are those individuals long recognized as pioneers in California. The Mason and Owens families have been extensively documented and this text does not introduce anything new to the historiography. Ballard will force historians to acknowledge that others- previously unknown- contributed to the growth of Los Angeles.

William Loren Katz, *The Black West: A Documentary and Pictorial History of the African American Role in the Westward Expansion of the United States* (2005)

Los Angeles is mentioned briefly, primarily because most historians believe that the first true black community in California emerged in the north, as a result of the Gold Rush. Historians have therefore largely ignored the experiences of African Americans in southern California. Katz only deals with Los Angeles in passing, and records the city's tiny (in comparison to San Francisco) black population. Ballard will demonstrate that while small, the black community in Los Angeles was vibrant and active.

Josh Sides, *LA City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (2006)

Professor Sides (California State University, Northridge) was widely and deservedly heralded for this seminal work. However, once again, the experiences of blacks in Los Angeles during the 19th century are not a part of this study. Because the black population remained relatively small, most historians have focused on the black community in early 20th century, erroneously believing that there was not a significant community before this time. My research shows that this was not the case at all.

Throughout my research, I sought the advice of both Dr. Flamming and Dr. Sides (see above). Both support my work and each confirms the necessity of additional research that would benefit students and scholars of local, California, and United States history. Simply put, my article will chronicle the life of a historically significant individual who has not been identified nor studied by any other scholar.

Sabbatical Project

During my sabbatical I will complete necessary research, join the Los Angeles History Research Group, and write an article for publication in a scholarly journal. I have already spent hundreds of hours at various museums and archives compiling information about John Ballard. However, there are still vital questions that remain. Most importantly, I have yet to explore John Ballard's life *before* he came to Los Angeles. He was born in Kentucky about 1830. At that time, the state was home to 165,213 slaves and while it did have a free black population, it represented only 1.3% of the overall state population. It is therefore highly likely that Ballard was born a slave, which makes his appearance in California in the 1850s even more intriguing. Was he freed by his owner? Did he run away? Did his owner bring him to California? Slavery was never a static institution and illuminating the experiences of just one slave who obtained freedom would make a significant contribution to the field. I have cultivated several contacts in Kentucky to assist me with research and already institutions there have shown interest in my work. The University of Kentucky has included Ballard in their *Notable Kentucky African American Database*.

In addition to conducting research on Ballard's early life and journey west, I will join the Los Angeles History Research Group. This prestigious organization is part of the Huntington-USC Institute on California and the West. Scholars submit papers for peer review and are then discussed at meetings at the Huntington Library. The group's mission is "to encourage an exchange of ideas and concepts that can aid each scholar's work. The group provides a forum for the latest scholarship on Los Angeles, as well as for innovative interdisciplinary projects that engage Southern California's history." Participation in this group will greatly increase my knowledge on western history. I will also have the benefit of gaining valuable advice on my article from some of the most preeminent historians in the field, as well as graduate students working on

the most current research. My article proposal has already been partially accepted by the *Southern California Quarterly*, an academic journal produced by the Historical Society of Southern California. I would also like to submit the article to national publications.

Benefit to the Faculty Member, Students, College, and District

After completion of my sabbatical, I will be a better historian and better teacher. I will also bring distinction to Moorpark College and the Ventura County Community College District. A publication in a well-respected academic journal will elevate the perception of our college, and community college teachers in general. My project will keep me current and connected to my field and allow me to develop an additional area of expertise. Finally, and most importantly, this sabbatical will greatly benefit my students.

Every semester, I teach 2 or 3 courses in History M07A or M07B, *Social and Political History of the United States*. That means that every year, I am honored to teach approximately 250 students about our nation's development. As reflected in the CORs for both courses, slavery, race, and western settlement are key components of the course curriculum. But rather than teaching students these themes in an abstract way, I can tell them the story of John Ballard, a man whose very life encompasses the intersection of all three. This project can also make what is sometimes perceived as a boring discipline come alive for students by taking history out of the textbook and showing them that history is real and it's right in their own backyard.

My sabbatical experience will also translate into more complete instruction of research methods. Moorpark College is primarily a transfer institution and the four-year universities expect that our students will have had exposure to research methods. My own research can serve as a model for instruction and hopefully inspire students as they complete their own projects.

Conclusion

Thank you for taking the time to review my sabbatical proposal. This project will make a significant contribution to the field of history. It has enormous potential to benefit my own teaching and the campus community at large. It is also very important to me that I complete this project in a timely manner. After the *Los Angeles Times* printed an article about my research, I was contacted by a family who thought that they might be descendants of John Ballard. They knew they had an ancestor named John, but knew nothing more. After further research, I proved that they were indeed John Ballard's descendants. The family was eager to learn more, so we agreed to meet- in the President's Conference Room at Moorpark College (see attachment 12-13). Since then I have had the pleasure of getting to know the 86-year-old great-grandson of John Ballard. Mr. Reginald Ballard knew his great-grandfather in name only, and had no idea of his historical significance. Sharing my research with this family has been an unexpected joy and honor and has taught me that history really does repeat itself. Mr. Reginald Ballard is a retired fire captain. In the 1950s he successfully challenged the Los Angeles County Fire Department's segregation policies and won. Today, his uniform is on display in the Fire Museum in Los Angeles. I look forward to publishing an article dedicated to Mr. Ballard's courage, a trait that seems to run deep in this family.