

Absalom Hawkins (1855-1903)

Absalom Hawkins, known as Ab by nearly all, was born on December 25, 1855. According to his obituary, he was born in Kansas City, Kansas. However, census records record he was born in Tennessee which is more plausible because Kansas City, KS was not founded until 1868. Ab was the son of former slaves. His mother was Mrs. Rachel Hawkins, a washer woman, and his father's name is unknown. Ab's mother was listed as a widow in the Bloomington City Directory of 1870 which would indicate the family moved to Bloomington prior to that date. The move from Kansas City made the Hawkins 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).

Ab was one of the truly unique residents of the city of Bloomington in the last third of the 19th century. He began his career as a hack and omnibus driver in 1875 and spent nearly all of his adult life in this career field. He was first employed by McKisson and Payne who had an omnibus company based out of the Ashley House hotel. He then began working for Foster and McBean who also had an omnibus company based out of the Windsor Hotel (formerly known as Ashley House). Ab was later employed by Foster and Eddy who replaced McBean when he died. 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. This mode of transportation basically ran from train stations to Downtown Bloomington, then Bloomington to Normal and later from downtown Bloomington out to the eastside. 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 19th 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). Many of these operated near the Windsor Hotel located on the corner of Jefferson and Center Streets in downtown Bloomington. Hacks were almost exclusively used by those citizens in upper economic brackets. 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. Some of those people included David Davis, A.B. Funk, and Adlai E. Stevenson I. Throughout his career he also drove some well known men when they visited Bloomington including Robert G. Ingersoll, Governor Fifer, and Gov. Richard J. Oglesby.

Hackneys first appeared in London and Paris in the 1620s and replaced the sedan chair as a means for the rich to get around. Fights often broke out between the operators of the

two conveyances. 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. It was bad enough that London has had regulations in place on hack drivers for the last 314 years. Many of these same issues translated to 19th century Bloomington-Normal as well.

Hawkins stayed above this mess and was a very popular choice to drive the well-to-do around town. 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, he rarely failed to have a flower.¹ Ab was very outgoing and friendly but was also known to be pretty forthright in his descriptions of local notables he considered to be cheapskates.

The problems of other drivers led to various ordinances concerning the unasked for handling of luggage, use of profanity, loud speaking, and misrepresenting themselves to customers. Eventually, all hack drivers had to pay \$3.00 a year for a license and wear a badge that read “hack.” At one point, the *Daily Pantagraph* carried a short article entitled “War on the Hack Drivers” detailing how local police cracked down on overaggressive solicitation, fighting between drivers, and operating where they were not supposed to. It appears that most drivers were arrested one day and tried and convicted the next.² Probably the best known incidents occurred in 1884 with a driver named Frank Steele. He became involved in the harassment of some Chinese citizens in Bloomington which nearly cost him his life. Six months later, he was allegedly shot by two customers from Gibson City who thought they were being overcharged in a search for prostitutes.³

Five years after Ab had established himself enough in his profession, he began a family. He married 17 year old Miss Julia Bee on September 9, 1880 in a ceremony at the home of Henry Clay Dean. The ceremony was performed by Reverend Malone, former pastor of the A.M.E. Church. 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.”⁴ 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. Ab never remarried after the death of Julia.

¹ “Absalom Hawkins.” *The Daily Bulletin*, September 25, 1903

² “War on the Hack Drivers.” *The Daily Pantagraph*, January 30, 1883.

³ Frank Steele Excites Ah Moo Long to Mad Frenzy with a Dead Rat.” *The Daily Pantagraph*, January 23, 1884.

⁴ The Union Forever, An Important Wedding in Colored Society.” *The Daily Pantagraph*, September 10, 1880.

After the death of his wife, Ab continued to drive either a hack or an omnibus. Ab 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. Ab was not completely immune from suffering accidents on the job either. In about 1893 Absalom 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 Ab's carriage came upon a section of pavement that was described as being "as rough as a section of Blue Ridge Mountains." The front wheel of the carriage struck a hole that was "big enough to bury a horse in."⁵ Ab 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. Ab 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 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."⁶ The other local newspaper of Bloomington, *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."⁷ He was buried next to his wife Julia in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

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⁵ "Absalom Hawkins." *The Daily Bulletin*, September 25, 1903

⁶ "The Last of Earth, Funeral of Ab Hawkins This Afternoon." *The Daily Pantagraph*, September 26, 1903

⁷ "Absalom Hawkins." *The Daily Bulletin*, September 25, 1903