



“Eliza Jane Jillbell Craig”

1841-1924

Narrative for Grinnell Historical Museum
Hazelwood Cemetery Walk, September 2023

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Mrs. Eliza Jane Jillbell¹ Craig was, among many things, a teacher,² a mother, a daughter, a wife, a sister, a Quaker, a landowner, and a historian. In her 83 years, she travelled across the US by covered wagon, attended college, built a life with her husband, George Craig, and raised three remarkable daughters with him. She is the progenitor of a rich, and interconnected Black family legacy in Iowa and across the United States. The stories, values, and knowledge that she passed down to her children are still kept today by her granddaughter and great-granddaughter.

Mrs. Craig is laid to rest here, in Hazelwood Cemetery. In death, she rests among family. Her grandson Frankie Goode, her son-in-law Edward Goode, and family friend Mumford Holland are all buried here with her in the same plot. Her middle daughter, Anna Catherine Goode, is buried in the plot next door. And just a little ways over the hill, Mrs. Craig's youngest daughter, Eeva Pearl Craig Renfrow, is laid to rest.

¹ According to Mrs. Eva Pearl Renfrow as quoted in the 1937 Crisis article, [“Up From Slavery.”](#) Mrs. Craig spelled her maiden name “Jillbell.” Mrs. Craig’s brother, Mr. Aaron Gillbal, used “Gillbal” as his preferred spelling, according to government documents.

² In the same 1937 “Up From Slavery” article, Mrs. Eva Pearl Renfrow discusses her mother’s history as a teacher.

Today, Mrs. Eliza Jane Jillbell Craig rests peacefully. However, her life began on a much different note, with a heart-wrenching separation and a tumultuous journey. She was born in South Carolina to a French planter and Jane, an enslaved woman.³ This French planter, Antoine Gillebelle, died when Eliza Jane was a very young girl. Prior to his death, he freed Eliza Jane along with her siblings and her mother and arranged for them to stay with some Quakers in Ohio. However, with Antoine upon his deathbed and the covered wagon packed to take Jane and her young daughter across the country, Jane was faced with an impossibly painful dilemma. Should she comfort Antoine on his deathbed and send her children off with strangers, or travel with her children and abandon her life partner in his final moments. Ultimately, she chose to stay with Antoine Gillebelle as he passed onto the next life. One can only imagine how Jane navigated this series of unimaginable losses. How did she feel as she watched her child travel away into the distance? What words did she whisper in her daughter's ear before the wagon departed - what provisions - emotional or physical - did she provide her daughter for the long journey across the Appalachian mountains?⁴ I don't know. But just as Eliza Jane carried her mother's name - Jane - across space and time, she also carried the story of their last moments together across generations. She passed it down to her children, and they passed it down to theirs. Thanks to Eliza Jane, her mother's suffering was not lost to time, rather, it was carried on through her commitment to preserving her family's history.

Not much is known of Eliza Jane Jillbell Craig's time with the Quaker's in Ohio. We do know that throughout much of her childhood, her Quaker guardians did not treat her as she deserved. She may have had a connection with her older brother and sister in Ohio, but the

³ Jane was enslaved by Antoine Gillebell, but they had three children together and by all accounts had an agreement with each other. The "Up from Slavery" article says: "He grew to love one of his slave girls, my grandmother, and in time made her mistress of his house, treating her with honor and affection. When children came he accepted them as his own and gave them every advantage, even planning for their complete education by a clause in his will."

⁴ An idea explored in "All she carried: The journey of Ashley's sack, a Black family keepsake", by Tiya Miles, published in 2021.

exact details are s unsure. She emerges again in the record in her young teenage years as a 16 year old girl, when she enrolled in school at Wilberforce University in Ohio with some support from local Quaker connections.⁵

After attending school, Eliza Jane Jillbel Craig worked as a teacher.⁶ At one point in her early twenties, she made the decision to travel the 500 miles from Ohio to Cedar County, Iowa. There, she met and married her husband George Craig in 1864.⁷ Mr. Craig was also formerly enslaved, and there is quite an interesting history about how he escaped slavery and ended up in Cedar County Iowa - but you'll hear about that later.

A year later, the newlyweds had their first child - baby Theodora Craig. Soon after her birth, the young family moved to Oskaloosa, Iowa. There, George Craig worked as a barber and Eliza Jane Craig “kept house, ” according to the census.⁸ While building a life in Oskaloosa together, Mr. and Mrs. Craig had two more daughters: Anna Catherine and Eva Pearl.⁹

As Mrs. Craig's daughters grew older, they began to marry and build their own lives. Theodora and Anna Catherine settled into Grinnell, and the rest of the family followed in the late 1880's. In Grinnell, Mr. George Craig continued work as a barber. Mrs. Eliza Jane Craig owned their family home on the corner of Spring Street and 2nd Avenue. And on the same block 3 other Black people owned homes, including Mrs. Craig's daughter Anna Catherine Craig Goode and their close family friend Mumford Holland, who is laid to rest in this very plot alongside Mrs. Craig.

Things got difficult for the Craigs as they reached old age in Grinnell. Records show that health and finances became difficult for the couple to manage towards the end of their life. Grinnell was also not kind to Mr. Craig, a successful Black businessman and politician in

⁵ Quaker meeting notes

⁶ Up from slavery article

⁷ Marriage record

⁸ 1870 census

⁹ Shared name

a racist and white-dominated place. Mrs. Craig supported her husband through his projects and cared for him in his old age. He passed away in 1924, a couple months before Mrs. Craig passed away herself. You'll notice that the couple is not buried together. This is ultimately due to the failure of the state medical system to support poor and marginalized people and their families through death, though you will hear more of that story at another point, I truly believe that Mr. and Mrs. Craig are together in spirit, if not in body.

Mrs. Eliza Jane Jillbell Craig's legacy lives on today through her grandchildren and greatgrandchildren. She was the first in at least four generations of Black teachers and educators - you may have heard of her granddaughter Mrs. Edith Renfrow Smith, the first Black woman to graduate from Grinnell College. Mrs. Renfrow Smith, her mother Eva Pearl Renfrow and her daughter Alice Smith all had - and have - a career as teachers.

Throughout this cemetery walk, you will learn (are learning) more about the lives of many amazing Black Grinnellians whose souls rest here in this hallowed ground. They are an integral part of Grinnell's history, though many of their stories have been erased. Listen, and carry their stories with you, just like how Mrs. Eliza Jane Jillbell Craig did in life.