

Dr. William C. Hobbs (1800-1861)

Dentist, teacher, merchant, county clerk, fashion trendsetter, and “style” leader of society; all these descriptions can be given to William C. Hobbs, one of the most colorful of McLean County’s early residents. He arrived in Bloomington around 1837 perhaps from Louisville, Kentucky. He is known to have attended Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., but no records of his early life have been found. During his time in Bloomington he would try many different business ventures but was unsuccessful at them all. One resident remembered, “He was the best and kindest of men in the world, (but) he was destitute of all business ability.”

First Hobbs opened a dental practice. This lasted only a short time. Dentistry was very informal at that time. Anyone could call themselves a dentist. Generally doctors or barbers served as dentists and their main method to relieve the pain was to pull teeth. Instead of extracting teeth by the pulling method, Hobbs twisted them out, a particularly painful procedure. Perhaps this led to the failure of his practice but Hobbs soon began a new career as a teacher. Still, he kept the title of “Doctor” for the rest of his life.

Dr. Hobbs called his new school a “select” school and charged a higher tuition than any of the other schools in town. It was soon considered the “most prominent school in the county.” Hobbs limited enrollment to 25 students. At first the school was located in two rooms rented at the McLean County Courthouse. School began at 8 a.m. and ended at 5 p.m. There were two recesses of an hour each. School started on January 2 and ended December 24. Dr. Hobbs felt spelling was very important and held spelling matches every Friday. In addition to academics, he “laid great stress upon instructing his pupils in the amenities, graces and usages of polite society.” Although he seems to have been well liked by his students, he was not remembered as a particularly good teacher. He would rather set books aside and have a spelling match.

Next, Dr. Hobbs became a merchant. He worked in several local stores eventually forming a partnership with one local merchant, William H. Allin. This partnership ended when it was “dissolved by mutual consent” in 1851 and Allin continued in business alone. Then in 1857 Hobbs was elected as clerk for McLean County, a position he held until his death.

Although never successful in business, Dr. Hobbs was nevertheless considered to be “among the most prominent and deserving of Bloomington citizens.” Coming from the East, Hobbs brought “a touch of class” to town. He was thought to be the authority on fashion, style, and proper etiquette. In many ways, Bloomington at the time was a “rough and tumble” town with rough and tumble citizens. They were generous and open-hearted people who lacked the culture and “finish” that Dr. Hobbs appeared to have in great quantity. “He was considered by many to be the final authority for every social question and his advice was not to be ignored.” His was the final word in fashion and etiquette in town as long as he lived. His favorable opinion was said to be necessary for any purchase of dress, bonnet, or ribbon for the ladies in town.

With a number of friends, Dr. Hobbs helped found Bloomington’s first library in 1840. Unfortunately, he was given responsibility for managing the library. Since he felt subscribers should be able to keep books as long as they liked and return them as they pleased, or not at all, the books were soon scattered and lost and the library was forced to close.

He was also very active in the local Temperance movement. This was a national movement to reduce or eliminate the consumption of alcohol as it was thought to be the root of all evil. Hobbs became the first “worthy patriarch” of The Sons of Temperance when that society was formed in 1848. He told the story of how the death of his great love in his youth had

led to his addiction to alcohol and claimed his fortune. He was also very involved with the Free Masons. When the Bloomington Lodge was founded in 1847 he became the first initiate and was its second grand master. The story is that he bought the Masons a cedar bucket and silver dipper for drinking water at meetings when the lodge first began. These were used for 50 years and kept as treasured mementos.

Hobbs is also said to have been a friend of Abraham Lincoln. No doubt Hobbs met Lincoln in his position as county clerk when Lincoln was a lawyer for the 8th Judicial Circuit Court here. When told that Lincoln was going to run for president Hobbs was opposed on the grounds that Lincoln lacked sufficient refinement. However once Lincoln was nominated, Hobbs gave him his full support.

Dr. Hobbs was also involved in the founding of Illinois Wesleyan University in 1850. Together with other notable men of the town, Dr. Hobbs was on the first board of trustees charged with founding a university in Bloomington. Since there was a great Methodist population in town, it was decided the university should be Methodist. Enough financial support was raised in town that the Methodist Conference agreed to establish Illinois Wesleyan University here in Bloomington. Dr. Hobbs was elected President of the first University Board of Trustees and held that office for two additional terms.

On February 10, 1861 Dr. William Hobbs died in his “bachelor quarters” over the McLean Count Bank which was owned by his friend Asahel Gridley. The cause of death was unknown. A large funeral was organized by the Masonic Lodge with the service held at Phoenix Hall on West Washington Street (across from the McLean County Courthouse). All businesses were closed in Bloomington to honor the man who was considered “among the best known.” He was remembered as “perhaps the most genial, most generally useful man who has ever lived in Bloomington.” He is buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

Discussion Question: What exactly were Dr. Hobbs skills? Did living in a Western frontier town help or hurt his career opportunities?