

John Edward McClun (1812-1888)

John Edward McClun was born on February 19, 1812 in Frederick County, Virginia. He was the youngest of eight children born to Thomas and Elizabeth Bailey McClun. The McClun family was Scots-Irish from Northern Ireland and they settled in Pennsylvania. His father, a Quaker, moved from Pennsylvania to the Shenandoah Valley when he was a young man. The family home was built of logs that were weather boarded and whitewashed and there was a stone chimney outside the house. John wrote a memoir about his life which stated that his birthplace in Virginia was a beautiful location in which to live and his relationships with his older siblings as ideal.¹ John, being the youngest child, was a great pet with his brothers and when they came home from work, he was in the habit of running out to meet them to be carried back in by them in triumph.²

John's youth however was filled with great sadness. His brother Jefferson died at a young age and John described this event as "the most tender event of his whole life."³ Next, his father Thomas died in 1819 when John was only seven years old. His father was raised in a strict Quaker home and was described as an excellent man except for his love of strong drink which John felt was responsible for his early death. This notion made McClun an active temperance crusader for the rest of his life. His mother, with the help of the children, eked out subsistence on the farm. John recalled that his mother was a woman of will and great energy to take on the task of raising a large family. His brothers tilled the land; his mother tended the livestock, gardens, and dairy. Because of this, John had great respect for his mother whom he considered a truly remarkable woman.

John learned the art of sales from his mother. As a boy, John was often sent to the market in Winchester, Virginia by his mother to sell butter, eggs, chickens, and vegetables from their farm. Over the years John became an expert at selling. On one occasion, John was at his wit's end because he could not sell a pair of dressed geese and it was getting close to the end of the day. He had almost given up selling the geese, which were obviously old and tough, when an old woman came up to him and offered to buy one of the geese. John recalled that he thanked her for the kind offer but stated that "these poor old geese have been united together in the most amicable relationship for twenty years, and it would be sad to part them now." This shrewd statement, which linked a financial effect with a humanitarian thought, convinced the woman to buy both geese.⁴

In 1830 when John was eighteen years old he and his mother had saved enough money for him to enter the common school for some formal education. He proved to be an apt student even studying during his time off from school. John said that during the spring when he had to return to work in the fields he did not neglect his books. He studied his grammar while plowing saying that "while those fat, lazy horses belonging to the man to whom I was hired at seven dollars per month, were turning at the end of the furrow, I was busy with my grammar."⁵ He returned to school the next year, made rapid progress and

¹ "Thoughts and Recollections of an Old Man," 1882, McClun Papers, ISU Archives

² *Good Old Times of McLean County*, p. 339

³ "Thoughts and Recollections of an Old Man," 1882, McClun Papers, ISU Archives

⁴ *Good Old Times of McLean County*, p.861-862

⁵ *Good Old Times in McLean County*, p. 339

procured a position as a teacher in a one room school house. The building measured about eighteen feet by eighteen feet and he taught forty students ranging in age from six to twenty-one. After three years of teaching he decided to do some exploring of the western states. John traveled alone on horseback through some of what is now considered part of the Midwest, liked what he saw and returned for his mother.

In October of 1835 John and his mother began their trip in a two horse-drawn wagon. Winter was beginning to set in so John left his mother in the care of one of his brothers in Indiana. John continued on to Illinois arriving in Springfield on December 4, 1835. He found the people there a little “rough” by eastern standards but a moral and religious people nonetheless. Job opportunities were lacking in Springfield even though the city was in a constant state of growth. With his funds dwindling after several failed business attempts, John sought steady employment. In 1836 he found a job as a store clerk working for David Duncan in Waynesville, IL. While the town lacked a tavern, church, post office and school house, Duncan’s store did considerable business with the people who came from “all quarters to purchase the necessaries of life.”⁶ However, after only six months on the job Duncan died which forced McClun to look for work elsewhere.

John decided to return to Bloomington where he had visited six months prior. It was here that he opened a store of his own. He described his new home as a “beautiful little city set upon a hill. It contained about three hundred inhabitants. The houses were small, plain and cheaply built, yet they were painted white, which gave to the place an air of neatness and beauty.” He also recalled that the “prairie came up to town in a state of nature, except a few farms,” and that deer, wolves, and rattlesnakes roamed at large throughout town.⁷ Over the next few years John was joined in this new town by two of his brothers, Robert and Absalom, and his mother. His store did well during this time, being that it was only one of five stores in Bloomington. He then branched out into land speculation buying thirteen acres from William Evans. From this land he would lay out the Third Addition to the city of Bloomington. He continued to buy and sell land over the years even buying some in places like Urbana. Much of his land was rented out to tenant farmers or to lumber interests.

On January 31, 1839 John married Hannah Harkness who was the daughter of Samuel and Esther Evans Harkness of Rhode Island. They would make their home at 405 West Jefferson Street. This union was to bring both comfort and grief into the McCluns’ lives. Eleven children were born to them with only five reaching adulthood. Most of their children died very young. Of the five who reached adulthood, the oldest, Elisha, committed suicide in Chicago over a \$200 debt which occurred after both John and Hannah had passed away. A short time after his marriage to Hannah, John’s mother passed away in 1843 at the age of 67. John credited his mother for being responsible for “anything commendable in my character.” He claimed that she taught him to be honest, to always be industrious, to speak evil of no one, and to fear the Lord.⁸ These tragedies weighed heavy upon him the rest of his life.

John was a deeply religious man. He was an active member of the First Methodist Episcopal Church where he was a member from 1837 throughout the rest of his life. He was a trustee of the church and Superintendent of the Sunday school where he served

⁶ *Good Old Times in McLean County*, p. 341

⁷ *Good Old Times in McLean County*, p. 342

⁸ *Good Old Times in McLean County*, p. 343-344

three terms for a total of twenty-five years. He also helped fund the construction of a new building for the church in 1865 having pledged three payments of \$666.66. It was his strong Christian faith which probably helped him deal with the many tragedies that he suffered throughout his life. He was quoted later in life to have said that "the Christian's faith will make you strong to withstand the troubles and disappointments of life- it will be your consolation in sorrows, bereavements, and death."⁹

In 1842 John's store in Bloomington suffered from some hard times due to a national economic downturn. He was forced to ask his creditors in Philadelphia for help and because of his reputation as a fair and honest man, his creditors gave him a new stock of goods. Later that year John also won lucrative contracts for several mail routes. Horses and feed were fairly cheap and this enterprise proved to be very profitable turning the bad economy to his advantage.

In 1849, McClun was elected to the office of County Judge for McLean County, which was a position that had traditionally been held by a commissioner. While he had no legal training, "he attended faithfully to the duties of his office while he held it."¹⁰ He held this position for three years and when he left office, he noted that during his time the county's debt was reduced and the tax rate cut in half. However while the people of the county had confidence in him enough to elect him judge, it seemed that he doubted his abilities by saying that he was sorry he had not the "qualifications to serve the people better in so high and responsible an office; but having done the very best I could, I shall lay down the honors so generously conferred upon me by my fellow citizens, with a conscience clear that the many errors and blunders I must have committed have been those of the head, and not the heart."¹¹

In 1860 John embarked on yet another business venture by opening a bank. He and several other prominent citizens of Bloomington founded the Home Bank of Bloomington in October of that year. It was located at 106 West Washington Street. For several years the bank prospered until economic hard times hit the country yet again forcing the bank to fail in 1876. By his own account, this failure greatly reduced John's own personal wealth.

On December 13, 1862 John and some other members of his family bought Lot #1 in Bloomington Cemetery. The lot contained forty graves and cost \$320. Today a lot of that size would cost \$28,000. It is a large circular lot in a prominent location on top of a hill. He, his wife and most of his children, would all be buried in this plot.

Besides being a successful businessman, John served his community in many other ways. In 1850 he was one of thirty prominent citizens chosen to serve on the first Board of Trustees of Illinois Wesleyan University. In September of 1852 he helped found the county Bible Society whose purpose was to provide bibles to the needy. John was also on the first board of the Central Illinois Female College founded in 1852 and abandoned in 1856 because the head teacher's health made it impossible for the college to remain open. He was the secretary of the McLean County Thief Detecting Society, a sort of neighborhood watch group. From 1853 to 1855, John served as a member of the House of Representatives for the State of Illinois. During his two terms in the House, he also served on the State Board of Agriculture and the Finance Committee. He was a member

⁹ *Good Old Times in McLean County*, p. 347

¹⁰ *Good Old Times in McLean County*, p. 345

¹¹ "Resignation of County Judge," *Bloomington Intelligencer*, February 4, 1852

of the State Board of Education from 1857 to 1860 and contributed money to the founding of Illinois State Normal University in Bloomington. In 1856, John was a member of the committee which created the first public library in Bloomington, later named Withers Library. He was elected one of two Township Supervisors from Bloomington when McLean County adopted the township form of government in 1858. He was a long time member of the Sons of Temperance, crusading against the sale and manufacture of liquor. John was also appointed to the War Bonus committee in April of 1861 during the U.S. Civil War. This committee would oversee the distribution of enlistment bonuses for volunteers in the Union Army.

After his bank failed in 1876 the last years of John's life were fairly quiet ones as he had retired from business life. About ten days before his death, John began to feel ill and was diagnosed with the flux which was an abnormal discharge of the bowels much like dysentery. After this short illness, on July 30, 1888 John McClun died at his home. In his obituary, the *Daily Pantagraph* said that "the death of Judge McClun removes a familiar figure from Bloomington," who was well known and well liked by all. Because the weather was so hot, his funeral and burial were held the very next day. It was a very large and elaborate funeral held at First Methodist Episcopal Church; two ministers delivered eulogies, a quartet sang, children from the Sunday school he was superintendent of dropped flowers on the grave, large floral arrangements surrounded the entire funeral, and Judge John Scott, who was a very old and dear friend of McClun, gave a touching eulogy about the passing of one of Bloomington's pioneer settlers. The pallbearers were some of the most prominent men in Bloomington including Abram Brokaw, James Goodheart, J.F. Burman, and P. Whitmer. He was buried in the family plot in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery. His wife, Hannah followed him in death just three years later on October 23, 1891. She was buried next to her husband and several of their children.

By: Candace Summers, 2008