

community

The Eaglesons: A Legendary Black Family

by Carmen Siering

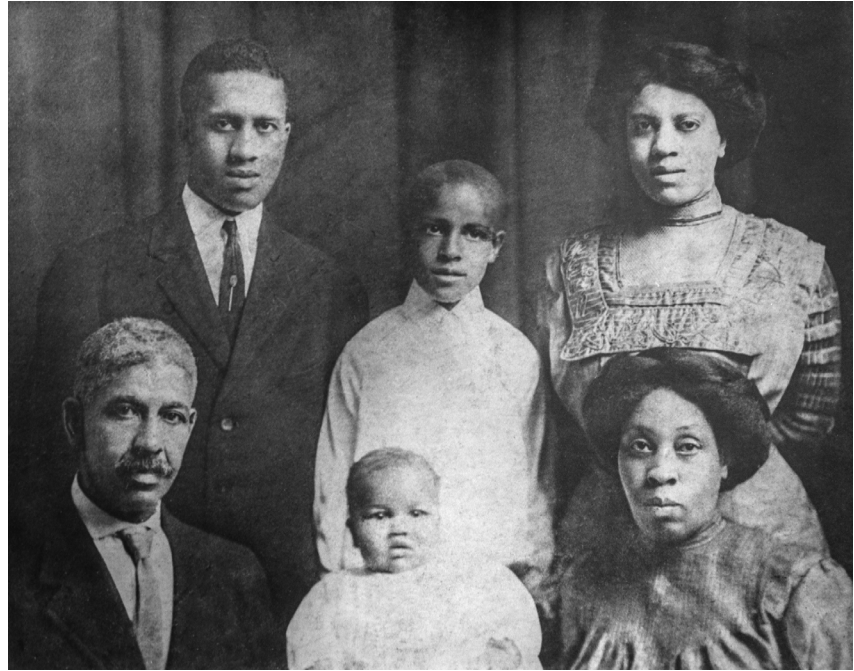
Like many people, Betty Bridgwaters first learned that Jordan Avenue was to be renamed Eagleson Avenue by reading it in the newspaper.

“I called my sister and asked her, ‘Did you know anything about this? Because I didn’t.’” Now Bridgwaters says she thinks the renaming is “wonderful and amazing.”

Formerly named for David Starr Jordan, Indiana University president from 1885 to 1891 and a proponent of eugenics, the street now celebrates the history of one of Bloomington’s most prominent Black families.

Bridgwaters, 76, is the great-granddaughter of Halson Vashon Eagleson Sr., who moved to Bloomington in the 1880s. While numerous reports say Halson was born into slavery, Bridgwaters, a family historian who insists on digging into primary sources, says she hasn’t been able to document that.

“I can’t find where he was in slavery,” she says. “I know his father moved from Pennsylvania to St. Louis. When they had a Black War there, they moved on to Iowa.”



(top) In February, the City began replacing Jordan Avenue street signs with Eagleson Avenue ones. Photo by Andrew Krebs, City of Bloomington (middle) An undated Eagleson family portrait with (front row, l-r) patriarch Halsen Vashon Eagleson Sr., Oran Wendle Eagleson, and Eliza Loggins Eagleson; (back row, l-r) William Eagleson, Halsen Vashon Eagleson Jr., and Katie Mae Eagleson. Not pictured are the two oldest sons, Preston Emmanuel Eagleson and Walter Vashon Eagleson Sr. Photo courtesy of Betty Bridgwaters (above) A halfback on the football team from 1893–1895, Preston Eagleson (front row, second from left) was the first Black athlete at IU. He was also the first Black IU student to earn a master’s degree. Photo courtesy of Indiana University Archives

A barber by trade, Halson later moved to Indiana: first to Chambersburg, then to Mitchell. Finally, he moved to Bloomington with four children in tow—Preston Emanuel, Bridgwaters’ grandfather; Walter Vashon; William; and Katie Mae. Later, Halson Vashon Jr. was born in Bloomington. Oran Wendle was born in Unionville, Indiana, after Halson established a home for Black orphans there.

Bridgwaters says Halson moved to Bloomington to ensure that his children got an education. Five of the six attended IU; three completed multiple degrees:

- Preston was the first Black student to earn a master’s degree (in philosophy) and the first Black athlete at IU, playing halfback on the football team from 1893 to 1895.
- Halson Jr. was the first Black student to earn an “I” letter with the marching band. He graduated with a doctorate in physics.
- Oran earned a doctorate in psychology. A family history notes the degree was withheld for a year because he was so young when he earned it.

Generations of Eagleson descendants, male and female, graduated from IU with degrees in everything from philosophy and chemistry to psychology and mathematics.

Other notable family members include Preston’s son, Wilson Vashon Eagleson Sr., who earned his master’s degree in chemistry