

## **Central Illinois final resting place for once-enslaved persons**

The stain of slavery pervades the American experience, dating well before the nation's founding to the present. Yet the all-encompassing evil of the "peculiar institution" can also numb us to the realization that those enslaved were fully formed individuals deserving the soul-affirming dignity to tell their own stories.

Glimpses of those stories are available to us right here in Central Illinois, well north of the Mason-Dixon line. Fugitives of slavery during the Civil War and enslaved persons liberated by the Union Army made their way here in search of freedom. And after the Civil War, some freed people left the former Confederacy and headed north, hoping to make new lives in Bloomington-Normal and elsewhere.

There are several dozen, and likely many more, formerly enslaved persons buried in McLean County and other nearby communities, including Clinton, Delavan, Gibson City and Pontiac.

Because many enslaved persons never knew their birth date, there was often guesswork when it came to one's own biography. Anna Jackson, for instance, passed away in Normal on Feb. 7, 1881, with her age listed as a highly improbable 112. She was born in South Carolina, and her enslaver's surname was Raab. When Jackson was around ten years old, she was sent to live with Raab's daughter, who had married a man named Jenkins. Anna Jackson herself then married a man enslaved at the Jenkins' place, and they had ten children, all of whom were "sold off."

Through torturous circumstances, the couple was split apart but both eventually gained their freedom and were reunited—having discarded their enslaver's name in favor of Jackson. They made their way to Normal, though life was still one of privation. Her husband died at the McLean County Poor Farm in 1862. "They were poverty-stricken," noted *The Pantagraph*. "She labored on the washboard for support, and in the spring of 1865 she sent to Missouri for her daughter, Mary, who had ever since cared for the old lady."

We hope that Anna Jackson found some solace in the quiet cadences and pleasing patterns of quilting, for she was recognized as one of the most accomplished quilters in the Twin Cities. In fact, she was still actively piecing quilts not long before her death.

The pauper's cemetery on the former grounds of the McLean County Poor Farm serves as the final resting place for an undetermined number of formerly enslaved individuals. Located about five miles south of downtown Bloomington, the county's poor farm served as a home for indigent residents, transients, the elderly, the mentally ill and other wards of the county.

On May 28, 1911, William Jones died at the Poor Farm and was laid to rest at its “potter’s field.” He was born enslaved in 1810 in Virginia, and had lived in Bloomington for fifty some years before becoming a Poor Farm “inmate” (as residents were called) five months before his death.

Several formerly enslaved individuals buried in McLean County were Civil War veterans, having enlisted in the Union Army once they gained their freedom. Isaac Esque, enslaved in Louisiana, shook off the chains of bondage and enlisted in the 65th Regiment, U.S. Colored Infantry. Several weeks after the war’s end, Ike (as he was known) opened a barbershop on East Beaufort Street in Normal, said to be the town’s first such establishment. He continued barbering at that place for eighteen years before moving his business to Bloomington, where he cut hair for another ten years. He was also known as one of the toughest checkers players to beat in the area.

In his later years Esque tended a small “truck patch” on the northern edge of Normal, and local residents became accustomed to him hauling produce in and about town aboard a spring wagon pulled by his beloved mule.

He was an active member of the local post of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), an influential fraternal society of Union veterans in the post-Civil War era. “He is regular, attentive and one of the leading spirits of the Normal organization,” noted *The Pantagraph* some six years before Esque’s death. “When one considers his start in life, the hardships and privations he endured, it is remarkable what he has accomplished—for he owns his home and is proud of the fact.”

As Esque’s health declined, Normal’s Civil War veterans cared for one of their own. “Comrades from the Charles E. Hovey Post, GAR, looked after him to a great extent, with the help of kind friends,” it was said. This gesture of brotherhood among former brothers-in-arms, black and white, stands in stark contrast to the nation’s moral abdication when it came to integrating the military, which didn’t happen until after World War II. It should be further noted that the GAR in this area welcomed black veterans, but when the American Legion first organized after World War I, there were racially segregated posts in the Twin Cities.

Isaac Esque passed away on Aug. 28, 1920, though it’s not known where he was laid to rest.

Lexington Cemetery, located on the small community’s western edge, is the final resting place for two formerly enslaved individuals who served in the Union Army—Daniel Smith (see accompanying photograph) and Jack Turner. In the case of the latter veteran, there is precious little available documentation. It’s said Turner was born in 1820, escaped his enslaver during the Civil War and joined the Union Army. He lived in a humble abode on the outskirts of Lexington

in a timbered tract west of what's today the Amtrak / Union Pacific rail line. His marker reads: Jack Turner, Colored, 1820—April 7, 1903.

Simon B. Malone is buried in the Civil War soldier's plot of the "old city" section of what's today Evergreen Memorial Cemetery. He was born into slavery in 1842 in Tippah County, Miss., near the Tennessee border. He was 20 years old when, with the arrival of the 5th Regiment, Ohio Cavalry, he liberated himself, and eventually enlisting in Co. D of the 13th Regiment, United States Colored Heavy Artillery.

In 1867, two years after the war, he married Julia E. Dillon and the two settled in Normal. Malone held various jobs in the Twin Cities, including teamster and Town of Normal poundmaster—the latter a position involving the care and feeding of stray livestock (and in this instance, perhaps dogs as well.)

Malone built a two-story, wood-frame house on the 500 block of Kingsley Street. Sadly, the Malone house was lost to arson on Oct. 15, 1981. The following year, the Town of Normal erected a Humans Relations Commission marker at the site to commemorate the first house in Normal built by an African American. The fate of that marker, which no longer stands, is unknown.