

Samuel R. White (1846–1917)

Samuel R. White was a well-known builder and businessman in Bloomington, Illinois. He went from having very little to becoming very successful, and his story is a big part of Bloomington's history. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, he helped shape the city by turning 30 acres of open land into a well-planned neighborhood with nice homes and modern features. That neighborhood is now called **White Place** and is still known for its special architecture.

Samuel was born on December 27, 1846, in Huntington, Indiana to James and Lucy (Phelps) White. His father, James, died when Samuel was only four, leaving his mother to raise four children. She later married a man named John Reed. Like most kids at the time, Samuel went to school in the winter and helped with farm work in the summer. At 19, he became a carpenter's apprentice.

In 1868, Samuel moved to Illinois and worked as a carpenter in different towns. He returned to Indiana in 1869 and started his own contracting and funeral business. That same year, he married Minerva Moore. In the spring of 1870, they moved to Bloomington, Illinois, planning to stay only a short time—but they ended up making it their permanent home.

Samuel began building homes, schools, and barns around McLean County. By 1872, he and Minerva lived on East Douglas Street. In 1881, a fire badly damaged their home while Minerva was cooking. Thanks to quick neighbors, she got out safely. After that, they moved to a new home on Mulberry Street.

In 1873, Samuel started a lumber and coal business that later became the **S.R. White Manufacturing Company**. He built several important buildings in Bloomington, like the Stevenson hardware store and the First Ward School. He also advertised as a contractor and seller of building materials.

In 1879, he began making furniture and opened a factory. At first, he made bedroom sets and hired only a few workers. As the business grew, he made more furniture like tables, bookcases, and wardrobes. By 1883, business was so good that he built a large planing mill and factory.

Sadly, fires destroyed his factory in 1884 and again in 1887. Each time, he rebuilt quickly. His new factory was made of brick and had strong machines and better fire protection. He also built additions as business kept growing.

As big furniture companies started taking over the market, Samuel changed his focus to building other items like doors and windows. He worked on many important construction projects across Illinois. He helped build or repair places like the Hotel Peoria and the Dunlap House.

By 1889, Samuel and Minerva had six children. They were active in their church and helped local charities. Samuel gave money to help build a new chapel and supported the Women's Industrial Home (later renamed the Girl's Industrial Home).

He also invested in many local businesses, including printing, grocery, and machinery companies. In 1901, he helped start the **Bloomington Business Men's Association**, which supported improvements in the city and parks. The various businesses which Samuel was involved in provided jobs for around 250 people, which helped the city grow.

In 1889, Samuel started the **Bloomington Builder's Supply Company**. It later became the **Bloomington Store Fixture Company**, which made furniture for stores, banks, and offices. By 1897, this store had moved to East Douglas Street, near his other businesses. Around this time, he also gave control of the lumber company to his son so he could focus on other projects.

In 1895, Samuel built the **White Block**, a five-story brick building for his manufacturing company. It had modern safety features like fireproof floors and separate vaults for dangerous materials. His products were sold across the country.

Samuel also worked as an insurance adjuster, helping people and companies figure out how much they lost in fires. He worked all over the country, including after the big 1906 earthquake in San Francisco.

In 1897, Samuel began planning a new neighborhood development called **White's Place**. He bought 30 acres of land that had been weedy, swampy, and not very pleasant. He wanted to turn it into a beautiful, modern area for families to live.

He worked with architect **Paul Moratz** to design homes in different styles, with features from neighborhoods in cities like St. Louis and Indianapolis. The neighborhood would have paved streets, sidewalks, gas and water lines, and even a planned park and lake. It also included wide boulevards with grassy areas and a fountain in the center.

Samuel had strict rules for the neighborhood. Homes had to cost at least \$3,000 to build (about \$85,000–\$100,000 in 2015), be two stories tall, and meet high design standards. No old or cheaply built homes were allowed. Lots were lined with strong iron fences and gates.

The homes were all different but shared a high level of quality and style. Alleys were paved behind the houses for deliveries, keeping the front streets quiet and clean. A night watchman helped keep the area safe.

White's Place was special because it was one of the first carefully planned neighborhoods in Bloomington. Samuel wanted to create a community that was not only beautiful but also safe, healthy, and comfortable. Today, White's Place is still known as one of the most unique and charming neighborhoods in the city—thanks to Samuel White's vision and hard work.

The wide main street in White's Place had a fancy entrance with three big iron gates built into stone, designed by Paul Moratz. The gates had the name "Whites Place" and the year "1898" written in iron at the top. The design was inspired by a gate created for a neighborhood in St. Louis, which White and Moratz admired. While similar, Moratz's gate was made of rough stone and had gently sloped sides.

To get people interested in buying land and building homes in White's Place, White ran ads in the local newspaper, *The Pantagraph*, and handed out flyers and brochures. In 1899, he published a booklet about the neighborhood. One ad listed the many benefits of living there:

It's close to the best parts of the city, and you don't have to cross dangerous train tracks to get to it. It's easy to reach by streetcar or on paved streets and is near universities and schools. No heavy wagons are allowed, so your street and yard stay clean. Plus, all the utility pipes are in the back alleys, so the streets stay nice.

Homes slowly started going up. White built his own house at 27 White's Place in 1899. It was designed in a fancy Queen Anne style with special details and cost \$4,000 (around \$114,000 in 2015). His daughter Elizabeth and her husband built the most expensive house in the neighborhood at the time, costing \$10,000. White and his wife later moved in with them when the house was turned into a duplex.

By the end of 1904, 18 homes had been built. Another 17 went up over the next five years. When interest slowed, White made changes to attract more buyers. He kept the rules about the types of homes and materials used, but allowed for smaller, less expensive homes and dropped the requirement for front fences. This made the area more appealing to middle-class families.

Between 1910 and 1914, building in White's Place really picked up, with 52 new houses added. Most of these cost between \$7,000 and \$10,000 at the time. By 1915, there were about 90 homes in the area. The people who lived there were mostly from upper or middle-class families—doctors, teachers, store owners, lawyers, and even a mayor.

Bloomington was doing very well between 1895 and 1929, with lots of business growth. Samuel was smart to start developing during this boom. With more paved roads, electric trolleys, and the invention of cars, it became easier for people to live farther from their jobs. White's Place was the perfect new neighborhood for this lifestyle.

Many of the features Samuel promised were added over time. In 1899, he built a 110-foot smokestack for a new heating plant to warm the homes. It was fully working by 1913. White said the new heating system would be one of the best around. A worker lived nearby to keep the steam boilers running, and the system stayed in use until 1949.

White also wanted to include a park and an artificial lake called Lake Minerva, named after his wife. The lake was supposed to have two small islands, walking paths, and even a glass roof for winter use. But it was never finished and eventually filled in after White died. He also had plans to expand the neighborhood northward with more homes in an area called "Lake View," but that project never happened either.

Over the years, residents helped improve White's Place. They added a better heating system, widened the main road, paved the alleys, and replaced stone sidewalks with concrete. In 1915, new electric streetlights were installed. A local artist designed the posts, and the lights made the neighborhood even more attractive. *The Pantagraph* said the lights made the area look beautiful and many neighbors came out just to see them.

As White grew older, his health began to fail. He spent two months in the hospital and died peacefully on September 21, 1917, at the age of 70. The cause was cancer. His funeral was held at his church and was very well attended. The minister praised White for his positive attitude and for all he did to help Bloomington grow. He said White's Place was a lasting tribute to him.

White was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery, and family came from out of state to attend the funeral. After he died, one person who lived at the south end of the street reportedly removed the "S" from "Whites Place" to show that the area no longer "belonged" to White—at least according to family stories.

White didn't leave a will, so his son Louis took care of his estate, which was worth about \$63,000 at the time (over \$1.2 million in today's money). Just a few months later, Minerva White passed away too. She had been sick with heart problems and was said to have never recovered from her husband's death. She was remembered as a loving wife and mother and was buried beside Samuel.

In 1988, White's Place was officially listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Today, it is still one of the most beautiful and historic neighborhoods in Bloomington—a lasting reminder of Samuel White's vision and dedication to the city.