

Biddy Mason

She escaped slavery — and became a generous millionaire

1818 - 1891

Entrepreneur

Pioneer

Health care provider

Investor

Philanthropist

American Hero



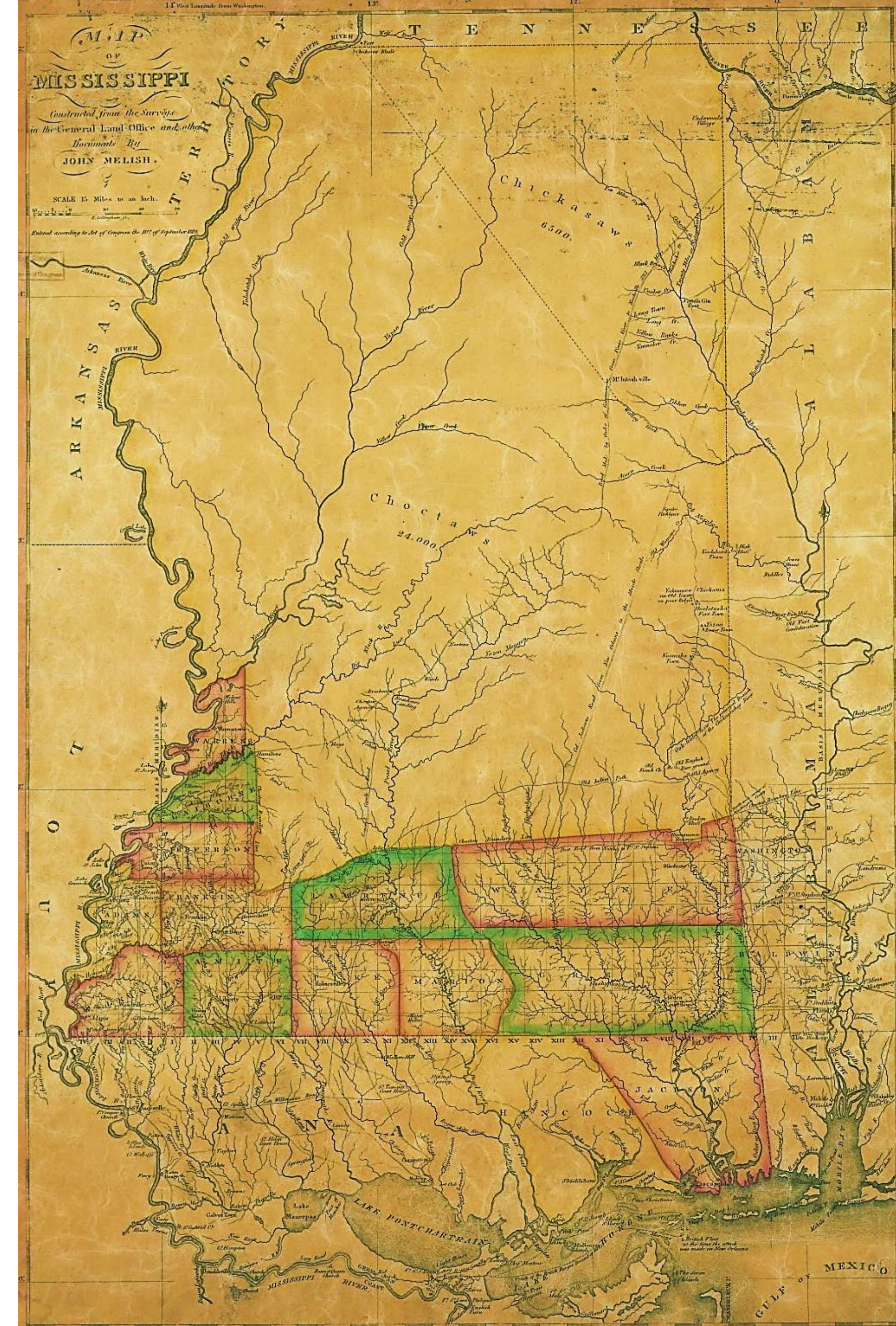
Early Life

Biddy Mason was born into slavery in 1818 and spent her youth in Mississippi, where she became a skilled healer and midwife.

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

These would become central callings of her life.

*Map of Mississippi by John Melish, 1820.
The organized counties in the southern parts of the state are in colored borders, mostly occupied by white American settlers and enslaved black people; the northern part of the state is still Choctaw and Chickasaw Indian territory.*



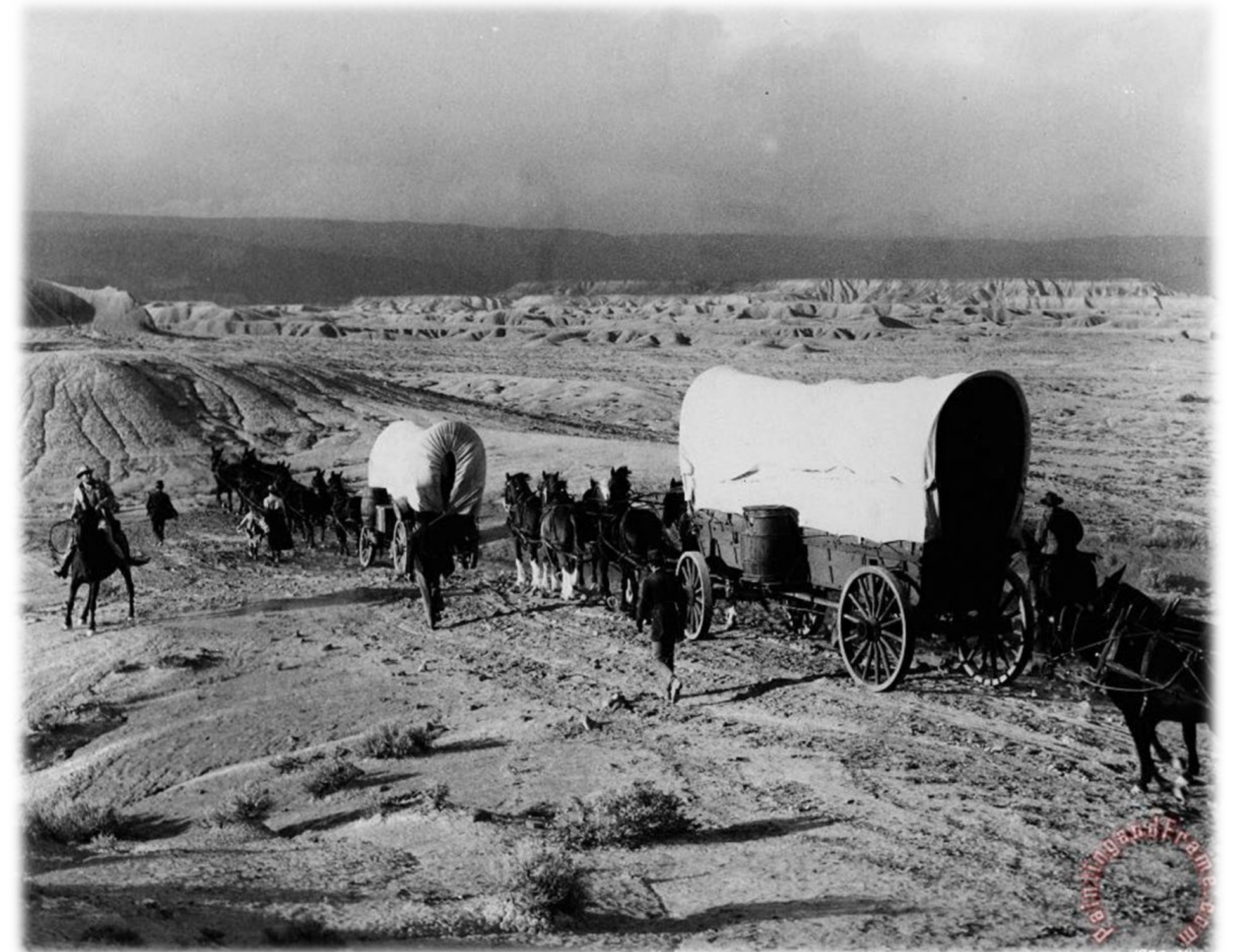


Westward Journey

In the 1840s her enslaver, Robert Smith, took his family and slaves westward to join his fellow Mormons in Utah.

She walked the entire way (1,700 miles) behind a wagon train.

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



California

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

He took Biddy and her children with him.

Along the way, she met a free black couple, who urged her to sue for freedom once she reached CA.





Freedom!

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

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



Freedom!

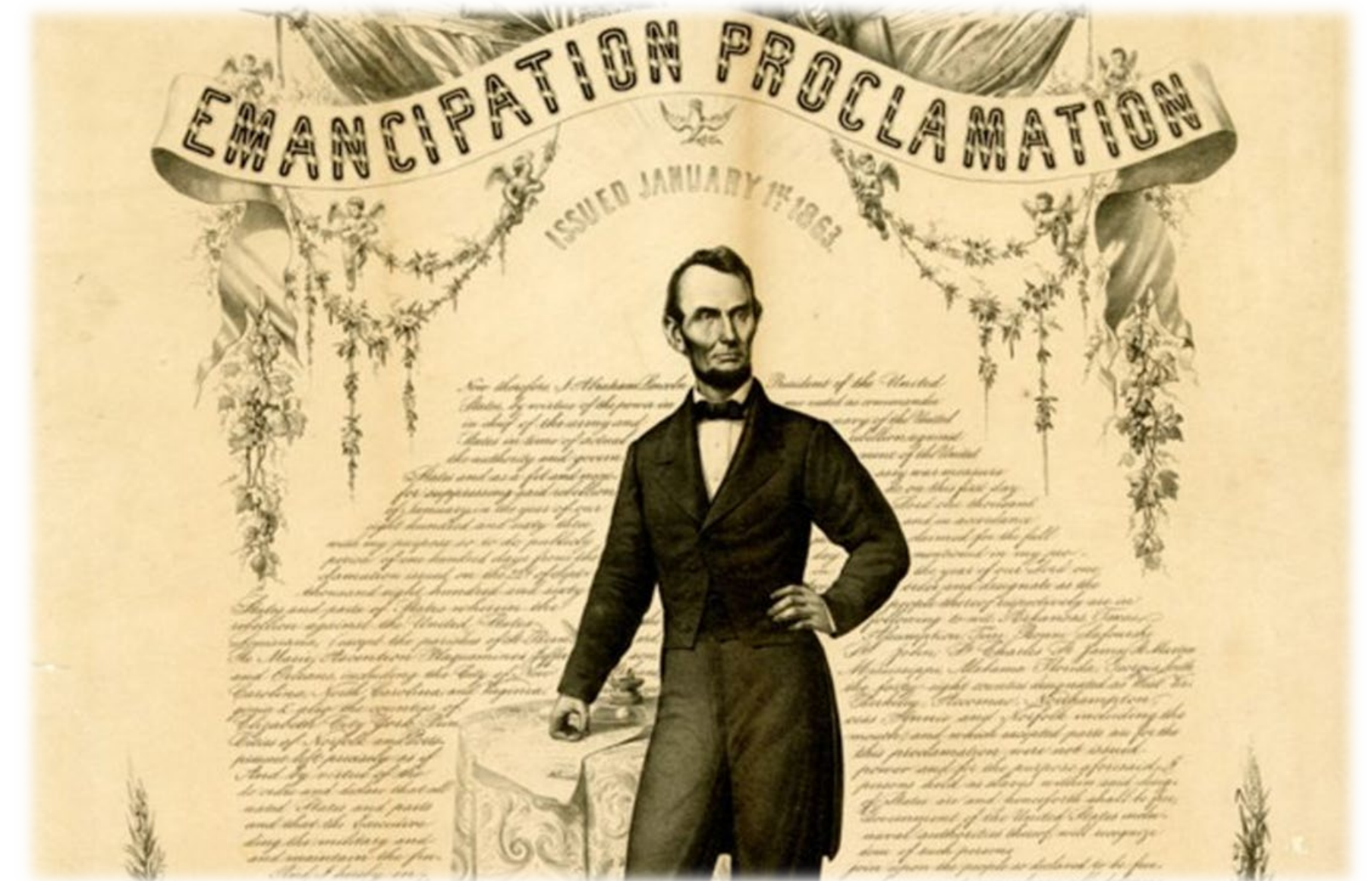
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Do you know what year the rest of the slaves in America were emancipated?

1865.

In 1863, President Lincoln declared all slaves in regions “in rebellion against the United States,” i.e. the Confederacy, “forever free.” But slavery was only abolished nationwide with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865.



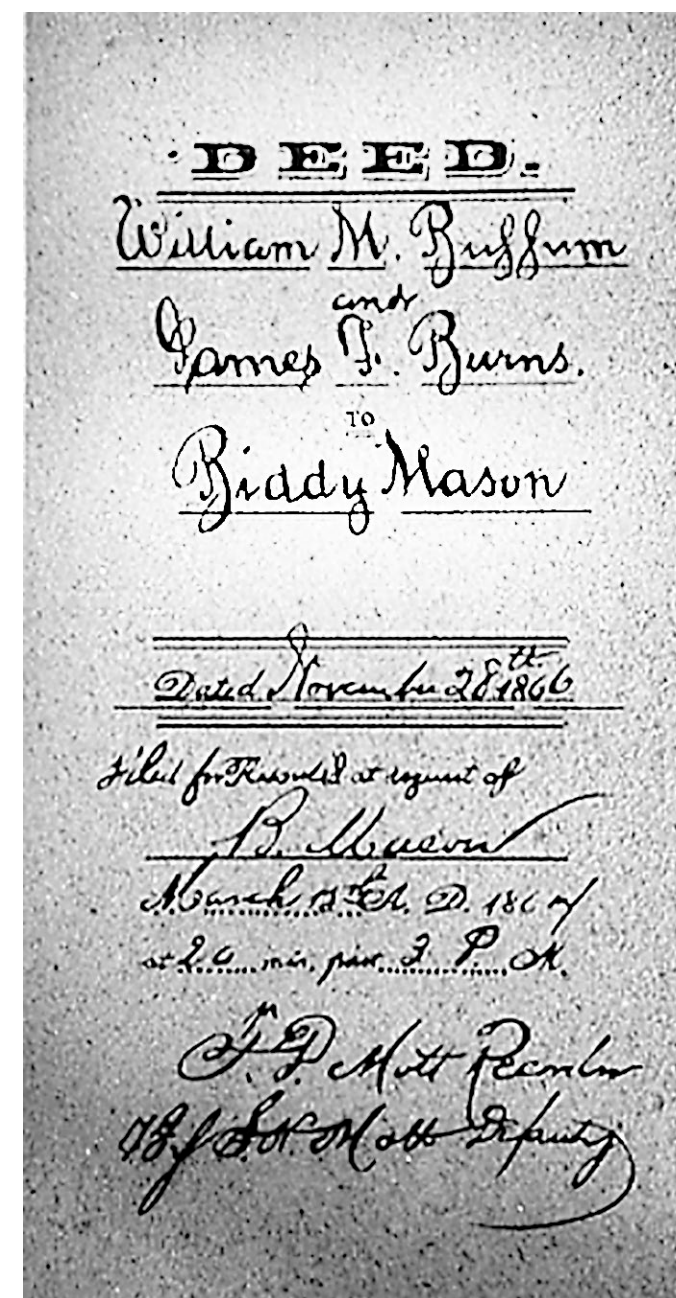
Working for wages and investing her money

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

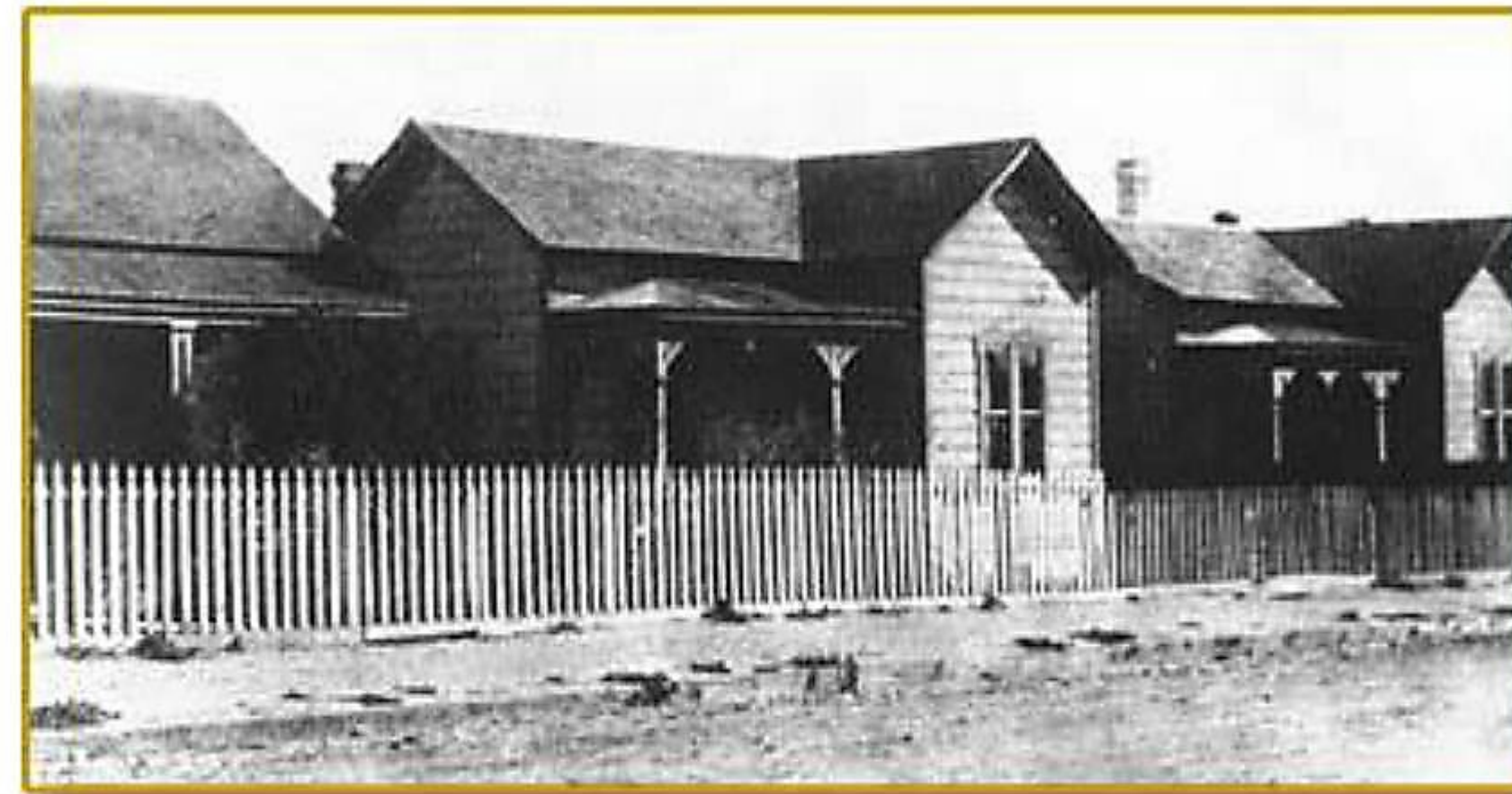


Wise investment choices

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



Biddy Mason's Home



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

Courtesy of the UCLA Special Collections

A wealthy and generous woman

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



A Generous Spirit



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

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

— Biddy Mason

Civic-Mindedness

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

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



Accomplishments

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

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



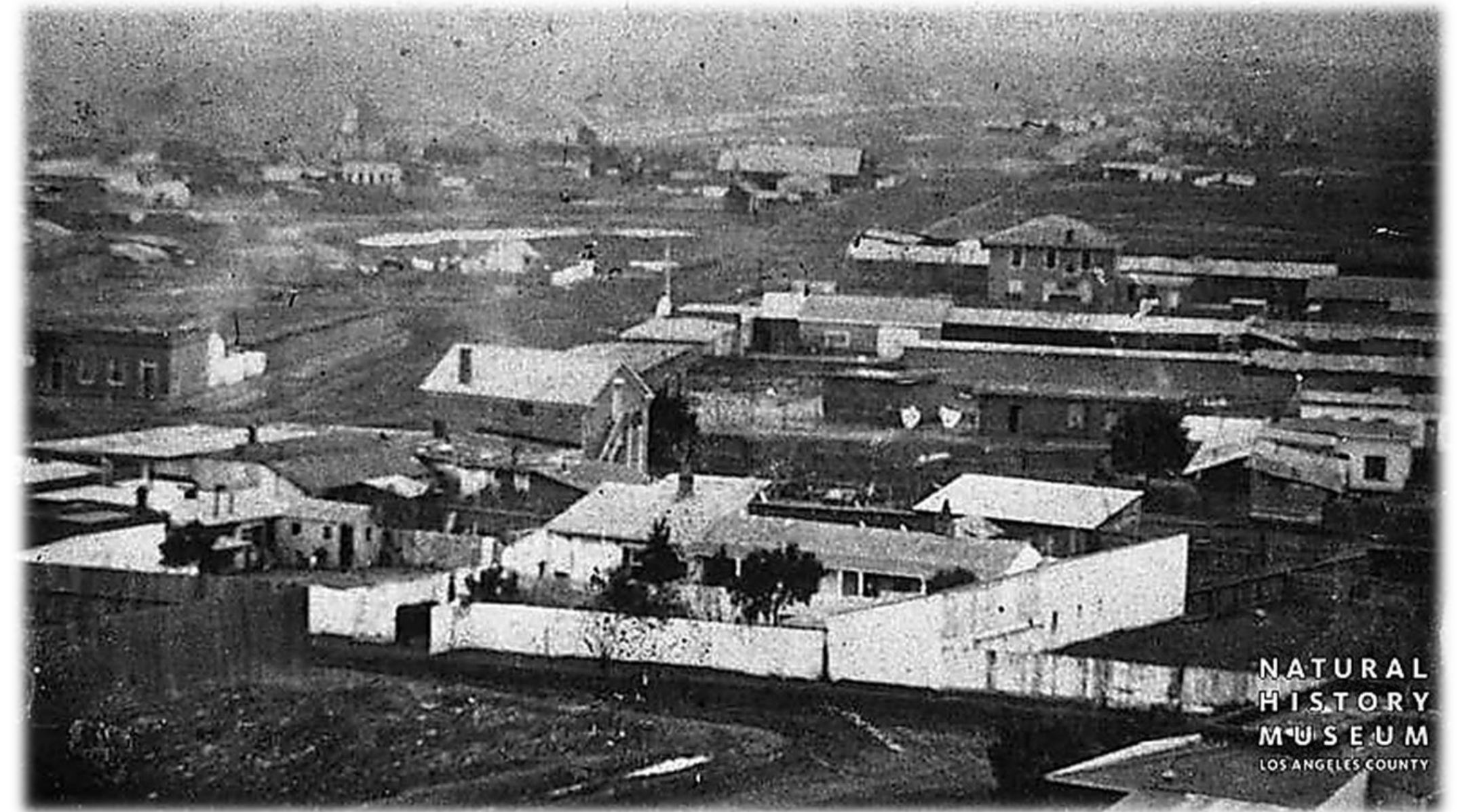
Accomplishments

During a Los Angeles smallpox epidemic, she used her knowledge of herbal remedies to care for the suffering, at great personal risk.

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

Biddy Mason also founded a traveler's aid society.

She founded an elementary school for black children.



Los Angeles in the 1860s



Accomplishments

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

Why do you think these causes were important to her?

Great Flood of 1862.

Contemporary illustration shows the capital city of California, Sacramento, after the massive flooding that afflicted the entire west coast that year.



An important legacy

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

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



Biddy saw opportunities and took advantage of them

Los Angeles was beginning a great growth curve when Biddy arrived.

What places are poised to grow now?

Where do you see opportunities today?



Memorializing a remarkable life

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





What causes would you like to support?

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

What causes are important to you?

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

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



Vocabulary

appreciate

assets

depreciate

down payment

interest/compound interest

investment

philanthropy

profit

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

