

## Few African Americans in Solano 150 years ago

By Nancy Dingler

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The 1850 census listed 962 African Americans in California. Unfortunately, it does not break down how many were free or how many were considered slaves.

Out of this number, 580 resided in Solano County.

Many slave owners saw the California Gold Rush as a chance to extend slavery into Western territory. They felt little risk in bringing small numbers of slaves to California because they believed that the National Fugitive Slave Law, passed as part of the Compromise of 1850, would support their claims.

Some slaves brought to California were given the opportunity to gain freedom through arrangements with slaveholders. Some were allowed to purchase freedom for themselves and family members, while others gained release from bondage by working for a specific period of time. Self-liberation was chosen by the bold, who knew that in the early years no police system existed to keep them in servile roles.

White miners feared competition from slave labor. They resented the idea of profit going to the master who did no work and they feared the wealth and control that Southern aristocrats would gain.

As defenders of free labor, white miners were worried that slaves would be freed and represented a pool of cheap labor to compete with them. Free black miners sought to avoid conflict or harassment by working in partnership with white miners, especially New England anti-slavery men, or by working areas that had Mexican or Chinese miners. In Yuba County an African American mining company found satisfaction by naming their operation the "Sweet Vengeance Mine."

Newspapers in 1850 reported slave escapes and court cases involving enslavement. They ran ads offering slaves for sale, along with freedom papers notices. It was estimated that at any time, there were between 200 to 300 enslaved African Americans in mining areas.

In addition, California Indians also were held as slaves during this period. De facto slavery was still practiced for many years after its legal abolition. Some slaveholders tried to hide enslaved people in remote mining and rural areas to avoid possible loss. During the fall of 1849, delegates met at Colton Hall in Monterey to produce an

anti-slavery constitution. Although Southern political power in California was strong at the time, there was fear that the subject of slavery would complicate matters in gaining statehood.

The new constitution left the status of slaves who arrived before and after the admission undefined, and no provision was made stating how long blacks could be held in bondage in the "free state." These issues were left for the first Legislature to decide when it was formed. In December the first state Assembly passed an anti-Negro immigration bill, which would have banned all blacks from living in the state.

David Broderick, a former New York Democrat, led opposition and the bill was defeated in the state Senate. However, because of loopholes in the state's laws, both free and enslaved African Americans continued to arrive. One of the enslaved arrivals was Adam Willis. He was born in Missouri in 1824. Willis was either inherited or purchased by the Vaughn family of Saline County, Mo.

In 1846, Maj. Singleton Vaughn came to California with Willis, settling around Woodland, then moved to Benicia. In 1852 Vaughn sent 23-year-old Willis back to Missouri to bring Vaughn's family to California. Willis remained with the family until he was given his freedom sometime before 1855. Willis worked as a cook in the Suisun area, including for Josiah Wing, founder of Suisun City. He continued as a cook for several hotels over the years and for the Solano County Hospital in Fairfield.

In his obituary of Nov. 20, 1902, it was noted that he was one of the few African Americans in Solano County in the 19th century. "Everyone knew 'Uncle Adam' as he was familiarly known and the fact that so large a number attended his funeral held at the People's Methodist Church, was evidence of the esteem in which he was held."

Nancy Geary came to Solano County with her owners, settling in Dixon in 1868. She was born in Mississippi about 1840 and as a young girl was given to the J.G. Duke family.

The family moved to Texas before trekking to California. It is not known when Geary gained her freedom. By the time she arrived in Dixon, she had been married and lost her husband. She had two sons, Jeff, who died young and Frank, who would hold an important position at Mare Island around the turn of the 20th century. Geary worked as a midwife and nurse. In later years, she owned her own store in Dixon and made ice cream, which she used to bring out to the field workers.

A leaflet in 1898 listed places to eat: "Mrs. Nancy Geary is prepared to furnish a wholesome meal at the corner of First and B Street and will treat her patrons well."

Notice of her death on July 18, 1910 stated, "Mrs. Nancy Geary, although of the colored race, among the older families, probably had as many sincere friends as any person in town, who will miss her especially in times of sickness. Until advancing age had laid its hand upon her, she had been a most capable nurse, and in many of the old families of the town there was never a sickness but she had been nurse, and a very tender, sympathetic and faithful nurse she always proved to be."

Abolitionist leaders made California a battleground in the national movement against slavery. Literary societies, political conventions, church groups and civil rights organization met to discuss the best way to help those held in bondage. African American churches, fraternal and political organizations provided assistance to runaways. Three colored conventions were held in the state between 1855 and 1857, the first two in Sacramento and the last in San Francisco.

The delegates hoped to achieve basic rights, including those of testimony, franchise and education. The three conventions were an effective training ground for black leadership. With the coming of the Civil War, the anti-slavery movement in California gradually evolved into a civil rights movement. After freedom from slavery was secured for all, efforts focused on gaining a broad range of political, economic and social rights.

Much of our local history, the stories of people who came from all over the world and made Solano County, particularly Fairfield-Suisun, their home is slowly disappearing. The community effort to save the old library in Fairfield with the hope that one day it would become a repository of this history, so that future generations would be able to learn of their origins has been an ongoing effort. Many years have been spent by a dedicated few to bring a much deserved historical museum to the county seat.

The Solano County Historical Society and the Museum Roundtable group are seeking membership. They need volunteers with time and ideas for fundraising. They also need endowments. The dream of a museum is close at hand. What is needed is the ongoing community support - the same support that helped save the old library.

If you have old photos that are in danger of being lost or discarded, or have a suggestion for a story or family history that is unique to our community, please contact me at History\_Whiz10@yahoo.com, or leave a message with Patty Amador at 427-6981.

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