

## Biography of David Jennings

By Ruth Lang

Between 1860 and 1910 the African American population in California grew slowly from 4,086 to 21,645 and remained about 1 percent of the total population throughout the era. There was a small presence of African Americans in some San Joaquin Valley towns, due to the recruitment of farm laborers in the region. In August 1908, Colonel Allen Allensworth and four other settlers established the town of Allensworth – founded, financed and governed by African Americans. Previously, around 1890, another African American community had settled in Fresno County – in the small town of Fowler. The Hutchinson Collection in the Fresno Historical Society Archives contains a number of photos of this community, including a photograph of an elderly gentleman – David Jennings.

According to a December 28, 1908 interview in the *Fresno Morning Republican*, Jennings stated that he was born April 17, 1817 in South Carolina. His boyhood was spent as a house servant on a plantation in that state. Later, he was apprenticed to a tailor. At age seventeen, he married and the couple had five children. His wife, Binna, and his children were later sold and David became the property of Wade Hampton, governor and later United States Senator from South Carolina. Wade Hampton was a member of one of the richest families in the antebellum South. He owned and operated many plantations in Mississippi and South Carolina. His privileged childhood years would be spent on the lavish family estates of “Millwood” and “Cashier’s Valley.”

At the outbreak of the Civil War, Hampton entered the Confederate service as a brigadier general. He took four slaves with him as servants, one of which was David Jennings. Mr. Jennings’ job was to look after the general’s horses. At the battle of Bull Run, Hampton had three horses shot from underneath him and Jennings was always ready with a fresh horse. Jennings also was with the general at the battles of Manassas Junction and Gettysburg. After the war, David Jennings was a free man. He worked in a general store in Columbia, South Carolina, where he lived for twenty-seven years.

Jennings’ daughter, Julia Bell, had relocated to Fowler, California. Julia, encouraged of the possibilities of Fowler, persuaded her brothers, Jordan and Simeon Young, to come also to the Fowler area. It is not known if the Young brothers were also the sons of David Jennings. Assisted by friends, she tried to find her parents in the South. She located her mother and brought her to Fowler. Soon after, David Jennings was found living in Columbia. He came to Fowler in 1892, reuniting with his wife and daughter. At first, he worked as a farmer – sowing wheat and corn – and then resumed his old trade as a tailor – cleaning and repairing clothes.

Mr. Jennings died in Fowler on September 22, 1914.