

James Dyer, African American Pioneer

By Peter Linenthal

James P. Dyer was born in 1819. The Dyers owned a soap factory and boarding house in New Bedford, Massachusetts on South Water Street. A city made rich by the worldwide demand for whale oil, New Bedford was also a center for the abolitionist movement and a place of refuge for enslaved people who had escaped, including Frederick Douglass. Mr. Dyer's father, also named James, and his mother Mary, ran the boarding house catering to Hawaiian sailors. Following a terrifying outbreak of cholera at their residence, James P. Dyer joined the 25-man crew of the whaler *Minerva* in 1839 and went on a three-year voyage to Brazil, Australia and New Zealand before returning to New Bedford. He married Sabina Taylor of Fairhaven in 1847; their daughter, Ann, was born soon after. News of the discovery of gold in California reached the East Coast in 1848.

The Dyer family came to California around 1850 as California was entering the union as a "free" state, probably taking the sea route around South America. He joined San Francisco's Black community, many, like him, from New England cities, to successfully fight structural racism. Mr. Dyer represented San Francisco in the Colored Conventions and became president of the San Francisco Literary Institute near his home, which had 800 volumes in its library and held lectures and debates. The San Francisco Athenaeum and Literary Association was likely the first public lending library in San Francisco and is the predecessor of the Society. Mr. Dyer was also an active member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and supported the city's African American newspapers.

James P. Dyer established a soap and candle factory high on the sandy slopes of Nob (then Fern) Hill in the 1852, at the time, the edge of the rapidly growing city. The neighborhood was called Spring Valley, a name later adopted by Cow Hollow, and was home to many African American, Chilean, and Hispanic residents. As the neighborhood became residential, smells from the soap factory became a problem. Neighbors, including Henry Haight, who became governor running on a racist platform, complained. In 1865, Mr. Dyer moved his factory south to the Potrero, once the pasture for Mission Dolores' cattle, the new edge of town, where soap, gunpowder, and glue factories were located. Dyer's Soap Factory was known as the New England Soap Factory, the Queen Lily Soap Factory, and Fischbeck & Gloom Soap Factory into the 1950s. Mr. Dyer died at age 50 in 1869 and was remembered as, "...just in all his dealings, strictly honest, temperate in his habits, generous to a fault, his heart was ever open to the calls of distress, and his hand followed his heart. Every enterprise which had for its object the progress of our people found in him a steady supporter." A bronze plaque marking his first factory at Mason and Pacific Streets would make perfect sense.

I became interested in Mr. Dyer while researching the Queen Lily Soap factory building, now Pioneer Square, at 18th and De Haro Streets which stands a few blocks from my home. Quintard Taylor's article, "African American Men in the American West 1528-1990" in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political & Social Science*, vol. 569, May 2000, said that James Dyer was the only Black antebellum manufacturer in the West, which got my attention. Mr. Dyer is included in

the San Francisco Planning Department's "[African American Citywide Historic Context Statement](#)".

Peter Linenthal is the Director of the Potrero Hill Archives Project. To view a recent video presentation on James Dyer by Mr. Linenthal go to:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tZh1XWvajE>