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MERIAM MEGAPHONE

a newsletter from the Meriam Library at California State University, Chico

IRMA WILLIAMS

PIONEERING EDUCATION AND CHANGE AS CHICO STATE'S FIRST BLACK STUDENT



By Ryan Browar, Archivist

Meriam Library Special Collections and University Archives

California State University, Chico

In the heart of Northern California, where the pioneering spirit runs deep, Irma Williams forged a path that would inspire generations. As Chico State's first Black student, she carried forward a legacy of resilience, determination, and a deep commitment to education—values passed down from her grandfather, Alvin Aaron Coffey, a man born into slavery who defied the odds to free his family and build a future in California.

A Legacy of Strength and Education

Irma Williams' roots trace back to an extraordinary lineage. Her grandfather, Alvin Aaron Coffey (1822-1902), was enslaved in Kentucky and later brought to California during the Gold Rush. Though he was initially unable to secure his freedom, he worked tirelessly in the gold fields, earning enough to buy not only his own freedom but also that of his family. With their newfound independence, the Coffeys settled in Shasta County, where Alvin opened a school for Black and Indigenous children. Soon after, the Coffeys homesteaded a plot of land in Red Bluff, where Alvin joined the Society of California Pioneers as their only Black member.

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