



**ATT:** AB 3121 Reparations Hearing Committee Members & CDOJ Staff

**Prepared By:** Arianne C. Edmonds

**Session:** December 8, 2021 10:05 am - 12:00 pm PT

I want to thank the AB 3121 Reparations Hearing Committee Members, The California Department of Justice and all those who support behind the scenes for inviting me to present my family legacy and offer my views on reparations. Black Americans were excluded in the framing of the American constitution; reparations offer us an attempt to re-examine the 13th and 14th Amendments. These amendments left room for the continuance of legalized oppression and enslavement with the birth of the prison industrial complex and civil rights violations. In my testimony, I'm looking to address the broken constitutional promises at its root. Together, I'd like to explore how to peel back the layers of our unjust system that dishonors our status as full citizens.

Back in 1876, my great great grandfather, Jefferson Lewis Edmonds, a formerly enslaved man turned newspaper editor, farmer and civil rights advocate, stood before a United States Senate committee and testified about the voter suppression and violence he experienced in Mississippi after the passing of the 14th Amendment. His testimony exists in the public record as a rallying cry and challenge to the American political system to honor the constitutional promises made to him after emancipation.

I've been invited, by all of you, to finish the work Jefferson started. My great great grandfather demanded protection from the American government and wanted honesty from its lawmakers. He spent his lifetime defining and refining what true, evolved and full African American citizenship should look like. What it should feel like. On December 8th, I look forward to continuing the conversation. I hope to explore how we might co-create policies that ensure that this country honors its agreements and begin the road to recovery, reconciliation and restoration.

*Enclosed in this statement is my personal bio, background information on Jefferson Lewis Edmonds' life & legacy, the significance of our family newspaper, The Liberator and information links about the work of the JL Edmonds Project.*

## BIOGRAPHY

Arianne Edmonds is 5th generation Angeleno, archivist, curator and founder of the J.L. Edmonds Project, an initiative dedicated to preserving the history and culture of the Black American West. She has curated exhibitions and presented her research about Black history, memory and legacy at cultural institutions like California African American Museum and Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Her family archives stretch back to the 1850's and her story as the keeper of her family archives can be found in the *New York Times 1619 Project*, *The Root* and *LA Weekly*. Ms. Edmonds is currently writing her forthcoming book for *Oxford University Press*, about the American Black press and her family's 20th century newspaper, *The Liberator*. In 2021, Ms. Edmonds became a Senior Civic Media fellow at USC Annenberg funded by the MacArthur Foundation and appointed one of the newest Commissioners of the Los Angeles Public Library.

## LIFE OF JEFFERSON LEWIS EDMONDS

Jefferson was a newspaper editor and political activist in late 19th Century Los Angeles. But his life started very differently. He was enslaved for the first 20 years of his life, and lived a life of forced physical labor in tobacco and cotton fields on the Edmonds Plantation in Crawford, Mississippi.

Upon being freed in 1865, he relocated to Clay County, Mississippi and pursued an education in a series of "freedman schools." funded by the Freedmen's Bureau under the Lincoln administration. In 1875, he began teaching in Mississippi, and did it for 11 years. In 1888, he bought a small farm in Northern Mississippi, about 35 miles south of Memphis, Tennessee. During that time, he was active in local politics, helping to get candidates elected during the Reconstruction Era. Due to the threats of violence in Mississippi, Jefferson decided to move his wife and nine children to Los Angeles in the late 1880's. He began writing for newspapers like the *LA Herald* and *Los Angeles Times* and purchased farm land.

In 1896, Jefferson published his first newspaper, the *Pasadena Searchlight*. He used the paper to support the candidacy of Democrat William Jennings Bryan. But many in the community were upset about this and complained to the paper. As a result, Jefferson was removed as editor. Four years later in 1900, he started a second paper, and I called it *The Liberator*. He ran *The Liberator*, for fourteen years and had his daughter Susie and son Jefferson Jr. help as associate editors. Jefferson featured articles with Booker T Washington and documented W.E.B Dubois first visit to LA. His paper was known for its support of working class black Angelenos, fighting for civil rights, and supporting candidates of any party who he felt supported black community objectives.

Edmonds, along with Rev. Jarrett E. Edwards, pastor of the First AME Church, and John Wesley Coleman, a businessman, started the LA Forum in 1903. The forum was a community activist group that would meet every Sunday at the Odd Fellows Hall at 4 pm to read newspaper articles from around the country and give updates on all happenings in the community. The Forum members raised money for causes as diverse as the San Francisco earthquake, the 28th Street YMCA, black agricultural homesteading experiments, and sending Ruth Temple, the first black female doctor on the west coast, to medical school. By 1910, The Forum became a source of support for newly arrived black Angelenos to find jobs, start business and purchase homes. After Jefferson passed away in 1914, many people called Jefferson a California "booster." His belief was that formerly enslaved men and women turned sharecroppers from the south could come to Los Angeles for a fresh start and a chance to have true political freedom and economic advancement.

"If we erase from the pages of American history the negroes presence, it would be a short, uninteresting stroy"  
- Jefferson Lewis Edmonds (*Liberator* 1919)

#### **ABOUT THE LIBERATOR**

*The Liberator* was an early 20th-century newspaper that documented the emerging African American population in Los Angeles. Founded in 1900 by Jefferson Lewis Edmonds, formerly enslaved man who advocated for improved social and economic conditions for Black men and women, the publication reported on local, national, and international news and provided a source of racial upliftment for over a decade. Edmonds also used his journalistic platform as a vehicle to denounce injustices both locally and abroad. As *The Liberator*'s editor, Edmonds portrayed Los Angeles as a city of hope for African Americans, particularly compared to the violence and hardship they experienced in the South, and the paper contributed significantly to the city's rapidly increasing black population in the 1940's and 1960's.

#### **THE ARCHIVE**

From 1900-1914 J.L. Edmonds owned and operated *The Liberator* newspaper. During that time, he had the foresight to save each issue of the paper and archive it in bound books. These volumes were passed down in the Edmonds family for over 100 years. The Edmonds family partnered with the *Los Angeles Public Library* and California Revealed, a *California State Library* initiative to digitize the physical copies of the paper and make this vestige of American history available for public viewing worldwide.

#### **MORE INFORMATION**

- [J.L. Edmonds Project Website](#)
- [Press | Unearthing the Black newspaper that sold the California dream to freed slaves](#)
- [Liberator Newspaper | High School Lesson Plan](#)
- [Liberator Newspaper Digital Archive](#)