

Local revelations Vallejo woman documents slavery, early black pioneers

By Nancy Dingler

Saturday, February 24, 2007

Sharon McGriff-Payne of Vallejo is passionate about her latest project: the recorded history of African-Americans in Solano County.

She has been so successful in her quest that she unearthed unknown manumission papers in the Solano County Archives for Adam Willis, a slave who lived in Benicia.

Manumission is the legal term for granting freedom to a slave. The finding was so astounding, that when McGriff-Payne contacted Marc Tonnesen, the county recorder/assessor, he insisted on a formal presentation of the document to the Board of Supervisors.

It has been longed believed that slaves were not kept in California, except the native Americans by the Spanish Californios on their estates. But, here was proof that African-American slaves were brought to California by the Americans.

In Willis' case, his owner, Singleton Vaughn, finally freed him in 1855, before the Civil War.

The manumission document, which Tonnesen described as being in pristine condition, hangs in an exhibit in San Francisco's Museum of the African Diaspora until April 30.

McGriff-Payne was born in Florida. When she was 1 year old, her family moved to Vallejo. Her father had been in the Navy and stationed for a time in California and fell in love with Vallejo.

McGriff-Payne said that she has always loved history for as long as she could remember; it was her favorite subject.

McGriff-Payne worked as a staff writer for newspapers in California, New York and Florida. She was a reporter for the North Bay Progress during the late 1970s through the 1980s. She went on to edit a military base newspaper until 1990, when she retired upon marriage. When her husband retired, who also has a life-long interest in history, the current passion was rekindled.

When McGriff-Payne lost her parents a few years ago, she came to the sad realization that her mother had a lot of memories and they had not talked enough. McGriff-Payne was aware that a lot of the older prominent black community in Vallejo were dying off and she didn't know about their histories either.

One of her neighbors had written a book about the history of the Filipino people, which inspired McGriff-Payne to do more.

McGriff-Payne read "The Negro Trail Blazers of California" by Delila Beasley in the '70s. Beasley wrote a column in the Oakland Tribune about 1918 through 1930. In the early 1900s, Beasley, by either horse, carriage or train, traveled throughout California, looking for African-American pioneers and recording their histories.

McGriff-Payne wanted to know more. She wanted to know if Solano County had early black pioneers.

She started researching at the local library. McGriff-Payne quickly learned that she could not rely on local daily newspapers, periodicals, or city or county histories from the 1800s or early 1900s for much information on Solano's African-American community.

"This is not to say these publications completely ignored black folks," said McGriff-Payne. "In some instances I found interesting pieces of information. However, I felt the 'coverage' of African-Americans was so demeaning, that except for giving me a place and a time, the information was useless."

In her research, McGriff-Payne discovered three black published newspapers, the San Francisco Elevator, the Pacific Appeal and a very short lived one, Mirror of the Times, of which there were only five known published editions.

It was these papers which leant insight into the black community of early California. These newspapers can be found on line or on microfilm at the Oakland Museum and the San Francisco Library.

The San Francisco Elevator and the Pacific Appeal were published in the 1860s and ran until the 1900s. For a time, Phillip Bell was the editor of both newspapers.

There were "stringers," reporters who would send in local stories. William Powns reported the news from Suisun, while Edward Hatton covered Vallejo. Edward's father, Joseph Hatton sent in news from Napa.

One of McGriff-Payne's earliest exciting discoveries told of John Grider, an African-American Bear Flag veteran.

This information was discovered in an 1878 Vallejo directory. The information on this early Vallejo resident lead her to the Vallejo Naval and Historical Museum and from there, "countless other places." John Grider was interviewed by Delilah Beasley.

Grider lived in Solano County from 1850 to 1924. Grider was one of eight African-Americans who participated in the Bear Flag Revolt at Sonoma in 1846. This fact of history has never been illuminated.

Grider was born in Tennessee and came to California in bondage around the mid-1840s. He gained his freedom from his owner, George H. Wyatt in 1850. Grider was able to purchase his freedom with the gold that he had mined at Murphy's Camp in Calaveras County.

Grider was the lone African American member of the Vallejo Society of Pioneers. A skilled horseman, he worked at various livery stables throughout his career.

Grider was one of the last known members of the Bear Flag party when he died at the age of 98. Grider, however, was not the only African-American veteran of the Bear Flag party in Solano County. Joseph McAfee called Benicia home until the late 1860s, when he moved to Santa Cruz.

McGriff-Payne's research, which covers the years 1850 through 1925, has opened up an entire historic catalog of men and women of African-American descent, who have contributed to the diversity and progress of California. For instance, Elizabeth Bundy, a middle-aged cook, purchased a home on "D" Street in Benicia for \$1,500 on her cook's wages.

John R. Landaway and Wilson Dixon of Vallejo and Charles Gibson of Suisun were members of a state-wide education committee in the 1860s and 70s, who raised money to fight for educational opportunities for African-American children. The children, until the 1860s were denied public school education.

These men also served on Bay Area committees to commemorate the Emancipation Proclamation and later the passage of the 15th Amendment, which gave African-American men the right to vote. These events were celebrated with huge gatherings throughout the North Bay and Bay area.

McGriff-Payne is writing, with passion, a book about all these people. She is bringing to life, once more, those who have helped shape our county.

Downloaded from the Solano History Database

<http://www.solanohistory.org/488>

<http://articles.solanohistory.net/488/>

