

Dr. William C. Hobbs (1800-1861)

Dr. William Hobbs was born in Maryland on December 24, 1800. Very little is known about his life before coming to Bloomington including who his parents were. It is known that he attended Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. and was educated as a Catholic.¹

Hobbs likely arrived in Bloomington, IL around 1837 or 1838. One local resident, James S. Ewing, recalled that Hobbs came to Bloomington from Louisville, Kentucky but no records of where he lived before coming to Bloomington have been found.² During his life in Bloomington, Hobbs tried his hand at several different business ventures, all of which failed. Local resident Caroline Kimball stated that while he was one of the best and kindest of men in the world, he was destitute of all business ability.³

When Hobbs first arrived he opened a dental practice. It was said that he began practicing dentistry somewhere out East (possibly in Maryland where he was born) prior to coming to Bloomington but it is not known where. According to an advertisement he published in the *Bloomington Observer*, he stated he would “feel grateful for the patronage of the public” at his newly established business.⁴ However, his practice only lasted a short time. According to Mrs. Virginia Graves, he did not have much success as a dentist because he was not a professional. His method of dentistry was also unpopular. Instead of extracting or pulling out the teeth of the patient, he twisted them out, which was most likely even more painful than pulling the tooth. Mrs. Graves also recalled that dentistry at that time was not held in high regard. People during this time were more concerned with “securing a house” than taking care of their teeth.”⁵

Dentistry was a brutal practice before the 20th century. Dentistry as a practice did not exist until the 16th century and it was not until the 19th century that the first dental school was founded. Even then anyone could call themselves a dentist with little or no training. Typically general physicians or barbers served as dentists and their main method of dentistry was simple tooth extraction which was used to alleviate pain and halt tooth decay.⁶ In the early days of dentistry, remedies included using arsenic to weaken the root of the tooth for root canals; fillings were made of a toxic mixture of silver and mercury which was heated to 200 degrees before being poured into the exposed nerve of the tooth; and when anesthetic was introduced in the late 1800s, it was in the form of Laudanum (an alcohol herbal preparation which contains powdered opium) which was used until the invention of Novocain in 1905.⁷

After abandoning his dental practicing, Hobbs began a new career as a teacher, though for the rest of his life he retained the title of “Doctor.”⁸ Dr. Hobbs opened a “select school,” which was supposedly a term he coined. It was said that the tuition for his school was higher than most of the other schools in town. The school year ran from January 2 to December 24 with

¹ *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society, Volume I: The War Record of McLean County with other papers, Mrs. Virginia Graves, “Dr. William C. Hobbs.”* (Pantagraph Printing and Stationery Co. 1899) p. 390

² “Dr. William C. Hobbs,” *The Sunday Bulletin*, March 18, 1906

³ John Burnham, George P. Davis, and Ezra Prince. *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society, Bloomington, Illinois, Volume II: School Record of McLean County with Other Papers.* (Bloomington, IL: Pantagraph Printing and Stationary Co., 1903) p. 224

⁴ “W.C. Hobbs Dentist,” *The Bloomington Observer*, January 13, 1838

⁵ *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society, Volume I*, 390

⁶ “A Pictorial History of Dentistry,” www.dentalassistant.net/pictorial-history/

⁷ “A Short Painful History of Dentistry,” <http://kosmo.hubpages.com/hub/A-Short-Painful-History-of-Dentistry>

⁸ *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society, Volume I* p.415

very few holidays in between (save Independence Day and Washington's birthday which Dr. Hobbs' very adamantly made sure were observed).⁹ Hobbs' school was located in the McLean County courthouse in one room on the northwest corner and eventually expanded to two rooms because the number of students increased rapidly. As recalled by Dr. Laban Major, (one of Hobbs' pupils) while Hobbs taught school in the courthouse, only "twenty-five scholars were allowed to attend" at a time.¹⁰ Hobbs' school was considered "the most prominent in the county at that time."¹¹ His school then outgrew the rooms at the courthouse and he moved his school to the First M.E. Church on the corner of Main and Olive Streets and then moved again to a building on South Main Street.¹²

Hobbs' method of teaching was considered unique at this time. School began at 8 a.m. and ended at 5 p.m. There was a morning and an afternoon recess that lasted one hour each. Mrs. Virginia Graves, a former pupil of Hobbs, recalled that when Hobbs was still teaching school at the "old courthouse," he would take his students "strawberrying at recess, finding berries along the [north] slough west of North Main Street between Mulberry and Market streets." When he taught on South Main Street, he took his students "blackberrying" along the south slough at West Street (now Roosevelt Street). At noon, Hobbs would have his students practice their spelling. Mrs. Graves recalled that he would arrange all of his "scholars" that were able to spell in more than two syllables in one class. Dr. Hobbs was particularly fond of spelling matches and conducted them every Friday afternoon. The afternoon exercise consisted of reading in geography or grammar to "break up the monotony." Hobbs also "laid great stress upon instructing his pupils in the amenities, graces and usages of polite society."¹³

It is not known whether Dr. Hobbs received any formal training as a teacher. While it appears that he was well liked by his students, Mrs. Graves stated that "the doctor's talents for imparting knowledge to children, especially small children, was meager indeed, and he did not understand how to adapt himself to different scholars. He had only one method and he followed that year after year, teaching grammar just as he had learned it twenty or thirty years before."¹⁴ Dr. Hobbs distrusted new ways of teaching and much preferred to set books aside and hold spelling matches, where he held higher regard for the boys over the girls. Mrs. Graves remembered that she used the exact same set of school books for the entire six years she was a student of Dr. Hobbs. Hobbs also did not use blackboards in the classroom because he considered them "entirely useless." It is not known exactly how long he taught school, but he taught many well known residents of Bloomington-Normal including Mayor T.J. Bunn, Mrs. Virginia Graves, Dr. Laban S. Major, Adam Guthrie, James S. Ewing, and Nannie McCullough Orme Dyson.¹⁵

After Dr. Hobbs left the teaching profession, he became a merchant at several Bloomington stores including Dr. Warriner's store on the south side of Front Street, between Main and Center, and later worked at William Temple's store on Front Street between Main and East Streets.¹⁶ It also appears that he had formed a business partnership with William H. Allin,

⁹*Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society, Volume I* p.392

¹⁰ "Dr. William C. Hobbs"

¹¹ *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society, Volume I* p.390

¹² *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society, Volume I* p.390

¹³ *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society, Volume I* p.415

¹⁴ *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society, Volume I* p.391

¹⁵ Burnham, Davis, and Prince, p. 550

¹⁶ *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society, Volume I* p.392

another local merchant. However, that partnership dissolved in October of 1851 when an advertisement appeared in the *Western Whig* stating that the co-partnership which had existed between the two men was “dissolved by mutual consent.” Allin continued the business after the partnership ended.¹⁷

Although Hobbs was never regarded as a serious fellow, he was considered to be “among the most prominent and deserving of [our] present citizens.”¹⁸ Hobbs was thought to be a unique man of elegance whose goal was to simply be proper. Coming from the East where “decency and sophistication ruled,” Hobbs’ had hoped to bring a touch of class to the burgeoning frontier town of Bloomington. At the time, Bloomington was made up of emigrants from other countries and those seeking adventure further west of Indiana. “While they possessed all the essentials of openhearted, generous people, they lacked that finer touch of superficial culture and finish which Dr. Hobbs bore in such apparent quantity.” Charles Capen (who was a member of the Free Masons with Hobbs) stated that Hobbs was considered by many residents of Bloomington to be the “sole authority” for every social question and his answers and advice were not to be ignored. “If a gift were to be purchased, he was the first to be consulted...A wedding was hardly considered valid unless he planned the details and then gave his present to the occasion.” Dr. Laban Major stated that Hobbs attended every ball, wedding and funeral held in Bloomington. “When [Hobbs] would attend a party of any kind, the lady of the house never dared to pass the cake before submitting it to him for inspection.” Hobbs would break off a small piece, taste it, and say “in his ceremonious way ‘Very good indeed, but it is a little too sweet’ or ‘not quite enough flour.’”¹⁹

Hobbs was also considered to be the “arbiter of fashion and elegance of manner” in Bloomington during his life. James Ewing recalled that he “was a large, handsome and elegant gentleman.” Hobbs was always clean shaven and his abundant hair was “raven black.” Ewing stated that while “other citizens were dressed in blue jeans, tow linen, and linsey woldsey, [Hobbs] wore broadcloth, silk vests, immaculate linen and silk lined cloaks” and always wore a tall silk hat.²⁰ Mrs. Charlotte Scott remembered that Hobbs had a “positive mania for black satin vests, and invested in a new one every month regularly.” Mrs. Scott also recalled that “Dr. Hobbs was a great snuff taker, and used perfumery so odorous that his friends said of him that they could tell of his approach as far away as three blocks.”²¹ Hobbs was not only concerned with his own appearance and fashion, but of the entire community as well. Laban Major stated that “hardly any lady in Bloomington could buy a dress or bonnet or ribbon without consulting Dr. Hobbs as to whether or not it was becoming.”²²

One way in which Hobbs (and several other influential members of the community) improved the culture of Bloomington was by establishing a library. With the population continuing to grow and a growing need for books within the established schools and churches, a movement began to form a free library. So in 1840 Dr. Hobbs, Jesse Fell, James Allin, and John F. Henry established Bloomington’s first library, known as the Bloomington and McLean

¹⁷ “Dissolution,” *The Western Whig*, November 12, 1851

¹⁸ John H. Burnham. *History of Bloomington and Normal in McLean County, Illinois.* (Bloomington: J.H. Burnham, Publisher, 1879)p74

¹⁹ “Dr. William C. Hobbs”

²⁰ “Dr. William C. Hobbs”

²¹ Annette, “City’s First Mayor.”

²² Dr. E. Duis. *The Good Old Times in McLean County.* (McKnight and McKnight Publishing Company, Second Edition, 1968) p. 293

County Library. These men took it upon themselves to establish a library which anyone in town could use. They purchased about one thousand volumes of books from Philadelphia and brought them back to Bloomington. The library was “a splendid” library at first but in the end was an utter failure due in part to poor management. Dr. Hobbs, who was the one most responsible for managing the library, “let subscribers keep books out as long as they pleased, return them as they pleased, or not at all, and could not bear to fine anyone for keeping books over time.” The consequence of his actions was that the books became scattered or lost and within a few years the library was forced to close.²³

Bloomington was left without a library until 1857 when the Ladies Library Association (predecessor of the Bloomington Public Library) opened a new public library on Center Street (above today’s CVS drug store, across the street from the McLean County Museum of History). Hobbs also had a hand in the development of this permanent public library when he was appointed to serve on the committee that was charged with creating a draft constitution and by-laws.²⁴

As early as 1840 Dr. Hobbs became involved in the local Temperance movement. He gave vigorous assistance to the Temperance movement in McLean County.²⁵ The Temperance movement came to McLean County in the 1830s and Bloomington is credited with being one of the first places in what was considered the “West” at that time, to organize a temperance society. The Temperance Movement focused on urging people to either reduce or to completely abstain from the consumption of alcohol. They also preached that alcohol was the root of all evil and was the cause of the problems in society. There were several temperance societies which had formed in Bloomington prior to Hobbs’ arrival. Hobbs first became a member of the Washingtonian Temperance Movement. The Washingtonians were made of reformed drinkers who appealed to men by moral suasion to abstain from alcohol.²⁶ By 1848 The Sons of Temperance, a secret organization, was formed and Hobbs “was its first worthy patriarch.”²⁷ During speeches he gave on Temperance, Hobbs referred to his own life where he had sought comfort in alcohol. He told the story about how when he was younger that he had been engaged to be married before he came to Bloomington. Tragically, the young woman died just before their wedding day arrived and upon her death, “all his hopes of happiness were blasted. He, like many others, sought to drown his troubles in the wine cup” and this addiction claimed his fortunes. But, he turned his life around and was reformed. It was recalled by many residents of Bloomington that he wore a tall white hat with a broad band of black crepe around it and remained single the rest of his life in honor of his lost love of his youth.²⁸

Dr. Hobbs was also deeply involved with the Free Masons. In 1847 the Free Masons of Bloomington was organized and the first meeting of Bloomington Lodge, No. 43, was held on November 17, 1847. There were eight charter members of the society. The first meeting took place on Front Street in a room over Dr. R. O. Warriner’s store where Hobbs was a clerk at the time. As the story goes, at the first meeting a member was sent out for a bucket and dipper to serve water to members during the meeting. He went to the store where Hobbs was a clerk to purchase these items. Hobbs inquired as to what they were going to be used for and upon

²³ Burnham, Davis, and Prince, p. 224

²⁴ Burnham, Davis, and Prince, p. 227

²⁵ *The History of McLean County, Illinois* (Chicago: WM. Le Baron, Jr. and Co., 1879) p.378

²⁶ Burnham, p. 74

²⁷ Burnham, p. 75

²⁸ *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society, Volume I* p.390

learning their purpose, stated that he wished to make a gift of the bucket and dipper to the new lodge. He then presented the Masonic lodge with a “fine cedar bucket and silver plated dipper.”²⁹ The bucket and dipper were used by the Bloomington lodge for fifty years until they were retired and placed in a glass case in 1897.³⁰ Soon after, Dr. Hobbs became the first initiate of the society and was later made its second master in 1849.³¹ He was the first Mason from Bloomington to become grand master of the Grand Lodge of the State of Illinois.³² The Freemasons emphasize “personal study, self-improvement, and social betterment via individual involvement and philanthropy.”³³

Because Dr. Hobbs was one of the movers and shakers in Bloomington, he was an advisor and friend to many throughout town. Perhaps his most notable friendship was with Abraham Lincoln. Before his national rise to politics, Lincoln traveled the 8th Judicial Circuit in Illinois trying cases as a lawyer. This included frequent stops in Bloomington. Hobbs would have met Lincoln through his work as clerk for McLean County, a position he was elected to in 1857 and served until his death in 1861. Many locals remembered that Hobbs was a valued friend of Lincoln. So much so that according to local lore Dr. Hobbs is responsible for convincing Lincoln to have his very first photograph taken, which supposedly occurred in Bloomington. While this is an interesting anecdote, it is in fact false. Lincoln’s first photograph was not taken in Bloomington, but in Springfield in about 1846 or 1847.

Dr. Hobbs continued his friendship with Lincoln for the rest of his life. Hobbs was even so bold as to oppose Lincoln’s nomination to the presidency on the grounds of Lincoln “not possessing in sufficient degree the courtly style and severe dignity requisite for that office.”³⁴ However after Lincoln won the nomination, Hobbs gave him support.³⁵ Dr. Hobbs’ opinion of Lincoln’s lack of refinement may seem harsh, but for Hobbs it was his way of life.

One particularly dark incident which Dr. Hobbs found himself entangled in most likely tested his skills and tact. In about 1851 or 1852 a man by the name of Lord Houghton arrived in Bloomington. It is not known how Dr. Hobbs came into Lord Houghton’s acquaintance, but it was said that he was obliged to take charge of him. Claiming to be an English Nobleman, Houghton wanted to establish banks and loan money to the people of Bloomington at 6% interest. In order to receive the money, Lord Houghton wanted only the first mortgages on real estate from customers for security. The only tangible credentials that Houghton possessed were a few letters of reference from “reliable” sources in New York and Philadelphia and his refined manners and handsome looks; “tall, blonde hair, of fine physique, a commanding personality, and with aristocracy stamped upon him.”³⁶ Dr. Hobbs had neither real estate nor could borrow the funds to invest with Houghton. Instead, Hobbs introduced him to the “brilliant and polite society” of Bloomington with whom he was intimately acquainted.³⁷ Although many of the conservative men of Bloomington remained skeptical of Houghton’s business, several

²⁹ “Dr. William C. Hobbs”

³⁰ “Dr. William C. Hobbs”

³¹ “Bloomington is Believed to Have More Masons Within Its Borders Than Any Other City of Like Size in the U.S.,” *The Daily Bulletin*, February 6, 1921

³² *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society, Volume I*, p.413-415

³³ The Masonic Service Association of North America, “History of Freemasonry,” <http://www.msana.com/historyfm.asp>

³⁴ “Dr. William C. Hobbs.”

³⁵ “Dr. William. C. Hobbs.”

³⁶ Madame Annette. “Remembers the Lord,” *Sunday Bulletin* (July 22, 1900)

³⁷ “Dr. William C. Hobbs.”

representatives of the business community (including Judge McClure, John McClun, James Miller, and several others) obliged the “Lord” in enterprise. Houghton not only won over the confidence of the men, he also wooed the wives of his prospective clients promising to place their faces on the currency. Some of those wives (including Mrs. McClure and Mrs. Miller) even went so far as having daguerreotypes made in advance at a local photographer to use on the currency when it was ready to be printed! As letters of credit were advanced to Houghton, he promised when the ship of gold arrived in New York from England (which was delayed of course), he would give the cash to the borrowers.³⁸

Before Houghton was to depart, the citizens of Bloomington thought a huge feast should be held in honor of the nobleman. Dr. Hobbs, being the social authority, was sought out to plan such an event. The event became known as the “peacock dinner” where its namesake was served with all the pomp and circumstance of a royal feast. Lord Houghton left the dinner with a great amount of mortgages, equal to the amount of mesmerized patrons. The “Lord” made his departure and was never heard from again. It is not known how much money he made off with, but his scams were not limited to Bloomington as other cities were charmed by the nobleman. At an unknown date, a man matching the description of Houghton was apprehended in St. Louis and brought to Springfield.³⁹ Whether he was punished or released, there is no record. But those who “furnished their mortgages, afterwards had a little axiom...Put not your trust in riches, English nobles, or peacocks.”⁴⁰ It does not appear that there was any outward ill-will towards Dr. Hobbs over this incident. But most of the information that is known comes second hand and was written between 30 and 40 years after Hobbs’ death. So his part in recommending the Englishman may have been forgiven.

In addition to all of his other community activities, Hobbs was also involved with the founding Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington. Joined by a list of other notable men of the town, Dr. Hobbs was on the first board of Trustees that established the university. Since there was a great Methodist population in the area, (including Hobbs who had joined the Methodist church soon after his arrival in Bloomington) it was decided that the university would be a Methodist Christian College (even though those who were involved in its inception were of various faiths). In hopes of making the idea a reality, two of the founding members, James C. Finley and John S. Barger, attended conferences throughout 1850 with no success. Due to the lack of finances, the men were turned down. Finally, a report was written by Finley and Barger that detailed the financial support and the necessity of an educational stronghold in Bloomington. It was submitted to a Methodist committee on education of Illinois. The report was approved in late 1850 and before the Methodist conference adjourned, the founders of Wesleyan, including Hobbs, signed their names to the paper that would seal the establishment of Illinois Wesleyan University. In December of 1850 a meeting was held to determine the officers that would serve on the Board of Trustees and Hobbs was elected as President and re-elected him twice more.⁴¹

Dr. William Hobbs died on February 10, 1861 in his “bachelor quarters” over the McLean County Bank, which was owned by his friend Asahel Gridley. It is not known what the cause of his death was. A large funeral service was organized by the Masonic Lodge No. 43, where Hobbs was a member. The service was held on February 12 at Phoenix Hall, located on

³⁸ “Remembers the Lord.”

³⁹ “Dr. WM. C. Hobbs, *Sunday Bulletin* (March 18, 1906)

⁴⁰ “Dr. WM. C. Hobbs, *Sunday Bulletin* (March 18, 1906)

⁴¹ Elmo Scott Watson. *The Illinois Wesleyan Story 1850-1950*. (Bloomington: Illinois Wesleyan University Press, 1950) p. 22 and 32

the fourth floor of the Phoenix Block at 110 and 112 W. Washington Street.⁴² Charles Capen recalled that Hobbs' funeral was held on a stormy day and all businesses were closed in Bloomington in honor of the man who was considered "among the best known."⁴³ Capen also recalled that it seemed as though the whole town felt the loss of Hobbs and that this loss was "irreparable." Many who attended the funeral reminisced about him—"some humorous, some pathetic." Most were in agreement though that he was "perhaps the most genial, the kindest-hearted, most generally useful man who has ever lived in Bloomington."⁴⁴ A large number of mourners were present at his funeral including many Masons from around the county and state. After the funeral, a large and imposing procession of people made their way to the cemetery where Hobbs was to be laid to rest. This procession was made up of members of: "the Supervisors Court, the Masonic Lodge, the Oddfellows Lodge, Temperance Orders, the Fire Department, and many other citizens, and many carriages also attending with ladies and personal friends."⁴⁵ Dr. William Hobbs was buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, IL in accordance with Masonic traditions. Dr. Hobbs continued to be remembered for many years after his death, especially among his former students. James Ewing, one of those students, recalled that when Dr. Hobbs died, he left "no enemies, a good many debts, and twenty-seven satin vests."⁴⁶

By: Emily Swartz, 2012

Edited By: Candace Summers, 2012

⁴² *Bloomington-Normal City Directory*, 1870

⁴³ *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society, Volume I*, p.415

⁴⁴ Burnham, p. 100

⁴⁵ "The Funeral of Dr. W.C. Hobbs," *The Daily Pantagraph*, February 13, 1861

⁴⁶ "Dr. William C. Hobbs."