

# BRIDGET “BIDDY” MASON (1818-1891)

## FROM SLAVE TO ENTREPRENEUR AND HUMANITARIAN

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**B**iddy Mason won freedom from slavery, worked as a nurse/midwife and then became a successful entrepreneur and a generous contributor to social causes. She was born August 15, 1818 in Mississippi, U.S.A. as a slave on a plantation owned by Robert Smith. She had three daughters, Ellen, Ann and Harriet, whose father was reputedly Smith himself. In 1847, Smith became a Mormon convert and decided to move to the Utah Territory with his household and slaves. In this strenuous two-thousand-mile cross-country trek, Mason was responsible for herding the cattle. She also prepared meals, acted as a midwife and took care of her children.

In 1851, Smith moved his household again, this time to San Bernardino, California, where Brigham Young was starting a Mormon community. Smith probably did not know that California had been admitted to the Union in 1850 as a free state and that slavery was forbidden there. Mason petitioned the court and in 1856 won freedom for herself and for her daughters. She moved to Los Angeles and found employment as a nurse and midwife. Hard work and her nursing skills allowed her to become economically independent.

Mason was also very frugal and only ten years after gaining her freedom, she bought a site on Spring Street for \$250. She instructed her children never to abandon this site. Mason was one of the first black women to own land in Los Angeles. This site is now in the center of the commercial district in the heart of Los Angeles. In 1884, she sold a parcel of the land for \$1500 and built a commercial building with spaces for rental on the remaining land. She continued making wise decisions in her business and real estate transactions and her financial fortunes continued to increase until she accumulated a fortune of almost \$300,000. Her grandson, Robert Curry Owens, a real estate developer and politician, was the richest African-American in Los Angeles at one time.

Biddy Mason also gave generously to various charities and provided food and shelter for the poor of all races. Lines of needy people were often forming at 331 South Spring Street. She also remembered the jail inmates whom she visited often. In 1872 she and her son-in-law, Charles Owens, founded and financed the Los Angeles branch of the First African Methodist Episcopal church, L.A.'s first black church. She also owned a house on

Azusa Street in the Boyle Heights section of Los Angeles. She gave the property to Rev. Wallace Seymour at it became the site of the Azusa Street Revival.

Biddy Mason died January 15, 1891 and was buried in an unmarked grave at Evergreen cemetery in the Boyle Heights area of Los Angeles. Nearly a century later, on March 27, 1988 a tombstone was unveiled which marked her grave for the first time in a ceremony attended by Mayor Tom Bradley and about three thousand members of the First African Methodist Episcopal church. Thursday, November 16, 1989 was declared a Biddy Mason Day and a memorial of her achievements was unveiled at the Broadway Spring Center located between Spring Street and Broadway at Third Street.

Contributed by *Danuta Bois*, 1998.

**WOMEN TRAILBLAZERS OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH**

**Bridget “Biddy” Mason**

**From Slave to Entrepreneur and Humanitarian**

**Women’s Discipleship Group**

**Terri McFaddin Series #5-3**

**Scripture Focus:** **Psalm 113:7-8** *He raises the poor out of the dust, and lifts the needy out of the trash heap. That he may seat him with princes.*

**Opening Statement:** The story of Biddy Mason should inspire every woman to dream the impossible dream. Many people believe that without the doors of opportunity being opened wide to invite us inside, we must remain in a downtrodden state. But Bridget “Biddy” Mason disproves that concept with the testimony of her life. There were no open doors and no opportunities for her to latch on too. She had three strikes against her; she was a slave, she was a woman and she was of African ancestry. The story of her life proves that with God’s help all things are possible. She leaves behind the footprints of success in business and humanitarian efforts.

**Observations:** In our day and age we have been led to believe that a woman must be beautiful, well educated, socially connected and fashionable in order to be successful. Photographs of Biddy Mason depict her as a plain,

plus sized, coffee colored women. Her physical appearance is quite different from the contemporary view of women. Yet she did not allow her race, gender or appearance to hinder her road to success. It is important to revisit her story in order to determine what we can learn from her life.

Paragraph 1: Bidy Mason was misused as abused what affect did it have on her life?

Paragraph 2: What circumstances allowed Bidy Mason to gain her freedom? What lesson do we learn about her character?

Paragraph 3: How did she become a success in business without any formal training? List three of her attributes that are clearly displayed.

Paragraph 4: How did she use her success to help others and bring honor and glory to God?