

Samuel Noble King (1834-1913) and Mary Reed King (1842-1928)

In the later portion of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, **Captain Samuel Noble King** was among McLean County's most highly regarded citizens. A progressive, some said "pioneer," farmer and respected horse-breeder, Capt. King worked to "support the improvement of the farm and the farm home and for the betterment of agricultural conditions."¹ His leadership skills drew notice, first in the Civil War as commander of Company A of the 26th Illinois Volunteer Infantry and, upon his return, in a number of agriculture-related causes. **Mary Reed King** was a pioneer in her own right. A teacher by trade, she helped create a nursery and preschool in Bloomington. She was also a key figure in the development of domestic (household) science education. The Kings' accomplishments did not end with their deaths, as they willed a generous part of their estate to underwrite the Jessamine Withers Home, a respite home for elderly women.

Samuel Noble King (known as S. Noble to most) was born in Tarlton, Ohio, on October 22, 1834, one of David and Almema (Caldwell) King's nine children, six of whom survived to adulthood.² David was an orphan, discovered in the streets of Baltimore at the estimated age of three. According to family lore, the child could not articulate it, but his family was presumed to have died during the yellow fever epidemic gripping the city at the time. He was taken in and raised by a couple in Cumberland, Pennsylvania and, ultimately, became an "honorable gentleman and superior businessman."³ David obtained an apprenticeship as a store clerk in Portsmouth, Ohio where he met his future wife, Almema Caldwell.⁴ David and Almema married on November 9, 1826, in Hamilton, Ohio.⁵

In 1840, David King moved his family some 80 miles from Tarlton to the larger city of Springfield, Ohio, to accommodate David's budding mercantile business. S. Noble attended Wittenberg College (now Wittenberg University) in Springfield and, in 1853 at the age of 19, headed west on horseback to another Springfield—this one, the capital of Illinois. S. Noble decided to become a farmer rather than follow his father into the mercantile business.⁶ After a year in the employment of John Reed of New Berlin (roughly 17 miles west of Springfield), he hankered for something to call his own. He had saved enough money to buy a small plot of land near the village and engaged in farming, a vocation to which he would remain committed for the next half-century.⁷ By the order of things, the young steward then prepared to settle down and, on January 11, 1859, he married Alice Tenney in New Berlin. He was 23; she, 19. Sadly, their union was short-lived. Alice contracted bronchitis and, after languishing for six months, died in October of that same year.⁸

When the United States Civil War broke out in 1861, S. Noble answered President Abraham Lincoln's call for volunteers to flesh out the Union Army's skeletal fighting force. S. Noble enlisted as a private in the 26th Illinois Infantry Regiment, Company D, mustering in on August

¹ "In Capt. King's Memory," *The Pantagraph*, March 3, 1913.

² "David Ward King," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Ward_King, Accessed August 13, 2023.

³ Ancestry.com, *North America, Family Histories, 1500-2000* (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2016), 627.

⁴ "David Ward King."

⁵ Ancestry.com, *Ohio, U.S., County Marriage Records, 1774-1993* (Lehi, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2016) 112.

⁶ "Death Summons Capt. S. Noble King," *The Pantagraph*, February 4, 1913.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Ancestry.com, *U.S., Federal Census Mortality Schedules, 1850-1885* (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010), 5; "Death Summons Capt. S. Noble King."

17, 1861 at Camp Butler, Sangamon County, just a few miles northeast of Springfield.⁹ Company D was under the command of Capt. J. B. Harris, a fellow farmer from Alexander, Illinois (12 miles west of New Berlin).¹⁰ S. Noble was quickly recognized by his superiors as officer material, and on January 12, 1862, he was promoted to Second Lieutenant and transferred to Company A.¹¹ On June 3 and October 1 of that year, he was elevated to first lieutenant and captain, respectively.¹²

It is worth noting here that it was customary for those who achieved officer status in the early wars—Revolutionary War, War of 1812, Mexican-American War, Civil War, and Spanish-American War—to retain military titles, even brevet, well beyond discharge. Thus, S. Noble King was often referred to as “Captain King” for the rest of his life. There is some disagreement, though, about his actual rank at the time of his departure from service. In some sources he is listed as “Captain King;” in others, “Lieutenant King.” On the marker commemorating his willing of property to fund the Jessamine Withers Home, his name was etched in as “Lieut. S. Noble King.”¹³ There is a possibility he was not officially promoted to captain, but assumed a kind of honorary title as de facto leader of Company A.¹⁴

The 26th Illinois saw action at the sieges of Corinth and Vicksburg, Mississippi, and Savannah, Georgia, and in the battles of Missionary Ridge (Chattanooga, Tennessee) and Atlanta (part of General William T. Sherman’s “March to the Sea”)—all significant in the greater conflict’s outcome. Overall, the regiment marched a total of 6,931 miles, fought 28 battles, and participated in innumerable skirmishes.¹⁵ While S. Noble was neither wounded nor ill during the entire four years he served during the war, he watched as it wreaked havoc on the 26th. The regiment, which had roughly 1,500 men in service, suffered 286 fatalities (19 percent)—90 in combat and 196 from disease.¹⁶

Following the long, arduous ordeal, S. Noble mustered out of the army on October 26, 1864. Like many of his comrades, he became a lifetime member of the Grand Army of the Republic, a fraternal organization for veterans of the Union (U.S.) Army, Marine, and Naval forces who fought in the Civil War. He was active in Bloomington’s William T. Sherman GAR Post 146.¹⁷ S. Noble also participated in annual reunions of the 26th regularly. Beginning in 1885, members of the regiment (and their families) would gather in Bloomington or other Central Illinois towns to renew friendships, enjoy comradery, reminisce, and take part in entertainment and other

⁹ Brigadier General J.N. Reece, *Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Illinois, Volume II 1861-1866 Containing Reports for the Years 1861-1866*. (Springfield: Phillips Bros. State Printers, 1900), 366.

¹⁰ Illinois State Archives, Office of the Secretary of State, Illinois Muster and Descriptive Rolls, <https://www.cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/archives/databases/reghist>.

¹¹ Reece, *Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Illinois, Volume II 1861-1866 Containing Reports for the Years 1861-1866*, 356.

¹² Historical Data Systems, comp. *U.S., Civil War Soldier Records and Profiles, 1861-1865* [database on-line] (Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc., 2009).

¹³ “This Farm of 240 Acres . . .,” King Monument, *The Pantagraph*, June 23, 2013.

¹⁴ *U.S. Civil War Records and Profiles, 1861-1865*.

¹⁵ John H. Burnham, George P. Davis, Ezra M. Prince, ed. *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society, Volume I: The War Record of McLean County with other papers*. (Pantagraph Printing and Stationery Co. 1899), 53-54

¹⁶ Dyer, Frederick H., *The Civil War Archive; A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion. 3 vols.* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1959), www.civilwararchive.com/Unreght/unilinf2.htm#26th (retrieved January 3, 2021).

¹⁷ Roster of Wm. Sherman Post No. 146 G.A.R., Bloomington, Illinois, <https://newhorizonsgenealogicalservices.com>, (retrieved January 25, 2021).

activities.¹⁸ According to sources, S. Noble participated in at least four reunions, but most likely more.¹⁹

Following the war, (and the pre-war death of his young wife) S. Noble realized there was no longer anything to interest him in New Berlin. He disposed of his property and sought to make his fortune in McLean County.²⁰ He bought 240 acres of “unfenced prairieland” two-and-a-half miles from Bloomington on what is now Towanda Avenue (Normal Township). Soon after, he purchased 160 acres a mile-and-a-half northeast of his original plot (the present-day location of Menards).²¹ From thence, he climbed to prominence in the agriculture industry. His name became synonymous with scientific farming and was recognized not only in McLean County, but throughout the entire state of Illinois.

S. Noble set aside, at any given time, five to ten acres of his “north” plot for trials in soil enhancement, crop rotation, and fertilization utilized by the University of Illinois in Urbana, Illinois. His farm became one of fifteen University of Illinois Experimentation Stations. These “test plots” contributed to the work of Cyril G. Hopkins, chair of Agronomy at the U of I and among the foremost authorities on soil fertility in the United States.²² The faculty of the College of Agriculture at the U of I called S. Noble “a farmer of wide practical experience” and “an ardent student of scientific principles as applied to modern methods of permanent soil improvement.”²³

S. Noble was considered a pioneer in the development of crop rotation and fertilizers. He developed a three-year crop rotation plan involving corn, oats, and clover. In an interview with *The Pantagraph* in 1900, S. Noble stated that only about a third of his land was planted in corn in any given year. The rest was in oats and clover.²⁴ After a field was planted in corn one year, the following year would be oats and then clover. S. Noble stated that “the clover is sown with the oats makes a good showing the next year after the oats are harvested.” Once the oats were harvested, the clover was cut for hay (with some used to feed his livestock and the surplus sold for profit), S. Noble observed that this method of crop rotation tended to make soil more fertile and reduce the risk of crop failure in the event of drought or disease.²⁵

He experimented with phosphorus as a fertilizer, applying a half-ton per acre, and was thought to be among the first in McLean County to use statistics in evaluating the effects of fertilizer. He was also McLean County’s first known operator of a surface cultivator.²⁶ S. Noble abandoned the common practice of burning off corn stalks after harvest. He decided to try plowing them under into the soil instead, along with using straw bedding, to improve the growing quality of the soil. The result was an increased yield of nine bushels per acre.²⁷ That

¹⁸ “Reunion of the 26th Regiment,” *The Pantagraph*, October 14, 1886.

¹⁹ “The Twenty-Sixth,” *The Pantagraph*, October 14, 1886; “Sixth Annual Reunion of the 26th...,” *The Pantagraph*, September 19, 1890; “Reunited Boys,” *The Champaign Daily Gazette*, September 15, 1892; “Reunion of Old Soldiers,” *The Clinton Public*, October 20, 1899.

²⁰ “Death Summons Capt. S. Noble King.”

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² “Soil Day Program Recalls Pioneer in Modern Farming,” *The Pantagraph*, August 23, 1953; “Residence of Late Capt. King on His Farm,” *The Pantagraph*, April 26, 1913; “Cyril G. Hopkins,” <https://distributedmuseum.illinois.edu/exhibit/cyril-g-hopkins/>, Accessed August 13, 2023.

²³ “In Capt. King’s Memory.”

²⁴ “Corn-Oats-Clover Rotation,” *The Pantagraph*, May 15, 1900.

²⁵ “Soil Day Program Recalls Pioneer in Modern Farming.”

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

may not sound significant by today's standards (with the most recent average corn yield in Illinois was 215 bushels per acre), but considering that S. Noble's best corn yield was 80 bushels per acre (over 100 acres) in 1907, a nine-bushel increase would have translated to a 10 percent increase.²⁸ Any increase in yield would make farmers very happy come harvest time.

Because of his investment in the field of agriculture, S. Noble became a member of the Illinois Farmer's Institute. Beginning in the 1850s, as homesteaders beat ways and means out of the seemingly intractable prairie, they began to realize they needed "the assistance of experts who had made special study of this subject."²⁹ They looked to universities, which were beginning to consider farming a science. Meetings were organized, featuring the day's experts as guest speakers. These assemblies came to be known as Farmers' Institutes, the first of which was held at Yale College (later Yale University) in 1860 and conducted by Samuel William Johnson, an agricultural chemist. By 1870, many state farm organizations made some provision for lecturers to address gatherings of farmers. The classic form of the Farmers' Institute took shape during the 1880s. By 1885, the programs were systematized, and state appropriations were granted to implement them. By 1889, the movement was in full swing.³⁰

The Illinois Farmers' Institute was officially founded on June 24, 1895, with the goal of assisting and encouraging "useful education among the farmers, for developing agricultural resources of the State," and to develop greater interests in "cultivation of crops, in the breeding and care of domestic animals, in dairy husbandry, in horticulture, in farm drainage, in improved highways, and general farm management." Farmers would meet annually at the state and local level to "have liberal discussion" over these and other subjects.³¹ Each county in the state had their own local chapter of the Farmers' Institute, which reported back to the state organization and board of directors. The McLean County chapter was created on November 23, 1895, and S. Noble was appointed vice-president.³²

S. Noble was a very active member of the Farmers' Institute. He led discussions at annual meetings and presented programs on a variety of agricultural topics, including horse breeding and training.³³ While he did not find all speakers at each and every Farmers' Institute to be compelling, he apparently found the gatherings quite educational for the question-and-answer sessions and the collaboration among attendees that often followed the lectures.³⁴

Because of his leadership and expertise in the field of agriculture, S. Noble was elected to the board of directors of the state organization, representing the 13th District (which included McLean County) on February 23, 1899 (redistricting changed the district to the 17th by 1903).³⁵

²⁸ "Average Corn and Soybean Yields Across the Midwest," <https://farmdocdaily.illinois.edu> (retrieved January 15, 2021).

²⁹ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Harper, John, comp., *History of State Farmers' Institutes* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1906).

³⁰ Rossiter, Margaret W., *The Emergence of Agricultural Science: Justus Liebig and the Americans, 1840-1880* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1975).

³¹ Charles F. Mills, ed. *Annual Report Illinois Farmer's Institute with reports of County Farmers' Institutes for the year 1897*. (Springfield, Illinois: Phillips Bros. State Printers, 1897), 6-8; H.A. McKeene. *The Eighteenth Annual Report of the Illinois Farmers' Institute*. (Springfield: Illinois State Journal Co. State Printers, 1914), 11.

³² Mills, ed, *Annual Report Illinois Farmer's Institute with reports of County Farmers' Institutes for the year 1897*, 317; "Farmers in a Union," *The Chicago Tribune*, February 22, 1896.

³³ "County Farmers' Institute," *The Clinton Public*, December 29, 1899.

³⁴ "Soil Day Program Recalls Pioneer in Modern Farming."

³⁵ "Favor the Beet Bounty," *The Chicago Tribute*, February 24, 1899; "Farmer's Institute," *Woodford County Journal*, December 24, 1903.

He also served as a delegate to the National Farmers' Institute congress that same year.³⁶ S. Noble served on the board of directors of the state organization for six years.³⁷

During S. Noble's tenure on the board of directors of the Illinois Farmers' Bureau, he and the other board members requested that U of I create a scholarship program for prospective students interested in the study of agriculture at the university. This program was created in 1899 and established a fund to "encourage many a farmer's boy and girl to work for a higher education which they might not otherwise hope to obtain."³⁸ Any young man or woman over the age of 16 could apply.³⁹ One candidate from each of the 102 counties in the State of Illinois would be selected to receive a two-year scholarship for the College of Agriculture at the university.⁴⁰ Those wishing to be considered for a scholarship were to apply to the director of the Illinois Farmers' Institute of the congressional district in which they resided (which would have been S. Noble in the 13th District).⁴¹ Upon receiving applications, S. Noble selected one winner from each county in his district (made up of six Central Illinois counties) after rigorous screening.⁴² The response to the scholarship was overwhelming. In 1900, S. Noble reported that he had received so many applications for the free scholarship that he could not answer all the requests. To him, this was "ample proof that the farmers of Illinois are just now beginning to discover that within the borders of their state is located one of the most complete and thorough agricultural schools in the United States."⁴³

S. Noble was a big supporter of the College of Agriculture at the U of I. Through his work for the Illinois Farmers' Institute, he was appointed chairman of a legislative committee to help secure a \$150,000 appropriation from the Illinois General Assembly to construct a "suitable building and equipment" for the ag school at the university in January 1899. The need was great due to the large and increasing number of students (aided by the establishment of the scholarship program) attending the ag school at the university.⁴⁴ S. Noble lobbied hard for state funds to be allocated for the agriculture building.⁴⁵ That hard work paid off. The State of Illinois passed the appropriation bill to fund the building, and construction began in August of that year.⁴⁶ The building was constructed for a cost of \$150,000 (approximately \$5.3 million in 2023) and consisted of four parts built around an open court and connected by corridors.⁴⁷ There were offices, classrooms, laboratories, restrooms, an assembly hall, and fire-proof storage for records.⁴⁸ When the Agriculture Building (later renamed Davenport Hall in 1947) was dedicated

³⁶ "S. Noble King of Bloomington," *The Champaign Daily Gazette*, August 25, 1899.

³⁷ "Death Summons Capt. S. Noble King."

³⁸ "Free Agricultural Scholarship," *Gibson City Courier*, July 14, 1899.

³⁹ "Free Agricultural Scholarship," *The Pantagraph*, September 9, 1899.

⁴⁰ "Free Scholarship at the University," *The Champaign Daily Gazette*, September 1, 1899; "Free Agricultural Scholarship."

⁴¹ "At the request of the Illinois Farmers' Institute...," *Farmer City Journal*, July 14, 1899.

⁴² "U of I Scholarships Can be Obtained of S. Noble King, Bloomington," *The Champaign Daily News*, August 21, 1901.

⁴³ "Call for Free Scholarships," *The Champaign Daily Gazette*, September 11, 1900.

⁴⁴ "Agricultural College Building," *Dixon Evening Telegraph*, January 17, 1899; "Notable Day at Champaign," *The Inter Ocean*, May 21, 1901.

⁴⁵ "Working for the University," *The Champaign Daily Gazette*, February 18, 1899.

⁴⁶ "How to Feed Live Stock," *The Champaign Daily News*, July 11, 1899.

⁴⁷ Measure of Worth, <https://www.measuringworth.com/calculators/uscompare/relativevalue.php>, Accessed August 13, 2023.

⁴⁸ "At New Building," *The Champaign Daily Gazette*, May 21, 1901.

on May 21, 1901, S. Noble was the first speaker during the morning session.⁴⁹ At the close of his speech, he stated that they now had the pleasure “of seeing the building ready for use. Through the united and persistent efforts of the farmers of Illinois we have...a college of agriculture which we confidently trust will be an honor to this great state.”⁵⁰

S. Noble’s progressive thinking also led him to advocate for infrastructure because farms needed reliable rural roads. To generate awareness and explore a solution to the generally poor conditions of secondary roads (especially in the winter and spring months), he accepted the nomination of his fellow landowners as chairman of the local executive committee to organize a “Good Roads” convention for the counties of McLean, Tazewell, Logan, DeWitt, Champaign, Livingston, and Woodford counties. The event was held September 19, 1899, at the Coliseum in downtown Bloomington. Attendees heard from several dignitaries, including E.G. Harrison, a representative of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Rella C. Harber, secretary of the State and Inter-State Good Roads and Improvement Association.⁵¹

As chairman of the convention, S. Noble opened the proceedings by welcoming the large audience. He expressed what was on everyone’s mind: “Our country roads, after 40 years of working, have behaved very unpleasantly for several months of the year.”⁵² The day’s activities included the planned demonstration of a heavy roller on an east-west road near Miller Park, (which was, unfortunately, cancelled due to inclement weather); an assembly at the Coliseum with several speakers and break-out groups; and, in the evening, a stereopticon slide presentation with images of roads of various surfaces across the country, some maintained well, some not.⁵³ By the end of the day, the consensus among conventioners was that roads should remain unpaved, should be tiled to prevent the dirt surfaces from turning into quagmires in the rainy season, and should be regularly graded. Attendees, recognizing the expense of such a proposal, also felt that some kind of tax should be levied for this purpose, that it should be collected in cash, and that Chicago—a significant beneficiary of down-state grain—should bear the lion’s share of the cost.⁵⁴ S. Noble participated in at least one more Good Roads convention, serving as a delegate representing Illinois at the National Conference of American Roadmakers in Detroit, Michigan on February 13, 1903.⁵⁵

In this pre-mechanization age, S. Noble also became interested in the quality and durability of work animals. Most farmers bought and traded draft horses when necessary. S. Noble decided to breed, use, and sell his own. According to advertisements for his horses, S. Noble had been breeding his horses “to the best horses imported by the Dillons and Stubblefields,” (who bred Percherons) since the early 1870s.⁵⁶ Percheron horses were a strong and durable breed of workhorses. They could pull more weight, withstand the heat better, do the work of two regular

⁴⁹ *Building Dedication Program for the Agricultural Building, University of Illinois, May 21, 1901*, University of Illinois Archives, Urbana, Illinois; “Davenport Hall,” The University of Illinois: Virtual Campus Tour, <https://uihistories.library.illinois.edu/virtualtour/maincampus/davenport/>, Date Accessed September 18, 2023.

⁵⁰ *Address, S. Noble King, Bloomington, May 21, 1901, College of Agriculture building dedication*, University of Illinois Archives, Urbana, Illinois.

⁵¹ “A Good Roads Convention,” *The Pantagraph*, September 20, 1899.

⁵² “Good Roads Convention,” *The Pantagraph*, September 20, 1899.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ “Gov. Yates Names Delegates,” *The Inter Ocean*, January 27, 1903.

⁵⁶ “For Sale, High Grade French Draft Stallions and Mares,” *The Pantagraph*, December 31, 1885.

horses, had a quiet disposition, and were perfect for farm work.⁵⁷ Around the year 1883, he began importing his own Percheron horses. One of the first horses he purchased was a filly named Jessie from France.⁵⁸ S. Noble normally had between 75 and 80 head of horses on hand.⁵⁹ And from the horses he bred, he kept the “choicest mares” for his own breeding.

He entered his horses in fairs and livestock shows around the state, winning numerous awards. In November 1888 at the Chicago livestock show, S. Noble took the “Farmer’s Review” medal for best French draft sire.⁶⁰ At the Bloomington fair in 1890, he took second place for his “full blood French draft mare three years old.”⁶¹ That same year, S. Noble took first premium on his one-year-old French draft stallion “Luther,” and second on “Knickerbocker” in the same class at the Illinois State Fair.⁶² It was noted that he always had a fine exhibit of horses at the State Fair.⁶³ He described the breeding of these animals as critical to his vocation, but also his hobby. His expertise and reputation earned him invitations to judge Percheron competitions at various fairs, including the St. Louis World’s Fair in 1904. As was his way, he became involved at the association level, serving as vice-president and treasurer of the Illinois Stock Breeders Association, president of the Illinois Stallion Registration Board, and president of the National French Draft Horse Association.⁶⁴

S. Noble richly enjoyed farming. “A farmer’s life,” he was heard to say, “is most independent and happy.” He saw agrarian life as liberating. “When I get out on my farm,” he observed, “I can halloo as loud as I please and it’s nobody’s business.”⁶⁵ In spite of his expressed contentment with farming and all that went with it, he realized something was missing. He had distracted himself for a decade since Alice’s death with soldiery and the building of a farming enterprise. Now, he found himself ready again for companionship. S. Noble wed Mary Amelia Reed on June 27, 1871, in Ottawa, Illinois. He was 36; she, 28.⁶⁶

Mary Amelia Reed was born in Franklinville, Cattaraugus County, New York on September 20, 1842, one of Abram V. and Rachel (Freeman) Reed’s six daughters.⁶⁷ An itinerant farmer, Abram moved his family to several residences in New York, then to Sturgis, Michigan; to Ottawa, Illinois; and, finally, to Normal Township, Illinois, where he apparently formed a partnership of some kind with S. Noble King.⁶⁸ Mary and S. Noble were, thus, “thrown together” by circumstance. She had been an educator by trade, teaching for seven years in the Peru and

⁵⁷ “The Origin and History of Percheron Horse,” Percheron Horse Association of America, https://www.percheronhorse.org/percheron_origin/, Accessed August 13, 2023.

⁵⁸ “S. Noble King Retires,” *The Pantagraph*, January 18, 1911.

⁵⁹ “Soil Day Program Recalls Pioneer in Modern Farming.”

⁶⁰ “Chicago livestock show,” *The Pantagraph*, November 24, 1888.

⁶¹ “Bloomington’s Fair,” *The Pantagraph*, September 17, 1890.

⁶² “State Fair Premiums,” *The Pantagraph*, November 4, 1890.

⁶³ “For the State Fair,” *The Pantagraph*, September 9, 1896; “For the State Fair,” *The Pantagraph*, September 23, 1898.

⁶⁴ “Death Summons S. Noble King;” “Closing Session of Annual Meet,” *Champaign County News*, February 10, 1906; “Stockmen in Session,” *The Inter Ocean*, November 17, 1898; “Illinois Stock Breeders,” *The Pantagraph*, November 16, 1899; “Stallion Registration Board Officers,” *The Decatur Herald*, November 12, 1909.

⁶⁵ “Soil Day Program Recalls Pioneer in Modern Farming.”

⁶⁶ “Death Summons S. Noble King.”

⁶⁷ “Mrs. S. Noble King Dies in California,” *The Pantagraph*, December 22, 1928.

⁶⁸ Ancestry.com. *New York, U.S., State Census, 1855* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2013; Ancestry.com. *1860 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2009; Ancestry.com. *1870 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2009.

Ottawa, Illinois areas and, for another three years, filling the role of principal at East Ottawa Grammar School.⁶⁹ During the 1868-1869 school year as principal, her salary was \$700 (or \$14,500 in 2023).⁷⁰

Mary adapted well to life on the farm; but, like her husband, she aspired to higher purposes. She became active in the local chapter of “The King’s Daughters,” (now the “International Order of the King’s Daughters and Sons”), a Christian organization formed to do charitable work.⁷¹

While she and S. Noble had no children of their own, Mary was interested in how children were raised and—predictably, considering her background—their early education. Well ahead of their time, the Bloomington Chapter of the King’s Daughters saw a need for a place where working mothers could leave not-yet-school-age children in a safe and educational environment. The club repurposed a cottage at the corner of West (now Roosevelt Street) and West Mulberry Streets in Bloomington and established the “King’s Daughters’ Home” there in 1890. The program combined a nursery for small children with a kindergarten for older children to learn and prepare for grammar school. If a mother did not have the financial resources, no tuition was charged for her children to attend.⁷² Mary also served on the board of The Day Nursery and Settlement Association (founded in 1908) which had similar mission and worked to assist working mothers like the King’s Daughters’ Home.⁷³

Another cause Mary supported was the education of women in the domestic sciences. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women were still “at home.” However, the task of managing a household was becoming increasingly complex, perhaps even more so than their husbands’ work. As a result, women needed expertise and, thanks to people like Mary King, learning opportunities emerged.

In 1898, the Illinois Association of Domestic Science was founded. It was organized as a branch of the Illinois Farmers’ Institute “to arouse a wider interest in the science and art of housekeeping” and was designed to assist farmers’ wives and “to stimulate mutual helpfulness in their methods of housekeeping.” The system of organization was exactly the same as the Farmers’ Institute, in that each county had its own domestic science association.⁷⁴ Mary was a co-founder the McLean County chapter and, for the ensuing 30 years, worked for its growth and development into a viable institution.⁷⁵ She also served as secretary and president of the state association.⁷⁶ She helped organize and often conducted sessions at conventions for women to learn important skills, e.g. preparing and cooking meat, the uses of different cereals, bread-baking, management of a cellar, sanitation and cleaning, preventing contagious diseases, and budgeting.⁷⁷

⁶⁹ “Mrs. S. Noble King dies in California.”

⁷⁰ “Board of Education,” *The Ottawa Free Trader*, July 11, 1868; Measuring Worth, <https://www.measuringworth.com/calculators/uscompare/relativevalue.php>, Accessed August 14, 2023.

⁷¹ “A Brief History, International Order of The King’s Daughters and Sons,” <https://iokds.org> (retrieved February 5, 2021)

⁷² “King’s Daughters’ Home,” *The Pantagraph*, January 12, 1891.

⁷³ Candace Summers, “Clara Louise Kessler,” McLean County Museum of History, accessed August 14, 2023, <https://mchistory.org/research/biographies/kessler-clara-louise>, 3; “Day Nursery Association in Its Progress,” *The Pantagraph*, May 22, 1919, 13.

⁷⁴ A.B. Hostetter, ed. “Annual Report of the Illinois Farmers’ Institute with reports of County Farmers’ Institutes for the year 1900. (Springfield, IL: Phillips Bros. State Printers, 1900), 18.

⁷⁵ “Mrs. S. Noble King dies in California.”

⁷⁶ “Would Improve Homemaking,” *Joliet Evening Herald-News*, February 21, 1905.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

At the February 1897 Illinois Farmers' Institute annual meeting, Mary presided over sessions related to the farmhouse and modern conveniences.⁷⁸ At the January 16, 1900 meeting of 13th Congressional District of the Farmer's Institute in Bloomington, Mary presented a paper on "The Domestic Science Association: It's Scope and Value to Farmers' Wives" that evening.⁷⁹ At the DeWitt County Farmer's Institute on December 18, 1900, she gave an address on the "Domestic Economy." It was reported that she was "a fluent, graceful talker, logical in her ideas, and her address proved very interesting to all."⁸⁰

In a candid interview in February 1905, Mary (then president of the IADS) told reporters of the *Joliet Evening Herald-News* that the purpose of the IADS was to educate women on "better ways of homemaking, better sanitation, better living at less cost, proper food for children, and the economy of everything, not only of time and strength, but of material." She added, proudly, that "90 counties are working under the Association." She articulated the other purpose of the Association, which was "to introduce domestic science departments in the schools."⁸¹

Mary concluded the interview thus: "We believe we have accomplished a great deal in Illinois, and we hope to do more. Our aim is, of course, to produce the very best type of man and woman by the proper training and home treatment of children as well as the proper management of the home."⁸²

She was a staunch advocate for improving the teaching of domestic science in public schools. At the Champaign County Farmers' Institute in February 1901, she read a paper on this very topic. She felt it was necessary for schools to teach young girls the essentials of domestic science. "Industrial education should not be the luxury of the few, but the necessity of the many," Mary stated. "Let the school life and the home life touch as many points as possible. Let the children be instructed in the fundamental principles of healthful living and domestic science. Let this science be placed on par with the other sciences."⁸³

The activities in which Mary King was involved very likely contributed to the development of home economics (later family and consumer sciences) curricula in schools and the University of Illinois Extension program. The Extension program, now based in the UIUC Department of Agriculture, Consumer, and Environmental Sciences, reaches all 102 counties in Illinois and offers educational programs in five broad areas: energy and environmental stewardship; food safety and security; economic development and workforce preparedness; family health, financial security, and wellness; and youth development (4-H).⁸⁴

The Kings were also active members of the Second Presbyterian Church of Bloomington. S. Noble served as an officer on the church council and Mary combined her devotion and teaching skills by conducting a Bible study class for adult women.⁸⁵

In 1907, at 72 years of age, S. Noble had enjoyed unusually good health and remained quite active, considering that the average American male at the time did not survive much beyond 50.⁸⁶ An incident in the spring of that year, though, tested his resilience. The Kings had been

⁷⁸ "A Great Gathering of Farmers," *The Champaign County Gazette*, February 20, 1897.

⁷⁹ "District Farmers' Institute," *The Pantagraph*, December 14, 1899

⁸⁰ "The Farmers' Institute," *The Clinton Public*, December 21, 1900.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ "Champaign County Farmers' Institute," *The Champaign Daily News*, February 15, 1901.

⁸⁴ <https://extension.illinois.edu/global/who-we-are> (retrieved, February 9, 2021).

⁸⁵ "Mrs. S. Noble King Dies in California."

⁸⁶ National Center for Health Statistics. Health, United States, 2019, 2019 *At-a-Glance Table* (Hyattsville, MD 2021: <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/atus/ataglance.htm>Article title).

honored with a visit from their nephew, David Ward King of Missouri (son of S. Noble's brother, Robert Quigley King), a farmer and inventor of the "road drag," a device for grading dirt roads.⁸⁷ Considering S. Noble's oft-expressed interest in rural thoroughfares, one can only imagine the enthusiastic dialogue between the two! But, on the afternoon of May 31, S. Noble drove the homeward-bound David to the Union train depot. As the elder King departed the depot platform for his buggy (which was parked on West Washington Street), he crossed the tracks and was struck a glancing blow by an east bound Big Four freight train engine. As *The Pantagraph* reported, "one arm fell under the wheels and was horribly mangled."⁸⁸ He otherwise suffered non-life-threatening bruises and contusions. He was taken by ambulance to Brokaw Hospital and Chicago & Alton railroad surgeons were called to treat him. Unfortunately, his arm was too badly damaged, and the surgeons were forced to amputate his left arm near the elbow.⁸⁹ S. Noble was released from the hospital within the week, convalesced at home for a time under Mary's care, and eventually resumed his active lifestyle, but with some limitations.⁹⁰

A little more than a year after the accident, tragedy struck again, literally; but this time the victims were of the four-legged kind. On August 15, 1908, lightning struck a metal fence on the King farm and two registered Percheron mares, apparently in contact with the fence at the unfortunate moment, were killed. Having spent much of his working life breeding and caring for Percherons, these two horses meant more to S. Noble than the money they could potentially bring, to be sure. As fate would have it, just the day before, he rejected an offer of \$1,000 (about \$32,800 in 2023) for the animals.⁹¹

In January 1911, the Kings retired from farming. They rented out their property in Normal Township, sold his entire herd of Percheron horses (19 mares and fillies, and 5 stallions), and moved to 903 North Main Street in Bloomington.⁹² In an interview with *The Pantagraph* that announced his retirement from farming, he recalled that he had raised "fifty-four crops of corn" since he began farming in Illinois in 1854. He also stated that he had been crazy about horses for as long as he could remember. S. Noble said that his father "kept a carriage horse and from the time I was six years old I took care of that horse. That led me to the farm, my love for stock, more for horses....there is no other animal that has as good sense as a horse." While he was born and raised in town, he enjoyed working on the farm and didn't know of anything he would have liked better.⁹³

Just two years into retirement, after the New Year in 1913, he caught a cold, which, within a month, complicated into septicemia. He died on February 3, 1913, at the age of 78 and was interred in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery two days later.⁹⁴ The list of his pallbearers was a veritable "Who's Who" of McLean County: Capt. John Howard Burnham, Civil War officer (33rd Illinois Infantry Regiment), one-time superintendent of Bloomington Public Schools,

⁸⁷ Center, Ellen Kay Miller, *Index to USDA Farmers' Bulletins* <https://pubs.nal.usda.gov> (DC: USDA/ARS, National Agricultural Library, Retrieved 2018-04-13).

⁸⁸ "S. Noble King Was Hit by a Train," *The Pantagraph*, June 1, 1907.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ "Capt. King Goes Home," *The Pantagraph*, June 7, 1907.

⁹¹ "Lightning Kills Fine Horses," *Paxton Daily Record*, August 19, 1908; Measuring Worth. <https://www.measuringworth.com/calculators/uscompare/relativevalue.php>, Accessed August 14, 2023.

⁹² "S. Noble King Retires," *The Pantagraph*, January 18, 1911; "Closing Out Sale of Percherons," *The Pantagraph*, January 17, 1911; *Bloomington and Normal City Directory, 1911*. (Bloomington: Pantagraph Printing and Stationary Company, 1911), 362.

⁹³ "S. Noble King Retires."

⁹⁴ "Death Summons Capt. S. Noble King."

editor of the *Daily Pantagraph*, and a noted local historian; Capt. James Moore, Civil War officer (145th Illinois Infantry Regiment) and freight agent for the I. B. & W. Railway; Franklin Y. Hamilton, a Bloomington attorney and brother of John M. Hamilton, governor of Illinois; and C. L. Mays, first president of the McLean County Farm Bureau.⁹⁵

The faculty of the College of Agriculture at U of I passed resolutions concerning the death of one of their most ardent supporters. The resolutions stated that:

“Illinois has lost one of her most loyal soldiers and citizens; a farmer of wide practical experience; an ardent student of scientific principles as applied to modern methods of permanent soil improvement; a breeder of Percheron horses for over forty years who stood for the very best in both quality and type of purebred live stock... The college of agriculture has never had a more loyal friend to support its work for the improvement of the farm and the farm home and for the betterment of agricultural conditions.”⁹⁶

That she mourned her husband of more than 41 years is certain, but Mary clearly did not go quietly into the life of a dowager. Instead, she remained an active philanthropist, and in the summer of 1914, at the age of 72, she toured Europe. She was accompanied by Miss Belle Goudy, and they planned to spend several months traveling around Europe. The pair set sail on May 19 on the steamship “Arabic.”⁹⁷ However, that trip was cut short. Mary and Belle returned to the United States on August 29, just days ahead of the impending outbreak of the First World War.⁹⁸ Mary remained in New York for several weeks before returning to Bloomington on September 28. When interviewed by *The Pantagraph* once she was safely back in Bloomington, Mary stated that she had little trouble leaving Europe. Unlike other tourists who had “harrowing experiences” getting out of war-torn Europe, she stated her “own experience was quite commonplace and would furnish nothing on which to base a good newspaper story.”⁹⁹

Upon their retirement, the Kings spent the winters of 1911 and 1912 in Pasadena, California.¹⁰⁰ Following S. Noble’s death, Mary split her time between her Bloomington residence and a second home in Pasadena, dying at the latter after a gradual decline of health on December 20, 1928, at the age of 86.¹⁰¹

Together, the Kings were a force to be reckoned with in the advancement of agriculture, childcare, domestic sciences, and civic responsibility in McLean County and beyond. Their pièce de résistance, though, was yet to come.

In his will, S. Noble understandably left his earthly possessions to Mary.¹⁰² He also added a provision for the disposal of his property upon Mary’s death. He and Mary desired that a considerable portion of their estate—the 240-acre plot in Normal Township where they farmed

⁹⁵ “The Last of Earth,” *The Pantagraph*, February 6, 1913; “Capt. J.H. Burnham Dead,” *The Pantagraph*, January 27, 1917; “State Service,” *The Pantagraph*, September 3, 1864; “Capt. James Moore . . .,” *The Pantagraph*, February 23, 1870; “Death Claims F. Y. Hamilton,” *The Pantagraph*, November 30, 1922; “C.L. Mays, Prominent Farmer, Dies,” *The Pantagraph*, January 31, 1941.

⁹⁶ “In Capt. King’s Memory,” *The Pantagraph*, March 3, 1913.

⁹⁷ “To Sail Next Tuesday,” *The Pantagraph*, May 14, 1914.

⁹⁸ “Mrs. S. N. King Home From War-Torn Europe,” *The Pantagraph*, August 31, 1914.

⁹⁹ “Mrs. King Home from Europe,” *The Pantagraph*, September 28, 1914.

¹⁰⁰ Capt. S. Noble King Talks of the West,” *The Pantagraph*, May 20, 1911.

¹⁰¹ “Mrs. S. Noble King Dies in California.”

¹⁰² “In Capt. King’s Memory.”

and lived—be left to fund, in perpetuity, the Jessamine Withers Home, also known, in the parlance of the times, as the “Old Ladies Home of Bloomington.”¹⁰³

At the time of her death in 1897, philanthropist Sarah Withers left her second private residence at 305 West Locust to establish a home for impoverished elderly women. She requested that it be named the Jessamine Withers Home after her adopted daughter, Jessamine, who died in 1892. Sarah had designated her first home, at the corner of East and Washington Streets, for the establishment of the Withers Library (now known as the Bloomington Public Library).¹⁰⁴

Though Sarah Withers dedicated a building for the Jessamine Withers Home, she was not able to provide operating capital, and, despite several small donations and legacies, the project remained dormant for the next 17 years.¹⁰⁵ Enter the Kings. Within a month of the reading of her husband’s will, Mary decided to denounce part of her inheritance and order that the 240 acres of farm ground be, as soon as legally possible, placed in a trust, with the annual income designated to support the home.¹⁰⁶ Leaders of Second Presbyterian Church of Bloomington (where the Kings were members) were to be the trustees.¹⁰⁷ By the end of April, that same year, Mary conceded additional properties to the trust, expanding it to more than one-half of her and her husband’s entire estate.¹⁰⁸

Owing largely to the King trust, the Home opened on May 12, 1914, with the Board of Lady Managers (members of which represented the protestant churches in Bloomington) supervising operations and a superintendent handling day-to-day affairs. As it entered its 50th year in the 1960s, regulations on nursing homes had been made more stringent by the State of Illinois and, because women now enjoyed the benefits of Social Security and Medicare, very few women were able to qualify for residence. The Home closed in 1963, with the current residents transferred to the new Heritage Manor in Bloomington. The trust continued to support its former residents until the last one (Augusta “Gussie” Becker) died in 1982.¹⁰⁹ It has since been used to underwrite the care of a handful of qualifying women in nursing facilities in the Twin Cities and to purchase several apartments at Westminster Village, a continuing care retirement community in Bloomington.¹¹⁰

Starting in 1957, the Withers Home property—the 240-acre plot willed by the Kings—was gradually liquidated. That year, 75 acres were sold to General Electric, and in 1965, the remaining 165 acres was sold to the Bloomington Industrial Development Corporation. Today, this site is now home a variety of commercial properties, including the Chateau Hotel and Conference Center and Best Buy. A pink granite monument commemorating the Kings’ legacy remains in a prominent place just north of Best Buy in the parking lot.¹¹¹

Due to shrewd investing and difficulties finding qualified candidates, the trust grew to \$4 million by 1998. The Second Presbyterian Church trustees, while maintaining the trust’s original

¹⁰³ “A Legacy to Help Thy Neighbor,” *The Pantagraph*, August 2, 1998.

¹⁰⁴ Higgins, Valerie, *Withers Home Collection* (McLean County Museum of History, 2007).

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ “Mrs. S. Noble King Renounces Will,” *The Pantagraph*, March 6, 1913.

¹⁰⁷ “A Legacy to Help Thy Neighbor;” “Mrs. S. Noble King Renounces Will.”

¹⁰⁸ “Residence of Late Capt. King on His Farm,” *The Pantagraph*, April 26, 1913; “Mrs. Noble King Asks Vision,” *The Pantagraph*, April 30, 1913.

¹⁰⁹ Cook, Kaitlyn. Biography of Augustus Becker. McLean County Museum of History. 2018. Retrieved from <https://mchistory.org/research/biographies/becker-augusta-gussie>, August 14, 2023.

¹¹⁰ *Withers Home Collection*; “A Legacy to Help Thy Neighbor.”

¹¹¹ “A granite monument in the Best Buy Parking Area,” *The Pantagraph*, June 23, 2013.

intentions, have sought new opportunities to assist nursing home-bound women in the community.¹¹²

In a reversal of Shakespeare's words in *Julius Caesar*, the good S. Noble did was not "interred with his bones," but instead lived long after him. The day following S. Noble's death, a *Pantagraph* staff editorial summarized his life with these words:

The death of Capt. S. Noble King removes from our midst a man of sterling worth and great usefulness. He was an example of all the honorable traits that adorn good citizenship. A true soldier for his country in time of war, he has been none the less true in promoting the best interests of the community in times of peace.¹¹³

The paper was no less venerating in its recognition of the life of Mary King: "In the passing of Mrs. Mary Reed King . . . Bloomington and McLean County lost one of the women who left an indelible impression on her own time, and a legacy of noble charity."¹¹⁴

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¹¹² *Withers Home Collection*.

¹¹³ "Staff Editorial," *The Pantagraph*, February 4, 1913.

¹¹⁴ "Death of Mrs. S. Noble King" (Staff Editorial), *The Pantagraph*, December 23, 1928.