

Peter Charles Duff (1856-1919)

The Duff family was one of the earliest black families to establish themselves in Normal, Illinois. And the head of that family was Peter Duff, who moved up from Kentucky in search of a better life and more opportunities than were afforded to him in living as a black man in the southern United States.

Peter Charles Duff was born on July 15, 1856, in Irwin, Perry County, Kentucky to John and Edith Duff who were enslaved at the time. Peter, like most of his brothers and sisters, was born into slavery. But, sometime in 1870, a 14-year-old Duff (and later some of his siblings) came to Normal as part of the post U.S. Civil War stream of black migration from the south.

When Duff arrived, he was hired by Jesse Fell, a businessman, landowner, and acquaintance of Abraham Lincoln known for helping found a number of Central Illinois communities—including Normal—as well as Illinois State Normal University. Fell was also known for his abolitionist sentiments. Duff remained in Normal the rest of his life because of the opportunities he had working for Fell.¹

Duff was required by Fell to learn to read, write, and understand the fundamentals of arithmetic in order to work for him. Duff took classes at public schools and, according to Fell family history, had much assistance from the Fell children in his studies.² In 1878 he also lived with the Fell family at their home on Broadway Avenue in Normal.³

Duff was encouraged to learn the carpenter's trade by Fell and developed considerable skills as a carpenter—a career he continued for the rest of his life.⁴ Duff first focused on residential carpentry, working for Twin City contractors Cunningham and Kofoed. He also served as a workman in the construction of shop buildings for the Chicago & Alton Railroad in Bloomington.⁵ It was his work on a northwest Bloomington reservoir project in 1905 that led to him getting involved in heavy construction work. Duff began working for the Chicago & Alton Bridge Builders, located out of Brighton Park, Illinois, in 1906 after the reservoir project was completed. Duff worked on constructing concrete forms needed to repair Chicago & Alton Railroad bridges. While this work was likely steadier than carpentry work, this work required him to be away from home for extended periods of time during the week, coming home on the weekends.⁶

Since his arrival in Normal, Duff was interested in purchasing land to build a house and start a family. Duff entered into an agreement with Fell to purchase two adjoining lots of land in Normal, located at 107 W. Poplar Street. The terms of the agreement were lenient: Duff agreed to pay taxes on the land until he could pay the purchase price of \$600 (or about \$19,600 in 2025).⁷ Ten years later, Duff was able to purchase the land from Fell in 1880.⁸

¹ Greg Koos and Marcia Young. "Peter C. Duff: Craft as Biography," in *Material Culture*, Vol. 25. No. 3, 1995, 36.

² Gina Hunter and Susan Hartzold, "A Cosmopolitan Place: The Duff Family," *Challenges, Choices, and Change: Making a Home* exhibit, McLean County Museum of History.

³ Gould, David. *Gould's City Directory of 1878-1879 Bloomington-Normal*. (Bloomington: Leader Steam Printing House, 1878), 56.

⁴ John Muirhead. *A History of African Americans in McLean County, Illinois 1835-1975*. (Bloomington, IL: Bloomington-Normal Black History Project, 1998) 23-24; Koos and Young, 38.

⁵ Koos and Young, 38

⁶ Hartzold, Susan. "Duffs' lives reflect Black experience," *The Pantagraph*, February 28, 2021; Graybill, Elaine. "Jesse Fell helped a black settler to a better life," *The Pantagraph*, September 29, 1987; Koos and Young, 48.

⁷ Measuringworth.com, date accessed January 22, 2026.

⁸ Graybill, "Jesse Fell helped a black settler to a better life."

Three years later, Peter married Fannie Walker on November 22, 1883, in Normal. The couple would have seven children; Alverta, Julia, Janie May, Cordelia, John Walker, Rollie, and George T. Three of their children died at young ages. Their youngest daughter, Cordelia, died at birth on August 30, 1899. Rollie died of Typhoid fever in 1912 when he was about 19, and Janie, died in 1918 at the age of 27 during the Flu Pandemic of 1918-1919.⁹

Fannie Walker Duff was born into slavery on January 30, 1865, in Richmond, Madison County, Kentucky, to Charles and Julia (Hawkins) Walker. After the Civil War ended and the death of her father, Fannie, her mother, and siblings continued to stay with their former enslavers, George and Mary Green, because they had no resources and no where else to go. Fannie's mother remarried in 1873, at which time they left the Green family. Like her future husband, Peter, Fannie's family had few opportunities for employment in the South, so they decided to leave and moved to Normal in 1881.¹⁰ Normal was a community that was growing with plentiful work, more open to black individuals moving there, and perhaps less racial discrimination than Kentucky.¹¹

Using his skills as a carpenter, Peter Duff built a house for his family on the land he had purchased from Fell.¹² The Victorian cottage was never a "finished" work for Duff. It was an evolving structure that was enlarged, modified, restyled, and improved several times, especially as his family continued to grow, until Duff's death in 1919.¹³

He made significant renovations and improvements to the house over the years. In the 1890s, he added a second parlor on the east elevation and a bay window on the west elevation. Additionally, he remodeled the inside of the house to formally create separate spaces for the dining room and kitchen.¹⁴ Duff also improved the kitchen by adding wall cabinets and counters, a pass-through door to the dining room, a cistern pump and wall-hung sink.¹⁵ All of these major additions came from "Duff's desire to create a fashionable, convenient, and modern home for his family."¹⁶ The cabinets are now part of the permanent collection of the McLean County Museum of History.

Between 1915 and 1919, Duff made more renovations to the house in an attempt to convert it into an Arts and Crafts Bungalow. He placed an entirely new foundation under the house using rock-faced concrete. Duff also added an Arts and Crafts style front porch. He made additional improvements to the kitchen and dining room by installing a central-heating system, which allowed him to create a built-in cabinet (which resembled a pie safe) where the chimney had previously been located. One of his final upgrades was the installation of an indoor bathroom in the house.¹⁷ The house is still located at 107 W. Poplar Street in Normal, although much of the original fabric of the house has either been removed or covered up.¹⁸ The last Duff family member to live in the home was Julie, who passed away in 1984, and the house was sold three years later.

⁹ Graybill, "Jesse Fell helped a black settler to a better life."

¹⁰ Hunter and Hartzold, "A Cosmopolitan Place: The Duff Family."

¹¹ Koos and Young, 37.

¹² Peter Duff vertical file, McLean County Museum of History Archives.

¹³ Koos and Young, 40.

¹⁴ Ibid, 41-42

¹⁵ Muirhead, 23-24; Koos and Young, 44.

¹⁶ Koos and Young, 44.

¹⁷ Ibid, 45-46

¹⁸ Muirhead, 23.

Duff's work as a carpenter helped him prosper in Normal. He became a respected member of the community and was very active in social and religious organizations. He was a member of Second Christian Church in Normal, serving as the superintendent of the Sunday School and an elder for the church. He was also a member and served as chaplain of the all-black Paradise Chapter 2829 of the International Order of the Odd Fellows, a fraternity based around fellowship and charitable works.¹⁹ Like most fraternal organizations at the time, the IOOF had separate lodges for black and white individuals.

Peter Duff passed away on February 25, 1919, at the family home on West Poplar Street. His death was due to the 1918-1919 Flu Pandemic. The week prior he had been working on a job for Chicago & Alton Bridge Builders and contracted influenza. He returned home to try and recuperate but suffered two attacks of apoplexy (today referred to as a stroke), the second of which took his life.²⁰ According to his obituary in one of the local newspapers, Duff was considered "a man of sterling qualities and strong principles. He was highly respected by this community and his loss will be greatly felt by all who knew him."²¹ His funeral was held at Second Christian Church in Normal and he was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington.

By: Candace Summers, 2026

¹⁹ Koos and Young, 38; "History." *Grand Lodge Of Illinois Independent Order Of Odd Fellows*. <https://ioof-il.org/history>. Accessed June 27, 2023

²⁰ "Peter C. Duff Past Away This Morning," *The Pantagraph*, February 25, 1919.

²¹ Graybill, "Jesse Fell helped a black settler to a better life."