

# California African American Museum

In February, 1781, settlers of African, Indian, and Spanish ancestry set out for what will become Los Angeles from Mexico

CAAM Web Staff, Saturday, February 15, 2020



"Mission San Gabriel". A photochrom postcard published by the Detroit Photographic Company, 1899

In 1781, Spain had grand ambitions for the vast territory known as "the Californias" and its ports in San Diego, Monterey, and San Francisco. Mexican independence was still three decades away (cession of the region to the United States almost

seven) and the Spanish empire had strung North America's Pacific coast with missions to convert indigenous populations to Catholicism and presidios (or garrisons) to deter the local ambitions of rivals England and Russia. In addition to building missions and presidios, the Spanish also encouraged secular and civilian colonization, offering incentives to residents of the more established colonies in Mexico if they moved north and established pueblos.

In February of that year, Spanish colonial officials recruited eleven families--eleven men, eleven women, and twenty-two children--from Sinaloa and Sonora as part of that third effort, sending them north to build a farming community near Misión de San Gabriel Arcángel in what is now San Gabriel. Colonial Mexico of was a zone of great diversity, and Los Pobladores--or the townspeople, as the group of families would eventually be known--reflected this. Spaniards and indigenous peoples in the region intermingled (under conditions of colonial and sexual coercion to be sure, but some freely), as did some of the 200,000 enslaved Africans brought to New Spain between the conquest of the Aztecs and Mexico's abolition of slavery in 1829. A good portion of Los Pobladores came from parts of Sinaloa with large populations of mulattos, as those of mixed Spanish and black ancestry were known, and colonial recordkeepers made sure to note to which racial casta adult members of the party belonged:

- 1 Peninsular (Spaniard born in Spain)
- 1 Criollo (Spaniard born in New Spain)
- 1 Mestizo (mixed Spanish and Native American)
- 2 Negros (full black ancestry)
- 8 Mulattos (mixed Spanish and black)
- 9 Indios (full Native American ancestry)

Escorted by 17 soldiers and followed by a second party made up mostly of livestock, the group took seven months to travel the five-hundred plus miles to the mission at San Gabriel. Tradition has long fixed the date of their arrival as September 4, 1781, at which point the group is said to have walked en mass with two priests and four soldiers to a site on the Los Angeles River just a few miles away. There they established El Pueblo de La Reina de los Ángeles, or The Town of the Queen of the Angels, or what we know as Los Angeles.

History holds a few facts distinct from the local tradition of the September 4, 1781 founding of Los Angeles. For one, Los Pobladores started arriving in the area in June and began the work of building the Pueblo immediately. For another, our appreciation of the group's diversity was late coming. The California Historical Society reminds us that "the Pobladores's multiracial ethnicity—particularly their African roots—would not be formally recognized until 1981, when a plaque was erected in commemoration of the city's 200th anniversary that accurately depicted the settlers' multiracial makeup."

The community-wide effort was led by pioneer librarian Miriam Matthews [right], Los Angeles's and the state's first black librarian. In an oral history, she explained: "That was my top priority: a proper founders monument to be erected in the plaza, in the State Historic Park, which is near Olvera Street." The plaque honors the founders of Los Angeles, listing them by name, race, sex, and age. Twenty-six of the 44 founders are of black and mulatto descent.



Miriam Matthews worked as a librarian in the Los Angeles Public Library system for more than 30 years. Photo by Judith Sedwick, from the Schlesinger Library Flickr Page [https://www.flickr.com/photos/schlesinger\\_library/13270529424/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/schlesinger_library/13270529424/)

The other great erasure of Los Angeles' founding myth, though, is that of the area's indigenous population, the Tongva. The rhetoric of founding often suggests that these were empty lands and there were an estimated 5000 to 10000 Tongva in the region at the beginning of Spanish colonization. Exposure to European diseases and forced relocation to make room for missions and pueblos reduced their numbers, and today, just some 1700 identify as Tongva.







## Related Exhibitions

To learn more about the history of slavery in California, visit our exhibition *California Bound: Slavery on the New Frontier, 1848–1865* on view until April 28, 2019.

## Related Dates

**#blackhistory:** On September 15, 1829, Afro-Mestizo Mexican President Vicente Ramon Guerrero issued the Guerrero Decree, prohibiting slavery in most of Mexico

**#blackhistory:** On June 19, 1865, Union General Gordon Granger declares that Texas' enslaved people are free, a day they and their descendants would commemorate as Juneteenth

**#blackhistory:** On January 10, 1867, Congress passed the Territorial Suffrage Act which allowed African American men in the western territories to vote

**#blackhistory:** On February 26, 1869, Congress sent the 15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution to the states for ratification

## California African American Museum

learn 600state #blackhistory:

<https://caamuseum.org/learn/600state/black-history/blackhistory-in-early-february-1781-settlers-of-african-indian-and-spanish-ancestry-set-out-for-california-from-mexico-seven-months-later-they-would-found-los-angeles>

Accessed on December 20, 2023, for  
*"La Zambra del Zorro"*