

Julia Bee Hawkins (1863-1888)

Julia Bee was born in Illinois on March 29th, 1863. It is not known who her parents were but in the 1880 census she was listed as the daughter of Henry and Ellen Dean who might have been her adoptive parents. While we do not know a great deal about Julia herself, what we do know can be gleaned from her marriage to a well-known carriage and omnibus driver named Absalom “Ab” Hawkins. According to his obituary, Ab was born on December 25th, 1855 in Kansas City, Kansas. However, according to census records, he was born in Tennessee which is more plausible because Kansas City, KS was not founded until 1868. Ab came to Bloomington with his parents sometime before 1870. Not much is known about his father, and his mother Rachel Hawkins was listed as a widow in the Bloomington City Directory of 1870.

Julia Hawkins grew up during a time of great change in our country. On January 1st, 1863 the same year Julia was born, Abraham Lincoln announced a proclamation abolishing slavery in all areas rebelling against the United States, known as the Emancipation Proclamation. This was also at the height of the Civil War.

At the age of 17 Julia married Ab Hawkins on September 9th, 1880 in Bloomington. Their wedding was publicized in *The Daily Pantagraph*. The ceremony took place at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Clay Dean located on 503 West Washington. The ceremony was performed by Rev. Malone, a former pastor of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.) in Bloomington, Illinois.¹ Today this church is known as Wayman A.M.E. Church and is the oldest African American Church in Bloomington having been founded in the 1840s. In attendance at the wedding were “guests including many of the leading people of the city, both white and colored.” Julia wore a gown of “peach blow silk and satin, with lace.” Ab wore “black with white vest, gloves and a tie.” After the lovely ceremony, refreshments were served in “elegant style.” Since Ab was very well known throughout the city, many people attended the wedding. Their wedding was given far more attention by the *Daily Pantagraph* than most African American weddings of the time. In attendance were several high standing citizens of Bloomington who brought presents for the new married couple: David Davis brought a butter dish, A.B. Funk brought a fan, and Adlai E. Stevenson I brought a cake dish.

After they were married, Julia and Ab had three children. Their first child, Hattie Ellen, was born on June 13th, 1881. Luella was born on October 30th, 1883. Their third child, Leota, was born on June 7th, 1886. Leota died on August 17th, 1887 of the measles and was only 14 months old.

Though Julia was recorded as a housewife in her obituary², African-American women also worked as clothes washers, laborers, servants, and cooks in Bloomington-Normal in the 1880s. African-American men did not have many options either, working as barbers, whitewashers, merchants, grocers, and many other types of laborers.³ However, Ab worked as a hack and omnibus driver most of his life. He was the only African-American “hack” in the city of Bloomington at that time. He primarily drove a “hack” or a “hackney,” which was a relatively small, four-wheeled vehicle pulled by two horses used to carry people for hire. They did not follow a schedule but instead drove a

¹ “The Union Forever,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, September 10, 1880

² *Death Records for 1888*

³ John W. Muirhead. *A History of African-Americans in McLean County, Illinois 1835-1975*, 23

customer wherever the driver and the customer agreed upon. Ab was well known and well liked by many in the city, including those in the upper class community and never ran into any legal trouble as a hack driver.

On June 19th, 1888 Julia died of pulmonary consumption at the age of 25. She had the disease for three years before she passed away. She died at their home on 610 South Main Street. After Julia's death, Ab never remarried. He lived until the age of 47 when he passed away on September 24th, 1903. They are buried next to each other and their daughter, Leota, at the Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, Illinois.

By: Lisa Dretske 2009