

Richard Blue (1841-1921)

Richard Blue was born on February 22, 1842 in Dayton, Ohio. The names of his parents are unknown. He was recorded as “**mulatto**,” an outdated and now offensive term for a person of both white and Black ancestry. Blue was a member of the white Rayburn family household for much of his youth. Because of this, he was likely not **enslaved**.

In 1851, Judge James Rayburn and his family left Ohio and moved to Old Town Township in McLean County, Illinois, which is located southeast of Bloomington, IL. Blue, then nine years old, moved with them and worked as a farm laborer for the family.

When the Civil War broke out in 1861, many free Black men attempted to join the Union Army, but were refused. It was not until 1863, after the **Emancipation Proclamation** had been issued by President Abraham Lincoln, that they were allowed to join. On February 3, 1865, Blue enlisted in the Union Army, joining the 29th United States Colored Infantry, Company A, in Springfield, initially serving as a private. Blue was somewhat **disabled** due to a foot injury he received while chopping wood on the Rayburn farm in 1857. Because of that disability, he was assigned to musician duties, soon achieving the rank of **principal musician**.

In May 1865 (after the war had ended), the 28th Indiana, 29th Illinois, and the 26th and 31st New York (all of which were Black regiments) were transferred to Texas for **garrison duty**, guarding the U.S-Mexican border, as well as looking out for **Confederate** uprisings. By coincidence, many of the regiments—including the 29th—were present in Galveston when General Gordon Granger issued General Order No. 3 on June 19 which declared that all enslaved people were free. Today, this date is recognized and celebrated as **Juneteenth**. The Emancipation Proclamation was issued two years prior to this, but that news had been purposefully kept from the enslaved individuals in Galveston. News of emancipation relied on the ability of Union Troops to communicate that information, thus the news traveled slowly making Texas the last state to free enslaved people.

The 29th Regiment served along the Rio Grande until they finally mustered out in Brownsville, TX on November 6, 1865, six months after the war ended. Blue was among the roughly 180,000 Black soldiers who served in the Union Army (roughly 10% of the total Union Army).

Black soldiers were almost always treated unequally when compared to white soldiers. They were paid \$10 per month, while white soldiers were paid \$13. Furthermore, Black soldiers had an additional \$3 per month deducted from their pay for a clothing **allowance**, bringing their **net pay** down to \$7 per month, while white soldiers received their full \$13 per month. It took eighteen months of **debate** in Washington D.C. to decide on equality for pay and supplies for Black soldiers.

Blue married Emily L. Cooper on May 5, 1870. She was born in Shawneetown, Illinois on March 7, 1840, and moved with her family to Bloomington in 1857. Emily and Richard would go on to have six children, three of whom survived to adulthood. Unfortunately, Emily (called Letitia in her obituary), died on March 22, 1898. She contracted **influenza** in the fall of 1897, which resulted in kidney trouble. Her funeral was held on March 24 in their home on South Madison Street. She was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

Sometime around 1868, Blue opened a barbershop in downtown Bloomington. Blue’s patrons were *exclusively* white, because at this time it was not considered acceptable for a barber to serve both white and Black customers, regardless of the race of the **proprietor**. The accepted norm was not to “cross the color line.” Additionally, with the relatively small population of Black individuals in Bloomington, there was more money to be made by cutting white people’s hair.

Though Blue was successful in many areas throughout his life, politics proved to be his true passion. He remained active in both local and state politics for much of his life, working towards Black **empowerment** and fighting for Black rights.

On March 30, 1870, the 15th Amendment, which granted Black men the right to vote, was formally adopted as part of the United States Constitution. The amendment stated that “the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be **denied** or **abridged** by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of **servitude**.” Blue, along with four other Black men, served on a committee to arrange a public demonstration in celebration of the adoption of the amendment.

Because of their newfound voting rights, combined with citizenship which was conferred upon all people born in the United States because of the passage of the 14th Amendment, Black men were now allowed to serve on **juries**. Richard Blue has the **distinction** of being the first Black person to serve as a juror in Bloomington’s history, and was called for that duty at least four times in his life.

The first case for which he served as a juror was that of Bloomington vs. Bateman in May 1870. H.M. Bateman owned two popular restaurants at 110 West Front Street and 111 North Street and was charged with violating “The Sunday Law,” a city ordinance that **prohibited** most business from taking place on Sundays.

Aside from his engagement in activities related to the **judicial branch** of government, Blue became heavily involved with the election activities. He often represented Bloomington at various political conventions across McLean County and Illinois, participating in general Republican conventions, as well as the **segregated** Black Republican conventions.

In 1879, Blue threw his hat into the political ring and ran as a candidate for **alderman** of the Third Ward, which had the highest percentage of Black residents of Bloomington living in it at that time. Blue was well respected by members of both the Black and white communities in Bloomington. That, combined with his long record of political activities, made him the logical choice for a Black candidate in the upcoming municipal elections. Despite support and confidence in his abilities, he received only 156 votes, losing to the **incumbent** alderman William W. Stevenson, who received 360 votes.

However, while Blue did not succeed in being elected as an alderman, he did receive a **political appointment**. Newly elected Mayor Elisha B. Steere (a fellow Republican) appointed Blue as a mail carrier for the City of Bloomington in May 1879. The role of the mail carrier was somewhat of a political position, often assigned based on **partisan** loyalty. Blue held the position, in addition to operating his barbershop, for at least one year.

In addition to his political activities, Blue was involved in a variety of cultural activities, and was an active member or officer in many local clubs. In June 1881, he contributed an essay to a meeting of a Black literary society. *The Pantagraph* noted that meetings of the club “are always largely attended.” **Black literary societies** were becoming popular throughout the United States during this time period. Also called reading rooms or debating societies, Black literary societies were seen as a way for members of the Black community to become more politically active, as well as better readers, writers, speakers, and thinkers. These groups were a way for “African Americans to develop a literary background as well as the oral and written skills needed to express and represent themselves with confidence” in the safety and comfort of a group of their peers.

Following his musical experience in the Civil War, Blue continued to perform in a

“colored glee club” in Bloomington-Normal, which frequently performed at political events. In October 1880, the club won first prize at a singing competition at a Republican rally in Bloomington, winning \$15. By December of that year, he was the leader of the club. The club performed at an 1883 celebration of the anniversary of the ratification of the 15th Amendment.

Richard Blue died at St. Joseph’s Hospital on March 26, 1921, following a sharp decline after about four to five years of illness. He was universally praised, with *The Pantagraph* calling him “one of Bloomington’s oldest and most highly respected citizens,” and the *Sunday Bulletin* describing him as a “**staunch** and influential Republican.” He was buried on March 29 in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery after a funeral service at the Wayman A.M.E. Church, of which he had been a long-time member.

Richard Blue was a dedicated member of the Bloomington political community and **unparalleled** in his commitment to **civic engagement**. His **legacy** lives on as Bloomington remains a center for **progressive** politics in Central Illinois.