

Eliza (Davis) Esque (abt. 1845 – Aug. 18, 1914)

Before the Civil War, before the Emancipation Proclamation was ever written, African-Americans in Bloomington were celebrating freedom. Beginning in 1859, members of the Wayman A.M.E. (African Methodist Episcopal) Church celebrated the “First of August,” an event to promote the freeing of slaves in the United States, and also to celebrate the end of the international slave trade and freeing of slaves in the British West Indies. Eliza Davis Esque quite possibly attended these celebrations as she was an active member of Wayman A.M.E. Church.

Very little is known about Eliza. She was born Eliza Davis, a slave in St. Charles County, Missouri, around 1845. Her first husband was also a slave. The two were separated and Eliza never knew what happened to him. He was possibly sold to a new master who took him away. Marriage ceremonies between slaves frequently included the words, “til death or distance do us part.” It is known that in 1862, Eliza moved to Bloomington as a free woman.

Here, she married Hardin Esque, who was born in 1825 in Tennessee. They were married on November 26, 1863. While they did not have any biological children of their own, Eliza helped Hardin raise his children by his first wife, and they had one foster child, Fred K. Johnson. The Esques first lived at 319 Madison Street and later moved just a few blocks to 305 S. Lee St.

Eliza and Hardin attended Wayman A.M.E. Church which was founded in 1846 and is the oldest African American Church in Bloomington. Members of this church had long worked to end slavery. The first “First of August” event was held in 1859 and began with a band, a parade, and speeches. These celebrations continued into the 1870s or 1880s. After the Civil War, they also celebrated an “Emancipation Day.” These two holidays were eventually blended.

Eliza and Hardin married at the height of the Civil War. Less than a year later, Hardin entered the war as a private in the Union Army. He enlisted in Bloomington, but returned to his home state of Tennessee to join the 3rd U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery in Memphis. At the beginning of the war, African American men were not allowed to serve in the military. As the war dragged on, there was the need for more soldiers, and many felt that African American men should be allowed to fight for the cause. After the Emancipation Proclamation was issued on January 1, 1863, President Lincoln allowed African American men to enlist. Many did, including about 40 from Bloomington-Normal.

At the war’s end, the citizens of Bloomington held a reception dinner to welcome back its African American soldiers. The event was held at Phoenix Hall in downtown Bloomington and included a day of festivities, demonstrations, speeches, and a dinner dance. Nearly 300 people attended. It is not known for certain that Hardin or Eliza attended, but quite possibly they did, as he had been mustered out of service on October 3, 1865 and the celebration was held October 19.

After just twelve years of marriage, Hardin died in 1875, from a condition he developed during his Civil War service. He was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery. In 1889, Eliza was awarded a widow’s pension for Hardin’s military service. She received \$12 a month until her death 39 years later. She died of pneumonia in 1914. Her funeral was held at Wayman A.M.E. Church where she had attended those many years. She is also buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington.

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Discussion Question: Trace the ways that prejudice affected Eliza and Hardin’s lives. Under such circumstances, why would Hardin want to serve in the military of the United States? What would you have done?