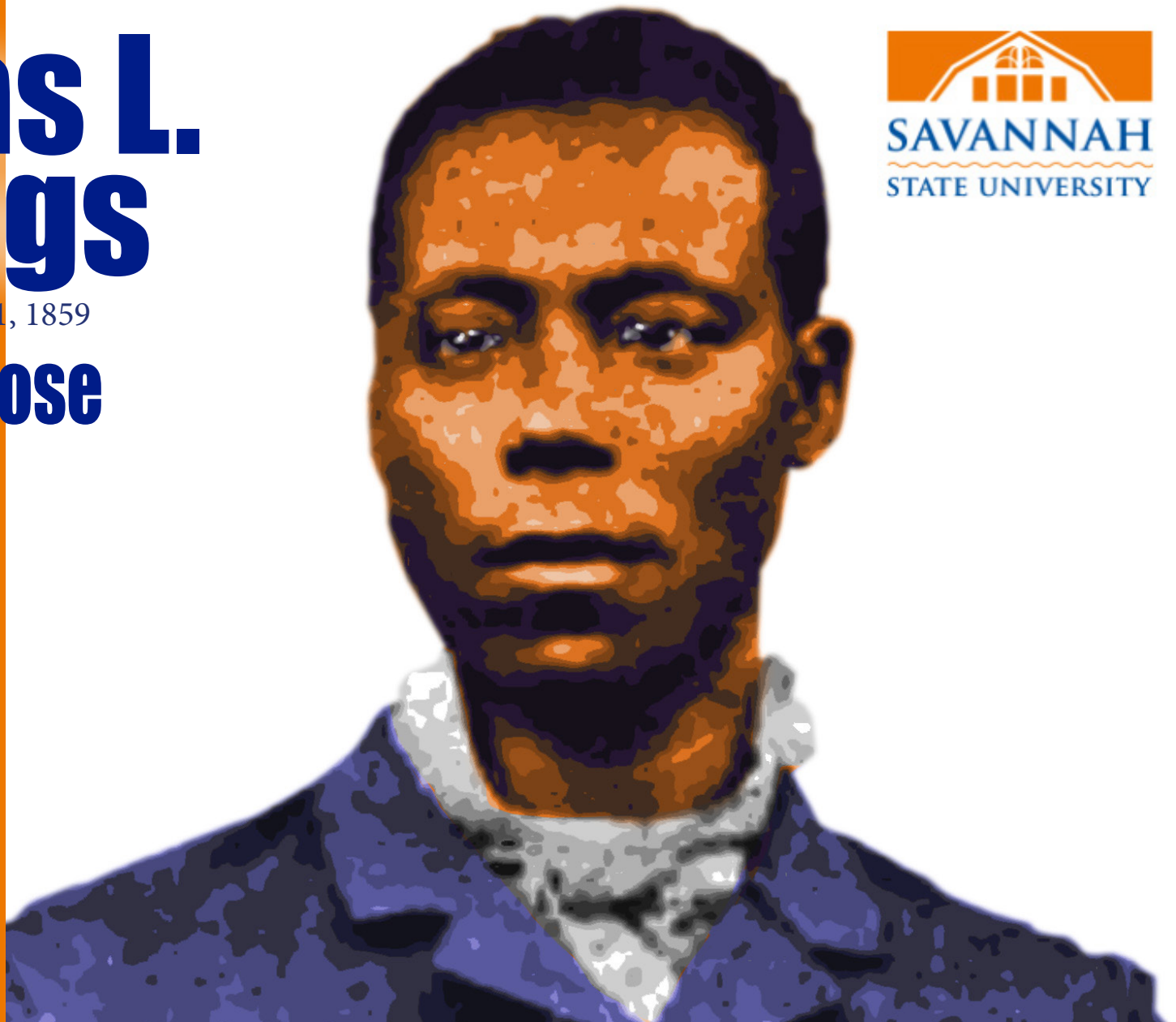


# Thomas L. Jennings

January 1, 1791 – February 11, 1859

## Sense of Purpose



“Our relation with Africa is the same as the white man’s is with Europe, only with this difference, the one emigrated voluntarily, the other was forced from home and all its pleasures...” Thomas Jennings

**T**homas L. Jennings was unique in many ways. He was born a black free man in New York. He became a tailor, working for an employer in New York. His career evolved as he became recognized for his expertise in tailoring. His reputation allowed him to open his own store with a following. He expanded his offerings to become the owner of a clothing store in New York City. Through the course of seeing his created clothing become soiled and ruined, he began experimenting with ways to safely clean the fabrics. Through this process, he discovered “dry-scouring”, which he patented in 1821. The fact that he was able to apply for and receive a patent was a landmark event, making Jennings the first African American to hold a patent. Only as a free man could he have had that right. He was able to defend the patent successfully in court as well. As a result of his invention and patent, he was able to amass a fortune.

As a wealthy entrepreneur, driven by his **sense of purpose, his super skill**, Jennings was able to provide large sums of his fortune in support of abolitionists’ activities for the rights of Africans in America that later became a movement. He not only paid for the freedom of enslaved people, he became a key member for the *First Annual Convention*

*of the People of Color* in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1931, and two conventions that followed. He founded and supported multiple charities and causes, including the *Freedom’s Journal*, the first black-owned newspaper in America. He also donated generously to Harlem’s Abyssinian Baptist Church.

Although Jennings and his family were afforded many opportunities, Elizabeth Jennings, Thomas’ own daughter, was not allowed on a public bus to go to church. Affording the best legal representation available in New York, Elizabeth was represented by Chester Arthur, later to become the 21st president of the United States. The case against the bus company in court in 1855 was won. This was a landmark decision that led to the New York law forbidding discrimination in public transportation.

The same year as his daughter’s court case, Thomas Jennings became one of the founders of the *Legal Rights Association* in order that discrimination and segregation defense could be tried in court with legal representation. Although Jennings died in 1859, his passion to end enslavement was realized shortly after his death.

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