

Belle Blue-Claxton (1872 – 1926)

Belle Blue-Claxton was born in Bloomington, IL on April 30, 1872. She was a daughter of Richard Blue and Emily Louisa Cooper. She had a brother, James Percival, and a sister, Lutie. Her father, a native of Dayton, Ohio was employed as a farm laborer for Judge James Raybern near Bloomington. During the U.S. Civil War, Richard enlisted in Company A of the 29th United States Colored Regiment on February 3, 1865 in Springfield, IL.¹ Sometime during his term of service, he was appointed to be a musician in his regiment. This appointment was most likely because he was slightly disabled due to a foot injury he received while chopping wood in 1857.² Richard served for about nine months, mustering out in Brownsville, Texas on November 6, 1865.³

Belle and her husband James Claxton, resided at 306 South Madison Street (near the current location of Lincoln Towers an assisted living facility). James had been a Bloomington resident since 1918. Belle and James had no children. Lucinda Posey, another well-known African American woman, recalled that Belle was “a tall, stately, light-complexioned woman, always in a ‘shirtwaist’ and full skirt, her hair piled high on top her head.” She also described James as “a tall Indian-looking man.”⁴

Belle and James were both very active in the growing movement to obtain civil rights for African Americans which had been guaranteed to African Americans by the 14th and 15th Amendments. James was chairman of the Colored Citizens Bureau in 1926 while Belle served as secretary. James and Belle were also members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and Belle served as secretary for the local branch. The N.A.A.C.P. was a civil rights organization that is still active today and works to ensure a society in which all individuals have equal rights and there is no racial hatred or racial discrimination.⁵ The local chapter of the N.A.A.C.P. was organized in August 1918. Belle also took the position as a delegate for the local chapter at the N.A.A.C.P. conference in Cleveland, Ohio in 1919.

As a member of the N.A.A.C.P. Belle was part of the June 1919 movement where a group of African American citizens of Bloomington called for the de-segregation of the beach at Miller Park. At the time, there were two separate beaches; one for African Americans and the other for whites. The separate beaches had been established in 1908 when park commissioners decided to build a separate beach and bathing facility for African Americans. This was done because “the efforts of blacks to swim at the public beach were resented by less-than-accommodating members of the white community.”⁶ Park officials stated that African Americans were “entitled to some rights,” as they too were taxpayers and Miller Park Lake was a taxpayer supported lake. However, officials built a separate beach for African Americans instead integrating the existing beach.⁷

¹ Illinois State Archives, Illinois Civil War Muster Database, <http://www.ilsos.gov/genealogy/CivilWarController>

² Edward Miller Jr. *The Black Civil War Soldiers of Illinois, The Story of the 29th U.S. Colored Infantry*. (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 1998) 139

³ Illinois State Archives, Illinois Civil War Muster Database

⁴ Lucinda Posey, Bloomington Normal Black History Project, McLean County Museum of History Archives

⁵ NAACP website, <http://www.naacp.org/about/mission/index.htm>, 2008

⁶ Bill Kemp, “Miller Park Lake weathered racism, pollution,” *The Pantagraph*, August 19, 2007

⁷ Kemp, “Miller Park Lake weathered racism, pollution.”

White bathers had access to the majority of the beach and even had their own changing rooms. African Americans were relegated to a very small area of beach in the older northeastern section of the lake near the stone bridge. This section was usually very dirty and unsanitary.⁸ A committee representing the African Americans of Bloomington spoke to John G. Welch, Commissioner of the Department of Public Property, declaring that as taxpayers, they had the same rights to the beach and bathhouses which had been designated for whites only. Commissioner Welch's response was that plans had been made for improving the facilities at the section of the lake designated for African Americans only.⁹

A few days later a second committee led by a city patrol driver at police headquarters, Daniel Johnson, approached the Commissioner once more. This time, the committee said that the majority of African Americans preferred the segregation but demanded their facilities be equal to the ones whites had available and to which they were denied. Johnson said that members of the race would be better pleased with such regulations than the integration asked for by the former committee. Commissioner Welch said that the council planned to improve conditions for the African-Americans and that an African-American attendant would even be placed in charge of the bathhouse.¹⁰

In response to the *Daily Pantagraph* articles written about the protest Belle wrote a letter to the editor in order to further explain the situation and to clarify the N.A.A.C.P.'s stance on the controversy. She wrote to explain that three of Bloomington's most worthy and highly-esteemed citizens and taxpayers were part of the first committee, a "special investigative committee," that approached the Commissioner. She went on to explain that this committee expressed the sentiments of the organization which demanded the exercise of citizenship rights, which the law guaranteed to every citizen. Belle wrote, "We are not asking a favor of Mr. Welch; we are simply demanding our rights. We have an organization, national in scope, that stands for something, and that is justice."¹¹

By the end of July, the "white" portion of Miller Park lake's beach was extended along the drive north of the lake and had two carloads of sand dumped onto the beach. The slough grass along the lake shore was removed and the brick bottom of the entire beach was scraped clean. It was also reported that the African-American's section of the beach was improved upon as well. These improvements included the addition of sand and several loads of gravel that were dumped into the water close to the edge of the beach.¹² Charles Thomas, a former sergeant in the 370th U.S. Infantry (known as the famous "Black Devils") during World War I, was appointed to be in charge of the African American beach. Part of his duties was to make sure that beach regulations were observed.¹³ In another article in the *Daily Pantagraph*, the author of the article reported that the facilities at the African American beach were much improved and most African Americans were content with their "Jim Crow" beach. The Jim Crow laws advocated "separate but equal" public facilities for each race. Even so, there were still some groups who advocated for a beach open to permit a mingling of both the white and black races.¹⁴

⁸ "Colored People Protest on Park Lake Arrangements," *The Daily Pantagraph*, July 15, 1919

⁹ "Colored People Protest on Park Lake Arrangements."

¹⁰ "Second Negro Committee Has Word on Bath House," *The Daily Pantagraph*, July 17, 1919

¹¹ "Mrs. Belle Blue-Claxton Tells About Committee," *Daily Pantagraph*, July 18, 1919

¹² "Extension of Park Beach About to be Done," *The Daily Pantagraph*, July 29, 1919

¹³ "Soldier Custodian of the Bath House for Negroes," *The Daily Pantagraph*, July 30, 1919

¹⁴ "Extension of Park Beach About to be Done."

While continuing to remain actively involved in civil rights, Belle was also a member of Wayman African Methodist Episcopal Church. She had an extensive professional life contrary to the norm for an African-American woman to remain confined in the domestic realm. Belle held several positions at businesses and offices. She was a stenographer and bookkeeper for many years for S.P. Robinson, a Bloomington lawyer. She also worked for five years as secretary for General John McNulta in Chicago and 10 years as head bookkeeper for the Percheron Society of America.

Belle died on July 19, 1926¹⁵ following a stroke of paralysis earlier that day which was similar to a stroke she had suffered three years previous. Her funeral was held at the Coleman Chapel and she was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.¹⁶ Belle's husband died several years later on July 22, 1932 following a short illness. He was buried next to Belle in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, IL.

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¹⁵ Death Index entry for Belle Blue Claxton. Illinois Regional Archives Depository, <http://www.ilsos.gov/isavital/idphDeathSearch.do>, date accessed April 22, 2014

¹⁶ "Mrs. Belle Claxton, Well Known Colored Woman, Is Summoned," *The Daily Pantagraph*, July 20, 1926. Her headstone incorrectly states her death was June 14, 1928.