

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

Absalom "Ab" Hawkins was born on December 25, 1855. Although his obituary says he was born in Kansas City, Kansas, records show he was likely born in Tennessee, since Kansas City wasn't founded until 1868. Ab was the son of formerly enslaved people. His mother, Rachel Hawkins, worked as a washerwoman, and his father's name is unknown. In 1870, when Ab was about 15, his mother was listed as a widow in the city directory of Bloomington, Illinois, which suggests the family moved there before then. Ab's mother passed away in 1881 from tuberculosis.

Ab was one of Bloomington's most unique people in the late 1800s. He started his career as a driver for horse-drawn carriages, known as "hacks" or "omnibuses," in 1875. He worked for different companies over the years, including McKisson and Payne, and later Foster and McBean, who operated from hotels in Bloomington. Ab was the only Black hack driver in the area at the time, a rare and noteworthy position, as most Black individuals living in Bloomington had jobs like servants, washer woman, cooks, laborers, or barbers.

At that time, Bloomington-Normal had three main modes of public transportation: horse railway (which was a rail car pulled along a fixed route by a team of horses or mules, somewhat like today's bus system), omnibuses (large carriages for multiple passengers), and hackneys (smaller carriages for private rides). Hack drivers like Ab were mostly hired by wealthy people and often used for special events like weddings. Some of Bloomington's most well-known citizens, including David Davis and Adlai Stevenson I, were among Ab's customers.

Hackneys, first used in London and Paris in the 1600s, were sometimes linked to fights between drivers, crime, and dishonest behavior. However, Ab stood out because he was known for being honest, friendly, and always well-dressed. He wore a fine silk hat, a white vest, a tall tie, and a large watch chain. People liked him, and he made a lot of connections with influential people.

During Ab's time as a driver, there were problems with some drivers being rude or dishonest, which led to rules requiring all drivers to pay for a license and wear a badge. One well-known incident in 1884 involved a driver named Frank Steele, who was arrested after being involved in a fight with Chinese citizens in Bloomington.

In 1880, Ab married 17-year-old Julia Bee. Their wedding was considered a big event, partly because some of Ab's wealthy friends attended. They had three daughters: Hattie, Luella, and Leota, who tragically died from measles at just 14 months old. Julia died of tuberculosis in 1888, only 25 years old. Ab never remarried after her death.

After Julia's passing, Ab continued working as a driver, but he faced some challenges. In 1893, while driving near the Windsor Hotel, he was thrown from his carriage after hitting a large hole in the road. He was knocked unconscious and suffered a serious head injury. Although he recovered, it took months before he returned to work. He eventually stopped driving hackneys and worked in local saloons as a porter for the last few years of his life.

Ab died on September 24, 1903, at the age of 47. He had been ill for about five weeks before passing away at his daughter Luella's home. The cause of death was likely related to the injuries he suffered years earlier. At his funeral, many of his white friends came to pay their respects. The local newspaper, *The Daily Pantagraph*, wrote that Ab

would be remembered as a key figure in the town's history, even though he was not wealthy. He was buried next to his wife, Julia, at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.