

## **Absalom Hawkins (1855-1903)**

Absalom Hawkins (known as Ab by nearly everyone) was born on December 25, 1855. There is some confusion as to whether he was born in Tennessee or Kansas. Hawkins was the son of former slaves. His mother was Mrs. Rachel Hawkins, a washer woman, and his father's name is unknown. When Hawkins' family moved to Bloomington around 1870, mother was listed as a widow in the Bloomington City Directory that year. The move from Kansas City made the Hawkins family among the very few who came to our area from the West rather than the East or the South. His mother died in 1881 of consumption (tuberculosis).

Hawkins was one of the truly unique residents of the city of Bloomington in the last part of the Nineteenth Century. He began his career as a hack (cab) and omnibus driver in 1875 and spent nearly all of his adult life in this career field. He was the only African American hack driver during this time period in Bloomington-Normal, a fact that most likely made him proud. This was during a period of time when most African Americans in Bloomington-Normal were relegated to such occupations as servants, washer women, cooks, whitewashers, barbers, or other types of laborers.

His career as a hack driver came during a time when there were three basic means of public transportation in Bloomington-Normal. One was the horse railway, which was a rail car pulled along a fixed route by a team of horses or mules. Second was the omnibus system, somewhat like today's bus system. An omnibus was a much bigger vehicle pulled by horses along a more or less regular route. The car was usually pulled by three horses side by side or by two teams of horses lined up two in the front and two in the back. The vehicle was entered from behind and people paid the driver up front. An omnibus held more people than a hack did. The average cost of using an omnibus in the late Nineteenth Century was from five to ten cents.

The third was a hackney. A hackney was a relatively small four-wheeled vehicle pulled by two horses and used to carry people for hire. The hack driver would take the patron where ever he or she wanted to go (much like the cab drivers of today). Hacks were almost exclusively used by those citizens that had a lot money. They were especially favored for transportation to weddings and other dressy events. It was through this that Hawkins made his wide circle of acquaintances with Bloomington's best-known citizens.

Hackneys first appeared in London and Paris in the 1620s. From the beginning, hack drivers developed a rather unsavory reputation. Sometimes they used their knowledge of city streets to set up robberies of customers, they fought with one another over riders, and were famous for knowing where places of vice could be found.

Hawkins stayed above this mess and was a very popular choice to drive the well-to-do around Bloomington-Normal. Both on and off the job, he was instantly recognizable by his manner and dress. He was considered a dandy (a person who was always conscious of how he dressed and acted). He always wore a fine silk hat, a clean white vest, and a tall tie. He also wore what was described as a massive watch chain and some kind of crystal that shone like the rare gem it was imitating. In his button hole, Hawkins rarely failed to have a flower. He was very outgoing and friendly but was also known to be pretty forthright in his descriptions of local notables he considered to be cheapskates.

Five years after Hawkins had established himself enough in his profession, he began a family. He married 17-year-old Julia Bee on September 9, 1880 in a ceremony at the home of Henry Clay Dean. The *Daily Pantagraph* gave their wedding far more coverage than most African American weddings of the time. This was probably because the guests of the couple included some of Ab's well-known and wealthy acquaintances he had met through his work. The newspaper described the wedding as an elegant affair. Julia wore "a lovely dress of peach blow silk and satin, with lace while the groom was attired in black, with white vest, gloves and tie." There was also an extensive and impressive list of gifts in the paper including silver, china, lamps and a fine cook stove.

Ab and Julia had three daughters: Hattie Ellen, Luella, and Leota, who died of measles when she was just fourteen months old. Sadly, Julia died on June 19, 1888 almost a year after their daughter Leota died. Julia was only 25 years old at the time of her death and she died of consumption (tuberculosis). Ab never remarried after the death of Julia.

After the death of his wife, Hawkins continued to drive either a hack or an omnibus. He was considered one of the safest hack drivers in town. It was not an infrequent occurrence for hack drivers to be involved in accidents. According to newspaper reports on at least one occasion there were two serious wrecks within hours of each other. Hawkins was not completely immune from suffering accidents on the job either. In about 1893 Hawkins was driving his carriage near the Windsor Hotel (now the site of the Illinois House building) along Center Street. Streets were very primitive in those days and his carriage came upon a section of pavement that was particularly rough. The front wheel of the carriage struck a hole that was "big enough to bury a horse in." Hawkins was thrown from his seat and flew through the air landing on the pavement head first. He was knocked unconscious with a serious scalp wound. When he recovered consciousness, his mind was deranged for weeks. He eventually recovered but it was months before he returned to driving a hack. Hawkins was restored to his old position but left hack driving for good sometime before 1899. For the last few years of his life he worked in a couple of different local saloons as a porter.

On September 24, 1903 at the age of 47, Ab Hawkins died at the home of his daughter Luella King, who lived at 606 South Madison Street in Bloomington. His death was caused by rheumatism and general debility which may have been caused by that serious accident he suffered years earlier. He had been confined to the house for about five weeks prior to his death. At his funeral, many of his white friends also came to pay their final respects to their dear friend. *The Daily Pantagraph* wrote that "he was a feature of the town and will be remembered longer than many with white skins and better filled purses." The other local newspaper of Bloomington at the time, *The Daily Bulletin*, ran a large obituary for Bloomington's beloved hack driver. It was written that his career "was a remarkable and interesting one" and that "characters such as he are few and the refreshing originality of the man has made him a place in local history." He was buried next to his wife Julia in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.