

**A Journey of Hope And Service:
The Life of
SARAH MASSEY OVERTON**

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Dedication

This essay is dedicated to three twentieth century African American pioneers, Sydney Jones, Leanna Jones and their daughter, Rebecca.

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to acknowledge the many African Americans living in San Jose, California who made this publication a reality. Many members and friends of the Antioch Baptist Church provided vivid memories of their childhood and life in San Jose as viewed through the eyes and hearts of African Americans.

A special acknowledgment to Clyde Arbuckle, a mentor and who willingly opened his home, heart, mind and many records of African Americans to the author. A gifted historian who has been an inspiration to many who live in Santa Clara County.

This essay would not have been possible without my husband, John who often worried about my health and well-being while I balanced my personal life and this research project.

Table of Contents

Dedication	Page Number i
Acknowledgments	ii
Introduction	1
Near Midnight	3
Dawn	4
Morning	6
Noon	8
Afternoon	10
Evening	12
Midnight	14
Bibliography	

Introduction

This is a story about the journey of Sarah Massey Overton. An African American woman born during the nineteenth century. Her arrival in San Jose would not only make a difference for the residents of San Jose but also for everyone who lived in the beautiful state of California.

Ida Beasley in her nineteenth century formidable work, *The Negro Trailblazers of California* describe in vivid detail the lives of Californians of African Ancestry. She documents the many faces, institutions, and organizations of this period. Her book describes and chronicles the political organizations, churches, newspapers, military participation, individuals, families, occupations, and educational institutions that were in existence at the time. She spent numerous hours, months, and years interviewing individuals, reviewing newspaper articles, government documents, diaries, and church records in order to provide us with a glimpse of the life of the African American living in California prior to the twentieth century.

We meet Sarah Massey Overton in her book, a woman of courage and faith. A proud, caring, knowledgeable and respected woman. A lady who was not content to be the wife of Jacob Overton, mother and caregiver to her children, Harriet and Charles, but a woman of strength and substance. Was she typical of an African American woman of her time?

A woman who worked in her church, yet was able to balance her life with her husband, family, church, work, and service. Sarah Massey Overton volunteered her service to the San Jose and African American communities of California.

Sarah Massey Overton was an African American California trailblazer, a beacon, a nineteenth century explorer, and aurora during many of the stormy times in early California.

Near Midnight

Lift up your eyes upon this day breaking for you. Give Birth again to the Dream.
Maya Angelou

Sarah Overton San Jose, California
August 24, 1914

Wife of Jacob Overton
Mother of Harriet Belle Overton
Charles Overton, Son
Brother John Massey of Oakland, California
Brother Henry Van Ness of Rockville, Connecticut

Aged 64 Years, 4 months, 9 days
lived at 456 South Eighth Street
San Jose, California

Services: 1:45 p.m. at the home listed above
Christ's Episcopal Church
4th and William Streets
Services at Oak Hill Cemetery
Please omit flowers

San Jose Mercury News
August 24 and August 25, 1914

Dawn

Sarah Massey was born in Lennox, Massachusetts around 1850. Her father Francis Massey was born in Virginia and moved the family which included her mother Harriet Massey, her two brothers John Massey and Henry Van Ness to the west. The reason her family moved to California is unclear. They arrived in California and originally lived in Watsonville and then later settled in San Jose.

The Massey family had a high respect for education. It was during this period that women did not attend school on a daily basis in California. We find this young woman attending a popular boarding school for African American children. She attended the Phoenixian Institute which was a private school and had students from throughout California.

This boarding school was a vital part of the Trinity Episcopal church located at Fourth and William Streets. The Headmaster of the school was a prominent African American leader of the church, Reverend Peter Williams Cassey. This was a very unique school in that children from as far north as San Francisco and Oakland lived and attend this school for an outstanding religious and secular education.

Sarah Massey would attend Trinity Episcopal Church as a small child along with her parents. She would later return to the church offering hours of volunteer service to what would become her family church. She have a lifetime mission, her work at the church, and in the community. Her beginning was fresh, cloudless, and the sun was coming up in her life. It was going to be a beautiful and remarkable day.

Morning

A young man by the name of Jacob Overton would come to California from Kentucky and settle in San Jose. He was not a very tall man he was approximately 5'6 3/4" but interested in a beautiful, bright, knowledgeable young woman who would become his future wife. He, too, would attend Trinity Episcopal Church and would be baptized and confirmed in 1867. Jacob Overton was approximately sixteen years old when confirmed and would later meet his wife, Sarah Massey.

Sarah Massey was busy attending school, assisting her parents in the home, and preparing to become the future bride of Jacob Overton. They would marry and continue to live in San Jose.

To be fortunate enough to attend the Phoenixian Institute meant that Sarah Massey could meet children like herself who would spend their time in school focusing on reading, writing, mathematics, and religion. Reverend Peter Williams Cassey an active church member and leader of Trinity Church would provide her with much wisdom about religion and people of the community. She would be taught by an extremely capable, bright and intellectual man.

As the sun would rise on her life, Sarah Massey was fortunate to have church, family, friends, and knowledge. She was being exposed to the great minds in her church and the community.

The dawn of her life had begun in Massachusetts but as the sun would rise she would find herself in San Jose with much hope and a sense of belonging to her church and family. A morning filled with light, very little wind, clear, no storms or rain, yet one which was bright and filled with hope and promise.

Noon

Sarah Massey was attending Trinity Church and met Jacob Overton was to become her future husband. This young man did not sit tall in the saddle but he had brown hair, brown eyes, no visible marks and he chose her as his bride. He would work initially as porter, then a gardener, and finally as a caterer in San Jose.

Jacob Overton was baptized March 1, 1867 by Reverend Ebenezer Steele Peake, the rector at Trinity Church. This same church leader would marry Jacob and Sarah on December 30, 1869 at Trinity Church.

A marriage of two early California trailblazers that would become one of sheer joy. A new period of Sarah Massey's life would continue to unfold. She had prepared herself intellectually and would marry a man who would become a leader in San Jose. Jacob Overton worked for the Knox family and Sarah did not work outside the home but began to be involved in active service to her church and San Jose community. Her service during the early years had been to her family (parents and brothers) and during marriage would be to her church.

It is noon in the life of Sarah Massey Overton. The sun is at the highest point in the sky. This part of her life is a period of adventure and

preparation. The adventure of not knowing what is around each corner nor what lies ahead on her road of life. She has prepared herself with her schooling and knowledge of homemaking. Always ready for new situations that will come to her as the sun is at its high point.

Noon in many cultures is the period of reflection and exploration. It is a time to look back and yet move forward into unexplored territory and new terrain.

Afternoon

Sarah Massey Overton's life was filled with love, hope, and faith. She had love for her husband Jacob and her two children. She had a daughter Harriet Belle Overton who was baptized on December 25, 1870 at Trinity Church by the Rector Reverend McGorley. She would have a second child, Charles Henry who was born the following year on April 21, 1872. He would be baptized by Reverend George W. Foote on April 21, 1872. Reverend Peter Williams Cassey would be a witness to the baptism of her only son.

It was without a doubt a happy period for Sarah Massey Overton. She had married, had two children, and lived in a comfortable home in San Jose. A woman surrounded by the love and warmth of her husband and two small children.

Life in San Jose would become more active for Sarah during marriage she became a member of the Political Equality Club of San Jose, the San Jose Suffrage Amendment League and the Victoria Earle Matthews Club. A devoted worker to her church, family and now she had extended her life to include the San Jose community.

Sarah Massey Overton would continue to explore untravelled territory into the evening of her life. The afternoon had been cool and the weather mild. The sun was beginning to set yet, she still had much to accomplish in her life. There was much work that needed to be done before sunset. Her life had been glowing and bright as the sun. She had would be involved in new areas and meet new and different challenges for women and especially African American women in San Jose. The sun was about to set and soon it would be evening. There was still much work to be done.

EVENING

The twilight years of Sarah Massey Overton continued to be filled with hope, faith, love and service. Her hope for African Americans in California, faith in her church, love for her family, and service to the San Jose and California communities. Imagine an African American woman who assisted her husband in his early catering business, a busy family and church life, and still provided service to others in her community.

During an earlier period in her life she had become politically active in areas of voting rights and the concerns of young women who were "endangered" and at risk of opportunists who would bring harm and destruction. Her work for young women who came to California would continue for many years.

Sarah Massey Overton would serve as vice-president of the Victoria Earle Matthews Club and second vice-president of a Suffrage Amendment League, and a member of the Political Equality Club. She was just not a single member but held offices in several of these organizations and provided leadership and intellectual stimulation to several important causes to African Americans at the time.

The sun has set and the evening brings dampness, darkness, and quiet. Sarah Massey Overton has seen the billowy white clouds, felt the warmth of the sun and the gentle breeze of the wind. The sun has changed colors from shades of bright yellow to deep oranges and would then disappear on the horizon. The moon will rise and fill the dark sky soon and it, too, will have a pivotal role in her life.

Midnight

The hush of midnight is quiet, still, and very clear. Sarah Massey Overton will begin still another long journey.

Her first journey had meandering paths as well as crooked roads. Her life that began sixty-four years prior would come to an end. The young girl who had an opportunity to attend the private boarding school had briefly returned to fight for education in California. She had used her own money to travel the state and speak to legislators and all who would listen to her on the importance of the rights for children of African ancestry to attend public schools.

Sarah Severance wrote an excellent letter in tribute to Sarah Massey Overton. She stated that, "she was a distinguished citizen of that city and one of the distinguished women of her race in California."

Sarah Massey Overton, California trailblazer, wife, mother, and distinguished Californian would enter the darkness of death. An earlier journey would be filled with service, hope, faith, and love. The midnight of her life would be filled with peace and love surrounded by her family and friends at Oak Hill Memorial Park in San Jose, California. A final journey for a woman who made a difference.

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