

Lucinda Barton (1838-1929)

Lucinda Robinson Barton was born on January 18, 1838 in Washington Co., Missouri. When she was four, her parents, Robert and Jane Robinson, moved from Missouri into neighboring Madison County, Illinois. The Robinsons, descendants of former slaves, were thought to have a diverse heritage. Lucinda's grandchildren believed that "she had Irish, African and Native American ancestry."¹

When her parents died in the early 1850s Lucinda moved to Batavia, Illinois (in Kane County), where she lived with her sister, Mrs. Judah Watts. It was here that she was educated and learned how to read and write even though there were only three African-American families in town.

Eventually Lucinda returned to Edwardsville in Madison County and married Milton Barton, a descendent of displaced Cherokee Indians in North Carolina. He was the son of Glafey and William Barton Junior.

Before coming to Normal in 1862 Milton worked as a farmer and nurseryman in Carlinville, IL. Milton was remembered as having long hair tucked under with a multitude of hairpins and always wearing a sweatband around his forehead and Native American clothing.

Descendents of Milton and Lucinda recalled that they had also lived near Alton, IL where Milton had worked as a nurseryman. It is there that Milton may have met Jesse Fell when Fell had come south to buy trees for his landscaping project at Illinois State Normal University. Family tradition suggests that Fell hired Milton to help him plant the trees.

Lucinda and Milton eventually had ten children, nine of whom survived to adulthood. They were: William Carey, Ulysses, Pleasant, Evalina, Osceola, Jenny, Sherman, Lucinda, Blaine, and Eugene. These names were inspired by contemporary military, political, and literary figures. For instance their fifth child, Osceola, was named after the famous Seminole resistance fighter.

When the Barton family moved to Normal in 1862, the town had yet to be incorporated and they were among the first African American residents. Just ten years later, there would be over 100 African Americans living in Normal.

In the late 1800s Normal's considerably large African-American population suffered relatively little discrimination compared to African-Americans in other similarly-sized Illinois communities at the time. This may be due to the economic growth sustained by its location on the Illinois Central and Chicago & Alton railroad lines, lots of job opportunities at ISNU, and the fact that many town leaders were liberal or moderate reformers who supported equal rights and abolition (in contrast to Missouri, Lucinda's birthplace, which was strongly pro-slavery). Either way, the Bartons were a prosperous family. They owned their home located at 316 School Street and an automobile and managed to enjoy a similar standard of living as their white neighbors.

On June 18, 1885 Milton Barton passed away at the age of 49 of rheumatism. Services were held at Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church which he and his family had been

¹ John Muirhead, "The Barton Family," in *The William Carey Barton family : a study in historical archaeology* by Dr. Edward Jelks. (Bloomington: Bloomington-Normal Black History Project and McLean County Historical Society, 1996) 2

members of. In fact, the Barton family may have been some of the church's oldest members.

Lucinda enjoyed cooking in her backyard with a large pot over a campfire much to the chagrin of her daughter Evalina. According to Evalina's daughter, Lucinda Brent Posey, Evalina once found her mother cooking and said "You're NOT on a reservation now! You're in town with two stoves in the kitchen. Don't let me catch you cooking in the backyard anymore."² Lucinda was offended but continued to secretly cook outside with her granddaughter. She thought food tasted better when cooked outdoors.

She was also a strong believer in herbal remedies, especially something called "the bitters." Every fall she gathered roots for "the bitters": hickory bark, dandelion roots, plantain roots, and other unknown ingredients which she would cook meticulously and eventually bottle up. Supposedly, "the bitters" could cure any ailment although it was remembered as tasting terrible. Lucinda Brent Posey recalled that "I learned never to complain; the pain was not nearly as bad as taking "the bitters."³ Lucinda Barton also used turpentine, carbolic acid, and even the occasional cow manure poltus to cure anything from headaches to stomach flu.

Lucinda had seen many changes in the community during her long life. One event in particular occurred in 1867 when residents of the town of Normal voted to uphold ISNU President Richard Edwards' decision to admit the first African American student to the Model School (later named Metcalf School).

After a long life spanning nearly a century, Lucinda died at the age of 91 on February 24, 1929. She died of a stroke at the home of her daughter Lucinda Barton Dabney. She was the oldest member of Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church at the time of her death. She, like her husband, was buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

By: Laurie Peterson, 2008

² "Lucinda Brent Posey Shares Her Family Heritage," McLean County Museum of History Archives.

³ "Lucinda Brent Posey Shares Her Family Heritage"