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**The African American Great Migration
and San Mateo County**

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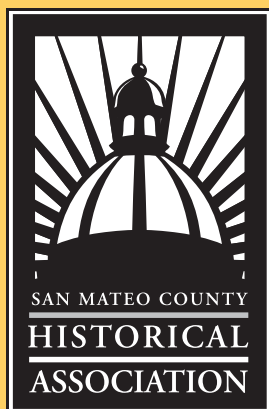


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This essay started as a project of Dr. Carol McKibben's class on the Great Migration at Stanford University in 2014. Contributing to this essay is work from Stanford students Miles Brinkley, Melissa Diaz, Eve Simister, Measha Ferguson Smith, Max Walker-Silverman, Kirsten Willer and Olivia Wong.

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Cover: Sidney, Harriett, Joseph and Eva Garrett lived on Third Avenue in San Mateo, March 1915. Photo courtesy of Claire Mack.

The African American Great Migration and San Mateo County

by Eve Simister

Between 1910 and 1970, about six million African Americans left the South and created new homes and communities in the North, Midwest, and West.¹ Many wanted to escape the grasp of Jim Crow, the system of state-sanctioned segregation and oppression that endangered their lives. They found relatively better opportunities for work and education in cities like New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, despite the racism that extended far beyond the Mason-Dixon line. Some historians have termed this exodus from the South the Great Migration.²

In this issue of *La Peninsula*, we are using a few oral histories in the context of this national history to tell a local story. Many African American residents of San Mateo County experienced the Great Migration first-hand. The narratives of several remarkable leaders personalize broad trends and enrich our understanding of the county's past and present. This study originated as part of a Stanford University history course on the Great Migration led by Professor Carol McKibben. In collaboration with the San Mateo County History Museum, students interviewed Black community members Annabelle and Basil Emery, Rose Jacobs Gibson, James Hutchinson, Bob Hoover, Claire and Eddie Mack, Ed Riley and Lisa Yarbrough-Gauthier. They shared the stories of their winding roads from the South to San Mateo County or reflected on their parents' migration experiences. These oral histories and the students' writing are woven together under the themes of Leaving the South, Challenges on and Beyond Arrival and Activism and Resilience to present a picture of how this Great Migration influenced local communities.

LEAVING THE SOUTH, CHOOSING SAN MATEO COUNTY

Margaret Sharp Yarbrough and **James Yarbrough** were born in in the 1920s in Cleveland, Tennessee. They moved to Detroit, Michigan, in the early 1940s, then to Los Angeles in the mid-1950s, and finally to East Palo Alto in 1967. Their daughter, Lisa Yarbrough-Gauthier, explained that her parents moved from Cleveland to Detroit because of new opportunities. They moved "to get away from whatever was happening in Tennessee at the time," Ms. Gauthier said. She emphasized the appeal of the destination: "At that time Detroit was the booming city. The automobile industry was there with lots of jobs and opportunities."³

Unfortunately this atmosphere of growth and opportunity did not last in Detroit. With a slump in the automobile industry, many jobs disappeared and gang violence and crime rose in the atmosphere of poverty and discontent. An opportunity to leave Detroit presented itself to the Yarbrough family in the form of a military relocation. The army stationed Mr. Yarbrough to Santa Maria, a city northwest of Los Angeles, and so the family moved to California. Ms. Gauthier's brother and sister were born in Santa Maria. In the late 1950s, the family moved from Santa Maria to the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles, where Ms. Gauthier was born in 1965. Two years later, the family moved to East Palo Alto to escape the violence of the riots sparked by racial discrimination in Los Angeles.⁴

Born in San Mateo in 1936, **Claire Mack** comes from a lineage of Californians that extends farther back than one might expect, given that the Great Migration did not start until about 1910. Her maternal grandmother, Eva Lycurgus, was born in Oakland around 1889. Mrs.



Kelly and Lily Mack in San Mateo, September 1929.
Courtesy Eddie Mack.

Mack's maternal grandfather, Joseph Garrett, was born in 1874 in Halifax County, Virginia. He made his way to California by way of the army, as did many Black men—in his case via the Presidio post in San Francisco.⁵ He was discharged from the Presidio after serving as a Buffalo Soldier in Cuba during the Spanish-American War in a company that fought along with Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders at the battles of Las Guasimas, El Caney, and San Juan Hill.⁶ Mrs. Mack's mother, Eva Garrett, was born to Ms. Lycurgus and Mr. Garrett in San Francisco in 1912. In 1913 the couple and their three young children left San Francisco for the rural town of San Mateo further south down the Peninsula. In the army Mr. Garrett had worked as a muleskinner, driving mules and horses to transport goods. He owned a horse and found work in San Francisco moving furniture, and then later on as a

woodcutter for families in Hillsborough. The military also brought Mrs. Mack's father, William Cullen, to San Francisco, where he served in the same company as the father of her future husband, Eddie Mack. Mr. Cullen was from Texas, and after his discharge from the Presidio, he worked in the meat packing plants of South San Francisco, where he learned from his coworkers how to speak Italian.⁷

Eddie Mack's father, Kelly Mack, was born in Eutaw, Alabama, and after military service, returned to the South. One day in Birmingham he was on a streetcar and, as Mr. Mack puts it, he had "forgotten what the rules are down in the South." He was sitting in the Whites only section of the car. The conductor walked back to him, put a pistol to his head, and said, "You get to the back or I'll blow your brains out." The incident motivated him to leave the South and move to California. He went by train in 1924 and brought his wife and two children with him. His brother was already living in San Mateo and working at a restaurant owned by a African American man named Noah Williams. Mr. Mack's father decided to join his brother on the Peninsula.⁸

Like the Yarbroughs and the Macks, many Black families came to California by way of the military. "We know quite a lot of families who were in the navy," said Ms. Gauthier, "Moffett Field, [located on the border of Sunnyvale and Mountain View], used to be a Navy station and it still has some military connection. A lot of people retired from the Navy and moved to East Palo Alto." Military necessity created opportunities for some social mobility at a time when Blacks were barred from advancing in most industries. About one million African Americans served in World War II, all in segregated units and mostly in low ranks, as the White establishment doubted their fighting capabilities. Many Blacks were stationed in California, which was strategically important because of the Pacific Coast. The military presence in California indirectly attracted many African Americans, who came to accompany family in the military and to work in the burgeoning ship building industry. The

accomplishments of the Tuskegee Airmen and other Black soldiers placed pressure on the military to end its practice of discrimination. In 1948, President Harry Truman issued Executive Order 9981, which outlawed segregation in the military. Though this commitment wavered in the Korean War, it nonetheless marked a turning point in the struggle for racial equality and fair treatment within the armed forces. Many African Americans found that military life offered more opportunities than civilian life.⁹

Born in 1923 in Shreveport, Louisiana, **James L. Hutchinson** aspired to become a doctor. Laws in the South excluded African Americans from access to medicine, and mainstream medical training was even more unattainable. Dr. Hutchinson recalled a childhood with around five Black physicians outside of traditional healers and midwives.¹⁰ Dr. Hutchinson earned his bachelor's degree in biology from Wiley College in Texas before serving in the U.S. Armed Forces Medical Department in North Africa and Europe during World War II. Upon return, he attended Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee, which was one of two institutions educating Black physicians at the time, and graduated in 1950. His background serving in the medical corps of the military gave him a "taste of the world." Dr. Hutchinson became one of the six million African Americans to migrate across the United States in search of better treatment and opportunities in the Great Migration.¹¹

Resettlement outside of the harsh realities of Jim Crow became a pattern for Black doctors. Census data shows that by 1930, forty percent of the nation's Black physicians resided outside of the South, although eighty percent of the nation's almost 12 million African Americans still lived in the South.¹² Facing scant opportunities in the South, Dr. Hutchinson accepted an offer of residency at Sacramento Community Hospital. He got in his car and made it to California easily enough, but found once he arrived that life was not free from all racism.¹³

Many African Americans, like the family members of



Henry Jacobs served in the Army during World War II.
Courtesy Rose Jacobs Gibson

Rose Jacobs Gibson, were drawn to San Francisco's wartime shipbuilding industry. In 1943, the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce claimed that the Bay Area was home to the largest shipbuilding center of the world.¹⁴ Ms. Jacobs Gibson's mother, Clara Williams, and her sisters joined this booming industry, taking advantage of the opening of jobs vacated by men. They moved into housing projects that the federal government had built in the Hunters Point neighborhood of San Francisco. By 1950, African Americans made up 43 percent of the population in the census tract encompassing Hunters Point.¹⁵ The surge in economic opportunity for women was short-lived; many women lost their jobs to men returning from the war.¹⁶ Still, San Francisco left an impression on Ms. Jacobs Gibson's mother and aunts, and many of them stayed in the Bayview-Hunters Point district, establishing a network



Clara Jacobs and her children visit relatives in the Bayview District of San Francisco. Photo courtesy of Rose Jacobs Gibson.

of family and friends in their newly adopted city. Ms. Jacobs Gibson's father, Henry Jacobs, served in the Army during World War II, then later returned to his wife in Louisiana. Through his service, he had gained mechanical training that helped the couple achieve the economic stability necessary to bring their children out west. In the mid-1950s, the family moved to the Potrero Hill neighborhood. Ms. Jacobs Gibson described the Potrero Hill of her childhood as "family-oriented and pleasant;" a place that was "close knit...everyone took care of each other and watched out for each other." Their home became another place where relatives who migrated from Louisiana could stay.¹⁷

When Ms. Jacobs Gibson's family rented a home in Potrero Hill, the neighborhood was about 73 percent native-born White, 21 percent foreign-born White, and 5 percent African-American, with the majority of the foreign-born being Italian and Russian.¹⁸ Unlike other parts of San Francisco, the apartments in Potrero Hill were not segregated; there were people of all cultures in the apartment complexes. Ms. Jacobs Gibson said

diversity was "one of the joys of San Francisco." By extension, schools were diverse as well. In her words, "It was always a multicultural classroom. Although there may have not been a lot of African Americans, it was a mixed class and I liked that."¹⁹ By the time the family left Potrero Hill in 1960, the Black population had risen to about 25 percent.²⁰ That year, after Ms. Jacobs Gibson's eighth grade graduation, the family moved to East Palo Alto. Her parents wanted to own their own home, and at that time, African Americans were denied the privilege of choosing to live anywhere they could afford. East Palo Alto was one of the few communities on the Peninsula where Black families could buy homes in the 1960s. Ms. Jacobs Gibson's father also liked the idea of living in a small town again as he had done in Louisiana.²¹

Ed Riley's grandfather left South Carolina in the 1930s in order to protect his family. He had gotten in a fight with his White employer, and his friends also got involved in the brawl. Someone was shot, and the family fled to avoid the risk of retaliatory violence,



Ed, Margaret, Brenda and Richard Riley in New York, c. 1956. Photo courtesy Ed Riley.



Malcom Boykin, Ed Riley, Leroy Burchett and Buddy Venable competed for Winston-Salem State University, 1959. Photo courtesy Ed Riley.

although no one knows who fired the shot. The family moved to New York because they had kin connections there.²² Mr. Riley's father, Willie Oscar, was particularly excited about the opportunity to go to the North. He attended an integrated school and completed his high school education in New York. During his time in high school, he met and fell in love with Margaret Grant. They married in 1938. The Grant family had ancestry in New Rochelle, New York, stretching back approximately 110 years. Because Ms. Grant was light-skinned, she was treated better by Whites than darker complected Blacks like her husband. He initially worked by selling newspapers and he later became a machinist, an insurance man, and a talented musician.²³

Mr. Riley was the couple's middle child, born in 1940. His mother wanted her children to live in integrated environments so that they would have higher expectations of equality. While she recognized the importance of cultural solidarity in all-Black neighborhoods, she did not want her children to interact only with Black people and think that they had to live

with segregation. After growing up in New Rochelle, Mr. Riley received a shock when he headed to Winston-Salem State University in North Carolina on a basketball scholarship in 1958. His father asked him several times if he was sure that he wanted to study in the racist South with a "northern attitude," even though Winston-Salem was a historically Black school. Mr. Riley had heard stories about rampant racism in the South, but he did not believe that it could be that different from New York. He thought that he would face occasional episodes of discrimination, but for the most part he would speak his mind and stand up for himself.²⁴

During his freshman year, Mr. Riley engaged in a small-scale student sit-in at a restaurant near the University that excluded Black people. He distinctly remembered the cook emerging from the kitchen with a knife in his hand and yelling, "I want all you n-----s out of this place." One of the athletes in the protest group hit the cook so hard that he went "tumbling back to the kitchen." Afraid of arrest for physical assault, the students ran back to campus and avoided going to



The Cullen home (left) on Fremont Street in San Mateo, 1936.

town for the next year.²⁵

In 1959, Mr. Riley left Winston-Salem for Modesto Junior College for one year. He competed in track and field, setting junior college records in 110 meter and 440 meter hurdles. In 1960, he started at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), where he was recruited to run on the track team. He was grateful for the opportunity to leave the South and anticipated the type of racial integration in California that he had experienced in New York. While at UCLA, Mr. Riley feared being drafted into the Vietnam War. He negotiated with a recruiter to run track for the Air Force. After attending basic training in Texas, he was stationed in Germany for four years and raced in meets around the world, including two Olympic trials. Enjoying freedoms that were denied to him back home, Mr. Riley found it difficult to leave Europe and spent an extra year in France, which he described as his favorite country in the world. Then he returned to finish his studies at UCLA and got married in 1967 to Joanne Montgomery. After several moves around California together, they made their way to San Jose. The couple had two

children, Kellie and Tracey.²⁶

CHALLENGES ON AND BEYOND ARRIVAL

The “rules” with respect to race relations were less clear on the surface in California. Nevertheless, the punishment for breaking these rules was severe. One of the first challenges newcomers faced was finding a place to live. Customary real estate practices governed where people of color could live in San Mateo County. While the “ethnic quarter” did not exist formally, it was shaped and enforced by realtors and bankers, who would not sell a home or give a loan to a Black family, effectively preventing them from moving into White neighborhoods. Realtors who might consider selling to a certain racial group in the wrong area might be blacklisted.²⁷

Mr. Mack recounted the trials that one Black family endured as they tried to move into a predominantly White neighborhood in the city of San Mateo in the early 1930s. When the news spread that a Black family had purchased a house, a message circulated threatening

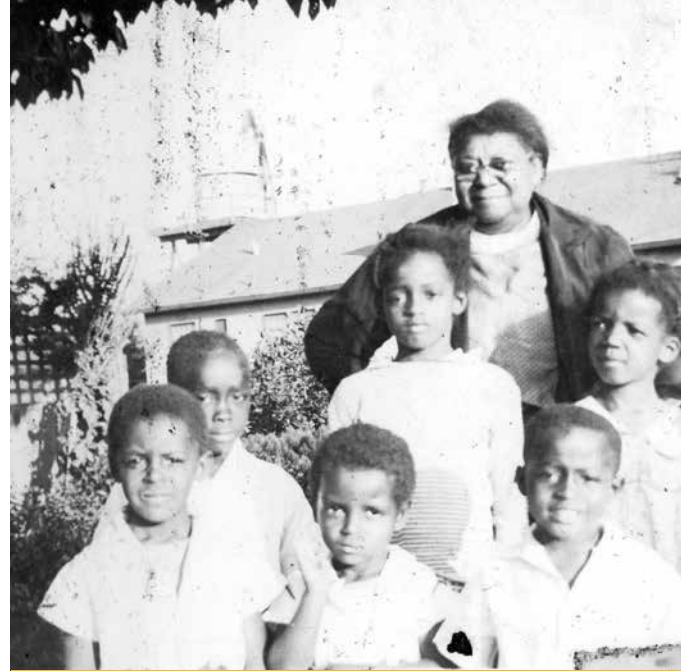


Basil (top left) and Annabelle (lower right) celebrate their wedding anniversary at their North Grant Street home in San Mateo, 1951. Photo courtesy Basil and Annabelle Emery.

that the family would be prevented from entering the home. The Ku Klux Klan in San Mateo had launched a membership drive in 1924 in the *San Mateo Times*.²⁸ Armed with shotguns, a group of men, including the fathers of Mr. and Mrs. Mack, stood guard throughout the night while the family moved into the house.²⁹

In the late 1930s, Mr. Mack's parents purchased a home in San Mateo, having previously rented. "No Blacks lived west of El Camino," Mr. Mack recalled. "The ethnic community was relegated to this part of town," Mrs. Mack explained. "Right during World War II the boundaries became very strict. It was between 3rd Avenue and Poplar, the railroad track and Bayshore Freeway. That was the configuration in which minorities could live."³⁰ Within these boundaries, Black, Chinese, Japanese, and Latino residents built communities.³¹

Basil and Annabelle Emery faced similar restrictions when they searched for a house in the city of San Mateo. Mr. and Mrs. Emery were born in Louisiana in the 1920s and got married there in 1942. After serving in the Air Force in Burma, India, and China, Mr. Emery reunited with his wife in San Mateo in 1946. She had



Eddie Mack (second from left) with Mrs. Selby and neighborhood children. Photo courtesy Eddie and Claire Mack.

family members who lived locally and worked in the shipbuilding industry. The Emerys bought a house in the only neighborhood where a realtor would sell them one. "To the west of the 101 freeway, to the east of the railroad tracks, and then Poplar to the north and 3rd was to the south. That was [the neighborhood] we could buy in," recounted Mr. Emery.³²

During World War II, **Mrs. Mack's father**, Mr. Cullen, ran the San Mateo city dump. He was the second Black employee of the city, the first one having been a janitor for the Police Department. New homes for veterans of the war were being built across from the dump, and Mrs. Mack remembered a sign going up over them – a red sign with white letters. It read, "Restricted," meaning no veterans of color were allowed to buy those homes, despite the fact that they were going up in the eastern part of the city, where minority groups had previously been allowed to live.³³

Mr. Mack described the San Mateo of his childhood as a community in which "Blacks had a place, and you stayed in your place. You didn't eat up town. You didn't eat out anywhere because you weren't allowed."³⁴ In

San Mateo



A



B



C



D

A Members gather in front of St. James A.M.E. Zion Church, 1936. The church was organized in 1919. Courtesy Claire and Eddie Mack.

B Claire, Raymond and David Cullen at a war bond parade in San Mateo, c. 1943. Courtesy Claire and Eddie Mack.

C Annabelle and Basil Emery attend a party at Masonic Hall in San Mateo, c. 1948. Courtesy Annabelle and Basil Emery.

D Lunch at St. James A.M.E. Zion Church, c. 1940s. Mrs. Gorm, fourth from the right, got a job at Woolworths as she could pass as white (see page 13). Courtesy Claire and Eddie Mack.

the South under Jim Crow this sort of segregation was a matter of law, and business would declare being for “Whites only” openly. In San Mateo, as Mr. Mack remembers it, Blacks just would not be served. They would either be ignored or told that their business was not welcome.

Both Mrs. and Mr. Mack attended San Mateo High School, where Mr. Mack was a star on the football, basketball, and track teams. One day his football coach announced that after a big game against San Jose, the whole team would go out to dinner at an Italian restaurant. While the rest of the locker room cheered, Mr. Mack’s heart sank. “I’ll play sick or something, because I’m not going,” he told himself. “I was afraid that if I got there they would say that we don’t serve Blacks.” He eventually went to an assistant coach and shared his fears. The coach assured him that the dinner would go smoothly, and it did. “But had I come by myself with my family,” Mr. Mack pointed out, “I’m not so sure they would have let us in.” Mrs. Mack chimed in, “They would not have.” According to Mrs. Mack, there was not a single sit-down restaurant in San Mateo when they were in high school that would serve Black clientele. The students went to school together, “but although we were with each other, our lives were not intermingled,” Mrs. Mack explained. “It was a relationship where they knew you, and they knew what you were about, and if you were a good athlete, then that’s it,” added Mr. Mack. “When you go on the campus you’d be friends...when you got off of the campus you would go your way and they would go their way.”³⁵

After serving in the armed forces in Korea, Mr. Mack got a job at the United States Postal Service in 1952 during the early years of a policy of desegregation of the federal government that resulted from President Truman’s Executive Order 9980.³⁶ According to the Macks, African Americans had worked at the post office before, but they had been able to pass as White. Mr. and Mrs. Mack got married in 1953 and began searching for a house to purchase, but they



Dr. James Hutchinson at his practice in San Mateo. Photo courtesy James Hutchinson.

had a hard time finding a bank that would give them a loan. They were trying to buy a home within an “ethnic” neighborhood, yet that did not mean they could receive the same financial assistance from the federal government as Whites.³⁷

Once **Dr. Hutchinson** completed his internship and residency at Sacramento County General, he decided to open his own practice near his home in San Mateo. “Renting an office was very difficult. One excuse after another,” he recalled. During the day, he operated out of the office of Dr. Mayer in Redwood City. In the evening, he used Dr. Banner’s office in San Mateo.³⁸ Eventually a realtor agreed to sell Dr. Hutchinson the three-story Victorian that still houses his practice today. Finding a willing realtor was not the last obstacle. Local White business owners feared that their properties would lower in value if Dr. Hutchinson established his practice in the neighborhood, so they challenged his permits and protested the purchase. However, Dr. Hutchinson successfully bought the building in 1952. San Mateo County now had its first Black physician.³⁹

With the help of a defiant realtor, **Mr. and Mrs. Emery**



Clara Jacobs and her siblings at her East Palo Alto home.
Courtesy Rose Jacobs Gibson.

that the U.S. Supreme Court confirmed in 1967.⁴¹

The Rumford Act had only just been reinstated when the **Yarbrough family** bought their house, where Ms. Gauthier still lives today. Although by law the Yarbrough family could have bought a home in another suburb, enforcement lagged behind policy and a White neighborhood would probably not have welcomed their presence. In contrast to the turmoil of Los Angeles, the affordable comfort of East Palo Alto appealed to the Yarbroughs. The suburb seemed safer for children than Los Angeles. The family felt warmly welcomed in East Palo Alto. Ms. Gauthier said her mother “just felt good about where we were when we made it to East Palo Alto. It was a comfortable move. It was different. She didn’t feel like we were in danger. We lived in East Palo Alto at a time when you didn’t have to lock your front door or worry about anything happening. My parents divorced, and she raised six children, and it was a place where she could feel comfortable...My mom bought her house for \$18,000. I know some people who said they purchased their house for \$13,000, \$10,000 for a three-bedroom house,” Ms. Gauthier said, “It was an area where you weren’t in the city and you could have a yard and a house.”⁴²

In 1968, **Mr. Riley** moved to San Jose to take a job as the manager of a record store. With some funding from the GI Bill, he and his first wife, Joanne Montgomery, purchased a house in a small, middle-class neighborhood. A year later, the Rileys divorced. Mr. Riley moved to San Francisco, a city that he described as “racially fluid.” Next he spent a year in Menlo Park with his second wife, Candis Staberg. He described Menlo Park as “lily white” and expensive. The only other African American in the neighborhood was an elderly man who lived across the street from Mr. Riley and had been there for some time. This man told Mr. Riley about real estate agents pressuring him to move away and the Ku Klux Klan even burning a cross in front of his house. In 1978, Mr. Riley and his wife moved to Palo Alto, where they appreciated the racial diversity and political activism of the Stanford students, but they

challenged customary housing segregation by moving to a predominantly white neighborhood in Belmont in 1962. “Anywhere you saw a house that you could afford and that you liked, you should be able to buy it,” Mrs. Emery said. “We were lucky enough to have our realtor, because at that time, they would fire a realtor if he sold to a Black,” she explained. The head realtor told the Emerys that the house they wanted to buy had already sold, but their realtor knew that this was a lie. “He bought the house and handed the deed over to us,” said Mrs. Emery.⁴⁰

In 1963, the California legislature passed the Rumford Fair Housing Act, which outlawed race-based housing discrimination and restrictive covenants. In response, the real-estate industry funded the Proposition 14 campaign to overturn the Rumford Act, arguing that the people should be able to sell their homes (or not sell their homes) to whomever they chose. The Proposition passed in 1964 with nearly two-thirds of the popular vote, giving Californians the legal right to discriminate. In 1966, the California Supreme Court ruled that Proposition 14 violated the U.S. Constitution, a ruling



A NAACP dinner inside Noah's Ark in San Mateo, c. late 1920s.

were priced out of the city two years later.⁴³

Next the couple moved to Redwood City, where they confronted housing discrimination, despite the passage of the Rumford Act over a decade earlier. When Mr. Riley attempted to rent an apartment, the landlord told him that the place was already rented out even though it was still listed as available in the advertisement. Mr. Riley was wary of racism and called one of his White friends to investigate. The landlord was happy to rent the apartment to the White man, confirming Mr. Riley's suspicion. Mr. Riley and his wife decided against filing a lawsuit and decided to find another apartment. In 1993, Mr. Riley moved to the city of San Mateo, where he started working as a private caterer and as a beloved track coach at San Mateo High School.

ACTIVISM AND RESILIENCE

Noah Williams, an African American man from Kansas City, Missouri, opened restaurants in the city of San Mateo that became centerpieces of the Black

community.⁴⁴ He worked in a cafeteria in San Francisco for a few years before moving to San Mateo in 1920 with his wife, Mabelle. In 1923, he opened his first restaurant, Noah's Cafeteria, on South B Street, where he drew devoted customers from around the Peninsula with his famous fried chicken and Missouri baked hams.⁴⁵ Mabelle was Black but passed as White, so she worked out front while Noah worked in the kitchen, leading many customers to assume that she was the owner. Passing was quite common in San Mateo at the time. "I had a Sunday school teacher, and she got a job at Woolworths," Mr. Mack said. "My parents would say to us kids, when you go in the store you don't recognize Mrs. Gorm. Don't even speak to her. Just go about your business." Noah moved his establishment to Third Avenue in 1923 and changed the name to Noah's Ark. Complete with biblical décor, a mezzanine floor, a men's smoking room, and a women's lounge, Noah's Ark became the most popular restaurant in San Mateo history by some accounts.⁴⁶

Noah's Ark employed Mr. Mack's father and uncle



Basil Emery worked as a cook at Peninsula Hospital, c. 1954. Courtesy of Basil Emery.



Basil Emery later worked as a human relations counselor at Peninsula Hospital, c. 1970. Courtesy of Basil Emery.

as well as Mrs. Mack's father at various points. In fact, Mrs. Mack said, "All the Black men that came to this city that I know of worked for Noah. If they didn't work for Noah, they worked as butlers and hired help for Hillsborough families." Even though African Americans worked at Noah's Ark, they could not patronize the restaurant because their presence might prompt Whites customers to leave, and the Black community in San Mateo was too small for Mr. Williams to maintain his business without Whites. To solve this problem, Mr. Williams arranged a special deal. On Mondays Noah's would technically be closed, yet it would be informally open to Black customers. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and other Black organizations held meetings at the restaurant. Unfortunately, the Great Depression sunk Noah's Ark, which closed its doors in 1931.

A generation after the days of NAACP meetings at Noah's Ark, **Mr. Emery** got involved in the NAACP and served as the president of the San Mateo chapter from 1958 to 1964. Under the leadership of Mr. Emery, the NAACP established a credit union in San Mateo to

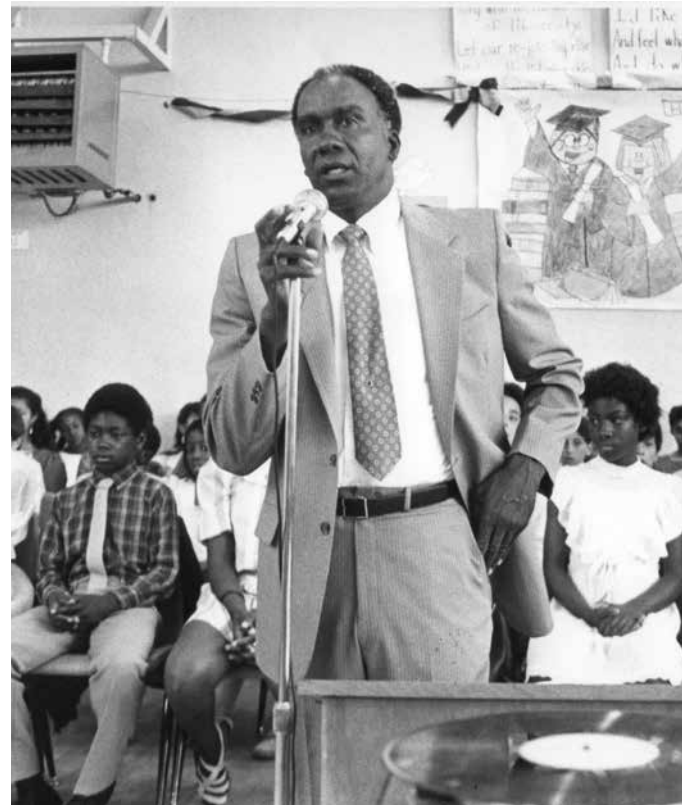
provide loans to African Americans at a time when other banks in the area refused to lend to them. "We thought it would be easier for Blacks to have their own places to have funds and bonds," Mr. Emery explained, "We kept that for about ten years, and then other banks were opening for housing and other things like that, so there wasn't any need for it."⁴⁷

Mr. Emery worked at Peninsula Hospital (now called the Mills-Peninsula Medical Center), an institution for which he laid the foundations. He started by passing out flyers, campaigning for the creation of a new hospital, and then working on its construction in the early 1950s. When the hospital opened in 1954, he joined the staff as a cook and was soon promoted to the role of chef where he was responsible for food services for thirteen years. Mr. Emery moved to the personnel department in 1968 and used his position as a human relations counselor to increase employment opportunities at the hospital for people of color.⁴⁸ Mr. Emery was also committed to increasing access to jobs in his volunteer work. With the NAACP, he organized job trainings that helped those who attended improve

their qualifications. He met with merchants at stores in downtown San Mateo and convinced them to set aside money in their budgets for training potential employees. The stores would set up cash registers in their basements that applicants could practice using. He also worked to set up trainings to help African Americans become bank clerks. He publicized job openings at the local barbershop and at the church he and Mrs. Emery attended, Pilgrim Baptist in San Mateo.⁴⁹

For **Mrs. Yarbrough** in the late 1960s, East Palo Alto was the place where she made a “nest” for her children, with safety and comfort in the form of community support. Ms. Gauthier said that out of all the places where they had lived, her parents felt most connected to California and specifically East Palo Alto, her mother especially. She said, “[My parents] both had a connection to California once they moved here. For my mom, she built a home for her children that happened to be in East Palo Alto in the end, so that’s where her connection was. She had family in Tennessee and Detroit but she didn’t visit those places very often, she stayed in California. My dad stayed in California but he moved around a lot, he bounced around more than my mother. My mother, being a nurturer, she made a nest and a home for her children.”⁵⁰

For Mrs. Yarbrough, a safe space for her children was intimately connected to the feeling of “home.” East Palo Alto provided exactly that: “There are people in the community that became family members just because the community rallied together and raised all the children. You didn’t feel like there were strangers and you felt accountable to everybody,” said Ms. Gauthier. Mr. Yarbrough connected to East Palo Alto in a different way: “He was part of a construction crew in East Palo Alto and he built a lot of the sidewalks, and put in a lot of the streets so just in the Peninsula he would take us around and say ‘I put that sidewalk in’ or ‘I built that’ or ‘I helped with this runway’...It felt good because that was his pride, his contribution and his ability to give back...The city is changing but there are some



Bob Hoover addresses a Belle Haven fifth grade class, June 1985. Photo by Norbert Von Der Groeben.

sidewalks that I see and I’m like, ‘My dad said he put that in.’”⁵¹

By 1970, the Freedom Movement in the United States began to undergo an internal shift. On the heels of the desegregation reform achieved by the nonviolent confrontation of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Vietnam War, and the surge of Black nationalism, lower and middle-class African Americans set their sights on higher goals than simple integration. In East Palo Alto, **Bob Hoover** was one of the leaders of that movement, reforming and strengthening the entire community by focusing on reform in the sphere of education. With a feeling that “we could accomplish what we dreamed of,” he and other residents of East Palo Alto built a self-sustaining Black community by voting representatives into public office and organizing schools and services to meet community needs. In his work with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Mr. Hoover organized county votes to try to place Black residents on

city councils, plus housing and school boards. Because East Palo Alto was not yet incorporated, it was governed as an unincorporated part of San Mateo County and control rested on representation on those boards. Mr. Hoover explained that the Black Panthers including Stokely Carmichael also participated in community activism in East Palo Alto.⁵²

Before the creation of schools in the community, the educational resources available to Black students were severely lacking. **Gertrude Wilks**, a community leader in East Palo Alto, wrote in 1990, “I did all of the things for my children that they said you were supposed to do: I married one man, stayed under the same roof, made all of the cupcakes, made all of the coffee, and was a good parent. Yet my son graduated from high school not reading and that made me mad. I’ve been mad ever since.”⁵³ With the conviction that African American children should not be deprived of quality education, Mrs. Wilks, Mr. Hoover, and other leaders established the Nairobi Day School in 1966, which expanded into an educational system serving students from preschool to college level.⁵⁴ Black doctors, engineers, and lawyers who were unable to find work elsewhere due to discrimination taught at the school. Thus, the children received the highest levels of education in the classroom and outside. **Mr. Hoover** said, “You couldn’t go wrong with this setup. You had doctors and lawyers and principals all living in the same community. The man who earned those degrees is the same one teaching you in high school, and living next door to you. He’s the one mentoring you on weekends and in church. We were self-reliant.”⁵⁵ Activists tried to change the city’s name to Nairobi as a symbol of renewed pride in African ancestry, culminating in a failed referendum in 1968. Over the next decade (1970-1980), the Black population of East Palo Alto stayed around sixty percent while the White population dropped from 34 percent to 25 percent, and the city attracted more minorities while the total population grew slightly.⁵⁶

Eventually, Mr. Hoover’s educational work took him in other directions. In 1975, he left East Palo Alto to



Gertrude Wilks working for the Nairobi Day School, 1979.
Photo by Carolyn Caddes.

pursue another degree and assist friends in activist efforts in other cities for several years. He returned to East Palo Alto in 1983, shortly after the city officially became incorporated. He found that it was in a state of disaster. The introduction of drugs, particularly crack cocaine, had ravaged East Palo Alto along with thousands of minority communities in the United States. Those middle-class Black families who could afford to leave East Palo Alto did so. Mr. Hoover noted, “We lost our luster because our leadership was gone. Our doctors and teachers got money and left the neighborhood.”⁵⁷ The Board of Trustees of the Nairobi Schools elected to defund the schools, and so these life-changing community organizations were lost. Coupled with the inflow of drugs, this closure of these schools was a severe blow.

Introduced by outsiders, crack obliterated families in communities of color. Young African Americans looking to make money fast or escape their realities

East Palo Alto



A Bob Hoover at Coalition for Effective Government press conference at East Palo Alto City Hall.

B Rap singer Warren Shelby performs at Juneteenth, June 1991. Photo by Tom Fink.

C Basketball tryouts at Bell Street Gym, July 1992. Photo by Bonnel.

D Bay Area family gathering hosted at Jacobs' East Palo Alto residence. Photo courtesy of Rose Jacobs Gibson.



Candlelit anti-drug march in East Palo Alto, December 1985. Photo by Martha Jane Stanton.

turned to the “white angel,” with devastating results. Rising gang violence turned once safe neighborhoods into war zones. In 1992, East Palo Alto earned the infamous title of America’s murder capital, with the highest number of homicides per capita. In addition, politicians proclaiming a War on Drugs shifted legal drug penalties to give more incarceration time for the use or sale of drugs likely to be in Black communities than in rich White ones. Crack cocaine garnered over ten years more penal sentencing on average than powdered cocaine, which was commonly sold in White suburban areas. As a result, although White youth were also selling and using drugs, Black and later Latino youth were disproportionately incarcerated.⁵⁸ **Ms. Jacobs Gibson** described the havoc that drugs caused: “You’re wondering, where are the drugs coming from, who’s bringing them in here, and why are they choosing to bring them here. And after a while it becomes pretty clear that this is just another form of oppression against Black and Brown people.” **Ms. Gauthier** also described a tight-knit community devastated by drugs in the eighties. There is no need to recall the South to find a

source of shared tragedy in East Palo Alto, for the crack epidemic and gang violence have filled this space in the city’s collective memory.

Recovery was a community initiative, coinciding with major demographic change, as East Palo Alto transitioned from predominantly African American to predominantly Latino. Upon return to the city, Mr. Hoover focused his activism on drug abuse and dealing, gang violence, and mass incarceration. He began to work with the local police to ward peddlers off corners. He also established mentorship programs through after-school activities to attempt to stem the flow of young people to crime. In 1991, he founded the East Palo Alto Junior Golf Program, which teaches life lessons in addition to how to swing a golf club. Mr. Hoover explained, “What I wanted to do was to use golf as a vehicle to help kids with their personal development, but most of all to really get them to understand the connection between their education and their future.”⁵⁹ The program is now celebrating its twenty-fifth year. Into his mid-eighties, Mr. Hoover has continued to serve the East Palo Alto community. In 2011, Hoover became



Bob Hoover gives golfing tips, March 1992. Photo by Jill Mott.



Claire Mack interviewing Jesse Jackson at KCSM, June 1984. Photo by Isago Isao Tanaka, courtesy Claire Mack.

the director of East Palo Alto's parolee re-entry program, leading the local police department's effort to provide job training and logistical support to people recently released from prison. "Hoover is someone who can lead people to find their self-worth and self-esteem," said a local pastor who helped with the program, "He tried to retire several years ago. The community just kept on asking him to come back."⁶⁰

African American residents of San Mateo County have also looked to local government as an avenue for social change. **Mrs. Wilks** was a leader in the East Palo Alto community in the late 1970s and served on the first city council after East Palo Alto was officially incorporated in 1983. In the 1990s she led a group of "prayer warriors," taking a bold stand to drive drugs and violence out of the city.⁶¹

Mrs. Mack earned an associate's degree in broadcasting from the College of San Mateo, and then attained bachelor's degrees in broadcasting and community development from Antioch College in 1969. For the next thirty years she worked in local television and radio on the KGO and KCSM stations. In 1991, she

became the first African American elected to the San Mateo City Council. During her 12 years on Council, she served as mayor three times.⁶² Mrs. Mack championed the cause of affordable housing and fought to preserve and improve neighborhoods. She explained her housing philosophy: "Just because a house is old doesn't mean it can't be kept nicely. And just because people of color live in a neighborhood, it doesn't mean it isn't a nice neighborhood, doesn't mean it has to be a barrio, doesn't mean it has to be a slum, doesn't mean it has to be a ghetto."⁶³ Mrs. Mack won the Outstanding Citizen of San Mateo Award in 1975 and the State of California Women of the Year Award in 1994, among other accolades.⁶⁴ She has published three novels and now runs a business selling her signature crunch cake and other sweet treats.

Ms. Jacobs Gibson served on the East Palo Alto City Council from 1992 to 1999. She served as mayor of the city for two years, from 1995 to 1996. She pioneered projects to reduce crime and give momentum to the "city on the move." From 1999 to 2012, Ms. Jacobs Gibson served on the San Mateo County Board of

Supervisors. She prioritized affordable housing, equity in health care, and re-entry programs for formerly incarcerated individuals, among other laudable causes.⁶⁵

Ms. Gauthier is an active leader in the East Palo Alto community, where she raised her three children. She served as Mayor for the year of 2015 and remains on the City Council. She mentors high school students and serves hot meals to the community weekly in addition to working full-time in a venture capital firm in San Francisco. In her work as an elected official, Ms. Gauthier is committed to changing the reputation of East Palo Alto. She has a promising outlook for the city she calls home.

CONCLUSIONS

The term “Great Migration” implies that the Black people who left the South between 1910 and 1970 shared a certain common experience. The labeling raises the question: was the Great Migration really “great” from the perspective of those who left the South, or did they view their move on an individual basis? For those who migrated and their descendants, is the mass movement of African Americans over decades a useful framework for understanding their family and community history? These stories of community building and activism suggest that at least some African Americans who left the South and their descendants perceived the migration as an individual experience and creating “home” as a group process, a community initiative. The shared experience of community transformation outshines the individualized migration experience in the memories of some of the men and women interviewed. Ms. Gauthier noted that some East Palo Alto residents, particularly older residents who moved together with many family members, felt strongly connected to their Southern background and to the story of the Great Migration. Yet for many African Americans, leaving was a process of parting ways and a new beginning. The

lonely experience of moving contrasted the sense of community that they found in emerging predominantly-Black cities like East Palo Alto, Oakland, and parts of Los Angeles. Group pride and community organizing, on both informal and formal levels, have made San Mateo County a home for African Americans, Latinos, and other ethnic groups as the demographics of the city continue to change. In the words of Ms. Gauthier, “The migration is still kind of happening.” She explained, “The East Palo Alto community has changed from predominantly African American to Latino, and the community is still evolving. You see more Caucasians living in the community and you see more Pacific Islanders and more Asians.”

With resilience and creativity, the individuals profiled here overcame obstacles that discrimination posed. They became outstanding leaders in San Mateo County and cultivated vibrant communities. We would like to thank Annabelle and Basil Emery, Rose Jacobs Gibson, James Hutchinson, Bob Hoover, Claire and Eddie Mack, Ed Riley and Lisa Yarbrough-Gauthier for their willingness to share their stories. We are honored to have this opportunity to incorporate their voices into historiography as we strive to make the narratives of San Mateo County more inclusive and reflective of the diversity within the county.

Eve Simister

Eve Simister is a senior at Stanford University majoring in history. She focuses her research on modes of remembrance in American history, questioning whose voices narrate and whose voices remain suppressed. Last summer, she engaged with these issues as an intern at the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. She is writing an honors thesis on the ways American universities have confronted the legacy of slavery in their institutional histories.



A Annabelle and Basil Emery married in 1942. They were photographed for a Valentine's Day article in the *San Mateo Times* in 1993. Photo courtesy of Annabelle and Basil Emery.

B From 1999 to 2012, Rose Jacobs Gibson served on the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors. Photo courtesy of Rose Jacobs Gibson.

C Married in 1953, Claire and Eddie Mack live in San Mateo. Photo from 1980s courtesy of Claire and Eddie Mack.

D Candis and Ed Riley have lived in several Peninsula towns. Photo courtesy Ed Riley.

Endnotes

One of the books used in the Stanford class was Isabel Wilkerson's *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2010). The format of this essay reflects Wilkerson's work.

- ¹ "The Great Migration, 1910 to 1970," United States Census Bureau, last modified September 13, 2012, <https://www.census.gov/dataviz/visualizations/020/>.
- ² Historians have also used the term "the Great Migration" to refer to the migration of Europeans to North America in the seventeenth century as well as the settlement of the American West in the nineteenth century. For the purposes of this essay, the Great Migration refers to the movement of African Americans from the South in 1910-1970.
- ³ Lisa Yarbrough-Gauthier, interview by Eve Simister, October 28 and November 6, 2014.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Claire Mack and Eddie Mack, interview by Max Walker-Silverman, November 17, 2014.
- ⁶ William B. Gatewood, Jr., *"Smoked Yankees" and the Struggle for Empire: Letters from Negro Soldiers, 1898-1902* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1987), 8.
- ⁷ Mack and Mack, November 17, 2014.
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- ⁹ "African-American Military Experience" in *Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History*, vol. 4. 2nd ed., ed. Colin A. Palmer (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2006), 1449-1453.
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- ¹⁵ Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo and Charles Wollenberg, "A Day's Work: Hunters Point Shipyard Workers, 1940-1945," Found SF, n.d., http://foundsf.org/index.php?title=A_Day%27s_Work:_Hunters_Point_Shipyard_Workers,_1940-1945.
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- ¹⁷ Rose Jacobs Gibson, interview by Melissa Diaz, October 27 and November 20, 2014.
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- ¹⁹ Jacobs Gibson, October 27 and November 20, 2014.
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- ²¹ Jacobs Gibson, October 27 and November 20, 2014.
- ²² Ed Riley, interview by Olivia Wong, October 10, 2014.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Mitchell Postel, *San Mateo: A Centennial History* (San Francisco: Scottwall Associates, 1994), 166.
- ²⁸ Postel, *San Mateo*, 180.
- ²⁹ Mack and Mack, November 17, 2014.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ "City of San Mateo, San Mateo County: Decennial Census data 1950-1960," *Bay Area Census*, accessed December 11, 2014, <http://www.bayareacensus.ca.gov/cities/SanMateo50.htm>.
- ³² Basil Emery and Annabelle Emery, interview by Kirsten Willer, November 3, 2014.
- ³³ Mack and Mack, November 17, 2014.

- ³⁴ Ibid.
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ "Executive Orders Harry S. Truman 1945-1953," *Harry S. Truman Library and Museum*, accessed November 25, 2014, <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/executiveorders/index.php>.
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- ³⁸ Hutchinson, November 2014.
- ³⁹ Ibid.
- ⁴⁰ Emery and Emery, November 3, 2014.
- ⁴¹ David B. Oppenheimer, "California's Anti-Discrimination Legislation, Proposition 14, and the Constitutional Protection of Minority Rights: The Fiftieth Anniversary of the California Fair Employment and Housing Act," *Golden Gate University Law Review* 40 (2010): 117-127.
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- ⁴⁴ Postel, *San Mateo*, 168.
- ⁴⁵ Paul Buchanan, "Good Eating Recalls Local Mainstay Noah's Ark," *The Daily Journal* (San Mateo, CA), November 24, 2014, <http://www.smdailyjournal.com/articles/news/2000-11-27/good-eating-recalls-local-mainstay-noahs-ark/925.html>.
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