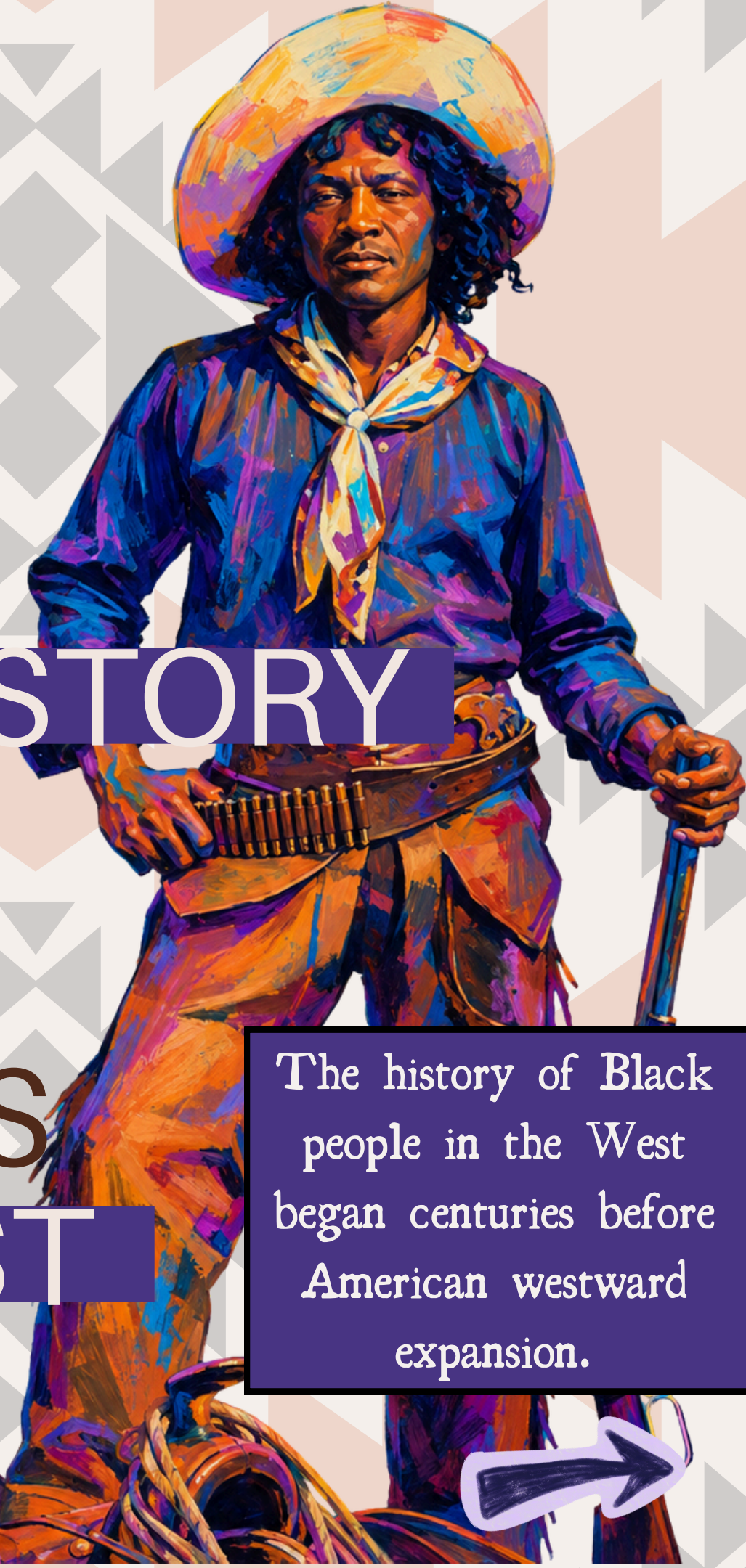




THE BLACK HISTORY MISSING FROM AMERICA'S WILD WEST STORY



The history of Black people in the West began centuries before American westward expansion.





THE BLACK WEST DID NOT BEGIN WITH AMERICAN EXPANSION

In 1528, Esteban, an enslaved African born in Azamor, Morocco, arrived near present-day Texas after surviving the failed Narváez expedition. He later traveled across parts of the Southwest before returning to the region in 1539 as a guide and interpreter for a Spanish expedition.

Esteban's presence reveals that the history of African descended people in the West began centuries before the Louisiana Purchase or the westward expansion of the United States.

However, his story should not be romanticized as simply a Black explorer. Esteban was a formerly enslaved man whose travels were connected to Spanish attempts to expand into lands already inhabited by indigenous peoples.





BLACK PEOPLE WERE ALREADY LIVING IN THE WEST

Esteban was not an isolated example. For the next several centuries, people of African descent continued to enter the Southwest, often traveling north from Mexico rather than west from the eastern United States. **Some were enslaved while others became free settlers, laborers, landholders, and members of Spanish and Mexican communities.**

Black people were also present in “Indian Territory” before the major Black migrations of the late nineteenth century. **The Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek, and Seminole Nations included people of African descent, some of whom were enslaved.** Therefore, the narrative that Black western history began when formerly enslaved people migrated from the South after the Civil War ignores a much older Black presence in the region.





WHY DID BLACK AMERICANS MOVE WEST?

After emancipation, Black Americans gained legal freedom without receiving the economic security necessary to protect that freedom. **The collapse of Reconstruction, racial violence, political intimidation, and economic exploitation led some Black Americans to consider migration as an alternative to remaining in the South.**

The West represented the possibility of acquiring land, finding employment, and establishing communities with greater economic and political independence.

The Exoduster movement highlights how migration became one strategy Black Americans used to exercise greater control over their lives. *However, opportunity in the West did not mean freedom from racism.*

Ho for Kansas!

Brethren, Friends, & Fellow Citizens:

I feel thankful to inform you that the

REAL ESTATE

AND

Homestead Association,

Will Leave Here the

15th of April, 1878,

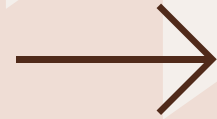
In pursuit of Homes in the Southwestern
Lands of America, at Transportation
Rates, cheaper than ever
was known before.

For full information inquire of

Benj. Singleton, better known as old Pap,
NO. 5 NORTH FRONT STREET.

Beware of Speculators and Adventurers, as it is a dangerous thing
to fall in their hands.

Nashville, Tenn., March 18, 1878.



WHAT WAS THE BLACK EXPERIENCE IN THE WEST

The experiences of Black westerners cannot be reduced to cowboys and Buffalo Soldiers. **Black people worked as farmers, miners, railroad workers, entrepreneurs, laborers, professionals, and domestic workers while establishing churches, newspapers, businesses, and other institutions that supported growing Black communities.**

However, Black westerners encountered many of the same racial restrictions they attempted to escape. Western governments restricted Black voting, court testimony, jury service, interracial marriage, and other rights. **The West could provide Black people with opportunities that were increasingly restricted elsewhere, but migration did not remove them from the racial discrimination that existed throughout the United States.**

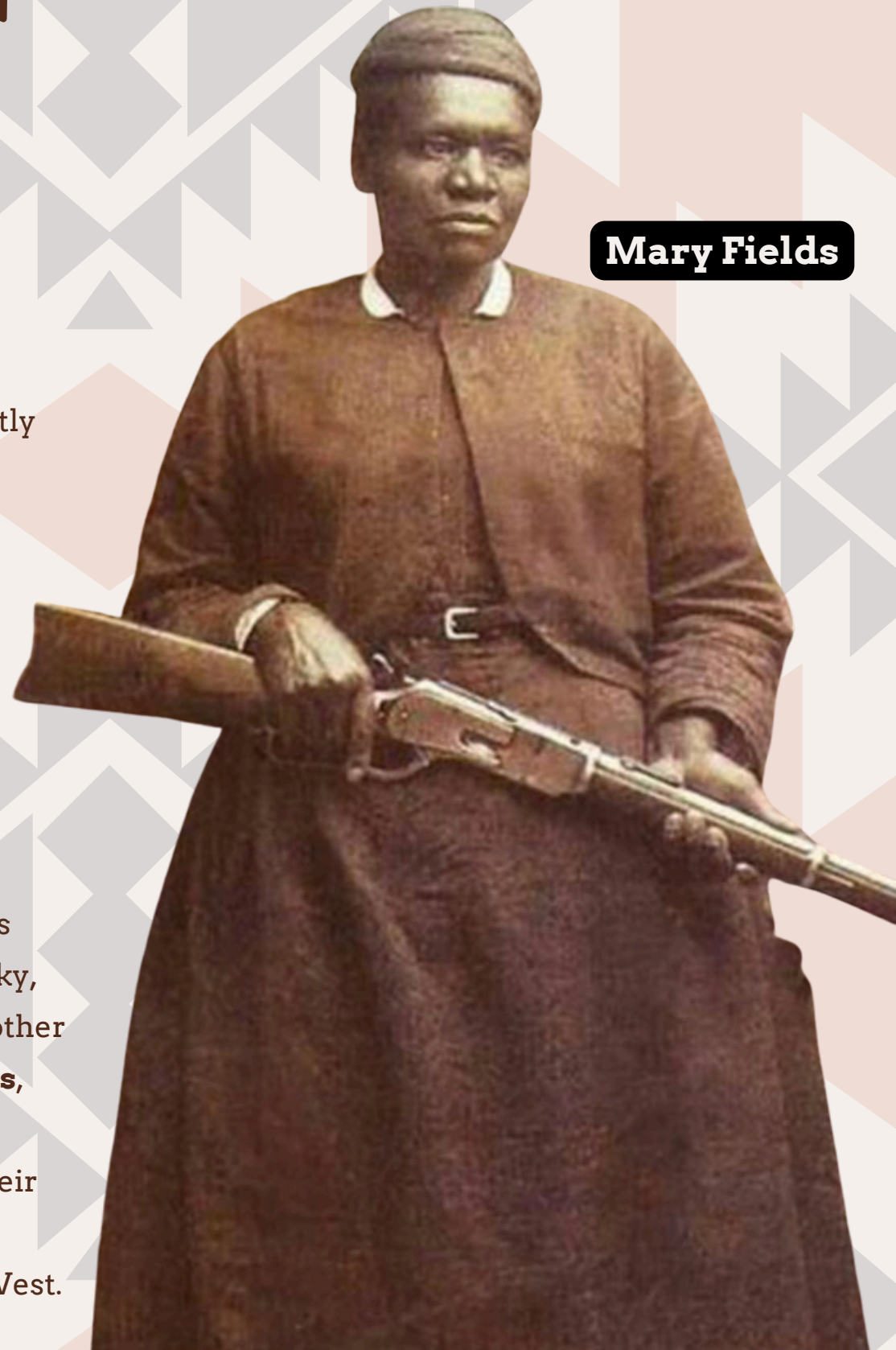




BLACK WOMEN WERE ALSO BUILDING THE WEST

Historical narratives of the Black West have frequently centered men, particularly cowboys, soldiers, and homesteaders. Roger Hardaway argues that this interpretation produces another historical omission because **Black women were also migrating, working, acquiring property, establishing businesses, and building western communities.**

Biddy Mason gained her freedom from slavery in California in 1856 before becoming a nurse, midwife, millionaire property owner, and philanthropist in Los Angeles. **Clara Brown**, formerly enslaved in Kentucky, accumulated property in Colorado and later helped other formerly enslaved people migrate West. **Mary Fields**, who was born enslaved in Tennessee, eventually obtained a contract to carry U.S. mail in Montana. Their experiences show that Black women's labor and migration were also part of the development of the West.



Mary Fields



BLACK FREEDOM ON INDIGENOUS LAND

The pursuit of Black freedom in the West also existed within a complicated history of Native land and American expansion. **Some Black people living in “Indian Territory” had been enslaved within Native nations, while indigenous peoples themselves had experienced forced removal and the continued loss of their land to the United States.**

Historian Alaina E. Roberts explains that **emancipation created overlapping questions regarding land, citizenship, community, and belonging.** Formerly enslaved Black people of the Five Tribes could pursue land and Black autonomy while the United States continued dismantling Native control over the territory. Therefore, Black freedom and Indigenous dispossession cannot be treated as separate histories.





THE OKLAHOMA “PROMISE LAND”

By the late nineteenth century, **Oklahoma** became one of the most ambitious examples of **Black attempts to use westward migration to obtain land, economic independence, and political power**. Black migration promoters encouraged African Americans to settle in the territory, while Black communities established farms, businesses, newspapers, churches, schools, and local governments.

More than twenty Black towns eventually developed in Oklahoma and places such as *Langston, Boley, Taft, Rentiesville, and Clearview* prove that Black westward migration was not solely about leaving the South. For some migrants, the goal was to create communities where Black people could exercise greater control over their economic and political lives.





BLACK OKLAHOMA

Edward P. McCabe was one of the most prominent advocates for increasing Black migration into Oklahoma. In 1891, he declared, *"We will have a negro state governed by negroes."* **His political ambitions reflected the belief that concentrating Black landowners and voters could provide African Americans with political influence that was rapidly disappearing elsewhere.**

However, Oklahoma never became the political refuge envisioned by its Black promoters. **Statehood in 1907 strengthened white political control, while Jim Crow laws and attacks on Black voting rights increasingly restricted the political possibilities Black migrants had attempted to create.** The Oklahoma experiment demonstrates both the possibilities and limitations Black Americans encountered when they looked West for greater freedom.



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