

Jeremiah B. Sanderson: Educator and Tireless Campaigner for Educational
and Civil Rights of “Colored Citizens” in Early California

by

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“I feel a deep interest in the work in which we are about to engage. When first it was announced that this Convention was to be held, I rejoiced. We are scattered over the State in small numbers; the laws scarcely recognizing us; public sentiment is prejudiced against us; we are misunderstood, and misrepresented; it was needful that we should meet, communicate, and confer with each other upon some plan of representing our interests before the people of California.”¹ (p5 – 1st convention)

Jeremiah Burke Sanderson was born in on August 10, 1821 in New Bedford, Massachusetts.² During his life there, he had ample opportunity to become a spokesperson against slavery and for civil and educational rights for Blacks. Part of the experience of living in New Bedford included seeing Black Americans vote, attend public schools, and being surrounded by the visible anti-slavery work of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, William Lloyd Garrison, and William Nell. An ardent student and reader of literature, philosophy, and history, he became a speaker renowned enough to share the stage with Frederick Douglass.³ Historians write that Sanderson

¹ Proceedings of the Third Annual Convention of the Colored Citizens of the State of California, 1865. Reprinted in Adam S. Esterovich (Ed.), *Proceedings of the First State Convention of the Colored Citizens of the State of California, 1855*, reprint 1969. San Francisco: R & E Research Associates, Inc. This is a book that has pulled together the proceedings of each of the three Annual Conventions of the Colored Citizens of the State of California, held in 1855, 1856, and 1865 (quote on p. 5).

² Family record, copy from the family Bible, in Jeremiah Burke Sanderson Papers, Bancroft Library, Berkeley, CA. Thanks to Rudolph Lapp, who garnered the Sanderson Collection from granddaughter Kate J. Grases. After spending much time with Kate and her family, she allowed Lapp to acquire many (but not all were taken – a fire and looting occurred in the house) personal items and documents – family Bible (from which the family record is taken), newspaper clippings, correspondence with William Nell, letters between him and his wife, and photos.

³ Several books, articles, and collections of oral history describe Sanderson’s life in the Northeast U.S. Included are Rudolph M. Lapp, “Jeremiah B. Sanderson: Early California Negro Leader,” *The Journal of Negro History* 53 (1968); Rudolph M. Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California* (New Haven: Yale University

worked at his occupation as a barber during the week, spoke at churches on Sundays, and spoke throughout the region on the need to abolish slavery.

Sanderson left Boston for California in 1854 aboard the steamer S.S. Sonora, hoping to make and save enough money in the economically burgeoning California to go back home to be with his family.⁴ Sanderson's reputation as an eloquent and passionate speaker for Black civil rights preceded him, and when he first landed in San Francisco he was immediately enlisted to make the leading speech at an anti-slavery event.⁵ From his first arrival in San Francisco, Sanderson both traveled and spent significant amounts of times in various locations throughout the West, fighting for equal civil and educational rights for Blacks, organizing events, opening and teaching in schools, preaching in churches, speaking at events encouraging rights, and writing and publishing documents pushing for rights.

Racial Context of 1850s-1970s California

In 1850 California became a state, officially designating itself as a free, non-slave state. Add to this the economic opportunities offered by the gold rush beginning in 1849, and word of economic and social potential for African Americans led to migration from across the nation. Included were free Blacks who came to California from the Northeastern and Midwestern U.S., and slave owners, whose slaves earned enough money in California to buy their freedom. "Now for the first time there was news from a western region holding material promise for Negroes. The reports of the social fluidity of

Press, 1977); and Sue Bailey Thurman, *Pioneers of Negro Origin in California* (San Francisco: Acme Publishing Company, 1971).

⁴ Letter from J. B. Sanderson to wife Catherine, February 27, 1857, in Sanderson Papers.

⁵ Lapp, 1977, 191, the celebration was of the British Emancipation Act of 1833.

the California frontier environment perhaps suggested racial equality to some blacks.”⁶ And indeed, newspapers and newsletters from the northeast, including the anti-slavery *Liberator*, Frederick Douglass’ *North Star*, and the *New Bedford Mercury* printed reports from Blacks who had become successful in California, and to varying extents urged Blacks to “go West” to California. The *New Bedford Mercury*, for example, “openly advised its black readers to consider California as a place of refuge.”⁷ Fredrick Douglass helped keep Blacks informed of the possibilities in California after 1849, publishing reports in his newspaper the *North Star* of numbers of Blacks finding success in California.⁸

Despite these economic and social freedoms, African Americans were still legally restricted, for example, not being allowed to testify in court. And Black children were not allowed to attend the public schools of the state. Thus, the Black communities had to organize for their own schools, first as self-supported schools and later as publicly funded, state-supported schools. A scant five years after California became a state, the first public schools for Black children began.

Educational Law

California educational law first hinted at segregation with the School Law of 1855, Section 18, which provided school funding based strictly on the number of White students attending a school. This threat of loss of funding based on race was extended in 1860, when schools were prohibited from admitting “Negroes and Mongolians” under threat of losing all funding. By 1864, new school law went further and required that districts had to open separate schools for Negro children, providing there were 10 colored

⁶ Rudolph Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 15.

⁷ *Ibid*, 19.

⁸ *Ibid*, 16-17.

families in a town whose families would submit a written petition requesting it such a school. When a town had fewer than 10 colored children, by 1866 the Revised School Law of 1866, Section 57-59, provided that districts could choose how to educate those children, whether it be in separate schools or in the regular public schools (provided that no white parents make a written objection). After several “separate but equal” types of cases throughout the state, in 1880, Section 1662, legislation required that “schools must be open for the admission of all children.”⁹ After 1880, “blacks never again were mentioned in the school law.”¹⁰

J. B. Sanderson’s Work in Sacramento

After arriving and speaking in San Francisco, J. B. Sanderson’s first stop was in Sacramento. His main work in Sacramento came in the areas of education and civil rights for Blacks in the community and state. As Sacramento had approximately 200 Black children in 1854, a private school, in the teacher’s home, was opened by Miss Elizabeth Scott. When Sanderson arrived in Sacramento, he immediately set out to convince the Sacramento City Board of Education to help publicly fund the “Ungraded School No. 2 – Colored.”¹¹ While the movement toward education for Blacks had already begun, Sanderson used his verbal talents to finalize the public funding of the school. He is considered as the founder of the public school and was its teacher: the school opened in April, 1855, with 28 students. In his diary, Sanderson writes about his

⁹ Charles Wollenberg, *All Deliberate Speed: Segregation and Exclusion in California Schools, 1855-1975*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976), 25.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 25.

¹¹ An excellent, detailed history of the Sacramento Colored School was published in *Golden Notes*, a publication of the Sacramento County Historical Society. Marilyn K. Demas, “Ungraded School No. 2 – Colored: The African American Struggle for Education in Victorian Sacramento,” *Golden Notes*, 45 (1999): nos. 1 and 2.

excitement in opening the school – both his personal excitement and his excitement for how this would help the colored children of Sacramento.

Sacramento, California, April 20, 1855. Today I opened a school for colored children. The necessity for this step is evident. There are thirty or more colored children in Sacramento of proper age to attend school and no school provided for them by the board of education. They must no longer be neglected, left to grow up in ignorance, exposed to all manner of evil influences, with the danger of contracting idle and vicious habits. A School they must have. I am induced to undertake this enterprise by the advice of friends and the solicitation of parents. I can do but little, but with God's blessing I will do what I can.¹²

Despite the success in getting funding for a public colored school, Sanderson felt the need to write personally to the Board of Education of Sacramento, asking them for further funding to help maintain the school (letter dated July 10, 1855). The original funding did not pay for the salary for the teacher. A sample from his letter to the Board shows his passion for the cause.

Gentlemen, you have just been elected the board of education for the City of Sacramento. The parents of the colored children appeal to you; they respectfully and earnestly ask your attention to the school for your children. They ask you to take it under your protection and patronage and to continue such appropriation for its support as in your wisdom and liberality may seem required to make it permanent and efficient for the

¹² J. B. Sanderson's diary is not included in the Sanderson Collection. This letter was reprinted in Delilah Beasley, *Negro Trail Blazers of California* (Los Angeles: Author, 1919).

training of their children's minds, than whom they know none need instruction more than those children that they may become upright and worthy men and women. Respectfully submitted in behalf of the colored parents of Sacramento, California, by the teacher of the colored school. J. B. Sanderson.¹³

His letter was successful, with the Board of Education taking over the funding of the colored school in Sacramento.

To this point, most schools in California did not require their teachers to hold teaching certificates. J. B. Sanderson, though, wrote a second letter to the Sacramento Board of Education, this time asking for permission to take the examination for getting a teaching credential. He took the test and passed, an early example of a teacher of any race getting a teaching credential in California.¹⁴

While working diligently to get the public school created in Sacramento, Sanderson was able to continue his work as a civil rights activist. While serving as the school's teacher in 1855, the "colored community" throughout the state had been planning to organize into a political group in an effort to end the legal restrictions on Black citizens of California. While not a slave state, California still made it illegal for Blacks to be able to testify on their own behalf, to attend school with White children, and to attain dignity within the state. To begin a mobilization to fight for these rights, leaders of the Black communities especially throughout Northern California organized and held the First State Convention of the Colored Citizens of the State of California, on Nov. 20,

¹³ Letter reprinted in Beasley, 174-175. The letter and its implications for the maintenance of the public colored school is also discussed in Demas, 1999.

¹⁴ There is no copy of Sanderson's Sacramento Teaching Certificate in the Sanderson Papers. This information is reported by Beasley, p. 175.

21, and 22, 1855, at the Sacramento colored Methodist Church.¹⁵ J. B. Sanderson was called on to open the convention and was then elected as its first secretary. In further recognition of his reputation in speaking and writing, he was also appointed as one of the members of the State Executive Committee and as one of the members of the Publishing Committee, which had as its charge to “procure the printing of the proceedings of this Convention, in pamphlet form.”¹⁶ The education and eloquence of the delegates to this convention can be seen in part of one of the addresses presented at the 1st convention.

‘Knowledge is power,’ said Bacon, one of England’s wisest sons. The truth of this apothegm, history and common experience abundantly prove. No people have become truly illustrious, great and powerful, who did not make learning the subject of especial attention.¹⁷

In the speeches, addresses, and statements at the conventions, we can see a variety of concerns mixed in, including discussions of slavery, education, dignity, rights, how to address the White community and whether that is different than addressing the Black community.

During the Second Convention of the Colored Citizens of the State of California, held again in Sacramento, Sanderson again served as one of the secretaries to the group. This time, the convention voted to compensate Sanderson \$50 for his preparation of the proceedings of the convention into a published form. Along these same lines, he was appointed as a member of the Committee on Free Press, charged with studying the idea of contributing to the development of Black newspapers throughout the state. The

¹⁵ *Proceedings*.

¹⁶ *Proceedings*, p. 15.

¹⁷ *Proceedings*, p. 24. This address was prepared by delegates J. J. Moore, and T. M. D. Ward, of San Francisco. Ward was a long-time family friend of the Sanderson’s, beginning in New Bedford and continuing until Sanderson’s death in 1875.

Committee recommended at the Second Convention that the group should take over the publication of the *Mirror of the Times*, the first Black newspaper in the state of California. There was much debate on this, with no clear decision at that point in time.

Transitional Period for J. B. Sanderson

While still quite actively involved in activism for civil and educational rights during the time of the Conventions of Colored Citizens of the State of California, the latter part of 1856 also marked the beginning of a transitional period for J. B. Sanderson. There is no clear evidence of what positions Sanderson held during 1856-1858, how he was occupied, or even exactly where he lived. For example, as a delegate to the Second Convention he was a delegate from El Dorado County, a county that was host to a lot of gold mining. There is no indication of what he was doing there, except that he was still present in Sacramento as a delegate to the convention. There are a number of personal letters, though, both to and from J. B. Sanderson, that indicate his state of mind during this timeframe. It could be said that this was a time of personal struggle and turmoil during this time, related to both personal emotions and frustration about the state of affairs in the state.

Undoubtedly, based on the letters from and to family and friends back in Massachusetts, part of this transitional time for Sanderson relates to missing his family. His wife Catherine and four children still remained in his original hometown, and a letter to Catherine dated February 27, 1857 portrays his emotions at his recent struggles within the state of California.

My dear Wife...On the 12th of this month I left Sacramento by a steamer to come to this place [Shasta, CA], from that time to the present it has

been storming almost without intermission; I was five and a half days in coming here...So you will see I have made another change; discouraged, sick at heart, and doing but little in Sacramento, I was ready to do anything that seemed to offer a reasonable prospect of saving something; just then Mr. Gong (?) a gentleman of this Town offered me \$75 per month, until the Spring business commences, when he thinks he will be able to pay me something more; I decided to come. Since I have been here now about ten days the weather has been exceedingly stormy; rain rains from day to day with now and then a ray of sunshine and occasionally hail, larger than I ever saw before. Shasta is 225 miles from Sacramento at the head of the Sacramento River high up amid the hills. It is nearly a week after the Atlantic Mail arrives before I can get your letter, which is indeed the most disagreeable consideration in my residence here. My thoughts are continually of home, of you and the children – at times I have felt anxiously and wretchedly enough to get up and start at once for home, poor as I am. Heaven help me to be patient for a few months longer. I am now making one more effort to get together a few dollars, at least enough to come home to my family...After having been in this State three years, it is hard for me to impose these conditions upon myself. I know not if I shall be able to stay, but I will try: and is it for myself? No: it is because I have always hoped, and do hope to do something better for my family here than I can at home.¹⁸

¹⁸ Letter from J. B. Sanderson to Catherine Sanderson, February 27, 1857, in Sanderson Collection.

Letters from an old friend in Boston, William Nell, confirms Sanderson's feeling of discouragement and homesickness. William Nell was a famous anti-slavery activist who worked for many years with abolitionist Garrison. It is clear how close Sanderson and Nell were when we note that J. B. and Catherine Sanderson's first born child was named William Nell Sanderson, born in 1849 in New Bedford. In letters from Nell to Sanderson, always addressed "My Dear Jerry," Nell keeps Sanderson up on current activities related to the abolitionist movement.¹⁹ Nell includes flyers about various events that he was organizing in Boston, including a Commemorative Festival at Faneuil Hall on March 5, 1858 to protest the Dred Scott Decision as well as copies of the *Liberator*. Nell seems to have been encouraging Sanderson, as he talks about including word about him and other fellow Californian Blacks in the *Liberator*. He also compliments Sanderson on the newspaper *Mirror of the Times*, a black owned and published newspaper in California. Nell states that he would like to include mention of the paper in the *Liberator*. Nell wonders several things about Sanderson, though, including "Why have you not been a correspondent? [for the *Mirror*]." And "When are you coming home?" It is possible that hearing such news from back home discouraged Sanderson in his efforts to move California along faster in the establishment of civil and educational rights for Blacks.

In a handwritten draft of a speech that was undated, but must have been written prior to April 1858, gives a further indication of the turmoil in Sanderson's personal and public life. He wrote:

Spoke this Evening upon the subject of the emigration of our people. We came from the East. Our motive was money – we made it – we have lost

¹⁹ Letters from William Nell to J. B. Sanderson, Dec. 17, 1856; July 1, 1857; Oct. 1, 1857.

it – like thousands of others, extravagance, vice. The aim was not right; the motive not mixed properly – the means not righteous – the result disastrous. The laws here are bad. Public sentiment is corrupt. In many ways this is evident. The vote, the oath, in court, the School laws, the excitement of late in respect of schools. The Archy case – Immigration law, agitation in the legislative...²⁰

J. B. Sanderson's Work in San Francisco

The first colored public school in San Francisco was in the basement of the St. Cyprian A. M. E. Church on May 22, 1854.²¹ While not the first teacher of the school,²² J. B. Sanderson became one of the school's teachers in 1859. As a constant encourager of education for more Black children, Sanderson noted that the number of Black children attending the St. Cyprian school was small compared to the number of Black children within the city of San Francisco. So, Sanderson and other educators prepared letters that appealed to parents to send their children to the school. "They reminded parents that the school and the appropriation for it were not easily achieved; it would be tragic to suffer the loss of the appropriation."²³ The committee also set up a practice where committees of parents would monitor attendance and encourage other parents to become more actively involved in the school.

Sanderson was soon to return to his earlier strategy of writing to the Board of Education (previously in Sacramento, now in San Francisco), to try to get a new school

²⁰ Handwritten document in the Sanderson Collection. There is no date and no location indicated on this document. However, since Sanderson mentions the Archy Lee Fugitive Slave case, the speech must have been written before April 1858, since that was when the case was resolved.

²¹ Beasley, 1919; Lapp, 1977.

²² The first teacher was J. J. Moore, one of the active members of the Convention of the Colored Citizens of the State of California. Moore was one of the drafters of the convention's initial address on the need for education for the Black children of California.

²³ Lapp, 1977, 173.

building and get the public school out of the basement of a church. He writes so elegantly that

Our children – as yours – are passing on to manhood and womanhood; they will be virtuous or vicious, respectable or disreputable, reeducated or ignorant. We feel the same deep and absorbing anxiety touching the future of our children, that you feel for yours. While you are making such wise and liberal provision for the school of the youth, deeming your labors and money so expended good economy, because children are the true jewels of the state – educated they are its riches, its strength, its hope and glory; the basis of its perpetuity – permit us to suggest what, no doubt, you have felt deeply in your own hearts, that the same arguments apply to colored children. Respectfully submitted J. B. Sanderson, et al.²⁴ (p. 176 in Lapp book, reprint of the *Pacific Appeal* article which was this letter published September 27, 1862)

In 1964, the new Broadway School opened in San Francisco.

After five years as a teacher, he was promoted to principal of the school. However, the sting of racial discrimination sunk in at that point, when Sanderson was released by the San Francisco Board of Education.

When his black assistant, a young woman, had to leave her position, only a white woman could be found as a replacement. Racial etiquette would not permit a white woman in any subordinate position to a black. A white

²⁴ This letter was published in the September 27, 1862 issue of the *Pacific Appeal*, a Black-owned and published newspaper. It was reprinted in Lapp, 1977, 176.

principal was found. Reverend Sanderson lost his status as principal and was transferred to another San Francisco Negro school [Broadway school].²⁵

He was transferred to a colored school on Broadway.

A set of written notes included at a later date in a copy of the Board of Education and Regulations of the Public Schools of the City of Stockton, 1873, Sanderson described the struggles of that time to get the additional schools opened in White parts of a town.

When the synagogue was purchased the removal of the colored school was decided upon. That school for years was kept in the basement of the St. Cyprian Church. It was the last school removed from a basement. The Board had tried, the colored people had tried for months, to purchase a lot on which to erect a school-house for us. Who would sell a lot for a colored school? Property holders usually object to a school upon, or contiguous to their property or homes. They dislike the crowds and noise of children. Added to this was the old prejudice against the negro. They said “What! A nigger school in our neighborhood! No, No!” There was no lack of lots for sale; but when it came out that the lot was wanted for a colored school, either it was said “No lot for sale” or an exorbitant price was demanded.²⁶

Before moving on to one of his most well-known educational efforts in Stockton, Sanderson’s path took a short detour, about which almost nothing is known. A document in the Sanderson Papers indicates that J. B. Sanderson received his Teacher’s Certificate

²⁵ Lapp, 1977, 181.

²⁶ Sanderson Papers.

on April 29, 1867, from Multnomah County, OR (Portland). However, no record indicates whether he was actually a teacher in the Portland area. The only other reference that I could find related to Portland was a letter from Sanderson's daughter Florence. It seems that she was engaged to a Mr. De Souzer, a man who was now in Portland, but that he had stopped communicating with her. She asked her father for his forgiveness for any wrong she had done in the matter.²⁷ Since this letter was written in 1871, no connection can be clearly drawn between Sanderson's Teacher's Certificate and the connection with his daughter.

J. B. Sanderson's Work in Stockton

J. B. Sanderson seems to have reached the pinnacle of his teaching career in Stockton, where he became a teacher of the colored school there in 1868. By that time, the school had already become a part of the Stockton public school system, meaning that it was an entirely public school. Sanderson's reputation as a teacher in particular must have reached across the state by this time, as "colored people sent their children from all parts of the State [sic] to be tutored by him."²⁸ A particularly well-known Black family from Los Angeles, that of Bidy Mason, sent three of their children to Stockton to be educated by Sanderson. Bidy Mason began her life as a slave, moved to California and bought a plot of land for \$250, and later when the land she had accumulated was sold for \$250,000, her land became part of the incorporated area of Los Angeles. Bidy made sure that her children were well-educated, and one of her sons later became friends with Booker T. Washington and became a politician. J. B. Sanderson's reputation as a teacher was clearly very strong by the time he reached the Stockton colored school.

²⁷ Letter from Florence Sanderson to J. B. Sanderson, April 14, 1871, Sanderson Papers.

²⁸ Beasley, 176.

When examining how Sanderson helped to get the school further established as a part of the public school system in Stockton, we can see that he followed his similar pattern in his efforts to create public education for Sacramento and San Francisco: he wrote letters. In his diary he records that he “wrote letters of invitation to the Board of Education, to the Board of Education, to the several clergymen of the city, to the Editor of the *Stockton Independent*, to the County Superintendent of Schools, and to Captain C. M. Weber, the donor of the ground upon which the school stands.”²⁹ Sanderson then goes on to describe the ceremony which included parents and guardians and a lot of baked goods provided by the ladies of the city.

Sanderson also seems to have been pleased with the progress of the school. In several letters from family members, they told him how pleased they were to hear in his letters about the success of the school.³⁰ In a letter dated April 25, 1868 from Kate Sanderson to her husband J. B., she wrote that “I received your very pleasant letter and was glad to hear from you and also to hear you speak so cheerfully of the school which from the description I should judge to be a very neat and comfortable place.” In a letter dated June 11, 1858, J. B. Sanderson’s daughter Mary Jane wrote to him that “I am glad that your school is getting on so much and that everything is pleasant up there.” And in July (July 18, 1868), J. B.’s wife Kate wrote to him with advice on which house he should buy in Stockton. Based on his descriptions in letters to her, she recommended to him that he buy the house that is near the school, because it sounded nice. Sanderson was clearly making a home in Stockton, and letters describe children and grandchildren visiting him in Stockton.

²⁹ From Sanderson’s diary, dated May 1, 1868, recorded in Thurman, 40.

³⁰ These letters are all found in the Sanderson Papers.

J. B. Sanderson fully immersed himself in the Stockton community at this time, taking on a key role in the “District Educational Convention” in 1871³¹ and receiving a “Pastoral Certificate of the African M. E. Church,” awarded to the Reverend Jeremiah B. Sanderson, March 30, 1872.³² Knowing of Sanderson’s long history in voting rights activism, when Blacks from across the state met in Stockton on November 20, 1871, at the Second Baptist Church, the delegates elected J. B. Sanderson as Vice-President. When the meeting began, Reverend Sanderson gave the opening prayer.³³ The major effort of this convention was to prepare a proposal to the state legislature asking for equal education for Black children in California. The group prepared statements that were taken to the State Assembly as a bill in 1872, asking the legislature to allow “Children of African descent” to be stricken from the educational law, and that children would be allowed into the same schools as White children.³⁴ While the bill was not passed, the effort foreshadowed the legalized end of segregation in California in 1880.

J. B. Sanderson’s Last Days

In 1874, J. B. Sanderson left Stockton and moved to Oakland, where he shifted his main focus to working with the church. While his reputation as a teacher, a speaker, and a civil rights activist within several conventions of Colored Citizens had been recognized to this point, this acknowledge of his influence on the African American community in California expanded in 1875 to pastoral recognition as well. In 1875, he was appointed secretary of the 1875 Annual Conference of the African Methodist

³¹ This convention is described in Beasley.

³² Sanderson Papers.

³³ Beasley, 178.

³⁴ Beasley, 178.

churches of California. He was also elected at that conference to be its delegate at the national conference of the A.M.E. church to place the next year in Atlanta.³⁵

J. B. Sanderson had a large family spanning his life in the Northeast and California.³⁶ J. B. and Catherine married on Feb. 1, 1849, in New Bedford, Massachusetts. And while he remained in the Northeastern area of the U.S., they had His wife Catherine spent her life in California in San Francisco. Their children William Nell Sanderson, Mary Jane Sanderson, Florence Therese Sanderson, and Kate Cleaveland Sanderson were all born between 1849 and 1854 (their son Thomas Clarkson died after one year of life). And once Catherine and the children had joined J. B. in California, they had four more children, all born in San Francisco between 1860 and 1866: Sara Elizabeth Sanderson, Jeremiah Sanderson Jr., Charles Gibson Sanderson (died at age 9), and Abraham Lincoln Sanderson. J. B. and Catherine Sanderson also had at least five grandchildren and several great-grandchildren. Many of their children went on to have publicly successful lives. Mary was the teacher of the first colored school in Oakland. Sara was the first Black female to graduate from a kindergarten teacher training program in San Francisco.

J. B. Sanderson died suddenly, too early at the age of 54, in an accident on a train track. The announcement of his death was published in Black and White newspapers throughout the Northern California region, all expressing sorrow at the loss of an influential man. One such obituary stated that “In the loss of the late Rev. J. B. Sanderson the communities both of Oakland and San Francisco have a lost a most exemplary citizen, the colored churches of the coast a staunch pillar, and society at large

³⁵ Lapp, 1968, 332.

³⁶ Family record, Sanderson Papers.

one of its brightest ornaments... 'Peace to his ashes'."³⁷ But I would like to present Catherine Sanderson's words as the penultimate description of the life and death of J. B. Sanderson.

He was taken first to his own church and then over the bay into Bethell. And the people could not all get into either of the churches. A number of whites attended his funeral. The whites lament the death of Jeremiah Sanderson very much and they sympathize with me and family... Brother Ward you must pray for me and all of my family. I would have been better satisfied in mind if I could have talked with him before he died. But I could not. He died before I could get to him. He was coming from his prayer meeting. He had taken the church clock up town after meeting to have it fixed, and did not wait for the cars, but walked on back until he passed the first block this side of the church. And the cars came a long when he attempted to get on and was caught and run over. The fall he got was what killed him. Instantly it broke the back part of his skull. He did not live but a few minutes. He only spoke 2 or 3 words. That's what the people say that went to him on the track. It does not seem to me sometimes that he is dead. I can not hardly at times realize that he is gone.³⁸

Conclusion

³⁷ Obituary in the August 21, 1875 issue of the Black newspaper the *Pacific Appeal*. It was reprinted in Thurmond, 41-42.

³⁸ Letter from Catherine Sanderson to T. M. D. Ward, a long-time family friend. Letter dated Nov. 19, 1875, Sanderson Papers.

Jeremiah Burke Sanderson, a free, New Bedford educated Black man, was originally known as an eloquent speaker for the anti-slavery movement, sometimes speaking at gatherings along with Frederick Douglass. Sanderson moved to California during the gold rush era and became one of the most influential spokesman, activist, and educators in the state. His work as an educator helped expand the educational opportunities for Black children throughout the state. He successfully petitioned to get the first “colored school” opened in Sacramento in 1855, at a time when the city was still creating its first public school system. He was brought to San Francisco in 1859 to teach and later become a principal of the colored school there. An finally, in 1868, his name had become so well-known that he start another new colored school, in Stockton, and even some of the most well-known Black families in Southern California sent their children to be educated by Sanderson.

Additionally, though, Sanderson was also known for his work as a key organizer of the First State Convention of the Colored Citizens of the State of California, in 1855. At this time, the key agenda item was to push for the rights of Blacks to be able to testify in court on their own behalf. In subsequent conventions, agenda items expanded to include pushing for greater educational and economic opportunities for Black citizens of the state. A description of J. B. Sanderson by William Wells Brown perhaps describes him best: “All accounts from California speak of J. B. Sanderson as doing more for the enfranchisement and elevation of his race than any one who has gone from the Atlantic states.”³⁹ (p. 92)

³⁹ William Wells Brown, *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements* (Boston: R. F. Wallcut, 1863), quote from p. 92.

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