



Lowelifes Respectable Citizens Club

Volunteer trail work in Southern California's Angeles National Forest, fostering conservation, sustainability, & community in Los Angeles County

lowelifesrcc.org

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#theresnolifelikelowelife

March 15, 2023

RE: Robert Owens historical sign installation at El Prieto trail

Lowelifes Respectable Citizens Club proposes the installation of a sign at El Prieto recognizing the historical connection between [Robert Owens and the El Prieto Canyon area](#).

Who was Robert Owens?

Born into slavery in 1806, Robert Owens worked to earn his freedom and moved to California in 1853. He settled in El Prieto Canyon and built a successful business based on lumber and livery services. Over time, Robert Owens became the wealthiest African American man in Los Angeles County. Owens was not only a successful businessman but also an influential figure in Los Angeles. His direct partnership with the Los Angeles Sheriff secured the release of Biddy Mason. Mason became a historical hero for her community.

Why is a historical sign installation about Robert Owens important?

Historical information about early African American settlers in Los Angeles is not easily accessible. In August 2021, Lowelifes published the first comprehensive article online showcasing Robert Owens' story. Bringing this story to a sign installation is an important step forward in educating our trail users and engaging the local community.

What does the local community think?

To ensure their community is represented in this process, Lowelifes engaged local African American community leaders Veronica Jones (Altadena Historical Society Board Director and Altadena Town Council Representative) and Steven McCall (Los Angeles Conservancy Board Director). On February 20th, we visited the proposed sign installation site together. This sign will elevate the Robert Owens story to a new level of accessibility. We have included multiple letters of support and foresee our community contributing both to any costs and labor needed for sign installation.

What about the sign's artwork?

A draft of Robert Owens sign artwork is included in our proposal. The artwork mirrors existing successful, long running historical signage installations along the Mt. Lowe Railway. El Prieto Canyon is near the Mt. Lowe Railway and a similar sign is appropriate. The small size reduces graffiti but limits the amount of information. We propose including a QR code linking to the online article on Robert Owens. Also, there are no known photographs of Robert Owens. As a placeholder, a photo of his grandson, Robert Curry Owens is included in the artwork. Ultimately, an "artist's depiction" of Robert Owens, or some other artwork, could be a better representation.

Is there a timeline for this Robert Owens sign installation?

Members of the local African American community are excited at the possibility that complete installation of the Robert Owens sign could be accomplished prior to June 2023 for the federal holiday of [Juneteenth](#). This is a reasonable timeframe. Lowelifes can finish design, construction, and installation within a few months of USFS approval.

Throughout the community there is tremendous interest in the history of the Angeles National Forest. The Mt. Lowe Railway area continues to be one of the most visited sites above Altadena. El Prieto Trail is one of the most popular singletrack trails in the area and continuing historical signage there would be an asset to our forest. Let's bring the little-known story of Robert Owens into the light.

Sincerely,

Matt Baffert
CEO, President

Erik Hillard
CFO, Treasurer

Rob Pettersen,
Secretary

ROBERT OWENS HISTORICAL SIGNAGE

Landscape Recommendation (rough sketch)

Approximation of Proposed Interpretive Sign

ABA Clear Space

Existing Signage

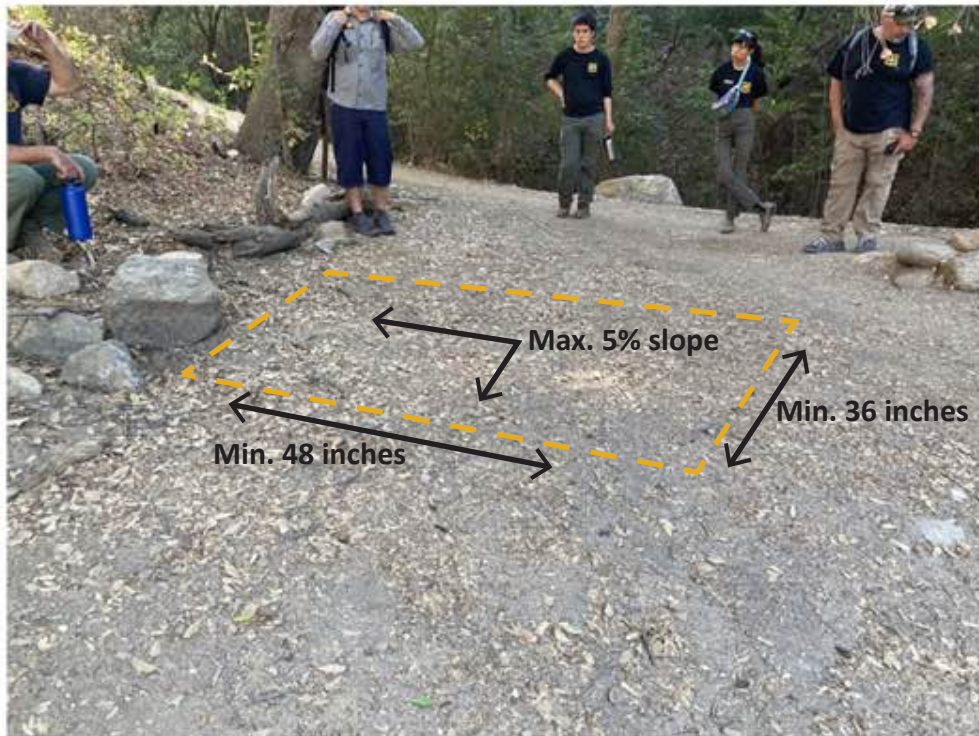
Trail

Forward Approach



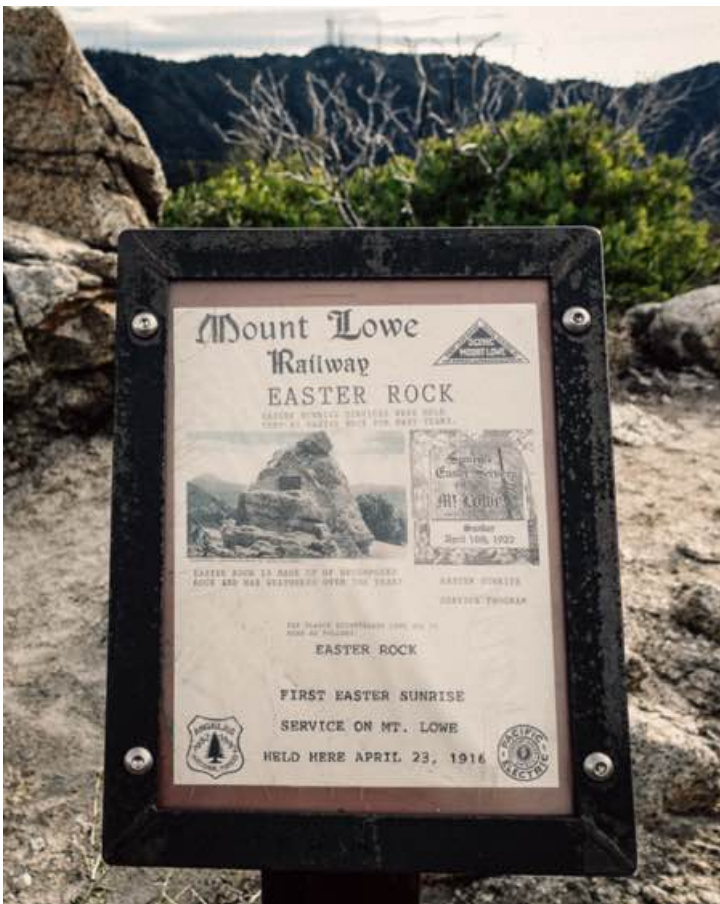
"El Prieto" Trailhead - from Gabrielino Trail/North Arroyo Road

NOT TO SCALE



Approximate Clear Space at Trailhead:
Forward Approach of 36 inches wide and 48 inches long, MINIMUM
No more than 5% slope in any direction

NOT TO SCALE



Existing USFS Angeles National Forest historical signage along the Mt Lowe Railway



Similar materials and construction will be used to mirror the existing historical signage



Who was Robert Owens?

Born into slavery in 1806, Robert Owens worked on a Texas cotton farm. With his exceptional skills, Robert Owens swayed his enslaver to hire him out locally with all income split between them. This arrangement, coupled with his outstanding work ethic, allowed Owens to buy his freedom at age 47.

In November 1853, Robert Owens left Texas for California as a free man. Just outside Los Angeles and above Pasadena, Robert Owens soon found the foothills of the impressive San Gabriel mountain range. Owens settled into a shaded canyon and built himself a cabin. The currently unknown location is somewhere not far off the beaten path of today's El Prieto Trail.

In 1862, Owens secured a contract with the United States military to supply wood for fuel. His canyon homestead provided ample timber but getting the lumber out and to the city presented a serious challenge. Owens created an extremely steep road to haul the lumber out and over to Millard Canyon. From there, it was far easier to transport the lumber into Los Angeles. This became known as Uncle Bob's Trail, now overtaken by nature and near impossible to locate within the forest.

Owens expanded his business ventures to include livery stable services: boarding, care, and rental of horses. With his increasing wealth, Owens purchased then inexpensive land just south of the Los Angeles city center. As the city grew, so did the value of his land between Los Angeles St. and San Pedro St. He continued to purchase and develop property around the city. Soon, Robert Owens became the wealthiest Black man in Los Angeles County.



For more information about Robert Owens, scan this QR code to read an article by the Lowellites Respectable Citizens' Club. lowellfeccc.org



Sample Robert Owens sign artwork



Mockup of sign with Robert Owens artwork



Robert Owens property in Downtown Los Angeles near San Pedro St.



Robert Owens' grandson Robert Curry Owens

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March 13, 2023

To: USFS Angeles National Forest Staff

I am a docent volunteer with the Los Angeles Conservancy, Las Angelitas de Pueblo Historic Monument, and recently I became certified as a Docent Naturalist at Eaton Canyon in Pasadena. I am writing in support of the effort by the *Lowelifes Respectable Citizens Club* for the installation of a sign at El Prieto Trail honoring the often-overlooked African-American California pioneer **Robert Owens**.

Part of my motivation for becoming a docent for these various organizations is to share the history of often-overlooked stories of the African-American experience, and that of other minorities, with students, and people generally, who may not have otherwise been exposed to these important stories.

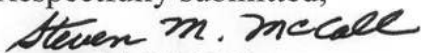
Envision school trips for students (of all ages) making the two-mile round-trip trek up the Gabrielino Trail/North Arroyo Road to the site of the proposed **Robert Owens sign** at the beginning of the El Prieto Trail.

Such a hike would provide a great opportunity to explore and discuss the pre-European presence and culture of the Tongva nation in this area. Along the way one could point out the local native plants and discuss their multiple uses by the Tongva, as well as discuss ecological concepts and natural features found along the trail.

Ultimately reaching the Robert Owens sign, discussion could turn to the presence of African-Americans in California in the 1800s as well as the connection between Robert Owens and another early African-American pioneer in California history, Bridgette "Biddy" Mason. This would be an excellent learning opportunity for all to trace the arc of the African-American presence in California, from the Pobladores, to Charles White, to the recently deceased Pasadena philanthropist and real estate developer, Bill Galloway.

Such a trek would be a winning combination of education and exploration of the local natural environment, and the **Robert Owens sign** would be at the heart of the experience.

Respectfully submitted,


Steven M. McCall

Docent Naturalist at Eaton Canyon
Las Angelitas de Pueblo Historic Monument Docent
Los Angeles Conservancy Docent and Board Member

March 13, 2023

USFS Angeles National Forest

I am pleased to support the proposed signage at the site of the El Prieto Trail. The sign would serve all those that visit the trails. The many hikers, dirt bikers and visitors would be able to share in the history of the trail. What an exciting thought.

For the past 5 years I have worked with the Altadena Historical Society to uncover and bring to light some of the hidden histories of Altadena including the history of those that are under represented in our history books. The proposed Robert Owens sign would help educate and enlighten visitors about Altadena's rich history and bring to light a hidden history.

Knowing the history of our surroundings affords us an opportunity for a better appreciation and understanding of how this area came to be. What better way to learn our history than while surrounded by nature?

Thank you to the Lowelifes Respectable Citizens' Club for their vision to provide us with the opportunity to learn the history of one of our beautiful trails while enjoying nature.

Thank you in advance to the Forest Service for their commitment to our community, preserving our history and the national forest.

Sincerely,



Veronica Jones

Board Member – Altadena Historical Society

Chair – Altadena Town Council

vljones4610@gmail.com

(626)644-6760



March 2, 2023

TO: USFS Angeles National Forest

We think it's important to let you know our thoughts regarding proposed signage at the site of El Prieto Trail. This is an exciting and important project that will enhance visitors' understanding of what happened so long ago in our mountains.


As you may already know, Altadena Historical Society is dedicated to collecting and preserving the history of Altadena for researchers and future generations. In the past few years, we've put an emphasis on finding the hidden histories of the area. Placing a sign on the El Prieto Trail helps our mission of giving a voice to one of the hidden histories of Altadena.

The Robert Owens sign would add a history lesson to a beautiful hike. A win, win for all those that visit El Prieto Trail. Preserving and sharing the history of our trails is important.

The Altadena Historical Society respectfully requests that you do not change the name of the trail -that the name "El Prieto" remains intact, linked to Robert Owen through interpretive signage, thus keeping historical narrative in place.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,


Jane Brackman - President
Altadena Historical Society



P.O. BOX 6018- Altadena CA 91003

March 10, 2023

Dear, USFS Angeles National Forest

Re: El Prieto Trail

The Altadena Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) supports the project of placing a sign with information regarding the history of the trail and Robert Owens. The sign would help educate and inform all those that enjoy the trail about the truly amazing accomplishments of a man who was born into slavery.

We also support not changing the name of the trail. It is important to preserve the historical context of the trail and highlight the expansive histories of our community.

We are dedicated to preserving and disseminating the impressive, but still hidden histories of Altadena.

Please feel free to contact me (626.222.2189) if you have any questions.

Best Regards,

Wilberta Richardson

Wilberta Richardson

President