



THE NEVADA COUNTY
**Historical
Society** EST. 1944

Celebrating and Preserving
the History of
Nevada County, California

161 Nevada City Hwy., Nevada City, CA 95959
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**County of Nevada
State of California**

**Nevada County Historical Landmarks Commission
Application for Registration of Historical Landmark**

Name of proposed landmark: The Preston and Louisa Alexander Family Homesite

Location: 330 Alexander Street, Nevada City, CA 95949

Name of applicant: Nevada County Historical Society (NCHS)

Address: 161 Nevada City Highway, Nevada City, CA 95959

Home or work phone: NCHS History Center (530) 265-7569, currently not answered regularly;
Linda K. Jack cell phone: (650) 888-1379.

**Name and address of landowner upon whose property proposed landmark is located, if
owner is not applicant:** David and Louise Beesley

I authorize the placing of a plaque or marker on site.

Louise L. Beesley
Landowner's signature

July 27, 2020
Date

Nevada County ~ at the heart of California's golden history



Firehouse No. 1 Museum
2014 Street
Nevada City, CA 95959
(530) 265-5468

**Nevada County
Narrow Gauge Railroad Museum**
#5 Kidder Court
Nevada City, CA 95959
(530) 470-0902

North Star Mining Museum
933 Allison Ranch Rd.
Grass Valley, CA 95945
(530) 273-4255

Searls Historical Library
161 Nevada City Hwy.
Nevada City, CA 95959
(530) 265-5910

Brief history and description of proposed landmark: The Alexander Family Homesite was located at what is now 330 Alexander St. in Nevada City, which runs between Main St. and Coyote St., along Buckeye Ravine. Preston Alexander (1834-1889), and his wife, Louisa (1838-1902) were among the earliest African American pioneers in Nevada County. Preston Alexander purchased the 1.6-acre property from the estate of John Ramas on May 19, 1859.¹ On April 27, 1861 he made a Declaration of Homestead, appearing before John Kendall, acting Justice of the Peace, who recorded it that same day.²

The property is recorded on the Nevada City Assessment Roll of 1867 under “Preston Alexander.”³ It is designated as Lot No. 21 in Block No. 9 on the official map of the city drawn by H.S. Bradley in 1869 where it is shown under the single name “Preston.”⁴ On March 21, 1870 Preston Alexander paid Nevada City the sum of \$15 and was granted title to the property.⁵ Initially he had constructed a small cabin, which over time had been enlarged and improved to accommodate the growing Alexander family. When the property was purchased by Charles Graham in 1928 he razed the house, which was then described as “one of the oldest in that section of the city.”⁶ Portions of adjacent properties were later reconfigured. Today the 330 Alexander St. property is measured at just under an acre. None of the 19th century buildings are still standing.

Following Preston Alexander’s death in 1889 his heirs were: his widow, Louisa Alexander; two daughters, Mary St. Clair and Rosella Scott; and two sons, John and Horatio Alexander. On September 30, 1898 they took a promissory note from Edmund Coleman, an African American resident of Nevada City, for \$328 to purchase the property. On January 29, 1902 Coleman made the final payment on his mortgage. It was recorded on February 12, 1902.⁷ Edmund Coleman died intestate in Pacific Grove, CA on September 21, 1910.⁸ The estate was contested, but ultimately passed to his brother, Groves Hickman Coleman and his wife, Daisy Coleman, of Yakima, WA.⁹

Unique aspects or properties of proposed landmark: The property is unusual, perhaps unique for Nevada City, in that African Americans owned it from the Gold Rush era into the early 20th century. At some point prior to April 19, 1900 the alley that ran along the property was named Alexander St. for Preston Alexander.¹⁰ It is one of only two streets in Nevada City named for a black person, the other being Nimrod St., which is named for Nimrod Jones. If designated as a

¹ Pierce, Bosquit Abstract & Title Co., *Abstract of Title to Lot 21 in Block 9 in the City of Nevada*, 8.

² *Abstract of Title*, 4.

³ *Nevada City Assessment Roll, 1867*, 3 (Searls Historical Library)

⁴ *Official Map of Nevada City* made by H.S. Bradley in 1869.

⁵ *Abstract of Title Certificate no. 145*, 10.

⁶ *Morning Union*, July 31, 1928, 4.

⁷ *Abstract of Title, Mortgage*, 12-17.

⁸ *Monterey Daily Cypress and Monterey American*, September 22, 1910, 4.

⁹ *Abstract of Title, Decree of Final Distributions*, 2-5.

¹⁰ See for example Roberts, Mark L. and neighbors on Alexander St. in the 1900 Census.

Ancestry.com. *1900 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc., 2004.

landmark, 330 Alexander St. would be the first landmarked property associated with a black person in Nevada County.

In her book, *The Negro Trail Blazers of California*, Delilah Beasley reported Preston Alexander's arrival in California as 1849, but he does not appear on the 1852 California State Census.¹¹ Preston Alexander's obituary reports that he arrived in Nevada City in 1853.¹² Later census records report that his eldest son, John Preston Alexander (1854-1923), was born in California. John's obituary indicates that he was born in Nevada City, confirming that Preston and Louisa were in the community no later than March 1854.¹³

There is one reference that reports that both Preston and Louisa had been enslaved and owned by a family named Preston prior to gaining their freedom, but that has yet to be documented.¹⁴ If true it is possible that "Preston" was a name given under slavery and "Alexander" the name taken as a freeman. As adults, two of Preston Alexander's sons, Horatio and John, used "Preston" as a surname on occasion.

According to the census records Preston Alexander was born in about 1834 in the District of Columbia. However, voter registration records beginning in 1871 consistently list his birthplace place as Virginia. Louisa was a native of Wisconsin or Illinois, who came to California with her parents in the early 1850s.¹⁵ Her maiden name and the names of her parents are unknown. On the census records Louisa reported that her mother and father had both been born in Missouri. In Louisa's obituary, her parents are described as "highly respected colored people," suggesting that they were known in the community and still remembered at the time of her death.¹⁶

Louisa and Preston Alexander were reported to have had eight children of which five lived to adulthood: John Preston Alexander (1854-1923), who used the surname "Preston"; Mary Amelia St. Claire née Alexander (1856-); Horatio Henry Alexander, who was also known as Rashe, and used the surname "Preston" (1861-1911); Louisa Alexander (1862-1896); and Rosella Elizabeth Scott née Alexander (1865-).

Preston Alexander worked in a variety of positions in the community: as a miner, general laborer and janitor. He was also the billposter in Nevada City, the person who put up and took down the dozens of announcements of events, public notices, and advertisements that papered the city on a daily basis.¹⁷

¹¹ Beasley, Delilah L. 1919. *The Negro trail blazers of California: a compilation of records from the California archives in the Bancroft Library at the University of California, in Berkeley; and from the diaries, old papers and conversations of old pioneers in the state of California*. Los Angeles, p. 105; *Morning Union*, April 13, 1923, 5.

¹² *Daily Transcript*, November 23, 1889, 3.

¹³ 1900 United States Federal Census, Nevada City, Nevada County; *Morning Union*, April 13, 1923, 5.

¹⁴ *Morning Union*, April 13, 1923, 5

¹⁵ *Morning Union*, March 14, 1902, 6. Her parents are not yet identified, but there were many free and enslaved blacks in Wisconsin who worked in the lead mines during the territorial period and after statehood.

¹⁶ *Daily Transcript*, March 13, 1902, 2.

¹⁷ Maria E. Brower, *Nevada City*. Arcadia Press, 2005, 56.

He was active in many aspects of the civic life of Nevada County. For example, at the time the *History of Nevada County* was published in 1880, he was a member of the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church in Grass Valley, and an officer of the A.M.E. Church in Nevada City.¹⁸ He was among the many Nevada City adults-white and black-who studied music with Nevada City's music impresario Dennis Drummond Carter.¹⁹ In 1880 Preston is listed as a private in Company C of the Nevada Light Guard when they defeated the Sacramento City Guard in a target-shooting contest held in Nevada City.²⁰ He was often selected to serve in the county's trial jury pool.²¹

Preston Alexander was also actively engaged in the civil rights issues important to African Americans, nationally and locally. He was frequently involved in organizing what are known today as "freedom festivals." These were festivals that celebrated events important to African Americans. Typically festivals were held in both Grass Valley and Nevada City, and involved black and white residents, including many prominent white businessmen, who often got top billing in the promotional materials. For example, in the inaugural celebration of Abraham Lincoln's *Emancipation Proclamation*, in January of 1863 Preston Alexander was one of three "officers of the day." And in the following year he was a member of the "Committee of Arrangements."²²

In the fall of 1869, in anticipation of the ratification of the 15th Amendment, Nevada City's Dennis Drummond Carter canvassed the community to prepare a list of eligible black voters in Nevada County, which was published in the black-owned San Francisco newspaper *The Elevator*. The list included Preston Alexander.²³ On April 12, 1870, Preston Alexander was one of the organizers for Nevada City's first celebration of the passage of the 15th Amendment.²⁴ He exercised that hard-won right to vote by appearing regularly in the County's Great Register.²⁵

On November 22, 1889, at the age of fifty-seven, Preston Alexander died from "paralysis."²⁶ His burial was handled by William C. Groves, who established the Pine Grove Cemetery. His funeral was held at the Methodist Church and was largely attended. In describing the funeral, the *Daily Transcript* reported that: "No citizen could have had a higher tribute paid to his memory than has been accorded on all hands to that of Mr. Alexander."²⁷ He was remembered as a "...straight forward and industrious man of sound sense and was much liked in the community."

¹⁸ Wells, Harry Laurenz. 1880. *History of Nevada County, California: with illustrations descriptive of its scenery, residences, public buildings, fine blocks, and manufactories*. Oakland, CA: Thompson & West. 153-154.

¹⁹ Beasley, 207.

²⁰ *Record-Union* (Sacramento), May 31, 1880, 3

²¹ *Morning Union*, January 28, 1879, 3 and June 24, 1886, 3.

²² *Nevada Journal*, January 14, 1863, 3 and *Pacific Appeal*, January 16, 1864, 4.

²³ *The Elevator*, November 12, 1869, 2.

²⁴ *Morning Union*, April 12, 1870, 2.

²⁵ See for example 1871 in Ancestry.com. California, *Voter Registers, 1865-1898* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry Operations, Inc. 2001.

²⁶ *Morning Union*, November 23, 1889, 3.

²⁷ *Daily Transcript*, November 25, 1889, 3.

²⁸ He was buried in Pine Grove Cemetery, as would be other family members, but their gravesites are unmarked.²⁹

Regrettably, Louisa Alexander's life is not as well documented as her husband's. She died on March 13, 1902 at age sixty-two³⁰. Her obituary reports: "She has always held the esteem of a large circle of friends, who will greatly regret her demise. She was of cheerful disposition, and made friends readily."³¹ The Reverend Josiah Sims, a white and rather controversial minister, conducted her funeral. One aspect of Louisa Alexander's funeral is especially puzzling. Of the seven pallbearers listed in the newspaper announcement, six were white men, several of them prominent businessmen of Nevada City. One, Mark Roberts, was a neighbor on Alexander St., but the connection of the others to Louisa is unknown. The only black pallbearer was Edmund Coleman, who had purchased the home on Alexander St.³²

In May of 1903 the adult Alexander children, the now widowed Amelia, John, and Horatio left Nevada City to reside in San Francisco. John and Horatio later returned, and died in Nevada City in 1923 and 1911, respectively.³³

How will the landmark be protected and maintained? The owners of the property will maintain the landmark.

Bibliography Cite or attach available books, records, articles or other materials pertaining to the proposed landmark:

Books

- Delilah L. Beasley. *The Negro trail blazers of California: a compilation of records from the California archives in the Bancroft Library at the University of California, in Berkeley; and from the diaries, old papers and conversations of old pioneers in the state of California.* Los Angeles, 1919, 153-54.
- Maria E. Brower, *Nevada City.* Arcadia Press, 2005, 56.
- Wells, Harry Laurenz. 1880. *History of Nevada County, California: with illustrations descriptive of its scenery, residences, public buildings, fine blocks, and manufactories.* Oakland, CA, 154.

Articles:

²⁸ *Daily Transcript*, November 23, 1889, 3.

²⁹ William C. Groves, *Burial Records*, November 24, 1889, 145. Searls Historical Library, MM-91-E.

³⁰ *Genealogical Abstracts from Old Mortuary Records Grass Valley-Nevada City, California*, Volume 2 prepared by Capt. John Oldham Chapter of the National Society Daughters of the American Revolution, 16.

³¹ *Daily Transcript*, March 13, 1902, 2 and *Morning Union*, March 14, 1902, 6.

³² *Morning Union*, March 16, 1902, 4. The white pallbearers were "John Werry, head of NC Gas & Electric in 1902, in 1910 the County Recorder; Mark Roberts, neighbor on Alexander St.; Charles E. Ashburn, long-time janitor at the County Court House; J.G. O'Neil (likely John W. O'Neil), newspaperman and one-time assessor and tax appraiser who was appointed to assess the property at the time of the Coleman probate; and T.C. (Tom) Canfield, head of the Nevada City Fire Department, and who ran the Fire Boy's Saloon.

³³ *Morning Union*, May 12, 1903, 5. For John's death at the County Hospital see *Morning Union*, April 13, 1923, 5. For Horatio's death see the *Morning Union*, May 27, 1911, 6. Horatio lived in Oakland for a number of years, and returned to Nevada City shortly before he died, also at the County Hospital.

- "Charles Graham to Build Bungalow on Alexander St.," *Morning Union*, July 31, 1928, 4.
- Articles concerning estate of Edmund Coleman: *Monterey Daily Cypress and Monterey American* (Monterey, CA). September 22, 1910, 4; May 5, 1911, 4; May 14, 1911; and January 24, 1912, 4.
- About the Alexander children moving to San Francisco. *Morning Union*, May 12, 1903, 5.
- "Rashe Preston (Horatio Alexander) is Victim of Dropsy," *Morning Union*, May 27, 1911, 6.
- "Aged Colored Man (John Preston Alexander), Life Resident, Dies at County Hospital," *Morning Union*, April 13, 1923, 5.
- "Died This Morning, Mrs. Preston Alexander Passed Away About Nine O'clock," *Daily Transcript*, March 13, 1902, 3.
- "Mrs. Preston Alexander Dead," *Morning Union*, March 14, 1902, 6.
- Concerning Louisa Alexander's pallbearers, *Morning Union*, March 16, 1902, 2.

Historical or civil records: (e.g., ownership, assessments etc.):

- 1867 Nevada City Assessment Roll, volume B, 3. (Searls Historical Library)
- Pierce, Bosquit Abstract & Title Co., *Abstract of Title to Lot 21 in Block 9 in the City of Nevada*. (Courtesy of Louise and David Beesley)
- H.S. Bradley, *Official Map of Nevada City*, 1869.

Other: (e.g. photographs, prints or drawings. Please list and attach separately)

- Advertisement for Preston Alexander's billposting (Foley Library) and photograph of Preston Alexander, (PIC 6-Craig 145, Searls Historical Library)
- Photograph of Horatio Alexander, also known as Rashe" Preston (POR 2-A78, Searls Historical Library)


 Applicant's signature

8-4-2020
 Date

On behalf of the Board of Directors, Nevada County Historical Society

This completed form and all related documents shall be sent to the:

Nevada County Historical Landmarks Commission
 Attention: Chairman
 P. O. Box 1014, Nevada City, Cal. 95959

An application must be considered solely on its historic or architectural merits and not for commercial gain, political benefits, or other non-historical reasons.
 An individual Commissioner can advise and counsel an applicant, but all applications must be considered by the full Commission, meeting in regular session.