

Communication from Public

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Comments for Public Posting: Esteemed Council: Kevin de León's recent motion of 21 June, regarding a proposed renaming of Pershing Square, is riddled with disinformation. As a historian, I feel it necessary to point out important facts about both John Pershing and Bidy Mason. De León's only mention of General Pershing (fourth paragraph, final sentence) is that Pershing "never stepped foot in Los Angeles." That is, of course, wildly untrue: Pershing spent a great deal of time in Los Angeles with his friend and local resident George S. Patton, and was engaged to Patton's sister, Anita Wilson Patton. Pershing was close with old-school Los Angeles families like the Workmans and Wilsons (both families having come to Los Angeles in 1842). In the early years of World War One, Patton commanded the Los Angeles headquarters of the Coast Artillery, and delivered addresses to the Red Cross. After leading our forces to victory in World War One, Pershing was in Los Angeles to personally dedicate the square named in his honor, and 50,000 people—1/10th of the entire city—came to see him speak. Pershing was back in Los Angeles in 1923, where thousands again saw him speak, and he personally planted a redwood at the War Memorial Building that stands mightily to this day. What's telling, of course, is that de León's lone reference to Pershing—the baffling untruth that Patton "never stepped foot in Los Angeles"—also completely ignores Patton's totemic importance to American history, and the mammoth importance the park, as named after Pershing, has played for our veterans in general (a topic covered in Courtland Jindra's communication to Council dated 01 July). The text of de León's motion, ignoring Pershing, consists wholly of Bidy Mason's merits. He calls her (fourth paragraph, first sentence) "a major founder of the City of Los Angeles" and (fifth paragraph, final sentence) "one of Los Angeles' founders." While Mason plays an important part in our history, it is absolutely fallacious that she could be considered a founder. It is therefore important to examine and weigh the contributions of Bidy Mason to our history. De León calls Bidy Mason (first sentence) "a pioneering figure in Los Angeles" and in making that argument, de León is forced to distort facts. De León states Mason "bravely petitioned the court for freedom" (she did not: it was a rancher named Robert Owens who petitioned for the freedom of fourteen slaves, which included Bidy Mason and

her three daughters). De León states Mason “co-founded the First African Methodist Episcopal Church in Los Angeles” (which is certainly true, but by stating she “co-founded” it would seem to connote she was one of, say, two founders; Mason was one of twelve individuals who established the local branch of a church that had been established in Philadelphia in 1816). Biddy Mason's 1856 trial and Judge Hayes' decision disallowing Robert Smith's continued ownership of 14 slaves, is without question an important piece of American legal history. After gaining emancipation, what made Biddy Mason all the more famous? After making money working as a midwife, she became an ardent capitalist and prolific landlord. It is ironic that in today's age, where capitalism in general—and landlords specifically—are held in contempt, we esteem Mason for exactly those things (and Mason was extremely strict when collecting for her fortune; she famously wouldn't allow the First AME Church hold services in the AME church, because they owed her money). De León points out that Mason was involved in charitable causes to help the poor and uneducated, but such activity was common currency among two distinct types of people in Victorian America: dedicated Christians, and the very wealthy. Mason was both, and like any of the fervently religious she was dedicated to “Christian Charity,” and like the wealthy at the time, was bound to the concept of noblesse oblige, i.e., the kind of work that led the era's Carnegies, Rockefellers and Vanderbilts to build libraries, universities, and engage in general philanthropic good works. Mason is of course a wonderful and important part of our shared collective memory, and despite de León's contortions of truth, I am thrilled we celebrate, and have celebrated, Biddy Mason. And by “have celebrated” it is instructive to remember—this being an important fact Councilmember de León so conveniently (and obviously) omits—Los Angeles has had a park named in Mason's honor for the last 35 years, built on the former site of her Spring Street home. Conversely, there is zero evidence Mason ever set foot in the park now known as Pershing Square, which Pershing dedicated in person. Councilmembers, it is time to revere the Biddy Mason Park that Los Angeles dedicated in 1989. Moreover, it is time to revere Pershing Square, named after the man who led us to victory against tyranny.