

Colored Conventions Project Teaching Guide for College/AP
EXHIBIT:
Equality Before the Law: California Black Convention Activism, 1855-65

Prepared by Samantha de Vera in collaboration with P. Gabrielle Foreman

Reviewed by Janel Moore Almond

This teaching guide can be taught in conjunction with Jean Pfaelzer’s article “None but Colored Testimony against Him: The California Colored Convention of 1855 and the Origins of the First Civil Rights Movement in California” which appears in the volume *The Colored Conventions Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century* (2021), edited by P. Gabrielle Foreman, Jim Casey, and Sarah Lynn Paterson, published by the University of North Carolina Press. For more information on the contents of the volume and where to find it, [click here](#).

“Equality Before the Law: California Black Convention Activism, 1855-65” curated by Gabriel Barrett-Jackson, Emma Cones, Christina Delany, Lindsay Drapkin, Lila Gyory, Sydney Hemmindinger, Rosa Pleasant, Reilly Torres, Victoria Walker, Daniel Waruingi. Created for Prof. Sharla Fett’s History 213 Class, Occidental College, Spring 2016. ([link](#))

Questions:

1. While California entered the Union as a free state in 1850, Jean Pfaelzer notes that “In fact, California remained a slave state. Its constitution was a fraudulent ticket to the civic and military benefits of statehood. With most eyes turned to the ‘Gold Mountain,’ southerners won control of the governor’s mansion and the legislature.”¹ California’s legislature subsequently passed acts that paved the way for wholesale discrimination, disenfranchisement, slavery, and forced removal of persons of color, to name a few. *Looking at the [biographies included in this exhibit](#), how do the lives of Black Californians reflect the state’s possibilities and failed promises?*
2. Both [this exhibit](#) and Pfaelzer’s article show that African Americans in California rallied against the state’s highly racist constitution, which banned any person of color from testifying or giving evidence against white people. The first three Colored Conventions in the state centered on demanding equal access to justice and thus marked “the first civil rights movement in the Golden State.”² *Explain this intervention. How does this knowledge compel us to rethink narratives about California, its legal system, and the social movements that emerged in the state?*
3. This [page](#) explores how African Americans, Native Americans, Mexican Americans, and Chinese persons in California interacted and shared space. *How did California’s diverse population shape California conventions’ protests and demands?*

¹ Pfaelzer, 333.

²Ibid. 331.

Colored Conventions Project 2020-21
Teaching Guide for College/AP - Equality Before the Law

4. This exhibit offers maps indicating where convention delegates came from. In each of these counties, Black communities remained relatively small throughout the nineteenth century. *What insights can we glean through these maps? What do they say about California's Black community?*
5. This exhibit delves into the political and social contexts in which Black Californians' resistance movement emerged. *Write a paragraph to a page proposal for a visualization or other type of content that would accompany one of the sections in this page.*
6. CLASS ACTIVITY: If your class were to create/hold a convention today, what issues would be its focus? Write a convention call that outlines the convention's objectives, urgent issues at hand, and the active measures delegates and attendees would need to consider, discuss, and plan. Write a comprehensive call and brief version of it (see examples [here](#) and [here](#)). Prepare to address the following questions:
 - a. How would your convention be organized?
 - b. What organizations and which leaders would be invited? Who are the non-famous people who would need to be there and from what communities/entities would they draw? Consider how an unprecedented number of Black women participated in the 1854 Emigration Convention and how their presence informed the issues that were discussed and the resolutions that were passed.
 - c. What objectives do you think most attendees would agree on?
 - d. What major differences in approaches do you think delegates might have?
 - e. How do you think it would be covered by the press?

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Suggested Readings:

- Coleman, Willi. "African American Women and Community Development in California, 1848–1900." In *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California*, edited by De Graaf Lawrence B., Mulroy Kevin, and Taylor Quintard, 98-126. Seattle; London: University of Washington Press, 2001.
- Hudson, Lynn M. *The Making of Mammy Pleasant: A Black Entrepreneur in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008.
- Lapp, Rudolph. *Blacks in Gold Rush California*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995.
- Pfaelzer, Jean. *Of Human Bondage: Slavery in California*. Berkeley: University of California Press, (forthcoming).
- Smith, Stacey L. "Remaking Slavery in a Free State: Masters and Slaves in Gold Rush California." *Pacific Historical Review* 80, no. 1 (2011): 28-63.
- Taylor, Quintard. *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528–1990*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1998.

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