Frederick Douglass Describes The Life Of A Negro Tailor, 1859
Aptheker, 420-422

A biographical account of Thomas L. Jennings was written by Frederick Douglass when Jennings died, at the age of 68, on February 11, 1859. It is of interest not only because of the specific information which it contains, but also because of the light it throws upon the career of a modest and very useful Negro resident of New York City.

Mr. Jennings was a native of New York, and in his early youth was one of the bold men of color who, in this then slave State, paraded the streets of the metropolis with a banner inscribed with the figure of a black man, and the words, "AM I NOT A MAN AND A BROTHER?" He was one of the colored volunteers who aided in digging trenches on Long Island in the war of 1812. He took a leading part in the celebration of the abolition of slavery in New York in 1827. He was one of the founders of the Wilber force Society. When in 1830 Wm. Lloyd Garrison came on from Baltimore, Mr. Jennings was among the colored men of New York, Wm. Hamilton, Rev. Peter Williams, Thomas Sipkins, and others, who gave him a cordial welcome and God-speed, and subscribed largely to establish the Liberator, and to aid in the publication of "Garrison's Thoughts on Colonization. ..."

He was a leading member of the first, second and third of the National Conventions of colored men of the United States, held in New York and Philadelphia in 1831-4. He was one of the originators of the Legal Rights' Association in New York city, and President thereof at the time of his death. His suit against the Third Avenue Railroad Company for ejecting his daughter from one of its cars on Sabbath day, led to the abolition of caste in cars in four out of the five city railroads. He was one of the founders, and during many years a trustee of the Abyssinian Baptist Church.

In his boyhood, Mr. Jennings served an apprenticeship with one of the most celebrated of the New York tailors. Soon after reaching manhood, he entered business on his own account, and invented a method of renovating garments, for which he obtained letters patent from the United States. Although it was well known that he was a black man of "African descent," these letters recognize him as a "citizen of the United States." This document, in an antique gilded frame, hangs above the bed in which Mr. Jennings breathed his last, and is signed by the historic names of John Quincy Adams and William Wirt, and bears the broad seal of the United States of America. For many years Mr. Jennings conducted a successful business as Clothier, in Nassau and Chatham streets.

Mr. Jennings had a large family, whom he educated carefully and successfully, both in intellectual and moral training. He taught all his children some useful trades, and accustomed them betimes to rely on themselves for their support. His son William died twenty years ago, a successful business man in Boston; Thomas was until lately, one of the most skilful dentists in New Orleans; his daughter Matilda is one of the best dress makers in New York City, and Elizabeth the most learned of our female teachers in the city of New York, having obtained mainly through her own labor, the honor of a diploma from the Board of Education of said city. This is a noble picture of a noble man. Born in a slave state, and of a race held in slavery, living in the midst of all the crushing influences which human prejudice and caste could heap upon him, he yet fulfilled all the purposes of an upright man, a useful citizen, and a devoted Christian; on no occasion in his long life did he bate one hair's breath of the rights and dignities pertaining to his manhood. He upheld society by an active, earnest and blameless life, and by contributing thereto children carefully trained to conduce to the general good. Not gifted with extraordinary talents or endowments, he made full use of such as it had pleased God to give him.

Mr. Jennings was one of that large class of earnest, upright colored men who dwell in our large cities. He was not an exception, but a representative of his class, whose noble sacrifices, and unheralded labors are too little known to the public, even to the real friends of freedom, the class of whom even our honest friend Gerrit Smith has written, that "the mass of them are ignorant and thriftless." It is a strange ignorance which is manifested by the attendance of 25 per cent more of
colored than of white children in the Public Schools of New York City; a strange thriftlessness which shows a smaller proportion of colored than of white persons supported at the Alms-Houses and other charities in New York and Philadelphia. We know that in making such statement, Mr. Smith reluctantly wrote what he believed to be the truth; his view, however, was syllogistic rather than the result of a study of the facts: "while there are a few noble exceptions," said he, "the mass of the blacks are ignorant and thriftless." And he reasoned thus, "the mass of the blacks are poor, and live in the large cities; all poor who crowd large cities are ignorant and thriftless; therefore," &c., &c.

Now the facts happen to be, that, of the free blacks of the free States, a little more than one-third live in the large cities, and the portion who do live in large cities have more wealth (general) and larger intelligence than the proportion who live in the country. We are not defending city dwelling n the part of this class--we state facts. And, in view of them, and while re proudly cast our mite on the cairn of Thomas L. Jennings, we call upon l1e Hon. Gerrit Smith, in the name of our departed brother, to wipe off the stigma which he has cast upon him and his like, by withdrawing, as publicly as he made it, his unfortunate statement in regard to the mass of the lacks.