



DIANTHA FRANCES GRAHAM, UIU B.S. 1894

Upper Iowa University's First Graduate of African American Descent

By Janette Garcia, UIU Archivist

Diantha Graham

Born: April, 1870 to Thomas Graham and Sarah A. Tann Graham

Married: Robert A. Zangle (both parents from Bavaria, Germany) on February 22, 1900

Children: Francis Lorine, Robert Lewis

Race:

1666 Emancipation of great-great-great-great-grandfather John "Jack" Kekotan, Charles City County, Virginia

1880 Census in Fayette: Mulatto

1885 Census in Fayette: Colored (Black)

1890 Census records destroyed in fire

1900 Census in Greenwood, IA: White, occupation school teacher

1900 Marriage Record: Scotch and Portuguese

1910 Census in Baker, South Dakota: White

Sources:

Census records, family trees searched through Ancestry.com

UIU Collegian student newspaper: <http://uiucollegian.advantage-preservation.com/>

West Union Community Library Fayette county newspapers: <http://westunion.advantage-preservation.com/>

Starting in 1852, a group of families traveled to Fayette, Iowa, bought farms, and settled down in an area called the "Colored Settlement." The majority of the families were mulattoes from another small town in Illinois. Bass, Graham, Lewis, Tann, and Epps were all common surnames found in the settlement. At least fourteen students who were identified as Mulatto or Black began their education at Upper Iowa University between 1879 and 1900. As was typical for the time, the majority of students did not complete a four year degree. Susan Angeline

Collins was the first African American student at UIU. Diantha Graham was the first student of African American descent who completed her college education and earned a Bachelor of Science degree in 1894.

Diantha Graham's first published appearance at Upper Iowa University was as a high school student when she earned first place in the High School Declamation Contest held on campus in January 1888. In high school she also participated in debates and oratory.¹ Upon graduation from high school, the graduating seniors gave presentations. According to the local newspaper, Diantha's was "on the much-talked-of theme nowadays, 'Ambition in Women.' A dangerous one to handle in these times when the Council of Suffragists declares that unless the right to vote is given them they will strike hands with anarchists and repeat the horrors of the French Revolution."²

Upon graduation from high school, Diantha was hired as a teacher at the stone school house in Westfield.³ Teacher requirements in the 1800s only required that the teacher be more advanced than their students. Schools hired academically advanced students to teach, even if they had never attended college. Those who did earn college credits could then demand better pay. In a later Collegian student newspaper article, Diantha was praised for not only keeping students in the classroom, but increasing their numbers over several terms.⁴ Another article written during her second term in the stone school house mentioned she had "an enrollment of 23 scholars and an average attendance of 20."⁵ An article written in 1967 discusses the school records of Walter Messerli (white). The article made a point that while the 1960s were at the height of the Civil Rights movement, when Walter attended school 1895 to 1902, "both [teachers] Diantha Graham and Mary McComb were Negroes, integration having been implemented in Fayette county schools long before it received its current emphasis."

Already an accomplished student, and a new teacher, Diantha enrolled at Upper Iowa University. She continued to participate in spoken presentations, this time as part of the Zeta Alpha sorority programs. As a senior she was elected as the Senior Class Orator. One oration was entitled 'The Present Day.' Another was on 'College Banquets.' The Collegian student newspaper quoted in part:

*"Man is but a social plant that has been reared and cultured by all preceding generations, and the present generation continues this, destined to unite the remotest past to the future. Without entertainment man becomes selfish, unjust, and cruel. Banquets are the most effective means of developing man's social nature. College societies and classes ought not to neglect this best way of becoming acquainted with those in our own organizations."*⁶

¹ A declamation is a delivery of an address previously delivered. For example, if one were to recite Lincoln's Gettysburg address. An oratory is an original speech written by the speaker, and is intended to inform or persuade.

² (1888 April 13) Fayette Letter *West Union Gazette*, p8. Retrieved from <http://westunion.advantage-preservation.com/>

³ Westfield has now been merged with Fayette, and lies on the west side of Highway 150.

⁴ (1890 September 26) Fayette Letter *West Union Gazette*, p1 Retrieved from <http://westunion.advantage-preservation.com/>

⁵ (1889 May 31) Fayette Letter *West Union Gazette*, p1. Retrieved from <http://westunion.advantage-preservation.com/>

⁶ (1892 May 1) Banquets *Collegian*, p10. Retrieved from <http://uiucollegian.advantage-preservation.com/>

Academically, as a junior at UIU she enrolled in the Scientific Course and the Business College. As a senior she also enrolled in UIU's Art School. In 1894 Diantha graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree. She continued teaching in the public schools until she married Robert Zangle in 1901. Robert and Diantha had two children: Francis Lorine, and Robert Lewis. Diantha passed away in 1924.

A regular column in the West Union Gazette was the "Fayette Letter" full of news about the comings and goings and gatherings in Fayette. The "Fayette Letter" packed a lot of news into a little bit of space, with some paragraphs listing several different events. Other paragraphs expounded on a particular thought. This author does not believe the juxtaposition of the following two stories was accidental.

***Fayette Letter.** The lecture of Col. Bain on Friday evening had a good attendance, considering the busy season, and was a mixture of the comical and serious, which threw Mrs. Stowe and Uncle Tom's Cabin into the shade in its description of plantation life. We think he made one mistake in his assertion that the colored people were as much to blame as the whites for keeping up the class distinction. In the Yale law school not long ago, we learn from an eastern paper, that two members of the senior class, one white and one black, being chosen to speak in contest for a prize, that the white dude refused to enter it on account of the color of his opponent. That at least was the reason given. At this distance we are safe in guessing that the pale face was a sprig of aristocracy, whose degrees are purchased by money, who was afraid of being beaten by his colored brother, in which case the mortification would cause him to turn black. The young man need never come west to put out his shingle for here we wager on brain and not the color of the skin. Saturday, at early evening, the girls of the sophomore class had supper with Diantha Graham.⁷*

⁷ West Union Gazette, Friday, June 3rd, 1892, p1