

Spring 2019 Final Sabbatical Report

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Summary of Completed Sabbatical Goals

1. Collaborate with the National Park Service.

As my sabbatical neared, I contacted the cultural resources manager and collections manager in the Santa Monica Mountains to begin our collaboration. Then in early November 2018 the Woolsey Fire devastated the mountains and burned numerous National Park Service sites and structures. Unfortunately, this included the Museum Research Building, located on Kanan Road. The entire museum building that housed the park's cultural resources collection was destroyed.

Needless to say, park staff members were preoccupied with the immediate crisis at hand. Amazingly, through this tragedy, there was one positive result. The fire burned through some areas of the mountains that hadn't been cleared in decades and was covered with dense brush and ground cover. One particular canyon that was burned was once home to Alice Ballard, an African American homesteader I was researching. Recognizing the opportunity, a park service archeologist suggested that we explore the site. To our amazement, we found dozens of artifacts on the ground, a midden site, and a possible cistern. We enlisted the assistance of Dr. James Snead and his Historical Archaeology class at CSUN. After a more thorough survey and research, several of the recovered artifacts date to the time Ballard lived on her homestead: 1890-1903. Although my sabbatical is now over, I continue to work with the NPS and Dr. Snead on this ongoing archaeological project that will shed light on this woman homesteader in the Santa Monica Mountains.

2. Research women in the Santa Monica Mountains.

The majority of my sabbatical was spent researching primary sources. I visited and utilized the following archives and collections for my research:

National Archives and Records Administration
University of Nebraska, Center for Great Plains Studies
Calabasas Historical Society
Homestead National Monument
San Fernando Historical Society
CSUN Special Collections
Leonis Adobe
California Digital Newspaper Collection
Las Virgenes and Agoura Historical Society
National Park Service
Topanga Historical Society
Huntington Library
Los Angeles County Records
Santa Barbara Historical Society

Additionally, I consulted numerous secondary sources such as:

Dee Garceau, "Single Women Homesteaders and the Meanings of Independence: Places on the Map, Places in the Mind," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 15:3 (1995): 1-26

Nancy J. Taniguchi, "Lands, Laws, and Women: Decisions of the General Land Office, 1881-1920 A Preliminary Report," *Great Plains Quarterly*

Women Homesteaders in the Santa Monica Mountains
A Report Prepared for the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area
(Draft, not for publication)

By Patty Colman
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Introduction presented to the VCCCD as part of the final sabbatical report

A *Los Angeles Times* article from February 10, 1907 announced that “If there is a man in the city who hasn’t made use of his homestead privileges...he is losing a great opportunity if he does not make a homestead entry on some of the Santa Monica Mountain land.” Indeed, hundreds of men took the author’s advice. What is less known however, is that a few dozen brave and independent women took the advice as well.

The Homestead Act was passed during the Civil War and signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln in 1862. The Act states in part “That any person who is head of a family, or who has arrived at the age of twenty one years, and is a citizen of the United States, or who shall have filed his declaration intention to become such...who has never borne arms against the United States government....be entitled to enter one quarter section or less quantity of unappropriated public lands.”¹ A qualified person had to file their claim in the local land office and pay a modest filing fee. They were also required to live on the land for

While the Homestead Act did not specifically articulate gender, it did specify the qualification of being a “head of family.” The accepted societal definition of “head of family” or “head of household” in the 19th and early 20th centuries was well established and rooted in hundreds of years of common law in the United States. The General Land Office (the government entity within the Department of Interior that oversaw the implementation of the Homestead Act) agreed: the “head of family” was a man. Just two years after its passage, James H. Edmunds, commissioner of the General Land Office (GLO) explained that “ a married woman has no legal existence, her services and the proceeds of her labor being due and belonging to her husband...as the husband is the ‘head’ during the existence of the marital tie.”² Nearly two decades later another commissioner reaffirmed this position by stating that it was the “established rule of the Department” that a married woman was “incompetent to make a homestead entry.”³ The GLO held to this principal well into the 20th century.

In the western Santa Monica Mountains, there were approximately 439 homestead patents and (obviously) most were granted to men.⁴ But these men settled in family units consisting of wives, children, and sometimes extended family members. Consequently the majority of homesteading women of the Santa Monica Mountains - and nationally- worked *alongside* husbands or other male relatives, without their name on the official patent, mirroring the national experience. But this did not mean that these women did not contribute to the work. In addition to helping build a home and making the necessary agricultural improvements as required by the law, these women had the added responsibilities expected of a 19th and 20th century wife and mother; she cooked, cleaned, canned, tended to the small livestock, mended and washed clothing, cultivated the garden, and even provided an education for the children if living too far away from a school. Clearly, women were integral to a successful homestead. The Santa Monica Mountains were home to hundreds of these families, with women at their core.⁵

Though the Homestead Act in its very wording was biased in favor of male settlers, as noted earlier, the Act did not specify that a claimant *had* to be male, only the “head of family.” Therefore, a woman was eligible to

² James Muhn, “Women and the Homestead Act: Land Department Administration of a Legal Imbroglio, 1863-1934,” *Western Legal History* 7, no 2 (1994): 287

³ Muhn, 289

⁴ For this study, I focused on the western Santa Monica Mountains. I define this as Township 1 North and South 16 West through 1 North and South 21 West. Generally, this area runs from Santa Monica to Point Mugu.

⁵ While the majority of these families were Anglo, there were many Hispanic homesteaders such as the Santa Maria, DeDominguez, DeRocha, and Sanchez families.

file an entry if she was a head of household. As interpreted by the General Land Office, this meant a single woman who was unmarried, widowed, or divorced. This offered single women an incredible opportunity and path to economic and social independence that was not readily available (or acceptable) by other means. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, women had few job opportunities outside of the home and most of these did not pay a living wage. Women (by custom and law) were treated as second class citizens and did not have equal access to education, employment, or the legal system. This kept many single women financially dependent on family members, often being passed around from one household to the next, for their entire lifetime. Homesteading was an attractive (albeit risky) choice that “allowed women to cast off the thralldom of Victorianism and challenge the mores of traditional gender roles.”⁶ As famous homesteader Elinor Pruitt Stewart wrote, “any woman who can stand her own company, can see the beauty of a sunset, loves growing things, and is willing to put in as much time at careful labor as she does over the wash tub will certainly succeed; will have independence, plenty to eat all the time, and a home of her own in the end.”⁷

Historians such as Paul Gates divide homesteading into two phases. Phase I occurred between 1862 and the mid-1890s and took place primarily in the Plains states. Phase II occurred between the late 1890s through the mid-1920s and took place primarily in the far west, including California.⁸ The majority of homestead patents in the Santa Monica Mountains were granted within this time frame. In total, it is estimated that over one and a half million people homesteaded in the United States. It is estimated that 5 – 15% of all these homesteads prior to 1900 were granted to women and after 1900 it increased to 20%.⁹ Out of the 439 patents in the Santa Monica Mountains, 37 were granted to women; about 8%. Although comparatively a bit on the low side, the figures in the Santa Monica Mountains are within range of the national averages.

Several historians have found that most women who received a patent (and therefore were not married) did so as part of a larger family collaboration.¹⁰ For example, it was not unusual for a grown daughter to make a homestead entry adjacent to her parent’s land in order to increase the size and acreage of the family property. In other instances, widows homesteaded with the assistance of grown children. There appears to be

⁶ Edwards, Friefeld, and Wingo, *Homesteading the Plains: Towards a New History* (University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 134

⁷ Elinore Pruitt Stewart “Letters of a Woman Homesteader,” *Atlantic Monthly* 1913

⁸ Edwards et al, 12

⁹ Most recent studies put the number between 10-12%.

¹⁰ See Glenda Riley *Female Frontier* and Dee Garceau, “Single Women Homesteaders and the Meanings of Independence: Places on the Map, Places in the Mind” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 15, no 3 (1995)

approximately 14 women in the Santa Monica Mountains who homesteaded in conjunction with others, while most did so autonomously.¹¹ No matter how or why they chose to exercise their homestead rights, these women were truly remarkable settlers who, like Elinore Pruitt Stewart, were motivated to make “a home of her own.” This paper presents eight women who homesteaded in the Santa Monica Mountains between 1885 – 1916 who in their own way demonstrate the experiences and challenges of female homesteaders.