

Communication from Public

Name: Bob Wolfe

Date Submitted: 08/15/2024 03:25 PM

Council File No: 24-0751

Comments for Public Posting: I oppose Councilmember Kevin De Leon's motion to rename Pershing Square for Bidy Mason for the reasons stated in the attached .pdf. The attached document replaces my earlier submission from 8/12/24, which inadvertently was posted with a single paragraph formatting which makes it difficult to read. Thanks for your consideration. Bob Wolfe

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Name: Bob Wolfe
Council File No: 24-0751

Comments for Public Posting:

I oppose Councilmember Kevin de León’s motion to rename Pershing Square “Biddy Mason Park.” I am an appellate attorney, with a strong interest in L.A. legal history. I have lectured and written about Pershing Square and Biddy Mason for Public Counsel and the California Supreme Court Historical Society. (While I am a member of the board of directors of each organization, I write here solely in my individual capacity.)

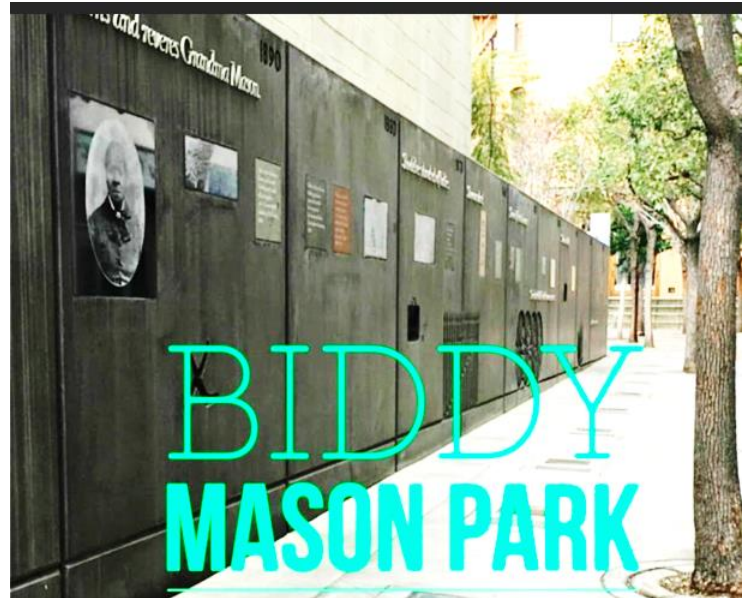
The KDL proposal displays a monumental disregard for Pershing Square, for public art, and for the ongoing efforts to celebrate and tell Biddy Mason’s remarkable story. Biddy Mason already has a place — and a park — in downtown L.A. It’s my favorite public space in all of Los Angeles. On June 24, 2024, the L.A. Times published my letter to the editor on this very subject.

The existing Biddy Mason Park is located next to landmarks like the Bradbury Building and Grand Central Market. It’s so powerful that it serves as the cover picture on an acclaimed 1997 book by historian Dolores Hayden appropriately called, “The Power of Place.” Through artworks by Sheila Levrant de Bretteville and Betye Saar, the park tells Mason’s story from enslaved woman, to the court case which led to her freedom, to her emergence as a wealthy philanthropist.

Why is the existing Biddy Mason Park so compelling a public space? It’s because it’s on the precise location where she bought land from her earnings as a midwife, where she built her house, where she founded the First AME Church, and where she became a wealthy philanthropist.

De Bretteville’s artwork recreates the seminal events in Mason’s life, including the writ of habeas corpus which led to Biddy Mason’s freedom, as well as her property deed to the property which she acquired (picture attached).

None of this has anything to do with Pershing Square. None of this can be recreated on Pershing Square – nor should it be. Pershing Square already has multiple historic public monuments, including a Spanish American War Memorial (1900), a Doughboy (1924), a statue of Beethoven (1932) and Barbara McCarren’s “Hey Day,” with its memorable quote (about Pershing Square) by Carey McWilliams. Adding additional out-of-context remembrances to Biddy Mason would get lost in the shuffle.



If Pershing Square is to be renamed, it should be after the person who is most responsible for creating it back in 1866: Cristóbal Aguilar, L.A.'s first Latino mayor. (The next Latino mayor, Antonio Villaraigosa was not elected until next Latino mayor, Antonio Villaraigosa was not elected until 2005.) On December 11, 1866, Mayor Aguilar signed an ordinance setting aside the area as a public square. Aguilar's most important decision occurred 2 years later, in 1868 when he vetoed an ordinance to sell off the city's water rights to a private monopoly. His veto message is attached.

I personally have spoken with Councilmember De León and his staff about renaming Pershing Square for Mayor Aguilar. Councilmember De León never had the courtesy to mention his alternative proposal to do so for Bidy Mason.

Cristóbal Aguilar is closely connected with Pershing Square. Bidy Mason is not. It is cynical at best – for Councilmember DeLeón to overlook Mayor Aguilar's unrecognized legacy while disrespecting Bidy Mason's. If anything is to be gained from this ill-considered motion, it should be to direct more loving care and attention to the existing Bidy Mason Park, including bringing the park forward to the Broadway and Spring Street streetscapes, and moving the Bettye Saar assemblage to a more publicly visible location.

Thank you for your consideration.

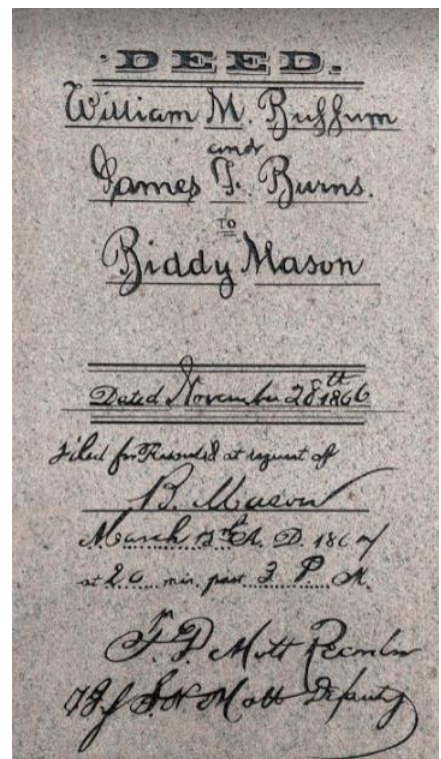
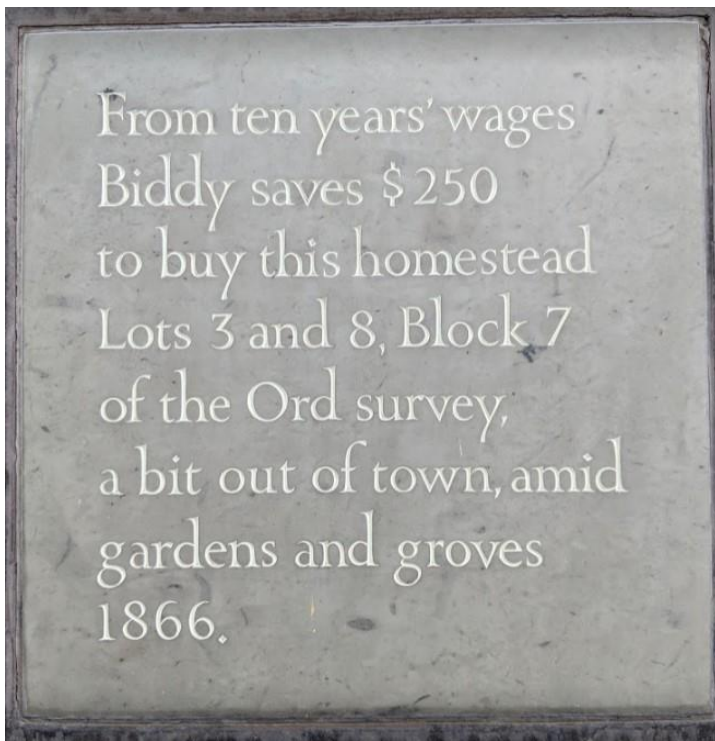


Amanda Gorman at Bidy Mason Park to celebrate Mason's 200th Birthday

She wins freedom in court.



The writ of habeas corpus that freed Biddy Mason, as depicted at Biddy Mason Park



The deed to Biddy Mason's homestead, as depicted at Biddy Mason Park



MAYOR'S OFFICE,
Los Angeles City, June, 6, '68.

In relation to the taking of water out of the river of Los Angeles and any of the canals of the city for domestic use and sale to gardens, I find the latter term so indefinite as to extent, that in the course of time great questions may arise with other vested rights of irrigation claimed by cultivators of the soil; all of which we should endeavor to avoid. Nor is the price offered, sufficient for the rights and privileges that would be conveyed by the said sale, when it is to be borne in mind that the corporation at the present time is leasing the franchise for the sum of \$1,500 per annum. Therefore with the above suggestions, and many more that might be presented, I trust your honorable body will appreciate my sincerity and weigh the reasons presented, because my convictions are based upon a general knowledge of what I know to be for the best interests of this city, which will not permit me to approve said ordinance.

Respectfully,
C. AGUILAR,
Mayor.

Cristóbal Aguilar, L.A.'s first and last Latino mayor until the election of Antonio Villaraigosa in 2005, pushed through an ordinance that created the park now known as Pershing Square. In 1866, he vetoed an ordinance to sell the city's waterworks to a private company headed by Dr. J.A. Griffen.