

## Eliza (Davis) Esque 1845-1914

Eliza Davis Esque was born around 1845 in St. Charles County, Missouri. Little is known about her family including the names of her parents. However, it is known that she was born into slavery<sup>1</sup> and that her mother was born in Virginia and her father was born in Missouri. Eliza married her first husband (who was also a slave) while living Missouri. But, according to her second husband's Civil War pension application, the two were separated somehow and she did not know what became of him.<sup>2</sup> It is possible that he was sold to a new master, thus separating them. According to her obituary, Eliza was survived by a brother, Alex Pollard, and a sister, Clara Coats.<sup>3</sup> In 1862, Eliza moved to Bloomington, Illinois from St. Louis, MO for unknown reasons.<sup>4</sup>

Eliza's second husband, Hardin (Harding) Esque, was born in 1825 in the state of Tennessee. He moved to Illinois sometime before 1860. She and Hardin were married on November 26, 1863. While they did not have any biological children of their own, Eliza did help Hardin raise his children by his first wife and they had one foster child, Fred K. Johnson.<sup>5</sup> The Esque's first resided at 319 S. Madison and later at 305 S. Lee St. in Bloomington.<sup>6</sup> Eliza was a member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (today known as Wayman AME). The church was founded in 1846 and is the oldest African American Church in Bloomington.

The members of the AME Church were very outspoken against slavery for many years before the Civil War. One annual event which they held to promote emancipation for slaves in the United States was known as the "First of August." The "First of August" event not only championed the issue of freeing slaves in the U.S., but also celebrated the end of the slave trade and freeing of the slaves in the British West Indies in August of 1834. The first "First of August" celebration was held in Bloomington on July 31, 1859. Tickets for the event were sold at .25 cents a piece and the money raised from the ticket sales was used to support the construction of a new building for the AME church. "On Sunday, July 31, 1859, Bloomington's black community met at 9:30 AM at the AME church. They formed a procession that included a band and many of the people carried banners."<sup>7</sup> Many white residents were in attendance and speeches were given by prominent figures among the African American community. These celebrations continued to be held until the 1870s or 1880s. There was also a separate Emancipation Day celebration that was held after the Civil war ended and was typically held in the winter. After the passage of the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment in April of 1870, "it appears that the First of August and Emancipation Day celebrations were blended into a general Emancipation Day celebration which was usually held in August or September."<sup>8</sup>

Eliza and Hardin were married at the height of the Civil War. Less than a year after they were married, Hardin enlisted as a private in the Union Army on October 4, 1864 in Springfield,

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. National Archives & Records Administration. Federal Military Pension Application of Harding Escue (Esaw Harding), "Declaration of a Widow for Original Pension," January 21, 1889.

<sup>2</sup> "Declaration of a Widow for Original Pension"

<sup>3</sup> "Funeral of Eliza Escue," *The Daily Pantagraph*, August 19, 1914

<sup>4</sup> Denise Fries Romack, Research Summary on Mrs. Eliza (Davis) Esque

<sup>5</sup> "Funeral of Eliza Escue"

<sup>6</sup> *Bloomington City Directories 1868-1911*

<sup>7</sup> Scott Wagers, notes on the First of August Celebration held in Bloomington from 1859 to 1870

<sup>8</sup> Wagers, notes on the First of August Celebration

IL.<sup>9</sup> He then returned to his home state of Tennessee and joined the 3<sup>rd</sup> U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery in Memphis, TN.<sup>10</sup> Prior to this African American men had not been allowed to serve in the military. However, there was a growing need for more soldiers and some felt that African American men should be allowed to serve to help fulfill this need. It was not until the Emancipation Proclamation was formally issued on January 1, 1863 by President Abraham Lincoln that African American men were allowed to serve in the Union Army.

After Civil War ended on April 15, 1865, both black and white soldiers began to muster out of service and return home. To welcome the African American soldiers back home to Bloomington, a reception dinner was held on October 19, 1865. The African American citizens of Bloomington, including Eliza Esque, (since Hardin served in the Union Army as well) desired to “return thanks to those who so readily gave all the assistance required.”<sup>11</sup> The reception was held at Phoenix Hall in Bloomington. Thirty black soldiers were present and participated in the reception, the majority of them having served in the 55<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts and 29<sup>th</sup> Illinois Colored Infantries. Twenty-five of the thirty soldiers in attendance demonstrated army drills and gave a few speeches. Nearly 300 African Americans and several whites joined the festivities which included a plentiful supper. *The Daily Pantagraph* reported that “the whole proceedings were pleasant and orderly....they never held more creditable meeting in this city. We are glad to see that the gallant services of our colored soldiers, are so highly appreciated by their friends who have been at home.”<sup>12</sup> It is not known if Hardin, Eliza’s husband, was in attendance at the reception. It was possible that he did attend the reception because he mustered out of service on October 3, 1865 in Memphis, TN.<sup>13</sup>

After only being married for about 12 years, Hardin Esque died on October 31, 1875. The cause of his death was attributed to chronic diarrhea, which he began suffering from during his service in the Civil War.<sup>14</sup> He was buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, IL. A weathered marker, with the word “colored” etched in the stone; (which is reference to his service in the Civil War) marks his grave.<sup>15</sup>

In January-February 1889, Eliza applied for and received Hardin’s Civil War pension. According to records, it appears that she was paid the sum of \$12 per month for his pension until her own death 39 years later.<sup>16</sup> She died of pneumonia on August 18, 1914. Her funeral services were held at the A.M.E. Church where she was a member.<sup>17</sup> She was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, IL, though she is not buried next to Hardin.

By: Emily Swartz, 2011

Edited By: Candace Summers, 2011

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<sup>9</sup> Federal Military Pension Application of Harding Escue (Esaw Harding), “War Department, Adjutant General’s Office” April 9, 1889

<sup>10</sup> Denise Fries Romack, “Mr Hardin Esque,” research summary

<sup>11</sup> “The African Reception,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, October 20, 1865

<sup>12</sup> Wagers, p.21-22

<sup>13</sup> Federal Military Pension Application of Harding Escue (Esaw Harding), “Discharge papers of Hardin Esque (Esau Harding) October 7, 1865

<sup>14</sup> “Declaration of a Widow for Original Pension”

<sup>15</sup> Denise Fries Romack, research summary of “Mr Hardin Esque”

<sup>16</sup> Federal Military Pension Application of Hardin Escue (Esaw Harding), “Form 3-1081 Pensioner Dropped”

<sup>17</sup> “Funeral of Eliza Escue”