BIOGRAPHY OF

PETER POWERS AS

TOLD BY HIMSELF

No colored resident of Northern Cal-

ifornia enjoyed greater respect of white

and colored people than did Peter Pow-

ers, whose body was consigned to the

grave Tuesday. He had resided in Nor-

thern California since 1857. He had won

his freedom by force of character, he

had bought the freedom of his wife

without money and during his long life

had worked for the moral betterment

of his people.

His career was interesting and

doubly so, as told by himself. When

he realized his time on earth was not to

be long, he dictated his biography. He

had been a resident of Chico for nearly

fifty years, and was known to nearly

everyone in this community. His life

story as told by himself is as follows:

“I was born of slave parents at War-

saw, Mo., my mother dying when I was

three weeks of age. My master was

an infidel, but at the age of eighteen

I was converted. After my conversion

I went into the house and talked to

my master about Jesus and what He

had done for me. This conversion took

place on Wednesday, and on Sunday

my master and eight members of his

family and myself were baptized. This

scene I could never forget.”

“After his conversion my master

promised me my freedom, and on his

death-bed he had my free paper writ-

ten. He died with his hand in mine,

talking of the goodness of our Saviour

and of the Beautiful Beyond to which

he was going. He died September 4,

1856.”

“When I went to the plantation to

bid farewell to my wife, her owner

wanted to know why I did not take my

wife with me. I said to him, ‘Nothing

in the world would give me more pleas-

ure, but you know that can’t be done.’

He said if I would give him security

for a certain amount of money and get

two reliable men to sign it, I might

take her. I was able to get four of the

best citizens to voluntarily sign it, two

being among the wealthiest men in the

community. We were talking on Sun-

day: in an hour afterwards I took my

wife over to my home. The next day

the papers were drawn up. My mis-

tress and her daughter began at once

to make clothes for my wife, and on the eighteenth of April in 1857 we left

home, with a herd of 250 head of cat-

tle and three wagons, and after travel-

ing five or six weeks we joined a train, then making our train very strong-

about 35 men and 550 head of cattle.

“We were not molested by the In-

dians, except that they broke into our

herd of cattle and got away with a

great many of them. The Holloway

train, which we traveled with a short

way, was taken with erysipelas and

camped on the wayside, while we went

on. They were captured by the Indians

and scalped, and many murdered. Mrs.

Holloway was scalped, but escaped

with her life. Then the Brown train,

with whom myself and wife, as well as

Mr. Alexander, who was in our train,

went on ahead and was massacred. In

almost three days we came upon their

graves and scattered remnants of their

train, and the scene I can never de-

scribe or never forget.

“After landing in California we came

direct to Marysville, where we located

and I commenced my first church work

in the Golden West. Having landed in

Marysville in September of the same year, 1857, I helped to dig the founda-

tion of the Mount Olive Baptist Church

at night, and working until 10 and 12

o’clock, while the sisters brought us

lunch. After having helped to complete

this church, we then set to work to

build a Methodist Church, Brother P.

R. Green being the leader, doing the

brick work, and I the mortar work.

“ In August, 1865, we went to Tehama

county, locating on a piece of land ten

miles from Red Bluff. I made inquir-

ies of two or three members of the

church and found no meetings were be-

ing held. I then began to talk, and said

I would not live in a place where they

had no meetings. I announced we

would have prayer meeting at our

house, when those three sisters hooted

at me and told me not to think of such

a thing. But having made up my mind

to do so I continued, and the first Sun-

day fifteen came and we had a good

meeting, prayer and songs, and I read

a chapter of Matthew. I was hardly

able to read, but I did the best I could.

We then gave it out again for next

Sunday, when forty came, and from

that time on we had regular meetings.

A white Presbyterian minister came

out from Red Buff Sunday after Sun-

day and we had lovely meetings, and

in three months from that time I talk-

ed them into building a church and

schoolhouse combined, which we did., and had paid for it in three months.

That was the beginning of the colored

church in Tehama county.

“My wife died the following May, so

after remaining there that summer I

moved to Marysville again to have my

children cared for, having a family of

five. I then came to Chico and located, and finding here no school for colored

children, as well as no church, I be-

came interested in the same and got

the children together. We had to have

ten to start a school, and not having

but nine we borrowed one from the

Indian camp, when I got them to come

to a little house, corner of Sixth and

Flume streets, and taught them their

alphabet. Then I went to one of the trustees and told him about our school,

and he came to visit it and in three

days time we had our teacher, so from

that time on we had a school here for

our children.

“On March 13, 1870, I got the colored

citizens together and organized a board

of trustees and made final arrange-

ments to take the first step toward

building a church, and on the 20th of

March the trustees were called to-

gether again to discuss the size of the

building. As I was a stranger to Gen-

eral Bidwell, Clayborne Jones was au-

theorized to go with me to the General

and introduce me to him, which he did

the next morning. After I had made

my mission known to him, and after

an hour’s consultation, he donated to

me a lot where our church now stands.

The General thought it was a great

undertaking for so few of us; but I told him I had faith in the Lord, and

he said I was right. I then went to W. K. Springer’s lumber yard, and he

donated me 1000 feet of lumber, and

the other company donated me 800

feet. This was my first forenoon’s

work for the church. Then General

Bidwell immediately gave us a deed to

the lot, and the lumber was placed on

the ground. I then wrote to Rev. J.H.

Hubbard of Marysville to come here

and incorporate this as an A. M. E.

Church denomination, and a meeting

was called for June 9, 1870 by Rev.

Hubbard.

“The trustees met at P. Jackson’s

barber shop June 13th and the con-

tract for building the church was let

to Briggs & Bradley. Clayborne Jones

was elected treasurer. P. Jackson sec-

retary, of the building committee. The

building was then finished, and on July

4, 1870, was dedicated by Bishop Ward,

J.C. Hamilton and J.H. Hubbard.

“About the year 1875 the people of

this community were very anxious to

have a Masonic Lodge. As I was the

only negro Mason in this part of the

coast, I readily consented to help es-

tablish the same. We were very suc-

cessful in establishing the order, and

I was elected worshipful master- the

first negro to hold this office in this

section of the country. Judge Thomp-

son of San Francisco was grand depu-

ty of the Independent Order of Good

Templars, and he appointed me {h}is

chief deputy, which position I held for

five years- a position never held before

by an negro.”

*CHICO RECORD*, FEBRUARY 15, 1912, p.