

This map and timeline were created for the Institute of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles (ICALA) by the Studio for Southern California History (Studio). The Studio is dedicated to critically chronicling and sharing the region's social history in order to foster sense of place. We encourage collaborative efforts among different people and institutions in order to gather place-based histories. Co-authors include Lanla Gist, Catherine Gudis, Kristen Hargrove, Deanna Matsumoto, Monica Pelayo-Lock, and Sharon Sekhon. Research on Belle Williams was conducted by Jenna Chaption, Refugio Jimenez Jr, Josiah Rath, Alyssa Rogan, Marisa Thornburg, and James White. Special thanks go to Studio friend and extraordinary documentarian Rory Coleman Mitchell who connected us with Asuka Hisa of the ICALA.

This map represents a fragment of the history of this Los Angeles neighborhood and is centered around the current location of the ICALA. There are many organizations and histories that are not included on this map as it is intended to be a conversation piece and to spark memories and contributions of viewers who see it at the ICALA. The research for this project is culled mainly through newspaper articles and the limited lens at different moments of history. This neighborhood has been a nexus for manufacturing, railway lines, and ethnic enclaves and this section of the city was threatened by the flooding of the Los Angeles River prior to its concrete channeling in the 1930s. This map was modeled off of traditional tourist maps of the late 19th and early 20th century. It includes illustrations from images gathered from the Library of Congress, Calisphere, city directories, and local newspapers. We attempted to focus on the human condition and change over time. We would like you to consider how things have remained the same, and how they have changed.

This map is entitled "Belle's Los Angeles" and is dedicated to Belle Williams, an African American woman whose life in this neighborhood represents bigger paradigms in American and Los Angeles history. Williams lived in this district between 1889 and 1901. Los Angeles newspapers document this period of her life, revealing the narrow ways in which mainstream print media both featured women of color and catered to white audiences. She is both a source of information and entertainment to writers and readers. Contemporary historians must read against these sources in order retrieve her lived experiences and "set the record straight." We examined the various ways the local press treat her, uncovering layers of lessons about racism, prostitution, human trafficking, violence against women and the policing of human behaviors.

The following is print media's narrative of Belle Williams' life. As you read, reflect on the word choices and imagery journalists used to describe Williams and her life circumstances. On July 18, 1895, the *Los Angeles Times* described Belle in detail:

A little diversion was created by the trial of Mrs. Belle Williams, a dusky beauty of doubtful reputation, for vagrancy. The most striking thing about Belle was her gaudy apparel. She had on a black silk dress, handpainted with gorgeous bouquets from the shoulders to the nethermost hem of the garment. Even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like Belle. The colors were so dazzling that Justice Owens had to hide his face behind a newspaper, Clerk Kinsey closed his eyes in slumber and Bailiff Appel put on colored glasses. Mrs.

Williams was arrested for vagrancy because a man who had gone to see her complained to the police that she had tried to rob him.

Belle Williams' history in Los Angeles print began in 1889 when the *Los Angeles Herald* reported that she had allegedly stolen money and a green scarf from Bessie McQuilkin on July 22, 1889. Williams was cleared of this charge when she proved she owned the scarf prior to the alleged theft and wore it in public.

Six years later, after working in various saloons and restaurants, Belle was arrested on April 18, 1895 with Thomas Kingsley for allegedly battering him with a buggy whip. Apparently, Kingsley stopped Williams' buggy in order to harass her and she whipped him in response. Both faced a \$10 bail and a date in court. By July, the *Los Angeles Times* described Belle as "buxom" and "colored." They also noted that her ex-husband, Gus Williams, was wanted in Texas for murder. He was eventually expedited, tried and acquitted. City police charged Williams with vagrancy and she was given a "100 day floater" sentence, which required her to leave Los Angeles for 100 days. One year later, Williams reported her lover for stealing money from her. On May 30, 1896, the Herald reported: "Charles Mallory, the consort of a notorious colored woman named Belle Williams, is in the city jail with a charge of larceny against him, preferred by the woman. They room in the Richmond house on Commercial Street and Belle had given Mallory \$150 in two bills, one was \$100 and one \$50, to care for. While she was sick abed Mallory went away and did not return. Yesterday she met him on the street and demanded that he return his money."

Two weeks later, Orange County visitor George Stokes charged Williams with theft of \$20 after visiting her at a home at the corner of Fourth and San Pedro Streets. She was eventually found guilty and sentenced to three months in prison. In October 17 of 1896, the both the Herald and the Times noted that she was charged for battery against Officer William Matuskiewiz. According to Matuskiewiz, she punched his jaw after he advised her to stop plying her trade on Main Street and Commercial Streets. Williams was acquitted at her trial on March of the 1897.

In 1897, Belle was charged with disturbing the peace. In front of Judge Owens Williams, she tearfully explained that a young man had forced his unwanted attentions on her and she had to knock him down twice to get him off. She also then "hammered his head with a brick-bat." Belle Williams was in the newspapers in 1898. On September 24, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Los Angeles Herald* reported that WH Cowan, a veteran of the British Army and the United States Army, killed himself by shooting himself in the head. He consorted with Belle Williams prior to his suicide, buying her a cottage at 438 Commercial Street and leaving her \$1,500. Belle oversaw Cowan's burial, ensuring the GAR buried him. While some may find her actions based in friendship, Los Angeles' local papers condemned Belle and blamed her for Cowan's death as he was destitute at the time of his suicide. Cowan went by the name "Dave" according to Belle. According to the Herald: "Cowan had served in the British army in New Zealand about twenty-eight years ago. After his service had expired he came to America and enlisted in the United States army, being assigned to the ordinance corps, and serving at Benicia for twenty-five years consecutively. After he left the army, he went to the Soldiers' home at Washington, DC, but soon left there and came west." He lived in Los Angeles approximately one year prior to his suicide.

Belle Williams and Laura Robinson got into a fight in January of 1898 over 15 cents. Williams' attack was so vicious that Robinson was afraid of being permanently disfigured; her face was covered in bruises when the trial date was set and unable to participate in the trial. The *Herald* describes Williams as "black as the proverbial Ace of Spades" and Robinson as "a saddle-colored harlot" who is battered by Belle's "capricious fists and enormous feet." Belle was sentenced to a "floater of fifteen days." In March, Belle was again arrested for fighting, this time with the white man Jack Kohler. She violated her fifteen day sentence and taken to jail.

In June 1898 Belle was arrested in a "disorderly house" at 151 Los Angeles Street where "whites and blacks of both sexes congregate and have a jollification every night." The article noted that fights also were common at the "joint." All in attendance were charged with disturbing the peace.

In October of 1898, Williams was the victim of the unwanted advances of Martin Killalee, who accosted her after her job singing at the Vienna Cafe. According to the *Los Angeles Herald*, Martin Killalee was given a sentence of a 100 day "floater" for "getting gay" with Williams against her will. One year later, Williams reported to the police that someone had burglarized and ransacked her home. Two years later in 1900, Belle was attacked by two of her clients on separate occasions. In January, white male AF Crutcher beat Williams and was given a sentence of fifty dollars or fifty days for committing battery. In December William Scott pled guilty to battery against Belle and fined \$5.

The last we see of Belle Williams in the newspapers is in 1901. As her situation grew dire, Williams' safety was a constant personal concern. On October 11, Belle visited the Los Angeles Police and asked to be locked up for her safety and they did so and listed her as a "lodger." An ex-lover was stalking her and followed her from Portland, Oregon, to San Francisco and now to Los Angeles. He'd attacked her with a knife and "nearly" killed her in Portland but she was afraid to press charges. She then went to Los Angeles and he arrived three days later. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, Williams was terrified: "She was so frightened that her eyes bulged and if she had been white her face would have been pale."

Belle's poignant and dangerous life was full of meaning. Despite how the press chose to represent her actions, she fought her assailants and she honored loved ones, surviving on her own terms. In the few dozen articles about Belle Williams, we learn a great deal about her circumstances—even through the eyes of people who did not see her as a human being. She is described as "notorious;" "the colored Amazon of Alameda Street;" "the most notorious colored woman that has ever made Rome howl in Los Angeles;" "Cyprian;" and "black as a spade." She is rarely described in humane terms and always with a tone of exaggeration. This illustrated map is dedicated to Belle Williams. Her life and story is a reminder that all historical inquiry, even place-based history, should place humanity at the center. We encourage you to recognize the Belle Williams of Los Angeles, then and now.