

(Shakopee), afterwards taking up land near Buffalo.”

Mary and James made a claim on the shores of Lake Mary, on the outside of Buffalo, Minnesota. By the 1860s, James started a stagecoach line. He had daily stage route between Buffalo and Monticello, and three times a week from Monticello to Minneapolis.

Near Buffalo, two more children were born, Guilford and Louisa.

Mary Brown Griffin died August 22, 1882 of cholera sporadic. Cholera is a bacterial disease usually spread through contaminated water. Cholera causes severe diarrhea and dehydration. It is easily treated today with a simple and inexpensive rehydration solution. But in 1882, something like this, which causes severe dehydration, probably was enough to cause Mary Brown Griffin to die.

Mary was buried at St. Joseph Catholic Church, which was located in 1881 at the corner of Second Street and 10th Avenue North in Minneapolis. It was a wooden building, 35' x 80', and serving 100 German families. Both Fr. Salzeder and his assistant, Fr. Bader, served there. According to the *Minneapolis Evening Journal* on August 22, 1882, Mary E. Griffin was buried from this church

What is remarkable is that Mary was African American, not German. And she was probably not Catholic. However, her sons, Martin and Frank (Franz) lived in the vicinity of the church. The other members of the family who lived in Minneapolis included her other children, Richard H. Griffin, Estella Griffin Wilkin, and Louisa Griffin James.



St. Anthony Plot 95 W 1/2 of 6. The tombstone was flat to the ground. The only reason it is readable was because it was covered with turf. The stone says “May she rest in peace, amen.”



SHAKOPEE HERITAGE SOCIETY  
2109 Boulder Pointe, Shakopee, MN 55379

952-693-3865

[shakopeeheritage.org](http://shakopeeheritage.org)



## SHAKOPEE HERITAGE SOCIETY



# Mary Brown Griffin

ca. 1825-1882

In Sha K' Pay, M.T. 1854-1856

(Picture not of Mary)



“...Daniel Gray pre-empted (his original claim) for him (he not being eligible on account of color or race, under the constitution as it was then, to acquire land directly from the government.” *Delano Eagle*, July 2, 1891

On left is Shakopee ca. 1858 by Edwin Whitefield, Minnesota Historical Society. This is what the area looked like when Mary Brown Griffin lived here.

Mary Brown Griffin was born around 1825 in Virginia. She was enslaved. Like many other African Americans at that time, little is known about her past.

One thing we know is that at some point, either by skill or luck, she became a free woman in Philadelphia.

Once she was in Philadelphia, Mary Brown met and married James Griffin in 1849. Mary and James moved to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania where James worked as a steamboat builder.

One of the steamboats that Mary Brown Griffin’s husband, James, helped built was the *Minnesota Belle*. When it was ready, James and Mary and their children Richard, Martin, and Estella, were on the steamboat in the beginning of May, ready to locate at the new town near Blue Earth, Minnesota Territory.

As Mary looked around the *Minnesota Belle* she saw several African Americans working on the steamboat. African Americans traveling on the western waters were quite common. Some free Black people, as well people who were enslaved, worked on the steamboats, many as firemen, stewards, and chambermaids.

African American travelers occupied a different status from that of the white people on board. While some African American enslaved people traveled with their masters and mistresses, sleeping on trundles in their owner’s private cabins, and where they could take care of errands. Probably most of the people on the *Minnesota Belle* were probably immigrants from other countries who moved to the United States. Free Black people, such as Mary Brown Griffin, were not allowed in the private cabins, however, but had to travel on the lower deck.

Captain Humberston had christened the steamboat the *Minnesota Belle*, and he loaded the boat with immigrants intended mostly for his new town near Blue Earth. He hoped the new town would become the chief city of the valley. Mary and James and their children were not immigrants, but they decided to move west in 1854.

To the Captain’s great chagrin, Humbertson’s new boat failed to climb the Little Rapids, near Carver, and he abandoned the river, townsite, and all, in disgust.

The *Minnesota Belle* landing in Sha K’ Pay, Minnesota Territory, in May 1854, after they failed to get over the Carver rapids. “The boat was from Pittsburg, bound for the upper part of the valley, and its being obliged to discharge its large cargo of freight and passengers here established Shakopee’s reputation as the head of navigation. This incident was used to good advantage by citizens to secure new settlers,” said William Hinds.

Mary and James Brown Griffin and their family were part of the new settlers, staying in Sha K’ Pay, Minnesota Territory from 1854 until 1856. According to the ***Wright County Heritage Herald***, James worked as a carpenter with Daniel Storer, and then was a teamster by 1856. He had wagons and teams in Sha K’ Pay, and he helped immigrant families to settle in the territory.

In an article in ***Minnesota History*** about Emily O. Goodridge Grey called *The Black Community in Territorial St. Anthony: A Memoir*, Emily Grey, an African American in Minnesota Territory, mentioned James and Mary Brown Griffin. On page 53, she said, “In 1855 there came from Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, James Griffen, wife, and children, first locating at Shohope