

Allen Withers (1807-1864)

Allen Withers was born on a farm in Jessamine County, Kentucky about seven miles from Nicholasville, on January 21, 1807. His father married twice and produced a total of twenty-one children; seventeen of whom, including Allen, survived to adulthood. Although most educational opportunities were closed to him, Allen succeeded in “obtain[ing] a pretty good English education.” Moreover, he was naturally drawn to business affairs and loved to travel. In 1825, at the age of eighteen, Withers journeyed throughout Indiana and Missouri for amusement and to visit friends and family. He also traded occasionally to make a small bit of money.

Withers’ first major business venture took place in the Southwest where he purchased mules and horses in Missouri and drove them into Mexico. During his two years in the region, Withers familiarized himself with a local Native American tribe and became quite comfortable in their culture. He learned both Spanish and the Native American tribes’ dialect and could easily communicate in either language. He often faced hardships. He regularly went without eating and did not make much money as his livestock frequently ran astray.¹

Allen’s father migrated to Bloomington, Illinois in 1832. Allen followed two years later. Shortly after his arrival, Allen completed the first census for Bloomington which totaled 180 persons.² In the spring of 1835, Merritt L. Covell hired him as a clerk in his dry goods store located at the south-east corner of Front and Main Streets. Not long after Allen began work, his father purchased the store from Covell and managed it as a father-and-son business. That same spring, Allen returned to Kentucky to marry his childhood playmate, Sarah B. Rice. They wed on May 2, 1836. Sarah proved to be a loving and supportive wife throughout the hardships they faced. The newlyweds returned to Bloomington shortly after their wedding.³ Upon his return, Withers completed a second census in 1836. In just two years, the population had grown two-and-a-half times and totaled 450 individuals.⁴

The Panic of 1837 devastated the local economy and forced many businesses to close, including the Withers’. Allen and Sarah sought a fresh start in Waterloo, Clark County, Missouri in the spring of 1839. Shortly after this move they transplanted to Alexandria, Missouri on the Mississippi River. Withers was again hired as a clerk, this time in his brother-in-law’s grocery store. At the same time, he built a house on land his brother-in-law had given him. After a year and a half had passed in Alexandria, Allen purchased 80 acres of land near Waterloo and built another home. A growing population later drove him to sell that property for \$600.⁵ At the behest of Allen’s father, Allen and Sarah returned to Bloomington in 1847. When they came back to McLean County, they brought their slave, Henry Clay Dean, with them. Upon entering Illinois, Henry was legally free, but remained with the couple for the rest of his life and was considered to be

¹E. Duis, *Good Old Times in McLean County*, (Bloomington: The Leader Publishing and Printing House, 1874), 258.

² LaBaron, *History of McLean County*, (1879), 351.

³ Duis, 258-259.

⁴ LaBaron,, 351.

⁵ Duis, 259.

a member of the family. Henry died in 1894 and was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

Sarah and Allen lived comfortably on the corner of East and Washington Streets in Bloomington, near the Washington Street entrance to Northrup's store.⁶ By 1860, Bloomington was booming. The town's population soared to around 8,000. Railroads brought prosperity and new Irish and German immigrants. Allen was a prosperous merchant whose success also spread to land speculation. Among other areas, he bought land on South Hill, divided it into lots, and sold those lots to the newly-arrived Germans. It was a dynamic time to live in Bloomington.⁷

In 1847, Withers began a partnership with William H. Temple, a prominent dry goods merchant, and maintained a store with him on Front Street. The partnership ended quickly for Withers sold his share and began a hardware store. After three years, he sold the hardware store and re-partnered with Temple. The second partnership did not last long either as Allen purchased 320 acres, three miles south of Bloomington and decided to raise livestock and farm. He and Sarah moved to this new property where they remained until his death.⁸

Allen and Sarah produced one child, Henrietta, who died at the age of two.⁹ Undeterred from parenthood, they adopted several needy children. One of whom was Jessamine, who was also the only adopted child to survive to adulthood. She married John F. Winter in 1870 and had two children with him.¹⁰ Sadly, Jessamine died at the age of 38 in 1893.¹¹

The Daily Pantagraph described Allen as "a large, portly, fine looking, aristocratic gentleman," whose "aristocracy oozed from every pore." Furthermore, the paper stated he conveyed true aristocracy, "which comes from the test of life, good breeding, culture, wealth and the association with the best of society."¹² He stood tall at six-foot-and-three-inches, was very muscular, and was physically and mentally dominating.¹³

During the mid-nineteenth century, many Southern families lived in Bloomington. Having come from Kentucky, Allen and Sarah were sympathetic to the institution of slavery. These opinions no doubt matched those of many Bloomington residents. In the 1850s however, the national debate over slavery exploded. Stephen A. Douglas's Kansas-Nebraska Act, which allowed a territory's population to determine whether it was slave or free, created controversy across the nation and incited violence in the West in what became known as "Bleeding Kansas." Furthermore, the topic of slavery dominated the election of 1856. At that time, many prominent McLean County residents including Allen Withers were members of the Whig Party. Fearing slavery's abolition, Withers and some other pro-slavery Whigs, became Democrats. Those who opposed slavery,

⁶ "A Noble Woman Gone: Death of Mrs. Sarah B. Withers," (*Pantagraph*, January 5, 1897).

⁷ Alice McCarty Schlenker, "The Heretics": 1-5.

⁸ Duis, 260.

⁹ "Withers Family Bible."

¹⁰ "Ended Her Long Suffering: Mrs. Jessamine B. Winter Passes Away After a Long and Painful Illness," (*Pantagraph*, September 15, 1892).

¹¹ "Noble Woman Gone"

¹² E.M. Prince, "Lincoln and Douglas, Their Great Campaign of 1858: E. M. Prince Recalls from Personal Recollection Some Interesting Local Features," (*Pantagraph*, February 12, 1907), 9.

¹³ Duis, 260.

including several of Withers's friends, joined the ranks of the newly-formed Republican Party. The issue of slavery also affected the church that the Withers attended, First Presbyterian Church. Some members of their church did not agree with the fact that slavery seemed to be supported by other members (like the Withers) and also the church itself. In 1850, the church had hired a new minister, a southern man named Fiedler Ewing. At a prayer meeting, he read an article commending slavery and that did not bode well with some members of the church. So, in 1855 a group of people, mostly members of First Presbyterian Church, formed their own church with a strong foundation against slavery. This new church would come to be known as Second Presbyterian Church, (which still exists today).¹⁴ Sarah remained a member of First Presbyterian Church until 1871, when she joined the congregation at Second Presbyterian Church.

In 1856, area Democrats nominated Withers for the Illinois legislature.¹⁵ He campaigned against John H. Wickizer, a Republican, and lost by "just nine votes." This narrow defeat illustrated Withers's popularity in a district that consisted of mostly Whigs and Republicans.¹⁶ Also in 1856, Withers attended the Democratic National Convention in Charleston, South Carolina as a delegate.¹⁷

Allen and Sarah knew Abraham Lincoln personally and were two of his early friends. However, the issue of slavery caused them to repudiate Lincoln and his policies toward the institution. Even though the Withers could not own slaves in Illinois, the couple did own them on their plantation near Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Allen regarded the situation as an economic necessity.

Following the election of 1860 and the Civil War it helped to produce, the Democratic Party split into two factions: War Democrats and Peace Democrats. Peace Democrats, including Allen Withers, sought a quick and peaceful end to the war.¹⁸ They "criticized the [Lincoln administration] for its war policies and . . . sought an armistice with the Confederacy." Peace Democrats were often termed "Copperheads" and were particularly visible in Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio between 1862 and 1864. Not all Copperheads supported secession, but they did find unity in their objections to the Lincoln administration.¹⁹

Not wanting to alienate business associates and friends in Bloomington, Allen soon became a Union supporter. And, being too old to fight, he helped raise money for the Union. During the April 17, 1861 meeting of the McLean County Board of Supervisors, Allen was selected as a member of the War Bonus committee which handled and distributed \$10,000 in enlistment bonuses for military volunteers and their families.²⁰

¹⁴ Guy Fraker. "Early History 1855-1900," *Sharing the Heart of Christ in the Heart of the Community: Second Presbyterian Church, Bloomington, Illinois*. (Bloomington: Illinois Graphics) 9

¹⁵ J.L. Pickering, *Official Directory of the Fortieth General Assembly of Illinois, Session of 1897*, (Springfield: Press of the Illinois State Register, 1897), 40.

¹⁶ Duis, 260.

¹⁷ "Allen Withers," "Sunday Bulletin," March 11, 1906, Dwight Frink Collection, Folder 29, McLean County Historical Society Archives.

¹⁸ "Family Jars," (*Daily Pantagraph*, January 6, 1864), in Don Munson, ed., *It Is Begun!: The Pantagraph Reports the Civil War*, (Bloomington: McLean County Historical Society, 2001), 144.

¹⁹ Delores Archambault and Terry A. Barnhart, "Illinois Copperheads and the American Civil War," Northern Illinois University, <http://www.lib.niu.edu/1996/iht319615.html>.

²⁰ "County Board of Supervisors," (*Daily Pantagraph*, April 30, 1861).

On May 30, the committee reported excitement and devotion to the war effort in McLean County and that it had already paid out \$4,076.72 to deserving individuals.²¹

Allen Withers owned several buildings in Bloomington in addition to the farm south of town. In 1864, he prepared to return to the city where he had purchased a home at 305 West Locust Street. Unfortunately, he never made the move; a “congestive chill” struck him, and he died very quickly on March 3. Reverend Fielding W. Ewing of Chicago led the funeral at the Withers farm on March 6.²² Allen’s estate passed to his wife, Sarah. Judge David Davis of Bloomington wrote Withers’s will in 1854 and was named as the executor of his estate. When Withers passed away however, Davis resigned from the position because of his work on the United States Supreme Court.²³ Allen Withers was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.²⁴

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²¹ LaBaron, *History of McLean County*, 239.

²² “Funeral Notice,” (*Daily Pantagraph*, March 5, 1864), 4.

²³ “Allen Withers.”

²⁴ “Allen Withers.”