

REFLECTION ACTIVITY: ALLEN LIGHT'S FREEDOM PAPERS

The Mexican Republic abolished slavery in 1829, when California was under its control, but the United States didn't abolish it until 1865. Between 1848, when the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed, effectively putting California under American control, and 1865, when slavery was officially abolished in the United States, California was known as a "free state," a complex, sometimes

contradictory categorization that didn't always protect the rights of African Americans and Afro-Latinos. During this period of history, legally free African Americans were required to carry Certificates of Freedom, or "freedom papers." Another version that was allowed were "sailor protection papers," and that is what Allen Light acquired in 1827. Complete this reflection activity to learn more about the journey of these important documents, and put yourselves in the place of the people who handled them.

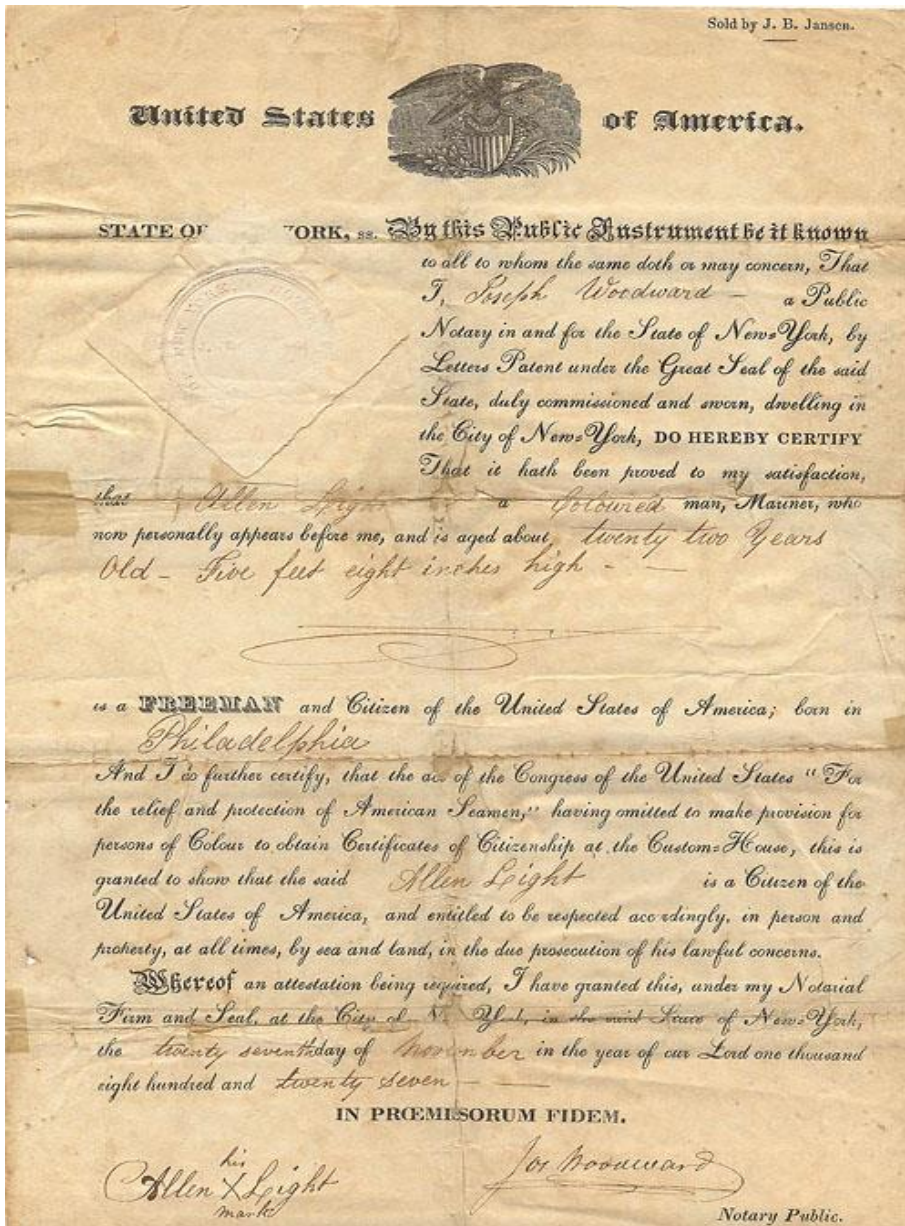


Photo courtesy of the San Diego History Center. To see another example of these historic documents, see [Joseph Trammell's Freedom Papers](#).

Over 70 years ago, in 1948, workers discovered two papers about a Black man, Allen Light, hidden in the walls of the Casa de Machado y Silvas adobe, a home built by a Californio family with strong roots in the Old Town San Diego community. In 1847, Allen Light lived next door to them with another free Black man, Richard Freeman. One of the documents found was a “freedom paper” or a “protection paper” that allowed Light to identify himself as a free Black man, while he worked hunting sea otters off the coasts of California in the 1830s. Light was famous for his expert marksmanship, hitting the otters in the head so the maximum amount of the animals’ pelts could be traded for profit. He became a Mexican citizen in 1839 and the Governor appointed him to patrol and protect the California coastline against illegal hunting. The other hidden document was the official document from the Mexican government appointing him to guard the coastline.

At a time when slavery was still happening and the rights and freedom of Black people were uncertain and under constant threat, Allen Light’s life was a rare and exceptional case of a Black man free to live and work as he pleased. By the fall of 1842, Light and his hunting companions arrived in San Diego, a popular place for hunters to sell their furs and buy supplies. Perhaps this is why he eventually decided to settle in the house in Old Town with Richard Freeman 5 years later. When the workers discovered Light’s papers in 1948, the house had become the Old San Diego Community Church. Over the years, from the late-1840s to the mid-1900s, the house had been a saloon, pool hall, and bowling alley, a rooming house, restaurant, and art studio. The documents were passed to Lillian Hummer, a church board member. Not knowing their historic importance, but wanting to keep a good record for the church, she filed them away. In 1967, the building had become a part of Old Town San Diego State Historic Park, so Mrs. Hummer moved the documents to her home until 1972 when she eventually turned them over to the Serra Museum’s librarian, Sylvia Arden. After being moved, passed to various people, and hidden from public view, the Allen Light papers are now on display at the San Diego Historical Society’s Research Archives.

Reflection Activity: Put yourself in the shoes of Allen Light, the workers who discovered the papers in the walls, Lillian Hummer, or Sylvia Arden. For the person you choose, write your answers out in a letter, a short scene from a play, a short story, or a journal entry.

- Imagine how Allen Light would describe his adventures, settled in his San Diegan home with his friend Richard Freeman, to his friends and family back in Philadelphia. How would he explain his Mexican citizenship? Why do you think he left his home? And why did he hide his papers in the walls of his neighbor's home? Do you think Light felt the papers were safer with the Machado Silvas family, due to their Californio heritage?
- What would the conversation of the workers who discovered the papers be on their lunch break? Who would they think Allen Light was, not knowing anything else other than what the documents seemed to suggest? How would they describe the discovery to their families or friends that night over dinner?
- Why did Lillian Hummer file the Light papers away? Was she trying to protect them? Who did she think Allen Light was? Why did she eventually turn them over to Sylvia Arden? What changed from 1948 to 1972?
- Imagine you are Sylvia Arden, receiving the phone call or letter from Lillian Hummer about the Light papers. What questions do you ask about the documents? As a librarian, are you frustrated that Mrs. Hummer held onto the documents for so long without letting a museum or historian know, or relieved that the documents are safe and excited to take a look at them yourself? Who did she think Allen Light was?

