

(in honor of Black History Month)
Two African-American Pioneers of Shasta County
by
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Jesse Spencer: One of the First Free Black Citizens of Shasta County

The U. S. Federal Census, Schedule 1, "Free Inhabitants", shows Jesse as the only black man listed within city of Shasta, working as a miner, and unable to read or write. Jesse (sometimes listed as James or Jessie) had been born a slave in either Kentucky (as listed in 1860), or in Virginia (as indicated in all subsequent references). Later we will find that Jesse had been freed at age 21, had paid for the freedom of his oldest child, and had gone west to earn the money needed to free his wife and other two children.

In 1863 the the men of Shasta County that were eligible signed up for the Civil War Draft. This occurred over a number of months. In the month of December alone, there were 450 men who signed up. Of that number we find that there were only two black men: Jesse Spencer and a man named Edward Johnson, both miners residing in Churn Town. In the 1870 census we find that Jesse and Edward are living together and mining in Shasta. Both are listed as unmarried.

But what about Jesse's family? I will let the Shasta Courier tell that story (note that there are two somewhat different versions of how Jesse and his family became separated)...

November 13, 1875:

Jesse Spencer is one of our colored citizens. Born in slavery he was, through the kindness of his master, manumitted and became a freedman at the age of twenty-one. But Jesse married a slave girl and here was the source of his trouble. Three children were born of this marriage and the condition of the children following the mother, they were held as slaves. Jesse worked and purchased the freedom of the eldest, and bargained for the freedom of the other two and of his wife. The sum demanded (\$1500) looked like a mountain of money to poor Jesse, and he turned his eyes to California with the same hope of sudden wealth which has lured so many hither. Jesse crossed the plains in 1852, and the year following received a letter from his wife stating she had escaped from the house of bondage, and with her two youngest children had reached that haven of the colored race, the Canadas -- Shortly after receiving the letter Jesse's cabin with its contents were destroyed by fire and the address from which it was written in Canada lost. Nor from that day to this has Jesse been able to find a clue to the whereabouts of his wife or children.

In the more than twenty years of silence which followed the destruction of the letter, a great change has come over the country. The overland journey which Jesse lived through four months to make is now completed in six or seven days. Perhaps, in the hope of meeting the long lost husband and father, the wife or children may have reached the Golden State. If any of them should have made this journey and this item meets their eyes, Jesse can be found at Shasta where any information concerning the long lost ones will be thankfully received. Our exchanges will confer a favor by noticing the case. The former residence of the parties was in Palmyra, Marion Co., Missouri.

December 18, 1875:

FOUND

James Spencer, a colored man, having purchased his freedom from his master, residing in Marion county, Missouri, bargained for the freedom of his wife and children on the payment of \$1500. To make his money, which seemed a vast sum to Jesse, he turned his eyes to the land of gold, and the Autumn of 1852 foun him in California. Soon after this his wife was sold to another master, and Jesse lost all trace of her

whereabouts. Then came the war, and the liberation of all the slaves, but no tidings of the lost ones reached Spencer in his "log cabin home" in the foothills of the Sierras. Letters were written from time to time to different persons but no response came back. Twenty-two years rolled by and Jesse had about abandoned all hope of ever again hearing from his family, when the idea penetrated his head that the newspapers might do some thing for him. Accordingly he came into this office last month and advertised for information in regard to the whereabouts of his family, and the following responses thereto, have made Spencer the happiest colored individual in all the land, and he says he "swar by de Courier from dis out."

"Quincy, Illinois, Dec. 14th, to Jessie Spencer, care of Courier office, Shasta, Cal.
Your wife and children are here--Answer." Eliza J. Spencer

Chicago, Dec. 9th, 1875.

Editor Shasta Courier--I have this moment read an extract from some paper stating that a colored man, Jesse Spencer, had in vain been trying to hear from his wife, Eliza Spencer. Eliza Spencer formerly belonged to my grandfather in Marion county, Missouri. She was a kind and trusted woman. She has visited me in this city, and the last I heard from her was well and also all of her three children.--She has endeavored to find whether her husband Jesse Spencer was still alive, and has frequently written to friends in California to ascertain, but not one word of information has she been able to obtain.

You will do an act of humanity in sending this note to Jesse Spencer, if you know his address and he can write to me, by that time I will learn the address of his wife and children.

Respectfully yours, Thos. E. Patterson, 50 Lake St.

So did Jesse reunite with his family after being separated by so much time, distance, and the institution of slavery? We find happy news in the 1880 census for Shasta: Jesse is still mining, and his wife Eliza is now living with him and working as a cook. But then another separation: in 1884 Eliza is living alone again in Quincy, Illinois, and the Shasta County Directory of 1885 lists Jesse as a laborer still residing in Shasta. But it appears they had a few more years together, as Jesse is found living with Eliza in Quincy in the 1887 and 1891 city directories. By 1894 Eliza is listed as a widow, and the 1900 directory lists her as having joined Jesse in eternity in March of 1899.

Jessie Litle: Respected Black Business Owner of Shasta County



JESSIE LITTLE / REDDING
GOOD FOR / ONE / BATH

Of the well over 200 different trade tokens from businesses in Shasta County used between the 1880's and the 1930's, this is the only one I have been able to identify as being owned by an African American. Jessie (sometimes

spelled Jesse) was born in North Carolina in 1853, and married Elvy (usually listed Elva) there in 1874. By 1896, they were living in Redding along with their four children although the third child, Hattie, died that year at age 15 and was buried in the Redding Cemetery.

May, 1901

ONE-STORY BRICK
Bank of Shasta County Will Build on Market Street

Jesse Litle, the colored shoemaker who occupies the little frame building standing on the lot owned by the Bank of Shasta County on the north-east corner of Market and Butte streets, was notified by the bank officials Wednesday to vacate. The directors of the Bank of Shasta County have decided to erect a one-story brick building on their lot...

Jesse Litle Will Move into the Bell Building

J. H. Yeakey has sold his second-hand store and stock of goods located in the building owned by Mrs. Mary Bell on Market street. The price paid was \$250. Since the Bank of Shasta county notified Mr. Litle that he must find new quarters he has been in a quandary until he succeeded in making the deal with Mr. Yeakey Monday morning. Mr. Litle will remove his whole business including his stock of shoes, barber shop and bath house, into the Bell building about June 1st. The fixtures of the Band Box millinery store are included in the sale. Mr. Yeakey will devote his time in introducing a new patent hammer.

In 1902 there was a new Masonic lodge started in Redding, these are generally referred to as Prince Hall Freemasons:

Colored Organization.

There has been a colored Masonic club of prospective Masons organized in our city and will be set up in the craft in a few days. They have arranged to give a reception to the public on next Friday night, April 11th, in one of the new stores in the Craddock building...

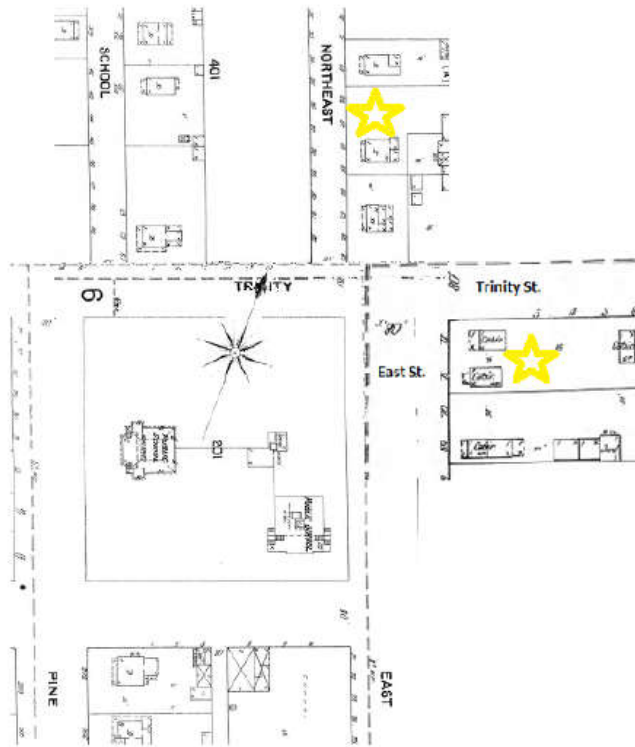
We will find out later that Jessie Litle was an active member of this organization, as were two of his daughters in the corresponding women's organization:

COLORED EASTERN STAR

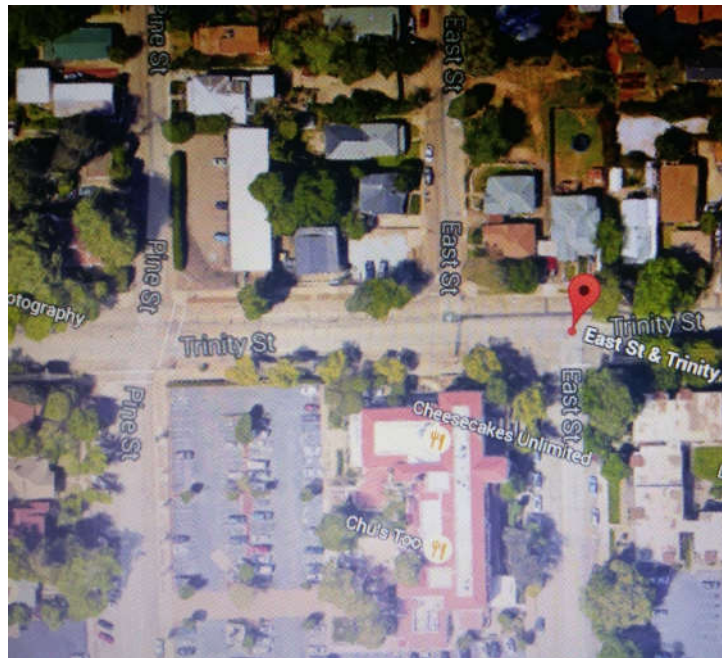
Charter Has Been Received and Officers Elected

The charter of Morning Star Chapter No. 14, Order of Eastern Star (colored), of this city, has been received. The following officers have been elected...Miss Nannie Litle, associate matron; Miss Louise Litle, treasurer...(and 12 others listed)

The 1904 Business Directory tells us that Jessie's son, William C. Litle, followed in his father's business footsteps and is proprietor of the Turf Saloon, located at 412 California Street (unfortunately, there are no known tokens from this business), while residing at the corners of East and Trinity Streets, just a block away from his parents on Northeast Street (now the northern most section of East Street above the Sacramento River) as indicated by the yellow stars below:



Below is this section of Redding today. Notice that what is the northern most section of Pine Street now, was called School Street in 1904:



Elva would pass in May of 1908:

Mrs. Elva Litle, wife of Jesse Litle, the Market-street shoe merchant, died in the family home on East street at 2 o'clock Saturday morning. She had been ill for nearly a year and the nature of the malady was such that death could not be warded off.

Mrs. Litle was born in North Carolina almost forty-eight years ago. She and her husband came to Redding twenty years ago and have always been prominent in the social life of their race. Mr. Litle is a substantial business man and has had the sympathy of the entire community in his affliction...

Jessie wouldn't be 'afflicted' for very long, as he married the widow Mary Jane Clark on June 28, 1909. William Litle would eventually move to Oakland and open up a barber shop on the Army base there, and would be spelling his name with a 'y', as in Lytle, for some reason from the 1920's until his death in 1948. I found this on the 1920 and 1930 census, as well as his 1942 draft card and death certificate.

Jessie passed away on May 3rd of 1917, a well respected member of Redding society:

*JESSE LITTLE IS STROKE'S VICTIM
COLORED COBBLER DIES FOLLOWING THIRD ATTACK OF PARALYSIS*

Jesse Litle, colored, for twenty years a cobbler in Market street, passes away in his North Pine street residence at 7:20 o'clock Thursday morning following his third paralysis stroke.

Litle was born in September, 1853, at Greensboro, North Carolina, and has been a resident of California for 30 years. He was married twice. He was well liked by all who knew him and was an active member of the colored mason lodge in this city.

He is survived by a wife, Mrs. Mary Litle, one daughter and one son -- Mrs. R. F. Johnson of Richmond and William Litle of Oakland, who were at his bedside when the end came...