Dennis Williams was born December 25th, 1851, in Mississippi to Margaret McGuiness, who was from Kentucky, and Dennis Williams, with the possible last name of Crawford. Dennis Williams Crawford might have been a slave owner since Dennis was "mulatto" and apparently dropped the name Crawford. In the census Dennis appears as an only child. His family was enslaved until the end of the Civil War when Margaret married John Isaac Kelsey who was from Missouri. They family moved to Springfield, Illinois, and first appear in the 1865 city directory with John as a plasterer residing at the corner of 13th and Washington streets. In 1874 they had moved to 115 North 9th Street and, three years later, to 1109 East Carpenter. It is not known what happened to Dennis' biological father. His stepfather was arrested and fined multiple times from 1866 to 1880 for assault on adults and children. He died in 1881 at the age of 51 from pulmonary tuberculosis. Margaret died at the same age in 1883 from an unknown chronic illness. They are both buried without grave markers in Oak Ridge Cemetery. Dennis inherited the house at 1109 East Carpenter and lived there with his wife for the rest of his life.

Marriage

In 1883, when Dennis was 32, he married Olivia D. Bowers, a teacher from Cairo, Illinois. There is no evidence of Olivia working outside the home, but she was most likely sewing for herself, Dennis, and possibly other people. She bought yards of calico, linen, plush, flannel, silk, muslin, lace, ribbon, and beaded wrap along with buttons from E. D. Poston & Co. on the state capitol square. There were also purchases at Seeberger & Bro., a tailor shop that sold men's and boy's clothing. Dennis worked from his studio on the square or sometimes from home when he was ill. He bought picture frames, pencils, erasers, and blotting paper from Frank Simmons Book & Art Emporium, and hats, gloves, umbrellas, and suit underwear from Fred & J. Buck on the square.

On Monday, May 19th, 1884, while Dennis and Olivia were at church, George W. Booker, a fellow church member, robbed their home. He took almost all of Dennis' clothing as well as Olivia's shawl, white skirts, and slips. The items, except for the shawl, were recovered and Booker and four male and one female accomplice were arrested. The newspaper reported that all men involved were African American and the woman was white.

In 1885 the couple entertained a large group of friends at their house. The guests were members of the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows and House of Ruth, which Olivia might have joined. Their guests must have congregated in the parlor of their home which was 40 feet wide and 157 feet long with six rooms. By 1889 they had acquired a seven-piece parlor set, a writing desk with chair, a hanging lamp, two hand lamps, four tables, two mirrors, eighteen pictures, three carpets, three rocking chairs, two easels, a sewing machine, five window shades, a wardrobe, a washstand, a dresser, an open lounge, a bed frame with box spring and two mattresses, a heating stove, a cooking stove, a clock, two kitchen chairs, an ironing board, four flatirons, a cupboard, a cow, a horse, and four sheep.

Olivia made train trips to Cairo to visit her relatives and sometimes Dennis accompanied her. Eventually they had two daughters, Ethel and Clara, who both died in infancy in 1887 and 1889 from inflammation of the bowels and tubercular meningitis. They are buried without grave markers in Oak Ridge Cemetery.

County and state fairs

Dennis began his artistic career by entering his works in the Sangamon County Fair and the Illinois State Fair. From 1874 to 1882 he won a multitude of first and second premiums in crayon, pastel, pencil, oil, and India ink categories. First premium paid $2 and second premium paid $1. Reporters covered him extensively and referred to him as an intelligent, popular, worthy, perseverant, and energetic genius.
They marveled at the quality and amount of his work and often listed his portrait subjects.

Studios and exhibits

In 1872 Dennis acquired his first studio above Salter’s Grocery Store on the square. During the next seven years he stayed on the square, moving above Officer & Peabody’s Clothing Store, A. E. Hall’s Clothing Store, and Roberts & Co. By 1879 Dennis had settled above Smith & Luer’s Shoe Store adjacent to Lincoln’s former law office and would stay there the rest of his life. Throughout his career he exhibited on the square at Hart’s Bookstore, Simmon’s Art Gallery, Ryan’s Drug Store, and Barclay’s Furniture as well as the Revere House in Springfield, the House of Representatives in the Illinois State Capitol Building, and the World’s Fair in New Orleans.

Business practices

Dennis became an integral part of business life on the square and one time boldly detained a jewelry store robber near his studio. He consistently advertised in newspapers and city directories and encouraged people to buy portraits as gifts for birthdays and holidays such as Christmas and New Year’s. Legislative session was a particularly busy and lucrative time for him. He scheduled sittings at his studio or encouraged people to stop by and leave a calling card to which he would reply with a follow-up letter. He charged $10 for bust portraits and $14 for full-length portraits, although he was willing to barter. Final works were shipped to out-of-towners with a guarantee; if they weren’t satisfied they could return with free shipping.

Dennis created portraits of lawyers, politicians, judges, war veterans, doctors, businessmen, wives, and the deceased from around the country. Some of them include:

- Robert Ingersoll—Illinois lawyer, politician, orator
- Asa Matthews—Illinois Speaker of the House
- David Davis—United States Supreme Court judge and friend of Abraham Lincoln
- John Logan—Illinois Civil War veteran
- Langley Whitley—Springfield doctor at Wabash Railroad Employees Hospital
- Frank Reisch—Springfield Reisch Brewing Company
- Mrs. George Gale—wife of vocalist for the Haverly Minstrels
- Frank Saner—Springfield deceased child who drowned in Sangamon River

In 1884 Dennis copyrighted the famous 1861 picture of Abraham Lincoln with his secretaries John Nicolay and John Hay and sold it around the country.
Techniques

Mr. Williams is a "born artist," and is not only very successful in catching the features and the most perfect expression of his subjects, but he blends the "lights and shades" so harmoniously as to give exquisite tone to his work.

Daily Illinois State Register 1882

Dennis was versatile in artistic medium and subject. In the 1874 Springfield city directory he advertised crayon, pastel, and pencil depictions of nature, farms, residences, and animals. In a later newspaper business ad he was specializing in animals and the deceased. Although he was always creating portraits of people, they became a more prominent part of his work later in his career. One-hundred of these portraits are documented in newspapers, although only three are known to exist that are signed and dated.

All three of the portraits are in large, ornate, gilded frames that measure between 38 inches to 47 inches high and 33 inches to 41 inches wide. Signature and date were placed above a shoulder or on the chest. Busts were in vignette or Stralovignette style, which he invented and was using by 1877. Other portraits were full-length, sitting on a balustrade, or sitting in a chair with one arm on a pedestal. Backgrounds included flowers in a vase, clouds, sunlight, and landscapes. He preferred to do live sittings, but was willing to work from photographs, especially if the subject was deceased. He spoke out against the artist use of solar enlarged photographs which was popular at the time. He thought it was a deceptive way for artists to make money. Sittings took less than one hour and could include individuals or groups of people such as siblings or parents with their children. C. C. Howorth, who owned a local framing business, provided gilded frames.

Community involvement

According to the Springfield newspapers, Dennis was involved in religious, political, business, racial, fraternal, and environmental organizations from 1876 to 1888. In 1876 he was secretary of the Hayes and Wheeler Club, which petitioned St. Paul's Church in Springfield to create a new parish for African Americans in honor of Abraham Lincoln. Four years later he was secretary for an African American voters group that met at Mt. Zion Baptist church. That same year he was also a subscriber for improvement at Fair Park, home of the Illinois State Fair. In 1880 he was secretary for a group that started the Young Republicans Club. Also in 1880, Dennis began his ongoing involvement in Emancipation celebrations in Springfield. He served as secretary and held various committee appointments to plan the elaborate events. For instance, in 1887 the celebration began at 10 am at St. Paul's A.M.E. Church and was headed by the Springfield Clipper Band. The crowd walked or rode horses to Lincoln's home and gave three cheers then went through the governor's lawn and gathered at Krous Park at the corner of Amos and Governor streets.

Citizens along the way waved flags and handkerchiefs. A crowd of around 600 listened to a reading of the Emancipation Proclamation, prayed, and heard various religious and political orators. In 1882 Dennis donated 25 cents for a new piano at Temperance Hall, although the extent of his involvement in the temperance movement is not known. Several years later he was part of the Blaine and Logan Club No. 2, a political group to elect Republican candidates. During that same time he became secretary of the First Ward Republicans and was on their committee to select delegates to the city convention. This may have been a precursor to his involvement as secretary in the Springfield Central Republican Club. Dennis even participated in Arbor Day of 1888 by planting a buttonwood tree in his front yard in memory of his daughter Ethel. In 1885 he had jury duty for one week. It is not known when Dennis joined the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows, Lincoln
Monument Lodge No. 1824 in Springfield, but in 1886 he was a member and held office. This national organization began in 1843 and provided financial assistance for medical and funeral expenses of African Americans who paid dues.

**Illness**

Malaria may have been a struggle for Dennis from the age of 14 when his family fled the South. The *History of Sangamon County, Illinois* 1881, states, "The first point made was Carson’s Landing, from whence they were sent to Haine’s Bluff, Mississippi, where they were all taken sick with the fever."

Dennis’ estate records indicate a $50 outstanding balance for treatment by Dr. A. C. James of Springfield. The doctor was located over C.W. Gill’s Drug Store on the northeast corner of the square. He had morning, afternoon, and evening office hours as well as 24-hour phone availability. For 17 years Dennis had a studio on that same square so he would have had easy access to the doctor and the drug store.

In 1887, a Springfield newspaper published an interview with Dennis in which he stated he was “nearly worked down and needed rest.” The reporter suggested a month-long vacation to which Dennis replied, “Well, you know how it is to leave your business, particularly if you have a little boom.” Eight months later, in June of 1888, a newspaper reported Dennis was confined at home by an attack of malarial fever.

Train trip

Dennis most likely took the Illinois Central from Springfield to New Orleans. He then boarded the Galveston, Harrisburg & San Antonio train destined for San Francisco on the afternoon of December 10th. After leaving New Orleans the conductor sent a telegram to El Paso, Texas, stating there was a man on board acting strange and someone on the train was put in charge of him. The conductor made 19 stops in Louisiana and 116 stops in Texas over 2 days, 2 hours, and 20 minutes. At 5:15 p.m. on Thursday, December 12th the train arrived in El Paso; when Dennis got off, two Morris Agency detectives named Ellsbury and Fisher, searched him. They found a round trip train ticket, $100, an Odd Fellows card and pin, and a bottle of whiskey. According to the El Paso Daily Herald, Dennis acted “cunningly,” saying he was King Kal kaua of Hawaii or the pugilist Peter Jackson and then hit the officers several times.

El Paso County Jail

Dennis was detained at the El Paso County Jail located at 219 South Campbell Street. It was a two-story building with an office, hospital, cells, gallows, and hangman’s trap. The jail was only about nine years old.

A day after his birthday, on December 26th, when Dennis had been there for two weeks, Springfield newspapers began reporting on what was happening to him in El Paso. His wife received a telegram which she gave to Charles Davis, son of Judge David Davis. The telegram said Dennis had “gone crazy” and needed to be accompanied back to Cairo. The El Paso Daily Herald reported that Dennis’ condition deteriorated and he died in jail on December 30th from consumption while waiting to go home. Star Stables on West Overland Street in El Paso prepared and shipped Dennis’ body back to Cairo via train.
Death

Dennis was buried in Cairo City Cemetery in Villa Ridge, Illinois. It’s difficult to know how he died since a death certificate or interment record could not be found, and his jail register did not indicate cause of death. There is no evidence in the historical data that Dennis struggled with violence, tuberculosis, mental illness, or alcohol. However, it was reported in the Springfield newspapers that he struggled with malaria. Malaria was still prevalent in the United States, including Illinois, in the 1880s. The death rate in Illinois for malaria in 1890 was 19 per 100,000 persons. It is also possible that Dennis died from complications of being treated for malaria. C.W. Gill’s Drug Store, which was below Dennis’ doctor’s office, sold Electric Bitters which was used to treat malaria. Often these types of remedies did make patients feel better temporarily as they contained alcohol with morphine, opium, or cocaine. However, they didn’t cure the illness and sometimes caused addiction. Finally, Dennis also could have been the victim of racial neglect and violence in Texas, as it was the third highest state in number of lynchings with the majority of victims being African American.

Legacy

Researchers may never know how Dennis Williams died, but we now know how he lived. Escaping poverty and racism in the South, he built a new life in Springfield, home of Abraham Lincoln, his Emancipator. Dennis chose a studio next to Lincoln’s law office with a view of the state capital Lincoln helped bring to Springfield. As an artist he chose to create portraits of some of the men Lincoln knew. As a businessman he reproduced and distributed a beloved picture of Lincoln and his White House secretaries. As a community member Dennis continually organized and celebrated Emancipation, supported Lincoln’s Republican party, and tried to establish a new church in his honor. As an artist he used his innate talents in bold and creative ways, not to become wealthy and powerful, but to make a difference and contribute to society. He maintained his enterprising, perspicacious, and heroic nature despite personal tragedies, and sadly, might have died because of his race.

Mary Frances is a college instructor, artist, and independent historian. She recently created a documentary film chronicling the life of Eva Carroll Monroe who founded the Lincoln Colored Home in Springfield, Illinois. Mary has lived in Springfield for 33 years and is interested in documenting untold African American stories.

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