

## **Carter Harris (1856-1944)**

Carter Harris was born on April 15, 1856, on a small plantation in Red Bank, Mississippi. He was the son of the plantation owner and an enslaved mother, so he had black, white, and possibly Native American heritage. Even though he faced many challenges as the child of a slave, Carter still managed to get a good education. Over his life, he had many jobs and lived in different states before working at Illinois State Normal University (ISNU) for 48 years.

Throughout his career, he often mentioned that he saw three wars, changes in fashion, the Great Depression, and the New Deal. Harris also remembered being a child during the United States Civil War and seeing Union soldiers pass by the plantation he lived on. He especially remembered meeting General Ulysses S. Grant during that time. He also loved telling stories about meeting Thomas Edison when Edison was a young telegraph operator.

Although Carter was born in Mississippi, he also lived in places like Holly Springs, Missouri, Memphis, Tennessee, Nashville, Tennessee, and Washington, D.C. While in Nashville, he worked for a law firm, and part of his pay was taking classes at Fisk University, a historically Black college. With this education, he became a teacher. Later, during the Reconstruction period, Harris left teaching and took government jobs, like being the postmaster in Memphis and a revenue collector in western Tennessee. He was even invited to Washington, D.C. by President James A. Garfield for a job, but he turned it down. When President Grover Cleveland was elected, Harris lost his government position and tried running a grocery store, but it didn't work out. By the time he started working at ISNU, he had done many jobs, including as a tobacco tester, carpenter, painter, and church lecturer. In an interview later in his life, he said that getting a regular paycheck was very important to him.

Carter also made extra money by catering. He and his wife, Ida, worked together in this business and met John W. Cook, the president of ISNU. Cook offered Carter a job as assistant janitor on campus in 1892. At that time, ISNU had only two buildings, Old Main and North Hall, and no sidewalks or shrubs. Carter was in charge of taking care of Cook Hall, which was being built and would be his home for the next 44 years. In 1899, records show he was paid \$480 a year for the job. Ida worked for a professor, and together they made extra money catering events for up to 500 people.

When Carter started at ISNU, there were about 600 students on campus, and everyone knew each other. He spent long hours making sure Cook Hall was clean and the heating worked. He even had an office in the building where he helped students with problems and made sure they followed the rules. During dances at the school, Carter acted as a chaperone. In 1934, the ISNU yearbook called him a "bouncer," and in 1912, the yearbook mentioned how he made sure that no local boys snuck into the first dance of the year.

Carter also saw the start of sports at ISNU. The first basketball games were played in Cook Hall before the McCormick Gym was built. Carter helped by hanging the first basketball hoops, and when games happened, all the equipment had to be moved. He rarely missed a game, and in 1933, he donated a trophy that would be given to the best football player each year. The "Carter Harris Trophy" was first given to Paul L. Custer, who later died in World War II.

For 25 years, Carter was a stockholder and director at the Normal Citizen's Savings and Loan Building Association. He was careful with his money and saved regularly. During his time at ISNU, he helped many students with small loans when they needed it.

Carter married Ida Tait Johnson on November 24, 1889, at the A.M.E. Church in Normal, Illinois. They lived at 202 West Locust Street in Normal and didn't have children. Ida passed away in 1916 after being ill for a short time. After her death and his retirement, Carter spent

much of his time reading and playing games like checkers and cards with his friends. He retired from ISNU around 1940 after working there for 48 years.

Carter passed away on April 21, 1944, in downtown Normal, Illinois, and was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington. In his will, he left around \$13,000, with a large part of it going to the ISNU student loan fund. A few smaller amounts went to other local organizations. In 1963, ISNU honored Carter by naming a new building after him for his long dedication to the university and its students.