

January 11, 2024
Job Number: 1005-026 Task Order 11
Report on Recent Upgrades to Owen Brown Gravesite, Altadena

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

2.6 1005-026.M01

TO: County of Los Angeles Department of Regional Planning,
Ordinance Studies (Historic Preservation)
(Mr. Dean Edwards)

FROM: Sapphos Environmental, Inc.
(Mr. Graham Larkin)

SUBJECT: Recent Upgrades to the Owen Brown Gravesite, Altadena,
California

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Memorandum for the Record (MFR) documents recent improvements completed at or near the gravesite of abolitionist Owen Brown in the Community of Altadena, in the unincorporated territory of Los Angeles County, California. Owen Brown is buried on a 6-acre piece of land approached by the El Prieto Fire Road, which connects with the tops of El Prieto road (on the west) and Rising Hill Road (on the east). As noted by Journalist Chris Lindahl,

Some of that land was part of the homestead belonging to Owen Brown and his brother Jason Brown and in front of the mountain that would be named after their father, John Brown — a white man whose attempt in 1859 to spark a slave rebellion at the Harper's Ferry, Virginia arsenal resulted in his hanging for the crime of inciting violent rejection of slavery...¹

¹ Lindahl, Chris. January 14, 2019. Abolitionist Owen Brown's Altadena grave to be preserved in compromise with La Vina developer. *Pasadena Star-News*. <https://altadenaheritage.org/abolitionist-owen-browns-altadena-grave-to-be-preserved-in-compromise-with-la-vina-developer/> (accessed December 2023).

Corporate Office:
430 North Halstead Street
Pasadena, CA 91107
TEL 626.683.3547
FAX 626.628.1745

Billing Address:
P.O. Box 655
Sierra Madre, CA 91025
Web site:
www.sapphosenvironmental.com

On January 27, 2021, Kathryn Barger, Los Angeles County 5th District Supervisor, and the Owen Brown Gravesite Committee filed a landmark nomination application for the subject property, documenting it as a historical resource, eligible for listing as a landmark in the County of Los Angeles Register of Landmarks and Historical Districts. To establish the site's eligibility for landmark status, Sapphos Environmental, Inc. architectural historian Mr. Graham Larkin, who meets the Secretary of the Interior's professional qualification standards for architectural history and history, accompanied a representative of the Owen Brown Gravesite Committee (Ms. Michele Zack) on March 10, 2022. There Mr. Larkin discussed and photographed recent changes made to the site, including the restoration, to its original location, of the 1889 Owen Brown grave marker, along with stones marking the placement of the body as depicted in an early-20th-century photograph. There was also a wood sign directing visitors from the El Prieto Fire Trail to the hilltop gravesite.

Subsequent to the 2022 visit, further improvements were made to the gravesite by the Owen Brown Gravesite Committee, in the form of interpretive panels and benches. Mr. Larkin again accompanied Ms. Zack, on December 15, 2023, to photographically document the improvements and assess the improvements in relation to the eligibility of the gravesite for listing as a landmark in the Los Angeles Register of Landmarks and Historic Districts. As a result of the field investigation, it has been determined that both the 2022 and 2023 upgrades are compatible with the eligibility of the resource for listing in the Los Angeles Register of Landmarks and Historic Districts and its ability to be recognized and enjoyed by the public. All of the upgrades are reversible, and none of them adversely affect the eligibility of the gravesite as a historical resource. None of the upgrades adversely adverse effect to the seven elements of integrity.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this MFR is to document the results of a field investigation completed to verify that recent improvements to the Owens Brown gravesite have not adversely affected its eligibility for listing as a historical resource, or Landmark, in the County of Los Angeles Register of Landmarks and Historic Districts. This MFR was prepared to support the County of Los Angeles Department of Regional Planning, Ordinance Studies (Historic Preservation) in their reporting to the Historical Records and Landmarks Commission.

The scope of the investigation was the 6-acre Owens Brown gravesite located near El Prieto Road in the community of Altadena, in the unincorporated territory of Los Angeles County (Figure 1, *Vicinity Map*). The subject property is approached from the west by way of the by the El Prieto Fire Road, which connects with the tops of El Prieto road on the west, and Rising Hill Road on the east (Figure 2, *Location Map*).

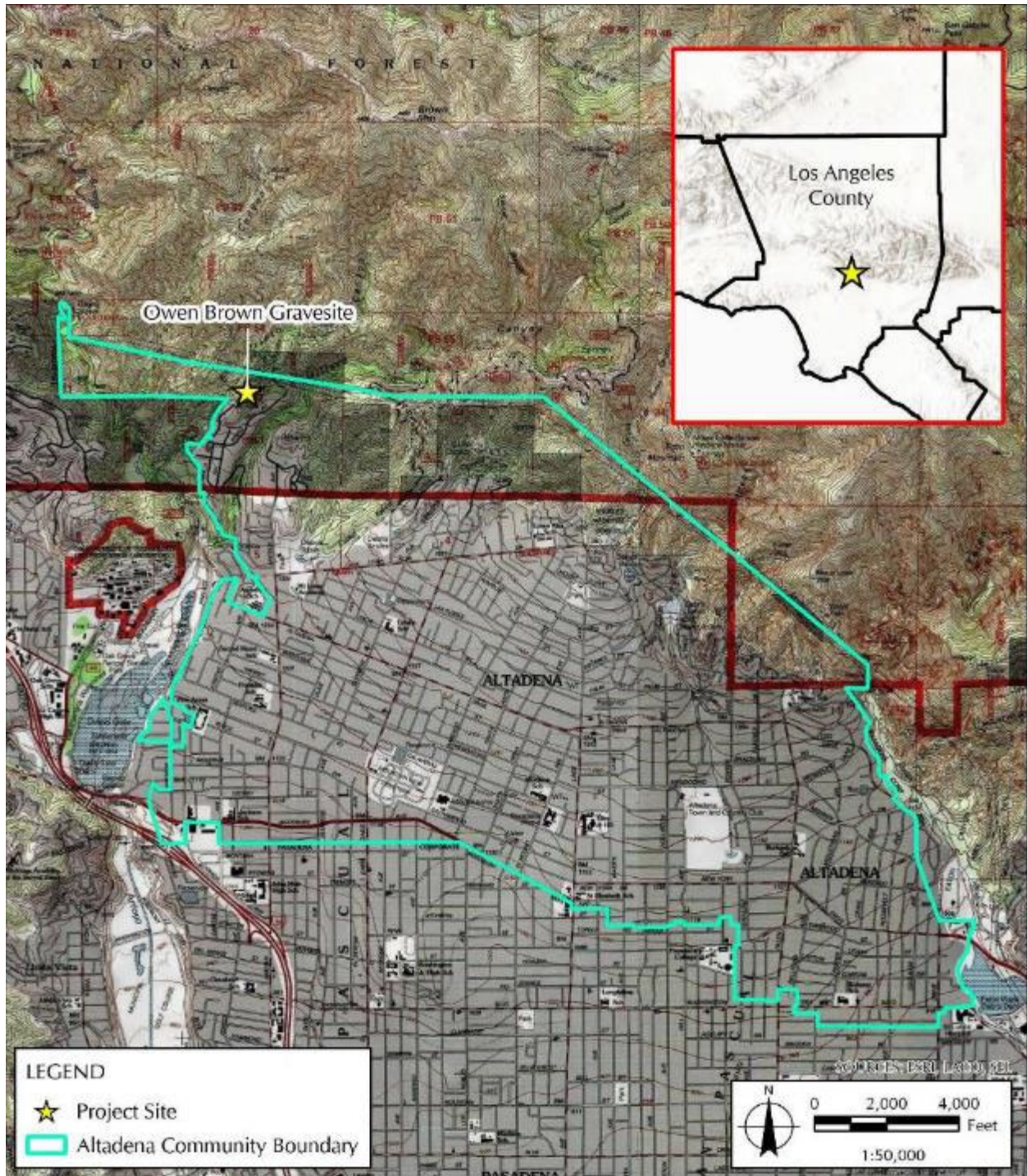


Figure 1. Vicinity Map
 SOURCE: Sapphos Environmental, Inc.

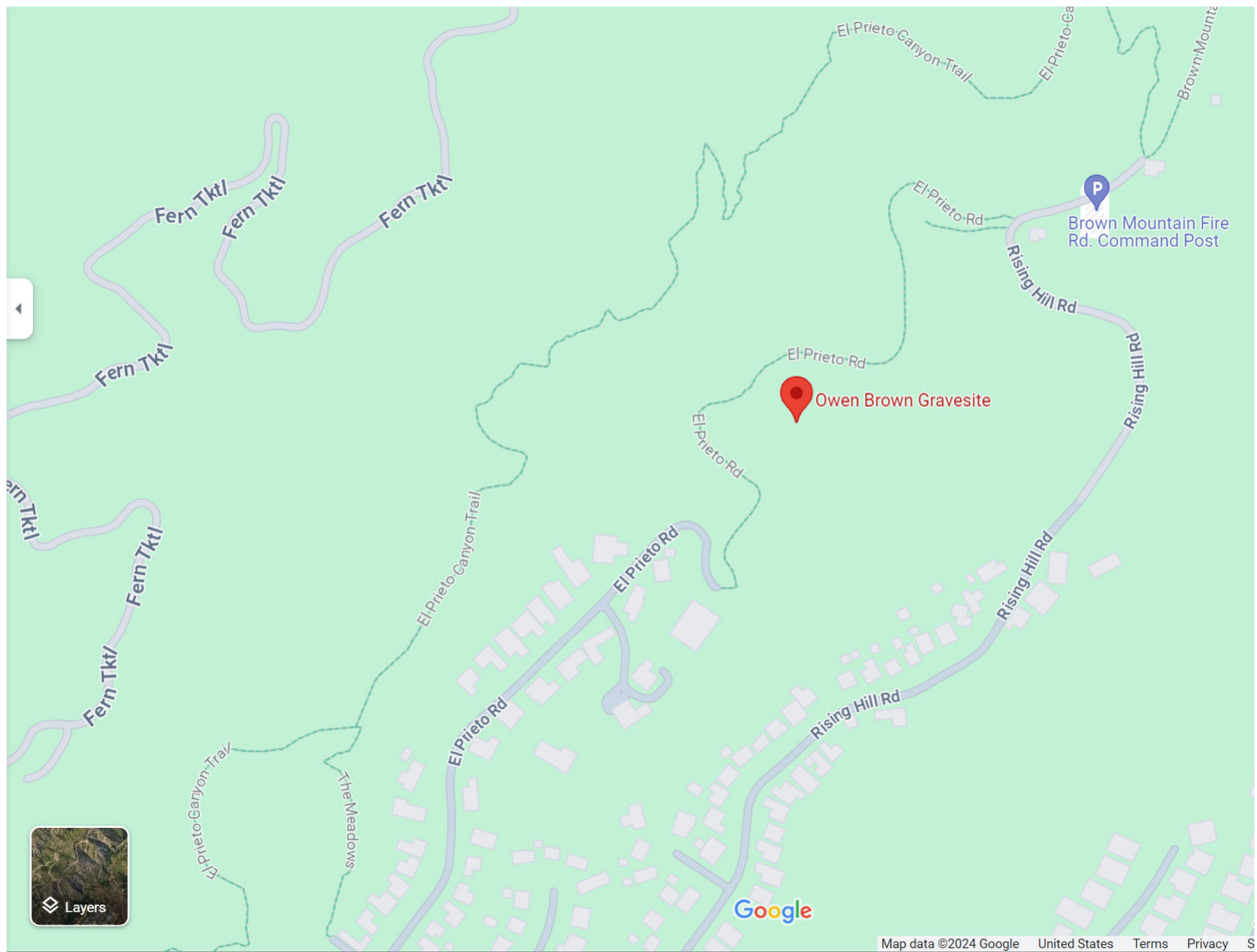


Figure 2. Location Map
SOURCE: Google Maps, 2024.

The site was evaluated in relation to the January 27, 2021, application of landmark designation for the Owen Brown gravesite. The evaluation of the effects of the recent improvement was undertaken using the intensive survey method prescribed in National Park Service Bulletin No. 24, including verification of continued eligibility for listing in the County of Los Angeles Register of Landmarks and Historic Districts, assessment of condition of the character-defining features, and reevaluation of the seven factors of integrity.

BACKGROUND

On January 27, 2021, the Owen Brown Gravesite Committee provided a completed landmark nomination application for the subject property. To establish the site's eligibility for landmark status, Sapphos Environmental, Inc. architectural historian, Mr. Graham Larkin, accompanied a representative of the Owen Brown Gravesite Committee (Ms. Michele Zack) on March 10, 2022. Improvements to the site by the Owen Brown Gravesite Committee, in the form of two interpretive panels and three benches, were subsequently made and unveiled in early December 2023. Subsequent to the improvements to the Owen Brown gravesite, Mr. Larkin returned to the site on December 15, 2023, again in the company of Ms. Zack, to photographically document the improvements and assess the improvements in relation to the eligibility of the gravesite for listing as a landmark in the Los Angeles Register of Landmarks and Historic Districts.

During the March 2022 visit, the only signage leading to the gravesite was a simple wood post with a wood sign reading "OWEN BROWN GRAVESITE," and directing visitors with a right-facing arrow from the fire road to the trail ascending to the summit of Little Round Top, the hill where the grave itself is located (Figure 3, *Aerial View of Little Round Top*).

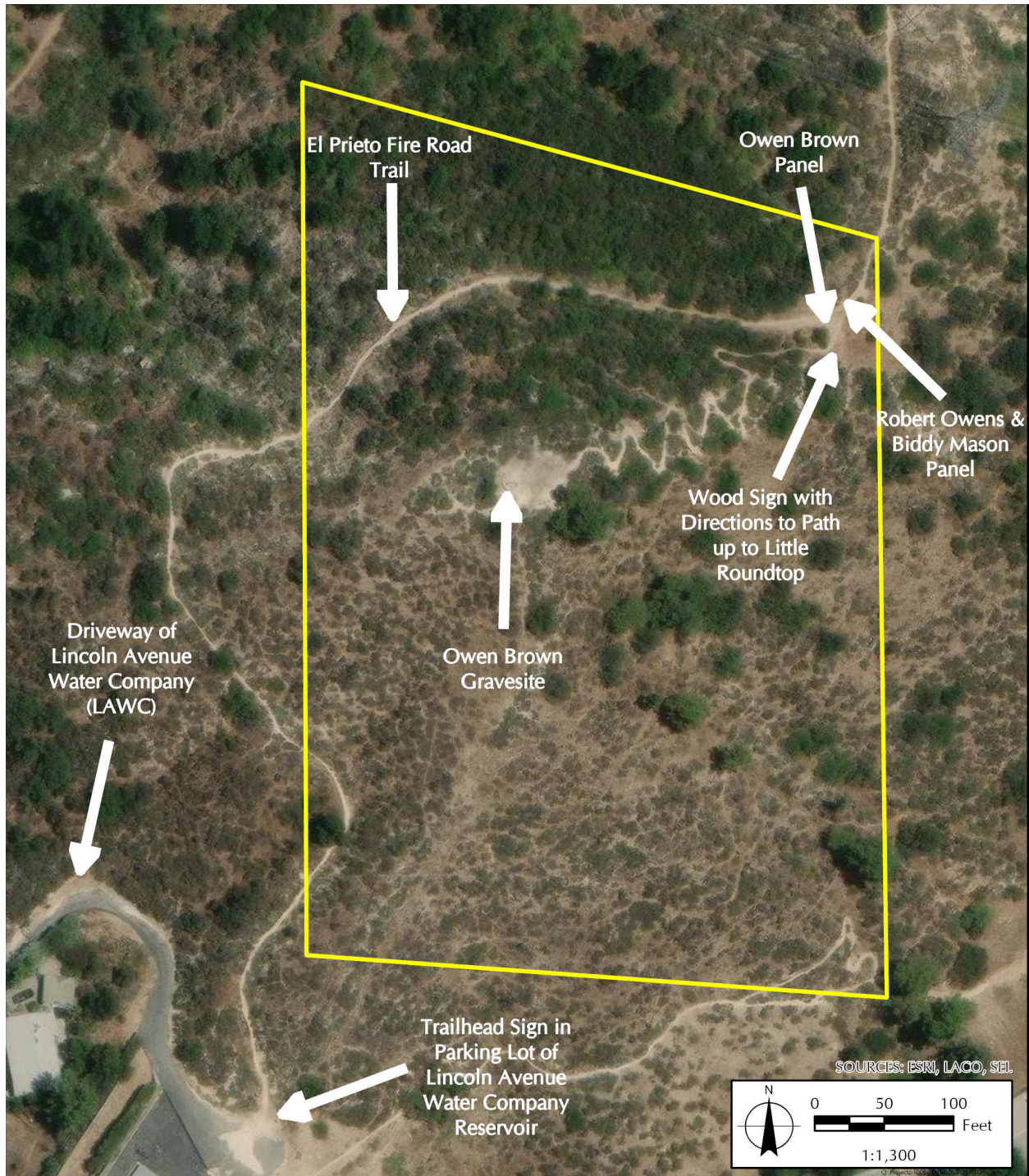


Figure 3. Aerial View of Little Round Top
(arrows indicating approximate locations of key features and parcel boundary in yellow)
 SOURCES: Google Earth (image) and Sapphos Environmental, Inc. (labels)

CHARACTER-DEFINING FEATURES

Contributing elements are those elements on the site that have characteristics and features relating to the historic context and significance of the proposed landmark, which were constructed during the period of significance and have sufficient historical integrity. Pursuant to County Code Section 22.14.080, character-defining features are defined as “the materials, forms, location, spatial configurations, uses, and cultural associations or meanings that contribute to the historic character of a historic resource that must be retained to preserve that character.” The character-defining features are as follows:

- The rustic, partially-dressed commemorative stone
- The adjoining ring of smaller stones, demarcating the location of the body beneath
- The hill on which the commemorative stone is located
- The pathway affording access to the site (between the wood panel with directions to Little Roundtop and the Owen Brown gravesite)

METHODS

Sapphos Environmental, Inc. architectural historian Mr. Graham Larkin, who meet the Secretary of the Interior’s professional qualification standards for architectural history, and history, accompanied Ms. Michele Zack to complete an intensive survey to assess if the 2023 upgrades to the 6-acre Owen Brown gravesite have adversely affected the character-defining features or integrity of the site as described in the application for landmark designation. The evaluation of the effects of the recent improvement was undertaken using the intensive survey method prescribed in National Park Service Bulletin No. 24.² The investigation focused on evaluation of continued eligibility for listing in the County of Los Angeles Register of Landmarks and Historic Districts, assessment of condition of the character-defining features, and reevaluation of the seven factors of integrity.

DESCRIPTION OF RECENT UPGRADES

The upgrades seen by Mr. Larkin on the visit of March 2022 include the restoration of the grave marker and the placement of a small directional sign. The December 2023 upgrades consist of two interpretive panels, three benches, and modification of an existing directional sign. These will be discussed in turn, in the order that they are encountered on the walk from the trail to the hilltop.

Interpretive Panels

There are two interpretive panels recently added to the subject property, fabricated by Winsor Fireform of Tumwater, Washington, and with information supplied by the Owen Brown Gravesite Committee (Figure 4A, *Location of Interpretive Panel Commemorating Robert Owens and Bidy Mason*, and Figure 4B, *Interpretive Panel Commemorating Robert Owens and Bidy Mason*). Mounted on twin steel posts, these high-quality, weather-resistant and unobtrusive panels are mainly rendered in shades of green and blue, along with tinted historic photographs. Both panels relate to the lives of abolitionists or former slaves during the second half of the 19th century, especially fitting subjects given the proximity to the adjacent Meadows neighborhood, which is historically African American. Both panels are located along the El Prieto Fire Road Trail, by which

² National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. 1995. How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation. National Register Bulletin. Available at: https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/upload/NRB-15_web508.pdf Insert citation for NPS Bulletin 24

one approaches the Owen Brown Gravesite when coming from the west. The trail is most readily accessed by way of the Lincoln Avenue Water Company reservoir parking lot, at the top of El Prieto Road in the Meadows.

The first panel, located along the side of the El Prieto Fire Road Trail, faces northward toward the El Prieto Canyon and is titled “How the El Prieto Canyon Got Its Name.” It recounts the life of Robert Owens (“El Prieto” or the Dark One), born into slavery in Texas in 1806. After purchasing his freedom from his enslaver, he moved to California in the early 1850s, where he built a cabin in the canyon and set up business as a lumber supplier, before bringing his wife and children to California, where they settled in Los Angeles and became wealthy through various business ventures. Robert and his son Charles were instrumental in the freeing of Biddy Mason, who is also commemorated in this panel.



Figure 4A. Location of Interpretive Panel Commemorating Robert Owens and Biddy Mason

SOURCE: *Sapphos Environmental, Inc., December 2023*

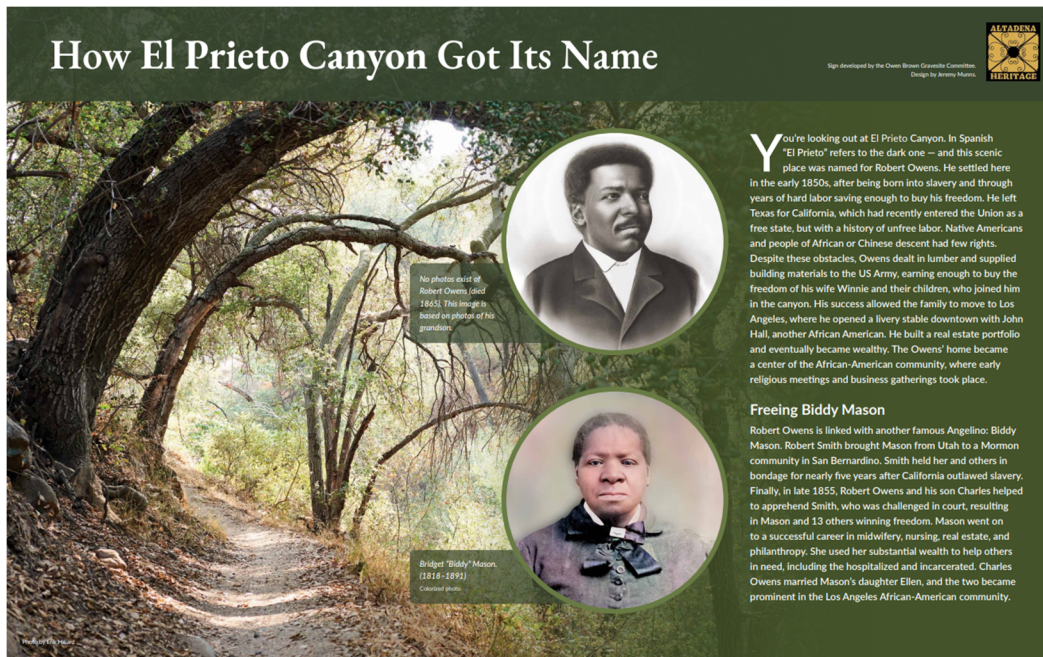


Figure 4B. Interpretive Panel Commemorating Robert Owen and Biddy Mason
SOURCE: Owen Brown Gravesite Committee, December 2023

The second panel, facing westward and located near the turn-off from the El Prieto Fire Road Trail toward the Little Round Top (Figure 5A, *In-Situ Interpretive Panel Commemorating Owen Brown*), is titled "An Abolitionist Comes West." The second panel recounts the life of Owen Brown, son of famous abolitionist John Brown, who lived for 20 years as a fugitive, for his role in the Harpers Ferry Raid, and finally moved with family members to Pasadena (Figures 5B, *In-Situ Interpretive Panel Commemorating Owen Brown*; and Figure 5C, *Base of Interpretive Panel Relating to the Life of Owen Brown*). During his lifetime, admirers of the Union cause would make the trek up to meet him in his Altadena cabin. After his death in 1889, the gravesite likewise became a pilgrimage site for Union sympathizers. In addition to historic photos and captions, the sign contains a QR code at bottom right, leading to the Altadena Heritage website where visitors can learn more about Owen Brown and his family.



Figure 5A. In-Situ Interpretive Panel Commemorating Owen Brown
 SOURCE: Sapphos Environmental, Inc., December 2023

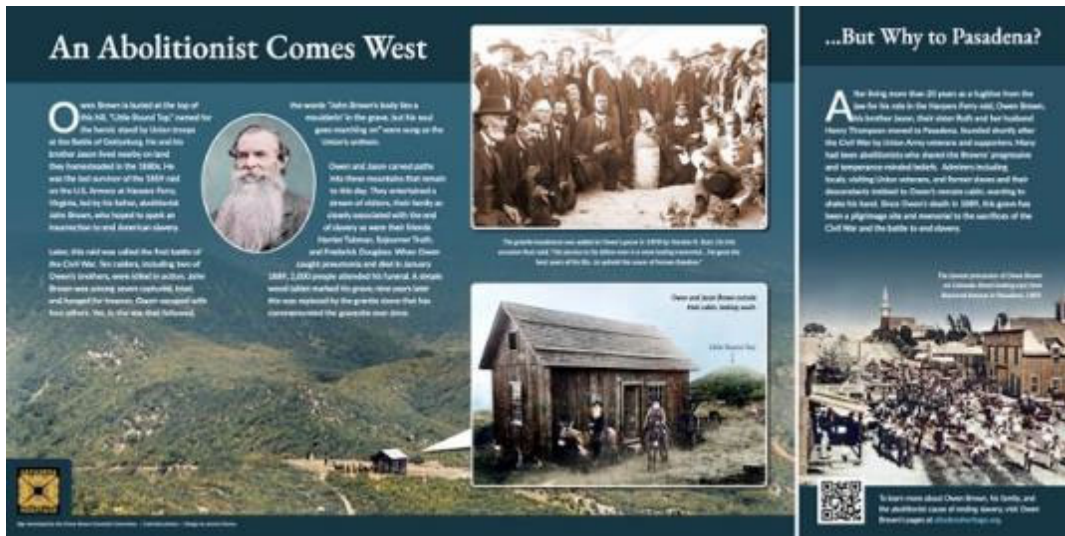


Figure 5B. Interpretive Panel Commemorating Owen Brown
 SOURCE: Owen Brown Gravesite Committee, December 2023



Figure 5C. Base of Interpretive Panel Relating to the Life of Owen Brown
SOURCE: *Sapphos Environmental, Inc., December 2023*

Just south of the Owen Brown panel there is a modestly-constructed wood directional sign, located at the junction of the El Prieto Fire Road and the path to the summit of Little Round Top. This sign was photographed by Mr. Larkin in March 2022, and again in December 2023. In the interim the wood had bleached, and an instruction to “STAY ON TRAIL” was added to the wood post (Figures 6A and 6B, *Wood Sign with Directions to Owen Brown Gravesite*).



Figures 6A and 6B. Wood Sign with Directions to Owen Brown Gravesite
SOURCE: *Sapphos Environmental, Inc., March 2022 and December 2023*

Grave Marker and Benches

On the summit of Little Round Top, there is a fairly flat clearing, on which can be found the Owen Brown grave marker. The history of the Original Commemorative Stone and its journey to be restored to its original location is recounted in detail in the “*Alterations*” subsection of the County of Los Angeles Landmark and Historic District Nomination Form for the Owen Brown Commemorative Stone.³ As indicated in that source, the original location of the grave is photographically documented in an April 1895 photograph, where the grave was originally demarcated with a large pine tree that subsequently died (Figure 7, *Earliest Known Photo of Gravesite [1895]*).

³ Los Angeles Department of Regional Planning. January 2021. Owen Brown Commemorative Stone Landmark and Historic District Nomination Form.



Figure 7. Earliest Known Photo of Gravesite (1895) (with Original Marker, Cedar Tree Behind, and Cairn in Foreground)

SOURCE: *Horatio N. Rust Photograph Collection: John Brown Collection (photCL 9)*

Stones demarcating the gravesite were placed in 1907, during the period of significance. The removal of the dead pine tree and replacement with the commemorative stone in 1898, as documented in historic newspapers and in a photograph of the inauguration of the current stone (Figure 8, *Placement of the Commemorative Stone, January 29, 1898*). A 1907 photograph shows a ring of stones in front of the marker (Figure 9, *Grave as Photographed in 1907*).



Figure 8. Placement of the Commemorative Stone, January 29, 1898
SOURCE: *Altadena Historical Society*



Figure 9. Grave as Photographed in 1907 (stone outline now present)
SOURCE: *Altadena Historical Society*

The commemorative stone was dislodged from its location in 1970 and rolled down the hill, where it was later discovered by a Forest Service Ranger and replaced to its original location. The commemorative stone and stones demarcating the gravesite again went missing in 2002. The commemorative stone and grave-marking stones were rediscovered in Meadow Area residences,

on the south side of Little Roundtop in 2012, and placed in storage for safekeeping. The commemorative stone and stones demarcating the site were replaced at their original location in 2021 by members of the Owen Brown Gravesite Committee. The first intensive survey of the site, to support the County evaluation of the application for Landmark designation, was completed by Sapphos Environmental, Inc. architectural historian Mr. Graham Larkin on behalf of the County, shortly after the replacement of the commemorative stone and demarcating stones in March 2022 (Figure 10A and 10B, *Owen Brown Gravesite*; Figure 11, *Owen Brown Gravesite: View of Memorial Stone*).

Shortly before the second visit in December 2023, three benches, built to the design of Mark Goldschmidt, were added for the benefit of visitors wishing to enjoy the hilltop. Like the signs, the benches are supported by sturdy twin steel posts. The seats of the benches, identical aside from slight variations in the rustic wood seats, were fabricated by gravesite committee member Rich Benson. As indicated on the corner inscription, they are made of wide slabs of Canary Island Pine (Figure 12A, *South Bench*; Figure 12B, *South Bench Detail*; and Figure 12C, *West Bench*).



Figure 10A. Owen Brown Gravesite (view facing west, with arrows indicating locations of key features)
 SOURCE: *Sapphos Environmental, Inc., December 2023*



Figure 10B. Owen Brown Gravesite (view facing north, with arrows indicating locations of key features)
 SOURCE: *Sapphos Environmental, Inc., December 2023*



Figure 11. Owen Brown Gravesite: View of Memorial Stone (facing west)
SOURCE: *Sapphos Environmental, Inc., December 2023*



Figure 12A. South Bench

SOURCE: *Sapphos Environmental, Inc., December 2023*



Figure 12B. South Bench Detail (showing inscription)
SOURCE: *Sapphos Environmental, Inc., December 2023*



Figure 12C. West Bench

SOURCE: *Sapphos Environmental, Inc., December 2023*

In addition to the aforementioned features (restored grave marker, benches, interpretive panels, wayfinding sign) put in place by the Owen Brown Gravesite Committee, there is a sign at the western base of the trailhead, in the parking lot of the Lincoln Avenue Water Company reservoir (Figure 13, *Trailhead Sign in Parking Lot of Lincoln Avenue Water Company*). Put up by the company, it indicates that the gravesite is a year-round fire danger and entreats visitors to be safe and respectful.



Figure 13. Trailhead Sign in the Parking Lot of the Lincoln Avenue Water Company Reservoir
SOURCE: *Sapphos Environmental, Inc., December 2023*

INTEGRITY ANALYSIS

Historic integrity is commonly defined as the ability of a site to convey its historical significance and is the composite of seven qualities: *location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association*.⁴ The setting has retained its integrity as the upper foothills are relatively undeveloped, the site remains undeveloped, and the gravestone has been restored to its original location and configuration. The recent additions of the interpretive signs and the benches do not detract from this integrity, and they enhance the feeling of association since they make clear the historic importance of the site to uninformed visitors.

CONCLUSION

As a result of the two field investigations, it has been determined that both the 2022 and 2023 upgrades are compatible with the eligibility of the resource for listing in the Los Angeles County Register of Landmarks and Historic Districts, and they facilitate understanding and enjoyment by the public. All of the upgrades are reversible, and none adversely affects the eligibility of the gravesite as a historical resource. None of the upgrades adversely adverse effect to the seven elements of integrity.

⁴ National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. 1995. How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation. National Register Bulletin. Available at: https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/upload/NRB-15_web508.pdf Insert citation for NPS Bulletin 24

REFERENCES

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