

Martha H. Rice (1817-1904)

Martha H. Baker (Rice) was born in Richmond, Kentucky on September 4, 1817. Her parent's names are not known. She had five brothers and sisters whose names are also unknown. Martha's father died before she was old enough to know him. Because of that, her mother moved her family to Nicholasville, KY. While there, Martha flourished. She was educated and became part of the Christian church, a faith that lasted her whole life.

On December 8, 1840 she married James L. Rice, a successful merchant also from Nicholasville. They had one child, Jennie Rice, who was born about 1849 and died in February 1872 at the age of 23. Martha and James lived in Kentucky for sixteen years until 1856 when they moved to Illinois. Martha recalled her experience moving from the South into a Union state in an article published in *The Daily Bulletin*. Martha and her family journeyed from Kentucky via the Ohio River to St. Louis, Missouri then on the Mississippi River to the Illinois River. They probably landed at Pekin, IL and then came to Bloomington, Illinois.¹ When they first arrived, they settled on a farm outside of Bloomington. A short time later, they moved into the growing town of Bloomington where they built a home on West Jefferson Street. Her husband, James, became a prosperous dry goods merchant, even partnering with his brother-in-law, Allen Withers, for several years.²

James and Martha most likely came to Bloomington because of the Withers family. Her husband was the brother of Sarah Rice Withers who was also a prominent figure in Bloomington. Sarah and her husband Allen first moved to Bloomington in 1836. Both families were from the South and shared the same political ideals, being Democrats and supporters of slavery. The Withers owned a slave names Henry Clay Dean while they were living in Missouri in the 1840s. Upon their return to Bloomington in 1847, Henry was free but continued to live and work for the Withers the rest of his life. Martha and James also owned slaves prior to their move to Bloomington. When they came to Bloomington they brought along two of the slaves they had owned in Kentucky, Polly and Isaac Hockaday. Although the slaves were free once in Illinois, they chose to stay with the Rice's as servants.³

During their first few years in Bloomington, Martha found that the citizens were not as "advanced or fancy" as Kentuckians. For example, when invited to a party at what was considered the most lavish of homes, Martha had ideas of fancy spreads and elaborate fashions so she "wore her best straight out of Kentucky."⁴ However, what she found was nothing as grandiose as she imagined. Martha told her sister that "I felt that I could return all hospitality here for everything was so plain."⁵ In addition to the small parties, Martha described how there was little entertainment as "card playing and dancing were almost unknown forms of entertainment" in Bloomington at the time.⁶

Even though there was a sizable population of people from Kentucky, Tennessee, and other regions of the South in Bloomington, the Rice's were not warmly welcomed when they first arrived. In the 1850s, the national debate over slavery exploded. Stephen A. Douglas's Kansas-Nebraska Act, which allowed a territory's population to determine whether it was slave

¹ "In Ante -Bellum Days," *The Daily Bulletin*, March 1, 1899

² "Mrs. Rice is dead," *The Daily Pantagraph*, August 17, 1904

³ 1860 U.S. Census

⁴ "In Ante-Bellum Days"

⁵ "In Ante -Bellum Days"

⁶ "In Ante -Bellum Days"

or free, created controversy across the nation and incited violence in the West in what became known as “Bleeding Kansas. Antislavery supporters “were outraged because, under the terms of the Missouri Compromise of 1820, slavery would have been outlawed in both territories.”⁷ Pro-slavery supporters were furious because they felt that people should be able to freely vote to make slavery legal in new states. The issue of slavery drove a bitter wedge throughout society including the people living in Bloomington. It was these tensions over the issue of slavery which would cause the Rice’s some trouble after they had been living in Bloomington for only five years.

Controversy erupted when it was discovered that James sold or gave corn to the Governor of the State of Louisiana. This was just days after Louisiana had seceded from the Union on January 26, 1861. Doing business with Louisiana was then seen as treasonous. *The Pantagraph* picked up the story from the *Baton Rouge Advocate* and did not waste time in attacking Rice. It was disclosed in the *Advocate* that Rice offered to sell the governor two thousand bushels of corn that was grown on his own farm, at 33 cents a bushel.⁸ It was also stated in the report that the state could pay Rice whenever it suited “the convenience of the State” or did not have to pay at all.⁹ An excerpt from the *Advocate* reprinted in *The Pantagraph* stated: “We know Col. Rice to be a prompt, responsible man and one whose sympathies are all with the South. He is well known in this community where he has made a host of friends.”¹⁰

What followed this report was a scathing article in which Rice was much maligned in this “treasonous” deal. James Rice was seen as feeding Secessionists with corn grown by loyal Unionists.

“How do you like the picture, citizens of Old McLean? Here is one of your neighbors, as he claims to be, who has availed himself of the benefit of your liberal institutions, now most magnanimously offers to divide his crop with the armed mob of rebels who have planted cannon on the banks of the Mississippi, and have closed the free navigation of the waters that flow from your own fields to the Gulf of Mexico?...How do you like the picture friends? Would not those same Louisiana braves make a splendid show, their stomachs filled with gratuitous Illinois corn (solid and liquid) and marching under a rattlesnake banner to strike down the Flag of our Union...”¹¹

The citizens of Bloomington did not take kindly to this revelation and some citizens hung James Rice in effigy in the streets of Bloomington. Sarah Withers, Rice’s sister, wrote in her diary the following on February 10, 1861: “Rainy, muddy, mirky Sabbath...My Brothers Effigy is hanging in the streets of this city. For what. Giving corn to his friends. Oh ye righteous blackhearted Abolitionists. How cowardly,”¹² According to Sarah’s diary, James and Martha Rice were eventually forced to move out of Bloomington because of the anti-Southern sentiment against them, but it is not known when this occurred.

Later, after the Civil War had begun, more incidents occurred in which the Rice’s support of the Union was again questioned. An unfortunate incident took place one day in James’s store. A group of Union soldiers entered his store with the purpose of cleaning out the entire inventory.

⁷ “The Kansas-Nebraska Act 1854,” <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=28>

⁸ “Another Liberal Offer to Governor Moore,” *Daily Pantagraph*, Jan 31,1861

⁹ “Another Liberal Offer to Governor Moore,”

¹⁰ “Another Liberal Offer to Governor Moore”

¹¹ “Another Liberal Offer to Governor Moore”

¹² Diary of Sarah Withers (January 1, 1860-May 26, 1861)

The soldiers claimed that James “would not sell goods as reasonably to northern as to southern soldiers.”¹³ According to Martha, “. . . a clerk came running to the house to tell me of the fate about to befall our business.” Martha and the clerk ran back to the store and straight into the mob of Union soldiers. One of the soldiers even dropped a pistol almost at her feet.¹⁴ After the soldiers had retreated to the back of the store, her husband arrived. After James waited on a customer, the captain for the Union soldiers approached him and told James of their complaint. James asked his employees to vouch for his friendship towards northern soldiers, which the clerk did.¹⁵ The matter was resolved but harsh feelings and troubling incidents continued to plague the Rice’s during the Civil War.

Martha recalled that her husband “was branded a secessionist because he was in sympathy with the Southern cause.” The Rice’s, being from the South, did sympathize with Southerners in support of slave owning. Martha stated that this “was perfectly natural” being that they were from Kentucky. However, Martha and her husband were not “in sympathy with the idea of separation of the Union.” She hated that it was extremely hard for them to convince “a prejudiced community when their minds are once made up on a question.”¹⁶ Martha stated that there was a time when a couple of ladies who were regular customers “would go without new clothes rather than purchase them from Mr. Rice in that Secesh hole.”¹⁷ But only months later, they were back in the store buying from Rice and having him order what was not in stock for them.¹⁸

After James died on November 13, 1866, Martha lived with her sister-in-law, Sarah Withers for a time.¹⁹ She also spent a few years in Missouri with her brother, only to return to Bloomington after he died. For the last two years of her life, Martha resided with Mrs. Judith Bradner of Bloomington, living not far from where she had originally lived on West Jefferson Street.²⁰

Martha Rice died on August 16, 1904.²¹ Although she was a true southerner at heart, she never regretted the life she made in Bloomington. Before she died, she left instructions for her funeral, which included the songs she wanted played and the ministers she wished to conduct the services.²² Her funeral was held at First Christian Church in Bloomington. Martha was buried beside her husband, James, and their daughter, Jennie, at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, IL.

By: Emily Swartz, 2011

Edited By: Candace Summers, 2011

¹³ “In Ante –Bellum Days”

¹⁴ “In Ante –Bellum Days”

¹⁵ “In Ante –Bellum Days”

¹⁶ “In Ante –Bellum Days”

¹⁷ “In Ante –Bellum Days”

¹⁸ “In Ante –Bellum Days”

¹⁹ “Mrs. Rice is dead”

²⁰ “Mrs. Rice is dead”

²¹ “Mrs. Rice is dead”

²² “Mrs. Rice is dead”