

George Washington Thomas (1861-1946)

George Washington Thomas was born in Wisemantown, Kentucky, around 1860 or 1861. Kentucky was still a slave state at the time, but there are no records showing that George was born into slavery. He was the first child of Samuel and Lisa (Bell) Thomas. He had four sisters—Mary, Luella, Effie, and Grace—and one brother, Everett. In 1884, Samuel and Lisa moved their family to Normal, Illinois, where Samuel worked as a blacksmith. They lived at 113 W. Willow Street, which would be George's home for the rest of his life. There is no specific reason recorded for why the family moved to Normal, but it could have been for better opportunities in land and work. Many African Americans from the South moved north in the late 1800s to escape crop failures and economic struggles. Also, Jesse Fell, who founded Normal, encouraged Black people to settle in the area and helped African Americans find work there.

At a young age, George learned blacksmithing from his father. He started working at a blacksmith shop owned by Henry W. Goff in Normal around 1891. There, George repaired wagons, shoed horses, sharpened tools, welded, and helped run the business. After working for Goff for over 10 years, George and his brother Everett opened their own blacksmith shop, possibly taking over Goff's shop. Their business operated from around 1904 to 1934.

In the early 1900s, there were many more horses than cars, so blacksmiths had a lot of work. Though we don't have personal stories from George about his work, it likely followed the typical routine of other blacksmiths. Some of the tools used included a forge (a hearth to heat metal), an anvil (to shape the metal), bellows (to stoke the fire), hammers, tongs (to move hot metal), wrenches, and a buckskin apron. Blacksmiths used coal to heat the forge, and horseshoeing was one of the most common tasks. To shoe a horse, a blacksmith would trim the hooves, heat the shoe, hammer it on the anvil, and then nail the shoe to the hoof. It took about 15 minutes to shoe one horse, and a blacksmith could shoe about 14 to 17 horses a day. The average charge was 50 to 75 cents per horse, which would be about \$13 to \$20 in 2011. Blacksmiths also repaired farm equipment and wagon wheels.

Blacksmiths usually started work early in the morning because the forge and the heat of the shop would make the afternoons too hot to work. This job was physically tough, and many blacksmiths had back problems from bending over the anvil all day. George, known as "Wash" in the community, was a tall, muscular man, about 6'1". He wore a leather blacksmith's cap and apron over his bib overalls. People in the community often remembered seeing him at work, especially children walking to school, who would pass his shop and see George working on horseshoes.

George married Amanda Merrill in December 1907, and they lived in the Thomas family home in Normal. They had no children, but they opened their home to African American students attending Illinois State Normal University. The students called them "G.W. and Mrs. G.W."

George was one of the wealthiest African American men in McLean County and was respected by the community. He and his wife were active members of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Normal, where George served on the church board and as secretary from 1901 to 1902. Amanda was also involved in the church and other social clubs.

After more than 50 years of blacksmithing, George retired from his shop a few years before he passed away on December 17, 1946. His wife Amanda died the year before. Both are buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, Illinois.