



From Slave to Business Owner: The Story of John Richards

In 1860, the Black community in Santa Rosa was very small. In that year, there were only 20 Black people listed in the Census of Santa Rosa. Eight of them lived with John Richards in his home. Richards was born a slave in 1824 in Kentucky and bought his freedom as a young man. Young and free, he traveled to Canada where he stayed for several years, until returning to the United States to work. When he returned, he married his wife Philena and lived in Massachusetts, Michigan and Missouri, before making his way to California. He arrived in Shasta County and then moved to Santa Rosa to open a barber shop.

The barber shop opened by Mr. Richards in 1856 was located on the corner of Second and Main streets, next to Santa Rosa's first hotel which also served as a stage shop. The location helped make Mr. Richards' barber shop the gathering place for people in town to chat and wait for the stage. He became incredibly successful in town, later owning 130 acres of land in the area of Santa Rosa that became the South Park neighborhood. The Richards used their opportunities and resources to help where help was needed. The two had no issue opening their home up to people in need. After the Civil War, John and Philena welcomed several homeless freed slaves into their home, including Samuel Clark who worked as a barber at the shop in town.

By the time Richards passed away in 1879, he owned three barber shops, including the shop in Santa Rosa. With the other two shops in Ukiah and Lakeport, Mr. Richards proved a real businessman and talented in his work. He became very well known, especially in the Black community of San Francisco. On the day of his funeral, Mr. Richards was honored with a service with a special train of friends from San Francisco came to join.

To read access the Press Democrat articles about Platt Williams, please visit the following links:

- <https://www.pressdemocrat.com/article/news/gaye-lebaron-santa-rosas-fight-to-equity-has-a-long-way-to-go/?sba=AAS&artslide=0>
- <https://www.pressdemocrat.com/article/news/platt-williams-santa-rosa-naacp-pioneer-dies-at-85/?artslide=0>

