



IN SEARCH  
*of the*  
RACIAL  
FRONTIER



AFRICAN AMERICANS  
IN THE  
AMERICAN WEST  
1528-1990

QUINTARD  
TAYLOR



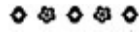
"An enthralling work that will be essential reading for years to come."

—David Nicholson, *Washington Post Book World*.

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In Search of  
the Racial Frontier  
AFRICAN AMERICANS  
IN THE AMERICAN WEST

1528–1990



**Quintard Taylor**



**W·W·NORTON & COMPANY**

*New York London*

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# Introduction

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There is room for only a limited number of colored people here. Overstep that limit and there comes a clash in which the colored many must suffer. . . . The few that are here do vastly better than they would do if their number were increased a hundredfold.

*Seattle Daily Intelligencer*, May 28, 1879

Your West is giving the Negro a better deal than any other section of the country. I cannot attempt to analyze the reasons for this, but the fact remains that there is more opportunity for my race, and less prejudice against it in this section of the country than anywhere else in the United States.

JAMES WELDON JOHNSON, NAACP national secretary,  
quoted in the *Denver Post*, June 24, 1925

The two statements above frame the central paradigm in the history of African Americans in the American West. Did the West represent the last best hope for nineteenth- and twentieth-century African Americans? Was it a racial frontier beyond which lay the potential for an egalitarian society? Or did the region fail to match the unobtainable promise imposed upon it by legions of boosters, to provide both political freedom and economic opportunity? Perhaps black Americans, in their desire to escape the repression of the East and South, simply exaggerated the possibilities in the region. Did western distinctiveness apply to race? Such questions defy easy, immediate answers.

Certainly evidence can be assembled that directs us to either conclusion suggested in the newspaper quotations. Colonial elites in seventeenth-century New Spain erected an elaborate racial classification system that was designed to ensure the maintenance of caste but that quickly disintegrated on its northern frontier, allowing persons of African ancestry remarkable social fluidity. African Americans in California and Oregon challenged antebellum discriminatory legislation. Often they received the support of prominent whites. Post-Civil War southern blacks benefited from overwhelming western support for their full and equal integration into the political life of the ex-Confederate states. Many of these white westerners were unwilling to extend comparable equality to African American residents in their own region. Twentieth-century African American westerners found both considerable support and opposition to their efforts to integrate the industrial workplace, residential neighborhoods, and public schools. Yet the very struggle itself reflects the fact that, as historian Duane Smith has argued, “The problem of black rights and citizenship was not limited to the South or Northern cities. The failure was that of the American people—not of a section or a particular generation.”<sup>1</sup>

There is striking ambiguity about race in the West. Much of it stems from the presence of four groups of color—African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans—all of whom interact with Anglos in varied ways over the centuries and throughout the region. These groups also interacted both competitively and cooperatively among themselves. Few western blacks at any point in history lived or worked in communities where they were the only people of color. The presence of black people as members of multiracial, multiethnic eighteenth-century communities, such as Los Angeles, Santa Fe, and San Antonio, as much as the presence of Latinos in contemporary South Central Los Angeles (Watts now has a Latino majority) suggests that historians need to examine how these groups faced one another in the West. Indeed, the concept of “race” as generally advanced in the South and East has undergone reinterpretation and redefinition precisely because of the presence of the variety of groups in the West. Richard White argued in 1986 that “minority peoples should be at

the heart of historical claims for Western distinctiveness.” Without them, he wrote, the West “might as well be New Jersey with mountains and deserts.”<sup>2</sup>

As important as such questions are to understanding the dynamics of the region, *In Search of the Racial Frontier* is not an analysis of western black-white social relations or a comparison of people of color. Rather its major purpose is to reconstruct the history of African American women and men in the nineteen western states on and beyond the ninety-eighth meridian—North Dakota to Texas westward to Alaska and Hawaii. Its chronological scope extends from the era of the first Spanish-speaking arrivals in the seventeenth century through the civil rights era of the 1960s. Its goals are threefold: first, to introduce and provide national visibility to the rich, diverse, complex tradition of black western history over the past five centuries; second, to illustrate both the black West’s regional distinctiveness and its continuity with the legacy of African American history in the rest of the nation and finally to establish conclusively the existence of multiple African American historical traditions. In examining the black West, the region least identified with the history of African Americans in the United States, this history follows the admonition of Roger Lotchin that “. . . the art and science of history progresses more from the literature that fills gaps in our knowledge than from the endless reinterpretation of well-known evidence.”<sup>3</sup>

*In Search of the Racial Frontier* pursues themes of race, ethnicity, gender, and environment, against the background of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is not primarily a study of colorful individuals, although some invariably will be discussed, as much as it is a collective biography, an examination of the African American quest for community in the West and the paradoxical consequences of that quest. It also seeks to locate the black West in the larger model of a regional history that defines the West as a place rather than a process.<sup>4</sup>

Our arrival at this juncture of western African American history has come after a long, controversial intellectual journey. Until the 1960s the images of the West centered on Frederick Jackson Turner’s ideal of rugged Euro-American pioneers constantly challenging a westward-moving frontier, bringing civilization, taming the wilderness, and, in the process, reinventing themselves as “Americans” and creating an egalitarian society that nurtured the fundamental democratic values that shaped contemporary American society. This interpretation was reinforced by western paintings, by novels, and, most important, by movies and television programs, which cemented into our national consciousness, as no historical work could, the image of white settlers as “conquerors” who superimposed their will on a vast, virtually uninhabited virgin land. African Americans, according to this interpretation, were not an indigenous conquered group, and certainly they were not among the conquerors. Thus black westerners had no place in the region’s historical saga. Walter Prescott Webb’s 1957 comment that the West is defined by its scarcity of “water, timber, cities, industry and Negroes” reflected and influenced conventional wisdom about African Americans and the region.<sup>5</sup>

By the 1960s and early 1970s the first significant writing on the African American West had emerged. That writing reflected what historian Lawrence B. de Graaf has called the recognition school, which posited that in simply acknowledging the presence of African American women and men in the western states and territories, historians had adequately fulfilled their primary mission of eliminating African American invisibility in the region. Kenneth W. Porter advanced that premise when he wrote his justification for pursuing black history in the American West. “Its thesis is simply they were there,” he declared in his 1971 edited volume *The Negro on the American Frontier*. “It does not intend, in overreaction to previous disregard or minimization of the frontier Negro, to present Negroes as the most important ethnic element on the American frontier. Negroes . . . could not . . . have played the same roles in the drama of the expanding frontier as did the dominant whites. What is surprising and significant . . . is that they were as important on the frontier as they were. . . .”<sup>6</sup>





In 1976 W. Sherman Savage's *Blacks in the West* appeared as the first survey of the West. It is a study in the classic Frederick Jackson Turner tradition, beginning with the Anglo-French fur-trading era and ending with the closing of the frontier in 1890. Savage excluded from his survey Texas but included Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa. Since publication of *Blacks in the West* an enormous body of books and articles on African Americans in the region has appeared, making imperative a new interpretative historical survey.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the foundation provided by the recognition school, we must pursue the significance of the black presence in the West beyond simply locating African Americans on the scene. What does it mean, for example, when we assess the role of African American soldiers on the frontier that they protected as an emerging political order inimical to the interests of western Native Americans, who throughout the post-Civil War decades fought to defend their families, homes, and way of life? What of the role of black soldiers in quelling strikes by western white workers who struggled against powerful eastern-based corporations for decent wages and living conditions? How does one reconcile the dedication of African American soldiers who risked their lives to defend lands that would soon be populated by settlers determined to deny other blacks the similar opportunity to settle and prosper?<sup>8</sup>

*In Search* also addresses the void created by the paucity of black western urban history. Nearly half this volume is dedicated to examining the western urban black experience. The black urban West provides the striking example of continuity between the experiences of nineteenth- and twentieth-century African Americans in the region and those of black people in other sections of the United States. With the publication of a growing number of monographs, numerous articles, and some chapters that serve both as specific studies and as segments of larger urban histories, black western urban history can provide a prism through which to examine and reinterpret the meaning of African American city life in the entire nation.<sup>9</sup>

Any accurate portrayal of African Americans in the West thus must begin with the efforts of these women and men in places as disparate as Helena, Montana; Topeka, Kansas; Boulder, Colorado; San Francisco; Seattle; San Diego; and San Antonio to fashion a supportive world far from the major centers of black population. To what extent were these small urban enclaves different from and similar to the surrounding cities and the African American urban cultures of the East and South? How did segregation and exclusion shape black western urban life and what were the subregional, ethnic,

racial, class, and gender considerations that impacted on such communities? Indeed, the differences within the West are often as striking as the differences between the West and other regions. The African American community of San Antonio, for example, was situated in former slaveholding and Confederate Texas, where “haciendas met the plantations.” Black people there confronted a different set of racial norms and values from those that impacted upon African Americans who migrated to Seattle, which for all practical purposes never experienced an antebellum period or the Civil War.<sup>10</sup>

If historians who sought a “new” western history were dismayed by the persistence of the mythic West, those who write African American history in the West are equally distressed by the emergence of a more recently promoted parallel myth of the black cowboy, buffalo soldier, and “motherly but single” elderly black female pioneer who found their place in the West.<sup>11</sup>

*In Search* will not conclusively lay to rest the image of the West as a region inclusive of rowdy, rugged *black* cowboys, gallant *black* soldiers, and sturdy but silent *black* women, but it will forcibly challenge the stereotype of the black westerner as a solitary figure loosened from moorings of family, home, and community. As Eugene Berwanger reminds us, few of the twenty-five thousand western African Americans in 1870 lived such romantic lives on the rural frontier. Instead they resided in cities, generating a living and making lives for themselves while developing supportive community institutions and attempting, as much as possible, to integrate themselves into both the larger social and political lives of their cities and the cultural and political life of the national African American community.<sup>12</sup>

For all that has been written on the black West, and a prodigious amount has been published and continues to roll off the presses, we still know woefully little about large areas of the African American past in this region. *In Search* signals the opportunity to begin our reconstruction of that past.

# **In Search of the Racial Frontier**

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## Spanish Origins, 1528–1848

African American life in the West began with nature's violence. In November 1528 a storm in the Gulf of Mexico washed ashore on the Texas coast two small boats, the only remnants of an ill-fated expedition. Spanish conquistador Pánfilo de Narváez's survivors included Esteban, a black slave owned by Captain Andrés Dorantes. Born half a world away in Azamor, Morocco, Esteban was the first African to set foot in what would become Texas and the western United States.<sup>1</sup>

Narváez's voyage began in Cuba in April 1528, when five ships and 400 adventurers set out from Havana to explore the North American mainland. On May 1 Narváez reached Tampa Bay, abandoned his ships, and, with 260 men, set forth into the interior. Native peoples warily watched this strange procession of breastplated soldiers, long-robed priests, and one servant, Esteban, for four months as it marched northwest under brightly colored plumes and banners. Despite repeated attacks that steadily reduced their ranks, the conquistadors pushed forward, driven by a search for riches and fame in the North American interior comparable to Cortés's discoveries in the Valley of Mexico a decade earlier. By July 1528 they reached Apalachee (near present-day Tallahassee), a village of forty thatched huts instead of their anticipated city of gold. The Apalachee drove the invaders south toward the Gulf of Mexico until the now much depleted party reached St. Marks Bay. The wounded Narváez ordered construction of five crude barges and then, believing he was closer to Mexico than to Cuba, commanded his party to sail west. Three of the five boats, including Narváez's, sank in storms off the Texas coast. One storm deposited Esteban and others on a sandbar near Galveston. They named it the Island of III Fate.<sup>2</sup>

Sixteen stranded men endured a Gulf Coast winter on the island and then, in April 1529, moved onto the mainland where they were soon captured and enslaved for the next five years by the coastal Indians. By September 1534 only four still lived: Esteban, Dorantes, Alonso del Castillo Maldonado, and Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca. They escaped from the Indians and fled into the interior, where friendlier Native Americans accepted them as medicine men. Because of his ability to "talk fluently with his hands in the language of the signs," Esteban became group interpreter, emissary, and diplomat with the natives. The disoriented survivors now began an arduous journey southwest. They crossed the Rio Grande and then, with the guidance of Shuman Apache, straggled over Chihuahua and Sonora. They finally reached Mexico City in July 1536, ending their eight-year fifteen-thousand-mile ordeal.<sup>3</sup>

Don Antonio de Mendoza, the viceroy of New Spain, failed to persuade Dorantes, Castillo, and Cabeza de Vaca to return to the northern frontier in pursuit of yet another legend of Indian wealth, the

Seven (Golden) Cities of Cibola. Undaunted, Mendoza in 1539 organized an expedition led by a Franciscan friar, Marcos de Niza, who purchased Esteban to serve as his guide and interpreter. The expedition traveled steadily across the Sonora desert with the Moroccan-born slave moving well ahead, dispatching regular reports to Fray Marcos while gathering around him a retinue of three hundred Indian women and men, who believed him to be a powerful healer and medicine man. Surviving Indian accounts of this journey describe the approach of a black katsina (the rain spirit that represented the ancestral dead), large in stature and adorned with animal pelts, turquoise, bells, and feathers on his ankles and arms. Yet when Esteban attempted to enter the Zuni town of Hawikuh (just east of the present Arizona-New Mexico border) after being warned by town elders to stay out, he was killed.<sup>4</sup>

Esteban did not “discover” Arizona or New Mexico. The region had been inhabited for thousands of years. Yet the expedition that cost him his life profoundly changed the course of western history. His journey strengthened Spanish claims in the north, sparked exploration by the Spaniards, and encouraged the founding of such towns as Santa Fe, Los Angeles, and El Paso. Esteban’s journey also initiated the tripartite meeting of Indian, Spanish, and Anglo cultures that was to shape much of the region’s history. The journey also opened this northern frontier to subsequent dark-skinned settlers. For the next three centuries persons of African ancestry more likely moved north from Mexico rather than west from the Atlantic slope.<sup>5</sup>

Esteban’s travels comprise the best account of an early African presence, but the historical records yield many examples of other Africans who accompanied Spanish explorers. When the Coronado expedition of 1540–42 retraced Esteban’s route to the northern frontier, “upward of a thousand servants and followers, black men and red men, went with them.” Most of these servants were Native Americans, but a number were Africans, including some who deserted with Indian members of the party. Moreover, a free black interpreter assisted Coronado expedition friar Juan de Padilla in 1541, when he chose to remain among the Kansas Indians. The Bonilla de Leyva-Antonio Gutiérrez de Humana Expedition of 1593, which attempted to establish a Spanish colony along the upper Río Grande near Santa Fe, had black members. So did the Juan de Oñate party that colonized New Mexico in 1598. Oñate’s colonizers included at least five blacks and mulattoes, two of them soldiers, and three female slaves. The Juan Guerra de Resa Expedition of 1600, organized to strengthen Oñate’s New Mexican colony, included several soldiers and their mulatto wives and children. Nearly a century later, in 1692, the Don Diego de Vargas Expedition, which reconquered New Mexico following the Pueblo Revolt, included Sebastián Rodríguez Brito from Angola. Other persons of African ancestry entered Texas with Spanish expeditions. In 1691 an unidentified black bugler accompanied the second Domingo Terán de los Ríos missionary expedition to the Indians of East Texas. Twenty-five years later a black man named Juan Concepción came with Domingo Ramón’s seventy-five-person party to found the mission of Nuestro Padre San Francisco de los Téjas just east of the Neches River.<sup>6</sup>

Isabel de Olvera, a servant accompanying the Juan Guerra de Resa Expedition, expected that her rights as free woman would be protected under Spanish law. Upon joining the expedition, Olvera became the first free woman of African ancestry to venture into northern New Spain. Her appearance in Santa Fe in 1600 predates by nineteen years the arrival of twenty blacks in Jamestown, Virginia. Concerned for her safety and status on the northern frontier, Olvera gave a predeparture deposition to Don Pedro Lorenzo de Castilla, the alcalde of Querétaro. She stated, “I am going on the expedition to New Mexico and have some reason to fear that I may be annoyed by some individual since I am a mulatto, and it is proper to protect my rights in such an eventuality by an affidavit showing that I am a free woman, unmarried and the legitimate daughter of Hernando, a negro, and an Indian named Magdalena. . . . I therefore request your grace to accept this affidavit, which shows that I am free and

not bound by marriage or slavery. I request that a properly certified and signed copy be given to me in order to protect my rights, and that it carry full legal authority. I demand justice.”<sup>7</sup>

We know little else of these early women and men except that their presence confirms the African contribution to the *raza cósmica*, the multiracial population that emerged in New Spain soon after the conquest of 1519–21. Although free black men accompanied Cortés, African slaves soon followed after 1521, and by 1570 the 20,000 black bond servants outnumbered the combined white and mestizo population. Nearly 200,000 Africans entered Mexico during the colonial period (1521–1821), a figure comparable to the 345,000 brought to British North America. Unlike the English-speaking mainland colonies, where racial boundaries were sharply drawn, New Spain produced a multiracial population through large-scale intermarriage. African women never comprised more than 25 percent of the black population in New Spain. Thus black men generally took Indian wives. Moreover, Spaniards and criollos often took mulattas as consorts and occasionally as wives, adding to the partly African population. The black-Indian and black-Spaniard population grew rapidly from 2,435 in 1570 to 369,790 by 1793. Mestizos demographically and culturally dominated Mexico after independence from Spain in 1821, but by the 1740s mulattoes outnumbered mestizos and constituted, after Indians and criollos, the largest “racial” group in New Spain.<sup>8</sup>

Cultural integration followed. Blacks and mulattoes adopted the religion, language, foods, clothing, and lifestyles of the *españoles* because both Europeans and Africans were racial minorities among a much-larger Indian population. Europeans and Africans integrated economically as well. Much of the Indian population maintained a self-contained, subsistence agricultural economy, but blacks and mulattoes alike, whether slave or free, like the Spaniards, criollos, and mestizos, served the economic interests of Spain. In British colonial North America racial demography and slavery combined to encourage a distinct “African-American culture,” as in the South Carolina lowlands or Tidewater Maryland and Virginia. Few areas of Mexico, however, other than the Veracruz region supported black populations large enough to foster cultural autonomy. In New Spain that autonomy rested with Indians rather than Afro-Mexicans.<sup>9</sup>



New Spain had few Spaniards of pure European lineage. Thus the task of settling the northern frontier fell primarily to Hispanicized Indians, mestizos, free and slave mulattoes, and blacks. Typically slaves were forced into military service and used as menial laborers. But many seventeenth-century free blacks and mulattoes became militiamen, an obligatory service for all free males. Both groups were assigned to garrison duty along the northern frontier and remained there as poorly paid civilian laborers at military garrisons, missions, or towns after their service was over. In 1760 Pedro de Labaquera, who traveled across Arizona to locate a site for a presidio, charged that most of the frontier soldiers he encountered were “mulattoes of low character, without ambition. . . .” After 1765 free mulattoes and blacks became professional soldiers when the crown established a regular army in New Spain. Nine years later a colonial official judged the population of northern New Spain to be so intermixed as to obliterate distinct racial antecedents. Nonetheless Spanish census records continued to note race or color until 1800, giving historians a fascinating glimpse into the role of class and race in assigning social status in New Spain.<sup>10</sup>

Spanish settlement in California reveals much about the consequences of forging a mixed-race population. Persons of African ancestry accompanied the naval and military expeditions that occupied San Diego and Monterey in 1769. One of them, Juan Antonio Coronel, was described as a *soldado de cuero* (leather-jacketed soldier), indicating he had joined the Spanish colonial militia. Friar Junípero Serra wrote of two mulatto sailors after his arrival at Monterey in 1771, and the Juan Bautista de Anza Expedition of 1775 included seven black soldier-settlers and their families among twenty-nine families emigrating to Alta California. The 1785 Santa Barbara census showed mulattoes comprising

19 percent of the town's 191 inhabitants, while in San Jose, Monterey, and San Francisco, five years later, the percentages were 24, 19, and 15 respectively. Approximately 55 percent of the Spanish-speaking population in California in 1790 was of mixed heritage, according to historian Jack Forbes, and 20 percent possessed some African ancestry.<sup>11</sup>

### Population of New Spain, 1570–1790

	1570	%	1646	%	1742	%	1793	%
Indians	3,336,860	98	1,269,607	74	1,540,256	62	2,319,741	61
Europeans	6,644	0*	13,780	0	9,814	0	7,904	0
Criollos	11,067	0	168,586	10	391,512	16	677,458	18
Mestizos	2,437	0	109,042	7	249,368	10	418,568	11
Blacks	20,569	0	35,089	2	20,131	1	6,100	0
Mulattoes	2,435	0	116,529	7	266,196	11	369,790	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,380,012</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>1,712,615</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>2,477,277</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>3,799,561</b>	<b>100</b>

\*Less than 1 percent is represented by 0. All percentages may not total 100 percent.

Source: Colin M. MacLachan and Jaime E. Rodríguez O., *The Forging of the Cosmic Race: A Reinterpretation of Colonial Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 197.

### Castas: Racial Classification System in Colonial New Spain

Male	Female	Offspring
Spaniard	Indian	Mestizo
Spaniard	Negro	Mulatto
Spaniard	Mestiza	Castizo
Spaniard	Mulatta	Morisco
Morisco	Española	Chino
Chino	Indian	Salto atras
Salto atras	Mulatta	Lobo
Lobo	China	Gibaro
Gibaro	Mulatta	Alborazado
Alborazado	Negro	Cambujo
Cambujo	Indian	Zambaigo
Zambaigo	Loba	Calpamulatto

Source: Leslie B. Rout, Jr., *The African Experience in Spanish America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 130.

Black and biracial settlers founded Los Angeles in 1781. When Spanish colonial officials chose to locate a settlement between the Mission San Gabriel and the Presidio of Santa Barbara, they recruited families from the province of Sinaloa. Twelve families, mainly from Rosario, a village two-thirds mulatto, left Sinaloa in February 1781 under a military escort for their five-hundred-mile land and sea journey to Alta California. Seven months later, on September 4, they reached what would become Nuestra Señora la Reina de Los Angeles de Porciuncula. Colonial records detail the races and places of birth of most of these settlers. They included Luis Quintero, a fifty-five-year-old black native of Guadalajara his mulatta wife, María Petra Rubio, forty, and their five children; José Moreno, twenty-two, and María Guadalupe Gertrudis, nineteen, a recently wed mulatto couple; Antonio Mesa, a thirty



eight-year-old black man born in Alamos, Sonora, his mulatto wife, Ana Gertrudis López, twenty-seven, and their two children; and forty-two-year-old Jose Antonio Navarro, a mestizo, his forty-five year-old mulatto wife, María Rufina Dorotea, and their three children. Twenty-six of the forty-six original settlers of Los Angeles, soon to be Alta California's largest settlement, were of African or part African ancestry.<sup>12</sup>

Surviving evidence suggests a similar pattern in Texas. Fray Antonio Olivares disdainfully described the seventy-two people who founded San Antonio de Bexar in 1718 as “mulattoes, lobos, coyotes, and mestizos, people of the lowest order, whose customs are worse than those of the Indians. Sixty-three years later another priest, Fray Agustín Morfi, described San Antonio's town council as “ragged band of men of all colors.” An informal 1777 census of San Antonio de Béxar confirmed his assessment. Among its population of 2,060 lived 151 blacks and mulattoes. The 1789 census of Laredo showed similar ethnic and racial diversity. Of the 708 residents, 45 percent were Spanish, 17 percent mestizos, and 17 percent mulattoes. Indians constituted another 16 percent of the population. The official census of Texas in 1792 confirmed the pattern in San Antonio and Laredo, where it recorded 34 blacks and 414 mulattoes, who made up 15 percent of province's population.<sup>13</sup>

Occasionally the records reveal some idea of black status and of relationships that crossed race, class, and gender boundaries. In 1735 Antonia Lusgardia Ernandes, a free mulatta in San Antonio, sued her former employer, Don Miguel Núñez Morillo, for custody of their son. Ernandes admitted that she “suffered so much from lack of clothing and from mistreatment” that she left Morillo and sought shelter with her two children in the home of Alberto López. When Morillo seized their son, “the only man I have and the one who I hope will eventually support me,” Ernandes appealed to the court to “make use of all the laws in my favor. . . .” Miguel Núñez Morillo admitted paternity but argued that Ernandes had voluntarily relinquished custody of the boy to his wife. The court found otherwise and awarded custody to the biological mother on the condition that she give her son a “proper home.”<sup>14</sup>

No reliable statistics exist for New Mexico's population comparable to those of California and Texas, but impressionistic evidence again points to a multiracial population. The region received its first permanent non-Indian inhabitants in 1598, when Don Juan de Oñate led 129 soldier-colonists into the Upper Rio Grande Valley, where they settled among the Pueblo Indians. One of the Oñate party, Francisco de Sosa Penalosa, brought “three female negro slaves, one mulatto slave, and other men and women servants.” The Spanish population grew slowly to 750 in 1630 and 2,900 in 1680. It also grew more diverse, including not only criollos but mestizos, New Mexican and Mexican Indians, mulattos and blacks, prompting Fray Estevan de Perea to characterize the region's colonists in 1631 as “mestizos, mulattos, and zambohijos.” Persons of African ancestry joined the various competing political factions that emerged in the region. During the 1640–43 civil war in New Mexico the faction that supported Governor Luis de Rosas was reportedly comprised of mestizos and mulattos, while Rosas's successor was supported primarily by “mestizos and sambahigos [*sic*], sons of Indian men, and Negroes, and mulattos.”<sup>15</sup>

Persons of African descent may in fact have moved to New Mexico to escape the discrimination they faced in central Mexico. Historian Dedra McDonald profiles the lives of two such men. Sebastián Rodríguez Brito, the Angolan-born free son of African slaves, rose from servant to soldier and landholder in the late seventeenth century and eventually married Isabel Olguin, an *española* widow in 1692. Jose Antonio, a Congo-born slave brought to El Paso del Norte in 1752, married Marcela, an Apache maid in a neighboring household eight years later. Such marriages, and the highly ritualized witnessing ceremonies that accompanied them, featuring Indians, mestizos, mulattoes, and Spaniards suggested that certain social networks transcended racial and class boundaries.<sup>16</sup>

Racial identification within colonial populations on the northern frontier, as in much of Latin America, was a matter of social class as much as physical appearance. In 1783 Spain's King Charles III began to issue documents called *cédulas de gracias al sacar* to "cleanse" persons of "impure origin," principally Indians and Africans. Such cleansing afforded legal, if not social, equality to certificate holders. By 1795 such certificates were sold rather than simply conferred upon worthy individuals. Few blacks could afford the seven hundred pesos required to change their racial status from *pardo* (half black-half Indian) to *quinterón* (one-eighth black-seven-eighths white) and the one thousand pesos to move from *quinterón* to white. Even so, official recognition of the ability, to purchase a new racial identity encouraged others to assert a higher status and allowed Spanish officials to ignore or blur the various categories. Pedro Huízar is one such example. A native of Aguascalientes, Huízar came to San Antonio de Béxar around 1778, where he was soon employed as sculptor at Mission San José. A man of numerous talents, Huízar became the mission carpenter, and in the 1790s he helped survey surrounding mission farmlands. By 1798 Huízar was the appointed justice at Mission San José, bearing the honorific title of Don. Don Huízar's racial status rose accordingly. First listed as a mulatto in the 1779 census, by 1793 he had become an *español*.<sup>17</sup>

Color, then, presented no insurmountable barrier to fame, wealth, or new ethnoracial status on the northern frontier. Some mulattoes near San Antonio owned both land and cattle. The mulatto Francisco Reyes, who arrived in Los Angeles from central Mexico in 1781, eventually became its alcalde while the descendants of Santiago de la Cruz Pico, a mestizo, and his mulatto wife, Jacinta, became prominent political leaders and wealthy ranchers in early-nineteenth-century California. In 1807 Felipe Elua, a black native of Louisiana, settled on an estate just outside San Antonio, where he grew sugar and cotton.<sup>18</sup>

Even so, color mattered in New Spain, for it still defined political and social class. As Jesus de La Teja has written, racial mixture notwithstanding, the stain of mixed blood attached to mestizos and the additional stigma of slavery attached to mulattos in colonial society reached the frontier. Throughout the colonial period the quintessential mark of status was to be considered *español* rather than mulatto, mestizo, Indian, or black. When San Antonio resident Antonio de Armas called Francisco Rodríguez's wife a mulatta, Rodríguez did not immediately defend his spouse. Instead he declared that should the charge be true, he would end the marriage, "for I married her in the faith that she was Spanish." Given such attitudes, few Spanish speakers of Texas, New Mexico, and California openly alluded to their African heritage.<sup>19</sup>

For three centuries Spanish colonial policies promoted, however inadvertently, upward social and political mobility among the *castas*. The Mexican War of Independence theoretically enshrined social equality in the constitution and laws of Mexico. That political revolution began in September 1810, when Fray Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla led mestizo, mulatto, black, and Indian masses in a brief but furious campaign to destroy the caste system and Spanish rule. Hidalgo's *Grito de Dolores* called for the abolition of slavery and the equality of all Mexican citizens before the law. The war continued fitfully for ten years without either side winning decisively. Then in 1821 Agustín de Iturbide, the Spanish military commander, joined rebel leader Vicente Guerrero in issuing the *Plan de Iguala*, a new proposal for independence. While much more conservative than the *Grito de Dolores*, the *Plan de Iguala* nonetheless reiterated the guarantees of social equality and the abolition of slavery, and it affirmed the right of all races to hold office. With an army of former enemies and the support of criollo conservatives, Iturbide forced the surrender of Spain's colonial armies. Although subsequent political regimes sought to curtail the promises, Mexico had legally committed itself to liberty and political equality for all its citizens.<sup>20</sup>

Fugitive slaves and free blacks “from the States” soon took note of those promises. Texas, the Mexican province most accessible to African Americans from the United States, became the principal area of settlement and a “political and cultural frontier.” Beginning in the 1820s, a small number of African Americans came to east Texas. Many were fugitive slaves, but the immigrants also included free blacks determined to live under Mexican liberty instead of American tyranny. Samuel H. Hardin for example, wrote that he and his wife had moved to Texas because Mexico’s laws “invited their emigration” and guaranteed their right to own property. Virginian John Bird came because he believed he and his son, Henry, “would be received as citizens” under Mexico’s colonization laws “and entitled as such to land.”<sup>21</sup>

Other free blacks shared these aspirations. William Goyens, a North Carolinian, settled near Nacogdoches in 1820 and became a blacksmith, freighter, trader, land speculator, and slaveowner. At his death in 1856 Goyens had amassed nearly thirteen thousand acres in four East Texas counties. Lewis B. Jones and Greenbury Logan, who arrived in 1829 and 1831 respectively received land grants in the Stephen F. Austin colony, while Jean Baptiste Maturia of Louisiana was awarded a land grant directly from the Mexican government. Although there appears to be no evidence of land grants held in their names, single black women also participated in the migration to Texas. Harriet Newell Sands a “free woman of color,” emigrated from Michigan in 1834 and worked as a housekeeper. Zelina Husk, a Georgia native, and Diana Leonard, who came from “the States,” were employed as washerwomen near San Jacinto in 1835. Fanny McFarland of Harris County “by industry, prudence, and economy” bought and sold small plots of real estate.<sup>22</sup>

However, the South Carolina-born Ashworth brothers, William, Aaron, Abner, and Moses, became the largest free black family in antebellum Texas and perhaps the wealthiest. The four brothers migrated to southeast Texas between 1831 and 1835. Two of the Ashworths were apparently wealthy enough to avoid military service in the Texas revolution, sending substitutes instead. Eventually the brothers acquired nearly two thousand acres in southeast Texas, and Aaron Ashworth owned twenty-five hundred head of cattle, the largest herd in Jefferson County. In 1850 Aaron Ashworth was the only resident of the county wealthy enough to afford a tutor for his children.<sup>23</sup>

Some free black immigrants in Mexican Texas openly appreciated such racial tolerance. When the American abolitionist Benjamin Lundy visited San Antonio de Béxar in 1833, he met a former slave from North Carolina who had become a blacksmith. The blacksmith said “the Mexicans pay him the same respect as to the other laboring people, there being no difference made here on account of color. Impressed by the prospects of freedom in Texas for former slaves, Lundy launched a program to purchase 138,000 acres of land and colonize 250 families within two years.<sup>24</sup>

The Mexican government never endorsed Lundy’s efforts. Nonetheless liberal politicians, such as Vice-President Valentín Gómez Farías, did support the relocation of former slaves in Mexico. Responding to Philadelphia abolitionist Samuel Webb’s 1833 inquiry about black colonization, Gómez Farías wrote: “[I]f they [black slaves] would like to come, we will offer them land for cultivation, plots for houses where they can establish towns, and tools for work, under the obligation [that they will] obey the laws of the country and the authorities already established by the Supreme Government of the Federation.”<sup>25</sup>

Euro-American immigrants, however, hoped to transform Texas into an empire for slavery. In 1821 Mexican Texas had only thirty-two hundred non-Indian inhabitants. Concerned that Texas might be seized by the United States, France, or Great Britain, the Spanish government in 1821 granted Moses Austin permission to settle a colony of American-born immigrants loyal to Spain along the Brazos and Colorado rivers. When Austin died later that year, Stephen F. Austin, his son, inherited his colonizing enterprise. By the time Austin reached San Antonio, Mexico had become independent but

nonetheless encouraged American settlement. The prospect of free land lured thousands of Euro-Americans across the Sabine and Red rivers. By 1823 three thousand U.S. citizens had entered Texas illegally, joining approximately seven hundred legitimate settlers. Seven years later the seven thousand Euro-American settlers had surpassed the three thousand Mexican residents, and by 1835 the American population stood at thirty-five thousand, including three thousand black slaves.<sup>26</sup>

The Texas revolution of 1835–36 is often presented as a contest between liberty-loving Anglos and Tejanos confronting a despotic Mexican government. That image belies a central motive in the campaign for independence: an Anglo desire to preserve slavery. That motive was to have a profound impact on Texas's free blacks. Although slavery had been introduced into Texas by the Spaniards, it was insignificant before the *norteamericanos* came. Nacogdoches, the largest settlement in east Texas had thirty-three black slaves in 1809 while San Antonio de Bexar and La Bahía (Goliad) combined had a mere nine slaves in 1819.<sup>27</sup>

All this changed in the early 1820s. Jared E. Groce, who reached central Texas in January 1822 from Georgia, brought with him ninety bondsmen and established the Bernardo cotton plantation on the Brazos River. Groce, like many subsequent arrivals, insisted that the cash crop, the labor system, and the social relations of the U.S. South, all resting on black slavery, could be replicated with ease along the Colorado and Brazos rivers.

Through the 1820s both Texas settlers and Mexican political and military leaders warily skirted the slavery issue. The Mexican government, committed constitutionally to black freedom, nonetheless desired economic development on its northern frontier. It vacillated, compromised, and occasionally defied slaveholder wishes. For their part Anglo settlers never confronted Mexican political sensibilities on black bondage. But they did exploit local and national political rivalries and official indecision to increase the number of slaves and the security of slaveowning in the region.

The contract labor system, introduced in 1828, proved an insidious subterfuge for slavery by redefining bondspersons as “indentured servants for life.” United States immigrants took their slaves before a Mexican public official and drew up a contract with each bond servant. Theoretically freed by the contract, the laborer nonetheless owed his value and the expenses of moving to the new country to his “former” slaveowner, who recovered those costs by appropriating his labor. The contract between Marmaduke D. Sandifer and Clarissa, “a girl of color,” before the alcalde at San Felipe de Austin on Christmas Day 1833 was typical. Clarissa agreed to “conduct & demean herself as an honest & faithful servant, renouncing and disclaiming all her right and claim to personal liberty for & during the term of ninety-nine years.” In return Sandifer promised to furnish her “food, lodging, and medical care and, should she be disabled, to support her in a decent and comfortable manner.” Such arrangements kept blacks in slavery by another name.<sup>28</sup>

As the American population rapidly outgrew its Spanish-speaking counterpart, some Tejanos openly supported the growth of slavery. Emboldened, many Anglo settlers sought to remove the subterfuge of the contract labor system and establish slavery outright. Indeed Texans such as James W. Fannin, Jr., Monroe Edwards, and Major Benjamin Fort Smith, impatient for additional bond servants, began to import slaves from Africa through Cuba. One historian of the trade suggests that by 1836 one in five Texas slaves came directly from Africa or the Caribbean.<sup>29</sup>

Most southern-born white settlers, who could not imagine Texas being developed without slave labor, would have agreed with S. Rhoads Fisher of Pennsylvania. Writing in response to Stephen Austin's short-lived proposal to encourage free white northern labor to emigrate to Texas, Fisher asked, “Do you believe that cane and cotton can be grown to advantage by a sparse white population? We must either abandon the finest portion of Texas to its original uselessness or submit to the acknowledged, but lesser evil of slavery.” Three years later Austin was persuaded: “I have been

adverse to the principle of slavery in Texas. I have now . . . changed my views of the matter; though my ideas are the same as to the abstract principle. Texas *must* be a slave country. Circumstances and unavoidable necessity compels it. It is the wish of the people there, and it is my duty to do all I can, prudently, in favor of it.”<sup>30</sup>

By 1835 Texas slaveholders had duplicated the U.S. slave system. Fully 10 percent of English-speaking Texans were slaves. Slaveholders now demanded protection of their property and open commerce in human beings. Texas and Mexico were on a collision course. African Americans, free and slave, would soon be caught in the middle of these contesting sides. For many Texas slaves Mexico’s flag represented liberty. As early as 1833 Juan N. Almonte, a Mexican government representative, arrived in Texas to inform the slaves of their liberty under Mexican law and to promise them land as freedmen. Three years later, and one month before his siege of the Alamo, General Antonio López de Santa Anna, president of Mexico and commander of the Mexican Army, queried government officials in Mexico City about freeing the slaves. “Shall we permit those wretches to moan in chains any longer in a country whose kind laws protect the liberty of man without distinction of cast or color?” Santa Anna received a response that placed the Mexican government unequivocally on the side of black freedom. Minister of War José María Tornel wrote Santa Anna on March 18 to reaffirm that “the philanthropy of the Mexican nation” had already freed the slaves. Santa Anna was simply to grant their “natural rights,” including “the liberty to go to any point on the globe that appeals to them,” to remain in Texas or another part of Mexico.<sup>31</sup>

The Mexican Army, which included some black infantrymen and servants, was poised to become a legion of liberation. As the army crossed the Colorado and Brazos rivers and moved into the region heavily populated by slaves, the boldest of the bondpeople fled to their lines. Soon after the Alamo fell, Brazoria’s slaveholders were quoted as saying that “their negroes . . . were on the tip-toe of expectation, and rejoicing that the Mexicans were coming to make them free.”<sup>32</sup> Fourteen slave families fled to the command of General José de Urrea near Victoria on April 3. In May thirteen blacks left Matagorda to join the Mexican troops. Countless others took flight toward Santa Anna’s forces both when they marched into Texas and when they retreated. In return for Mexican protection, these fugitives served as spies, messengers, or provocateurs for their liberators. Even after Santa Anna had been captured and signed his battlefield surrender on April 22, Texas found Mexican commanders loath to return fugitive slaves. Lieutenant Colonel José Enrique de la Peña, for example, personally intervened in one case when he disguised a soon-to-be reenslaved black as a Mexican soldier and sent him to safety in Matamoros.<sup>33</sup>

For most white Texans the prospect of a servile insurrection instigated by the Mexican Army proved far more frightening than black flight to Santa Anna’s lines. In October 1835 the Matagorda Committee of Safety and Correspondence, acknowledging Santa Anna’s preparations for suppressing rebellious Texans, declared that a “merciless soldiery” was advancing on Texas, “to give liberty to our slaves, and to make slaves of ourselves.” Residents of the Colorado River region were alarmed by the false rumor of an amphibious assault force of two thousand troops under the command of General Martín Perfecto de Cos poised to ascend the river and incite a servile insurrection. Later that month nearly one hundred black slaves on the Brazos did attempt a revolt although it is unclear whether they received any direct assistance from Mexican forces. Anglo troops from Goliad suppressed the revolt and hanged or whipped to death its leaders. Uprising fears intensified days after the fall of the Alamo. A Safety and Correspondence Committee at Brazoria announced that the advancing Mexican Army sought “a general extermination” of the people regardless of age or sex and claimed that the “treacherous and bloody enemy” intended to recruit black slaves “as instruments of his unholy and savage work . . . thus lighting the torch of war in the bosoms of our domestic circles.”<sup>34</sup>

While the Texas War of Independence cannot be called a “race war,” racial and ethnic tensions that lurked beneath the surface before 1835 became distressingly evident once the fighting began. The mostly southern-born Anglo Texans of the 1820s and 1830s, who applied white supremacy argument to justify black slavery and Native American removal, easily projected their racist views onto the Spanish-speaking population they encountered. In an appeal for U.S. support William H. Wharton, one of the more radical agitators for independence, declared: “The Justice and benevolence of God, will forbid that . . . Texas should . . . be permanently benighted by the ignorance and superstition . . . of Mexican rule. The Anglo-American race are destined to be forever the proprietors of this land . . . Their laws will govern it, their learning will enlighten it, their enterprise will improve it.”<sup>35</sup>

Racial differences made the break with Mexico easier than the U.S. struggle to free itself from Great Britain sixty years earlier. Whereas Americans had broken their political allegiance with the British, a people of “kindred blood, language, and institutions,” wrote one Texan to the *Telegraph and Texas Register* in December 1835, “we separate from a people one half of whom are . . . different in color, pursuits and character.”<sup>36</sup> Stephen Austin spoke for many Anglos when he declared the revolution a contest between the barbarism of a “mongrel Spanish-Indian and negro race, against civilization and the Anglo-American race,” while James W. Fannin demanded that Texans take up arms to prevent the violation of “the Fair daughters of chaste white women” by the oncoming Mexican Army. Such sentiments became a fountainhead of racist imagery that extended well beyond the end of the fighting and constituted a profound “reversal of fortune,” according to historian Paul Lack, for Tejanos and black Texans who were ostracized and segregated after the Texas revolution. A delegate to the Texas Constitutional Convention of 1845 justified this nexus between black and brown Texans when he declared, “In their taste and social instincts, they [the Mexicans] approximated the African. The difference between them and the Negro is smaller, and is less felt, I believe, than that between the Northern and Southern European races. . . . Notice how [the peons] meet [the slave] on an equality. They do not intermarry with the white population; they form their connections among the slaves.”<sup>37</sup>

For every slave that fled to the Mexican lines, far more took advantage of the confusion and turmoil of the fighting to make good their escape. Recently arrived Africans seemed particularly adept at flight, often persuading American-born bondsmen to flee with them. The Africans developed such a reputation for fierce resistance that they moved at will in the interior Colorado River region. Other slaves fled to the sparsely populated region south of the Nueces River or toward an already well-established colony of fugitive slaves at Matamoros. Planters who sent or traveled with their slaves into east Texas or Louisiana during the “Runaway Scrape,” the mass flight of Texas settlers before the march of Santa Anna’s army, frequently told of black fugitives who fled north toward the Red River west into Comanche country. Such slaves were willing to risk the possibility of acceptance and freedom with Native Americans or the advancing Mexican Army rather than face the prospect of continued bondage in Texas.<sup>38</sup>

Only a handful of the 150 free black Texans voluntarily supported the revolutionary cause. Most realized that their status, and possibly their collective fate, would change dramatically with a victory by Anglo Texans. Some, however, chose the independence campaign because of personal friendships or vague promises of land, or because they were persuaded that some grievances against Mexico were justified. Samuel McCullough, Jr., was influenced by all of these ideas when he volunteered to fight at Goliad on October 9, 1835. He became “the first whose blood was shed in the War of Independence” when a wound in the shoulder cost him the use of his arm. During the assault on Mexican forces at San Antonio, Greenbury Logan was wounded and disabled for life. Pennsylvania native Peter Allen, one of the few black volunteers from the United States who served in the independence campaign, joined the ill-fated command of James W. Fannin, which was captured and executed by Mexican forces in the

Goliad Massacre. William Goyens served as an interpreter between Sam Houston and various Indian nations in the successful effort to prevent an alliance between Mexico and Native Americans.<sup>39</sup>

The Texas revolution set in motion political forces that in the next decade added all of Mexico's northern frontier to the United States. But it also initiated the decline in status of the indigenous Afro-Mexican population of Texas and the free blacks who sought refuge there. The new constitution graphically spelled out their status in independent Texas, giving citizenship rights to all persons except Africans, the descendants of Africans, and Indians, and declared that "no free persons of African descent . . . shall be permitted to reside permanently in the republic without the consent of the Texas Congress." The constitution announced that "All persons of color who were slaves for life previous to their emigration to Texas, and who are now in bondage, shall remain in the like state of servitude." Furthermore, it denied future Texas Congresses the power to prevent U.S. emigrants from bringing their slaves into the republic or emancipating slaves. Newly independent Texas had fixed African slavery as its predominant economic and social system and simultaneously stripped citizenship from its free black inhabitants.<sup>40</sup>

Disabled by his war wounds and fearing the loss of his property to back taxes, Texas revolutionary war veteran Greenbury Logan petitioned the Texas Congress in 1841 for assistance. Reacting to the sweeping changes ushered in by the War of Independence, Logan said, "I love the country and did stay because I felt myself mower [*sic*] a freeman then in the states . . . but now look at my situation. Every privilege dear to a freeman is taken away."<sup>41</sup> The future of slaves, however, was certain. With the guarantee of state protection to the "peculiar institution" impossible under Mexican hegemony, the three thousand African American "servants" held in bondage in 1835 rapidly grew to a quarter of a million slaves three decades later.

Far fewer blacks entered California between 1821 and 1848, and none are known to have arrived in New Mexico during the period. As with African Americans in Texas, black emigrants to California correctly concluded that both Spanish and Mexican rule offered fewer racial restrictions than in the United States. Yet California's vast distance from concentrated black settlement in the American South precluded it from becoming a major destination of English-speaking African Americans.

Unlike Texas or New Mexico, however, California's political leadership included some individuals of African ancestry such as Andrés and Pío Pico, descendants of one of the most successful Californio families. The two grandsons of Santiago and Jacinta de la Cruz Pico became influential in Mexican-era California politics. Pío Pico, consummate politician and "revolutionist," challenged three California governors and subsequently became governor twice during the twenty-five years of Mexican rule in California, first in 1831 and again in 1845–46, when he served as the last governor of Mexican California. Pío Pico, who eventually became part of the political elite in Anglo-dominated post-1848 California, could not rally Mexican support for California resistance to the American occupation forces. Andrés Pico, a wealthy landowner, served as a military commander in the Mexican California militia, and in 1846 he defeated American General Stephen Watts Kearny at the Battle of San Pascual. In January 1847 he represented California at the signing of the Treaty of Cahuenga (with U.S. Commander John C. Frémont), which ended the Mexican War in California. After the American occupation Pico mined gold at Mokelumne and served in the California legislature in 1851 and again in 1860–61.<sup>42</sup>

California's other prominent official of African ancestry, Lieutenant Colonel Manuel Victoria, served briefly as governor in 1831. Before his arrival in Alta California, Victoria had earned a reputation for honesty and efficiency while *commandante* of Baja California. But he soon ran afoul of the local political elite, including Pío Pico, who unflatteringly described Victoria as "very dark, thin,

beardless . . . gruff and despotic.” In November 1831 a group of influential Californios, including Pico, issued a ~~pronunciamento, a declaration of insurrection against Victoria~~. Rebel leaders confronted Victoria’s forces at Cahuenga Pass near Los Angeles. Governor Victoria was seriously wounded in the ensuing confrontation, forcing his surrender. The rebels declared their victory and placed Victoria on a ship bound for Mexico.<sup>43</sup>

The ambiguity of California’s fluid racial order confused and irritated English-speaking visitors, such as Richard Henry Dana, who condemned the society as far too free of racial distinctions for his tastes. Shortly after his arrival in California in 1835, he wrote: “Generally speaking, each person’s caste is decided by the quality of the blood, which shows itself, too plainly to be concealed, at first sight. Yet the least drop of Spanish blood, if it be only of quadroon or octoroon, is sufficient to raise them from the rank of slaves and entitles them . . . to call themselves Espanolos. . . .”<sup>44</sup>

The ambiguity that distressed Dana proved naturally attractive to some English-speaking African Americans who began arriving after 1810. The first English-speaking African Americans to enter California were seafarers who jumped ship while in the province’s various ports. A seventeen-year-old African American known only as Bob was one of the first when he deserted a New England vessel, *Albatross*, in 1816 and three years later was baptized in Santa Barbara as Juan Cr stobal. William Warren left his ship when it landed in the San Francisco Bay in 1828 and settled near San Jos . John Caldwell, a cook on the frigate *California*, deserted in Monterrey in 1832 and took refuge in the San Jos  home of John Burton, a former Massachusetts ship captain.<sup>45</sup>

Of the black sailors who settled in California before 1848, Allen Light became the most prominent. Light was a crew member of the *Pilgrim* along with Richard Henry Dana, whose *Two Years before the Mast* chronicled the ship’s voyage to California. Light deserted the ship at Santa Barbara in 1835, acquired Mexican citizenship, and became a leading otter hunter along the southern California coast. In 1839 Governor Juan Bautista Alvarado appointed Light *comisario general* to serve as “principal representative of that national armada” assigned to halt illegal otter hunting of California’s coastal waters. Light thus became the first U.S.-born black to serve as a Mexican official.<sup>46</sup>

West Indian-born William A. Leidesdorff was Mexican California’s most prominent African American. Leidesdorff, of Danish-African ancestry, left the West Indies as a young man and became a successful merchant captain in New York and then New Orleans before arriving in Yerba Buena (San Francisco) in 1841. Soon after his arrival he sailed his commercial schooner *Julia Ann* on regular voyages between Honolulu and California. He also operated the *Sitka*, the first steam-powered vessel on San Francisco Bay. By 1844 Leidesdorff had become a Mexican citizen and received a thirty-five-thousand-acre land grant along the American River. Despite his adopted nationality, Leidesdorff’s commercial ties with the United States led to his appointment as American vice-consul in 1845 by President James K. Polk, who was unaware of the California’s African ancestry. Leidesdorff was thus involved in the diplomatic maneuverings of the American explorer John C. Fr mont, whom he entertained in his Yerba Buena home in 1846 and escorted to Monterey to meet American Consul Thomas Oliver Larkin. As one of the most prominent businessmen in the city Leidesdorff was elected to the town council in 1847 and helped establish its school system. The following year he became city treasurer.<sup>47</sup>

Leidesdorff’s business transactions with another prominent pre-gold rush Californian, Captain John A. Sutter, reveal his incorporation into the local elite and his acceptance of the Spanish and Mexican enslavement of Native Americans. Between 1844 and 1846 Sutter had run up a debt to Leidesdorff of \$2,198, a third of which he liquidated by supplying Leidesdorff with Indian slaves. In the spring of 1846 Sutter promised ten or twelve “selected Indians . . . which will be of some service to you” along with “two Indian Girls, of which you will take which you like the best. . . .” Sutter then



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