

John Jackson Mayes (1851-1918)

John Jackson Mayes, Jr. was born on April 7, 1851 in St John's, New Brunswick, Canada.¹ Mayes was the son of John Jackson Mayes, Sr. and Sybil (Robert) Mayes, both of whom hailed from England.² There is little information available on Mayes' early life, but we do know that at the age of 17, John (better known as J.J.) moved to Boston, Massachusetts. Shortly thereafter, he moved to Chicago, Illinois, and was reportedly living there in October 1871 during the Great Chicago Fire.³

The fire began on the evening of Sunday, October 8, 1871, breaking out in or near the O'Leary family's barn at 137 DeKoven Street, on the South side of the city.⁴ Many Chicagoans felt safe in the North and West sides, believing that the fire would calm down before it could spread from the South side. However, by midnight the fire had jumped from one side of the Chicago River to the other. It had reached the North side by the early morning on Monday, October 9.⁵ In all, the fire burned for two days, killing around 300 people. By the time the flames died down, "two thousand acres lay waste; about eighteen thousand buildings were destroyed, and about ninety thousand people (were) left homeless."⁶ It is not known exactly where Mayes lived in Chicago or if he was directly affected by the fire.

By the fall of 1877, Mayes had moved to Bloomington, Illinois, first renting a room at Mrs. Mary L. Alsop's boarding house, located at 302 East North Street.⁷ Not long after his arrival in Bloomington, Mayes began his career as a photographer. Together with Arthur Bell, Mayes opened a Photograph Parlor, located at 221 North Main Street (at the corner of Main and Jefferson Streets) in downtown Bloomington.⁸ Their studio offered services such as photo enlargement, baby photographs, group pictures, and frames and matting. They also copied old photographs and "enlarged any size, finished in Crayon, India Ink, or Oil."⁹ Advertisements for their studio stated they had "all the latest improvements for doing fine artistic work, and at reasonable prices."¹⁰ In the 1878-1879 *Bloomington City Directory*, the studio was listed as having four photographers: Mayes and Bell (the owners), and Charles Flanders and Edward Rogers.¹¹

¹ "J. J. Mayes, Veteran Photographer, Dead," *The Pantagraph*, June 28, 1918.

² U.S. Census Bureau; 1900 United States Federal Census; using ancestry library (accessed June 26, 2023).

³ "J. J. Mayes, Veteran Photographer, Dead."

⁴ Bessie Louise Pierce, *History of Chicago, Volume III: The Rise of a Modern City, 1871-1893* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 4; Richard F. Bales, "Did the Cow Do It? A New Look at the Cause of the Great Chicago Fire," *Illinois Historical Journal* 90, no. 1 (1997): 12. It is not known exactly how the fire started; the most common legend has always been that of Mrs. O'Leary's cow allegedly kicking over an oil lamp in the barn. That story was frequently reported as true by various newspapers at the time but has since been disproven. It was believed so widely, though, because of strong anti-Irish, anti-Catholic, and anti-immigrant sentiments in Chicago at the time.

⁵ Pierce, *History of Chicago*, 5.

⁶ *Ibid*, 6.

⁷ "Burglary," *The Pantagraph*, February 7, 1878; David B. Gould, *Gould's City Directory for 1878/1879, Bloomington and Normal, being a Complete Index to the Residents, a Classified Business Register, and containing an Appendix of Useful Information of the Churches, Societies, Banks, City, County, and other Miscellaneous Matter* (Bloomington, IL: Leader Steam Printing House, 1878), 124 and 201.

⁸ *Gould's City Directory for 1878-1879, Bloomington and Normal*, 225; "Photography. Mayes & Bell," *The Pantagraph*, September 21, 1877.

⁹ "Photography. Mayes & Bell."

¹⁰ "Photography. Mayes & Bell," *The Weekly Leader*, September 13, 1877.

¹¹ *Gould's City Directory for Bloomington and Normal, 1878/1879*, 24, 65, 124, 154.

However, the partnership between Mayes and Bell did not last very long. On September 11, 1878, *The Pantagraph* reported that Mayes and Bell had mutually dissolved their firm, with Mayes selling out all of his interest in the business to Bell.¹² Later that same month, Mayes began to venture into his own business, making a trip to Chicago to “procure material for his new gallery.”¹³ By 1879, Mayes had established his own gallery (located at 402 North Main Street), and Arthur Bell and Bell’s brother had opened their own studio, “Bell Brothers.”¹⁴ Mayes heavily advertised portraiture at his new gallery, stating “if you want a first-class picture of yourself, go and see Mayes in the McClun block.”¹⁵ Especially around the holidays, Mayes touted a “card or cabinet picture of yourself” as a very appropriate and valuable Christmas gift to a “sister, sweetheart, or wife.”¹⁶

Especially during the earlier years of his photography career, Mayes was an active presence in the community. In December 1878 he suggested photographing the Sleighing Carnival as a way to commemorate the event, though it is unknown whether he expected to be compensated for this work.¹⁷ In 1879 he offered three prizes to community members for solving a rebus (a word puzzle comprised of letters and images).¹⁸ Beyond his business-related connections to the community, Mayes was a member of Second Christian Church, the Illinois Club, and the McLean County Historical Society.¹⁹

Mayes’ work was highly regarded around Bloomington, with many glowing reviews appearing in the pages of local newspapers. An 1884 *Pantagraph* article applauded the “superior work” found at Mayes’ Studio, including a recent commission to photograph all 150 members of the Stubblefield family at their annual reunion. The article stated that each face was easily recognized and that the picture was one that would be “highly prized for the future.”²⁰

1878 was a busy year for Mayes, both professionally and personally. In addition to operating a busy photography studio, he also married Mabel de Conville. Mabel was born in Bloomington on July 2, 1858 to James and Louise (Minor) de Conville.²¹ Mabel had two sisters, Ada and Lulu, and a younger brother, St. Clair, who died at the age of four.²² Mabel’s father was a harness maker until his death in 1869. Her mother was listed as a dress maker in the Bloomington City Directories beginning in 1872, suggesting that she began working after her husband James’s passing.²³

On Saturday, September 21, 1878, J.J. and Mabel married at the home of Mabel’s cousin, J.M. Wright, in Fairbury, Illinois.²⁴ In the presence of a few friends, Reverend C. D. Merritt performed the marriage ceremony. After spending a short time “receiving the congratulations”

¹² “Dissolved Partnership,” *The Pantagraph*, September 25, 1878.

¹³ “J. J. Mayes goes to Chicago,” *The Pantagraph*, September 25, 1878.

¹⁴ “Photography,” *The Pantagraph*, February 7, 1879; David B. Gould. *Gould’s City Directory for 1880-81 Bloomington and Normal*. (Bloomington: Leader Publishing House, 1880), 233.

¹⁵ “Photographs,” *The Pantagraph*, August 29, 1879.

¹⁶ “Photographs,” *The Pantagraph*, December 9, 1880.

¹⁷ “Mr. Mayes proposes to commemorate the sleighing carnival,” *The Pantagraph*, December 25, 1878.

¹⁸ “Mayes, the photographer, offered three prizes,” *The Pantagraph*, January 11, 1879.

¹⁹ “J.J. Mayes, Veteran Photographer, Dead.”

²⁰ “Superior Art Work at Mayes,” *The Pantagraph*, September 10, 1884.

²¹ “Death of Mrs. Mayes,” *The Pantagraph*, March 9, 1906.

²² “Deaths,” *The Pantagraph*, February 11, 1865.

²³ Edward Arntzen, *Bloomington City Directory, including a Society, Statistical, and Business Directory for 1872-73*. (Bloomington, IL: Leader Printing Company, 1872) 168.

²⁴ “Hymeneal Happiness,” *The Pantagraph*, September 23, 1888.

from their friends, the couple departed the town to return to Bloomington. When the couple returned to his boarding house, his landlady, Mary Alsop, along with several other boarders, presented J.J. and Mabel with an elegant “gentleman’s easy chair” as a wedding present.²⁵ It appears that the newlyweds remained at the boarding house for a short time until they could find a suitable place in Bloomington to set up their own household. The next address listed for the Mayes family was 402 North Main Street. Since there is only one address listed for Mayes until 1885, it is possible that his residence and his studio were located at the same address.²⁶

Much like Mabel’s parents, Mabel and J.J. would go on to have four children, only three of whom lived to adulthood. Their first child died just days after its birth in 1880.²⁷ Their oldest daughter, Madeline, was born in December 1881.²⁸ She became a dance instructor, likely teaching at Illinois State Normal University (today Illinois State University).²⁹ She would go on to marry Van Allen Sham in 1926, and later performed on the piano accordion in Vaudeville shows. The middle Mayes daughter, Evelyn, is thought to have been born around 1884. Evelyn was a violin student at Illinois Wesleyan University in 1915, and a piano teacher at the Bloomington Conservatory of Music from 1924 to 1925.³⁰ The youngest daughter, Faye, was born around 1888. On May 22, 1913, Faye married Roy Spurgeon, with whom she had three sons and a daughter. Faye taught piano for most of her life, and eventually wrote a piano instruction book for beginners.³¹

J.J. Mayes was involved in a number of legal cases, with most related to an incident involving his dog, named Grip, in 1883.³² In early May that year, Hester Fell visited Mayes’ photography studio to get her photograph taken. Hester was the daughter of Henry C. Fell, a local insurance agent, and was around 12 years old at the time of the incident.³³ While Hester was at the studio, Mayes’ bulldog bit her on the leg so severely that she was confined to her home for an extended time. Reports on the incident expressed varying degrees of anger and forgiveness towards Mayes. Some reporters wrote that the bulldog was “large and savage,” while others said that this bulldog had been present at the studio for years and had never been an issue before.³⁴ Dr. David Gideon, editor of the *Sunday through the Mail* newspaper, heard the story and wrote an article that angered Mayes. On Tuesday, May 8, 1883, Mayes and Gideon met in front of the Owen, Pixley, & Co. clothing store (located at 301 and 303 North Main Street). Mayes asked Gideon for more information about the article.³⁵ There are a few versions of the story, but it seems that at this point, after learning that the doctor was the author, Mayes began

²⁵ “Hymenial Happiness.”

²⁶ David B. Gould, *Gould’s City Directory of Bloomington and Normal, for 1880-1881*, 128.

²⁷ “Mrs. J. J. Mayes was reported to be in a very low condition,” *The Pantagraph*, January 19, 1880.

²⁸ “A sweet little baby girl,” *The Pantagraph*, December 7, 1881.

²⁹ Charles M. Samson, *Bloomington and Normal Illinois City Directory 1917* (Bloomington, IL: Pantagraph Printing & Stationery Co., 1917) 425.

³⁰ *Polk’s Bloomington and Normal City Directory, 1924-1925, Containing a complete Residence and Business Directory and a Miscellaneous and Street Directory of Bloomington and Normal, Illinois* (Peoria, IL: Leshnick Directory Co, 1924.)

³¹ “Ex-Resident Publishes Music Book,” *The Pantagraph*, September 7, 1945.

³² “Sneak thieves are getting bolder,” *The Pantagraph*, June 13, 1882.

³³ U.S. Census Bureau; 1880 United States Federal Census; using ancestry library (accessed June 28, 2023).

³⁴ “The Tale of a Dog,” *The Pantagraph*, May 9, 1883; “A Cane Presentation,” *The Weekly Leader*, May 10, 1883.

³⁵ David B. Gould, *Gould’s City Directory of Bloomington and Normal, for 1882-1883, being a Complete Index to the Residents, a Classified Business Register, and containing an Appendix of Useful Information of the Churches, Societies, Banks, City, County, and other Miscellaneous Matter* (Bloomington, IL: David B. Gould, 1882), 133.

cursing at Gideon (newspaper accounts differ on the exact obscenities), after which Gideon struck Mayes twice in the head with his large hickory cane. The altercation continued until it was halted by bystanders.³⁶ Later in the day, Gideon went to the offices of the *Independent*, another local newspaper, to request that they not publish any more inflammatory remarks on the subject.³⁷ While Gideon was there, Mayes came by and again started both verbal and physical attacks on the doctor, which had to be stopped by onlookers.³⁸ Both men were arrested for assault. Mayes pled guilty and paid a \$7.00 fine, (the equivalent of \$211.46 in 2023). Dr. Gideon's trial took place on May 10, 1883, but the outcome is not known.³⁹

After these public displays of aggression by Mayes, most people agreed that the bulldog should no longer be kept in the studio. This sentiment only grew when, just a week later, the bulldog "attacked" again, this time at Mayes' barn on West Market Street, jumping into the face of a German laborer named John B. Trader.⁴⁰ The dog bit Trader's lip and knocked out one of his teeth. According to *The Weekly Leader*, Mayes promised the police that he would shoot the dog given its history of violence against the public.⁴¹ However, it does not seem that Mayes kept his promise. In September 1883, he denied allegations that his bulldog was out making trouble again, assuring the authorities that the dog was always chained up in his barn for the safety of his horses.⁴² Although he did not shoot his dog, Mayes did acquiesce to demands that the dog be removed from his downtown photography studio for the safety of the public.

Around the mid-1880s, Mayes became seriously involved in the world of horse breeding and racing. According to the *Pantagraph*, his interest in horses began around the time he began suffering from a recurring series of health problems. In April 1881, Mayes was afflicted by rheumatism (a painful inflammation of joints and muscles), which especially affected his right knee, forcing him to "hobble around on a crutch."⁴³ That December, Mayes was once again said to be ill and confined to bed.⁴⁴ Mayes eventually turned to horses to improve his "waning health."⁴⁵ He even lived on his family's farm (about 2 miles outside Bloomington) in the summers to better care for the horses, though he returned to Bloomington for the colder months.⁴⁶

By 1885, breeding, racing, and selling horses became Mayes' sole business endeavor. In January that year he sold his photograph gallery to Messers Heine Kadgihn and Ed Bush to focus on breeding and training horses.⁴⁷ He also leased the old Stubblefield Barn located on West Front Street for his horse business.⁴⁸ That spring Mayes also leased the old fairgrounds from Owen Lee Cheney. The fairgrounds were located between Market and Washington Streets and around half a

³⁶ "The Tale of a Dog," *The Pantagraph*.

³⁷ "Cheating the Tomb," *The Pantagraph*, December 6, 1883. *The Daily Independent* was a very short-lived newspaper that was founded in December of 1882. It was purchased by *The Daily Bulletin* in December 1883 according to this *Pantagraph* article.

³⁸ "The Tale of a Dog," *The Pantagraph*.

³⁹ "Yesterday morning," *The Pantagraph*, May 10, 1883.

⁴⁰ Gould, *City Directory for 1882-1883*, 177.

⁴¹ "Mr. Mayes' Bull Dog Gets in its Work Again, and is Ordered Shot," *The Weekly Leader*, May 17, 1883.

⁴² "Mr. J. J. Mayes denies the statement," *The Pantagraph*, September 22, 1883.

⁴³ "Mr. J. J. Mayes is suffering from rheumatism," *The Pantagraph*, April 28, 1881.

⁴⁴ "Mr. J. J. Mayes, the photographer," *The Pantagraph*, December 17, 1881.

⁴⁵ "The Old Fair Grounds," *The Pantagraph*, April 25, 1885.

⁴⁶ "A Summer Residence," *The Pantagraph*, April 19, 1884.

⁴⁷ "A Business Change," *The Pantagraph*, January 16, 1885.

⁴⁸ "Mr. J. J. Mayes, who a day or so ago sold his photograph gallery," *The Pantagraph*, January 17, 1885.

mile west of the mainline of the Chicago & Alton railroad.⁴⁹ Mayes used the grounds to train and breed horses for five years. He also rented the fairgrounds to traveling attractions such as circuses, and the “Great Mexican Wild West and Royal Hippodrome” show hosted by Fargo & Co. at the fairgrounds in 1885.⁵⁰

Mayes paid close attention to the bloodlines of the horses he bred from well-known and well-performing racehorses. He even offered extended pedigrees to anyone interested in purchasing or sponsoring a horse.⁵¹ A *Pantagraph* article from 1885 profiled a few of the racehorses Mayes owned. This included Mayes’ Sprague, a five-year-old brother of another accomplished horse, Rounds Sprague. Due to the award-winning bloodline of these horses, it was said that breeders and onlookers had “confidence in their ability to trot very fast.”⁵² Mayes’ Sprague was described as “a seal brown,” standing 15 ¾ hands high, and weighing around 1,100 pounds. The article also noted that the stallion had a gracefully arching neck, his throat latch was neat and clean, and his eyes were “bold, prominent, and exhibit nerve and will power.”⁵³ Mayes owned many other young horses and mares, including Monte Cristo, a “successful sire ... worthy of a more extended notice.”⁵⁴ These horses were very valuable. In 1887, Mayes sold his three-year-old bay Altair to Mr. McGregory of Lafayette, Indiana for \$1,500.⁵⁵ This is the equivalent of around \$48,000 in 2023.⁵⁶

In addition to his success in the horse business, which he is thought to have continued until around 1916, Mayes returned to professional photography. In 1893, he appears again as a photographer in the *Bloomington City Directory*.⁵⁷ His business’s physical location moved around many times during the 1890s and 1900s, as did the family residence. For example, the Mayes family moved from 426 North Main Street in 1886 to 203 East Walnut Street in 1887. From there they moved to 108 South Center Street in 1889, 303 South Main Street in 1891.⁵⁸ This bouncing around continued regularly through the 1910s. In 1915, Mayes was listed as residing at 306 North Roosevelt Avenue.

In November 1916, Mayes “retired” from photography in Bloomington, and opened a new studio in Clinton, Illinois by December 19 that same year. His studio was inside the Klein building, located at 110 North Monroe Street.⁵⁹ According to the *Clinton Daily Public*, the studio was a “splendid set of rooms” with a lighting system Mayes had set up that was “a feature worth seeing.”⁶⁰ Ads for his studio in Clinton touted a new “electrical nitrogen sky light” which

⁴⁹ Bill Kemp, “Bloomington’s west side first site for county fairgrounds,” *The Pantagraph*, July 29, 2012.

⁵⁰ “Mr. J. J. Mayes has rented the fair grounds,” *The Pantagraph*, April 7, 1885.

⁵¹ “Trotting Stallions,” *The Pantagraph*, June 10, 1887.

⁵² “The Old Fair Grounds,” *The Pantagraph*, April 25, 1885.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ “Mr. J.J. Mayes Sold...” *The Pantagraph*, April 11, 1887.

⁵⁶ Ian Webster, “U.S. Inflation,” *officialdata.org*, accessed August 10, 2023, <https://www.officialdata.org/us/inflation/1887?amount=1500t>.

⁵⁷ Charles O. Ebel, *Bloomington-Normal and McLean County Directory for 1893* (Bloomington, IL: Pantagraph Printing and Stationery Co, 1893) 315.

⁵⁸ *Bloomington City Directory 1886: with a Compendious Street Directory, and Map of the City* (Bloomington, IL: W. F. Curtis & Co, 1886) 261.; *Bloomington City Directory 1887: with a Compendious Street Directory, and Map of the City Revised to Date* (Bloomington, IL: W. F. Curtis & Co, 1887) 283.; *Bloomington City Directory 1891: with a Compendious Street Directory, and Map of the City Revised to Date* (Bloomington, IL: W. F. Curtis & Co, 1891) 591.

⁵⁹ “New Photographer,” *Herald and Review*, December 20, 1916.

⁶⁰ “New Photographer Opens,” *Clinton Daily Public*, December 19, 1916.

allowed Mayes to do evening photography sessions as well. Additionally, he boasted that he offered “up to date” photographs utilizing “porcelain pictures, large portraits in oil, sepia, and water colors” too.⁶¹ However, by July 4, 1917 he had sold the space in Clinton and decided to re-open a gallery in Bloomington, located at 320 North Main Street.⁶²

Mayes also taught photography at Illinois Wesleyan University’s College of Fine Arts during the 1899-1900 and 1900-1901 school years. He was made the Principal of the School of Photography because “he has had thirty successful years in the profession” and “his work shows the mind and hand of a master in his art.”⁶³ At any point in the calendar year, students could enroll in a three-month course to be instructed in three departments: Lighting, Posing, and Operating; Retouching; Printing and Finishing. Students could also specialize in any one of the three departments if they were particularly interested in a topic. This program was open to “any young man or woman desiring to enter the business world on a paying basis,” and upon graduation, students would be fully qualified to open and operate their own photography studio.⁶⁴

Not long after Mayes’ short tenure at Wesleyan, his wife, Mabel, fell ill. After two years of suffering through an unnamed illness, Mabel Mayes passed away at the family residence at 807 North East Street on March 6, 1906. She was described as a “woman of gracious personality... unusually well read and educated.”⁶⁵ She was also known to be musically talented, a trait she passed on to their daughters.

On June 27, 1918, J.J. Mayes passed away at his residence at 410 North Oak Street after an illness that lasted six months. According to *The Pantagraph*, Mayes had become progressively weaker over the course of those six months, eventually succumbing to his unnamed illness.⁶⁶ He was survived by their three daughters, all of whom would go on to succeed in their musical endeavors. His funeral was held at First Christian Church on Saturday, June 30, and was officiated by Reverend Edgar DeWitt Jones, a close friend.⁶⁷ Mayes was buried next to Mabel at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

By: Emily McCusker, 2023

⁶¹ “J.J. Mayes’ New Photographic Studio,” *Clinton Daily Public*, December 26, 1916.

⁶² “Returns to Bloomington,” *The Pantagraph*, July 4, 1917; “Local Notices,” *The Pantagraph*, December 8, 1917.

⁶³ *Annual Catalogue of the Illinois Wesleyan University 1899-1900* (Bloomington, IL: The University Press), 98.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ “Death of Mrs. Mayes.”

⁶⁶ “J.J. Mayes, Veteran Photographer, Dead.”

⁶⁷ “Funeral of J.J. Mayes,” *The Pantagraph*, July 1, 1918.