

PETER WILLIAMS CASSEY:
The Man and His Mission

Deborah LeFalle
1068 Pine Avenue
San Jose, California 95125
(408) 265-5773

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I. INTRODUCTION

Little is known and less is written about Peter Williams Cassey, a free Black man who came to California from the east coast during the Gold Rush days. Cassey was a man with a mission. Coming from an educated family background and a religious upbringing, at the young age of 22 he arrived in the Bay Area with hopes of contributing to improving the livelihoods of Black Californians. It was 1853 and while the territory of California was considered progressive even then, slavery in the southern states was still commonplace, making it difficult for Blacks to be accepted as equal citizens.

Cassey accomplished his mission by carrying out philanthropic work, ministering to those in need, and insisting on the equal treatment of Black people. His most noted accomplishment occurred when he answered the plea of Black families to open a school for their children so that they too could receive a quality education for future success in life.

In his lifetime, Peter Williams Cassey was a barber, clergyman, teacher, philanthropist, and equal rights activist. This essay chronicles his life and discusses the impact of his presence in the early shaping of San Jose.

II. SOURCES AND PERSONS CONSULTED

I first got the idea to write an essay on Peter Williams Cassey from reading a book entitled, The Negro Trailblazers of California by Delilah Beasley. In her book, the author makes reference to Cassey several times. Discovering that he lived in San Jose for almost ten years and in California for almost twenty, sparked my interest to uncover more information about this seemingly dedicated man.

My search for literature led me to several places. First, I visited the California History Center at De Anza College in Cupertino. There I encountered a kind librarian who retrieved several old newspaper clippings for me. These provided me with a foundation for further research.

My next stop was the San Jose Historical Museum. Here, I lucked upon a gold mine. I was given a publication entitled Black Americans in Santa Clara Valley to peruse. Published through a special project, with assistance from Lockheed Missiles & Space, the book was compiled under the auspices of the Garden City Women's Club, a respected organization of influential Black women in San Jose. From there I traveled downtown to the Martin Luther King, Jr. Library's California Room. One book in their collection, Seventy-Five Years in the Life of Trinity (church where Cassey was ordained), which I thought might be helpful,

proved to be unfruitful. A trip to the Trinity Cathedral at St. John & Second Streets also was to no avail..... I unfortunately could not make contact with the church historian in ample time for the submission of this paper by May 1, 1992.

With the information I was able to gather, I have read and digested it, synthesized it, and presented it in my own words on the following pages for your enlightenment and reading pleasure. ENJOY!

Much thanks and appreciation to Nancy Martin, an archive volunteer at the San Jose Historical Museum, and Lisa Christiansen, librarian at the California History Center. They both were very patient and helpful to me in my quest to learn about PETER WILLIAMS CASSEY, a true California pioneer.

III. P. W. CASSEY'S FAMILY ROOTS

Archival research indicates that Peter Williams Cassey's family history is documented back to 1752. Religion was a major influence throughout the family's lineage. Cassey's grandfather, the Reverend Peter Williams, who was ordained as a minister in 1820, founded the St. Philip's Episcopal Church in New York. He also engaged in philanthropic deeds to contribute to the betterment of Black people who had fled to urban areas in the north in search of freedom.

Cassey was born to his parents, Amy Matilda Williams and Joseph Cassey, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on October 13, 1831. His parents had married in 1829. Joseph Cassey was known to be a slave abolitionist and anti-colonizationist. It is said that the Cassey side of the family was quite wealthy and held prominence in the Philadelphia community.

Cassey learned the trade of barbering at a young age. He would also go on later to be trained as a minister and a teacher. It is believed, however, that it was through his work as a barber that first exposed him to the idea of heading out west. By listening to the many conversations among the local men who frequented the barber shop where he worked, Cassey perhaps learned here of the opportunities that awaited the curious in California.

Cassey came to San Francisco in 1853; but soon thereafter

moved to San Jose. Records of the Trinity Church of San Jose show Peter Williams Cassey as a charter member in 1863, the year the church first opened. Baptisms for Amy Henrietta Cassey and Emma Louisa Cassey occurred some time between 1861-1864, and 1864-1866, respectively. As Cassey is not a common surname, it is assumed that these women (or girls) were in some way related to Peter Williams. None of the literature I read made any reference to marriage, so it is hard to say whether either of them were his wife or daughter, or even if he ever did wed.

Cassey lived until the age of 86. He lived a full life, contributing much, and asking for little in return along the way. The city of San Jose is fortunate to have this visionary pioneer amid its rich past. For this, we all can be grateful.

IV. HIS EARLY YEARS

Peter Williams Cassey was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on October 13, 1831. Andrew Jackson was President at the time, and the establishment of non-native settlements in the west was in full swing. A conscious movement to abolish slavery had also been initiated.

Cassey was raised and educated in Philadelphia. He learned the barber's trade early on, as did a significant number of other Black men of his day. Many Black families had fled from the south to northern cities during the 18th and early 19th centuries in hopes of finding a better life. While they were "free", oppression still existed and the service industry for most was their primary source of employment.

Cassey learned of the opportunities in California and envisioned the possibilities that could be opened up for Blacks. In 1853 he decided to move to San Francisco to help lay the groundwork for Black people to prosper in this unfamiliar land.

V. THE MOVE WESTWARD

When Cassey arrived in California in 1853, he first settled in San Francisco. It was at a time when jobs were not accessible to Blacks in numbers, so he turned to earning his wages at something he knew well -- barbering.

With his mission in his mind, Cassey united with an organization called the Convention of Colored Citizens of California. One of their primary purposes was to serve as advocates for the rights of Black people. They did this by being the "eyes, ears and mouth" for the Black community. Reports of adverse legislation and acts of cruelty or discrimination would be passed along in a special code (from barber shop to barber shop). Because most of the barbers in the state at the time were Black, this proved to be an effective means of communication.

Remaining deeply rooted in religion, Cassey joined the Christ Episcopal Church (for coloreds) in San Francisco, and became rector there. But in response to the beckoning calls of Black residents of Santa Clara County, whose population numbered 87 in 1860, Cassey moved down to San Jose. Because Black children were prohibited from attending public schools until after the Civil War, Cassey opened a private boarding school in 1861. He named it St. Philip's Mission School.

VI. HIS IMPACT IN SAN JOSE

St. Philip's Mission School opened in 1861 in Downtown San Jose. The financial backing for its beginnings came from the Trinity Episcopal Church (to which Cassey by now had established ties), the Convention of Colored Citizens of California, a fundraiser organized by a teacher, Mr. Higgins, from the "White" school, and Cassey's own resources. During its ten years of existence, it operated out of several different sites and was apparently renamed to the Phoenixonia Institute. The school offered training in English and music. Its students were primarily from the San Jose region, but because it was the first school of its kind on the west coast, it attracted students from other parts of the state and out-of-state as well. A particularly large following came from San Francisco due to Cassey's credibility established since his arrival to that city in 1853. Tuition for attendance at the school was \$16-\$20 for a four-week term. This operating revenue received from tuition was supplemented by ongoing contributions from the Convention of Colored Citizens of California.

Eighteen-hundred-sixty-one was also the year that Trinity Episcopal Church organized and opened its doors in San Jose. Under the guidance of Rev. Sylvester Etheridge, Cassey became one of the charter members. Five years later on September 13,

1866, Cassey became the first Black person to be ordained a deacon of the Episcopal Church. Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, as it is called today, still stands at the corner of Second and St. John Streets and is designated as a historical landmark.

In addition to administering the Phoenixonia Institute, Rev. Cassey established St. Philip's Mission, a Sunday School for Black children which was conducted out of the Phoenixonia Institute building, and a church, Christ Episcopal Church, where Black people could comfortably worship in San Jose.

The Phoenixonia Insitute or St. Philip's Mission School was ultimately forced to close due to legislation passed in 1866 which permitted Blacks to attend their own publicly supported schools. The San Jose Board of Education opened a "colored school" to which Rev. Cassey (it appears) was named its principal. Students from Phoenixonia were matriculated into this new school. Eventually, publicly supported schools for Blacks became part of school systems up and down the state.

By 1870 the Black population in Santa Clara County had increased to 173. Of this total, 117 lived in San Jose, eighteen lived in Santa Clara and the remainder lived in developing towns and outlying rural areas. This was the first year that Blacks voted in San Jose without any challenge.

About this time Cassey's interest in local affairs began to shift back to San Francisco. He organized a group of people there in 1872 he called the Christ Church Mission for Colored People. In 1881, Rev. Cassey decided to leave California to

carry on similar work in North Carolina.

VII. HIS LATER YEARS

Rev. Cassey, now 50 years old, was appointed to serve as rector at St. Cyprian's Church in New Bern, North Carolina. Unfortunately, his work he had started in California ended with his departure to go south.

In 1894, the reverend relocated once again to Fernandina, Florida to take up pastoring the Church of the Good Shepherd in that city. But his calling was not over. His last assignment was at St. Cyprian's Church in St. Augustine, Florida. He moved here in 1900 and spent the next fifteen years serving this congregation. Two years later, the Rev. Peter Williams Cassey passed away in 1917 at the age of 86.

Cassey was honored as recently as 1978 by the Trinity Episcopal Church (Trinity Episcopal Cathedral) for giving of himself so unselfishly to the San Jose community.

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