

## NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

### *The Many Names for Jarena Lee*

**ABSTRACT:** Jarena Lee was the first woman preacher in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. She joined the antislavery movement and had her autobiography printed, first in 1836 and then again in 1849. Despite these significant contributions, she faded from the historical record. This essay synthesizes disparate and in cases contradictory archival, published, and digital sources to uncover her place and date of death. This project thus adds new biographical information about Lee, and it also reflects on methodological issues posed by research in early African American women's history.

JARENA LEE TRAVELED THOUSANDS of miles in service to her calling as the first woman preacher in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. While enduring chronic illness, financial struggles, and opposition from different clergymen, she preached to people from the Chesapeake to Canada and from New York to Ohio.<sup>1</sup> She also wrote her life story; according to one scholar, *The Life and Religious Calling of Jarena Lee, A Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel* was the first autobiography written by an African American woman.<sup>2</sup> Jarena Lee's accomplishments have drawn the attention of modern scholars, who have examined her autobiography as a window into the role of literacy, religion, gender, kinship, and work in early African American women's history. Yet few other sources have been discovered to flesh out her life

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<sup>1</sup> Jarena Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel* (Philadelphia, 1849).

<sup>2</sup> Priscilla Pope-Levison, *Turn the Pulpit Loose: Two Centuries of American Women Evangelists* (New York, 2004), 24.

story, and the details of her death have remained unknown.<sup>3</sup> Based on census records, death records, city directories, and other materials containing variants of the name Jarena Lee, this essay will pinpoint her place and date of death. In doing so, it will highlight the difficulties of writing early black women's history. By looking at the larger context of Jarena Lee's life and death, moreover, this essay will demonstrate that racial, gender, and class dynamics followed her to the grave.

Jarena Lee's autobiography describes her ascent from servitude in the post-revolutionary era to recognition as a preacher in the AME Church. According to the text, Jarena Lee was born in Cape May, New Jersey, on February 11, 1783. When she was seven years old, she was separated from her parents, taken about sixty miles away, and used as a "servant maid" by a Mr. Sharp. She encountered the Christian gospel during her youth, and, after a period of intense mental and spiritual trials, she finally entered the church fold under the sway of African Methodism's founder, Richard Allen. Within four or five years, she felt a call to preach the gospel and approached Allen. He rejected her request by pointing to the church bylaws that made no provision for women preachers—the rules only allowed women to hold prayer meetings and exhort, he concluded. Her life took a different turn when she married Joseph Lee, who served in the pulpit in Snow Hill, outside the city of Philadelphia. They had at least two children, and though she deferred to her husband's ministry, which took her away from her community in Mother Bethel, she continued her religious work as an exhorter. Following her husband's death, she returned to Philadelphia's Mother Bethel AME Church and found an opening. During a Sunday sermon, presiding preacher Reverend Richard Williams's voice faltered, and Lee delivered a spontaneous and dynamic sermon. The AME's elder, Richard Allen, felt so inspired that he authorized her to preach, reversing his earlier decision. At the height of her

<sup>3</sup> Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740–1845* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1998); Phebe Davidson, "Jarena Lee (1783–18??)," *Legacy* 10 (1993): 135–41; Richard S. Newman, *Freedom's Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers* (New York, 2008), 230–34; Carla L. Peterson, *Doers of the Word: African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North (1830–1880)* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1995), 73–87; Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom: African Women and Emancipation in the Antebellum City* (New Haven, CT, 2011), 111–19; Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African American Women and Religion* (New York, 2010), 23–29; Katherine Clay-Bassard, *Spiritual Interrogations: Culture, Gender, and Community in African American Women's Writing* (Princeton, NJ, 1999), 87–107; Clayborne Carson, Emma J. Lapsansky-Werner, and Gary B. Nash, eds., *The Struggle for Freedom: A History of African Americans*, 2nd ed. (New York, 2011), 156–57; Jean McMahon Humez, ed., *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress* (Amherst, MA, 1981), 11–42, 262–63.

work as a preacher, Jarena Lee delivered Sunday sermons from the pulpit of Mother Bethel AME Church in Philadelphia and traveled widely to spread the gospel.<sup>4</sup>

Lee did pioneering work both as a preacher and with the pen, publishing the first edition of her autobiography in 1836. Subsequently expanding the autobiography, she submitted her manuscript to the AME Church's book committee for publication. The annual conference of the church heard her request in 1844 but took no action.<sup>5</sup> Denied an outlet with the AME Church, she turned to another press and had the work printed in 1849.

Lee also ventured into the abolitionist movement. She attended an antislavery meeting in Buffalo, New York, in 1834 and one in New York City in 1840.<sup>6</sup> In 1853, Lee spoke at the American Anti-Slavery Society's convention in Philadelphia, a meeting attended by activists including William Lloyd Garrison, Lucretia Mott, and Sojourner Truth. During the convention, the society's business committee drafted a resolution declaring that it "abhor[red] and reject[ed] the aims of the American Colonization Society." When the resolution hit the floor of the general body, Lee joined Esther Moore of the Pennsylvania Female Anti-Slavery Society, itinerant minister and abolitionist Sojourner Truth, and others who voiced their opposition to colonization. The convention approved the anticolonization resolution unanimously.<sup>7</sup>

Having ascended from humble beginnings as a servant in rural New Jersey to the pulpit of Mother Bethel AME Church, Jarena Lee nonetheless ended her life in poverty among the ranks of Philadelphia's black working-class women; the federal census of 1860 names a "Jerene Lee," born in New Jersey in about 1782 and with a personal estate of fifty dollars. Though the record identifies Lee as male, it also lists Lee's profession as that of a "washerwoman." According to the census taker, Lee lived in Philadelphia's Eighth Ward with a woman named Afilinda Lone, a fifty-six-year-old cook who was also from New Jersey.<sup>8</sup> At the apex of her life, Lee moved in the circles of church and abolitionist leadership, but as she

<sup>4</sup> Lee, *Religious Experience*, 3–17, 32, and passim.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel A. Payne, *History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, vol. 1 (Nashville, TN, 1891), 178, 190.

<sup>6</sup> Lee, *Religious Experience*, 72.

<sup>7</sup> "Second Decade of the Anti-Slavery Society," *The Liberator*, Dec. 9, 1853, 192–93.

<sup>8</sup> Jerene Lee, 1860 US census, Ward 8, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, roll M653\_1158, page 63, image 67, Family History Library film 805158, accessed via Ancestry.com, Oct. 7, 2015.

Fredell & Sarah Purvis for situations as assistant in the Roberts Vaux Public School, the subject was duly considered and an election was proceeded with which resulted in the election of Sarah F. Fredell to commence on 2<sup>nd</sup> day 1<sup>st</sup> Mo. 4<sup>th</sup>.  
To the Board of Education  
Although not appointed for that object the undersigned would bring to the notice of the Board the establishment of a home for aged and infirm colored people who have whilst in health supported themselves and families respectably but from various causes are thrown in their old age upon the charities of their friends. Of this class was Farena Lee who died a few weeks since about eighty years old, she had been a slave in earlier life but for many years has laboured as a preacher amongst the Methodists, she endeavored to support herself as long as she could but in her last days depended upon the contributions of others, this was so distasteful to her that a short time before her death she remarked, "she wished she was done with begging."  
Ann Carson died lately aged between fifty and sixty and has been crippled so as to be entirely helpless for about twenty years, she was well taken care of but it was entirely by the liberality of others. One of the committee visited in company with Morris Hall several colored women of the class.

Fig. 1. Report, Mar. 31, 1864, Board of Education Minute Book, vol. 5, 1840-65, 468-69, AmS.145, Pennsylvania Abolition Society Papers (Collection 0490), Historical Society of Pennsylvania.



entered her final stage of life, her influence and resources waned. This becomes clear from an account of her last days.

A key reference to Jarena Lee's final days and death appears in the records of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society. In the early 1860s, the society's committee on schools made inquiries into the condition of Philadelphia's aged black population, seeking to advise the general body on whether the society should support emerging plans in the city for "the establishment of a home for aged and infirm colored people." The committee reported its findings at a general meeting on March 31, 1864 (fig. 1). During their research, committee members encountered "Jarina Lee," whom they reported as having "died a few weeks ago since [at] about eighty years old." Lee, they wrote, "had been a slave in earlier life but for many years has laboured as a preacher amongst the Methodist [*sic*]." Detailing her final months, the committee recorded, "she endeavored to support herself as long as she could but in her last days depended upon the contributions of others, this was so distasteful to her that a short time before her death she remarked, 'she wished she was done with begging.'"<sup>9</sup>

More precise knowledge about Jarena Lee's death becomes apparent through a close reading of various, at times contradictory, records. As demonstrated above, the Pennsylvania Abolition Society spelled her name "Jarina." The 1860 federal census misspelled her name and listed Lee as both male and a "washerwoman." Paradoxically, documents with such inaccuracies nonetheless yield information that may help answer some questions about Lee. Such is the case with her death certificate.

No "Jarena Lee" appears in the Philadelphia death records of 1863 or early 1864, the time that the Pennsylvania Abolition Society reported her death. The city did write a death certificate of a woman named "Gerenia Lee," who died on February 5, 1864, but the information captured on this form does not match up cleanly with the details of Jarena Lee's own narrative (fig. 2). For example, the city death certificate states that "Gerenia Lee" was born in Maryland, while Lee in her autobiography listed Cape May, New Jersey, as the place of her birth. Still, the "Gerenia Lee" described in the return of death bears some similarities to the Jarena Lee of her personal account. First, the certificate states that Lee's race was "colored." Second, it records that "Gerenia Lee" died of "old age" at the age of eighty-four; going by her autobiography, Lee's age at the time would have been

<sup>9</sup> Report, Mar. 31, 1864, Board of Education Minute Book, vol. 5, 1840–65, 468–69, AmS.145, Pennsylvania Abolition Society Papers (Collection 0490), Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

**RETURN OF A DEATH**  
**IN THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA.**  
**PHYSICIAN'S CERTIFICATE.**

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1. Name of Deceased, *Geremia Lee*  
 2. Colour, *Colored*  
 3. Sex, \_\_\_\_\_  
 4. Age, *Eighty four years*  
 5. Married or Single, *Single*  
 6. Date of Death, *February 3<sup>rd</sup> 1864*  
 7. Cause of Death, *old age*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*J. Bidell Gilman* M. D.

Residence, *No 806 south 3<sup>rd</sup> St.*

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**UNDERTAKER'S CERTIFICATE, IN RELATION TO DECEASED.**

8. Occupation, *Missionary*  
 9. Place of Birth, *Mayland*  
 10. When a Minor, } Name of Father,  
                               } Name of Mother,  
 11. Ward, *3<sup>rd</sup>*  
 12. Street and Number, *Harmony st, bet. 3<sup>rd</sup> & 4<sup>th</sup> St.*  
 13. Date of Burial, *Feb. 8<sup>th</sup> 1864*  
 14. Place of Burial, *White Cemetery*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*H. S. Guter* UNDERTAKER.

\* Residence, *No 134 Lombard St.*

Fig. 2. "Geremia Lee," Return of a Death in the City of Philadelphia, Physician's Certificate, Feb. 1864, City of Philadelphia, Department of Records, City Archives, Board of Health. Courtesy of the Philadelphia City Archives.

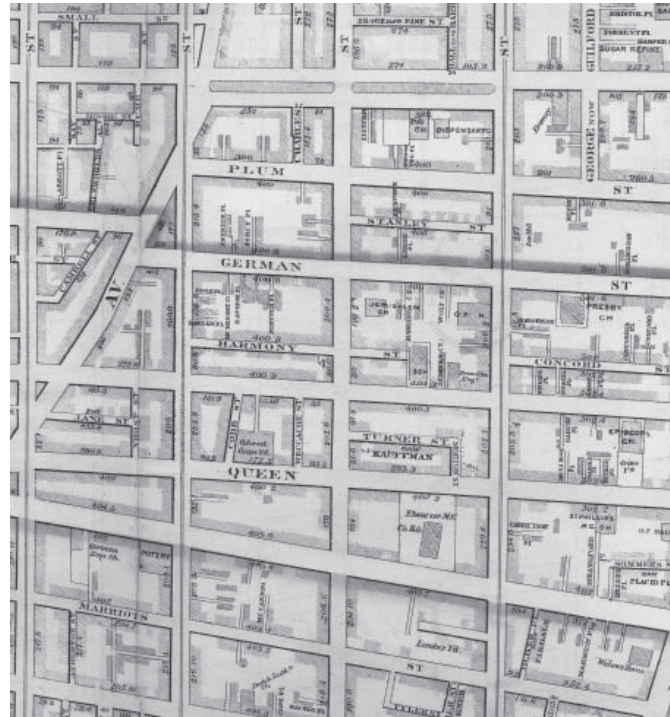


Fig. 3. *Smedley's Atlas of the City of Philadelphia* (1862). Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

around eighty. Most tellingly, the certificate listed her occupation as a “missionary.”<sup>10</sup> Jarena Lee and “Gerena Lee” also lived on the same street in Philadelphia. By 1863, Jarena Lee had moved from the Eighth Ward to the Third Ward; the city directory lists “Lee Jerena (c)” as living at 15 Bohemia Place.<sup>11</sup> Bohemia Place also went by the name of Harmony Court, which is where “Gerena Lee” lived (figs. 3 and 4). According to the death certificate, “Gerena Lee” resided at “Harmony Ct.”<sup>12</sup> Even though the death certificate contains information that contradicts her autobiography, the identifying markers of race, name, occupation, date of death, and residence suggest that “Gerena Lee” was Jarena Lee.

<sup>10</sup> “Gerena Lee,” Return of a Death in the City of Philadelphia, Physician’s Certificate, Feb. 1864, City of Philadelphia, Department of Records, City Archives, Board of Health; Lee, *Religious Experience*, 3.

<sup>11</sup> *McElroy’s City Directory for 1863* (Philadelphia, 1863), 438. The “(c)” stands for “colored.”

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 3, 12; *Smedley’s Atlas of the City of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1862), section 3; C. M. Hopkins, *Atlas of Philadelphia and Environs*, vol. 6 (Philadelphia, 1875), 11. Currently, this location is near the intersection of Fulton and Fourth Streets. “Gerena Lee” death certificate, Philadelphia City Archives.



Fig. 4: C. M. Hopkins, *Atlas of Philadelphia and Environs*, vol. 6 (1875). Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

The issue of identifying Jarena Lee in the historical record becomes more complex when looking at pre-1860s records. Variations of “Jarena” and “Gerania” appear in earlier documents, and an analysis of census records and the city directory suggests that those versions were names for Jarena Lee. The 1840 federal census names a “Terania” or “Gerania Lee” living in Philadelphia’s Walnut Ward. Her household consisted of two free black women, one aged twenty-four to thirty-five and the other aged fifty-five to ninety. Her autobiography would have put Jarena Lee at about fifty-seven years old in 1840.<sup>13</sup> The 1850 census, however, complicates the picture; it lists a black woman named “Geranna Lee,” aged fifty, who lived in the city’s Third Ward with the free black Philadelphians Eliza and

<sup>13</sup> Terania [Gerania] Lee, 1840 US census, Walnut Ward, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, roll 483, page 44, image 683, Family History Library film 0020554, accessed via Ancestry.com, Oct. 7, 2015.



Charles Wilmore. The document also states that “Geranna Lee” was born in Pennsylvania, whereas Jarena Lee’s autobiography says that she was born in New Jersey.<sup>14</sup> Though the discrepancies in age and birthplace between Jarena Lee’s autobiography and this census record raise some questions, it is likely that the “Geranna Lee” of the 1850 census is Jarena Lee. In 1850, “Geranna Lee” lived in the Third Ward with Eliza Wilmore, who in 1865 stayed at 15 Bohemia Place—Jarena Lee’s last address.<sup>15</sup>

These materials indicate that over the course of her life, Jarena Lee was recorded under many names. “Geranna Lee” and Jarena Lee had comparable names and links to the same address. “Gerenia Lee” and “Jarina Lee” died in the winter of 1864. They had similar names, ages, and occupations, and they lived on the same block in 1863 and 1864. It is almost certain that the names are referring to the same person. Most likely, Gerenia, Gerania, Geranna, Jerene, Jarina, and Jerena were phonetic variations of Jarena, who died on February 5, 1864, on Bohemia Place in the city’s Third Ward.

The death certificate gives a few other details concerning Jarena Lee. Henrietta Bowers Duterte, a prominent member of Philadelphia’s African American community and the first female mortician in the United States, served as the undertaker.<sup>16</sup> She certified that Olive Cemetery received Lee’s corpse on February 8, 1864.<sup>17</sup> Lee had lived among and served black Philadelphians, and she was put to rest in a graveyard established by and for African Americans. Her body remained in this cemetery on the city’s outskirts until it closed around 1920, when the remains were divided between Mount Zion and Eden Cemeteries. The location of her skeleton is an open question.<sup>18</sup>

This essay offers details about Jarena Lee from the years that followed the printing of her autobiography. Jarena Lee, like other black women in nineteenth-century Philadelphia, lived a precarious life; census and other records reveal that she moved frequently and struggled financially. In the last three decades of her life, she lived in three different wards of the city. While during her most noted years she worked as a preacher, in her later

<sup>14</sup> Geranna Lee, 1850 US census, Southwark Ward 3, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, roll M432\_821, page 214A, image 433, accessed via Ancestry.com, Oct. 9, 2015; Lee, *Religious Experience*, 3.

<sup>15</sup> *McElroy’s City Directory for 1865* (Philadelphia, 1865), 726.

<sup>16</sup> For information on Henrietta Bowers Duterte, see Julie Winch, *The Elite of Our People: Joseph Willson’s Sketches of Black Upper-Class Life in Antebellum Philadelphia* (University Park, PA, 2000), 10, 154n78; and Juliet E. K. Walker, *The History of Black Business in America: Capitalism, Race, Entrepreneurship* (New York, 1998), 129.

<sup>17</sup> “Gerenia Lee” death certificate, Philadelphia City Archives.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas H. Keels, *Philadelphia Graveyards and Cemeteries* (Charleston, SC, 2003), 85.

years she “endeavoured to support herself as long as she could.” She worked as a washerwoman but, tragically, also had to resort to “begging.”<sup>19</sup>

The steadfastness of her religious life and the relatively tenuous and unstable nature of her material existence are mirrored in the documents pertaining to her. Source material produced by people in the church and abolitionist movement identified her in ways that were largely consistent with her autobiography. Moving beyond the materials produced in the social circles that were most important to Lee, other records, particularly those produced by state actors, demonstrate a pattern of mistakes regarding her name, age, gender, and place of birth. The gaps can be explained by the larger problems of the federal census in early America. As social historian Richard Steckel has pointed out, in the antebellum period, the census tended to be riddled with inaccuracies, especially for “the poor, the low-skilled, the uneducated, the geographically mobile, the foreign-born, and those living in large cities or in remote areas.”<sup>20</sup> These inaccuracies were compounded when it came to African Americans. The national censuses of 1840 and 1850 were the first to collect the names of free blacks, and the 1840 census had a racial bias encoded on the form, which had fewer and broader age categories for African Americans than for white Americans.<sup>21</sup> State records alone cannot be relied upon for research on early black history.

Works like Jarena Lee’s autobiography offer alternative sources of information, and scholars have relied on it to explore the experiences of black women in early America. Lee, according to her narrative, migrated from New Jersey to Philadelphia, worked in the pulpit, and served in the antislavery movement. Some may question whether her autobiography provides a definitive and fully accurate portrayal of her life. In writing her own story, however, she seized some control over how she would be defined and remembered. While gaps in our knowledge about her remain, it is clear that Jarena Lee died in poverty in Philadelphia in early 1864.

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<sup>19</sup> Report, Mar. 31, 1864, Board of Education Minute Book, Pennsylvania Abolition Society Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

<sup>20</sup> Richard H. Steckel, “The Quality of Census Data in Historical Inquiry: A Research Agenda,” *Social Science History* 15 (1991): 594.

<sup>21</sup> Margo J. Anderson, *The American Census: A Social History* (New Haven, CT, 1988), 29–31.