



WEDDINGS OF SANTA CLARA
COUNTY PIONEERS AT TRINITY
CATHEDRAL IN SAN JOSE:
Sarah Massey and Jacob Overton (1869)

SUBJECT HEADINGS

African Americans in San Jose

Sarah Massey Overton (1850-1914)

Jacob Overton (ca.1846-1922)

Rev. Peter Williams Cassey (1831-1917)

Dr. William J. Knox (1820-1867)

Sarah Knox-Goodridge (1825-1903)

Trinity Episcopal Church, San Jose

Edmonia Lewis, artist (ca.1844-1909)

Author: Jean Libby

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Edmonia Lewis Sculptures photographed by Jean Libby in the
California Room of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Library in San Jose,
2014, 2018.

The union of Sarah Massey and Jacob Overton at Trinity Episcopal Church on December 30, 1869 was a promise to build an African American community within the bustling post-Civil War city of San Jose. Their wedding was officiated by Rev. Peter Williams Cassey, ordained a Protestant Episcopal deacon in 1866—the first African American in the West—although the actual sacrament was administered by the parish priest, as mandated in the denomination doctrine.

The couple were of disparate backgrounds: Sarah Massey from a free family in Massachusetts who settled in Watsonville/Gilroy ca. 1857; Jacob Overton brought in slavery as a child from Kentucky to the gold fields of Calaveras County ca. 1853 by a medical doctor who settled there.

Sarah Massey was twelve when her parents brought her from Gilroy to attend St. Philip's School at the onset of the Civil War. The life of civic advancement they made together began with Sarah's enrollment at the secondary school for children of color at the old hospital building on San Carlos Street in 1862. The secondary academy filled the needs of free African American families in San Jose with substantial education in many fields, including music and science. The closest school for black students was in San Francisco, in the basement of St. Cyprian A.M.E. Church, operating from 1854 to 1864.¹ The San Jose School Board began funding the segregated population at St. Philip's Academy, which became the Phoenixonian Institute, with small monthly grants beginning in 1863.

The following description from the *Pacific Appeal* in 1864 is most relevant:

Pacific Appeal, 26 March 1864 , "An Excursion by River and Rail, author: *Cosmopolite*--- I was accompanied by his amiable lady to the **Bascome Institute** kept by Mr. Peter W. Cassey, to see and examine which, was the principal object of my visit. --- The school was founded by Messrs. Smith, White, Langhorne, Cassey [**African American members of Trinity Episcopal Church, excepting Langhorne**] and a few others, who organized an association for that purpose by which the school was mainly sustained, (the tuition fees not being sufficient,) until recently : the county allows Mr. Cassey a salary of fifty dollars per month, the association still paying the rent, and defraying contingent expenses. " --- Mr. Cassey is admirably fitted for a teacher : he is an excellent general scholar, well versed in all the branches taught in a well organized **grammar school**,--- Mrs. Cassey is also well qualified to aid her husband in his labors, --- **San Jose is the place for a high school, or principal educational institution for colored children in this country, if we are ever to have one, and Bascome Institute should be the germ thereof.** --- [Philip A. Bell]

St. Philip's Mission for Negroes was established by Bishop William Ingraham Kip on San Antonio and 4th Streets at the same time, Peter Williams Cassey in charge. The organizers of the school, who continued its growth and function until racial segregation in California public schools ended in 1874, were also First Communicants in the Trinity Episcopal Church, which began meeting in San Jose City Hall in 1861.²

The 1870 San Jose Reversed Directory cites St. Philip's Episcopal Mission at 379–392 San Antonio Street: Rev. P. W. Cassey, missionary in charge; Jacob Overton, Sunday School Superintendent. Phoenixonian Hall (which the Directory calls a hotel) is at the same location.

When San Jose Was Young

A SERIES OF INTERESTING ARTICLES OF AN HISTORICAL NATURE PREPARED
ESPECIALLY FOR THE NEWS BY A WELL KNOWN AUTHOR AND JOURNALIST ³

NO. 302

OLDEST JANITOR IN SAN JOSE

For nearly half a century Jacob Overton has been janitor of the Knox block. As a boy of seven years he came across the plains with Dr. C. T. Overton of Kentucky, medical partner of the late Dr. Knox of San Jose. Dr. Overton practiced medicine in Colfax in the Overton party in crossing the plains was Dr. Caldwell of Santa Clara, father of Dr. "Bob" Caldwell.

When Jacob Overton was a small boy in Kentucky Dr. Overton adopted him and gave him his name. This little colored lad was the play-fellow of Dr. Overton's son. All the way across the plains they wrestled in boyish fashion, but when they were tired of fighting they made peace over a piece of bread and 'lasses.

"Those were great days," said Jacob Overton tenderly, as he recently recalled to me the joys of crossing the plains behind an ox team and wallowing in the sand with his play-fellow.

During the last days of Dr. Knox on a business trip he visited Colfax, where lived Dr. Overton. With Dr. Knox were Mrs. Knox and his daughter, Miss Jennie Knox. Dr. Knox was ill and wanted to come back to San Jose and asked Overton to bring him.

"You'll like it in San Jose," he said. Jacob Overton started with him, but already the doctor was very weak. At the Lick House in San Francisco he died. Jacob Overton brought the remains of Dr. Knox to San Jose. On November 14, 1867, Dr. Knox was buried. The next day Jacob Overton took charge of the Knox block.

"I have never been away since," said Overton. "It was fifty years ago next month I swept the mortar out of the building." Just at that moment Attorney J. C. Black passed with a pleasant word. "Mr. Black is the only man that was here when I came. He was just about the first person to move into the building, he and Judge Payne. The judge is dead. Nearly everybody of that time is dead. It was the best office building in town. In the rooms now occupied by Wallace and Reynolds, the real estate and insurance men, were the offices of Judge Peckham. Levi Goodrich was the architect of this building. He afterwards married Mrs. Knox. The builder of the Knox block was B. P. Graham."

Mrs. Knox-Goodrich, Mr. Overton explained to me, was very good to him. To please him she bought two bronze figures called 'Asleep' and 'Awake' by Miss Edmonia Lewis, the famous colored and Indian sculptress of Boston and Paris. Miss Lewis was exhibiting her work in San Jose. She came here through the influence of J. J. Owen, who was a great friend of the negro. Mrs. Knox-Goodrich paid Miss Lewis \$500 for the bronzes. They are still in the home of Mrs. Knox-Goodrich, which is now owned by her niece, Mrs. Schroeder. Miss Lewis was so pleased with the sale that she gave Overton a fine head of John Brown, which is his greatest treasurer. (sic)

Mr. Overton has two children. One is Hattie Overton, the kindergarten teacher, and the other is Charles Overton, the photographer, who has been for years with Bushnell.

Mrs. Fremont Older (Cora Baggerly Older) the "well-known author and journalist" who wrote the series "When San Jose Was Young" in 1916-1917, is as remarkable in her own right as the subjects of her interviews in the *San Jose Evening News*. Her husband Fremont Older was the editor of the *San Francisco Call* during the period.

Although the historical opinion that he was enslaved is quite certain, the story as presented suggests that Jacob was considered free when the Overton party entered California ca. 1853. This was the manner in which California practiced freedom: if the slaveholder emigrated to California and remained, those enslaved at the time of emigration were free. But, if the slaveholder intended to return to his original slave state, and did so, those enslaved could be returned to slavery with him.⁴ Jacob Overton was his own man when he left Colfax for San Jose at age twenty-one with Dr. William Knox, Mrs. Sarah Knox and their daughter in 1867. The 13th Amendment to the U. S. Constitution was law that slavery was forever abolished.

Emigrants from St. Louis (born in Kentucky and Virginia), Dr. William and Sarah Browning Knox settled in Nevada City in the early 1850s, serving in the California legislature. He made a fortune from the South Yuba Canal, the principal source of water for the gold mines of Nevada County. The system today supplies hydroelectric power for P. G. and E.

The Knox family moved to San Francisco in 1861, then to San Jose in January 1864. Dr. Knox was elected senator from Santa Clara in 1865. The Knox Block, which replaced an elegant adobe on the northwest corner of First and Santa Clara Streets, was constructed in 1866 (demolished in 1945). Dr. Knox entered the banking business with T. Ellard Beans, his brother-in-law, which became the First Bank of San Jose, in 1866.⁵



Historical Atlas Map of Santa Clara County, California. Thompson & West, 1876. Courtesy The California Room, Martin Luther King., Jr. Library, San Jose.

On the fateful trip which Jacob Overton was engaged to drive the family from Colfax to San Jose, the very ill Dr. Knox died at the Lick House in San Francisco on November 13, 1867. Jacob drove the widow and her daughter to their San Jose home on Second Street, Dr. Knox's body to the Oak Hill Cemetery, then to the recently constructed but still empty brick structure and found it in great disorder. As Jacob told Cora Older, he cleared the debris and made it habitable—and rentable: "That was fifty years ago and I have been here ever since."

Sarah Knox (who married architect Levi Goodrich in 1879) was well-known as an advocate for women's rights and suffrage. Her late husband Dr. Knox had initiated a resolution in 1865 to allow women to independently administer property they owned, beneficial immediately to his wife and daughter. Singularly individual, Sarah Knox-Goodrich was the only woman to be featured with a biography and photograph engraving in the History of Santa Clara County published in 1881.⁶

Sarah was not a racial liberal. Although she did reciprocate the care and competence that Jacob Overton exhibited in their journey, her attitude toward African Americans as a group was expressed in terms of "ignorant brutes," males permitted to vote when women were more deserving.⁷ Born in Virginia and raised in Missouri, Sarah Knox was an active member of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, in San Jose. This denomination was formed in opposition to the very liberal Methodist Episcopalians represented by the anti-slavery John Wesley. They participated with the Confederacy in the Civil War.⁸

In 1873 she purchased two sculptures by the African American artist Edmonia Lewis from an exhibition that moved from San Francisco to San Jose, achieving better results for the artist. Jacob remarks that Sarah Knox's support was at his request.⁹ Edmonia Lewis' marble John Brown bust which was his "most prized possession" is not extant. The artist made a number of small busts of the abolitionist; one has made its way into the Smithsonian Institute Collection.¹⁰

The marble bust of Abraham Lincoln by Lewis that is in the California Room with "Asleep" and "Awake" was acquired through public subscription mounted by the *San Jose Mercury* (abolitionist J. J. Owen, publisher) in 1873. There is a collection of literature about the artist and the San Jose exhibition at the location of the sculptures at the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library.¹¹



In 1877 Jacob Overton served on an all-City committee to commemorate the Emancipation Amendment at the Centennial of the American Revolution. There is a permit request for a gunfire salute on the Market Street Plaza at sunrise and sunset on January 1, 1878.

Jacob Overton's civic records always pointed to citizenship. In the census of 1870 in San Jose he was listed twice: once as a servant at the home of Sarah Knox (her report), and with his wife Sarah Massey Overton, their marriage within the year noted. Jacob reported to the census taker in 1870 that his occupation was a porter, a "male citizen of the United States" in the Constitutional Records column. Along with Rev. Peter Williams

Cassey he organized black male voters to register with the passage of the 15th Amendment.¹²

His successful catering business regularly served events of the California Society of Pioneers. Jacob joined the elite group himself, one of two known African American members. In 1912 he was reported in the *San Jose Mercury* as serving on a committee for visiting the sick of the California Pioneers of Santa Clara County, with fellow members Mrs. Virginia Reed Murphy and S. M. Lawrence. He was an agent for the *Pacific Appeal*, an African American newspaper published in San Francisco. Jacob and his son Charles were active in the Prince Hall Masons; the local Grand Lodge formed in California in 1856. They were officers of the San Jose Afro-American League.

Jacob Overton was active in Trinity Episcopal Church throughout his life, and was remembered into the 1990s as an usher by the Pope sisters, a longtime African American family in the congregation.

When Jacob Overton fell from a ladder while doing outside maintenance at his home on April 28, 1922 he was 75 years old: “born in slavery, the aged negro was liberated by the proclamation of emancipation and lived in San Jose most of his life.” He was greatly mourned throughout the City of San Jose.¹³

Sarah and Jacob Overton lived most of their lives at 456/460 S. Eighth Street in San Jose, dividing and adding to the home when their son Charles (born in 1875) married Augusta Hawley. The Overton home was next door to a large Victorian (432 S. Eighth) that was the residence of poet Edwin Markham in 1868 and 1869. **The San Francisco Call, July 25, 1896**



Most of the even-numbered side of the block was acquired by San Jose State University. The Overton home site today is a Child Development Center for the Associated Students at SJSU. The Markham home was preserved, according to a plaque near the sidewalk that was placed there in 1937 by the Edwin Markham Poetry Society. In 2002 the Markham Home was moved to History Park on Senter Road, where it is the Poetry Center for San Jose.

Sarah Overton is known for her strong support in the Political Equality Club, for women’s suffrage, and as a founder of the Garden City Women’s Club in San Jose. Sarah Massey Overton’s obituary at her death August 24, 1914, was written by Sarah Severance, a founder of the Women’s Press Association and activist for women’s suffrage.¹⁴

Her modern chronicler is journalist Loretta Green, a now-retired columnist for the *San Jose Mercury News* who was chosen as Woman of the Year for the 21st Assembly District by Joe Simitian in 2004. The Sarah Massey Overton essay is part of the feature "12 Who Dared" by Tracie Cone.

San Jose Mercury-News July 12, 1998 page 22A

by Loretta Green

SARAH MASSEY OVERTON

Boosting chances for African-Americans

Though many African-American women managed notable acts in the 19th century, they often toiled outside the notice of the mainstream press and historians.

But Sarah Massey Overton did leave a footprint on the landscape of local history. Overton spoke for the plight of African-American children barred from California public schools — years before *Brown vs. Board of Education* ended school segregation.

When interested citizens planned to open a private school for the excluded students called the Phoenixonian Institute in San Jose, Overton canvassed California and Nevada to raise support.

"Probably through the sentiment she aroused, the California legislators passed a law giving the Negro children the right to attend the public schools," said Overton's 1914 obituary in the *San Jose Mercury Herald*. That law was passed in 1880.

1850-1914

Delilah Beasley described her as "a distinguished citizen of that city and one of the distinguished women of the race in California" in her book, *The Negro Trail Blazers of California*.

Overton was born in Lenox, Mass., the year that the Compromise of 1850 admitted California as the 31st state and forbade slavery in it, and 13 years before Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation declared that her people could not be bought and sold like mules. She traveled with her parents to Gilroy, then to San Jose.

Describing her as a model homemaker for her husband, Jacob, and children, Charles and Harriet, the obituary noted that she was "gifted in household arts," and "cared for all good things such as peace and temperance."

But Sarah Overton apparently recognized the importance of connecting to the system. She was a member of the Political Equality Club of San Jose and traveled the state to interest African-Americans in voting.

Overton was second vice president of the San Jose Suffrage Amendment League and president of the Victoria Earle Matthews Club. Its mission was to "protect imperiled girls from those who prowl for their destruction."

Overton lived when opportunities were limited for the few African-Americans in the Santa Clara Valley. She made the most of those she had.

—Loretta Green

Harriet Massey, Sarah's mother, passed away at age 43 in Gilroy in 1866. She is the first interment of the Massey Family Plot, Section C Block 7, Lot 3 at Oak Hill Memorial Park. She and her husband Francis Massey (died in Watsonville in 1878) were buried from Trinity Episcopal Church. The Masseys were one of six African American families who were founding members of the church in 1861–1863 alongside such community leaders as Thomas Fallon, who had been mayor of San Jose, and overland route pathfinders Moses Schallenger and Samuel J. Hensley. The magnet for inclusion was Peter Williams Cassey, whose grandfather Peter Williams, Jr.(1780-1840) was an ordained Episcopal priest in New York. Rev. Williams was a creator of *Freedom's Journal*, the first published African American periodical in the United States and a prominent abolitionist.¹⁵ He tried to establish a manual labor school in the later style of Booker T. Washington in New York City which was called The Phoenix Academy, no doubt the inspiration of the Phoenixian Institute in San Jose by his grandson Rev. Peter Williams Cassey.

Sarah Massey Overton died on August 24, 1914 and Jacob Overton on April 28, 1922. Sarah's obituary notes that the officiant was Rev. Mitchell, who was pastor of the First AME Zion Church in San Jose; Jacob's burial is in the Trinity Episcopal Church records and his church membership noted in his obituary. Their son Charles Henry Overton (1875-1938) and his wife Augusta Hawley Overton (1871-1940) are in the Massey Family Plot as well. The burials and family were researched by the Garden City Women's Club of San Jose in 1978 for *History of Black Americans in Santa Clara Valley* prepared through Santa Clara Valley Employment & Training Board under CETA, Title VI, June 1, 1977 to September 30, 1978.

Attainment of suffrage in San Jose in 1870 and 1919 is directly attributable to the civic activism of Jacob and Sarah Overton. Their lives and work are examined in two recent works by San Jose African American academic authors: Herbert G. Ruffin II, *Uninvited Neighbors; African Americans in Silicon Valley, 1769-1990* (2014) and Jan Batiste-Adkins, *African Americans in Santa Clara County* (forthcoming 2019 from Arcadia Press).

Endnotes

¹ "Churches and schools," Chap. 7 in Rudolph Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California* (1977:158-185; notes 295-298).

² *The Elevator, 16 August 1867*

Proceeding of the Convention of the Phoenixian Institute: San Jose, July 31, 1867

. The Convention called by the **Phoenixian Institute**, organized December 22, 1862 for the religious, moral and political improvement of the colored people of the State of California,) met, according to announcement, this day, at 12 o'clock m., in the hall of the **Institute**. A. J. White called the house to order. (*many sentences omitted*) Resolved—That we recommend that the people of California be urged to contribute means to purchase the property in San Jose now occupied by said Phoenixian **Institute**. (*many sentences omitted*) Resolved—That our agent be requested to lay all the above subjects before the people, and urge the claims of each. (*many sentences omitted*) After which, it was resolved to **form a joint stock company for the purchase of the school property**. A Committee of three was appointed to prepare certificates and present the stock in a proper manner before the public. It was also resolved that certificates of stock be issued to those who had already donated for that purpose. It was further resolved that the price of stock be twenty dollars per share, payable in installments within one year. Committee on Stock : P. W. Cassey, W. A. Smith, and A. J. White. There being no further business, the Convention adjourned signed: G. W. Smith, S. A. Bristol .

Alfred J. White and Rebecca V. White, Peter W. Cassey and Annie Cassey, Mrs. Reding Speights (Nahomee Judah), G.[eorge] .W.[ashington] and W. A. Smith are all found in the records of Trinity Episcopal Parish published in 1903. *Trinity Church, San Jose, California; Advent, 1860, to Easter, 1903*. Trinity Parish Guild, 1903.

³ [Mrs. Fremont Older] "Oldest Janitor in San Jose," Number 302. "When San Jose Was Young." 1917-10-16.

Transcribed by Jean Libby

The entire series of 340 interviews is published online, scanned by Claire Martin for the Santa Clara County CAGenWeb Project <http://cagenweb.com/santaclara/WSJWY/wsjoy.html>

⁴ A good discussion of this complex history, including California's own Fugitive Slave Laws, is found in Herbert G. Ruffin II, *Uninvited Neighbors; African Americans in Silicon Valley, 1769-1990* (2014:22-29). Prof. Ruffin includes history of Peter Williams Cassey in this section.

⁵ *History of Santa Clara County, California; including the Geography, Geology, Topography, Climatography and Description; together with A Record for the Mexican Grants; Its Mines and Natural Springs, The Early History and Settlements, Compiled from the Most Authentic Sources; The Names of Original Spanish and American Pioneers; Full Legislative History of the County; Separate Histories of Each Township, Showing the Advance in Population and Agriculture. Also Incidents of Public Life; the Mexican War; and Biographical Sketches of Early and Prominent Settlers and Representative Men...Illustrated.* 1881: Alley, Bowen & Co., pages 765-769.

⁶ *Ibid.*, facing page 352. Dr. William Knox's portrait faces page 48.

⁷ *op cite.*, 768.

⁸ The Protestant Episcopal Church also split into North and South during the Civil War. Reconciliation occurred when the destitution of former slaves was so severe that a denominational Freedmen's Bureau was established.

⁹ Linda Larson, "A Short Biography of Sarah Louise Browning Knox-Goodrich Motto 'Equal Rights and Justice for All' typescript in the California Room, Dr. Martin Luther King., Jr. Library, n.d. .

¹⁰ Louis A. DeCaro, Jr. "A Memorial Bust of John Brown/Reception to the Sculptress Miss Edmonia Lewis..." at the Shiloh Presbyterian Church in New in 1878. Posted on John Brown the Abolitionist—A biographer's blog on October 8, 2010. <http://abolitionist-john-brown.blogspot.com/2010/10/memorial-bust-of-john-brown-reception.html>

¹¹ The San Jose Chapter of Links, Inc. honored the sculptor Edmonia Lewis on February 3, 1991. Mary Parks Washington, Art Chair, curated the collection in the California Room.

¹² Herbert Ruffin II, *Uninvited Neighbors; African Americans in Silicon Valley, 1769-1990*: 41-47. The story of the Overtons is in this section, including a photograph from Jacob Overton's catering business.

¹³ Jacob Overton's Death Notice: Evening News 4-28-1922.

¹⁴ "Death of Mrs. Sarah M. Overton is Loss to the Community" *San Jose Mercury Herald* 08-30-1914; Volume LXXXVI, Issue 61, page 5.

"Sarah Massey Overton" by Loretta Green in "12 Who Dared" by Tracie Cone. *San Jose Mercury News* (CA) 12 July 1998 Morning Final, page 1A.

¹⁵ Details of the ancestry of Peter Williams Cassey in Philadelphia and New York are summarized on the web page www.alliesforfreedom.org/stained-glass-windows-Trinity-Episcopal-Cathedral-San-Jose-backstories.html. Author Jean Libby is motivated to develop this history because of experience in the 1960s editing the award-winning *Palo Alto/Stanford NAACP Freedom Journal*. The name was bestowed by branch president Muata Weusi Puryear in honor of the original *Freedom's Journal*.