

## The Rev. Peter Williams Cassey



Few people are aware that in the 1860's and 1870's there was in San Jose an Episcopal mission school for black children, known as St. Philip's, and closely allied with Trinity Church. The guiding light of the mission was the Rev. Peter Williams Cassey. Without Mr. Cassey, St. Philip's might not have existed, and a piece of San Jose's history would not have been written.

Among the immigrants arriving in California in 1853 was a young black man of twenty-two, well educated and determined to succeed in whatever work he chose. Peter Williams Cassey arrived in San Jose at a time when a number of men

turned to teaching and by 1860, he had established himself and undertaken the teaching of black children who did not have the opportunity of attending public schools.

Peter Williams Cassey was born on the 13th of October, 1831, into the prominent, well-to-do Cassey family of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. His grandfather was the Rev. Peter Williams, the founder of St. Philip's Church, New York, and a leading philanthropist of his day. Coming from a family of this background, Peter Cassey was well fitted to teach and in December of 1862, he formally organized a school which was named St. Philip's Mission School, connected with the Episcopal Diocese of California, and under the wing of the infant Trinity Church which had been organized on 22 February, 1862.

Devotion to the Church and to his people, established the future course of Peter's life. He was confirmed at Trinity on the 26th of April 1863 by William Ingraham Kip, the first Anglican Bishop of California. Peter and his wife, Anna B., were members of Trinity Parish, and parish registers show the baptisms of two daughters: Amy Henrietta, 12 April, 1863, and Emma Louise (adopted), 26 November, 1864.

Located on Fourth Street in 1870, St. Philip's Mission School was also home for the Cassey's. The school was apparently a combination boarding and day school, and over the ten years that followed its organization "more than two hundred pupils attended."

Peter's energy and devotion to the school and to Trinity were noteworthy, for during the first year of the rectorship of the Rev. Ebenezer Steele Peake, arrangements were underway to have Peter

ordained to the diaconate. The Vestry Minutes of Trinity, 30 June 1866, state that the Bishop was to be requested to set the date for the ordination. Peter's elevation as a Deacon of the Episcopal Church was conducted by Bishop Kip on the 13th of August, 1866 and was the first instance of this ceremony at Trinity.

The Rev. Peter Williams Cassey was destined to remain a deacon throughout his life. He was never raised to the Priesthood, but received the designation of Perpetual Deacon and, in his later churches, he held the title of Rector.

Even with the dynamic spirit of Peter Cassey, St. Philip's Mission School unfortunately could not hold its own. The twin problems of finances and a relatively transient congregation proved too much. Peter began ministering to people in San Francisco in the early 1870's. He divided his time between St. Philip's and the small mission known as Christ Mission, San Francisco.

According to Trinity's Parish List, Peter "removed to San Francisco in 1871." He may have transferred his parish membership, but as of September 1875, his wife was in residence in San Jose. Annie Cassey died in San Jose on the 3rd of September 1875, and was buried from Trinity, at Oak Hill.

## Epilogue

In 1881, the Rev. Peter Williams Cassey left the Diocese of California, to answer a call from Bishop Atkinson of North Carolina. Peter was asked "to pastor the first flock of black people organized into a parish in that State." St. Cyprian's Church, New Bern (Berne), N.C., organized in 1866, welcomed Peter as its first priest. After 13 years, the Church of the Good Shepherd at Fernandine, Florida, became Peter's next charge. Later, for a short time, he was rector of St. Philip's in Jacksonville. In 1900, Peter arrived at what was to be his last church, the new St. Cyprian's Church at St. Augustine, Florida. For the next 17 years, Peter continued his vigorous life as Pastor and teacher. In 1917, on the 16th of April, St. Cyprian's lost its rector. Peter died at the age of eighty-six, and the Protestant Episcopal Church of America "lost one of the ablest and most devoted of its clergy."

In Bishop Weed's Memorial Address for Peter, he said of him: "He was a remarkable teacher ... He was broad-minded, an omniverous reader, a clear thinker. His devotion to the Church and his untiring pastoral work brought many into the Church ... A devout servant of the Lord, a Christian, a true and faithful pastor ... The poor and the sick will miss him and the example of his life will lead many to the Cross."

(Footnotes to and Bibliography for the above may be found in the Trinity Parish Office.)

## THE REVEREND PETER WILLIAMS CASSEY

When I was editing the first edition of The Trinity Windows back about 1975, technology was very different from today. The only search engine we had was snail mail and telephone. Our creativity and curiosity were the only limiting factors.

We knew a little about Reverend Peter William Cassey and I couldn't find any pictures of him but I knew from what we had that his last parish was at St. Cyprian's at St. Augustine, Florida. One day at work, I was bored so I picked up the phone, called information and got a phone number for the church. I called and talked to the Church Secretary and asked if she had anything that remembered Peter Cassey. She said that they knew that he played an important part in the history of the Parish so I asked if they might have a picture of him that we could use in our history book. She said that they didn't have one but his granddaughter might. I asked if she might have a phone number for her. She did and I called the granddaughter in Detroit. She was thrilled that we were writing up a history of him and said that she indeed had a picture of him. I asked if she could send me a copy and she readily agreed to do so. When we received it, we were ecstatic and that is the backstory.

Once in a while, it is good to be lucky.

# k h ‡ #  
K - u u ‡ u - # o K  
#  
u # o K  
o