

California Cultures: African Americans

A select look at important areas in the life of African Americans in California history (see the full exhibit online at: <https://calisphere.org/exhibitions/t8/california-cultures-african-americans/>).

Gold Rush Era to 1900



Overview

A small number of people from Latin America of African ancestry and other African people arrived in California before the Gold Rush. A few were a part of the early explorations. A few others, like entrepreneur Williams Leidesdorff (1810-1848), came to seek their fortunes. The biracial Leidesdorff came to California from the Virgin Islands in 1841. By 1844, he was a major San Francisco (then called Yerba Buena) landowner and later became the city's U.S. Vice Consul.

The Gold Rush Era

The Gold Rush Era marked the real beginning of African American migration into California. About 200 to 300 of the enslaved came to work the gold fields, followed by 'free' African Americans (black and white miners worked side by side).

In 1850, when California joined the United States as a free state, the census showed California with 962 African American residents. Many of the formerly enslaved gained their freedom, but lack of government oversight allowed slavery to flourish in certain regions. In 1852, a fugitive slave law made it illegal for the enslaved to flee their captures within California's supposedly free borders. Thus, all African Americans in California born free or formerly enslaved lived under a constant threat of arrest.

Nonetheless, as indicated by the political cartoon "Difficult Problems Solving Themselves," African Americans continued to move to the West. They came not only from the Deep South, but from Virginia, New York, and Massachusetts. By 1852, they numbered 2,000 — about 1 percent of California's population.

Struggling for Rights

During the mid-19th century, even "free" African Americans in California were barred from testifying in court or sending their children to public schools. In 1855, Mifflin Wistar Gibbs (1823-1915), an African American abolitionist who had spent years lecturing with Frederick Douglass, helped organize the First State Convention of Colored Citizens of California to fight for suffrage and equal rights.

Despite their lack of equal rights, African Americans served in the military during and after the Civil War. Included is an image of an African American in a Union uniform during the early 1860s; an 1899 photograph show Buffalo Soldiers from the 24th Mounted Infantry in Yosemite.

African Americans won the right to testify in California in 1863; but the right to vote came only with the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870. The 1867 lithograph "The Reconstruction Policy of Congress, As Illustrated in California," show the struggle African Americans faced in being taken seriously as voters: they are reduced to a caricature in a political cartoon, along with Chinese Americans and Native Americans.



Five U.S. Army soldiers of the 24th Mounted Infantry, mounted on horses near a road in forest in Yosemite, California in 1899.

The Struggle for Economic Equality, 1900-1950s



Afro-American Council, 13th annual meeting, Oakland, 1907

Overview

African Americans made up less than 2 percent of California's population in the decades before World War I, numbering about 7,800 in 1900. Despite their small numbers, they maintained a sense of community through memberships in the African Methodist Episcopal Church and organizations such as W. E. B. DuBois's National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Urban League, and the California Association of Colored Women's Clubs. In other parts of the country, African Americans such as Booker T. Washington, head of Alabama's Tuskegee Institute, were making inroads into education.

The Struggle for Economic Equality (1900-1950s)

Most African Americans lived in California's growing urban centers. Racial discrimination often relegated them to low-paying service jobs, such as the men in Anaheim's street corner shoeshine business or the chauffeur standing behind Edith Story and her automobile. But the 1907 photograph of businessmen, which commemorates the 13th annual meeting of Oakland's Afro-American Council, demonstrates the ongoing presence of a Black middle class (see above photo).

Some Black entrepreneurs, including several women managed to find financial success through hard work and good fortune. The formerly enslaved Biddy Mason used the money she earned as a nurse to invest in Los Angeles real estate, becoming a wealthy philanthropist and founding the First AME Church. Mary Ellen Pleasant, another former enslaved woman, ran several businesses and restaurants in San Francisco and used her resources to fight for African American civil rights.

African Americans were also part of the popular culture, although their participation was often segregated. A 1923 photograph shows baseball player "Bullet" Hilary Meadows of Oakland's Colored Giants, a team in the Negro Leagues. A 1926 photograph shows African American musicians, and the Hartzog Radio Night Hawks, just one of many such jazz bands of the 1920s.

Despite some notable success stories, most African Americans found it difficult to break out of the "traditional" occupations of domestic work and manual labor. This situation began to change as the United States entered World War I, and they found work in war-related industries.

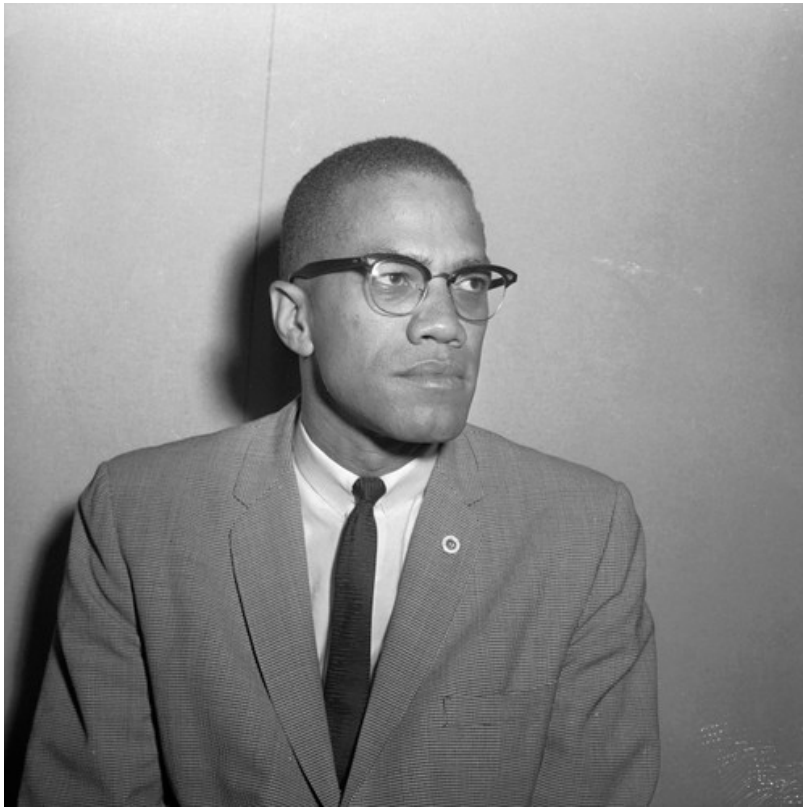
War Brings Change (1940s-1950s)

At the end of World War I, immigration from outside the United States was largely curtailed, cutting off the flow of new workers to industry and contributing to the "Great Migration" of African Americans from the South to industrial centers in the North.

World War II brought more change. As one photograph shows, African Americans enlisted in the military, and they also moved up the blue collar ladder to careers such as firefighting. In both the armed forces and the fire department, they served in segregated units, as the photograph of Oakland's Engine Company 22 shows. Again, after World War I, African Americans migrated to California in large numbers. They found work in war industries, including shipping, as illustrated by the photographs of workers at the Richmond Shipyards.

Many of these migrants came to Los Angeles. Ironically, as illustrated by the 1943 photograph captioned "Wartime housing in Little Tokyo's Bronzeville," a number of newcomers found housing in former Japanese American neighborhoods -- in homes and apartments left vacant when residents were incarcerated in internment camps. Chester Himes's 1945 novel, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, exposed the racial discrimination faced by many Black migrants in wartime Los Angeles. Racist real estate policies, including restrictive covenants, limited their ability to move out of segregated urban neighborhoods. Discrimination restricted their access to skilled and professional jobs as well as to higher education. As they returned home from the fight against fascism in Europe, many African American veterans saw the struggle for civil rights at home as an issue that needed to be addressed.

Civil Rights and Social Reform, 1950s-1970s



Malcolm X (El Hajj Malik El Shabazz), October 10, 1963
(*San Francisco Call Bulletin*)

Overview

By the 1950s, African Americans began to mobilize in earnest against discrimination. As the 1957 photograph makes clear, even baseball legend Willie Mays was touched by housing discrimination. They lived in the same culture as white Americans, as illustrated by the photographs of Oakland's Mc Clymonds High School marching band and the group of young woman at an NAACP-sponsored social event, thus, they wanted to enjoy equal rights.

The Struggle for Civil Rights (1950s-1960s)

Civil rights groups demanded an end to segregation. They fought for equality in education, housing, and employment opportunities, and they made some headway. White-collar and professional sector jobs began to open up for African Americans, as shown by the photograph of commercial artist Berry Weeks, working at his draft board in 1960. But not all white Americans welcomed change.

From the 1950s through the 1970s, movements for civil and social rights, equality, and justice swept the United States. As the photograph of a civil rights rally at San Jose State College (now San Jose State University) shows that the movement wasn't limited to African Americans, but also drew from the white community. As the movement gained ground, however, it created a backlash of racism in many parts of the country, including California. The 1963 photograph documenting a cross burning on the lawn of a African American family in San Francisco's Ingleside district in 1963 shows clearly that this backlash was not limited to the Deep South.

Most civil rights protests of this time were peaceful, as illustrated by two photographs taken in San Francisco in 1963: picketers protesting unfair hiring practices at Mel's Diner, and a march for civil rights on Market Street. Civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968), and Ralph Abernathy, Sr. (1926-1990), advocated these nonviolent protests. But others, such as Nation of Islam minister Malcolm X (1925-1965), were less patient with the process, foreshadowing the harder-edged protests to come.

In 1963, President John F. Kennedy (1917-1963) was assassinated. By February 1965, Malcolm X (El Hajj Malik El Shabazz) had also been assassinated. Later that year, anger and desperation fueled by years of discriminatory practices and police brutality exploded into violence in the Los Angeles African American neighborhood of Watts. The violence triggered by the arrest of a Black motorcyclist by white police was the most destructive urban uprising in U.S. history at that time. In one photo, a woman is shown standing outside her apartment was just one of many people affected. The riots lasted a week, involved more than 10,000 people, and left at least 34 dead.

The violence shocked the nation and left the community in disarray. But over the next few years the citizens of Watts pulled together to rebuild their neighborhood. Parades demonstrated their newfound civic pride. One photograph shows former heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali (1942-2016) riding in a convertible as Grand Marshall of the Watts Summer Festival in 1967; another shows the Queen of the Watts Christmas Parade in 1968.

Social Reform (1960s-1970s)

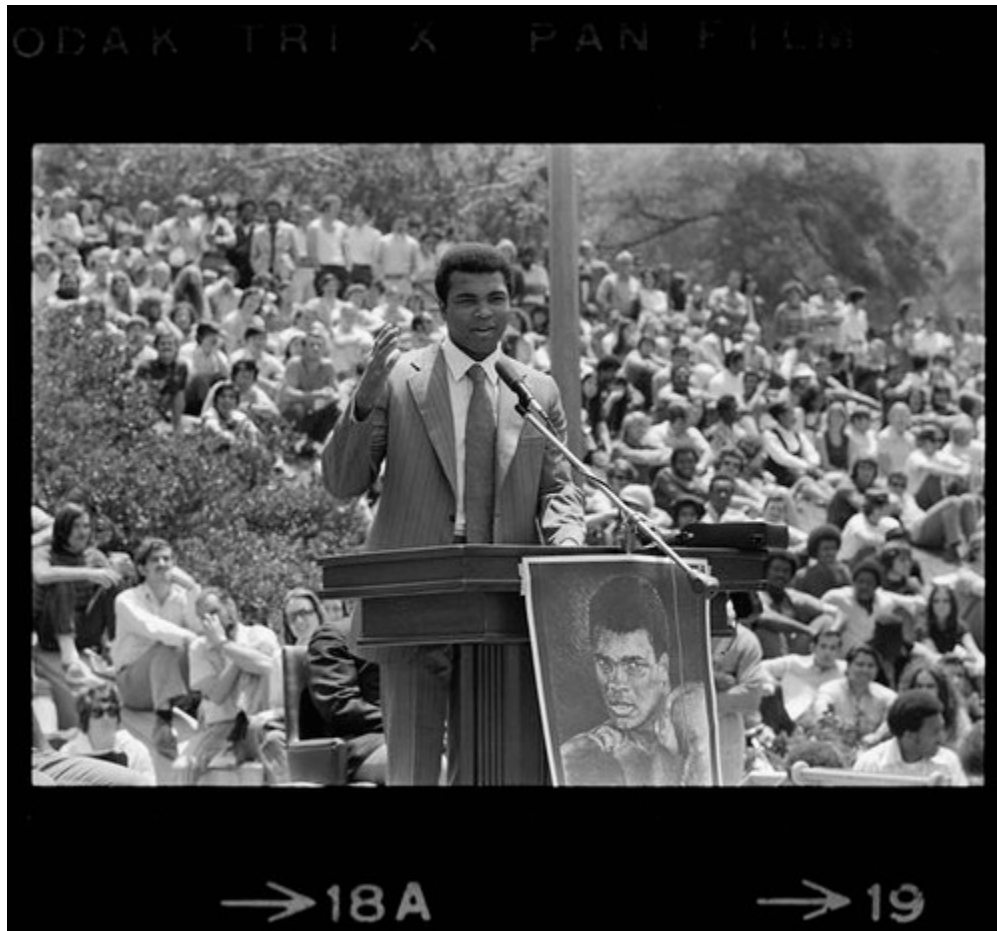
The violence in California and elsewhere in the U.S. seemed to culminate with the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., in April 1968. Memorials were held across the nation, including the one in the San Francisco Bay Area. A new subject, diversity — called "Negro History" in these early years began to be taught in schools, as illustrated by a photograph taken at Manual Arts High School in Los Angeles.

At the same time, the ongoing Vietnam War (1955-1975) reached into every community; hence a 1968 photograph shows San Francisco State College students waiting to hear if their draft number will be called in the draft lottery. After King's death the urgency for a different kind of protest emerged. African American anger was building, and movements for liberation and revolution such as the Black Power Movement and renewed Black Nationalist activity gained momentum, usurping the role of traditional civil rights politics that focused on integration.

The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was founded in Oakland by Huey P. Newton (1942-1989) and Bobby Seale in 1966. By 1968, Newton, the party's Minister of Defense, was on trial for murder. One photograph shows Black Panther Party members protesting outside the courthouse, giving the Black power salute. Another show Black Panther Party communications secretary Kathleen Cleaver (wife of author Eldridge Cleaver), talking to the prosecution; Newton fled to Cuba, but returned in 1977 and was later acquitted.

Bobby Seale was arrested in 1968 as part of the Chicago Eight protest at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago that year, and again for murder two years later. Like Newton, he too was acquitted. The "Intercommunal Day of Solidarity" poster rallied support for a number of political prisoners, including Seale, Newton, and Angela Davis. Davis, who later became a history of consciousness professor at the University of California at Santa Cruz, is shown speaking to students at UCLA in 1970. Despite the deaths and arrests of leaders, the Black Panther Party was still active in 1969, as the photograph of Southern California Panther leaders at a press conference shows.

Politics and Community, 1970s-Present



Overview

The murder trials finally took their toll. By the early 1970s the Black Panther Party had lost momentum, and so had their call for revolution. A 1971 photograph shows Muhammad Ali speaking to UCLA students about a broader range of topics: boxing, alcohol, narcotics, and his faith, in addition to the Black Panther Party.

Social Change Takes Hold

Meanwhile, the ideals the Black Panther Party had fought for were taking hold in the community. African American politicians like California State Assemblyman Willie Brown were elected and reelected to public office. In 1978, Mervyn Dymally (1926-2012) was the Lieutenant Governor of California (1975-1979). The voices of black artists like poet and author Maya Angelou were being heard. And African American entrepreneurs were operating businesses from day care centers to markets.

Building on this platform of progress, African Americans in the late 1970s pressed for more social change. A 1977 photograph shows a march for jobs and housing in Los Angeles on Martin Luther King Day, one of a number of similar marches across the country. In 1978, President Jimmy Carter signed the Humphrey Hawkins Bill, aimed at providing "full employment" for everyone.

By the 1980s, Martin Luther King, Jr., had become a historic figure and a hero. Across the nation, the names of streets — like Santa Barbara Avenue in Los Angeles — were changed to honor him (shown in a photograph), and Celes King III (1923-2003), an American hero: the founder of Congress for Racial Equality of California, longtime president of the Los Angeles branch of the NAACP, and a pilot in the famous all African American Tuskegee Airman Squadron during World War II.



Maya Angelou and Cecil Williams at Glide Memorial Church, Sunday, July 14, 1974.

Community Life, 1950s-1980s



About the Images

The images in this topic provide a glimpse into the daily lives and changing lifestyles of African Americans in California between the 1950s and the early 1980s. Photographs show men and women, young people and children, at church, social club events, schools, service projects, political actions, and at cultural centers that served as gathering places for the community. Some of the photographs include cultural and political figures of the times.

Overview

These photographs from the 1950s to the decades of social change and struggles for social justice in the 1960s, 70s, and early 80s show African Americans in a range of activities that reflect the changing concerns of the decades and the concerns of everyday life.

Family celebrations are commemorated by formal images (the Cadells cutting their cake in 1955) and less formal shots (like the group attending Jackie's wedding in 1967). Church is a center for the group standing in front of Brooks Chapel A.M.E. Church of Tulare. Other social groups pictured include the women of Gay Ann's Social Club at a formal event in San Bernardino in 1950, and the women of Berkeley/Oakland's Queen Esther Chapter no. 4, posing in front of a bus. A group of children pose in their Halloween costumes, candy bags ready, in 1968. In 1969, two boys play ball in the ruins of Wrigley Field in Los Angeles, home of the old Angels team.

Although most of the images are of everyday people—in school, at a beauty pageant, doing community service, attending political rallies, taking art classes, going fishing, dancing, and just hanging out with friends—some show well-known African American celebrities in the context of community activities: LA Lakers basketball star Kareem Abdul-Jabbar interacts with fans in 1980.



Jackie's wedding reception, October 15, 1967.