

## **Martha H. Rice** (Sept. 4, 1817-Aug. 16, 1904)

She was a Southern lady living in a Northern town. She was raised in a slave owning family and believed in slavery. But, she believed in the union and didn't want to see the United States divided. The same issues that were tearing the country apart in the mid-nineteenth century would cause distress and disruption to the comfortable life in Bloomington created by Martha Rice and her husband, James.

Martha was born into the Baker family in 1817 in Richmond, Kentucky. She had five brothers and sisters. At the age of 23, she married James L. Rice, a successful merchant from Nicholasville, KY, where she had grown up. After 16 years of marriage, the Rices moved to Bloomington, IL. James's sister, Sarah Rice Withers and her husband, Allen, had moved here in 1836, and probably urged Martha and James to join them. Later, Martha recalled their journey west for an article published in *The Daily Bulletin*. She, James and their daughter, Jennie, journeyed from Kentucky via the Ohio River to St. Louis, MO, and then on the Mississippi River to the Illinois River. They probably landed at Pekin, IL and then came to Bloomington.

After briefly settling on a farm outside town, the Rices built a house on west Jefferson Street. James became a prosperous dry good merchant, partnering for a few years with his brother-in-law and then building his own business. Martha and James had owned slaves while living in Kentucky. When they came to Bloomington, they brought two of their slaves with them, Polly and Isaac Hockaday. Once living in Illinois, a free state, the Hockadays were free, but both continued to work for the Rices as servants.

During her early years in Bloomington, Martha found social life not as "advanced or fancy" as among Kentuckians. After being invited to a party in what she considered the most lavish of homes, Martha wrote her sister that "I felt I could return all hospitality here for everything was so plain." She also described how there was little entertainment available, as "card playing and dancing were almost unknown" at the time.

During the 1850's, the issue of slavery continued to drive a bitter wedge between groups in Bloomington. Democrats, mainly pro-slavery and Southern in sympathy, felt that new states should be able to vote whether to be slave or free. Anti-slavery groups such as the Whigs and the new Republicans felt the Missouri Compromise had settled that Kansas and Nebraska should be free states. Tensions came to a head with the election of Abraham Lincoln as president. Southern states began seceding including Louisiana in January of 1861. For the Rices, former southerners and merchants, this meant trouble.

A few days after it seceded, James offered to sell two thousand bushels of corn grown on his own farm to the governor of Louisiana. *The Pantagraph*, picking up the story from a Baton Rouge newspaper, reported that James Rice stated Louisiana could pay him "whenever it was convenient...or not at all." *The Pantagraph* called this a "treasonous deal," saying that Rice was feeding Secessionists with corn grown by loyal Unionists. Some citizens of Bloomington responded by hanging James Rice in effigy throughout the streets of the city.

Having James "branded a secessionist" was very bad for business. At one point, union soldiers complained they were being over-charged and drew their guns in the store. Martha also recalled later in life that ladies who were customers "would go without new clothes rather than buy them from Mr. Rice." Eventually, Martha and James were forced to move out of town.

James died in 1866 and was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery. Jennie Rice, Martha's daughter, had died when she was 23 and had been buried there as well. After the death of her husband, Martha made her home with her sister-in-law, Sarah Withers, for a few years,

and then with other family members and friends. She died in 1904. Her funeral was at First Christian Church and then she was laid to rest beside her husband, James, and daughter, Jennie, in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery. Although she was always a true southerner at heart, she never regretted that Bloomington was her chosen home.

**Discussion Question:** Martha's story is a reflection of the great turmoil of her day. How did the division of the country affect business and commerce?